

Bloomington and Cambridge Compared: Varieties of Ontological Thinking, Social Positioning,  
and the Self-Governance of Common Pool Resources

Paul Lewis

Department of Political Economy, King's College London

paul.lewis@kcl.ac.uk

and

Jochen Runde

Judge Business School, Cambridge

j.runde@jbs.cam.ac.uk

This paper contributes to the literature on ontology and the history of economic thought by examining the ontological commitments of Nobel Laureate Elinor Ostrom from the vantage point of recent work on social positioning theory (SPT). The comparison highlights important features of Ostrom's thought on common pool resources (CPRs), most notably her emphasis on social positions and the correlative nature of the rights and duties and the role of power and authority associated with them. In addition to highlighting similarities between Ostrom and SPT, the paper also identifies differences and possible gains from trade. It is argued that Ostrom's approach could potentially be enhanced by following SPT in allowing for the social positioning of objects as well as people, and that SPT might benefit from Ostrom's ideas about the epistemic challenges involved in deliberate attempts at social positioning, and the possibility of failures in social positioning such challenges might entail.

Key words: Ostrom, ontology, social positioning, self-governance, rules.

JEL classification: B1, B2, B3, B4, B15, B52

## **Bloomington and Cambridge Compared: Varieties of Ontological Thinking, Social Positioning, and the Self-Governance of Common Pool Resources<sup>\*</sup>**

### **1. Introduction**

For over three decades, a group of researchers operating under the banner of Cambridge Social Ontology has highlighted the importance for economics and social theory of issues concerning the nature and basic structure of social reality (Lawson 1997, 2003, 2019; Pratten [ed.] 2015; Faulkner *et al.* 2017). A recurrent theme in this work is that such issues cannot be avoided because all approaches to the study of social and economic life presuppose that their preferred methods are suited to the social material under investigation. The question is then whether choice of methods is informed by explicit attempts to conceptualise the nature of the social world with a view to selecting those most appropriate to capturing its key features (such as its openness, internal relationality, and processual nature).

Contributors to the Cambridge project have long traced the failings of mainstream economics to an unquestioning reliance on methods ill suited to its subject matter (Lawson 1997, 2015a). Heterodox economists, in contrast, often explicitly address the question of fit between methods and (key features of) social reality as they conceive it. Further, far from being a recent development, this “realist orientation” has long been a feature of the work of prominent figures in the history of the discipline. The emphasis in Austrian economics on using methods that do justice to the subjectivity of choice and the open-ended and processual nature of economic life is one example. The emphasis placed by “Original” Institutional Economics on how institutions endure and/or change over time is another. Various others could be mentioned (Graca-Moura *et al.* 2020: 982-83).

Constructive work on developing theories of the nature of the social world falls into two broad categories. The first, sometimes called *socio-philosophical ontology* (Lawson 2019: 11), focuses on features of the social world regarded as general in the sense of obtaining or operating throughout it. Examples include attempts to conceptualise the nature of choice and the open-ended nature of the social world as the product of “creative” choice (as found, for

---

<sup>\*</sup> Department of Political Economy, King’s College London and Cambridge Judge Business School, University of Cambridge respectively. We are grateful for comments from Phil Faulkner, Tony Lawson, and three anonymous referees.

example, in the work of Ludwig Lachman, George Shackle and, as we shall see, Elinor Ostrom); the emergent nature of social reality arising from the organising relations between its components (as argued, for example, by Commons, Hayek, and Ostrom); and the processual nature of the social world, the reproduction and transformation of which is conceptualised as depending upon the interplay between human agency and social structure (as emphasised by Marx and Hayek, and Ostrom, amongst others). The second category, sometimes called *socio-scientific ontology* (Lawson 2019: 11), focuses on the nature of particular kinds of existents such as capabilities (Sen, Ostrom), capital (Marx, Lachmann, 1956), entrepreneurship (Schumpeter, Kirzner 1973), institutions (Commons, Veblen), markets (Hayek, Lachmann, Polanyi), and uncertainty (Keynes, 1921/1973, 1937; Knight, 1921).

Recognition of the importance of ontological issues is reflected in the growing number of studies of the ontological commitments of prominent heterodox economists, including Buchanan (Lewis and Dold 2020), Commons (C. Lawson 1994, 2015; Pratten 2020), Hayek (Fleetwood 1996; Runde 2001; Lewis 2015, 2016a, 2016b, 2017a), Menger (C. Lawson 1999, Yamamori 2020), Shackle (Latsis 2015), Sen (Martins 2006, 2007), and Veblen (Lawson 2015b, Martins 2020). These studies explore various ontological topics, both socio-philosophical and socio-scientific, as well as the “fit”, or lack thereof, between economists’ preferred methods and their ontological commitments. The present paper adds to this literature by looking at a different figure and topic: Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom and her work on the self-governance of common pool resources (CPRs), where local communities are sometimes able to devise sets of rules to self-manage and avoid the problems of over-use and under-investment that often afflict such resources (Ostrom 1990, 1999, 2005, [2009] 2014).

Ostrom’s work is especially interesting in this context for the surprising amount of common ground it shares with a developing stream of Cambridge Social Ontology called Social Positioning Theory (henceforth SPT) (Lawson 2019: 12-18, 86-88, 128-33, 2022). SPT offers a generalised account of the social world as comprising ensembles of emergent systems made up of relationally organised human and nonhuman entities that become components of those systems in virtue of their social positioning. As such, of course, it proceeds at a different level of abstraction from the more applied policy-oriented work of Ostrom and the wider Bloomington School of Institutional Analysis founded by her and her long-standing collaborator and husband, Vincent Ostrom. But their work does touch on ontological themes

and, where so, in ways strikingly similar to SPT, not least in the idea of social positioning and the matching nature of the rights and obligations associated with different social positions.

We hope to throw new light on Ostrom's work by confronting it with SPT and thereby adding to the small but growing literature on her ontological commitments (Aligica and Boettke 2009: 79-80; Malik 2017; Lewis 2017b, 2021; Miroiu and Dumitru 2021; Lewis and Aligica 2024). In addition, we hope that what follows might interest members of the wider Bloomington School by introducing a fleshed-out version of the idea of social positioning and, particularly, one that can incorporate CPRs and the technology involved in their protection and use in a larger theoretical framework. At the same time we hope that what follows will also be of interest to those helping develop SPT, partly by way of casting Ostrom's oeuvre as a rich source of empirical applications of a similar ontological framework, and also in virtue of the questions it raises about such things as the emergence of institutions, the difficulties of designing institutions to achieve specific ends, and the need for the further development of ontological categories.

We begin in the next section with an overview of SPT, drawing mostly on the work of its leading representative Tony Lawson, and highlighting elements that will be useful later in the paper. This section is followed by a corresponding overview of Ostrom's work on the management of CPRs. The remainder of the paper is devoted to a critical comparison of the two approaches, beginning with areas of alignment before moving on to points of difference.

## **2. Social Positioning Theory**

We start our account of SPT with the idea that the world is made up of totalities. Totalities are systems that have integrity and coherence at their own level of being and are made up of relationally organized elements, each of them totalities in their own right, that serve as components of the larger system. One of the defining themes in SPT is that totalities are emergent entities, possessing properties that are causally and ontologically irreducible to the set of each of their elements taken in isolation (Lawson 2019: 86-87, 199, 2022: 3-6, 9-10). That is to say, the manner in which the elements of the system are organised and become components of that system matters and constitutes an essential feature of the totality in question.

While totalities seem to be ubiquitous in nature, SPT is restricted to the social domain and, within that, for the most part focuses on what are called "communities". The social

domain is understood as all instances of all actual and possible kinds of phenomena whose existence depends on human beings and their interactions. Communities, in turn, are understood as a particular kind of totality that includes humans among its components. Examples include families, town councils and villages. Communities are distinct from totalities made up exclusively of nonhumans or what we will call “objects”. Many objects arise in nature, independent of human involvement, such as the entities we recognize as a coconut, stallectite or dinosaur skeleton (“natural objects”). But others depend on human involvement, not least the many objects constructed to extend human capabilities. We will refer to these as technological objects, examples of which include cellphones, guitars, and garden walls. The components of any object are always objects in their own right (Lawson 2019: 13; also see Cardinale and Runde 2021; Faulkner and Runde 2013, 2019; Heuer and Runde 2022).

A community social position, in SPT, is understood as a location or site that can be entered or occupied by any human or object, and by which that human or object becomes a component of that community. People (and artificial persons such as corporations that have legal standing in their own right (Lawson 2015c)) occupy “person positions”. Person positions within a community are constituted by a unique assembly of rights and obligations that stipulate permitted and required ways of acting for their occupants (Lawson 2022: 10). Object positions within a community are constituted by a unique subset of this assembly that stipulate allowed and required uses (ways of being used or operated, etc.) of the object concerned. The social positioning of any object locates it in relation to the other socially positioned entities within the community, thereby subjecting it to the organising effects of the specific configurations of social relations within that community.

An important feature of SPT is that every right (obligation) in the ensemble of rights and responsibilities constituting any person position is matched to a specific obligation (right) in a—usually different—corresponding ensemble constituting a different person position. Every matched right/obligation pair constitutes a community social relation, and the matching of rights and responsibilities across social positions implies that they are mutually constitutive or internally related; one would not exist without the other (Lawson 2016b: 365, 2019: 15, 2022: 5).

To illustrate, take the community of a town council. The person position of council chair is constituted by various rights such as its occupant having the authority to call meetings

to order and having the casting vote, and obligations such as its occupant involving all councillors in discussion and ensuring that they keep to the point, summarising the debate and facilitating the making of the resolutions required for effective and lawful decisions, and so on. These rights and obligations correspond to obligations and rights that constitute other positions to which they are related: a town council chair's obligation to represent the council at official events corresponds to the right of council members to be represented in this way; and the right of the council chair to the casting vote corresponds to the obligation of council members to accept the chair's decision. So long as the rights and obligations associated with the various positions that make up the town council are suitably chosen, the occupants of those positions will be encouraged and enabled to act in ways that facilitate the operation of the town council (Lawson 2019: 14-15, 87, 129, Pratten 2017: 1422-23, 2020: 1140).

Every social position carries with it a general expectation that its occupants contribute to the performance of the totality of which they are components. This contribution, role or use, is the system function associated with the position in question (Lawson 2016b: 379; Faulkner and Runde 2019: 1290; Cardinale and Runde 2021: 615). Thus a community such as a town council includes people occupying the positions of councillor, town clerk and town council chair. Councillors have the system function of representing the interests of their constituents in the larger community, the town clerk the system functions of maintaining council records and managing elections, and the town council chair the system function of running and ensuring the smooth operation of town council meetings. Objects have functions too in virtue of their social positioning, such as a gavel having the system function of helping make a noise loud enough to bring a council meeting to order.

There are six additional features of SPT to note before we move on to Elinor Ostrom. The first is that occupancy of a social position informs the identity of that occupant within the community (and often in larger communities in which the former community is itself nested as a component). By "identity" we mean the kind of thing an entity is regarded as being within the relevant community or communities. Thus the positions of councillor, town clerk and town council chair represent more than titles perhaps formalized by a contract. They are also an attribution that renders their occupants a councillor, town clerk and so on, both within the town council and the wider community of which the town council is itself a component. Of course, people generally occupy many social positions concurrently, each contributing aspects of their identity. Someone who occupies the position of town councillor could at the

same time occupy the positions of, and so be, a skydiver or lay priest. Further, people move into and out of positions over time. This identity-informing aspect of social positions applies also to positioned objects, although here the identity tends to be more uniquely tied to particular system functions.

The second feature is that the matched sets of rights and obligations described above involve “power-over” relations in that the exercise of a right to act in some way by the occupant of one position is matched by a corresponding obligation to respond in an appropriate way by the occupant of another position (Lawson 2019: 228, 2022: 11). As Lawson puts it, rights and obligations “work as power relations in that the exercising of a position right by one party leads to another, with a corresponding or matched obligation, doing what is required or requested, even if the latter party feels it is the last thing he or she wants to do” (2019: 15; also see Lawson 2016b: 365). More specifically, and following philosopher John Searle (2010: 8-9), Lawson conceptualises such matched rights and obligations as positive and negative deontic powers respectively, where “deontic power” is concerned with factors such as rights and obligations (Lawson 2022: 11 n. 23).<sup>1</sup>

Third, the capacity of any component of a system to serve its system function depends on its positioning relative to other components and therefore on the system as a whole. This capacity is not a property of the positioned entity, or the position it occupies, alone. Nor will it be able to serve its system function, at least to its full extent, if the rights and obligations associated with the relevant set of positions, and thereby governing how their occupants interact, have aspects that interfere with the exercise of that capacity. The capacity in question is, therefore, an emergent property of the appropriate relationally-organised system, being irreducible to the properties of its component parts (even though it only acts in and through the actions of the occupants of the relevant positions) (Lawson 2019: 33-43, 86-87, 2022: 3-4, 7).

Fourth, if the systems constituted through social positioning are to work well, then in addition to their having an appropriate structure, it is also necessary for position occupants to have (in general) the capacities needed to serve their system functions. In Lawson’s words, “certain basic properties or capacities are required of human beings and other items if any components formed out of them through positioning are to be both capable of, and reliable

---

<sup>1</sup> See Martins (2022) for an extended discussion of social relations as power relations from the viewpoint of SPT.

in, supporting some community/system way of working” (2022: 10). If the occupants of positions lack the requisite capacities—if, for example, someone appointed as town clerk lacks the relevant abilities—then they will be unable to function properly as a component, and thereby impair the performance, of the larger system.

Fifth, in exercising the rights and meeting the obligations of their positions people contribute to the reproduction—or on occasions, as noted below, the transformation—of the systems they are components of (Lawson 2019: 11-14, 24 n. 14, 2022: 6-7). On this view, social structure—the emergent realm of social positions that organise and condition people’s (inter)actions—and human agency are distinct but recursively related things: each is both a necessary condition for, and a consequence of, the other, with people drawing on (pre-existing) social structures in order to act, and with their actions (subsequently) contributing either to the reproduction or transformation of those structures (Bhaskar 1989, Lawson 2003). This account of the structure-agency relationship, the so-called transformational model of social activity, avoids the reductionist extremes of voluntarism (social structure created *ex nihilo* by human agency) and determinism (people’s actions completely determined by the positions they occupy, so that human agency is effectively eliminated).

Finally, according to SPT, people’s actions—including their own efforts at social positioning—are conditioned and shaped, but not uniquely determined, by the (pre-existing) totalities that provide the context for their (inter)actions. Social positioning always takes place in the context of an existing community, undertaken by people who occupy positions in already-established social totalities and who draw on the rights thereby afforded them in order to act. To continue with our example, suppose that the people who occupy the position of town councillor decide to create a new kind of position—council secretary, say—and hire someone to fill it. The councillors’ decision to engage in this act of creating and filling a social position was, no doubt, facilitated by the rights they enjoy as councillors (and also encouraged by their obligation to ensure the efficient operation of the town council even in the face of a limited budget). But the rights and obligations incumbent upon them did not *compel* them to act in this way, uniquely determining their actions. That is to say, their own distinctive powers of agency were surely important to devising the specific plan to respond to the challenges of running the council and determining a new kind of position.

### **3. Elinor Ostrom and the Governance of Common Pool Resources**



Ostrom's interest in the possibility of self-governance—that the community of users of a CPR might be able to devise a set of rules that would allow them to manage it successfully without external intervention—can be traced to her 1960s doctoral research on the management of water resources in California (Ostrom 1968). At the time, following a seminal article by Hardin (1968), users of CPRs were widely regarded as facing a collective action problem they were unable to solve by themselves. This problem was seen to stem from the two defining characteristics of CPRs: the difficulty of excluding people from the resource and thereby preventing them from consuming it; and any one member's consumption of the resource reducing the amount available for others. These properties were taken to imply that the pursuit of individual self-interest would lead to excessive depletion of, and under-investment in, CPRs (the "tragedy of the commons"). This predicament was often modelled as a prisoner's dilemma, with the non-cooperative equilibrium of that game leading to a Pareto-inefficient outcome representing the tragedy of the commons. The appropriate policy response was widely thought to be intervention by an external authority, which would either manage the resource directly or privatise it (Ostrom 1990: 2-15, 2009: 523-24).

However, by the mid-1980s mounting case study evidence indicated that users of CPRs were in fact often able to manage the resource successfully themselves, casting doubt on the alleged impossibility of self-governance (Ostrom 1990: xi-xiii, 2009: 525-27; Levi 2010: 7-10; Poteete *et al.* 2010: xxii, 31-33, 39-48, 60, 101-02). For Ostrom, these findings called into question the standard view of users of CPRs facing a prisoner's dilemma. While allowing that this representation captures aspects of the collective action problem, she also saw it as flawed for portraying users as passively accepting their fate rather than seeking to transform the situation by devising rules that generated the information and incentives needed to manage the resource themselves. While "[t]he prisoners in the famous dilemma cannot change the constraints imposed on them" (Ostrom 1990: 7), this is not always true of the users of CPRs.

Not all users of natural resources are similarly incapable of changing their constraints. As long as individuals are viewed as prisoners, policy prescriptions will address this metaphor. I would rather address the question of how to enhance the capabilities of those involved to change the constraining rules of the game. (Ostrom 1990: 7; also see Ostrom 2005: 17 and [2009] 2014: 176–77.)

Ostrom also criticises the prisoner's dilemma model for treating the situations represented as a closed system in which people respond to their circumstances in a determinate, lawlike way. Ostrom contends that such models exclude the possibility that people are genuine agents able to respond creatively to their circumstances (Ostrom 1990: 182–216, 1999: 494–95) and this where the case study evidence of successful self-management serves to “disprove [such] deterministic hypotheses” (Poteete *et al.* 2010: 33; also see pp. 22, 46). She concludes that: “If agency is taken seriously, we must allow for both creativity and differences in perspective. But creativity and differences in interpretation mean that lawlike social patterns are unlikely to arise ... Deductive-nomological reasoning suggests a mechanical view of the world, in which the same stimulus produces the same effect, *ceteris paribus*. Theories that view social phenomena as products of ... intentional action challenge this mechanical view” (Poteete *et al.* 2010: 9; also see pp. 22). If justice is to be done to the creative agency that generates the possibility of successful self-governance, then it is necessary to acknowledge that the social world is an open system in which people's actions are not simply a determinate response to their situation and in which they possess the power to act as “public entrepreneurs” who can transform their circumstances in ways that facilitate self-governance (Ostrom 1990: 6-7, 127, 182-216, 1999: 494-95).<sup>2</sup>

The transformation in question involves people devising social rules to regulate their interactions with the CPR. Ostrom defines social rules as “shared understandings ... about *enforced* prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are *required, prohibited, or permitted*” (2005: 18) which “individuals use to organise all forms of repetitive and structured interactions” (Ostrom 2005: 3). She identifies several kinds of *operational* rule that regulate people's interactions with CPRs, and which, in some combinations, may allow the tragedy of the commons to be avoided (Ostrom 1990: 52; 2005: 58):

1. Position rules ... specify a set of positions and how many actors may hold each one;
2. Boundary rules ... specify how actors are to be chosen to enter or leave those positions;
3. Authority rules ... specify the actions assigned to a position ... ;
4. Aggregation rules (such as majority or unanimity rules) ... specify how the decisions of actors ... are to be mapped to intermediate or final outcomes;

---

<sup>2</sup> For more on the notion of open and closed systems, see Lewis (2021: 625-26).

5. Information rules ... specify channels of communication among actors and what information must, may, or must not be shared;
6. Scope rules ... specify the outcomes that can be affected;
7. Payoff rules ... specify how benefits and costs are to be distributed to actors in positions. (Ostrom 2010: 13)

As their names suggest, these rules serve various purposes. Position rules define and create social positions, such as (authorised) 'user' of a resource and 'monitor'. Authority rules assign to positions various rights (permitted actions) and duties (obligations), concerning for example how much of the resource authorised users are entitled to and what maintenance activities they are expected to undertake; information rules govern what information the occupants of various positions possess, for example by specifying that authorised users must disclose how much of the resource they harvest; and payoff rules specify the benefits and costs assigned to various actions and outcomes (Ostrom 1999: 509, 2005: 193-210, 223-36). The rules thus shape both the incentives people face and the information they have, thereby influencing their capacity to manage the resource successfully. If these rules are well-chosen, then people will face the incentives and possess the information needed to avoid the tragedy of the commons (Ostrom 1990: 19-20, 91-100, 136-42, 185-88, 1999: 508-19).<sup>3</sup>

#### **4. Parallels between SPT and Ostrom on the Governance of CPRs**

There are clear parallels between SPT and Ostrom's analysis. Both portray a world of emergent totalities or systems in which higher-level systems depend for their continued existence on, and possess emergent properties distinct from, their lower-level constituent parts (Lawson 1997: 175-77, 2019: 38, 62; Ostrom 2004: 41, 44, 2005: 11-13, 125; also see Lewis 2021: 631). Both regard people as totalities in their own right, systems of interrelated biological components that possess emergent properties—such as consciousness, including the capacity to engage in intentional action—not possessed by those components in isolation (Lawson 1997: 175-77, 2003: 46; Ostrom 2004: 44, 2005: 125). And both focus on communities, relationally-organised systems comprising socially positioned human and possibly nonhuman components.

---

<sup>3</sup> For more concrete examples of the rules involved in managing a particular resource, see Ostrom and Basurto (2011: 327-29).

The details provided by the two accounts of how the interactions between the members of a community are shaped by the rights and obligations associated with the positions they occupy are similar too. (Ostrom talks of “duties” rather than “obligations”.) In Ostrom’s analysis of self-governance, these positions include “authorised user” and “monitor”, each with the system function of preserving the CPR. As noted above, the rules stipulate how much of the resource authorised users are entitled to and what they are obliged to do to maintain it. Other rules stipulate that monitors may deny access to unauthorised users and punish in specified ways authorised users who fail to abide by the rules governing their consumption of the resource. As in SPT, the rights (obligations) associated with one position are matched by corresponding obligations (rights) associated with other positions. Thus the rights of users to access the resource, and their obligation to maintain it, are matched by the obligations of monitors to allow access only to authorised users and to punish users who fail to fulfil their duty to maintain it. Drawing on the Original Institutional economist John Commons’ *Legal Foundations of Capitalism* (Commons [1924] 1968), Ostrom describes “the correlative nature of rights” as follows:<sup>4</sup>

To state that someone has a right, someone must have a duty to observe that right. The person with the right, then, is permitted to do something, while those with the duty are forbidden or required to do something. (Ostrom 2005: 297 n. 6; also see see Ostrom [2009] 2014: 179-80 and Schlager and Ostrom 1992: 250.)

---

<sup>4</sup> Ostrom included Commons’ *Legal Foundations* on a list of works that most influenced her thinking:

John R. Commons created the beginning of a vocabulary that both Vincent and I would use over the years for thinking about crucial units and processes such as: transactions, right-duties relationships, power-authority relationships, and the correlatives of these basic relationships (2004: 41).

Ostrom expanded on this influence in a 2009 interview, in a response to a question about who, if she could have dinner with anyone, she would choose: “Well, I would like to have a dinner with John R. Commons ... whose work I have read multiple times and I still assign to my students ... [H]e had a very interesting philosophy about rights having a counterpart to duties. And so if somebody has a right, somebody has to have a duty.” (Ostrom 2009, quoted in Wall 2014: 22).

So long as the set of positions and rules is suitably configured, so that their occupants relate to one another in the appropriate way, then their interactions will generate the information and the incentives required for the successful management of the resource.<sup>5, 6</sup>

As Ostrom explains, close study of the cases she was reading led her and her collaborators to follow Commons also in conceptualising property rights as “*bundles of rights* rather than a single right” and to consider the possibility that “one can relate the different ways these bundles are combined to a set of positions that individuals hold” such that “the composition of [the] bundle of rights” associated with each position “is analytically and empirically distinct from the attributes of the rights holder” (Poteete *et al.* 2010: 95-96, 47; also see Schlager and Ostrom 1992 and Ostrom [2009] 2014: 179-80).

Ostrom also draws on Commons’ ideas in analysing, again in a way that resembles SPT, the role of power and authority in social relations. Recall that for Lawson (2022: 11), the rights and obligations associated with pairs of social positions embody “power-over relations”, because the exercise of a right by the occupant of one position corresponds to a duty of the occupant of another position, to respond in an appropriate way. Ostrom adopts a similar view that rights-duty relationships embody a power relationship because the capacity to exercise a right ultimately depends on the extent to which the person who enjoys it has the authority

---

<sup>5</sup> Tony Lawson (private correspondence, 2023) asks whether it is correct to refer to the existence of rules in connection with rights and obligations when such rights and obligations aren’t codified. We saw above that Ostrom defines social rules as “shared understandings ... about *enforced* prescriptions concerning what actions (or outcomes) are *required, prohibited, or permitted*” (2005: 18). And in an earlier contribution, again drawing on Commons’ *Legal Foundations of Capitalism*, she defines “working rules” as “those actually used, monitored, and enforced when individuals make choices about the actions they will take (Commons 1957)” (Ostrom 1990: 51). With respect to the question raised by Lawson, it seems that Ostrom does regard working rules as something that exist over and above the rights and obligations associated with them, and that this is so irrespective of whether or not the rules have been codified. The reason is that working rules involve monitoring and sanctions when they are violated, which is something that seems to require that working rules can provide an agreed benchmark in a community, set expectations, and so on, and are to this extent “out there” as things that can be known and shared. As she puts it, one “should not talk about a ‘rule’ unless most people whose strategies are affected by it know of its existence and expect others to monitor behavior and to sanction nonconformance.” Further, and back to Lawson’s question, she appears in any event to allow that working rules may at least sometimes be, or “be aligned” with, “formal” rules that are codified: “Working rules may or may not closely resemble the formal laws that are expressed in legislation, administrative regulations, and court decisions. Formal law obviously is a major source of working rules in many settings, particularly when conformance to them is actively monitored and sanctions for noncompliance are enforced” (Ostrom 1990: 51).

<sup>6</sup> Ostrom also notes that users of a CPR need to devise institutions tailored to the particular resource they are attempting to manage (Ostrom 1999: 508, 526, 2005: 22-23, 26 [2009] 2014: 182; Ostrom and Basurto 2011: 321, 325, 329). This too is consistent with SPT, in particular Lawson’s point that because the process through which people become relationally organised as the components of social systems “always occurs in a context, ... some of these components become also related to features of the local environment” (2016b: 362).

to enforce it and thereby elicit the appropriate response from the bearer of the corresponding obligation (V. Ostrom and E. Ostrom [1972] 1999: 45-47; Ostrom 2005: 20, 144-46).<sup>7</sup>

Ostrom is also fully alive to the idea that, as it arises only through the creation of an appropriately-organised set of positions, the successful management of a CPR is an emergent property of the resource management system as a whole. It is possessed neither by any of the positions individually nor by the relevant set of positions if the rules governing the interactions between their occupants are poorly tailored to the resource in question (Ostrom 1999: 520–25, 2005: 255–56; also see Lewis 2017: 50-51). She emphasises that self-organised resource governance systems are “complex adaptive systems”, that is, “composed of a large number of active elements whose rich patterns of interaction provide emergent properties that are not easy to predict by analysing the separate parts of the system” (Ostrom 1999: 520-521; also see E. Ostrom’s remarks on p. 156 of Aligica and Boettke 2009). So there is another parallel here: in conceptualising resource management systems as emergent systems, Ostrom is developing a line of analysis that resembles the emphasis on emergent totalities in SPT.

Finally, Ostrom’s position on the relationship between social structure and the human agent closely resembles the transformational model of social activity. To see why, note first that she distinguishes between three kinds of rule (1990: 52, 2005: 58–62):

- operational rules regulate people’s everyday decisions about their interactions with the resource;
- collective choice rules set out the procedures governing how those operational rules are selected;
- constitutional choice rules specify how those collective choice rules are chosen.

---

<sup>7</sup> Vincent Ostrom elaborates on this point by following Commons in noting that, “right-duty relationships in the world of action are closely correlated to power-liability relationships. A right that cannot be enforced is without meaning. The meaning of a right in turn depends upon the availability of remedies that establish entitlement to enforce a right. A right without a remedy (i.e., a capacity to enforce a right) is without effective meaning in the world of action” (V. Ostrom [1988] 2011: 465; also see V. Ostrom 1976). It is worth underlining how central the notion of power was to the thought of Elinor and Vincent Ostrom. A major theme in their work concerns the shortcomings of monocentric social systems—roughly speaking, those characterised by relations of command and control in which there is a unique centre of ultimate power—and the advantages of polycentric systems in which, because there are multiple centres of countervailing power, there is no ultimate source of authority (Ostrom 2005: 283-86, [2009] 2014: 167-71; Boyte *et al.* 2014; V. Ostrom [1972] 1999, [1973] 2008: 65-86, 96-98). For discussions of how Ostrom’s work on the self-governance of CPRs reflects and informs a broader and deeper intellectual project centring on the possibility of self-governance more generally, see Aligica and Boettke (2011) and Lewis (2022: 72).

Rules at one level are embedded in a deeper set of rules that define how the former may be changed. For example, the operational rules governing people’s everyday decisions about how much of the resource to harvest and what maintenance activities to undertake are embedded in a set of collective choice rules specifying how those operational rules are chosen (Ostrom 2005: 33–34, 62–64). Consistent with the transformational model of social activity, Ostrom portrays people attempting to establish a set of operational rules that will facilitate self-governance as drawing on given collective and constitutional choice rules, which facilitate and constrain people’s actions, thereby shaping—without entirely determining—their efforts to devise appropriate operational rules. And in drawing on those higher-level rules, people of course also contribute to their reproduction, as the transformational model suggests (Ostrom 1990: 52-54, 184-85, 2000: 347, 2005: 3, 33-34, 62-64).<sup>8</sup>

Like Lawson, therefore, Ostrom seeks to avoid the polar extremes of determinism and voluntarism: “the research on social dilemmas demonstrates ... a world of *possibility* rather than of *necessity*. We are neither trapped in inexorable tragedies nor free of moral responsibility for creating and sustaining incentives that facilitate our own achievement of mutually productive outcomes” ([1998] 2014: 149). Ostrom rejects determinism in assuming that people possess powers of creative agency that enable them to devise systems of rules that facilitate self-governance. She rejects voluntarism in arguing that people’s efforts at self-governance are more likely to succeed under certain social-structural conditions (including, for example, collective choice and constitutional choice rules that acknowledge the right of local people to develop their own operational rules). Ostrom thus carves out a middle ground between voluntarism and determinism in which self-governance is indeed often a possibility but is contingent on pre-existing structures and whose realisation, far from being inevitable, requires skilled, creative, yet fallible, human agency (Boyte *et al.* 2014: 208; cf. Boettke and Aligica 2019: 134-39, 156-57).

In addition to analysing the social-structural conditions for self-governance, Ostrom also considers its dependence on the capabilities of those involved (1990: 7, 27). There is a further parallel between SPT and Ostrom’s work here. According to SPT, the performance of any totality depends on its positioned components having the capabilities to serve their

---

<sup>8</sup> Lewis (2021: 629-31) provides a more detailed account of the similarities between Ostrom’s approach to the structure-agency relationship and the transformational model of social activity advanced by Lawson and other contributors to Cambridge Social Ontology.

system function. Ostrom takes a similar line in arguing that the possibility of self-governance depends on people having the capabilities to practice “the arts and science of association” (Ostrom, quoted in Boettke and Aligica 2009: 159), of actually being able to use the rules to hold each other to account and to resolve conflicts over their use (Ostrom [1998] 2014: 153; E. Ostrom and V. Ostrom [2004] 2014: 86; Boyte *et al.* 2014; also see Ostrom 2006 and Aligica and Lewis 2023).

## 5. Differences

Having highlighted various parallels between SPT and Ostrom’s analysis, we now turn to some differences and where one approach might learn from the other.

### 5.1 Method

The principal aim of SPT is to identify and illuminate features of the social world that are general in the sense of obtaining or operating throughout it. The method it employs to do so is a form of retrodution that moves from widely-acknowledged general aspects of human experience to identifying their conditions of possibility. For example, it is argued that familiar features of the social world—such as the routinised nature of social life, the segmented and other-directed nature of social practices, and the fact that practices in particular settings often remain the same even when the individuals performing them change—can be rendered intelligible only by acknowledging certain broad features of social reality: that, according to SPT, it comprises assemblies of internally-related positions; that the rights and obligations that constitute these positions guides the behaviour of the people who occupy them; and that these rights and obligations are typically oriented towards, and constituted in relation to, the rights and obligations that constitute other positions (Lawson 2003: 32-53, 2019: 33). SPT as described above is a developing account of the constitution of such assemblies and, as such, a contribution to philosophical social ontology (Lawson 2019: 11-18).

Ostrom’s methodological approach is similar to that of SPT in some ways and different in others. It is similar in that she too employs something like retrodution in moving from case study evidence of attempts at self-governance of CPRs to an account of how people might devise sets of operational rules that would allow them to achieve this without external intervention. It differs in that it is empirical in the conventional academic sense of being based on evidence that is systematically gathered through a variety of “scientific” methods including fieldwork, meta-studies, and laboratory experiments (Poteete *et al.* 2010). Lawson’s work,



like most other contributions to SPT, is empirical too, but in the less formal sense of drawing on what we know about the social world courtesy simply of the lived experience of our day-to-day participation within it. The difference here is that Ostrom's account is "bottom-up" in the sense of having been stimulated by specific theoretical and empirical challenges arising from the study of self-governance, rather than aiming to theorise the nature of social being *per se*. And while she certainly made conceptual / theoretical contributions, such as distinguishing different person positions associated with the ownership, management and use of CPRs (Schlager and Ostrom 1992) and identifying categories often ignored in debates over the relative advantages of private and common property (Ostrom 2000), these fall more readily under the heading of scientific rather than the philosophical ontology of much of SPT.

### *5.2 Domains of social reality and successes and failures in social positioning*

Many of the differences between SPT and Ostrom's analysis have more to do with their focusing on different aspects of social reality than with any inconsistency between them. The major differences are two. First, whereas SPT considers the social world in general, much of Ostrom's work is restricted to the community management of CPRs. This is not to say that she entirely avoids making general claims about the social world, such as her observations about human agency implying that the social world is an open system (Poteete *et al.* 2010: 9-10, 22-23, 46) and where she invokes the conceptualisation of social reality advanced by John Searle (see section 5.6 below). Neither is it to deny that she felt her work on the governance of CPRs might have implications for governance more widely. However, at least by comparison to SPT at the present stage of its development, Ostrom's research is concerned far more with the specifics of self-governance in particular situations than with something like attempting to theorise the nature of social reality *per se*.

The second major difference is that whereas both SPT and Ostrom discuss already existing communities that are successful in the sense of having endured over time, Ostrom devotes relatively more attention to how they come into existence. In this second connection, therefore, Ostrom's work on community solutions to governance problems and the associated challenges of designing and implementing the required positions and rules, offers potential insights on questions SPT has yet to address at any length.

A guiding theme in Ostrom's work here is that people suffer bounded rationality, that while "intendedly rational" they are only "limitedly so" (Simon, 1961: xxiv). Bounded

rationality becomes especially problematic where complexity leads to decision problems that outstrip people's capacity to deal with them. This point is quickly reached when attempting to decide a set of rules to govern the use of CPRs, this because rules "combine in a configurational or interactive manner" so that "the way one rule operates is affected by other rules" (as for example when the boundary rules specifying who counts as an authorised user of a resource affect how easy and important it is to monitor and sanction people, thereby shaping the information and payoff rules with which they are best combined) (Ostrom [1986] 2014: 108, 110; also see Ostrom 1999: 509 and 2005: 234, 239-41, 255-57). As Ostrom sees it, the epistemic challenges of finding how rules interact in all of their possible combinations preclude "a complete analysis of the expected personal benefits, or broader personal performance, of all the potential rules changes that could be made" (Ostrom and Basurto 2011: 324; also see Ostrom 1990: 217-20, 1999: 508-09, 523-24, 2005: 48-49, 255-56). Optimal design is simply "not available to mere mortals" (2005: 31).

Since Ostrom is interested in how governance problems are solved in practice, she has no use for the assumptions of perfect information and utility maximisation of axiomatic choice theory (Ostrom 2010: 18).<sup>9</sup> She proceeds instead by portraying people as relying on heuristics and rules-of-thumb to achieve satisfactory outcomes and as experimenting with different combinations of rules until they hit on one that works well enough for their purposes. So while people are eminently fallible and prone to error under bounded rationality, in her view, they also possess the ability to learn from their mistakes and identify more effective ways of achieving their goals. Ostrom sees this ability as providing the potential for successful self-governance that—the evidence suggests—is sometimes realised (Ostrom 1990: 34, 38, 58-59, 1999: 496, 507-09, 523-25 2005: 104-09, 118, E. Ostrom and V. Ostrom [1994] 2014: 71; Ostrom and Basurto 2011: 335).

It is because "getting the institutions right' is a difficult, time-consuming, conflict-invoking process" which does not always succeed, that Ostrom considers "both successful

---

<sup>9</sup> Ostrom's rejection of the standard model of utility maximisation in favour of theories of bounded rationality reflects her underlying concern to tailor her analytical tools to fit key features of the social world. As she writes, "It is my responsibility as a scientist to ascertain what problems individuals are trying to solve and what factors help or hinder them in these efforts. When the problems that I observe involve lack of predictability, information, and trust, as well as high levels of complexity and transactional difficulties, then my efforts to explain must take these problems overtly into account rather than assuming them away" (1990: 25-26; also see Kieser and Ostrom [1982] 2000: 83, and for more on this 'realist orientation' in Ostrom's work, Lewis 2021).

and unsuccessful efforts to escape tragic outcomes” (1990: 14).<sup>10</sup> Successful efforts are in her view facilitated by what she calls polycentric governance regimes where, thanks to prevailing collective and constitutional choice rules that offer high degrees of autonomy to choose the operational rules governing their interactions with CPRs, people can experiment with different combinations of operational rules, and learn from the efforts of other groups to manage similar resources, until they find one that works sufficiently well for their purposes. While the outcomes thus produced might not be optimal, they are often superior to what can be achieved by central government control (Ostrom 1990: 133–42, 182–216, 1999: 508–521, 525–530, 2005: 239–45, 281–86).<sup>11</sup>

Ostrom’s concerns about the epistemic challenges communities face in achieving the social positioning required specifically for successful self-governance, and the consequent possibility of failures in this regard, mark an area ripe for development in SPT. This area is significant for its bearing on issues ranging beyond the problem of achieving successful self-governance arrangements for CPRs, including broader questions concerning institutional failure, the advantages of polycentricity in the face of complexity, and (the limits of) policy and its implementation.

#### 5.4 *Object positions*

We saw above that according to SPT objects may be socially positioned no less than people. Ostrom is alive to this idea, as can be seen in her distinction between *common-pool* and *common-property* resources. Common-pool resources are objects such as lakes, forests, fisheries, and so on, that could be associated with and managed through a variety of different property regimes. Common-pool resources become common-property resources—or private property or indeed the subject of any other form of property right—only via being positioned as such by the members of the community when devising the rules and positions governing their use (Ostrom 2000: 337-51). So here we have object positions within a community that

---

<sup>10</sup> Ostrom defines institutions as “the sets of working rules that are used to determine who is eligible to make decisions in some arena, what actions are allowed or constrained, what aggregation rules will be used, what procedures must be followed, what information must or must not be provided, and what payoffs will be assigned to individuals dependent on their actions” (Ostrom 1990: 51).

<sup>11</sup> A polycentric political system is one “having many centres of decision-making that [are] formally independent of each other” (V. Ostrom [1972] 1999: 52). In the case of communities seeking to manage CPRs, then, as noted in the main text, a polycentric system one is one where the prevailing collective choice and constitutional rules afford people the authority to choose their own operational rules.

are constituted by a unique subset of the rights and obligations that pertain to the common pool resource in question. This subset of rights and obligations are in turn partly constitutive of the person positions related to the positioning of that resource, such as the positions of authorised user, monitor and so on.

The same goes for the many other kinds of objects mentioned by Ostrom, such as the water pumps, pipes, injection wells, irrigation channels, dams, fences, and the like mentioned in her 1965 PhD dissertation (Ostrom, 1965). These objects too are socially positioned, the operational rules defining how they should or should not be used in relation to the resource in question reflecting this positioning. A good example is provided by the operational rules specifying “the types of fishing equipment authorized or forbidden at particular locations within a fishing ground” (Ostrom 1992: 250). Changing such rules requires an act of collective choice that effectively repositions the objects in question in the relevant community. And where existing technology develops or entirely new technologies emerge, new operational rules and positions may be precipitated as community members respond to these changes.

SPT offers a means of capturing the way that the self-governance arrangements considered by Ostrom are invariably assemblies of person *and* object-positions, where the identity of the occupants of person positions is often defined in relation to object positions. For example, if it is decided that the use of a particular technology is forbidden, this changes the rights and obligations—and, therefore, the precise identity—of authorised users of the resource.<sup>12</sup>

### 5.5 Trust

Lawson argues that the effective functioning of any community depends critically on its members being willing to meet the obligations associated with their positions and trust others to do the same. This willingness is reflected in the myriad conventions of everyday life, such as restaurateurs trusting their patrons to pay for their meals before leaving, kitchen staff trusting they will receive their wages at the end of the month, and so on. For Lawson, examples of this kind show how trust and trustworthiness serve as “the glue of social

---

<sup>12</sup> Phil Faulkner (private correspondence, 2024) makes the interesting point that natural resources like rivers and lakes might be allocated to *person* positions, e.g., the Magpie river in Canada which was granted legal personhood rights via twin resolutions adopted by the Innu Council of Ekuanitshit and the Minganie Regional County Municipality (<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/3/this-river-in-canada-now-legal-person>). In cases of this kind objects acquire rights of their own in the communities concerned.

communities ... nowhere more fundamental ... than to our meeting the obligations that derive from positions that we each and all multiply occupy” (Lawson 2019: 16). In his view, a willingness to trust and be trustworthy are among the most basic—if often taken-for-granted—capacities required of people to serve the system functions of the positions they occupy (Lawson 2016b: 369-70, 2019 16-17, 86-88, 2022: 18). Since all social totalities are organised through relations of rights and obligations that rest on this willingness, trust and trustworthiness “are necessarily all pervasive and basic” (Lawson 2019: 90).

Trust also features prominently in Ostrom’s work, and she too regards people’s ability to engage in trustworthy behaviour as a primitive capacity endowed by evolution (Ostrom [1998] 2014: 131; Poteete *et al.* 2010: 285-86 n. 5). But her account diverges from Lawson’s in interesting ways.

Perhaps the main difference is that, because he is principally interested in its role in the ongoing reproduction of already existing social totalities, Lawson tends to treat trust as explanans rather than explanandum.<sup>13</sup> Ostrom, in contrast, is interested in the role of trust in the processes by which communities attempt to achieve self-governance arrangements in the first place, perhaps in situations in which it was initially lacking. She is accordingly interested in the origins of trust and how it can be cultivated, and devoted considerable effort to exploring historic and socio-structural factors affecting the extent to which people trust each other, highlighting in particular the role of face-to-face interaction in building trust and facilitating cooperation (Ostrom [1998] 2014: 144-46, [2009] 2014: 190-93; also see Ostrom 1990: 21, 183-84 and Poteete *et al.* 2010: 223-29).

Ostrom’s account of trustworthy behaviour rests on a mixture of arguments. The key idea is what she calls “reciprocity”, a heuristic or rule-of-thumb she believes people adopt in the face of bounded rationality. Reciprocity is reminiscent of repeated game theory and refers to a family of strategies by which people (1) cooperate at the outset of their interactions—by moderating their consumption of the resource and investing in its maintenance—so long as they believe other people are reciprocators who will respond by behaving cooperatively themselves; (2) continue to cooperate as long as others do likewise; and (3) punish those who

---

<sup>13</sup> As Pratten (2017: 1425, 1427) observes in a detailed study of the role of trust in SPT, Lawson treats trust as “a primitive orientation to other community participants” that “operates as a default”—so that it is distrust rather than trust that requires explanation (see also Waller 2020: 1180).

cheat and thereby betray the trust invested in them (Ostrom [1998] 2014: 138-39). In this context, trust—understood as “the expectation of one person about the actions of others”—critically “affects whether an individual is willing to initiate cooperation in the expectation that it will be reciprocated” ([1998] 2014: 143).

However, after emphasising the role of trust needed to kickstart the first round of cooperation, Ostrom reverts to instrumental rationality and preference satisfaction to explain why, once the process has begun, people go on meeting their obligations. It is true that the preferences she has in mind are defined over more than the amount of the resource consumed and the money and effort put into conserving it, extending also to the intrinsic satisfaction of adhering to shared social rules and seeing other people’s welfare increase (Ostrom 1990: 34-38, 88-89, 205-07, [1998] 2014: 123-24, 136–38, 2005: 52-53, 109-13, 116–19; also see Lewis and Petersen 2023). But in light of her emphasis on the matched rights and obligations associated with social positions, not to mention her emphasis on trust generally, it seems odd that she should wind up arguing that what people do in name of the positions they occupy ultimately bottoms out in individual utility maximisation. While people surely do sometimes calculate whether it suits them to meet the obligations associated with a position they occupy, it seems that they also often fulfil such obligations, often in an unquestioning way, for reasons distinct from the instrumentally rational desire to satisfy their preferences. Ostrom’s appeal to instrumental rationality risks obscuring that rights and obligations have deontic power of their own that, once acquired, provide reasons for action “additional to, and independent of, the preferences of the individuals so positioned” (Lawson 2019: 129).<sup>14</sup>

### *5.6 Searle*

We close with an interesting potential incompatibility between SPT and Ostrom’s analysis. The issue arises where Ostrom suggests that the institutions of self-governance and the role of social rules in their creation can be seen as “institutional facts” in the sense set out by John Searle (1968, 1995) (Ostrom 2006: 6, 8; also see V. Ostrom [1991] 2012: 260-62 and 1997: 25–26). The potential incompatibility arises from differences between Searle and Lawson on the nature of social reality (Lawson 2016b, 2016c, 2019: 32-46, 71-2, 198-205; Searle 2016, 2017: 1466-70).

---

<sup>14</sup> Ostrom’s position here is surprising also in view of her embrace of Searle (see below), given his emphasis on deontology and largely dismissive attitude to rational choice theory. For details, see Lewis and Petersen (2023).

Searle's (1995) account of institutional facts is well known and involves three key elements. The first is that people assign functions to other people, such as "authorised user" or "monitor" in the case of self-governance arrangements of a CPR. The second is that such assignments are achieved *collectively* by the members of a community. Individuals cannot simply declare themselves an authorised user or monitor; statuses of this kind can only be bestowed by the other members of a community (an instance of what Searle calls "collective intentionality" giving rise to a collective intention or "social fact").

The third element is the "institutional fact" itself, a particular kind of social fact whose existence depends upon *constitutive* rules (Searle 1995: 40, 43-51). Constitutive rules typically take the form "X counts as Y in context C", where X might be a particular person, Y the status or function of being an authorised user or monitor, and C a particular community. That a specific individual taking on certain duties and enjoying particular rights counts as a monitor, for example, once appointed through an appropriate process, is an institutional fact. Searle argues that institutional facts arise only through speech acts by which community members agree to follow the (constitutive) rules specifying the functions to be (collectively) assigned to particular people.

The details of the debate between Searle and Lawson need not concern us here, and we restrict ourselves to two differences between them that bear directly on the link between SPT and Ostrom. The first is that Searle (2016: 404-408) rejects what he interprets as Lawson's conception of emergence and, therefore, that institutional facts are emergent in Lawson's sense. The issue turns in part on whether emergence presupposes ontological reducibility. Searle takes Lawson to task for assuming that it does, to which Lawson (2016c: 429-430) replies that his account does not presuppose irreducibility even though he believes most of the totalities of interest to him are in fact irreducible. Searle's position hinges on there being no more to any totality than its parts and their organization, which together form what he calls their "base". Once the organization of the parts is included in the base, Searle argues, there is nothing in addition that is emergent. For Lawson, in contrast, it is the organising structure of any totality that is, and is always, itself emergent. And here it seems that Ostrom is closer to Lawson than to Searle, because, as we saw in section 4 above, she too emphasises the emergent nature of social totalities.

The second difference concerns whether or not rights and obligations necessarily presuppose speech acts *a la* Searle. Lawson argues that language is not a necessary

precondition for rights and responsibilities and that while these are sometimes the product of speech acts, many emerge spontaneously through practice, initially being implicit in certain widely-accepted norms of (inter)action and only later becoming accepted and codified as rules through explicit speech acts (Lawson 2016b: 367-77). In response, Searle (2016) argues that deontic powers such as rights and obligations do presuppose language and are ultimately always propositional in structure even where the associated speech acts such as “the honking horn or raised finger” are nonverbal. Searle and Lawson do diverge on this point and it is unclear whose side Ostrom would have taken. But either way, her view that rules may arise and come to be followed without spoken agreement is close to Lawson’s own. She writes that “[a]ll rules are the result of *implicit or explicit* efforts to achieve order and predictability among humans” (Ostrom *et al.* 1994: 38; emphasis added). Although not entirely clear about what she means by “implicit” rule-creation, she appears to associate it with the “problem-solving” of “individuals trying to figure out how to do a better job in the future than they have done in the past” and argues that it involves “working rules” which “it is *possible* to raise to conscious awareness” but which can also order behaviour “at a relatively *subconscious* level” (Ostrom *et al.* 1994: 39-40; emphasis added; also see Ostrom 2005: 19). This position seems entirely consistent with Lawson’s views on shared practice and implicit collective agreements.

On both counts then, far from her embrace of Searle implying any inconsistency with Lawson and SPT, Ostrom’s position seem quite similar to SPT as represented by Lawson.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Much has been written on the relationship between Ostrom’s work and that of other schools of thought, particularly different traditions in institutional economics (Groenewegen 2011; Hodgson 2013). Some commentators have compared her ideas with the New Institutional Economics associated especially with Oliver Williamson (1975, 1979, 1985), with whom she shared her 2009 Nobel Prize (Earl and Potts 2011; Hodgson 2013). Others have compared them with Original Institutional Economics (Hodgson 2013) and, in some cases, with Commons in particular (Wall 2014: 22). Coming from diverse points of view, these contributions have done much to illuminate different aspects of Ostrom’s work.

SPT, the comparator used in the present paper, is in a different tradition, a still-developing and explicitly philosophical theory of the social world and its structure. As we have seen, SPT is pitched at a more general level than Ostrom’s work. It is unapologetically abstract



and theoretical, and, while providing a framework within which substantive economic and political issues can be addressed, does not do so itself. Ostrom's work, by comparison, is for the most part considerably more applied in nature and much closer to the flesh and blood of everyday economic problems and the political issues these often entail.

Yet there is much that unites two approaches. High on the list is their shared realist orientation, a commitment to ensuring that their analytical tools and concepts have the right fit with the social material under investigation. Paying attention to this fit requires thinking seriously about the nature of the social world and on this question too their views are remarkably similar, often in ways at odds with the idealising assumptions of mainstream economics. At a more general level, both see the social world as comprising ensembles of emergent totalities, as open, processual and one in which people, while fallible, have the capacity for creative agency and therefore the ability to shape their circumstances to at least some degree. At a more detailed level, both agree on the centrality of social positions in the social order, the associated rights and responsibilities, and their correlative relationship.

The places in which the two approaches do diverge, in our view, typically mark points at which there are potential gains from trade rather than any fundamental incompatibility. We have suggested that SPT might have something to learn from Ostrom's work on such things as the emergence of social totalities, and especially the challenges of establishing purposely designed institutions and the possibility of social totalities failing in the sense of being unable to serve their system function. By the same token, we have suggested that Ostrom and the Bloomington School might have use for the general theory of social positioning SPT offers, and then especially for its providing a unified framework that puts the emergent nature of social totalities to the fore and in which object- and people-positions are on par analytically and can accommodate the positioning of objects in Ostrom's accounts of the management of CPRs, and how this affects the positioning of the people in the communities concerned.

We close with a thought on bringing ontology to the fore in the history of economic ideas. Here is an example. One of the consequences of focusing on Ostrom's views on the nature of social reality and the communities she was studying was to draw attention to the importance she attached to the correlative nature of rights and duties and the role of power and authority in such relations. This insight led us, in the first place, to parts of her work where she had been influenced by the Original Institutional John Commons, thereby reinforcing

and adding detail to what Groenewegen (2011), Hodgson (2014: 603) and Wall (2014: 22) say about this influence (see Section 4 above). In the second place, it lends support to the view that Ostrom was open to a wider, more catholic range of ideas and influences than the many descriptions, and indeed occasional self-descriptions, of her as a New Institutional economist might suggest. Indeed there are many places in which her views on the nature of the social world conflict directly with what is often assumed in the New Institutional Economics. Another such difference lies in her view that explaining successful self-governance requires recognising that people often have pro-social preferences rather than being the simple opportunists assumed in much of the New Institutional Economics (Hodgson 2013: 383) (see Section 5.5 above). And yet another concerns the dynamic processes through which institutions conducive to self-governance do—or, as the case may be, do not—arise (see Section 5.2 above). In highlighting the contingent nature of such processes, Ostrom avoids what some see as the functionalism of the New Institutional Economics (Granovetter 1992; also see Hodgson 2014: 604). Each of these points, and indeed many others we could mention, turn on questions of ontology that reveal a position considerably more nuanced and differentiated than is often assumed.

## REFERENCES

Aligica, P. and P. Boettke. 2009. *Challenging Institutional Analysis and Development: The Bloomington School*. London and New York: Routledge.

Aligica, P. and P. Boettke. 2011. "The Two Social Philosophies" of Ostrom's Institutionalism. *The Policy Studies Journal*, 39: 29-49.

Aligica, P. and P. Lewis. 2023. On Capabilities and Agency in the Work of Amartya Sen and Elinor and Vincent Ostrom: A Comparative Analysis. Unpublished paper, Department of Political Economy, King's College London.

Boyte, H., S. Elkin, P. Levine, J. Mansbridge, E. Ostrom, K. Sotan and R. Smith. 2014. The New Civic Politics: Civic Theory and Practice for the Future. *The Good Society*, 23: 206-11.

Cardinale, I. and J. Runde. 2021. From dishwashing to dishwasher cooking: on social positioning and how users are drawn towards alternative uses of existing technology. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 45: 613-30.

Commons, J. 1924/1968. *Legal Foundations of Capitalism*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Peter E. Earl, P.E. and J. Potts. 2011. A Nobel Prize for Governance and Institutions: Oliver Williamson and Elinor Ostrom. *Review of Political Economy*, 23:1, 1-24.

- Faulkner, P., S. Pratten and J. Runde. 2017. Cambridge Social Ontology: Clarification, Development and Deployment. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 41: 1265-78.
- Faulkner, P. and J. Runde. 2013. Technological objects, social positions and the transformational model of social activity. *MIS Quarterly*, 37(3): 803-818
- Faulkner, P. and J. Runde. 2019. Theorising the Digital Object. *MIS Quarterly*, 43: 1279-1302.
- Fleetwood, S. 1996. Order without Equilibrium: A Critical Realist Interpretation of Hayek's Notion of Spontaneous Order. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 20: 729-47.
- Graca-Moura, M., P. Lewis, P. and J. Runde. 2020. Ontology and the history of economic thought: an introduction. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 44: 981-90.
- Granovetter, M. 1992. Economic Institutions as Social Constructions: A Framework for Analysis. *Acta Sociologica* 35: 3-11.
- Groenewegen, P. 2011. The Bloomington School and American Institutionalism. *The Good Society*, 20 (1): 15-36.
- Hardin, G. 1968. The Tragedy of the Commons. *Science*, 162: 1243-48.
- Heuer, T. and J. Runde. 2022. The Elbphilharmonie and the Hamburg effect: on the social positioning, identities and system functions of a building and a city. *European Planning Studies*, 30(1): 85-104.
- Hodgson, G. 2013. Editorial introduction to the Elinor Ostrom memorial issue. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 9(4), 381–385.
- Hodgson, G. 2014. On Fuzzy Frontiers and Fragmented Foundations: Some Reflections on the Original and New Institutional Economics. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 10(4), 591–611.
- Keynes, J. M. 1921/1973. A treatise on probability, in Johnson, E. and Moggridge, D. (eds.), *The Collected Writings of John Maynard Keynes*, vol. VIII. London: Macmillan.
- Keynes, J. M. 1937. The general theory of employment, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 51(2): 209-23
- Kieser, L. and E. Ostrom. 1982/2000. The Three Worlds of Action: A Metatheoretical Synthesis of Institutional Approaches. In M. McGinnis (ed.), *Polycentric Games and Institutions: Readings from the Workshop in Political Theory and Institutional Analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Kirzner, I. M. 1973. *Competition & Entrepreneurship*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Knight, F. H. 1921. *Risk, uncertainty and profit*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lachmann, L.M. 1956. *Capital and Its Structure*, London: Bell & Sons, Ltd.

- Latsis, J. 2015. Shackle on time, uncertainty and process. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39: 1149–65.
- Lawson, C. 1994. The transformational model of social activity and economic analysis: a reinterpretation of the work of J. R. Commons. *Review of Political Economy*, 6: 186–204.
- Lawson, C. 1999. Realism, theory and individualism in the work of Carl Menger. In S. Fleetwood, S. (ed.), *Critical Realism in Economics: Development and Debate*. London and New York: Routledge
- Lawson, C. 2015. Order and process in institutionalist thought: Commons and Ayres. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39: 1153–69.
- Lawson, T. 1997. *Economics and Reality*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. 2003. *Reorienting Economics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. 2015a. *Essays on the Nature and State of Modern Economics*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. 2015b. Process, order and stability in Veblen. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39: 993–1030,
- Lawson, T. 2015c. The nature of the firm and peculiarities of the corporation. *Cambridge Journal of Economics* 2015, 39, 1–32.
- Lawson, T. 2016a. Social positioning and the nature of money. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 40: 961–96.
- Lawson, T. 2016b. Comparing conceptions of social ontology: emergent social entities and/or institutional facts? *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 46: 359–99.
- Lawson, T. 2019. *The Nature of Social Reality: Issues in Social Ontology*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lawson, T. 2022. Social Positioning Theory. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 46: 1-39.
- Levi, M. 2010. An Interview with Elinor Ostrom. Available online at <https://www.annualreviews.org/userimages/contenteditor/1326999553977/elinorostromtranscript.pdf>. Accessed 29-9-22.
- Lewis, P. 2015. Notions of order and process in Hayek: the significance of emergence. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 39: 1167–90.
- Lewis, P. 2016a. The emergence of “emergence” in the Work of F. A. Hayek: a historical analysis. *History of Political Economy*, 48: 111–50.
- Lewis, P. 2016b. Systems, structural properties and levels of organisation: the influence of Ludwig von Bertalanffy on the work of F. A. Hayek. *Research in the History of Economic Thought and Methodology*, 34: 125–59.

Lewis, P. 2017a. Ontology and the history of economic thought: the case of anti-reductionism in the work of Friedrich Hayek. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 41: 1343–365.

Lewis, P. 2017b. The Ostroms and Hayek as Theorists of Complex Adaptive Systems. *Advances in Austrian Economics*, 22: 35-66.

Lewis, P. 2021. Elinor's Ostrom's "Realist Orientation": An Investigation of the Ontological Commitments of her Analysis of the Possibility of Self-Governance. *Journal of Economic Behavior and Organisation*, 189: 623-36.

Lewis, P. 2022. The Bloomington School, as seen from Virginia: Levels of Analysis; Social Ontology; Schools of Thought; and Policy Implications. *Cosmos and Taxis*, 10 (3/4): 72-85.

Lewis, P. and M. Dold. 2020. James Buchanan on the Nature of Choice: Ontology, Artifactual man, and the Constitutional Moment in Political Economy. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 44: 1159-79.

Lewis, P. and M. Petersen. 2023. Elinor Ostrom on Choice, Collective Action and Rationality: A Senian Analysis. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 19: 852-67.

Lewis, P. and P. Aligica. 2024. The Ostroms on Self-governance: The Importance of Cybernetics. Forthcoming in the *Journal of Institutional Economics*.

Malik, A. 2017. Covenant and Moral Psychology in Polycentric Orders. *Advances in Austrian Economics*, 22: 107-32.

Martins, N. 2006. Capabilities as Causal Powers. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 30: 671-85.

Martins, N. 2007. Ethics, Ontology, and Capabilities. *Review of Political Economy*, 19: 37-53.

Martins, N. 2020. Reconsidering the Notions of Process, Order and Stability in Veblen. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 46: 275-91.

Martins, N. 2022. Social Positioning and the Pursuit of Power. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 46: 275-91.

Miroiu, A. and A. Dumitru. 2021. Foundations of Social Order: The Ostroms and John Searle. In J. Lemke and V. Tarko (eds.), *Elinor Ostrom and the Bloomington School: Building a New Approach to Policy and the Social Sciences*. Newcastle upon Tyne: Agenda Publishing.

Ostrom, E. 1968. Some Postulated Effects of Learning on Constitutional Behavior. *Public Choice*, 5: 87–104

Ostrom, E. 2014. An Agenda for the Study of Institutions. In F. Sabetti and P. Aligica (eds.) 2014. *Choice, Rules and Collective Action: The Ostroms on the Study of Institutions and Governance*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Ostrom, E. 1990. *Governing the Commons: The Evolution of Institutions for Collective Action*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).

Ostrom, E. 1998/2014. A Behavioral Approach to the Rational Choice Theory of Collective Action. In F. Sabetti and P. Aligica (eds.) 2014. *Choice, Rules and Collective Action: The Ostroms on the Study of Institutions and Governance*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Ostrom, E. 1999. Coping with tragedies of the commons. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 2: 493–535.

Ostrom, E. 2000. Private and Common Property Rights. In B. Bouckaert and G. de Geest (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Law and Economics, Vol. II: Civil Law and Economics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Ostrom, E. 2004. The Ten Most Important Books. *Tidsskriftet Politik*, 7: 36-48.

Ostrom, E. 2005. *Understanding Institutional Diversity* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press).

Ostrom, E. 2006. Converting Threats into Opportunities. *PS Political Science & Politics*, 39: 3-12.

Ostrom, E. 2009/2014. Beyond States and Markets. In F. Sabetti and P. Aligica (eds.) 2014. *Choice, Rules and Collective Action: The Ostroms on the Study of Institutions and Governance*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Ostrom, E. 2010. A Long Polycentric Journey. *Annual Review of Political Science*, 13: 1-23.

Ostrom, E. 2004/2014. The Quest for Meaning in Public Choice. In F. Sabetti and P. Aligica (eds.) 2014. *Choice, Rules and Collective Action: The Ostroms on the Study of Institutions and Governance*. Colchester: ECPR Press.

Ostrom, E., R. Gardner and J. Walker. 1994. *Rules, Games, and Common-Pool Resources*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ostrom, E. and X. Basurto. 2011. Crafting Analytical Tools to Study Institutional Change. *Journal of Institutional Economics*, 7: 317-43.

Ostrom, V. 1972/1999. Polycentricity (Part 1). In M. McGinnis (ed.), *Polycentricity and local public economies: Readings from the workshop in political theory and policy analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Ostrom, V. 1973/2008. *The Intellectual Crisis in American Public Administration*. Third edition. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Ostrom, V. 1976. John R. Commons's Foundations for Policy Analysis. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 10: 839-57.

Ostrom, V. 1988/2011. Foundations of Institutional Analysis and Development. In V. Ostrom, *The Quest to Understand Human Affairs, Volume 1: Natural Resources Policy and Essays on Community and Collective Choice*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Ostrom, V. 1991/2012. Some Ontological and Epistemological Puzzles in Policy Analysis. In *The Quest to Understand Human Affairs, Volume 2: Essays on Collective, Constitutional, and Epistemic Choice*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Ostrom, V. 1997. *The Meaning of Democracy and the Vulnerability of Democracies: A Response to Tocqueville's Challenge*. Ann Arbor. University of Michigan Press.

Ostrom, V. and E. Ostrom 1972/1999. Legal and Political Conditions of Water Resource Development. In M. McGinnis (ed.), *Polycentric Governance and Development: Readings from the workshop in political theory and policy analysis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

Poteete, A., M. Janssen and E. Ostrom. 2010. *Working Together: Collective Action, the Commons, and Multiple Methods in Practice*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press.

Pratten, S. (ed.) 2015. *Social Ontology and Modern Economics*. London and New York: Routledge.

Pratten, S. 2017. Trust and the Social Positioning Process. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 41: 1419-36.

Pratten, S. 2020. Social Positioning and Commons's Monetary Theorising. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 44: 1137-57.

Runde, J. 2001. Bringing social structure back into economics: on critical realism and Hayek's Scientism essay. *Review of Austrian Economics*, 14: 5–24.

Schlager, E. and E. Ostrom. 1992. Property-Rights Regimes and Natural Resources: A Conceptual Analysis. *Land Economics*, 68: 249-62.

Searle, J. 1969. *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Searle, J. 1995. *The Construction of Social Reality*. London: Penguin Books.

Searle, J. 2010. *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Searle, J. 2016. The limits of emergence: reply to Tony Lawson. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 46: 400–412.

Searle, J. 2017. Money: Ontology and Deception. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 41: 1453–1470.

Wall, D. 2014. *The Sustainable Economics of Elinor Ostrom: Commons, Contestation and Craft*. London and New York: Routledge.

Waller, W. 2020. Book Review. *The Nature of Social Reality: Issues in Social Ontology*, by Tony Lawson. *Journal of Economic Issues*, 54: 1179-83.

Williamson, O. E. 1975. *Markets and Hierarchies: Analysis and Antitrust Implications*, New York: Free Press.

Williamson, O. E. 1979. Transaction cost economics: the governance of contractual relations. *Journal of Law and Economics*, 22: 233–261.

Williamson, O. E. 1985. *The Economic Institutions of Capitalism: Firms, Markets, Relational Contracting*, New York: Free Press.

Yamamori, T. 2020. The Intersubjective Ontology of Need in Carl Menger. *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, 44: 1093-1113.