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A Play in the Perpetual Game of Metaphysics

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Abstract

This is a review essay of Christoforos Bouzanis's *Social Imaginary and the Metaphysical Discourse: On the Fundamental Predicament of Contemporary Philosophy and Social Sciences*.

Keywords

Christoforos Bouzanis – metaphysics – social ontology – social imaginary

I have mixed feelings about Christoforos Bouzanis's *Social Imaginary and the Metaphysical Discourse: On the Fundamental Predicament of Contemporary Philosophy and Social Sciences* (2023, henceforth *SIMD*). On the one hand, I have always found the book's linchpin concept of 'imaginary', which has been used by (the classic of British idealism) F.H. Bradley, Cornelius Castoriadis, and Charles Taylor (*SIMD*, Chapter 6), as well as by Sartre and Lacan, among others, somewhat mystifying. On the other hand, *SIMD* is a thoughtful, although at times a bit abstruse, treatise on a deep and fundamental philosophical and meta-philosophical subject and is of special interest to me personally because it has several points of contact with and refers to my own work a few times, positively challenging me to contemplate certain potential shortcomings in my thinking.

For instance, *SIMD* juxtaposes what Bouzanis calls 'socialised metaphysics' and 'sociologised metaphysics', and the latter concept refers to a position once

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advanced by Osmo Kivinen and myself (e.g. Kivinen and Piironen 2006). Now for Kivinen and me, ‘sociologising metaphysics’ (or ‘sociologising philosophy’) named a certain *meta-theoretical attitude*—one that we thought was crucially *opposite to* another attitude that we called ‘*philosophising sociology*’. The latter, which could for the present purposes be renamed ‘*metaphysising social science*’, would be shared by all those who believe *social scientific research needs to be based on philosophical ontology*. As examples of expressions of that attitude of philosophising/metaphysising social science, we referred to the works of Roy Bhaskar and John Searle (both of whom are discussed in *SIMD*, too—as representatives of ‘socialised metaphysics’). Kivinen and I strongly objected to their apparent conviction that, for social scientific research to get off on the right foot—or, perhaps, to be ‘truly scientific’ at all—it needs to rest on a foundation of (the right kind of) philosophical ontology. We recommended instead adopting the opposite attitude, that of sociologising metaphysics: the view that *it is more fruitful and enlightening to use social scientific research to explain philosophers’ ontological positions than it is to use such positions as a foundation for social scientific research*.

I have no objections to the way Bouzanis speaks of sociologised metaphysics but would make a minor complaint about how he has named the contrasting position, ‘socialised’ metaphysics. Namely, the attitude of sociologising metaphysics shares with the tradition of *social epistemology* the conviction that the subject in question—knowledge acquisition/philosophical metaphysics—is a *thoroughly social affair*. The supposedly social nature of metaphysics is precisely *why* we believe it can be ‘sociologised’, that is, investigated with social scientific methods. So the attitude of sociologising metaphysics *leans on a ‘socialised’ notion of metaphysics*—in the sense of conceiving metaphysics (as a set of philosophical practices and a language game) as a social affair. This is why I find Bouzanis’s use of socialised metaphysics confusing, for it does not mean literally *socialising* metaphysics but the conviction ‘that social ontologies are epistemically prior to epistemology and methodology in the social sciences’, and that it is therefore important ‘in the social sciences ... [to] formulate and reflect on ... theories of what exists ...’ (3). That is, those who in Bouzanis’s terms advocate socialised metaphysics are very much the same people who I would say are metaphysising social science.¹ And I think my term is the more

1 To be fair, this is an apt description of the attitude of those who contributed to the book *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality* (Schmitt 2003), and it is that book that inspired Bouzanis to name the outlook socialised metaphysics. But precisely for that reason, the book also seems to me very poorly titled; it consists of papers by Searle and others which

appropriate, less confusing label for the theorists who think that social scientific outlooks inescapably involve metaphysics and would importantly benefit from philosophers' metaphysical theorising.

Having said that, I admit that Bouzanis is right to suggest that the approaches I call metaphysicising social science and sociologising metaphysics are *not mutually exclusive*. He makes a legitimate case for 'examining the assumed "contrast" between them, and arguing for a combinatory ... approach that reconciles these two tendencies' (4). Indeed, I do recognise some intellectual *reciprocity* between the two: social scientific research can make discoveries concerning why certain philosophers (or other people) would adopt such-and-such metaphysical positions, but philosophers' metaphysical investigations, I can now see, may also shed noteworthy light on some social scientists' (and other people's) tacit presumptions. I still would not say the latter project constitutes necessary 'foundation laying' for social sciences; I only admit a balanced circularity between the two and *not* of the kind where either is fundamental to the other.

Still, I hope this vindicates me from any suspicion of being among those whose intolerance towards abstract theory Bouzanis (1) laments for having created 'a hostile environment' for ontological and other meta-theoretical investigations in social sciences. Admittedly, I did once describe ontological social theorising as 'social theory for social theory's sake'—contrasted with (methodologically focused) social theory for *social sciences'* sake—and claimed it was 'almost completely devoid of practical social scientific significance ...' (Piironen 2014a, 153). Today, this statement seems to me embarrassingly bold and partial; I no longer believe that ontological theorising has next to no practical scientific significance—or that it is neatly distinguishable from methodological theorising. However, I am not making a complete U-turn here, either. I never quite claimed that social ontology is *worthless*: I acknowledged that there is *some* value to such theorising for theory's sake—the 'same kind of value as there is in art or a good game of chess ...' (Piironen 2014a, 153). And that is actually rather close to how I might still put it.

I do not mean by this that ontological theories *only* have aesthetic value or such value as there is to idle pastime entertainment, but rather the following. Just like art, ontological theories *can make us think, offer new narratives and open up* potentially fruitful *perspectives*; and like chess games, ontological arguments contain *objectively good/bad 'moves'* and have *winners and losers* (as

are definitely not trying to turn metaphysics into a social affair but instead theorise about the metaphysical nature of society, hoping to lay 'a foundation for social theory' (blurb text).

judged by the relevant community)—with exactly the same caveat that today's loser may find improvements for the next argument/game and win that one. However, most importantly, I still believe the value of ontological theories is like that of art and games in that *it has nothing to do with revealing a supposedly mind-independent Reality*. I hope Dr Bouzanis agrees with me about this, but he might not.

To start with, to a Rortian 'ironist' such as myself it sounds terribly grandiose to announce that SIMD tackles a 'fundamental predicament', and utterly wrong to claim that the predicament involves an '*under-theorised* state of contemporary thought on metaphysics' (9, emphasis added). I fail to see any such noteworthy predicament that could be solved through more philosophical theorising. If anything, we are already drowning in an ever-growing volume of increasingly complex and technical philosophical theories! I worry that Bouzanis's idea of finally providing the heretofore missing piece of theory about the True Nature of metaphysics is a sign of him being a captive of the *Subject–Object dualism*, someone who believes that *the reflecting subject must be presumed metaphysically* (as well as epistemically) *distinct from the object it reflects upon* (cf. Piirainen 2018). This subject–object/mind–world dualism implies the dualism of mind–body, too, and naturally leads to the social-ontological dualisms of individual–society and agency–structure (cf. Piirainen 2014b). Bouzanis, indeed, believes that individual reflexivity must not be identified ('conflated') with socially conditioned bodily habits or habitus (147, 177).² He thinks the assumption of a reflective, knowing subject is a *necessary premise* for there to be any *divergence* or *disagreement* about, and accordingly real *negotiations* or *struggle between*, different metaphysical worldviews (5, 177; see also Bouzanis and Kemp 2020).

I do not follow his logic here. While for us pragmatist '*trans-actionalists*' (to use Dewey's term) everything in the subject/object transactional process of reality-making is *both* subjective *and* objective—'the mind and the world jointly make up the mind and the world' (Putnam 1981, xi)—the mind and the world can certainly turn out somewhat *differently* in different subject/object transactions. Indeed, who would deny the common-sense view that there appear to be *many different* experiences of both the subjective mind and the world, and many disagreements and struggles between those? However, when

2 He has argued for a 'non-eliminative' notion of agential reflexivity that contradicts any theory wherein 'embodiment, habituation, and non-representational conditioning of situated practices prevail ... over the reflection on shared norms or world-images' (Bouzanis 2022, 178, emphasis removed). In one paper, Bouzanis and Kemp (2020) even claim that the idea of 'reflexive habitus', for example, is just 'conceptually confused'.

we ‘get philosophical’ about it, engage the philosophers’ language game, we can question and problematise such common-sense notions and may find that it is reasonable to think that no subjective mind is truly metaphysically distinct from the objective world, nor any object ultimately distinct from all subjective minds (Piiroinen 2018). Meanwhile, to me, Bouzanis’s clinging to the subject–object dualism casts serious doubts on the legitimacy of him labelling his position ‘*anti-realist*’.

Yes, realism and, therefore, anti-realism (whether of, say, constructionist, idealist, instrumentalist, phenomenalist-empiricist or pragmatist variant—or some mixture of those) is a *relative* position that can be defined in many ways,³ but there is one especially well-established division between metaphysical realists and their opponents, and it is based on precisely their divergent takes on the subject–object dualism. As Blackburn (1996) points out, whereas realists think that metaphysics investigates the structures of a supposedly mind-independent reality, their opponents conceive it as a more ‘self-reflective’ enterprise, something that intrinsically involves ‘gaining an understanding of ... how our “conceptual scheme” or perhaps any possible conceptual scheme, structures our ... thought about reality’ (64). And Bouzanis, in fact, approvingly quotes a view that is realist in just this sense: ‘metaphysics is not primarily concerned with thought or language’ but aims ‘to discover what fundamental kinds of things there are and what properties and relations they have, not ... the structure of our thought about them’ (Williamson [2008], cit. *SIMD*, 23).

Therefore, in calling his position anti-realist, Bouzanis must understand ‘anti-realism’ rather eccentrically. So he does, stating that his position is ‘anti-realist in the sense that it renders the ideational dimension as the ultimate one and takes it to be existentially prior to the material dimension’—he recognises the ‘existential pervasiveness of the ideational dimension’ (11, 181, emphases removed). This to me sounds less like *anti-realism* and more like a metaphysically *idealist* sort of realism. Certainly, idealism is oftentimes pitted against realism, but there are realist versions of it, too. I would say it depends on how *thoroughgoing* one’s idealism is—whether it overcomes the subject–object dualism by claiming that *everything* just is or involves ideas and therefore some subjectivity; and Bouzanis’s version does not seem so thoroughgoing. It only claims that the ideational ‘dimension’ is existentially more fundamental than the material dimension and insists on distinguishing both dimensions

3 Also, any group of realists or anti-realists typically divides into new groups of (stronger, stricter, truer) realists and (more thoroughgoing, radical or all-encompassing) anti-realists.

from the subjective minds contemplating and otherwise interacting with their objects, so that the minds will play a truly crucial constituting role *only* in the makings of the *societal*. In fact, Bouzanis goes on to explain that his analysis (merely) ‘relaxes’—as opposed to strictly denies, I take it—the metaphysical realist tenet of reality’s mind-independence, by showing that ‘there is at least one domain in nature, the societal, which is dependent on theorisation and human imagination’ (11, 181–182, emphasis removed). This does not seem like much of a relaxation to me, because few realists have claimed that *all* reality, let alone the societal, is independent from minds. Realists only ever needed to maintain that there are *some* parts of reality that *are* independent in that way—parts of the World that have some objective Way that they are, independently from any and all minds. As Bouzanis’s theory does not abandon the meta-metaphysical subject–object dualism, it fails to contradict this basic realist position.

Both subject–object dualists and my kind of pragmatist transactionalists offer various conceptual tools for making sense of metaphysics, for conceptualising the subject and objects and their most pivotal interactions or transactions. The emblematic such concept—supposedly naming things that have both ontological and cognitive priority—in SIMD is *imaginaries*, which consist of ideational objects, ideas and images and such. Now, one issue that I have with imaginaries is that Bouzanis insists on making their contents—as well as any human subject’s reflexive contemplation of them—a *non-linguistic* affair. He stresses that ‘the limits of our conceptualisations do not coincide with the limits of our thought and imagination: language is neither the only prior nor the ultimate condition of intelligibility’ (23). Accordingly, much of SIMD is dedicated to campaigning against the ‘linguistic turn’—the ‘unfortunate development’ of a detrimentally ‘disorienting’ ‘obsession with language’—in philosophy and social science (13 ff.). Meanwhile, I happen to think that the linguistic turn was a positive development, that it was a good idea to turn the focus of philosophical discussions on linguistic meanings. My reasoning is that, for starters, only with language can we have *propositions* and, hence, anything about which people can properly *agree or disagree*. Indeed, only with language can we have proper *beliefs* that can be either *true or false*, and therefore *knowledge (that)* about anything. In fact, if the contents of imaginaries are non-linguistic, *no one can hope to have any knowledge about them*; among other things, *we could never know whether we shared (some part of) an imaginary or not*. For although there undoubtedly is a sense of ‘thought’ and/or ‘imagination’ in which their limits do not coincide with those of conceptualisation, and a sense of ‘intelligibility’ in which language is not a condition of intelligibility, such thoughts, imagination or intelligibility would *not* be of the propositional

kind. Therefore, they could not constitute knowledge claims or even consist of propositional attitudes such as beliefs.

Bouzanis may refuse to see any problem here. In fact, SIMD argues that we should ‘replace the less helpful idea of web of beliefs’ with the idea of a ‘web of images’ (123) and even protests against the philosophical centrality of the concept of truth (Chapter 3). However, I struggle to understand how such webs of non-propositional images without truth-values could be interpreted as *ontologies*. For being non-propositional, they would not involve or imply any *facts*, and lacking truth-value, they could not even strictly *contradict* each other. Indeed, what would the ‘web’ in the web of images even *mean*, as, unlike with webs of beliefs, it cannot imply any expectation of *consistency*? Surely it must mean more than a ‘cluster’ and perhaps refer to a *psychological tendency* of certain images to bring to mind certain others. If so, that would testify to the pragmatist view that minds ultimately consist of habits (the most important such habits in the case of the distinctively human mind being habits of language use), for what else could these tendencies be but socially learned or conditioned neurological habits? This would mean that habits are the ontologically (and cognitively) more fundamental concept than imaginaries. But why, then, does Bouzanis (147, 177; see also Bouzanis 2022; Bouzanis and Kemp 2020) oppose the reducibility of the human mind, self and reflexivity to habits (about as vehemently as he opposes their reducibility to language)?

Apparently, he thinks that such pragmatism somehow denies the significance of *intelligent reflection* (of norms, world-images or one’s own self). It does not, although we pragmatists do view intelligent reflection as *less fundamental* than habits. It is less fundamental because, firstly, any such reflection takes place in a *context of* habitual action and practice, from an actor’s dispositional viewpoint, and secondly, all reflection crucially *consists in* embodied processes involving habitual and other neural dispositions. As Ryle famously put it, *knowing how is more fundamental than knowing that*, because the latter effectively is just a special kind of knowing how. In recent years, Dennett, a doctoral student of Ryle’s, has reworded this insight in his naturalist philosophy of mind, saying all ‘*comprehension*’ builds up from ‘*competences*’ (Dennett 2018).

To me, this naturalism seems just obviously true, but Bouzanis may disagree. His opposition to the materialistic (as well as linguistic) reducibility of minds and cognition, imaginaries and social reality, is certainly consistent with his avowed ‘*anti-naturalism*’ (11, 42, 80, 100, 182), which for me is the biggest issue with SIMD. Bouzanis’s anti-naturalist aspirations make it very hard for me to understand what, exactly, his key terms are supposed to refer to, and how those referents fit to the natural world. Most prominently, I cannot help contrasting Bouzanis’s ‘imaginaries’ with my own preferred social-ontological

key concept of ‘*social practices*’, which are quite easily understandable as *relatively consistent forms of collective, concerted and/or shared human behaviours* that can be thought to *both manifest and organise their participants’ intentions and other embodied dispositions*. I would like to understand imaginaries (and all the ideational stuff they consist of)—as well as the human minds contemplating them—similarly: as behavioural regularities manifesting embodied dispositions, although as more *narrow* such regularities that exist *within* and are *transmitted through* the broader regularities of social practices. This interpretation makes social practices the key social-ontological concept but recognises imaginaries as a modestly useful—as opposed to just mystifying and confusing—auxiliary concept.

However, unfortunately, Bouzanis does *not* seem keen to reduce imaginaries to social practices or to any social (structural, which to me means also agentive) forms. He thinks it is rather the other way round, ‘the ideational dimension ... [is] existentially prior to ... social structures’ and tends to ‘have an effect on the constitution of social forms’ (11), which to me sounds like making imaginaries horrifyingly *supernatural*, as well as turning the *order* of socio-cultural developments *backwards*. Like Taylor, for whom social imaginaries (the ways people imagine their surroundings that are shared by many people, even whole societies) constitute a ‘common understanding which *makes possible* common practices’ (Taylor 2007, 171–172, emphasis added), Bouzanis seems to think that metaphysical world-imaginaries—which *organise* people’s common reactions, beliefs and expectations—come *first* and *enable* social practices (8). And I think that is a social-ontologically misleading narrative, because while our (more or less) shared ideas, symbols, notions, stories and other behavioural regularities that could be said to constitute imaginaries do of course guide and even enable many particular social practices, their ontological existence depends on other, oftentimes antecedent social practices. Some practices might depend on things that can be made more understandable by means of the term imaginaries, but that term’s referents did not come first, nor is there any chicken/egg problem: social practices came first and should be recognised as the more fundamental thing in social-ontological narratives.

To make imaginaries, or indeed ideas or even images, (naturalistically) comprehensible, we need to identify them with socially shared embodied habits manifested as behavioural regularities in the social (agentive-cum-structural) practices in human communities. And to put the (cultural) evolutionary history in the right order, we need to be clear about the fact that such ideational objects could only emerge from earlier social practices, which must have included practices that gave us language and other cultural tools of thinking. Only through this sort of cultural evolution could the ideational stuff of imaginaries

ies or indeed imagination arise, or any self-reflection or reflexivity for that matter. And then there is no need or justification to fight against the ‘over-socialisation’ of individual reflexivity and agency, no need to try and defend a ‘core’ self to which reflexivity and agency could be predicated, which would not share any mutual constitution with other people (cf. Bouzanis 2022; Bouzanis and Kemp 2020). We do not need ‘*relatively autonomous*’ powers (of creative imagination)—as, crucially, ‘a factor of indeterminacy’—that would allow us to ‘*escape*’ all social determinants from shaping our minds into ‘merely an imprint of material necessity’ and to make ourselves something that is *not* ‘a mere co-product or a projection of external necessities’ (6). Those ideas belong to the awkward and counterproductive framework of social-ontological individual–society, agency–structure dualism, and we should be glad to be rid of that (Piiroinen 2014b). We naturalists—like Dewey and Dennett, for example—are anti-dualists about most things, including the relationship of the individual organism and its environment, and should therefore drop the Kantian, subject–object dualistic ‘*incompatibilism*’ and instead conceptualise agentive freedom and autonomy in a way that makes them perfectly compatible with social (and any other ‘extrinsic’) determination (Piiroinen 2023).

In sum, although I recognise the value of SIMD as a thought-provoking artwork and a bold play in the game of metaphysics, I would invite Bouzanis to reformulate its main concepts and narrative in a way consistent with a thoroughgoing naturalism and the variety of anti-dualisms discussed above. At the very least—even if he insists on thinking that useful analytical distinctions must refer to ontological distinctness—I hope he joins me, Dewey, Dennett and most secular academics in embracing metaphysical naturalism. To do so, it might not be necessary to give up all dualisms—although I would argue that that would make things easier, allowing all the pieces of the naturalistic narrative to fall into place most coherently. The crucial notion that I invite Bouzanis to embrace is just that *there is nothing supernatural or unnatural* in the world—nothing that could not (in principle) be explained in natural-scientific terms—referring only to what Dennett calls ‘*cranes*’, as opposed to any supernatural ‘*skyhooks*’. Notice that this does not require one to believe that every useful concept (say, imaginaries) can be *defined* fully satisfactorily in physical terms; but it does entail assuming that any entities or features conceptualised in non-physical terms actually *supervene on*—and, hence, metaphysically speaking *consist in nothing but*—physical stuff.

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