GROUNDING AND ANCHORING:
ON THE STRUCTURE OF EPSTEIN'S SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

1. Introduction

Brian Epstein's ambitious book, *The Ant Trap*, is a praiseworthy addition to recent social ontology and the philosophy of social sciences. Its central aim is to challenge a settled anthropocentric picture of the social world – a picture with which social scientists and philosophers have aimed to answer the following questions (among others): "*What are the social sciences **about**? … What **are** social facts, social objects, and social phenomena* – these things that the social sciences aim to model and explain?" (7).[1] The picture that Epstein takes issue with, answers these questions in an overly people-centered manner. Bluntly put: the received opinion seems to accept that the social world just is "composed by individual people" (10). This is, however, insufficient. After all, even though social facts and phenomena clearly involve individual people arranged in certain ways, we must still spell out how people are involved *in* social facts and phenomena (8). In other words, there are many metaphysical questions about social properties, relations, dependence, constitution, causation, and facts that cannot be answered with the anthropocentric picture or just be looking at individual people alone. In order to understand questions about (say) how one social entity depends for its existence on another, we need different metaphysical tools. These tools have not extensively been applied in our analyses of the social world, which (for Epstein) has had adverse results: without making use of such tools, we are likely to have misunderstood the "building blocks of the social world", in which case "it is no surprise that we are having trouble in the social sciences, since that misunderstanding distorts our models" of those worlds (9). Instead, Epstein holds, social ontological explanations would greatly benefit from making use of the theoretical toolkit that contemporary analytical metaphysics has to offer. And he focuses specifically on two metaphysical instruments: grounding and anchoring.

The first part of the book discusses why the received anthropocentric view is insufficient. There are two ways to frame this thesis: as ontological individualism or the "Standard Model". The former denotes a supervenience thesis, whereby there can be no change in the properties on the social level without a change in the properties found on the individual level. Epstein takes a mob to be an example of this way of constructing social entities out of individuals. The latter model holds that the social world is performatively constituted by collective individual intentions – social objects are "projections of our attitudes or agreements onto the nonsocial world" (74). The "Standard Model" is meant to capture the well-known picture from John Searle that institutional facts are of the form "X counts as Y in context C", with money being a paradigm example.

These two more usual ways of accounting for the social world (Epstein claims) turn on two different ways to relate people and the social world. The former ontological individualism takes "facts about people to be the *building blocks* of social facts"; the "Standard Model" takes facts about

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[1] Unless otherwise noted, all references are to: Epstein, B. (2015) *The Ant Trap*. Oxford: OUP.

individual attitudes to "*set up* constitutive rules or conventions governing the social world" (74). However, on Epstein own model (to be outlined shortly) all social facts involve both. So on his preferred social ontology, every social fact involves "building blocks, and also metaphysical reasons for why that fact's building blocks are what they are" (74), where these will be elucidated in terms of grounding and anchoring.

I find the case against the anthropocentric picture prima facie compelling, and I will not discuss it further here. Rather, I will examine Epstein's alternative metaphysical tools (grounding and anchoring). I contend that Epstein is exactly right to say that contemporary metaphysics contains many theoretical instruments that can be fruitfully applied to social ontological analyses. Doing so is precisely what I would like to see more of in robust social ontological research, for which Epstein deserves praise. That said, I am unconvinced that Epstein's tools achieve what they set out to do. In particular, I will address two issues: How is grounding for Epstein meant to work? Is anchoring distinct from grounding, and a relation that we need in our social ontology? I should note from the outset that I am not committed to either variant of the anthropocentric picture that Epstein argues against. So my point is not that these offer putatively better accounts than Epstein's. Rather, I am aiming to assess Epstein's social ontology in its own lights in order to see whether it achieves what it set out to achieve. I will first outline Epstein's general ontological picture (§2). I will then examine grounding in more detail (§3); and, finally, whether anchoring is ontologically needed (§4).

2. Grounding and Anchoring

In the first part of his book, Epstein outlines the basic metaphysical tools for his purposes. These purposes pertain to building models useful in social analyses and science, where in so doing "we are not only interested in the way things actually are, but how they *would be* if things changed" (63). Not all of Epstein's metaphysical tools are relevant for my purposes, so let me focus on the ones that are. Start by considering the following social fact:

(5.4) ***The mob ran down Howe Street***.[2]

This is a social fact by virtue of being a fact "that corresponds to a proposition that has any social entity as a constituent" (67) – that is, it has as a constituent a social object and/or a social property. Now, let's take Bob, Jane, Tim, Joe, Linda,… and Max to constitute the mob that ran down Howe Street. Therefore, (5.4) is grounded by the following fact:

(5.3) ***Bob, Jane, Tim, Joe, Linda,… and Max ran down Howe Street.***

Although (5.3) and (5.4) are different social facts, for Epstein, these facts are "intimately related" (69). They are different facts insofar as there is at least one possible world in which (5.3) obtains but (5.4) does not, and vice versa (e.g. "the mob is running, but Bob leaves the mob" [66]). Furthermore, Epstein holds that facts are entities in the real world, whereas propositions are abstract representations

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[2] The numbering of facts and propositions follows Epstein's original throughout the paper. I will also follow Epstein in denoting propositions with italics and facts with bold italics.

of real world facts. So, the proposition *The Earth is round*, which corresponds to a particular fact, is true if and only if the fact **The Earth is round** obtains. In short, facts correspond to propositions and the propositions expressed in (5.3) and (5.4) are different: for one thing, (5.3) has Bob and Jane as constituents, whereas (5.4) does not. Thus, the requisite facts also differ.

The intimate relation between (5.3) and (5.4) is that of grounding. It is no accident that (5.4) and (5.3) both obtain (say) on Tue 19th of Jan 2016 at 10:00pm: the former obtains *because* the latter does. Most basically, grounding is a non-causal dependence relation expressed using common idioms like 'in virtue of'. Stock examples include (cf. Clark & Liggins 2012; Fine 2001; Raven 2012):

- A conjunction is true *because* its conjuncts are true.
- Some fact holds *in virtue of* some other fact(s).
- An act's being pious *consists in nothing more than* being loved by the gods.
- Sugar's solubility is *explained by* its chemical composition.
- The brittleness of a cup *results from* the way its constituent atoms are arranged.

The above statements do not express a causal relationship; instead, they express a *metaphysical* one (69-70). There is a metaphysical, or non-causal, reason why (5.4) obtains when (5.3) obtains, which is just to say that (5.3) grounds (5.4). In other words: (5.3) is the *grounding* fact, (5.4) the *grounded* fact. And the fact *(5.3) grounds (5.4)* expresses a grounding *relation*.

It helps to highlight couple of further characteristics of grounding. First, full and partial grounding: Epstein rightly notes that (5.3) does not yet fully ground (5.4). That is, (5.3) obtaining is not yet metaphysically sufficient for (5.4) obtaining (70-71). We need some further facts to obtain, like the individuals all ran in the same direction, they were clustered together, and they constitute the mob. But the fact *I am married* "is metaphysically sufficient" to ground the fact *I am not a bachelor* (70). Second, grounding relations typically involve some kind of priority or fundamentality. The grounding fact is more fundamental than the grounded fact: that Bob and Jane ran down Howe Street explains in part that the mob ran down Howe Street, but the fact about the mob (the grounded fact) "does not metaphysically explain the fact that Bob and Jane" run down the street (the grounding fact) (70). Thus, (5.3) is a more fundamental fact than (5.4). Although Epstein does not explicitly note this, the fundamentality involved in grounding hinges on what metaphysically explains what: the explanandum (5.3) is more fundamental than the explanans (5.4).

Recall the "Standard Model of Social Ontology" introduced briefly above. It focuses on the well-known Searlean idea of constitutive rules of the form "X counts as Y in context C". For money in the USA the rule would read: Bills issued by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing count as dollars in the United Stated. For reasons that need not concern us here, Epstein prefers to reformulate constitutive rules as follows: For any z, the fact that z is X grounds the fact that z is Y. This sort of formulation is meant to articulate what are the grounding conditions for social facts. So for money, the constitutive rule reads (77):

For all z, the fact *z is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing* grounds the fact *z is a dollar*.

The social fact **Billy is a dollar**, where 'Billy' names the dollar bill in my pocket, is grounded in the grounding fact **Billy is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing**. The constitutive rule then "describes how the social fact is grounded" (76-77), but it does not ground the social fact. It provides a background principle on the basis of which we can describe how a number of different social facts are grounded, such as **Tommy is a dollar** and **Joey is a dollar**, where 'Tommy' and 'Joey' name other particular dollar bills. The constitutive rule is part of the background 'picture frame' – it is part of the *principle* that gives grounding conditions for different social facts. Thus, Epstein takes constitutive rules to be better understood as 'frame principles' (77). A frame principle sets up the grounding conditions for some social fact(s), not only in our actual world but for all possibilities. For example, the above constitutive rule about money frames the principle that sets up the grounding conditions for the social facts **Tommy is a dollar** and **Joey is a dollar**. In a world where both facts obtain, they are grounded by the grounding fact **[Tommy or Joey] is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing**. In a world where the fact **Joey is a dollar** does not obtain, the grounding fact would be **Joey is not a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing** (79). The frame principle stays the same, but the grounding conditions differ for different worlds.

With respect to money, we have elucidated what the grounding conditions are. But we must now ask: "why are *these* the grounding conditions for **x is a dollar**, rather than *those*? What puts frame principles in place?" (80). Or to put the point differently, what is the metaphysical 'glue' that binds members of social kinds and sets of social facts? For natural kinds and facts about natural kinds, Epstein notes, this 'glue' is typically thought to be laws of nature. In the social realm, something else does the job and this brings us to the second main aspect of Epstein's social ontology: anchoring. This is a type of relation that holds between sets of social facts and their grounding conditions (or sets of facts and a frame principle) (81). Contra Searle, the gluing isn't done by collective acceptance of certain constitutive rules. Rather,

> For a set of facts to anchor a frame principle is for those facts to be the metaphysical reason that the frame principle is the case…For a set of facts $g1,…,gm$ to ground fact f is for $g1,…,gm$ to be the metaphysical reason that f obtains in a world. For a set of facts $a1,…,an$ to anchor a frame principle R is for $a1,…,an$ to be the metaphysical reason that R holds for the frame. Both are "metaphysical reason" relations. But they do different work, and stand between different sorts of relata. (82)

Epstein's point is that grounding and anchoring together fit "a single model of social ontology" (82). By way of example, consider again money. Take the grounded social fact **Billy is a dollar**. As before, this is grounded by **Billy is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing**, where this grounding relation is 'framed' by a certain frame principle: For all z, the fact *z is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing* grounds the fact *z is a dollar*. We can understand this frame

principle as a Searlean constitutive rule. The question now is: on what does this constitutive rule metaphysically depend? What is its 'metaphysical reason' for existing? The answer for Epstein is: the principle is anchored by (in this case) our collective acceptance of the rule in our community. So, there is a set of facts about collective acceptance of the constitutive rule that anchors the frame principle, and these facts are distinct from those that ground the fact that Billy is a dollar. Together grounding and anchoring offer us a way to understand how the social world somehow depends on us, or is 'made' by us.

3. How does Grounding Work?

Epstein clearly notes that his social ontology includes the following components: "social facts, the grounding relation, grounding facts, frames, frame principles, the anchoring relation, and anchors" (88). However, there is a further component that Epstein repeatedly mentions: he frequently talks about 'grounding conditions' of social facts, and alludes to a distinction between grounding facts and "the facts that put in place the grounding conditions" (82). It is nevertheless rather unclear what the role of grounding conditions in Epstein's social ontology is. And depending on what work these conditions do, the details of his ontology will differ. I am not intending to make a nitpicky point about language. Rather, depending on what Epstein's grounding conditions amount to, we end up with different accounts of how grounding works. There are a number of candidates for what grounding conditions might amount to: (1) grounding facts; (2) frame principles; (3) anchors; or (4) none of the above. Let's see what difference these different candidates make.

First, we might suggest that grounding conditions just are grounding facts. So, the grounding condition for a cup's brittleness just is its chemical composition (the grounding fact). But this cannot be right. Think about grounding relations as typically discussed in metaphysics. One often-used example of grounding pertains to physicalism. The basic idea is that "the physical facts make it the case that the mental facts are what they are, have the intrinsic natures they do" (Bennett 2011, 33). So, physical facts ground mental facts. But are physical facts the grounding conditions of mental facts? Are the facts that put in place the grounding conditions identical to the grounding facts (in this case, to the physical facts)? It seems not: the grounding facts are about the constitution of our cognitive architecture, but there is a bunch of further conditions that 'frame' or 'arrange' these facts. These further conditions conceivably have to do with our evolutionary histories, with human embodiment, and perhaps just random and accidental mutations that have taken place in our developmental past. Take another typical example. The fact *Al and Beth's average height is 5'6"* is grounded in Al and Beth's respective heights: that Al is 5'4" and that Beth is 5'8" are the grounding facts. But there are some further facts that undergird these facts and that set up their conditions: for one thing, that we employ this manner of measuring height, that we engage in measuring heights at all, and certain mathematical rules used to calculate averages. These conditions seemingly 'frame' the grounding

relation: these are some further facts that put in place the grounding relation. It seems wrong then to equate grounding facts with grounding conditions.

This brings us to the second candidate: that grounding conditions are equivalent to Epstein's frame principles. After all, anchoring facts (for Epstein) set up or put in place particular grounding conditions (84). And if these facts also put in place frame principles, then the grounding conditions look to be equivalent to frame principles, and not something *further* that the frame principles in turn set up or put in place. So, we could say that a particular frame principle is equivalent to some particular grounding conditions. This way of thinking about grounding conditions fits Epstein's discussion of laws in Chapter 7. There he writes: "Laws can be understood as frame principles. They give the grounding conditions for certain social facts, and they have anchors" (88). Laws are like the constitutive rule about US legal tender outlined above. Epstein further holds that when are talking about certain legal rules being "put in place", we are talking about anchoring; these rules themselves, however, "give the grounding conditions for particular legal facts" (90). Again, this suggests that the grounding conditions are intimately connected to frame principles, such as those found in laws, constitutive rules about money, or evolutionary histories. In a sense, they provide principled background conditions or rules that make a grounding relation possible and gives it a certain shape: for instance, with different evolutionary histories or human embodiment the physical facts grounding mental facts would conceivably look rather different.

But thinking that grounding conditions are equivalent to frame principles isn't exactly right either, it seems. To begin with, some prima facie grounding conditions (understood in the above manner) are *unlike* principles or natural laws. Just think back to the examples above about physicalism and height. For instance, our evolutionary histories and human embodiment 'frame' physical facts that conceivably ground mental facts, but these seem to be different sorts of things to legal rules or to constitutive rules about money. Furthermore, Epstein explicitly rejects this option: "the constitutive rule [about money] is not among the grounding conditions for a social fact, but instead describes how the social fact is grounded" (76-77). Elsewhere, he again seems to draw a connection between grounding conditions and grounding facts. In elucidating frame principles and how to spell them out, Epstein notes that such principles are 'at heart' conditional: necessarily, if G obtains, then G grounds the fact that F obtains. Here the grounding condition will be the antecedent, whereas the grounded fact will be the consequent (156-157). Now, whether grounding conditions are equivalent to grounding facts, to frame principles or neither makes a difference to how our ontology is structured. If they are neither frame principles nor grounding facts, then our ontology includes a mysterious level of grounding conditions between frame principles and those grounding facts that were put in place by the principles.

If frame principles are not equivalent to grounding conditions, might grounding conditions be more akin to anchors, like us collectively accepting some collective rules about legal tender? This would be the third possible way to understand grounding conditions on offer. So, on this view,

grounding conditions are 'outside' the frame that includes the frame principle and some relevant grounding relation(s) the principle sets up. But now the relationship between grounding and anchoring starts to look puzzling: if grounding conditions are sets of facts that set up frame principles being 'outside' the relevant frame, are they not just further grounds in chains of grounding relations? The reason this looks puzzling is that for Epstein grounding and anchoring are meant to be different *kinds* of relations. If we accept this, though, there will be two kinds of relations that set up frame principles: anchors like collective acceptance of some rule that a frame principle expresses *and* some further facts that ground the principle. Or, if we have only one kind of 'metaphysical reason' relation that sets up the frame principle, does this not collapse the difference between anchors and grounds, which is central for Epstein's social ontology?

Epstein might reply that the grounding conditions are not 'outside' the frame that provides the metaphysical reason for some grounding relation obtaining. For instance, we could say that the grounding conditions (our evolutionary histories, human embodiment, random and accidental past mutations) for those physical facts that ground mental facts are just further facts grounding mental facts. That is, physical facts only partly ground mental facts. So, thinking that some grounding conditions somehow 'set up' the grounding facts is the wrong way to think: rather, what I have taken to be the grounding conditions are just further grounding facts that together fully ground some social fact. But, this response is suspect. For one thing, I already argued above that grounding conditions are seemingly not equivalent to grounding facts. There is another reason to find the response suspect though. Grounding is typically taken to be a non-causal explanatory dependence relation that is asymmetric, irreflexive and transitive.[3] As Epstein puts it, grounding should offer the "metaphysical reason" for some fact, not a causal one. However, facts about human evolution explaining facts about mental states would be a causal story. So if we take the non-causal characteristic of grounding seriously, as Epstein does, this reply does not succeed. In fact, it seems that precisely the right way to think about grounding and causation in this case is to think that mental facts are grounded in physical facts, and facts about human evolution (among other things) causally explain those physical facts. In the social realm, we would then say that the grounding conditions (e.g. collective acceptance of some constitutive rules about money) cause a frame principle to become effective (e.g. the principle: For all z, the fact *z is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing* grounds the fact *z is a dollar*). This principle then grounds a further grounding relation: the fact **Billy is a bill printed by the Bureau of Engraving and Printing** grounds the fact **Billy is a dollar**. What we have here is a chain of grounding relations that grounds out in the frame principle, where this principle causally depends on some further conditions (like collectively accepted beliefs about legal tender). This however puts pressure on the view that anchoring is a distinct type of "metaphysical reason" relation, and not a straightforward causal relation. After all, anchoring is meant to set up the frame principle, and I have

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[3] I say 'typically' because some philosophers hold that there is such a thing as metaphysical causation (cf. Schaffer 2016) different in kind to more ordinary causation. Note that I have the latter in mind when I speak of 'causation' for the rest of this paper.

described this 'setting up' here in causal terms. Anchoring would be just another way to talk about causal dependence relations and it would not be a distinct kind of non-causal or metaphysical relation, contra Epstein. This is related to the question: what work does anchoring do in our social ontology? I will return to this issue shortly.

What options do we have left? Perhaps grounding conditions amount to some other kinds of relations (that is, they are neither equivalent to grounding nor to anchoring relations). Until now, we have been looking at one type of example: that of money. But Epstein takes another type of example also to exemplify how people 'make up' the social world, where the earlier example of the mob serves as a paradigm case. How are the grounding and anchoring in this case meant to go? Epstein writes: "To ask about the grounding conditions for facts of the form ***x constitutes a mob*** is precisely to ask about the frame principles for facts of that form" (85). So again, it seems that grounding conditions are somehow equivalent to frame principles. However, this is supposedly difference to the earlier example of money in that "different sorts of facts" (85) ground (5.4) and ***Billy is a dollar***. Unfortunately, Epstein does not clearly state what he means here with different *types* of facts. The point is seemingly not just that there are different grounding facts, but that there are different sorts of grounding facts. How might we cash this out? One possibility is hinted at by Epstein's own claim just cited: when dealing with mobs, we must take into account constitution relations. And since grounding and constitution relations are not prima facie equivalent, this might explain how the underlying facts differ in kind. (I will discuss another possible way to understand different sorts of facts in due course.)

This option is not entirely unproblematic though. First, introducing constitution as a distinct kind of metaphysical relation seemingly once again adds an additional metaphysical layer to Epstein's ontology that has not been clearly elucidated. Second, there is an immediate ambiguity when talking about 'constitution' here that isn't insignificant. We can understand it in two different senses: (a) an aggregate makes up a new entity (a group of people makes up a mob), or (b) one social fact counts as another under certain circumstances. This latter sense fits Epstein's discussion of laws and legal facts. Take the fact ***x is a first-degree murderer***. What grounds this fact? Well, the fact ***x killed y with deliberately premeditated malice aforethought***. And of course this grounding relation hinges on some prior frame principle (typically expressed in legal documents): For all x, if x kills a person with deliberately premeditated malice aforethought, then that grounds the fact that x is a first-degree murderer. In other words, the frame principle provides the metaphysical reason for the grounding relation obtaining – a relation that ultimately grounds the social fact of x being a murderer.

We must now ask: Does the frame principle establish the constitutive conditions for being a murderer stated in terms of grounding, or does the grounding relation depend on a prior articulation of these conditions – articulations that are again somehow 'outside' the frame? In the latter case, the prior articulations of constitutive conditions play an independent role in spelling out the grounding relation and they make up extra pieces of our social ontology. Where these sorts of relations are to be placed in Epstein's grounding-anchoring model, though, is unclear. The former option, then again, ends up

yielding a wrong account of grounding. After all, grounding isn't supposed to be the same as simply satisfying some constitutive conditions for *being F*. Grounding statements are not meant to be identity statements, but Epstein's discussion comes close to saying just that. Think back to the stock examples of grounding used in metaphysics:

- A conjunction is true *because* its conjuncts are true.
- Some fact holds *in virtue of* some other fact(s).
- The brittleness of a cup *results from* the way its constituent atoms are arranged.
- Mental facts exist and have their intrinsic natures *due to* the existence and intrinsic natures of physical facts.

These examples are meant to show that grounding is an irreflexive relation (nothing can ground itself). But this seems to be violated in Epstein's example that ***x is a first-degree murderer*** is grounded in ***x killed y with deliberately premeditated malice aforethought***. This is because being a murderer *just is* to kill with premeditation. If we accept reduction as identity – where if *p* reduces to *q*, then *p=q* – there is no grounding relation (cf. Audi 2012). We have a merely putative grounding relation, which is really a claim about identity. Common grounding idioms like 'because' are to blame in creating a surface appearance of grounding. Now, Epstein is well aware of the difference between grounding and identity, and admits that on the surface the above example looks like an identity statement (92). Unfortunately, his discussion to debunk this is rather sparse and largely amounts to claiming that identity statements (like the one about being a murderer under discussion) are "better understood as giving the grounding conditions for having a social property" (92). Why it is better and what precisely is here meant with 'grounding conditions' unfortunately elude me. As I have been discussing so far, grounding conditions can be understood in a number of different ways and it is not obvious how we should understand them.

Epstein admits that philosophers have yet to work out an adequate account of grounding and that some basic characteristics of grounding are still unknown (81). So, he can of course retort further by claiming that whether we are dealing with a grounding relation proper or not is still up for debate. And presumably he would point out that this does not render grounding-talk fruitless. He cites our ability to pick out grounding relations with examples, partial theories and metaphors. So, although we do not have a perfect theory of grounding, this does not prevent us from picking out a specific metaphysical relation with 'grounding' and saying something insightful about that. I entirely agree with Epstein that there are still many open questions about grounding. But this makes me rather more unsure about how helpful Epstein's appeal to grounding is. My discussion above points to some apparent differences in social and non-social grounding relations. So is there a unified phenomenon of grounding at work at all? Some are deeply skeptical that there is a unified phenomenon of grounding (or of 'Grounding', as Jessica Wilson nicely puts it [2014]) to be systematically elucidated. Whether we can articulate a unified grounding relation that is theoretically fruitful even within the social realm is unclear to me. After all, there are degrees of unity possibly at work here (cf. Koslicki 2016). The

strongest view takes there be to just one specific kind of grounding relation at work. A weaker variant holds that there are "distinct specific grounding relations, but posits that these distinct specific grounding relations fall under a single generic kind, viz., grounding" (Koslicki 2016, 102). Still weaker is the view that 'grounding' just names a collection of resembling relations that display some objective similarities. Grounding as elucidated by Epstein would either be of the second or third kind: that is, we might accept that social and non-social grounding relations are distinct species of grounding. Or we might have to go as far as to say that social ontological grounding relations are even more weakly unified in merely resembling one another in some sufficiently objective manner. I am genuinely unsure about where Epstein's view of grounding does and is meant to fall on this spectrum of unity. Much more work on putative social ontological grounding relations needs to be done in order to settle the issue. In any case, the worry for Epstein is that his social ontology may be no more instructive than those that he argues against, if grounding ends up being a mere indicator of some resemblance relations connecting facts in the social world.

Let me spell this out a bit more by further thinking about grounding and constitution. At times, Epstein's grounding conditions sound like existence conditions: what are the existence conditions for some social fact(s). For instance, he claims: "whenever the grounding conditions [for money] are satisfied by some object, that object has the social property *being a dollar*" (82). But, this isn't how grounding in metaphysics typically works. Again, think about physicalism: with the above in mind, we would have to say that whenever an object satisfies some physical property *P*, the object has some mental property *M* (insofar as physical properties ground mental properties). But this isn't the point when metaphysicians discuss grounding and this would make grounding relations sound too much like merely satisfying some constitutive conditions for *being F*. However, consider now putative social ontological grounding relations. By contrast to physicalism, it does make sense to say that whenever a person owns a property leased, they satisfy the social property of being a landlord. But is this equivalent to the grounding relation: ***x owns a property leased*** grounds ***x is a landlord***? Well, this depends on whether reduction is identity, and whether this relation violates a hallmark characteristic of grounding (irreflexivity). All of this in turn depends on how we individuate facts. Contra Epstein, consider a worldly conception of facts, where facts are "individuated by their constituents and the manner in which those constituents are combined" coupled with reduction as identity (Audi 2012, 103). Now take the following example: *squareness* reduces to *being equilateral right quadrilateral* (ERQ). So, ***a is square*** and ***a is ERQ*** have the same constituents and the same manner of combination. Thus, given the worldly conception of facts, ***a is square*** is identical to ***a is ERQ***. But now the latter cannot ground the former fact: since these two putatively distinct facts are actually the very same fact, irreflexivity is violated. Might the same be true of many putative social ontological grounding relations that Epstein discusses? Prima facie, grounding relations involving constitutive conditions for being murderer and a landlord are akin to the case of being square and being ERQ. If so and the latter example does not capture a grounding relation proper, neither will the examples of being a murderer

or a landlord. The upshot is that Epstein has taken common grounding idioms at face value, but this has misleadingly lead him to focus on merely putative grounding relations. And so, his explication of grounding in social ontology ends up being vacuous.

Of course, Epstein's can point out that his way of individuating facts differs. As noted earlier, Epstein holds that facts are entities in the real world, whereas propositions are abstract representations of real world facts. And facts are individuated by the propositions that they express: the propositions expressed in (5.3) and (5.4) are different, since (5.3) has Bob and Jane as constituents and (5.4) does not; thus, the requisite facts also differ. We must be committed to this way of individuating facts – otherwise Epstein's social ontology is in trouble. But we do need an independent argument for why this manner of individuating facts is better than the worldly conception, especially when we are aiming to elucidate 'this-worldly' social ontology.

I do not wish to debate further here which way of individuating facts is preferable, although I pre-theoretically feel the pull of the worldly conception. A reason to privilege Epstein's account of facts is seemingly its usefulness. Epstein takes contemporary metaphysical grounding debates to help us in social ontological and scientific model building. And accepting his conception of facts apparently can be useful for this task. If we wish to advance good social policies, we must be able to model *possibilities:* how things might be and not just how things are. This should then tell us something about what we ought to do in order to advance the desired ends. For these sorts of social modeling purposes, Epstein holds, his ground-anchor ontology will be particularly useful. With this in mind, let me now turn to my second critical question: how useful is anchoring really?

IV. What Work for Anchoring?

One of the main motivations for distinguishing anchors and grounds pertains to how we can model possibilities in social sciences and social metaphysics. The idea is that in anchoring a frame principle, we establish the grounding conditions for "a given type of fact" (116). The frame principle then "gives grounding conditions for *all* possibilities in the frame" (115), but these grounding conditions do not include anchors. On this model, there is *not* just one universe of all possible worlds. Instead, for Epstein, there are many universes. So, a frame *A* includes one universe *U1* of all possible worlds; when a new frame principle is anchored, we move to a different frame *B* with a different universe *U2* of all possible worlds (116). This relates to the second way of understanding how facts might differ in *kind*, which was alluded to earlier. Above I noted that grounding and anchoring appear to involve "different sorts of facts" (85), but that it was unclear what this amounted to. Later on in the book, Epstein goes on to discuss two sorts facts: individualistic and social facts. The latter correspond to social propositions, which have "any social object or social property as a constituent" (102). The former facts correspond to individualistic propositions that have "individual people or individualistic properties as constituents" (102). An example of an individualistic proposition would be *John is cold*, whereas an example of a social proposition would be *John is rich.* Now, this is related to grounding

and anchoring. First, grounding is meant to elucidate social facts and how they are 'made up' of/ by individuals. Frame principles set up grounding relations to elucidate the metaphysical reasons for social facts obtaining, where these principles are anchored by some further set(s) of facts. This connects to individualistic facts: "all frame principles, across all frames, are exhaustively anchored by facts about individual people" (103). For instance, this is the case with Searlean collective acceptance, where constitutive rules are anchored by collective "we-attitudes" that are nevertheless individually held. This idea that frames are anchored by individualistic facts is denoted as 'anchor individualism'; and it differs from ontological individualism, which holds that if a social fact obtains, then the grounds for those social facts are individualistic facts – that is, individualistic facts ground social facts (109). Ontological individualism is then about grounding in Epstein's structure of social ontology. Note that the claim isn't individualistic facts *determine* social facts, but that social facts *depend on* individualistic fact. For Epstein, determination and dependence are different things and this makes a difference to how the claim about ontological individualism is formulated.

So, anchor individualism is a "thesis about how anchoring in general can possibly work. Ontological individualism is a thesis about how social facts in our frame can possibly be grounded, given that the anchors are what they are" (125). This is meant to be helpful in modeling social realities. If we wish to advance good social policies, we must be able to model possibilities. And this is what the ground-anchor frame gives us: by changing the anchors, we can shift between frames and then see what would happen to the social facts that some new frame principle provides grounding conditions for. This not only allows us to model possibilities; it also allegedly demonstrates why anchoring isn't just another form of grounding. Presumably if we just had grounding, we would have only one universe of all possible worlds, rather than many universes of all possible worlds (that is, we would not be able to shift between 'frames' and so model possible effects on social facts give different frame principles).

Now, I do not much care for talk of 'possible worlds' especially when doing socially engaged philosophy. But this hinges on many prior metaphilosophical commitments that I do not wish to debate here. Putting this aside, we can still consider whether Epstein's case for anchoring being a distinct "metaphysical reason" relation from grounding is plausible. Consider again the social fact ***x is a landlord*** that is putatively grounded by ***x owns a property leased*** (assuming for now that this is a genuine grounding relation). Following Epstein, this grounding relation is presumably set up by a frame principle of the kind: *For all x, if x owns a property leased, then that grounds the fact that x is a landlord*. Moreover, this frame principle is apparently anchored in various ways by some sets of facts about social practices, institutions, and our collective beliefs and acceptance of those practices/ institutions. Now, given anchor individualism, ultimately these sets of anchoring facts include just facts about individual people. But if grounding and anchoring are meant to be different kinds of relations, how do we get from the social fact ***x is a landlord*** to anchoring facts that are about

individual people? We know that the grounding relation involves a dependence claim whereby (following Epstein, p. 107) we hold that:

> If **x is a landlord** depends on **x owns a property leased**, then it is necessary that if **x is a landlord**, **x owns a property leased** partially grounds **x is a landlord.**

As noted, social facts depend on individualistic facts. But is the fact about owning a property leased the individualistic fact that grounds the social fact about being a landlord? Is *John owns a property leased* analogous to *John is cold*? I think not in that owning a property leased surely is also a social matter. And so, it looks like **John owns a property leased** must be further grounded in something prior or more fundamental that is *not* a social fact. However, as discussed above, this cannot be the frame principle that sets up the grounding relation. Actually, the individualistic anchoring facts look like the most prominent candidates: after all, frame principles are "exhaustively anchored by facts about individual people" (103). This option isn't open for Epstein though because anchoring is meant to be different to grounding – in short: frame principles are not grounded, but anchored. However, the worry now is that subsequently we can make good neither the dependence relations that grounding supposedly involves (because we do not have a grounding relation between a social and an individualist fact), nor the phenomenon of anchoring – all we know is that all frame principles are somehow intimately connected to anchors that provide a "metaphysical reason" for those frame principles to set up grounding relations. This relates to my earlier question about how helpful the social ontology on offer really is: Is there something ontologically distinct and important about anchoring? More specifically, is anchoring any more useful than supervenience when modeling the social world? Epstein explicitly rejects the usefulness of supervenience and I think rightly so. Supervenience offers us diagnostic tools to identify dependence relations in need of elucidation. But it does not elucidate dependence: we need to explicate not just that social facts *co-vary* with individualistic ones; instead, we need to show that social facts are "metaphysically *built* out of the individualist ones" (112). And taking supervenience to be dependence is like "confusing the ultrasound with the pregnancy" (112). However, does anchoring on Epstein's model go beyond these worries about supervenience? I am unconvinced.

Let me spell out this point further. Earlier I worried about what grounding conditions amount to. Later on in his discussion (specifically, in Chapter 9), Epstein clearly notes: "The frame principle gives the conditions for grounding the social facts, and the anchors set up these grounding conditions" (115). This again suggests that grounding conditions just are grounding facts, although above I argued that this seems wrongheaded. Still, Epstein is clear that anchors are not among the grounds for social facts. They are (in a sense) outside the frames that include frame principles, grounds, grounding relations, and grounding conditions (whatever those turn out to be). In order to make his case, Epstein argues against 'conjunctivism', which takes the grounds for a social fact to include both anchors and grounds. Anchors, on this view, would be just another kind of ground (115). On this view, there would be no difference between anchor and ontological individualisms (117). Take the social fact **Billy is a**

dollar. For the conjunctivist, the frame principle that sets up the grounding conditions, which ground this fact, would be grounded – *not* anchored – by the collective acceptance of the constitutive rule (i.e. acceptance that 'sets up' the frame principle).

In order to argue against the conjunctivist view, Epstein holds that conjuctivism gets the grounding conditions of social facts wrong. The upshot of collapsing anchors to grounds would be that we restrict social facts to ones

> whose grounding conditions not only include the ones we want them to have, but also all the anchors involved in putting the conditions in place. This is simply not how we use social facts. They can have simple grounding conditions. And when we assess them across other times and possibilities, we do not deny that they obtain merely because the anchoring facts do not obtain at those times and possibilities. (124)

I find this response in many ways puzzling though. Our choice of ontological models surely does not hinge on how social facts are used (whatever that means). It hinges on how (successfully?) social facts are analyzed and modeled. And (as I see it) this task is typically rather more complicated than Epstein above suggests. Moreover, I do not see why this would speak for or against anchors being grounds. For one thing, we are dealing with messy and complicated properties and relations. Including anchors as grounds need not be 'egalitarian', where an original grounding fact *g* is ontologically on a par with the some grounding fact *a* that on Epstein's ontology would be an anchoring fact. What Epstein calls 'anchoring facts' may work at different ontological levels, which would yield chains of grounding facts "going all the way down", rather than lateral relations where grounding facts are on a par with 'anchoring facts'.

Of course, much here depends on what the precise nature of anchoring as a relation is. And (as Epstein frankly admits) spelling this out requires more work. But my worries remain: anchoring is meant to be a metaphysical (non-causal) relation. The 'metaphysical glue' between the anchoring facts and frame principles that supposedly set up grounding relations nevertheless remains opaque und unclear. We know that changes in anchors set up new 'frames' and so that there is an intimate connection between frame principles and framing facts. But this is not so different from what Epstein found unsatisfying about supervenience that also tells us that there is some intimate connection between some (sets of) facts or properties. Anchoring is like a placeholder for there being a relation that looks significant, but that we do not understand well. And I think that this ends up being less useful than what Epstein had hoped. Epstein even admits that grounding is more directly relevant for social ontological projects and enables us to do much (even most) of the important work (127-128). So since anchoring relations remains so opaque in the book and, in any case, are less important than grounding, what work does anchoring really do for us that could not be done with grounding? This is not to argue for conjunctivism where anchors are different sorts of grounds. Rather, it is to suggest that anchoring relations might just be 'ordinary' grounding relations. There aren't two different sorts of

'metaphysical glue', but just one that comes in different 'strengths' for different purposes – some more intimate than others, for example.

Of course, what I say above does not show that anchoring just is 'ordinary' grounding. But the main gist of my discussion is this: as elegant as I find Epstein's grounding-anchoring model, I am still unconvinced that it can do the work that Epstein aims it to do for us – and I await with anticipation further elucidations of Epstein's social ontology.

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