

**Brian Epstein.** *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences.* Oxford University Press 2015. 312 pp. \$39.95 USD (Hardcover ISBN 9780199381104).

Brian Epstein has produced an ambitious, innovative approach to the analytical explanation of social facts and entities, including small and large social groups, collective actions, public artifacts, organizations, etc. Throughout, he urges a deep openness to unexplored methodological and ontological possibilities not exemplified in current social science practice or theory and systematically demonstrates how new analytical tools address what he sees as lacunae or confusions in current theory. Overall, one detects an undertone of empiricist naturalism fostering his suspicion of constructivist ontologies, especially of the Searlean sort. Epstein's prose is clear and accessible. Though key points are presented in the overwrought semi-formal analytic mode, he often includes helpful diagrams of distinctions and examples from social and natural science, as well as ordinary experience, to guide both his critiques of others' theories and his own positive analyses.

The book falls into two parts, each with nine chapters. An Introduction provides an overview and statement of Epstein's main thesis, that, ironically, 'philosophers and social scientists have an overly *anthropocentric* picture of the social world' (7). His interesting title alludes to the claim that human sociality is unlike that of other species such as ants, our understanding of which assumes that their members' constitutions account for group activity. He aims to dismantle anthropocentrism (individualism of one stripe or another) and show that our social world is not metaphysically people-centric. With sophisticated analytical tools like possible worlds and supervenience, he tackles group constitution, action, convention, intention, and much more.

Part I focuses on the many guises of individualism: ontological, methodological, explanatory, etc. Epstein poses the ontological problem as one of explaining the connections between higher and lower levels of metaphysical analysis. He rejects typical individualist/holist distinctions as false or uninformative to reveal metaphysical inadequacies of the kind exposed by reductive theories like Virchow's account of macro-properties of organisms solely in terms of their cells, which fails because there is more to organisms than cells; essential non-cellular parts abound between the cells. By the same token, an organization like Starbucks's consists not merely of individuals, but essentially includes both internal and external entities at various levels, from legal and monetary systems and commodities to sophisticated processing and accounting machinery. Mental states of members or relations among them are insufficient to account for what such organizations do.

Though Epstein wants to include all 'successful' models of social explanation in his 'framework,' his *bête noire* is what he calls the 'standard model' of social ontology exemplified by Searle's social constructivism (1995, 2010). He counts Searle's Austinian formula for constitutive rules (X counts as Y in C) with its attendant collective acceptance condition as insufficient, vague, and too individualistic for careful social explanation. In its place, he proposes a metaphysical 'framework' recognizing possible worlds composed of propositions whose constituents are properties, objects, and facts, some of which are social. A social fact is a fact corresponding to a proposition with social entities as constituents (66). Social science categories are said to have fixed instantiation conditions across worlds and times, necessary to tracking and comparing facts. Social fact B is said to be 'metaphysically grounded' in another fact A, when B 'because' of A, or better, A is 'the full metaphysical reason for [B's] obtaining' (109). On Searle's accounting, e.g., something is a dollar because it is widely accepted as such. The because relation is neither causality nor strict determination and may be full or partial.

Epstein's framework includes, besides transworld grounding conditions, 'frames' whose principles 'anchor' the grounding of social facts. In the standard model social facts are anchored by collective acceptance. Moreover, he distinguishes two kinds of individualism: grounding and anchoring, depending on whether the grounding conditions or the frame principles are individualistic. Chapter 7 compares Hume's and Hart's uses of behavior and codes of practice, exemplified in Hart's 'rule of recognition,' rather than individuals' attitudes as frame principles. Epstein's framework yields a revealing way to contrast these with Dworkin's norm-based anchoring of the legal frame.

It is worth noting that beyond this brief interlude, Epstein pays little attention to the values that group members and groups may hold and that figure into both their motivation and our understanding of what they do. By contrast Gilbert, Searle, and Tuomela see the importance of deontological 'desire independent reasons' for action from both internal and external social perspectives. Perhaps one could ask whether there are specific moral frames, or even whether morality itself could serve as a meta-frame helping to make sense of social facts across frames. It remains unclear just how porous the boundaries are between frames.

Ch. 8 takes on the metaphysics of individualism directly in contrast to the relations of social facts to grounds and frames. Anchoring is said to 'justify' grounding (103) and, since different frames are anchored in different principles, social science normally presumes a frame and concerns itself with the grounding of social facts rather than anchoring. Ontological individualism, our most common frame for social science, is best understood as about grounding rather than supervenience or reduction (106). (Here we may detect an echo of Kuhn's paradigms in Epstein's frames; both appear to be quite insular). Ontologically individualistic explanations ground social facts in individualistic facts, ones devoid of social properties or objects: that John, Mary, and Robert ran down the street may figure in grounding the social fact that the mob attacked the Bastille. Since the grounds of social facts are their metaphysical reasons, those reasons explain the social facts. For ontological individualism, those reasons are individualistic.

To conclude Part I, Epstein constructs a regress argument against what he calls 'conjunctivism,' a view he attributes to Searle and others. This view confusedly places anchors among the grounds of social facts by requiring grounding by pairs of facts, an empirical fact (this is a dollar bill) together with collective acceptance that such facts have social significance. Epstein thinks this only partially grounds social facts. We would need to collectively accept both the empirical fact and the constitutive rule (R) linking such empirical and social facts; but, he thinks, that means that we would also have to collectively accept as partial grounds our collective acceptance of such a rule (R\*) and then accept that as further partial grounds (R\*\*), etc. Still, there seems little reason why one cannot *directly* identify a rule and an instance falling under it, as we do with, say, arithmetic. The man at the plate swings his bat and misses the ball for the third time, so, having accepted the three strike rule, we count his swing as putting him out. The frame of baseball entails the strikeout rule and its instantiations. So, it is hard to see why more is needed, much less why a regress ensues.

But, admirably, Epstein thinks the real test is which approach gets the grounding conditions for social facts right and including anchors among the grounds gets them wrong (123). Here he insists that social science must take the grounding conditions as constant across frames, something conjunctivism is too rigid to allow. It would restrict social facts to intended grounding conditions plus all the anchors that put those conditions in place, which, he insists, is 'simply not how we use social facts'

(124). But again, isn't it clear that we regularly relativize cross-world or cross-time comparisons of social facts so as to reveal the differences between frames of reference? In explaining social progress, historians may unobjectionably discuss a slave-holding society in which it is a legal right for someone to kill another in circumstances that would not ground a similar legal right in ours. Epstein concludes that ontological individualism should not be about anchoring, but only grounding. Again, on his reading, Searle is an 'anchor individualist' since his constitutive rules are anchored only by collective acceptance grounded in individual acceptance.

Part II comprises an enlightening critique of various forms of individualist reductionism, a difficult task since, by Epstein's lights, a group is 'a thing constituted by and only by individual people' (133). The Senate is a group, as is the elderly, but money is not a group, and, less obviously, corporations and universities are not either, since none of these consists solely of people. For starters, Epstein notes four kinds of groups: unorganized ones like mobs, Weberian organizations, small intimate groups like friends taking a walk, and large, diverse ones like social classes. It is important, especially for social science, that groups are not sets, since groups, but not sets, may change membership without loss of identity and be traced through changes. Its members are not essential to a group as the parts of a lump of clay are to it because it is not the parts of people that constitute the group but people. In this context, A constitutes B means that the stuff of A is *part* of the metaphysical reason B is made of the stuff it is, though this leaves many facts about A unexplained; the people constituting the group explain only some facts about it (149). The same people may constitute another group even at the same time, etc.

One aim of Part II is to illustrate the use of frame principles and grounding conditions. Few facts about the Supreme Court [SCOTUS] are grounded in facts about its members, neither the court's existence, its constitution, nor its powers. Heeding Wittgenstein's admonition not to obsess over too few kinds of cases on penalty of missing patterns, Epstein says that the facts about even one simple group can be 'dizzingly diverse.' Though frame principles convey a kind of necessity, most facts about groups are contingent. This line of argument leads Epstein to see a 'structural flaw' in Searle's famous formula for social fact constitution, X counts as Y in context C, that it confuses constitution with existence. Epstein may be right that both the existence and constitution of a dollar (or SCOTUS) satisfy the same conditions, but it is not obvious that the context could not serve as a frame principle, in which case Searle's account would simply exemplify Epstein's. Indeed, in a recent article, Epstein himself suggests as much (see *A Framework for Social Ontology*, *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 46(2), 2016, 165). He follows this with a brief but thoughtful distinction between social and natural facts. Facts about empirical objects like the lump of clay and the ant colony are grounded, and therefore, individuated by their constitutions. Not so social facts, which are only rarely 'intrinsically individuated.' Nor, in Epstein's view is supervenience of much use in understanding what determines facts about social objects. He concludes that our freedom to ground social facts 'nearly arbitrarily' in all sorts of facts besides group membership is what makes the social world so flexible and powerful.

To account for the many ways we identify and track groups, Epstein introduces 'cross identifying criteria,' which eschew identity in terms of constitution or membership. People do constitute groups, but groups are not always constituted: if all the members of SCOTUS died today, SCOTUS would not cease and it would be the same group if it were reconstituted tomorrow, indeed, the same group as in 1789. A cross-identifying criterion provides conditions guaranteeing that objects desig-

nated differently at different times are the same object (179). Thus, criteria of identity fall into families rather than being unique for kinds, like Locke's memory criterion for same person or individualism's membership criterion for groups, serving not as grounds for persistence but as ways to systematize frame principles for the existence and constitution of kinds of objects, including groups. Epstein illustrates this by tracking, rather tediously, a pickup basketball team from creation to extinction. Against intentionalism, he insists that the existence and constitution of teams over time is grounded by facts about what we do, about systems in the world, rather than members' attitudes. They are 'largely anchored by facts about practical stuff in the world such as computer systems, by causal facts about the world, and by a few poorly worded rules...' (193).

From his pragmatist intuition that groups have evolved to accomplish our ends 'sometimes despite rather than because of their members' (217), Epstein concludes that though member attitudes (intentions, beliefs) contribute to group actions, so does the 'physical stuff.' Member intentions are at most partial grounds for group action. Commonly, group action is ordered by divisions of labor and power structures, as in politics, corporations, law courts, sports teams, etc., that are functions of non-member actions like corporate charters, precedents, etc. Laudably, Epstein sees how such factors constrain, as well as enable, group action (223-4). External facts are among the metaphysical grounds of group action. He illustrates the point with a case where two groups with the same members are empowered by different rules, so that even trivial differences, like the time of a committee meeting, may ground the action of one but not the other. Though the same people constitute both groups, their individual actions are externally constrained so that only some of their actions ground the actions of each group and even that only partially. Such external constraints help stabilize group action over time.

As Epstein sees it, the easiest task for anthropocentrism ought to be accounting for group intentions, but alas, it fails even here. Since social constraints on intention are less direct than those on action, Epstein sees them 'percolate' through constraints on social roles. In my judgment, there is far too little attention to social roles in Epstein's framework. They are important because they link individual and group, both with regard to internal motivation and external influence. Moreover, most social scientists make constant use of role theory. Like Aristotle, Epstein and most of his erstwhile antagonists take the conditions of individual and group action as parallel, *mutatis mutandis*, including a role for intention to guide and organize action to (usually) realize some end (238). One dis-analogy here is that in individual action the agent chooses autonomously, which is something the group simpliciter cannot do. Hence the intuitive strategy of individualism, though again, Epstein is on good grounds in insisting that individual intentions are not sufficient to account for group intentions. Consideration of marginal (or perhaps not so marginal) cases, like inequalities of voting power, lead Epstein to conclude that group intention, like group action, depends on more than member contributions. Indeed, clearly, the intentions of members can only contribute to group intentions when the group recognizes the members' intention—e.g., when the group is engaged in deliberation—otherwise, member intentions are what Tuomela calls 'private.' Thus, the group over time 'bends' individual intention to harmonize with group intentions, ends, and actions. Membership conditions, schedules, etc., are common external anchors constraining the group impact of individual intentions, structuring conservatism into, e.g., legislative processes (243). Epstein concludes that neither group existence, constitution, action, nor intention are exhausted by individual components (246), leaving little of anthropocentrism standing:

If group intentions do not supervene on member attitudes then, a fortiori, other facts about groups do not... Building the social world out of people, or modeling by starting with people, is a gross distortion. (247)

This is insightful and realistic as far as it goes, but after finally affirming that people and groups differ fundamentally in that the latter but not the former have people as their members, Epstein suggests that, while groups of different kinds are anchored and thus constrained differently, individual actions are not so systematically constrained (248), and for those actions that are constrained (perhaps by law), the constraints have minimal effect. But surely, if this were correct, much of ethics would be out of work, assuming, of course, that there is room for realism in ethics.

In his last two chapters, Epstein distinguishes between the social integrate model of Gilbert, Bratman, and partly Tuomela, in which group members are bound together by their attitudes towards one another, and the status model of Searle and partly Tuomela, in which group members are bound together by externally conferred social status. (Note that the status model is hardly new; It has roots in the Hegelian master/slave dialectic developed in Marxist accounts like Sartre's and May's, all of which recognize the ontological power of recognition). The social integrate model valorizes small, unchanging, egalitarian groups of social familiars and requires collective commitment to group standards for its constitution and identity. Tuomela extends the basic model to larger, inegalitarian groups by distinguishing operative from non-operative members, the latter acting vicariously through the former. Even so, '[t]o social integrate theorists, most of the groups falling in our broad conception are not genuinely social,' since they are poorly integrated (257). Social integrate theory aims to ground all social facts at once in social integration, contrary to Epstein's account which requires a variety of frame principles to match grounding conditions to social facts. Social integrates are a special case in Epstein's framework, so the theory is too narrow for social science. It treats 'groups as if they were sophisticated ant colonies,' the facts about which are merely functions of facts about their members (260). Commitments of members simply do not suffice to determine all the facts about social groups. Nor will 'group agency' suffice to ground all social facts: 'there is no common signature to group agents;' 'member integration alone is neither necessary nor sufficient for group agency' (262).

The status model seems more flexible. Like Searle, Tuomela distinguishes between I-mode and we-mode actions, marking the ontological utility of two kinds of agency grounding intentions, the latter supporting genuine sociality with agents 'doing their part *as their part*, thus acknowledging status assignment to roles as well as persons and objects.' This would seem to cover the waterfront, but again, Epstein demurs. It matters, he holds, to what substrate status is assigned. In Searle's famous example, no assignment of agent status to a line of stones makes them an agent. Nor can corporate agency be triggered by merely arbitrary assignment of powers. A 'faithfully Searle-style approach does not begin to do justice to agency' (271). Since the grounding conditions on a group's activity depend on how groups of that kind realize their system of practical activity, an assignment of status is unnecessary and adds nothing. Frame principles dispense with status projections. Sociality is a matter of neither mere constitution nor mere status (274).

Epstein's brief closing chapter suggests what he thinks the book has accomplished. Though anthropocentrism is inevitable, it is nonetheless an illusion to think that the social world is an artefact. Presumably, it is then, in some sense, natural. Though he thinks social science is too complicated to

be easy, it is nonetheless not hard to improve. The main improvement defended here is to discard individualism, since it doesn't work for anchoring or grounding of social facts. Anchoring needs to be dynamic to allow new social properties and kinds and the diversity of social entities requires a parallel variety of grounding conditions. He insists that group attitudes are determined by more than member attitudes and concludes with this memorable line: 'Facts about people figure in anchoring frame principles and into grounding social facts. But to think the social world revolves around us—around our languages, our minds, our bodies, our practices is old fashioned narcissism' (279).

But, though Epstein is skeptical throughout about social roles as grounding conditions, here roles and environmental facts 'partly anchor frame principles' (278). If roles can anchor frame principles and frame principles anchor grounding conditions, it is unclear why roles do not ground social facts. The role of parent, partly natural and partly cultural, surely serves to ground parents' actions and social practices. Reversing the usual comparison, Epstein sees natural science, which explains phenomena in terms of object constitution, as more tolerant of imprecision than social science, with its less 'well-behaved' objects, disconnected from constitution. Moreover, just as Part I concludes by driving conjunctivism into an infinite regress, Part II ends by decisively rejecting status models, since mere assignment of agent status makes nothing an agent: '...in no case does it make sense to see *agency* or *the ability to act* as assigned, authorized, or projected' (265). His systematic point is that a plethora of social facts are poorly accounted for by current intentionalist, constructivist, or individualist social ontologies. All this is insightful and interesting, but Epstein's account seems insensitive to the need for all those 'facts in the world' to be socially interpreted as to what counts as what, as in Searle's formula, for them to have any meaning, any social significance, beyond their sheer existence. And recognition and interpretation are intentional.

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