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Causally Redundant Social Objects: Rejoinder to Elder-Vass

Tobias Hansson Wahlberg*

Abstract

In Elder-Vass's response to my critical discussion of his social ontology, it is maintained (1) that a social object is not identical with but is merely composed of its suitably interrelated parts, (2) that a social object is necessarily indistinguishable in terms of its causal capacities from its interrelated parts, and (3) that ontological individualism lacks an adequate ontological justification. In this reply, I argue that in view of (1) the so-called redescription principle defended by Elder-Vass ought to be reformulated and renamed; that the conjunction of (1) and (2) renders social objects causally redundant; and that ontological individualism can be coherently formulated and theoretically justified within Elder-Vass's own metaphysics of objects with causal powers.

Keywords

causal power, critical realism, emergence, mereology, ontological individualism, social structure

I am very grateful to Dave Elder-Vass for his clarifying response (Elder-Vass 2014) to my critical discussion (Hansson Wahlberg 2014) of his book *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Elder-Vass 2010). In this reply, I highlight some problems that Elder-Vass's clarified position is afflicted with, and I argue that ontological individualism can be coherently formulated and theoretically justified within Elder-Vass's own metaphysics of objects with causal powers.

Elder-Vass (2010, 6) argued in his book, *The Causal Power of Social Structures*, that social objects such as queues, norm circles, and corporations have causal powers in their own right – powers that their parts (individuals) do not have. In my critical discussion (Hansson Wahlberg 2014) of his book, I went along with Elder-Vass for the sake of the argument in conceptualizing causation in terms of interacting causal powers (Elder-Vass 2010, Ch. 13; see also Harré and Madden 1975).¹ I distinguished two senses or ways in which a composite

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¹ Elsewhere I have expressed some skepticism about this type of causation (Hansson 2006).

object can have a causal power “in its own right” (the first sense is discussed by contemporary metaphysicians such as Trenton Merricks (2001, 2005), the second is defended by Elder-Vass (2010)): roughly, the composite object can have a power that (1) goes *beyond* the causal powers of its suitably interrelated parts; or it can have a power that (2) is merely *identical* with a subset of the powers of its suitably interrelated parts – namely, the powers that the parts have (collectively) when and only when they are interrelated in such a way that they form a composite object of the kind in question.² Let us call the first sense “the extra-power view” and the second sense “the identity view” of an object having a causal power in its own right. I maintained that the extra-power view is the substantial and interesting sense of a composite object having a causal power in its own right³ and that the identity view is misleading and diluted: “misleading” because on this view the parts (taken collectively or as a plurality) *do* have the powers in question, it is just that they do not have them when they do not form a composite object of the requisite kind; “diluted” because the powers that the composite object is said to have in its own right do not *add* anything to the powers had by its suitably interrelated parts.

Moreover, on the basis of Elder-Vass’s (2010, 24-25) endorsement of the “redescription principle,” I took him to be saying that, although the parts have the powers in question when and only when they are suitably interrelated, the composite object is “also” a proper subject of these powers because the composite object is simply *identical* with its suitably interrelated parts.⁴ Elder-Vass put the principle this way:

² Elder-Vass (2010, 25) formulated the idea thus: “we cannot distinguish between the causal power of the whole and that of its full set of parts, organised as they are now into that very whole. But we *can* make a counterfactual distinction between the causal power of the whole and the causal power that its parts *would* have if they were *not* organised into such a type of whole”. I think it is reasonable to understand “we cannot distinguish” as expressing identity in this context, that is, that the relevant powers are identical under the circumstance in question; otherwise, the view seems to involve some kind of causal overdetermination (distinct token causes having the same token effect). Elder-Vass calls the powers that parts have collectively when and only when they are suitably interrelated *weakly* or *relationally emergent* properties (properties and powers are equated). The remaining powers of the interrelated parts, that is, the powers that they have collectively irrespectively of how they are interrelated (a class of powers that I suspect might be empty, see Hansson Wahlberg 2014), he calls *resultant* (Elder-Vass 2010, 17). Notice that the issue whether the powers of the whole and the powers of its interrelated parts are identical is different from – although importantly related with – the question whether the whole itself (the thing that allegedly *has* the powers) is identical with its interrelated parts.

³ But I was careful *not* to call such powers “strongly emergent” because I did not, and I still do not, see any reason to think that they must be unexplainable – see especially note 21 in Hansson Wahlberg (2014). Elder-Vass (2010, 30) takes “strongly emergent” to be a predicate true of a higher-level property whose existence is unexplainable in principle.

⁴ Notice that the extra-power view presumes, on pain of violating Leibniz’ Law, that the composite object is *not* identical with its suitably interrelated parts but is merely composed of them – if it were identical with them, it could not have an extra-power, because then the suitably interrelated parts would also have to have it (see also McDaniel 2008).

This is the principle that *if* we explain a causal power in terms of (i) the parts of an entity *H*; plus (ii) the relations between those parts that pertain only when they are organised into the form of an *H*; *then* because we have explained the power in terms of a combination – the parts and relations – that exists only when an *H* exists, we have not eliminated *H* from our explanation. The entities that are *H*'s parts would not have this causal power if they were not organised into an *H*, hence it is a causal power of *H* and not of the parts.⁵ The *lower level* account of *H*'s powers merely *redescribes* the whole, which remains implicit in the explanation. In other words 'upper- and lower-level accounts refer to the same thing, as a whole and as a set of configured interacting parts' (Wimsatt 2006: 450) and hence a casual explanation which invokes the set of configured interacting parts implicitly invokes the same ontological structure as one that invokes the whole." (Elder-Vass 2010, 24-5; see also Elder-Vass 2007, 30-1)

I objected that the view that a composite object, such as a flower or a corporation, is to be identified with its suitably interrelated parts faces grave difficulties: the composite object turns out to be both one and many (which seems to be a contradiction) and unchangeable (which seems to be incompatible with how we conceptualize most composite objects, cf. Elder-Vass 2010, 35-8, 133-8).⁶

In his response, Elder-Vass (2014, 793-94) replies that by subscribing to the redescription principle he did not intend to defend the idea that a composite object is identical with its suitably interrelated parts – rather, his position was, and is, that a composite object is merely *composed* of its suitably interrelated parts. Consequently, he maintains that "Hansson Wahlberg's discussion of identity theory is thus irrelevant to my argument (and incidentally also rests on a somewhat perverse reading of it" (*ibid.*, 3). Apparently, I have misunderstood Elder-Vass on this issue; I thank him for pointing this out and for clarifying his view. However, I wish to reply that if Elder-Vass wants to defend a theory according to which a composite object is *not* identical with its suitably interrelated parts, but is merely composed of them, he should rename and reformulate his principle. (Below I will argue that the principle is flawed even if the aspects suggesting an identity thesis are removed.) I take it that to

⁵ As stated, the conclusion "hence it is a causal power of *H* and not of the parts" is obviously a non sequitur. I think that what Elder-Vass is trying to say here is that the parts do not have the power *simpliciter* – the parts have the power *only* when they are suitably interrelated, that is, when they form an *H*.

⁶ I acknowledged, however, that there are those who defend the notion that a single thing can be both one and many: for example Donald Baxter (1988a, 1988b; see also Cotnoir and Baxter, 2014; cf. Frege [1884] 1980, 59). Moreover, I admitted that stage theory (Sider 2001) might provide an escape route out of the second problem – if one is prepared to countenance its revisionary metaphysics and semantics (see Hansson Wahlberg 2008).

redescribe something is to, first, describe that something in one set of terms and then to describe that very thing *again* but in a new set of terms – otherwise we are describing first one thing, or a plurality of things, and then another thing (although the distinct things may be intimately related in various ways; cf. Fine 2003; Simons 1987, chap. 6; Wiggins 1968).⁷ And arguably, as Elder-Vass seems to concede in his reply, the principle should not contain expressions such as “refer to the same thing” and “the same ontological structure”. Moreover, Elder-Vass should eschew and not defend (immediately after he has stated the redescription principle) statements such as the following:

there is no ontological distinction, but only a descriptive one between a thing and its ‘microstructural property’ ... the microstructural property just *is* the thing ... an emergent entity is nothing more [*sic*] than its parts and their organization. (Elder-Vass 2010, 25-26; see also Elder-Vass 2007, 31).

Nor should he write when applying the principle to social objects that “the people plus the relations *are* the higher-level entity, so to say that the people plus the relations have a power is the same thing as to say that the higher-level entity has the power” (Elder-Vass 2010, 155).⁸

In any case, the clarified position that emerges from Elder-Vass’s response is (1) that he regards a composite objects as a true unit that is merely *composed* of its suitably interrelated parts (parts and relations that may coherently be taken to differ over time) but (2) that the *causal powers* that the composite object has in its own right at a certain time are the *same* as

⁷ Compare Jaegwon Kim’s remark (Kim 2005, 48, n. 13): “Some have suggested that the M-to-P* causation [which is an instance of mental-to-physical causation] is a higher-level ‘redescription’ of the causal process from P to P* [an instance of lower-level physical causation] ... Obviously, the redescription strategy is available only to those who accept ‘M = P,’ namely reductionist physicalist.”

⁸ I should perhaps point out that elsewhere Elder-Vass makes clear that he does not regard relations as *parts* of wholes; rather *things* make up wholes and become parts of wholes when and only when they are suitably interrelated: “The claim that societies are composed of relations rather than individuals, however, seems to me to confuse the issue. It is worthwhile in this context to revisit the application of the same principles to natural science. Molecules, for example, are composed of atoms, but not random, unrelated collections of atoms; they exist only as a result of stable and systematically organised inter-relations between the atoms that compose them. Those relations constitute the *structure* of the molecule, while the *parts* of the molecule are the atoms themselves. There is no obvious reason why we should not treat social entities in a parallel way ... it is one thing for the latticework of relations to constitute *structure* (i.e. the mode of organisation), and quite another for those relations to be seen as the *parts* of higher-level wholes” (Elder-Vass 2010, 22, *emphases original*). Let me also mention here that *if* composition is taken to be many-one identity (as the redescription principle as it is originally formulated suggests we should take it) and if composition only occurs when things are suitably interrelated, then the resulting wholes are only *contingently* (or temporarily) identical with their parts – an idea which is inconsistent with the widely accepted Kripkean conception of identity according to which the identity relation holds with *necessity* (Kripke 1980). Finally, notice also that in the paragraph quoted in this footnote Elder-Vass speaks of structure as *mode of organization*, which is third sense of “structure” utilized by Elder-Vass apart from those I have already mentioned in (Hansson Wahlberg 2014, 775, n. 776): “structure” as a composite object or whole, and “structure” as the causal power of a whole.

the (weakly emergent) powers of its suitably interrelated parts at that time. Thus, Elder-Vass still seems to be defending the identity view of a composite object having a causal power in its own right (a view that must not be confused with the explicitly rejected idea that a whole is identical with its suitably interrelated parts):

My argument is that (a) a set of configured interacting parts that compose a given whole at a given time, including both the parts themselves and the relations between them, is necessarily indistinguishable in terms of its causal capacities from (b) the whole itself at that time.” (Elder-Vass 2014, 794) [Again, I take “necessarily indistinguishable” to express identity, that is, that the causal capacities are identical – see footnote 2 above.]

However, the combination of (1) and (2) appears to entail that a composite object is causally redundant. Here is why. Suppose, initially, that the Humean position is right that there are no metaphysically necessary connections between distinct entities. (This assumption is not really necessary for making the essential objection, but it allows me to put the objection in a more vivid form.⁹) Then, as the whole is distinct from its suitably interrelated parts (it is somehow an entity “over and above” its parts, being merely *composed* of its interrelated parts), there is a possible situation or world in which the parts exist – suitably interrelated and with all of their causal powers intact – but in which the composed whole does not exist. In this situation, no causal power is lacking (compared to the situation where the whole does exist) because the absent whole is not considered to have an extra-power. But then the natural question is as follows: How do we know (how does Elder-Vass know) that the actual world is not like the situation where the whole is absent? No causal test will reveal this (because the relevant causal powers are indistinguishable). So, by applying Ockham’s razor, we conclude that, since there is no reason to postulate such a whole, we should not. And by applying the Eleatic principle – which says, roughly, that to be is to make a causal difference – we conclude that, in fact, in *no* possible situation is there such a causally redundant whole distinct from its interrelated parts.

In my critical discussion (Hansson Wahlberg 2014), I tacitly conjectured that it was precisely to avoid this kind of predicament (discussed in Merricks 2001; see also Kim 2005)

⁹ It might be thought that by adopting the metaphysical framework of power causation one is already committed to the falsity of this principle (e.g., Harré and Madden 1975). But that is not necessarily so. In some formulations of power causation, no necessary connections are postulated between causes and effects (e.g., Dupré 1993, chap. 9; Mumford and Anjum 2011, chap. 3). In any case, in the argument put forth, I am not concerned with a *causal* relation but with a *synchronic* relation of a single thing being *composed* of a plurality of distinct things at a certain time.

that Elder-Vass was out to defend the notion that a social object (indeed, any composite object) is *identical* with its suitably interrelated parts because then scenarios where the interrelated parts exist but the whole is absent do not make sense.

I wrote,

At this point a fundamental question arises for Elder-Vass (I focus on the social domain): given that the putative emergent social causal powers can be fully explained and accounted for in terms of individual people being organized, or interrelated, in certain ways, why must we also postulate social objects with these causal powers? Why not rest content with the individuals themselves, doing all the causing in virtue of their being interrelated in the relevant ways? Elder-Vass's answer is that the postulation of social objects does *not* add anything to this picture, because social objects are *nothing but* individuals (and possibly other things such as equipment, p. 57) interrelated in the relevant ways. (Hansson Wahlberg 2014, 777)

But as Elder-Vass now makes clear in his reply, he *does* regard a social object as an addition to its suitably interrelated parts in that it is merely *composed* of its interrelated parts (wherefore identity theory is irrelevant to his position).¹⁰ But if that is the case, then Elder-Vass faces the original objection that his social objects are causally and ontologically redundant. Thus, the following statements, which are included in Elder-Vass's (2010, 24) elucidation of the redecription principle, are put in serious doubt:

...because we have explained the power in terms of a combination – the parts and relations – that exist *only when an H exist*, we have not eliminated *H* from our explanation. The entities that are *H*'s parts *would not have this causal power if they were not organised into an H*. (emphases added)

In fact, in my critical discussion (Hansson Wahlberg 2014), I looked at Elder-Vass's specific examples, where *H* is taken to be a social object, and I argued that in those cases, it is *false* to maintain that “the entities that are *H*'s parts would not have this causal power if they were not organised into an *H*” because arguably the putative “parts” do not even *actually* compose an

¹⁰ I want to point out, however, that I did remark already in my critical discussion (Hansson Wahlberg 2014, 780-781) that some passages in Elder-Vass's book do seem to commit him to the notion that social structures or objects are entities *distinct* from their suitably interrelated parts.

H. (Notice that in the relevant section (Hansson Wahlberg, sect. 3) I assumed that *H* is *not* identical with its interrelated parts, as Elder-Vass now concedes it is not.)

It seems that Elder-Vass (2010, 55; 2014) thinks that he can deflect this sort of criticism by maintaining that if we endorse this style of reasoning, then in all likelihood we will be forced to eliminate not only social objects but composite objects in general, persons included (cf. Block 2003). However, for several reasons, I do not think that Elder-Vass's countermove of pointing out a potential regress involving a threat of mereological nihilism constitutes a *reductio ad absurdum* of the criticism I have put forth. First, my argument is principally this: *If* all of the putative causal effects of social objects can be fully explained and accounted for in terms of the effects of their suitably interrelated parts (as Elder-Vass claim they can, and I think he is principally right about this) and *if* social objects cannot be identified with their interrelated parts (Elder-Vass now explicitly denies that such many-one identities obtain, and I think he is right about this too), then *at least* social objects are causally redundant. Moreover, *if* we accept the Eleatic principle or Ockham's razor, then we should not be ontologically committed to social objects.¹¹ By arguing in this way, I do not mean to rule out that similar conditionals can be applied to other composite objects, or even to individuals. Perhaps the antecedents in the first kind of conditional are true in those cases, perhaps not; that would seem to hinge on whether the relevant objects can be identified with their interrelated parts (obviously, then the many-one problem and the problem of change reappear), and if not, whether they have extra-powers. (I will come back to the last option in the final paragraph of the paper.)¹² Thus, importantly, in criticizing Elder-Vass's social ontology, I have not committed myself to the truth of ontological individualism, the view that individuals exist but social objects do not. Rather, my argument is merely that *if* we assume that there are suitably interrelated individuals (a *prima facie* plausible assumption), then (but not only then) social objects are causally and ontologically redundant – at least, Elder-Vass has not succeeded in showing that they are not. Second, we should in general not rashly dismiss a difficulty pointed out for one type of object (here, social objects) just because the

¹¹ This does not hinder that we may speak loosely of social objects in day-day to life for pragmatic reasons, or that we may refer to social objects in scientific theories that are not meant to be, or are not yet, ontologically stringent and precise (cf. Elster 2007, 13).

¹² Please remember that I here follow Elder-Vass in thinking of causation in terms of causal powers. Barry Loewer (2002) argues that causal redundancy arguments can be handled if a counterfactual analysis of causation is adopted. Although Loewer's argument might disarm arguments based on the Eleatic principle, I do not think he has showed that his favored view of causation *requires* that we postulate higher level objects. In any case, the following literature should be of relevance if one is looking for reasons to postulate higher level objects with extra-powers: Dupré (1993), Cartwright (1999), Merricks (2001), Clayton and Davies (2006), Bedau and Humphreys (2008), Corradini and O'Connor (2010), and Groff and Greco (2013).

difficulty might apply to other objects as well. Thus, I agree with Jaegwon Kim (2005, 53-54. 64) when he replies to Ned Block (2003) as follows:

if indeed the supervenience argument [in our case, the causal redundancy argument against social objects] is generalizable, that only shows that we have a general philosophical problem on hand, and that is not necessarily a refutation of the argument. ... The nonreductive materialist [holist] must sort out and come to terms with these issues; ignoring them is not an option for him.

Third, the feared end-result – mereological nihilism – has to my knowledge not been shown to be a theoretically untenable position. In fact, it is a theory with very prominent defenders.¹³

In sum, I agree with Elder-Vass that there is an *overall* threat against composite objects if we apply this kind of reasoning across the board – but I do not think that we can turn such a threat into a vindication of the idea that there are social objects. I think people interested in the foundations of the special sciences ought to take redundancy arguments seriously and not dismiss them because they might lead to counterintuitive consequences.

Suppose, however, that we are *committed* ontological individualists. How can that position be justified if we accept causal redundancy arguments? Elder-Vass (2014, 795) puts the question thus:

How, then, can [ontological individualists] justify the claim that individuals are real and causally significant while social wholes are not? Unless ontological individualists can offer a coherent answer to this question, their argument saws off the branch upon which they are sitting [...].

I think there is a fairly simple answer to this question, already hinted at above: ontological individualists working within the causal powers metaphysics might simply hold that persons have extra-powers and so are genuine composite objects (see, for example, Merricks 2001), but that social objects do not have extra-powers and so are not genuine composite objects –

¹³ See, for example, Unger (1979, [1979] 1997), Wheeler (1979), Dorr and Rosen (2002), and Sider (2013). See also the physicist Eddington's (1929, ix-xvii) classic discussion of the ontological status of his table. And see Goldman (1987) for an interesting discussion of the principles used by the mind to structure the world into units.

“they” are in reality nothing else than individuals interrelated X-wise.¹⁴ So long as the notion of having an extra-power has not been shown to be self-contradictory (see Kim 1999 for discussion), such a response renders ontological individualism at least *conceptually* coherent and *theoretically* justified. Whether there are *empirical* reasons for thinking that persons have extra-powers is a question I do not dare to speculate about (although some think that our experiences of agency and free will *prima facie* are such reasons, cf. Dupré 1993, 214-17)), but nor do I need to in order to raise the philosophical issues I have been highlighting in relation to Elder-Vass’s thought-provoking and influential social ontology.

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¹⁴ For some discussion of how individuals (assuming that there are such things) can be interrelated norm circle-wise, queue-wise, and corporation-wise without composing a social *object* of the kind in question, see (Hansson Wahlberg 2014, sect. 3).

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