

The Identity of Social Enterprise

Social ontologists focusing on groups often appeal to the tools of analytic metaphysics. Whereas some of the literature concerns the role of rules and equilibria, a fair amount also concerns questions about the existence/persistence conditions for social entities. So, when we think about the ‘identity’ of some social entity, we are often thinking about the *identity conditions* for being *the same* social entity over time.

Within social philosophy, however, there is a different sense of identity that is significant and has garnered increasing discussion – the sense of identifying *in some particular way* or *as* something. Someone may identify as a Philosopher, or as a New Yorker, or as cisgender. This sense of identity is not wholly absent from discussions of social ontology, but when it is discussed (as in discussions of gender or racial identities) it concerns an *individual’s* identification as a member of a group. Much less discussed is how to think about *a group’s* identifying in some way. We may, for instance, wonder about a township as identifying as a coastal town, or a college identifying as a SLAC, or a basketball team as identifying as a member of the NCAA.

Apart from its seeming clear that at least a certain stripe of social ontologist would accept that social entities can identify in such a way, there are sure to be many questions about which kinds of entities can identify and as what, and what the differences are between individual identity (in this sense) and group identity. Here, we aim to contribute to this line of questions by considering a challenging case important for businesses worldwide, the case of corporations that identify as social enterprises.

While certain jurisdictions have a special legal category for organizations with a social mission, these categories are not identical across jurisdictions, and many jurisdictions do not have such a legal category. Nevertheless, many firms attest to being social enterprises. They develop a public mission, communicating this mission to stakeholders, and work to see it through. It is unclear to many that they can do this or what it means for them to do this, and it is debated whether social enterprises should be categorized legally.

After an introduction, Section 2 gives background on social enterprises, much of which is found in organizational studies or public administration. Then, using the notion of ‘agential identity’ from Dembroff & Saint-Croix (2019), in Section 3 we argue that ‘social enterprise’ is an agential identity that organizations can claim, distinct from their group membership or self-identity. Using this notion helps us to think about how firms could become social enterprises, and what is essential for being a social enterprise. In Section 4, we consider what it would take for a firm to authentically express this agential identity. Finally, Section 5 confronts the awkwardness of the fact that there is a legal category for firms with a social mission in some jurisdictions and not others.

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