# A bold metaphysics for the social sciences

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*Abstract for the session on the Social Sciences and Philosophy*

This paper starts from two, related sources. The first source is Alexander Wendt's claim in the final chapter of his recent book that, given the quantum mind hypothesis, the state as such is "only a potential reality, not an actual one", which can materialize momentarily "in daily affairs such as voting, paying taxes, and going to war, and then disappearing again." (Wendt 2015, 268) The second source is Axel Schmidt's discussion of the connections between the thought of John Duns Scotus and contemporary quantum physics (Schmidt 2003). An important element in that discussion is Scotus's radicalization of the metaphysics of contingency needed to understand human (and divine) freedom, which led to his discovery of synchronic contingency whereby free agents have open alternatives at one and the same instant of time.

This paper explores how a metaphysics of dispositional realism – as developed in contemporary analytic metaphysics, but retrieving the Aristotelian act-potency distinction – can connect Scotus's synchronic contingency to the kind of metaphysics of social reality proposed by Wendt. Although the connection between quantum theory and the Aristotelian notion of potency was already recognized by Heisenberg (Heisenberg 1962; Suárez 2007), Wendt only briefly considers these interpretations because he finds that they "as such do not capture the phenomenology of mental causation or willing." (Wendt 2015, 121). However, Scotus notably developed the Aristotelian position on potency precisely on the issue of willing (Scotus and Wolter 2000). Although no ready-made social ontology is available in or derivable from Scotus, key elements in his thinking will be used to develop a social ontology compatible with, or at least congenial to, Wendt's proposal.

The basic hypothesis is that if human beings are free in the sense of having metaphysically robust alternative possibilities for action at one and the same instant of time, then social reality is irreducibly more 'dense' than what is at any one instant of time actual in terms of the current practices of people. What they can do or could have done instead of what they did or are doing is a necessarily irreducible aspect of whatever currently actualized choice, and the metaphysics of social reality is therefore to a large extent a metaphysics of this unactualized realm of potential alternatives. It is a metaphysics of unmanifested powers or dispositions – cf. Wendt's idea of social structures as "pure potentialities" (Wendt 2015, 258) – which stands in certain necessary relationships with the actualized or manifested practices and decisions. These relationships are differentiated by their compossibility and concatenation with other potentialities as well as with their actualized counterparts.

A first social-scientific application would be in the field of comparative institutional analysis. Institutions qua social structures are powers or potentialities, but their specific dispositional profiles are synchronically contingent upon the continued and will of the persons involved to follow their deontic profile of rights, obligations, etc. A rash conclusion would be that since the continued existence of any political structure is at any time contingent, the attainment of any alternative political or societal structure is possible. Or, more radical still, any societal structure at all might perceived as an unjustifiable suppression of incompossible alternatives. However, the aspect of necessity introduced by institutions not only constrains the initial set of alternatives open to persons, but also drastically enlarges their set of alternative possibilities by enabling concatenations with the actions and possibilities of billions of anonymous people.

Moreover, different institutional set-ups exhibit different dispositional profiles, thereby enabling and constraining societies in different ways for actualizing a certain degree of societal perfection. A key research question is then which institutional profiles 'minimally' constrain and 'maximally' enable the individuals or societies involved in relation to these different degrees of societal perfection.

A second social-scientific application would be in economics. For a start, institutional economics can be tied in with the previous application as exploring the different degrees of economic prosperity certain institutional set-ups enable or constrain. Moreover, as argued by Hülsmann in relation to the possibility of economic laws given free human choice (Hülsmann 2003), economic laws do not primarily address the relations between successive points in time, but between synchronic points at one instant in time, by comparing a certain choice with its real though potential alternatives that are not actualized. Economics as framed within a fixed institutional structure therefore studies the dynamics of the synchronic choices made by countless persons as their concatenations and incompossibilities mutually impact the possible choices and degree of prosperity of other persons involved. Phenomena like savings, investment, capital, consumption, profit and loss can then be understood as differentiations within a realm of potential courses of action, actualizing different degrees of economic perfection or prosperity.

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