



Towards a Deflationary Truthmakers Account of Social Groups

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg¹ 

Received: 21 June 2022 / Accepted: 19 May 2023
© The Author(s) 2023

Abstract

I outline a deflationary truthmakers account of social groups. Potentially, the approach allows us to say, with traditional ontological individualists, that there are only pluralities of individuals out there, ontologically speaking, but that there are nevertheless colloquial and social-scientific *truths* about social groups. If tenable, this kind of theory has the virtue of being both ontologically parsimonious *and* compatible with ordinary and social-scientific discourse—a virtue which the stock reductive / ontological dependence accounts of social groups arguably lack.

1 Introduction

Contemporary social ontologists typically reject the notion that social groups (such as book clubs, street bands and faculty committees) can be reductively identified with pluralities, sets or fusions of individuals. Instead, they hold that social groups are *sui generis* entities *constituted* or *composed* by, or *grounded* in, collections of individuals, and that these constitution/composition/grounding relations are asymmetric dependence relations distinct from *n*-adic identity relations. Surprisingly absent from these discussions is an alternative position which involves neither reductive identification nor the postulation of ontic *sui generis* entities. The alternative I have in mind is to theorise social groups—or rather, truths about them—in terms of deflationary truthmakers. In this paper I provide a sketch of this approach. Potentially, the approach allows us to say, with traditional ontological individualists, that there are only pluralities of individuals out there, ontologically speaking, but that there are nevertheless colloquial and social-scientific *truths* about social groups. Thus, if it is tenable, this kind of theory has the virtue of being both ontologically parsimonious *and* compatible with ordinary and social-scientific discourse.

✉ Tobias Hansson Wahlberg
tobias.hansson_wahlberg@fil.lu.se

¹ Department of Philosophy, Lund University, LUX, Helgonavägen 3, Box 192 (Billing Address Box 188), 221 00 Lund, Sweden

The structure of the paper is as follows. In Sect. 2, I set out the standard objections to the (now unpopular) stock reductive identifications. In Sect. 3, I summarise difficulties for the ontological dependence accounts of social groups. Both of these sections are very concise. In Sect. 4, I outline my own deflationary truthmakers account of social groups and show how it avoids the difficulties canvassed in the two preceding sections. In Sect. 5, I address potential objections to the approach. I end with some concluding remarks in Sect. 6.

2 Difficulties with the Stock Reductive Identifications

It is generally agreed among social ontologists that what we, as social ontologists, are after is a metaphysical account of social groups which allows us to maintain, in line with colloquial and social-scientific discourse, the following (theses (1–5) below might even be regarded by some as expressing non-negotiable Moorean truths¹):

Social groups

- (1) are single things or units;
- (2) are located in space and time;
- (3) begin to exist when the members are suitably interrelated, or engage in certain activities, or are related to an appropriate external phenomenon;
- (4) can change members over time; and
- (5) can coincide membership-wise with distinct social groups.

However, if social groups are reductively identified with pluralities/sets/fusions of individuals, it becomes hard to maintain all of (1–5).² The difficulties here have been discussed thoroughly in the literature.³ I will sum them up, relegating more detailed comments to the footnotes. My aim is not to prove that all of the stock identifications fail. I wish merely to give a sense of what the main problems are in order to motivate interest in alternatives to reductive identifications.

First, if we identify social groups with *pluralities* of individuals, we face difficulties with (1), (3), (4), and (5). Picking up these difficulties in turn, we can observe

¹ See Armstrong (2004: 26–30) for the notion of ‘Moorean truth’: roughly, proposition that cannot be seriously doubted.

² To the extent that (1)–(5) are taken to characterise ‘collectives’ (e.g. crowds, audiences and mobs) and ‘categories’ (e.g. people over fifty, redheads, etc.) (see e.g. Forsyth 2019: 6–8, for discussion of these notions), the difficulties described below generalise to attempts to reductively identify collectives and categories with pluralities/sets/fusions of individuals. My focus here is on social groups, however, since it is uncontroversial that such groups, as spoken of in day-to-day life and in the social-scientific literature, are characterised by (1)–(5). It is less clear how collectives and categories are conceptualised. Are they supposed to be units? Can they change members over time? Etcetera. Cf. e.g. Forsyth (2019).

³ For an overview, see Ritchie (2015). For detailed discussions, see e.g. Marcus (1974/1993), Quinton (1975–76), Copp (1984), Ruben (1985), Gilbert (1989), Schmitt (2003), Uzquiano (2004), Effingham (2010), Ritchie (2013, 2020), Hansson Wahlberg (2014c, 2019a), Epstein (2015), Hawley (2017), Thomsson (2019), Horden and López de Sa (2021), Wilhelm (2022).

that: pluralities are precisely *not* single things, but several things (viz., two or more); ‘a plurality’ of individuals, *a*, *b*, *c*, will typically predate the formation of the relevant group (i.e., the relevant individuals typically all exist before they engage in the relevant activity or become suitably related); if individual *a* is, but individual *d* is not, one of *a*, *b*, *c*, then arguably *a* cannot cease to be, and *d* cannot become, one of *a*, *b*, *c* (i.e., arguably, pluralities cannot change members over time); and distinct pluralities cannot consist of the same members (mutual inclusion) on pain of becoming identical (e.g. Oliver & Smiley, 2016: p. 109).⁴

If we identify social groups with *sets* of individuals, difficulties arise with (2), (3), (4), and (5). Again, taking the issues in turn, we can point out that: sets are traditionally conceived of as abstract; a set of individuals {*a*, *b*, *c*} exists irrespective of how the elements *a*, *b*, *c* are related; sets are not changeable entities; and distinct sets cannot have the same elements.⁵

Finally, if we identify social groups with *fusions* (mereological sums) of individuals, (3), (4), and (5) are problematic: a fusion of individuals typically exists before the relevant individuals are suitably related; a fusion of individuals, as standardly conceived, cannot change summands over time; and distinct fusions of individuals cannot consist of the same parts.⁶

⁴ There has been a series of responses the last few years to these issues from defenders of groups-as-pluralities (Uzquiano 2018; Horden and López de Sa 2021; Wilhelm 2022). The responses all involve rejecting thesis (1). Theses (3), (4) and (5) are defended in various ways. For example, Horden and López de Sa (2021) defend theses (4) by arguing that names for social groups (such as ‘the U.S. Supreme Court’) tend to be *flexible* as opposed to *rigid*, and are thus akin to definite descriptions. Their being flexible allows us, according to Horden and López de Sa, to say, *truly*, that the U.S. Supreme Court used to include other people, even though the name, on their view, picks out a mere plurality (distinct pluralities at distinct times). The proposal is interesting, but it seems to me that Horden and López de Sa could just as well argue that it is true to say that the U.S. President has existed for over two hundred years although the U.S. President used to be someone else. Wilhelm (2022) defends (4) by invoking temporal counterpart relations, and (5) by arguing that metaphysically identical groups can be characterised, truly, as distinct in ordinary English. It seems to me that the latter view forces Wilhelm to hold that co-membered pluralities do not obey extensionality principles when spoken of in ordinary English – an odd consequence of the theory. Uzquiano (2018) develops a technically advanced theory of social groups as ‘variable plural embodiments’ which allows for member change as well as coinciding groups. It is not evident, however, that his theory can be counted as a strict groups-as-pluralities theory, as it distinguishes between pure or bare pluralities (roughly, pluralities as ordinarily understood), rigid plural embodiments (pluralities *qua* qualified by a plural condition) and variable plural embodiments *constituted* by distinct rigid plural embodiments at distinct times (Uzquiano here draws extensively on Fine’s 1999 theory of qua-objects, rigid and variable embodiments – understood as single objects – and constitution; cf. also Fine 2020.) Uzquiano’s theory therefore appears to be closer to the ontological dependence accounts (discussed below) than it is to traditional strict-reduction-to-pure-pluralities accounts (cf. Horden and López de Sa 2021: 10261).

⁵ But see Effingham (2010) for an elaborate defence of setism; for responses, see Ritchie (2013) and my (2014c).

⁶ Hawley (2017) has recently argued that putatively distinct but coinciding social groups, conceived of as fusions, should in fact be identified. Just as a single individual can fill different *roles* (e.g., in 2015 Boris Johnson was both mayor of London and member of Parliament for Uxbridge), so a single social group can fill different roles (e.g., one and the same group can be both the board of the Massachusetts Department of Transportation and the board of the Massachusetts Department Authority – a supposedly actual example of ‘coinciding groups’). On this reductive view, thesis (5) is a false proposition (see also Horden and López de Sa 2021 who borrow this response for pluralities). However, as I have pointed out elsewhere (see Hansson Wahlberg 2014c), the individual and social group cases are not analogous. An individual social role predicate such as ‘is mayor of London’ expresses, in Wiggins’s terminology, a

3 Difficulties for Ontological Dependence Theories

The problems outlined above have led many social ontologists to suggest that social groups should be characterised as entities *composed of*, or *grounded in*, or *constituted* by pluralities/sets/fusions of (interrelated) individuals (typically, by distinct pluralities/sets/fusions at distinct times), and that the various ontological dependence relations should be treated as distinct from *n*-adic identity relations (e.g. Uzquiano, 2004; Sawyer, 2005; Baker, 2007, 2019; List & Pettit, 2011; Hindriks, 2013; Lawson, 2013; Elder-Vass, 2014; Ritchie, 2013, 2020; Epstein, 2015, 2019; Fine, 2020; Passinsky, 2021).⁷

However, ontological dependence theories of social groups have their own difficulties. Again, the literature contains extensive discussion of these, and the aim of my summary is only to give a sense of the issues, in order to motivate search for alternatives.⁸ As before, more detailed comments are relegated to footnotes.

- (a) *Ontological dependence theories are not ontologically parsimonious.* Apart from individuals who may engage in certain activities and stand in certain relations (and perhaps sets or fusions of such individuals), such theories postulate entities (social groups) which are numerically distinct from, and hence *additional* to, the suitably interrelated individuals (or sets/fusions thereof). *Ceteris paribus*, we should prefer ontologically simple theories.⁹

Footnote 6 (continued)

phased-sortal (Wiggins 2001: 30). It is not associated with persistence conditions for entities of the ‘sort’ in question; it merely expresses a *phase* in the object’s career. Social group predicates, on the other hand, typically express sortals that *are* associated with persistence conditions for entities of the sort in question. Thus, while satisfying ‘is a mayor’ is straightforwardly compatible with simultaneously satisfying ‘is a member of Parliament’, satisfying ‘is the board of X’ may very well be incompatible with simultaneously satisfying ‘is the board of Y’, e.g. where Xs and Ys are governed by *distinct* persistence conditions. (However, if Xs and Ys persist by ‘exduring’, i.e. by standing in X-counterpart and Y-counterpart relations to other Xs and Ys, this problem can be mitigated; see my 2014c, 2019a; cf. Hawley 2001, Sider 2001, Wilhelm 2022.) An additional, serious obstacle to the identification of coinciding groups is that laws, or other relevant regulations, may simply *decree* – and thereby make it *true* – that the relevant groups are numerically distinct (cf. my 2019a: 4975). The deflationary truthmakers account of social groups developed below can make full sense of such declarations, but traditional mereological (but also set-theoretical and plural) accounts cannot, since on them social groups are brute objects characterised by brute principles such as the extensionality principle. (However, defenders of such accounts might try to follow Wilhelm 2022 and maintain that groups that are metaphysically identical can nevertheless be truly described as distinct in ordinary English.)

⁷ Standardly, constitution is taken to be an asymmetric one-one relation, while composition is taken to be an asymmetric many-one relation; grounding can be either one-one or many-one depending on the case. Sometimes the non-reductive position is formulated in terms of supervenient or emergent properties which are instantiated by a social group but instantiated neither individually nor collectively by the individuals who are members of the group.

⁸ For detailed discussions, see e.g. Zimmerman (2002), Effingham (2010), Hansson Wahlberg (2011, 2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2020, 2021), List and Spiekermann (2013), Epstein (2019), Passinsky (2021). Some of these discussions focus on artifacts and social entities in general, but they can be extrapolated to social groups as well.

⁹ Admittedly, defenders of dependence theories sometimes claim that dependent entities are ‘nothing over and above’ what they depend on (see McLaughlin and Bennett 2021 for an overview). But if dependent entities are indeed supposed to be *non-identical* with their bases, this locution makes little

- (b) *In effect, such theories postulate a level of being over and above the individualistic level.* On this view, there is one level consisting of (suitably related) individuals; ‘on top’ of that level there is another consisting of social groups numerically distinct from the individuals on the first level. If social groups in their turn are said to compose/constitute/ground higher level social groups or social entities, even higher levels are postulated.¹⁰ (And if fusions are postulated, there will be a level in between the individualistic level and the social-group level.) Among other things, this levelled ontology creates a causal exclusion problem in the social realm, analogous to the much-discussed causal exclusion problem in the philosophy of mind (cf. Kim, 2005).¹¹
- (c) Such theories entail that new ontic entities¹² (social groups) begin to exist in the world—at a level ‘higher up’ than the level of pre-existing individuals—when the individuals in question engage in certain activities, or become suitably interrelated or related to an appropriate external phenomenon. For example, a street band comes into existence as a new higher-level ontic entity when several individuals start playing instruments in a coordinated way on a street. A book club comes into existence as a new higher-level ontic entity when several individuals start thinking of each other as belonging to a common book club. And a faculty committee comes into existence as new higher-level ontic entity when the appropriate process of appointing has taken place at the relevant university. *But it is just incredible that new higher-level things (social groups) can ‘pop’*

Footnote 9 (continued)

sense. I agree fully with Audi’s verdict (although he himself defends grounding): ‘grounded facts and ungrounded facts are equally real, and grounded facts are an “addition of being” over and above the facts in which they are grounded.’ (Audi 2012: 101) Likewise, I think Schaffer is correct when he says: ‘In Quinean terms, whatever supervenes is an addition to being in the only available sense – it is an additional entry on the list of beings.’ (Schaffer 2009: 253) On the orthodox view, *ceteris paribus*, this list of beings should be as short as possible (Ockham’s Razor). However, it is sometimes suggested by defenders of dependent entities that Ockham’s Razor should be replaced by *The Laser*: ‘Do not multiply fundamental entities without necessity’ (e.g. Schaffer 2015: 647). The Laser does not rule against promiscuous postulation of dependent entities, even if they are taken to be additions of being (as they should). But this controversial, alternative principle has been thoroughly criticised in recent literature (see e.g. Da Vee 2020; Thunder 2021). Thus, I hold (following Effingham 2010 and others) that it is reasonable to criticise dependence theories for being ontologically uneconomical (in line with Ockham’s Razor) if there are other theories that can account for the ‘data’ (in the case of social groups: thesis (1)–(5), in Sect. 2) with a simpler ontology. In Sect. 4, I suggest that a deflationary truthmakers account may very well be able to do this in relation to social groups. Below, in this Sect., I mention further issues with the dependence approach to social groups.

¹⁰ See e.g. the diagrams in Sawyer (2005: 70), Schaffer (2009: 355), Elder-Vass (2010: 50), Forsyth (2019: 36).

¹¹ For discussion, see e.g. my (2014a), (2014b) and (2020). List and Spiekerman (2013) try to neutralise the exclusion argument, as applied to social phenomena, by adopting a proportionality approach to causation (cf. Yablo 1992; List and Menzies 2009). However, this approach has the counterintuitive consequence that when putative higher-level phenomena, such as social groups, allegedly cause effects, their bases or realisers (in the case of social groups: individuals) do *not* cause the relevant effects (even though they are agreed to be causally sufficient for the effects). For critical discussion of the proportionality approach, see Beebe et al. (2017: 9) and my (2022).

¹² On the standard Quinean view: values of variables bound by the objectual existential quantifier. For further discussion of ‘ontic entities’, see below (Sect. 4).

- into existence in the external world simply because individuals begin to play instruments, think of each other in a certain way, or perform certain declarative speech acts.* Worse, such creations may even involve backwards causation or generation, at least in the case of appointments, if the relevant speech acts or act are performed with a retroactive force: for example, if it is declared, at some time t_1 , that individuals a, b, c, \dots , are to be members of a specific group (a faculty committee, say) from time t_0 (where t_0 is before t_1).¹³
- (d) The persistence of social groups seems often to be partly a matter of convention or decision. The faculty committee is a striking example: whether such a committee, created in the past, still exists after, say, a membership change, may depend on what is stated in the relevant regulation (and this may differ between different faculties/universities, and even across time within one faculty/university) or on what further speech acts are performed by some relevant authorised person/s at the university in question.¹⁴ *But the notion that the persistence of an ontic entity can be a matter of convention is highly dubious.*¹⁵ This is so whether ontic objects persist by enduring, exduring or perduring. If ontic objects persist by enduring (by being wholly present at distinct times as numerically the same entity) their persistence can hardly be a matter of convention as the identity relation is arguably an *internal* relation that holds of necessity (if it holds). Likewise, if they persist by exduring (by having distinct temporal counterparts at distinct times) their persistence can hardly be a matter convention as the temporal counterpart relation, an external relation, cannot plausibly be stipulated into existence—irrespective of whether it is a non-supervenient relation à la Hawley (2001) or a relation that supervenes on spatiotemporal, causal and similarity relations à la Sider (2001). Finally, if ontic objects persist by perduring (by having distinct temporal parts at distinct times) their persistence can hardly be a matter of convention: four-dimensional aggregates of temporal parts simply have the spatiotemporal extensions that they have—these cannot be legislated at will.¹⁶

¹³ At my own university, retroactive appointments are a commonplace (certainly so in the case of individual statuses or roles), although the time interval in question typically is no longer than a few weeks. For general critical discussion of composite things coming into existence, see van Inwagen (1990). For critical discussions of the notion that ontic objects can be thought/declared into existence, see Sider (2001: 157), Zimmerman (2002) and Effingham (2010); for a replies, see Baker (2007: 43–47) and Passinsky (2021). For the addition of temporal complications (including ones based on relativistic considerations), see my (2019b; 2021). Silver (2022) welcomes backwards causation in the social realm, but he acknowledges that non-ontic renderings of social phenomena avoid such commitments.

¹⁴ See e.g. Epstein (2019).

¹⁵ See my (2011: 514–520) for detailed discussion.

¹⁶ One can try to explain away ostensible conventional group-persistence by maintaining (following Sider 2001, Ch. 5; Lowe 2005; my 2011: 520–525) that, when we settle issues about group persistence in one way rather than another, we are merely deciding to pick out (given endurantism/perdurantism), in the specific case, one ontic referent among others (i.e., one groupish three/four-dimensional object among other available groupish three/four-dimensional objects), or (given exdurantism) one temporal groupish-counterpart relation among other available groupish-counterpart relations (cf. Faller 2021). However, a further option (hinted at in my 2011: 509) is to hold that *there are no ontic referents* for our social-group names – and that this moreover enables us to conventionally stipulate, e.g. concerning a ‘faculty committee’, that ‘it’ has ‘persisted’ over a certain time interval (given that other conditions obtain in the world). In view of the other difficulties that afflict ontic conceptions of social groups (as canvassed in Sect. 2–3),

4 An Unexplored Alternative: The Deflationary Truthmakers Approach

It would be valuable, then, to develop an alternative account of social groups – one that does not involve reductive identification *and* avoids the problems besetting ontological dependence theories. I will now argue that a deflationary truthmakers account can fill this role.

The starting point of the deflationary approach is the general idea, often endorsed by truthmaker theorists (e.g. Armstrong, 2004: pp. 32–34), that many of the statements or propositions that we take to be true are made true by entities or facts quite different from those we expect (when, at least, we take the statements at face value). The statements or propositions have *deflationary truthmakers* – i.e., truthmakers that do not, at first sight, look fully ‘dressed up’ for the occasion, but which nevertheless suffice to make the relevant statement true (ibid.: p. 33). A few examples will illustrate the general idea.

Truthmaker B-theorists (e.g. Mellor, 1998) maintain that although tensed statements like ‘Ann ran yesterday’ appear to be made true by A-facts involving temporal A-properties (such as *being one day past*), they are in fact made true by B-facts involving temporal B-relations (relations such as *being before/after/simultaneous with*) and no A-properties. Similarly, truthmaker categoricists (e.g. Armstrong, 2004) assert that while dispositional statements like ‘this material is corrosive’ seem to be made true by the subject’s possession of a dispositional property or power, they are actually made true by the subject’s instantiation of an intrinsically inert categorical property governed by contingent laws of nature. Deflationists about rainbows (as we may call them) hold that statements like ‘there is a rainbow east of us’ are made true, not by rainbows, but by sunlight-reflecting raindrops (e.g. Mellor, 2009/2012, who strictly speaking claims that rainbow statements are made true ‘indirectly’ by sunlight-reflecting raindrops, ibid.: p. 104). And truthmaker deflationists about macroscopic objects and properties in general, maintain that the statements that look as if they are made true by such entities, such as ‘this brick is rectangular’, are in fact made true by fundamental particles arranged in certain ways (e.g. Cameron, 2008, 2010).¹⁷ If these philosophers are right, the relevant truths do not entail that there

Footnote 16 (continued)

this is the alternative I seek to develop in this paper, in the form of a deflationary truthmakers account of social groups (see below, Sect. 4).

¹⁷ Cameron (2008, 2010) does not explicitly use the term ‘deflationary truthmakers’, but I read him as implicitly endorsing the Armstrongian notion (although Cameron criticises Armstrong for some pre-2004 claims). Cameron puts the idea this way: ‘I think one of the benefits of truthmaker theory is to allow that $\langle x \text{ exists} \rangle$ might be made true by something other than x [...] $\langle \text{the sum of } a, b \text{ and } c \text{ exists} \rangle$ might be made true by some thing(s) other than the sum of a, b and c : it might simply be made true by a, b and c [...] The claim, then, is that complex objects exist [i.e., the proposition that they exist is true] but don’t really exist [i.e., they do not exist ontologically]: what really exists are simply the simples.’ (Cameron 2008: 4, 5, 6) See also Heil (2003, 2012), although he is less clear and forthright about the ontic status of macro-phenomena (e.g. Heil 2003: 189; 2012: 163–168). I should clarify that I am using these various truthmaking theories merely as examples of the general idea. I am not endorsing all of the specific applications. (In fact, I am sympathetic to powers theories when applied to physical objects, but not when

are, in an ontological or ontic sense, any A-properties, powers, rainbows, or even any macroscopic objects and properties. Thus, truthmakers need not exactly ‘mirror’ the content of the truths in question (cf. Heil, 2003: p. 189). An alternative way of expressing this point is to maintain that truthmaker theories are not committed to ‘truth as correspondence’ – not even in relation to positive, contingent truths (see Mellor, 2009/2012 and David, 2022 for further discussion).¹⁸

In what follows, I shall assume for the sake of convenience that there really are macroscopic objects and individuals, instantiating properties and relations ‘out there’ in an ontic sense (what this amounts to will be discussed below—for a brief, initial explanation, see note 12 above). These entities will be among the suggested truthmakers for truths about social groups. However, in principle I am open (see my 2014b) to the idea that, in the end, we should only refer to fundamental particles or fields as truthmakers—although this is certainly not practically possible at the moment (at least, not for me, given my very limited knowledge of the relevant physics and the workings of our brains, or of the entities ‘arranged brainwise’).

In very rough outline, then, what I propose is this. I begin with thesis (3), the idea (or Moorean truth) that social groups begin to exist when individuals engage in certain activities, or are suitably interrelated or related to an appropriate external phenomenon. Using the examples of social groups I gave earlier, I suggest the following. When several individuals start playing music in a coordinated way on a street, or start thinking of each other as members of a book club, or are elected and appointed in accordance with the relevant rules and regulations at a faculty/university, it becomes true to *say*, respectively: ‘A street band has been formed [or created]’, ‘A book club has been formed [or created]’ and ‘A faculty committee has been formed [or created]’. The truthmakers for such statements, however, are not new ontic objects that have, as it were, popped into existence in the external world—a street band, a book club, a faculty committee—over and above the relevant related individuals. The deflationary truthmakers are simply these individuals, as they perform certain actions (playing their instruments on a street) or enter into certain states of mind (think of each other as members of a book club). Where statements about the creation of formal groups such as faculty committees are concerned, the relevant truthmakers also include, I suggest, formal regulations and the relevant speech acts (e.g. acts of voting and appointing). In these latter cases, the time of the relevant ‘creation’ and the times of the relevant speech acts may be separated by (quite considerable) time intervals. Further, the time of the ‘creation’ may even *predate* the times of the relevant speech acts, making it true to speak of ‘retroactive creation’.

Footnote 17 (continued)

applied to social objects; see my 2014a, 2014b, 2020. I do defend a truthmaking version of the B-theory in my 2009.).

¹⁸ Truthmaker theorists often deny ‘maximalism’ – the view that every truth has a truthmaker (it may be denied, e.g., that negative and certain necessary truths have truthmakers). The point here, however, is that even when truths *are* thought to have truthmakers, the relevant truthmakers need only be, in Armstrong’s terminology, ‘deflationary’. (I should mention, though, that Armstrong 2004:16–17 somewhat confusingly maintains that truthmaker theories nevertheless are a species of correspondence theories – but this labelling is explicitly rejected, rightly so, by others, such as Mellor 2009/2012: 100.)

But since no ontic object is retroactively brought into being in such cases, no backwards causation is involved.¹⁹

Plausibly the proposed deflationary truthmakers would need to be supplemented with further material to be collectively sufficient for truth, but whatever has to be added here (internal and external norms might be candidates, cf. Thomasson, 2019), the central idea is that *irreducible ontic social groups do not have to be the truthmakers*.²⁰

Turning to some clarifying, basic formalism, I would defend the following. Suppose we paraphrase a true ordinary language statement such as ‘A book club has now been formed’, made at time t_1 , along the lines of ‘ $(\exists x)(Fx \wedge Lxt_1 \wedge \neg Lxt_0)$ ’ (where $F = _is\ a\ book\ club\ with\ such\ and\ such\ features$, and $L = _is\ located\ at\ time_$, and t_0 is an arbitrary time before t_1).²¹ On my view, the formalised version is *false*, given the *objectual* or *referential* interpretation of the existential quantifier (e.g. Quine, 1948/1980), simply because there are no F -objects to quantify over, at any time, in the objectual/referential (or, as I would put it, ontic) sense. Alternatively put: no F -entity can be reckoned as value of the variable ‘ x ’.²² However, if a *substitutional* interpretation of the quantifier is adopted (e.g. Marcus, 1972/1993; Kripke, 1976; in which case the symbol ‘ Σ ’ is often used), the formalised version *does* express a truth, given that there is a *true* substitution instance of the form ‘ $Fa \wedge Lat_1 \ \& \ \neg Lat_0$ ’, as the existential quantifier, on this reading, says that there is (the formal language in question is assumed to have a suitable stock of names). The truthmakers for such a substitution instance are, I suggest, of the kind described above – they are individuals thinking of each other as members of a book club. Thus, on the view defended here, the term ‘ a ’, in such a substitution instance, does not refer to an ontic referent, a ; nevertheless, the substitution instance is *true*, given that it has *deflationary truthmakers* of the kind described.²³

¹⁹ At least, not of a sparse kind – see below for a clarification of the notion of ‘sparse causation’ (and my 2022 for a more detailed account).

²⁰ In interesting respects, the account is not, in fact, very different from Thomasson’s theory of social groups (see in particular Thomasson 2019: 4831) which relies on the fulfilment of *application conditions* (which could in principle be deflationary) for social group *terms* such as ‘committee’ and ‘book club’. (Thomasson also discusses terms such as ‘women’ and ‘gay men’, but these are not usually regarded as social group terms – cf. note 1 above). However, Thomasson is critical of truthmaking theories (see e.g. her 2014 and 2020; but see Cameron 2020 for a response), and she does not invoke a distinction between objectual and substitutional quantification (and a corresponding distinction between ontic and merely-truly-spoken-of objects) as I do below.

²¹ The formalisation could also be used as a paraphrase of an ordinary language declaration expressing retroactive creation: a HoD, say, may implicitly or explicitly declare (e.g., by signing a certain document) at t_2 (where t_2 is later than t_1) ‘A departmental committee consisting of individuals a , b and c , is hereby taken to have been formed at t_1 ’.

²² Cf. Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment: ‘To be assumed as an entity is, purely and simply, to be reckoned as the value of a variable.’ (Quine 1948/1980: 13).

²³ An alternative way of making the distinction I am after would perhaps be to say that if we use the fundamental existential quantifier in ‘Ontologese’ (i.e., in the strict ontic language used by philosophers in the ‘metaphysics room’: e.g. Sider 2011: 202) and say that there are social groups, we say something *false*; but if we say there are social groups using a mere Hirschian quantifier (Hirsch 2002), we say something *true*. However, it seems to me that the classic distinction between objectual and substitutional interpretations of the quantifiers fits better with the core idea of this paper that social groups are not ontic entities.

Thus, when, in ordinary language or social-scientific discourse, we say that a social group was created at a certain time, the claim should, if we want to formalise it, be paraphrased and interpreted along the latter, substitutional lines. Of course, often actual substitution instances are lacking²⁴ because no one has produced them (i.e., uttered or written them down—the putative group may even lack a name). But this is compatible with what I am suggesting. The commitment of an ordinary-language or social-scientific claim to the effect that a certain social group has been created should not be taken to be to *actual* ordinary/scientific-language names and substitution instances. We should merely be taken to be committed to the notion that we *could* have introduced a name, ‘*G*’ say, for ‘the created group’ in question (even if we did not actually do so) which would have allowed us to say—*truly* (given the deflationary truthmakers)—‘*G* is a book club which...’. Further, the idea is that if we *were* to formalise this original claim and the appropriate substitution instances, a formal language explicitly containing substitutional first-order quantifiers and a suitable stock of names and predicates should be used (or developed).²⁵

I should perhaps highlight that my invocation of substitutional quantification sets me apart from standard truthmaker theorists. The typical truthmaker theorist does not make use of the distinction between objectual and substitutional quantifiers. I think, however, that this distinction helps to clarify how there can be existential truths about entities that do not ‘really’ exist (as, e.g., Cameron, 2008: 6 and Mellor, 2009/2012: 99 put it). Entities that do not ‘really’ exist are not ontic entities—they cannot be quantified over using objectual/referential existential quantifiers (\exists). But, there may nevertheless be existential truths (such as ‘There are book clubs’) ‘about’ non-ontic entities – these truths, however, should be formalised in terms of substitutional existential quantifiers (Σ), and are made true by deflationary truthmakers.²⁶

Next, thesis (2), the idea (or Moorean truth) that social groups are spatiotemporally located. I have already indicated what makes it true to *say*, in ordinary English, that a social group has been created (and thus can be said to be located) in time: the deflationary truthmakers are, at least partly, suitably related individuals that exist in time. The relevant, related individuals are also, I suggest, deflationary truthmakers for statements about the relevant group’s spatial location(s). For example, what makes it true to say ‘The book club is currently gathered at Elm Street’ is that a sufficient number of members of the club have congregated at Elm Street; and what

²⁴ Unless Platonism about language (or propositions) is true. Platonism about language is quite widely endorsed by philosophers (see Balaguer 2016 for an overview).

²⁵ In my (2023), I invoke second-order substitutional existential quantifiers to interpret ordinary-language claims about creation of institutional and social properties.

²⁶ In the philosophy of properties, it is quite common to distinguish between ‘ontic’ properties (universals or tropes) and mere ‘predicatory’ properties (true predications) – see e.g. Bird (2016). (This distinction stems from Lewis’s 1986: 59–69 distinction between sparse and abundant properties, although Lewis construed abundant properties set-nominalistically.) The view defended in this paper has much in common with this approach, but is generalised to objects and explicitly invokes substitutional quantification.

makes it true to say ‘The book club is currently dispersed all over the city’ is that enough members of the club are currently in locations all over the city; and so on.²⁷

On to thesis (4), the view (or Moorean truth) that social groups can change members over time. What are the truthmakers for particular statements about group-persistence through member-change? Since social groups are not genuine ontic entities on a deflationary truthmakers view, it is up to us to legislate ‘their’ persistence conditions. Such declarations (in their various forms, see below) are key truthmakers, I suggest, for statements about a particular social group’s persistence, including statements about its persistence through member change. The kind of persistence-statements I have in mind are simply common or garden statements such as ‘the group still exists’ and ‘the group has lasted a long time’. They are ordinary language statements which do not commit the speaker to a specific metaphysical view of persistence such as endurantism, exdurantism or perdurantism.

Consider the faculty committees, for example. These are formal groups whose persistence conditions—as noted above, and as pointed out by Epstein (2019)—often are governed by formal regulations at the relevant faculty or university (unless they are simply stipulated, on a case-by-case basis, by singular acts of declaration by some authorised person: for example, by way of a signature on a certain document expressing that a specific group is still active, although original members have been replaced). Epstein appears to think of the relevant regulation as an ‘anchor’ (his term) which determines the worldly persistence (including persistence through member change) of faculty committees, where those committees are understood as genuine, constituted, ontic entities. By contrast, on the view I am advancing here, the regulation is simply a truthmaker—along with the relevant worldly states of affairs ensuring that the persistence conditions stated in the regulation are fulfilled – of true *statements* about the relevant faculty committee’s persistence.²⁸

Of course, book clubs do not generally operate under regulations. Their persistence conditions are in effect decided upon informally, and somewhat circularly, by the members of the putative group itself (cf. Forsyth, 2019: p. 14). I suggest, then, that, what makes it true to say that a certain book club still exists following, say, a minor membership change is, at least in unexceptional cases, that a sufficient number of those who founded it, or some of the more influential individuals within the group, think of, or represent, certain contemporary individuals *as* members of the

²⁷ Does the so-called Location Problem in social ontology (Ruben 1985: 54; Hindriks 2013) show that this account cannot be correct? Ruben pointed out that the members of an organisation like the Red Cross can be located in a certain country without the organisation being located there. However, arguably, the Location Problem only applies to social entities like organisations, corporations and universities – it does not apply to social groups (Ruben 1985: 55 and Hindriks 2013: 416). If this is correct, street bands, book clubs and faculty committees cannot truly be said to have locations that differ from the locations of their members.

²⁸ Interestingly, Epstein suggests that some such regulations may simply decree that a faculty committee (at the relevant university) still exists if the committee has not been actively *disbanded* through some act. If this is correct, a statement like ‘faculty committee *a* still exists’ can be made true by the relevant regulation plus the absence of a disbanding act. In other words, as long as ‘*a* no longer exists’ is not true (because it does not have a truthmaker, a disbanding act) an utterance of ‘*a* still exists’ is true (cf. Mellor 2009/2012).

original book club, and thus think of the club as still existing despite the membership change – i.e. they accept that ‘it’ now consists of *these* individuals.

Spontaneously formed street bands are a little different.²⁹ Their persistence conditions are arguably established neither by formal regulation nor by their own members’ attitudes. The musicians here may simply be cheerful individuals who spontaneously start jamming at a city festival without knowing each other. The persistence conditions of such street bands appear to be specified—to the extent that they are—by how we in general tend to think and speak of such spontaneously formed social groups. I suspect our fairly unreflective practices here leave the persistence conditions of spontaneously formed street bands quite indeterminate. (Similar vagueness may characterise faculty committees and book clubs if the relevant regulation or the member-attitudes leave the persistence conditions indeterminate.) Thus, if a number of individuals in a spontaneously formed street band are replaced, or if the musicians have begun to walk in opposite directions, there may simply be no fact of the matter whether the original band still exists: that is, it may be indeterminate whether a statement to this effect is true. Suppose, however, that a statement with this content is definitely true on a specific occasion because the vague persistence conditions are clearly met. Then I suggest that the deflationary truthmakers will include—apart from the relevant background linguistic behaviour itself—the individuals and events that meet the conditions set up by the linguistic behaviour: for example, music-playing individuals at an appropriate spatial distance from each other, most of whom participated in the original ‘formation’ of the band. We do not need to postulate an irreducible ontic street band that has succeeded in enduring/exduring/perduring over the time interval in question as a truthmaker.

What about the claim of thesis (or Moorean truth) (1) that social groups are single things or units? When we conceptualise social groups as entities with persistence conditions that differ from those of pluralities—e.g., conditions allowing them to change members—we automatically construe them as single entities or units. Thus, I propose that among the deflationary truthmakers for a particular statement of the form ‘social group *G* is a single thing’ we find—apart from the several members of the group and their relations—the factors that are deflationary truthmakers for statements about *G*’s persistence conditions. As we have seen, where the faculty committee, book club and street band are concerned these factors include relevant regulations, speech acts, background linguistic behaviour and member-attitudes.

Finally, thesis (5), the idea (or Moorean truth) that distinct social groups can have the same members at the same time, even permanently. Here we can be very brief, I think. It will be true to say that the relevant co-membered groups are distinct if it is true to say either that they were ‘formed’ at distinct times (and here an account of the type outlined above, regarding thesis (3), can be applied) or that they are governed by distinct rules or norms (where the truthmakers may be distinct codes,

²⁹ I emphasize that these are *spontaneously* formed street bands. With this emphasis, I mean to stress that the groups are *highly* informal and therefore (as I see it) differ interestingly from informal social groups such as book clubs.

statutes, by-laws, attitudes, mental representations, linguistic behaviours, etc., as the case might be).

My contention is, then, that the deflationary truthmakers approach to social groups is compatible with all of theses (or Moorean truths) (1–5), as well as being free of the difficulties afflicting ontological dependence theories.

5 Objections

At this point, someone who endorses the Eleatic Principle that (roughly speaking) to be is to make a causal difference (see Plato's *Sophist*, 247e) may object as follows. Social groups are characterised as *causal* both in colloquial speech and in the social sciences. But to be causal social groups need to be real in the *ontic* sense, since it is the ontic sense of being with which the Eleatic Principle is concerned – at least, that is how modern metaphysicians and social ontologists typically understand the principle (see e.g. Armstrong, 2004: pp. 37–38—although he makes little explicit use of '∃').

My response: not so quick! Elsewhere I have argued at length that we should distinguish between what I call 'sparse causation' and 'mere abundant causation' (Hansson Wahlberg 2022). Sparse causation is realised in the form of worldly processes that connect cause and effect, understood as ontic entities. Possible examples of it include physical interactions and the propagation of physical quantities (e.g. Salmon, 1984 and Dowe, 2000). Mere abundant causation obtains if a causal *statement* is *true* but the (putative) causal relata spoken of are *not* connected by some appropriate physical process (at least, not at the level in question). Examples of mere abundant causation include cases of negative causation. In these cases the 'absence' of something is often truly said to be a cause, as is the case in 'the gardener's failure to water the flowers caused the flowers to wither' (see e.g. Schaffer, 2004).

The Eleatic Principle, if accepted, should be confined to *sparse* causation. Otherwise, given that there are causal truths involving absences, it will entail that absences are ontic entities (which is clearly problematic: see Mumford & Anjum, 2011 and my 2022 for discussion). And the account of social groups I have sketched is fully compatible with the idea that, although the *members* of social groups may participate in causal relationships of sparse kinds, social groups as such only participate in causal relationships of *mere abundant* kinds. To resist the Eleatic argument, therefore, we can accept that there may be causal *truths* about social groups, but point out that these truths do not have to correspond to any causal relationships of a sparse kind at some putative level of ontic social groups.³⁰

³⁰ Consider, for example, statements such as 'The book club left the room in a mess' and 'The faculty committee changed the rules about dissertations' (thanks to an anonymous reviewer for suggesting I address these). Such statements may plausibly be held to be causal (but see my 2020 for doubt about the causal status of the second kind), and specific instances of them may very well be *true*. But the (deflationary) truthmakers for such statements are arguably simply individuals and their – presumably, sparse – causal activities: book club members who move furniture around or throw garbage on the floor (in the first kind of case), and committee members who, after discussion, vote to change the rules about dissertations (in the second kind of case). (See below for further discussion of group judgments and group decisions.) If one holds that such statements are *also* made true by sparse causal processes at the level of

A second objection to the deflationary truthmakers account of social groups refers to rational group judgments (including group decisions) that may differ from what the majority of the relevant individuals would individually judge on the issue.³¹ Suppose three individuals agree, or are obliged, to adopt a *premise-based* procedure when forming a collective judgment on a proposition (in effect, a conclusion) of the form ‘*p* and *q*’. Assume further that the premises simply are ‘*p*’ and ‘*q*’, and that individual 1 judges that ‘*p*’ is true and that ‘*q*’ is true, individual 2 judges that ‘*p*’ is true and that ‘*q*’ is false, and individual 3 judges that ‘*p*’ is false and that ‘*q*’ is true. A majority of the individuals (i.e., individuals 2 and 3, assuming that they are rational) will judge, individually, that the conclusion, ‘*p* and *q*’, is *false*. However, given that they have agreed to follow a premise-based procedure where the collective judgment on the conclusion is determined by how a majority of the individuals judge each of the premises, the collective judgment will be that the conclusion is *true* (since a majority think ‘*p*’ is true and a majority think ‘*q*’ is true). Thus, the collective judgement, on the premise-based procedure, will be that the conclusion is true even though a majority of the individuals think it is false. But – and this is the advantage of the procedure – with the premise-based procedure, the collective judgements on the premises and the conclusion will be internally consistent. The collective judgements could of course have been formed *proposition-wise*: collective judgements on the premises could have been made first, based on the individual judgements of the premises, and then a separate and additional judgement on the conclusion could have been made, based on the individual judgements of the conclusion. But then the collective judgements would have been inconsistent: the premises would have been judged true, but the conclusion false, despite the conclusion’s following from the premises. By adopting a premise-based procedure, the three individuals will judge and behave, collectively, as a rational, unified, autonomous agent (List & Pettit, 2011: pp. 69–70, pp. 76–78).

How does this bear on the topic of this paper? Some may think that in cases like this, we are forced to postulate social groups (even ‘groups with minds of their own’, *ibid.*: pp. 77–78) as truthmakers for statements such as ‘the group judged that the conclusion is true’. They may claim that we should therefore be ontic realists about groups (cf. *ibid.*: pp. 5–6). However, as far as I can see, the cases simply do not require us to postulate ontic social groups. To return to the example above, the truthmakers for the proposition ‘the group judged that the conclusion “*p* and *q*” is true’ are simply the individuals’ judgements on the premises (‘*p*’ and ‘*q*’) together

Footnote 30 (continued)

irreducible ontic social groups, then one faces a causal exclusion problem (see above Sect. 3; for detailed discussions, see my 2014a, 2014b and 2020). (Again, I’m open to the possibility that the fundamental truthmakers in fact are sparse causal processes among entities yet ‘further down’; see above Sect. 4 and my 2014b and 2022.)

³¹ For detailed discussion of such ‘autonomous’ group judgements in response to so-called ‘discursive dilemmas’, see List and Pettit (2011: 8, 45, 70).

with their acceptance – or the externally decreed ruling – of the premise-based procedure.³²

Finally, let me mention recently published criticism of the kind of view defended in this paper. In response to my truthmaker account of the creation and existence of corporations (see Hansson Wahlberg 2021), Asya Passinsky (2021) says that she largely agrees with the main points but that.

[the truthmaker view] should provide an account of what concrete social objects *are*, which elucidates why these things can be brought into existence by agreement and the like. The truthmaker view does not provide such an account, as its focus is on ordinary statements about social objects rather than the objects themselves. (Passinsky, 2021: p. 8)

I think this complaint misses the mark, since on the deflationary truthmakers approach to social objects, such as corporations and social groups, there are no social objects in an ontological sense. In other words, there can be no positive account of what they ‘*are*’ in a heavyweight sense. And it is precisely because they do not exist in an ontic sense that we should focus on ordinary *statements* about them, not ‘the objects themselves’. If we can provide a full and convincing account of what makes such statements *true* (including statements about how social objects are ‘brought into existence’) without having to postulate social objects as ontic entities, we will have done all that is required. In this paper on social groups, and in my earlier examination of corporations, my aim has been to explain, in a preliminary way, how deflationary truthmakers accounts of these two phenomena might be developed.

6 Conclusion

On the deflationary truthmakers approach to social groups there are no social groups in an ontic sense. There are nonetheless various *truths* about social groups. The deflationary truthmakers are essentially individuals doing various things and standing in various relations (sometimes to appropriate external phenomena). The approach is fully compatible with theses (or Moorean truths) (1)–(5). It also avoids

³² What bearing does the deflationary truthmakers account of social groups have on the issue of whether non-distributive moral responsibility can be allocated to social groups (cases where, allegedly, no member of ‘the group’ can be held morally responsible for the outcome in question, as in discursive dilemma-style examples)? (Thanks to a reviewer for asking me to comment on this.) I am inclined to think: very little bearing. Even if social groups *were* ontic entities (real, autonomous agents, in the terminology of List and Pettit 2011), it would make little sense, I surmise, to allocate non-distributive moral responsibility to social groups – here I am influenced by Szigeti’s (2020) critical discussion of the topic. Saying this, however, is not to claim that we should not hold *juridical persons* (a.k.a. ‘fictitious persons’), like corporations and universities, *legally* responsible for outcomes of actions performed by their employees/members, outcomes for which the employees/members may not be legally accountable. However, a full discussion of responsibility issues is beyond the scope of this paper. Here I am concerned with statements that clearly have a truth value, and it is not obvious that ascriptions of moral responsibility have truth values.

various issues that weaken ontological dependence accounts. For these reasons, I believe the deflationary truthmakers approach to social groups deserves to be further investigated by social ontologists.

Acknowledgements Early drafts of this paper were presented at the Higher Seminar in Theoretical Philosophy at Lund University in October 2021, and at the Social Ontology & Collective Intentionality conference at the University of Vienna in August 2022. Thanks to the audiences for valuable feedback. Special thanks go to two anonymous reviewers for *Erkenntnis* for their very helpful and constructive comments. I would also like to thank Lena Wahlberg and Hannes Hansson Wahlberg for stimulating discussion. The core ideas of this paper were developed while I was working on my project ‘Causation in the Social Domain’, funded by Riksbankens Jubileumsfond (Grant Number: P15-0744:1).

Funding Open access funding provided by Lund University. Riksbankens Jubileumsfond, P15-0744:1, Tobias Hansson Wahlberg.

Open Access This article is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons licence, and indicate if changes were made. The images or other third party material in this article are included in the article’s Creative Commons licence, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the article’s Creative Commons licence and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder. To view a copy of this licence, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

References

- Armstrong, D. M. (2004). *Truth and truthmakers*. Cambridge University Press.
- Audi, P. (2012). A clarification and defense of the notion of grounding. In F. Correia & B. Schnieder (Eds.), *Metaphysical grounding – understanding the structure of reality, 2012* (pp. 101–121). Cambridge University Press.
- Baker, L. R. (2007). *The metaphysics of everyday life*. Cambridge University Press.
- Baker, L. R. (2019). Just what is social ontology? *Journal of Social Ontology*, 5(1), 1–12.
- Balaguer, M., (2016). ‘Platonism in Metaphysics. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2016 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2016/entries/platonism/>.
- Beebe, H., Hitchcock, C., & Price, H. (Eds.). (2017). *Making a difference—essays on the philosophy of causation*. Oxford University Press.
- Bird, A. (2016). Overpowering: How the powers ontology has overreached itself. *Mind*, 125, 341–383.
- Cameron, R. (2008). Truthmakers and ontological commitment: Or how to deal with complex objects and mathematical ontology without getting into trouble. *Philosophical Studies*, 140(1), 1–18.
- Cameron, R. (2010). How to have a radically minimal ontology. *Philosophical Studies*, 151(2), 249–264.
- Cameron, R. (2020). Easy ontology, two-dimensionalism, and truthmaking. In K. Bennett & D. W. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Oxford studies in metaphysics* (Vol. 12, pp. 35–57). Oxford University Press.
- Copp, D. (1984). What collectives are: Agency, individualism and legal theory. *Dialogue*, 23(2), 249–269.
- Da Vee, D. (2020). Why Ockham’s Razor should be preferred to the laser. *Philosophical Studies*, 177(12), 3679–3694.
- David M., 2022, ‘The Correspondence Theory of Truth’, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2022/entries/truth-correspondence/>
- Dowe, P. (2000). *Physical causation*. Cambridge University Press.
- Effingham, N. (2010). The metaphysics of groups. *Philosophical Studies*, 149(2), 251–267.
- Elder-Vass, D. (2010). *The causal power of social structures*. Cambridge University Press.

- Elder-Vass, D. (2014). Redescription, reduction, and emergence: A response to Tobias Hansson Wahlberg. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 792–797.
- Epstein, B. (2015). *The ant trap: Rebuilding the foundations of the social sciences*. Oxford University Press.
- Epstein, B. (2019). What are social groups? Their metaphysics and how to classify them, *Synthese*, 196(12), 4899–4932.
- Faller, A. (2021). How groups persist. *Synthese*, 198(8), 7149–7163.
- Fine, K. (1999). Things and their parts. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 23(1), 61–74.
- Fine, K. (2020). The identity of social groups. *Metaphysics*, 3, 81–91.
- Forsyth, D. R. (2019). *Group dynamics* (7th ed.). Cengage.
- Gilbert, M. (1989). *On social facts*. Princeton University Press.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2009). *Objects in Time – Studies of Persistence in B-time*, dissertation, Lund: Media-Tryck.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2011). Can persistence be a matter of convention? *Axiomathes*, 21(4), 507–529.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014a). Elder-Vass on the causal power of social structures. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 774–791.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014b). Causally redundant social objects: Rejoinder to Elder-Vass. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, 44(6), 798–809.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2014c). Institutional objects, reductionism and theories of persistence. *Dialectica*, 68(4), 525–562.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2019a). Why the social sciences are irreducible. *Synthese*, 196(12), 4961–4987.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2019b). Are there any institutional facts? In T. Hansson Wahlberg & R. Stenwall (Eds.), *Maurinian Truths* (pp. 83–88). Lund: Media-Tryck.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2020). Causal powers and social ontology. *Synthese*, 197(3), 1357–1377.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2021). The creation of institutional reality, special theory of relativity, and mere cambridge change. *Synthese*, 198(6), 5835–5860.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2022). Sparse causation and mere abundant causation. *Philosophical Studies*, 179(11), 3259–3280.
- Hansson Wahlberg, T. (2023). The truth about social entities. In A. Garcia (Ed.), *Value, Morality & Social reality* (pp. 483–497). Lund: Media-Tryck.
- Hawley, K. (2001). *How objects persist*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawley, K. (2017). Social mereology. *Journal of the American Philosophical Association*, 3(4), 395–411.
- Heil, J. (2003). *From an ontological point of view*. Oxford University Press.
- Heil, J. (2012). *The universe as we find it*. Oxford University Press.
- Hindriks, F. (2013). The location problem in social ontology. *Synthese*, 190(3), 413–437.
- Hirsch, E. (2002). Quantifier variance and realism. *Philosophical Issues*, 12, 51–73.
- Horden, J., & López de Sa, D. (2021). Groups as pluralities. *Synthese*, 198(11), 10237–10271.
- Kim, J. (2005). *Physicalism, or something near enough*. Princeton University Press.
- Kripke, S. (1976). Is there a problem about substitutional quantification? In G. Evans & J. McDowell (Eds.), *Truth and meaning: Essays in semantics, 1976* (pp. 325–419). Oxford University Press.
- Lawson, T. (2013). Emergence and social causation. In R. Groff & G. Greco (Eds.), *Powers and capacities in philosophy: The new aristotelianism, 2013* (pp. 285–307). Routledge.
- Lewis, D. (1986). *On the plurality of worlds*. Blackwell Publishing.
- List, C., & Menzies, P. (2009). Nonreductive physicalism and the limits of the exclusion principle. *Journal of Philosophy*, 106, 475–502.
- List, C., & Pettit, P. (2011). *Group agency: The possibility, design, and status of corporate agents*. Oxford University Press.
- List, C., & Spiekermann, K. (2013). Methodological individualism and holism in political science: A reconciliation. *American Political Science Review*, 107(4), 629–643.
- Lowe, E. J. (2005). Vagueness and endurance. *Analysis*, 65(2), 104–112.
- Marcus, R. B. (1972/1993). Quantification and ontology. In *Modalities: Philosophical Essays*, 1993, pp. 75–87, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Marcus, R. B. (1974/1993). Classes, collections, assortments, and individuals. In *Modalities: Philosophical Essays*, 1993, pp. 89–100, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- McLaughlin, B. & Bennett, K. (2021). Supervenience. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/supervenience/>.

- Mellor, D. H. (2009/2012). Truthmakers for what? In *Mind, Meaning, and Reality: Essays in Philosophy*, pp. 96–112, 2012. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Mellor, D. H. (1998). *Real time II*. Routledge.
- Mumford, S., & Anjum, R. L. (2011). *Getting causes from powers*. Oxford University Press.
- Oliver, A., & Smiley, T. (2016). *Plural logic* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Passinsky, A. (2021). Norm and object: A normative hylomorphic theory of social objects. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 21(25), 1–21.
- Quine, W. V. O. (1948/1980). On what there is. In *From a Logical Point of View*. 2nd edition, 1980, pp. 1–19, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Quinton, A. (1975–76). Social objects. In *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 76: pp. 1–27+viii.
- Ritchie, K. (2013). What are groups? *Philosophical Studies*, 166(2), 257–272.
- Ritchie, K. (2015). The metaphysics of social groups. *Philosophy Compass*, 10(5), 310–321.
- Ritchie, K. (2020). Social structures and the ontology of social groups. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 100(2), 402–424.
- Ruben, D.-H. (1985). *The metaphysics of the social world*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Salmon, W. C. (1984). *Scientific explanation and the causal structure of the world*. Princeton University Press.
- Sawyer, R. K. (2005). *Social emergence: societies as complex systems*. Cambridge University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2004). Causes need not be physically connected to their effects: The case for negative causation. In C. Hitchcock (Ed.), *Contemporary debates in the philosophy of science* (pp. 197–216). Blackwell Publishing.
- Schaffer, J. (2009). On what grounds what. In D. Chalmers (Ed.), *Metametaphysics* (pp. 347–383). Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, J. (2015). What not to multiply without necessity. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, 93(4), 644–664.
- Schmitt, F. F. (Ed.). (2003). *Socializing metaphysics: The nature of social reality*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Sider, T. (2001). *Four-dimensionalism: An ontology of persistence and time*. Clarendon Press.
- Sider, T. (2011). *Writing the book of the world*. Oxford University Press.
- Silver, K. (2022). Backwards causation in social institutions. *Erkenntnis, Online First*,. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-022-00613-y>
- Szigei, A. (2020). The discursive dilemma and collective responsibility. In S. Bazargan-Forward & D. Tollefsen (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of collective responsibility* (pp. 297–312). Routledge.
- Thomasson, A. (2014). *Ontology made easy*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, A. (2019). The ontology of social groups. *Synthese*, 196(12), 4829–4845.
- Thomasson, A. (2020). Truthmakers and easy ontology. In K. Bennett & D. W. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Oxford studies in metaphysics* (Vol. 12, pp. 3–34). Oxford University Press.
- Thunder, S. (2021). There is no reason to replace the razor with the laser. *Synthese*, 199(3–4), 7265–7282.
- Uzquiano, G. (2004). The supreme court justices: A metaphysical puzzle. *Noûs*, 38(1), 135–153.
- Uzquiano, G. (2018). Groups: Toward a theory of plural embodiment. *Journal of Philosophy*, 115(8), 423–452.
- van Inwagen, P. (1990). *Material beings*. Cornell University Press.
- Wiggins, D. (2001). *Sameness and substance renewed*. Cambridge University Press.
- Wilhelm, I. (2022). Pluralities, counterparts, and groups. *Philosophical Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-021-01755-5>
- Yablo, S. (1992). Mental causation. *Philosophical Review*, 101, 245–280.
- Zimmerman, D. (2002). The constitution of persons by bodies: A critique of Lynne Rudder Baker's theory of material constitution. *Philosophical Topics*, 30(1), 295–338.

Publisher's Note Springer Nature remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.