

# Causation and the Nature of the Social World

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# Causation and ontology

- Similarly for the social world, social explanation
- Social ontology
  - Investigates the nature and composition of the social world
- Theoretically interesting on its own
- Here will argue for relevance of ontology to causal inquiry
  - Causal learning plausibly involves ontological learning

# Social entities

- A crowd
- A jazz ensemble
- A marketplace
- A corporation
- A university
- A dollar bill
- A piece of property
- A law
- A religious category
- A gender category
- A racial category



# To explore these

- Start with an example of a simple (and problematic) model
  - James Coleman’s 1990 model for social explanation
  - Somewhat dated, but remains influential
  - Muddle when fail to distinguish causal and ontological determination
- Several shortcomings of widespread assumptions about the nature of the social world
  - Underestimates heterogeneity of “building blocks”
    - Overemphasis on individual people
  - Confuses different ways the social world is “constructed”

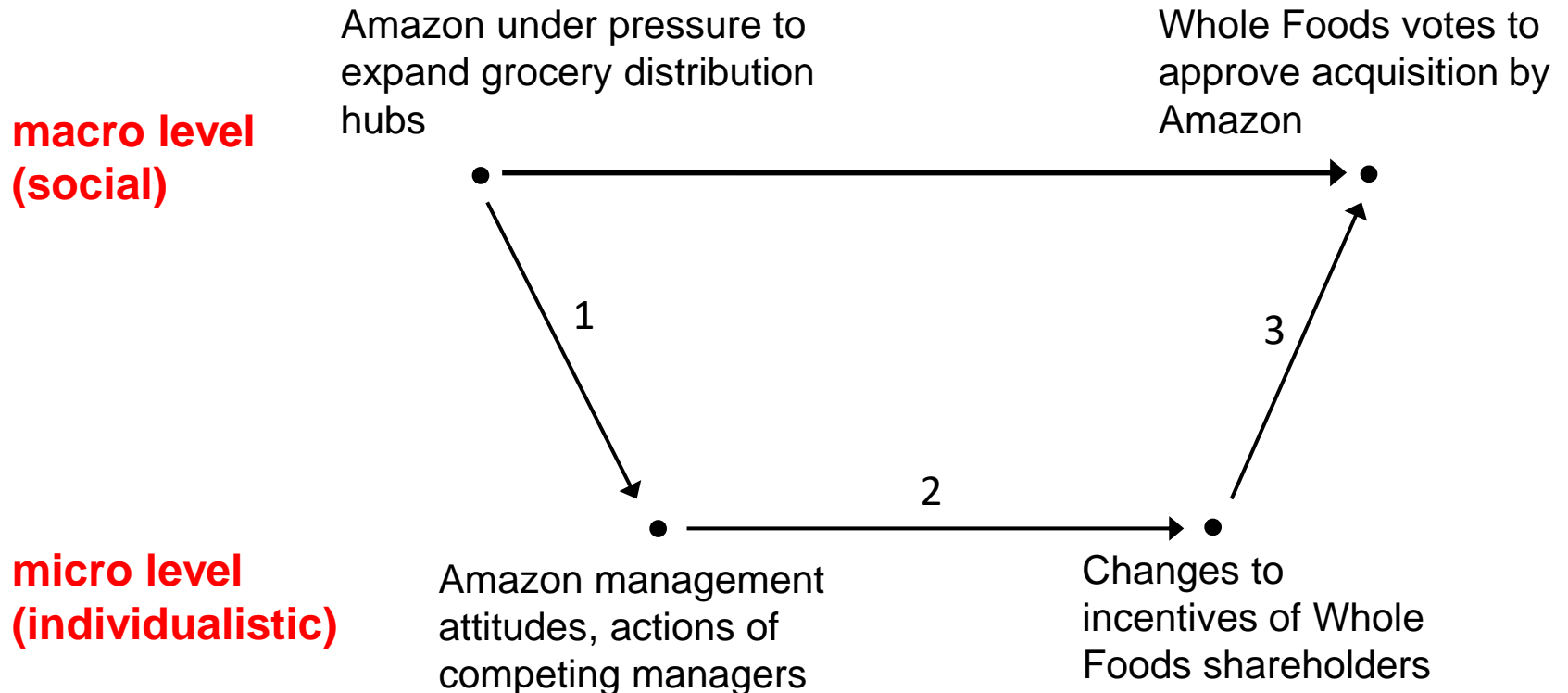
# Explaining a social phenomenon

Amazon under pressure to  
expand grocery distribution  
hubs

Whole Foods votes to  
approve acquisition by  
Amazon

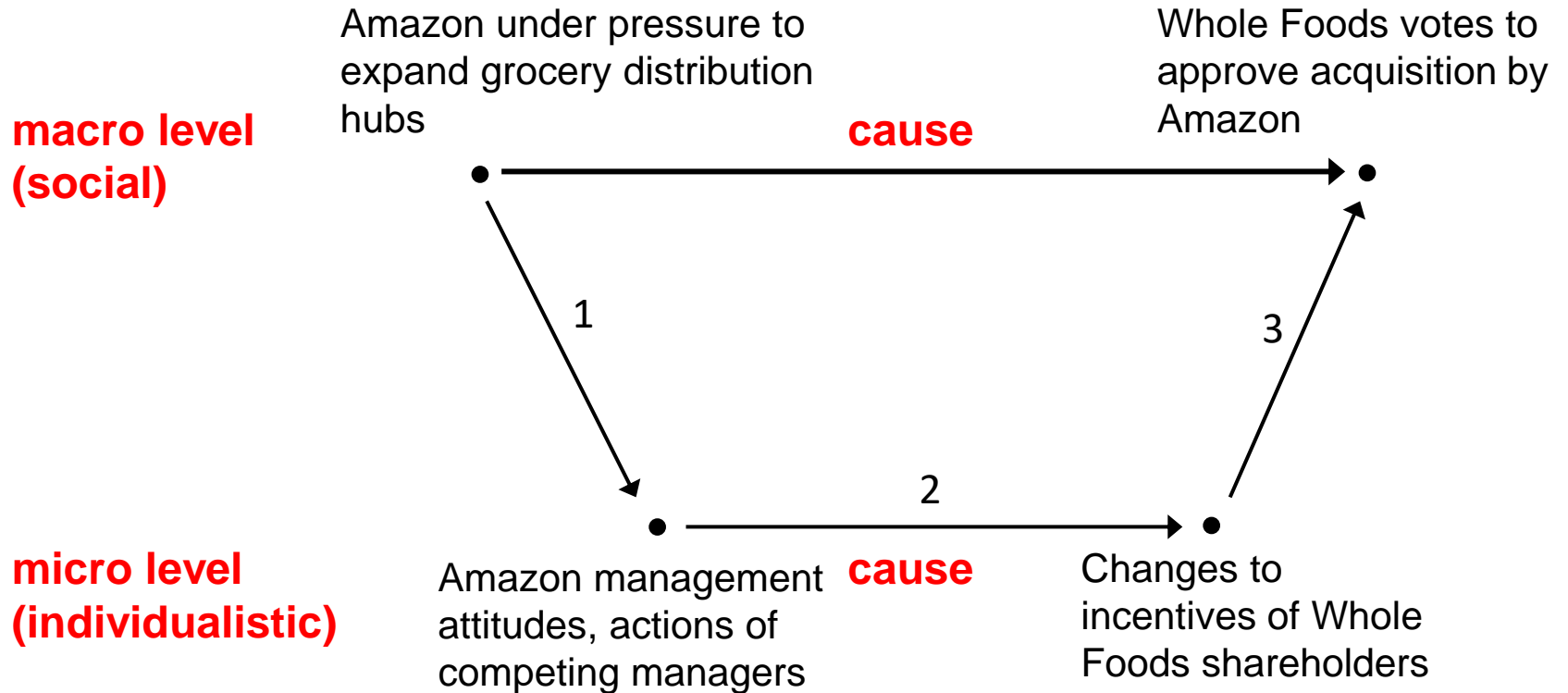


# Coleman's diagram



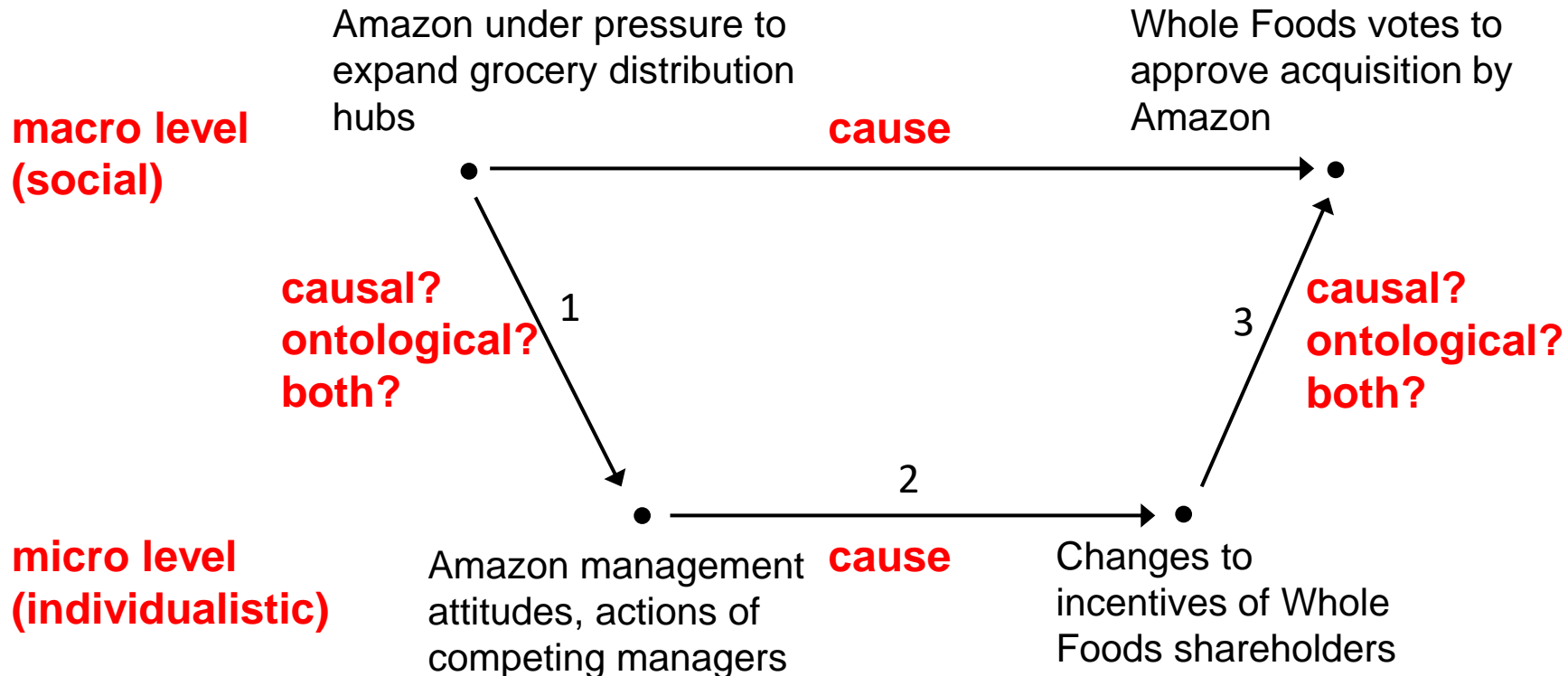
- “Good social explanations” in terms of individuals
- Individualistic, but not the most extreme form of individualism

# Horizontal arrows





# Diagonal arrows



- Do the social phenomena “consist of” the individualistic ones?
- What kind of “dependence” do arrows 1 and 3 represent?

# Failure to separate ontology from causation

Amazon under pressure to expand grocery distribution hubs

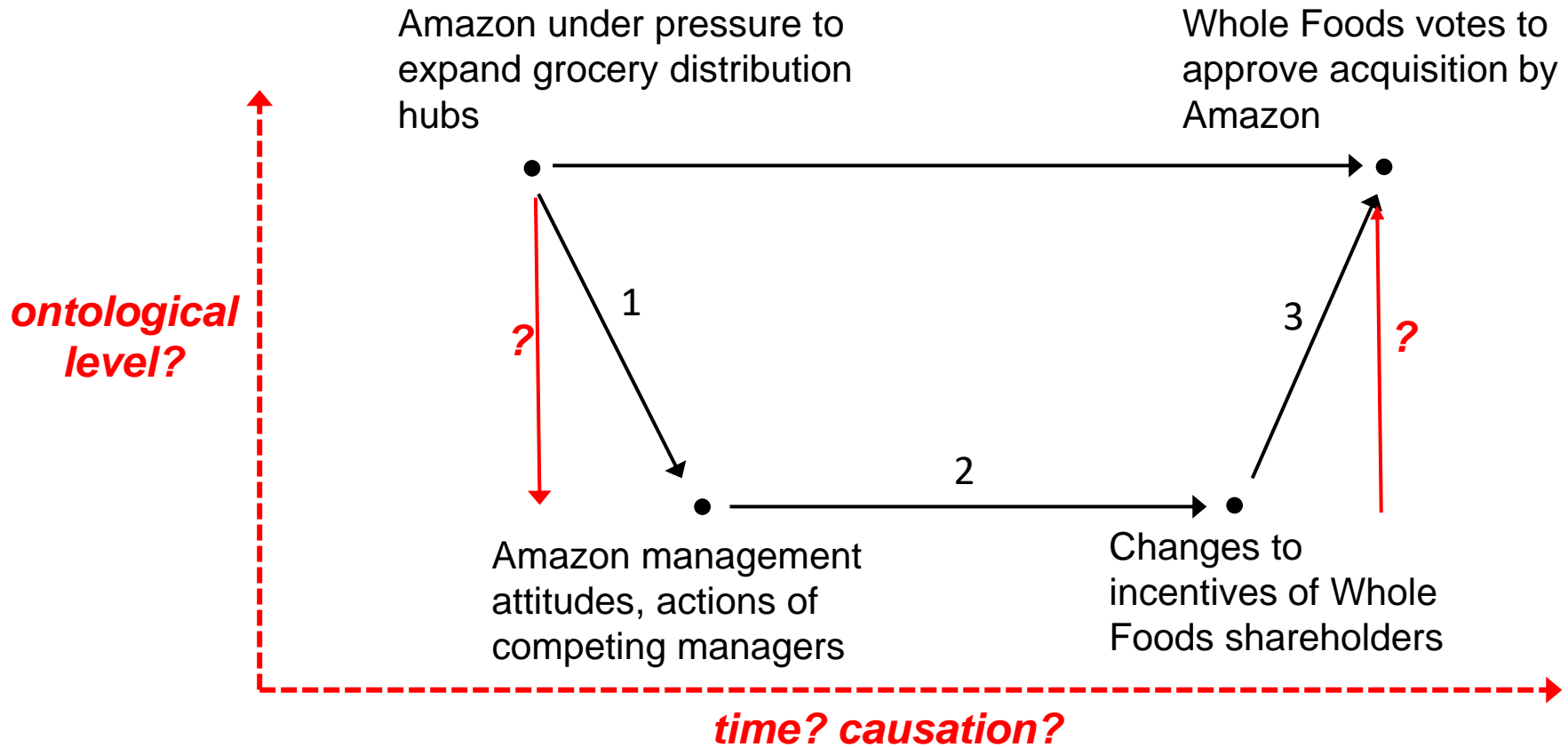


Whole Foods votes to approve acquisition by Amazon



- Ontology: What *are* these events, social phenomena, or social facts?
- Causation: How does the sequence work? What are the relevant causal relations and/or mechanisms?

# Problems with the dimensions of the diagram



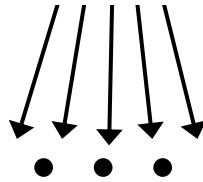
- Square the diagram?

# Ontology versus causation

Amazon under pressure to expand grocery distribution hubs



Ontological building blocks

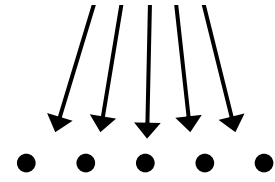


*The things that constitute or determine this social fact (or event or process)*

Whole Foods votes to approve acquisition by Amazon



Ontological building blocks



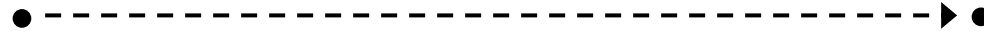
*The things that constitute or determine this social fact (or event or process)*

- **Ontological building blocks need not be synchronic**
  - Coleman’s diagram cannot make sense, and the idea of “horizontal” and “vertical” determination is very misleading

# Ontology versus causation

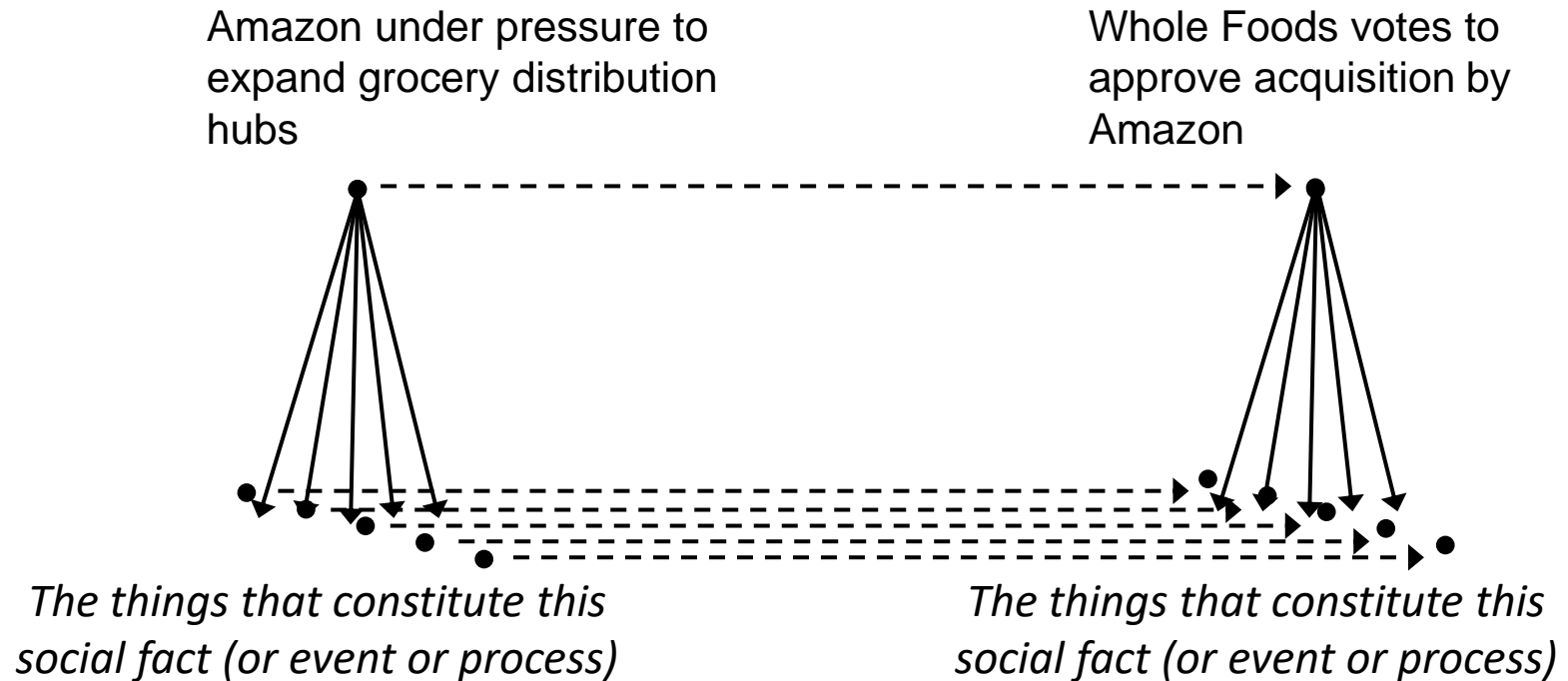
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- **How we construct causal explanations tacitly depends on prior commitments regarding the ontology**

# A more fundamental question about Coleman and much social explanation



- **Why would one think that either the building blocks or the important causal factors would be individualistic?**
  - The model ignores the heterogeneity of building blocks
  - The model ignores the heterogeneity of causal factors

# Grounding

- Non-causal determination, widely discussed in recent literature (Fine 2010, 2012; Rosen 2010)
  - Closely tied to “metaphysical explanation”
  - E.g., mean kinetic energy of water molecules in glass grounding temperature of water
- Typically understood to be a strict order (transitive, irreflexive, asymmetric)
- Also hyperintensional:
  - **Socrates exists** grounds **{Socrates} exists**
  - But, **{Socrates} exists** does not ground **{Socrates} exists**
  - Even though they are necessarily co-extensional

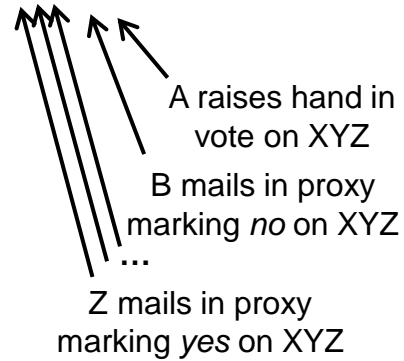
# The heterogeneous grounds of a typical social fact: Example: action of the Amazon stockholder group

**Whole Foods votes to  
approve acquisition**

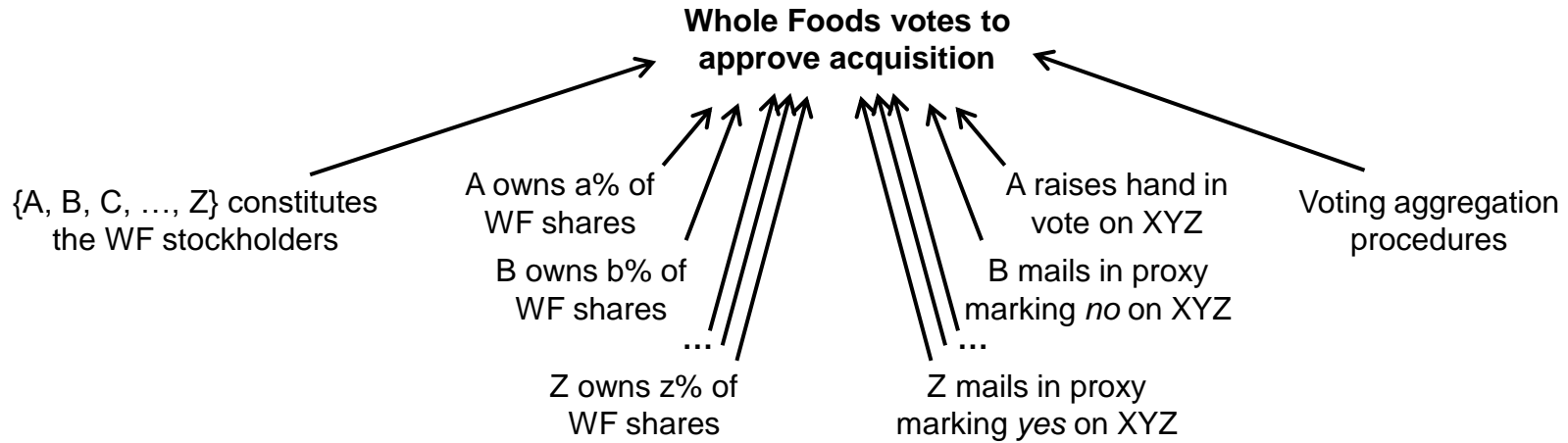


# Grounds of a social fact: Some obvious determining facts

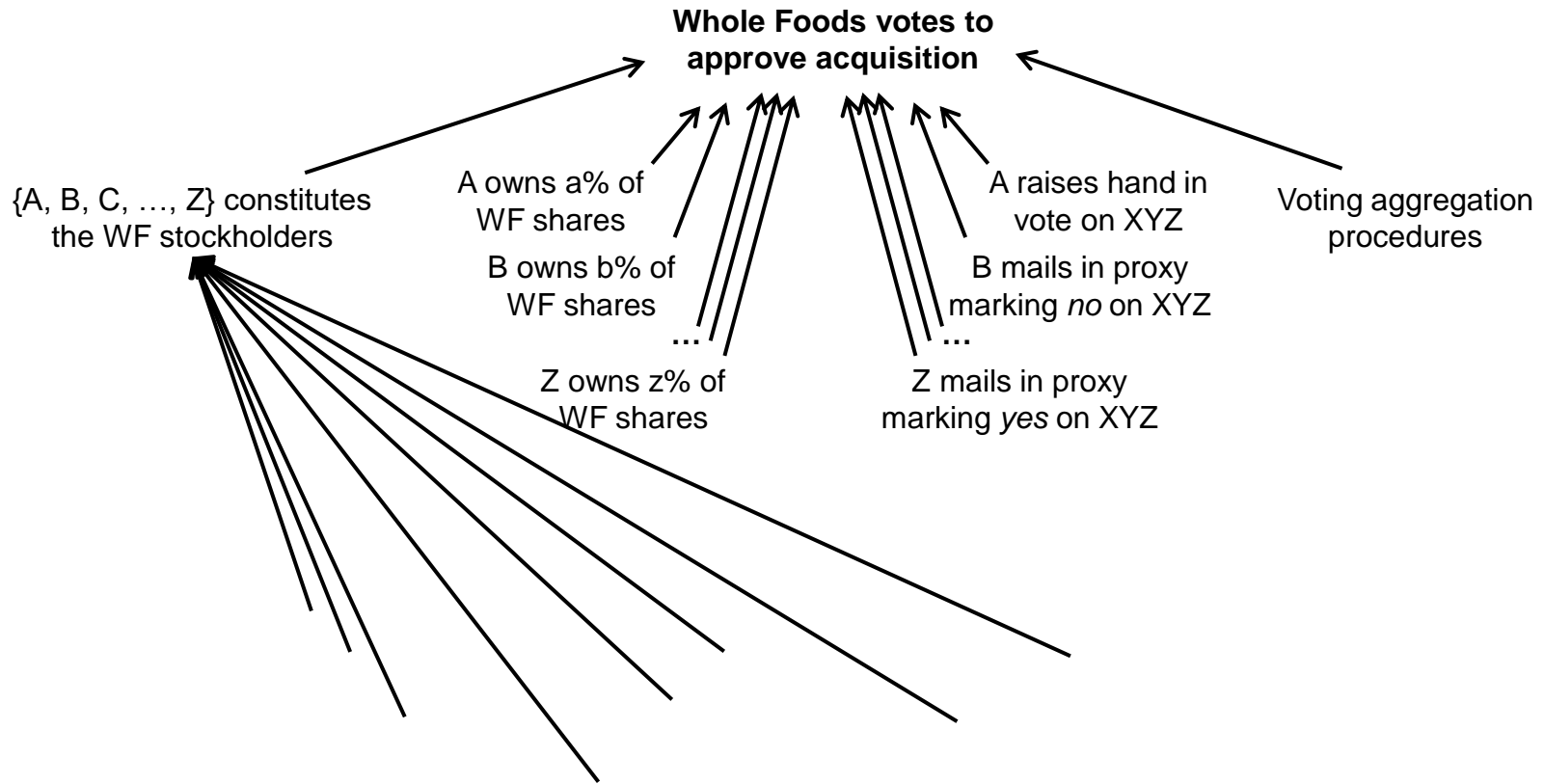
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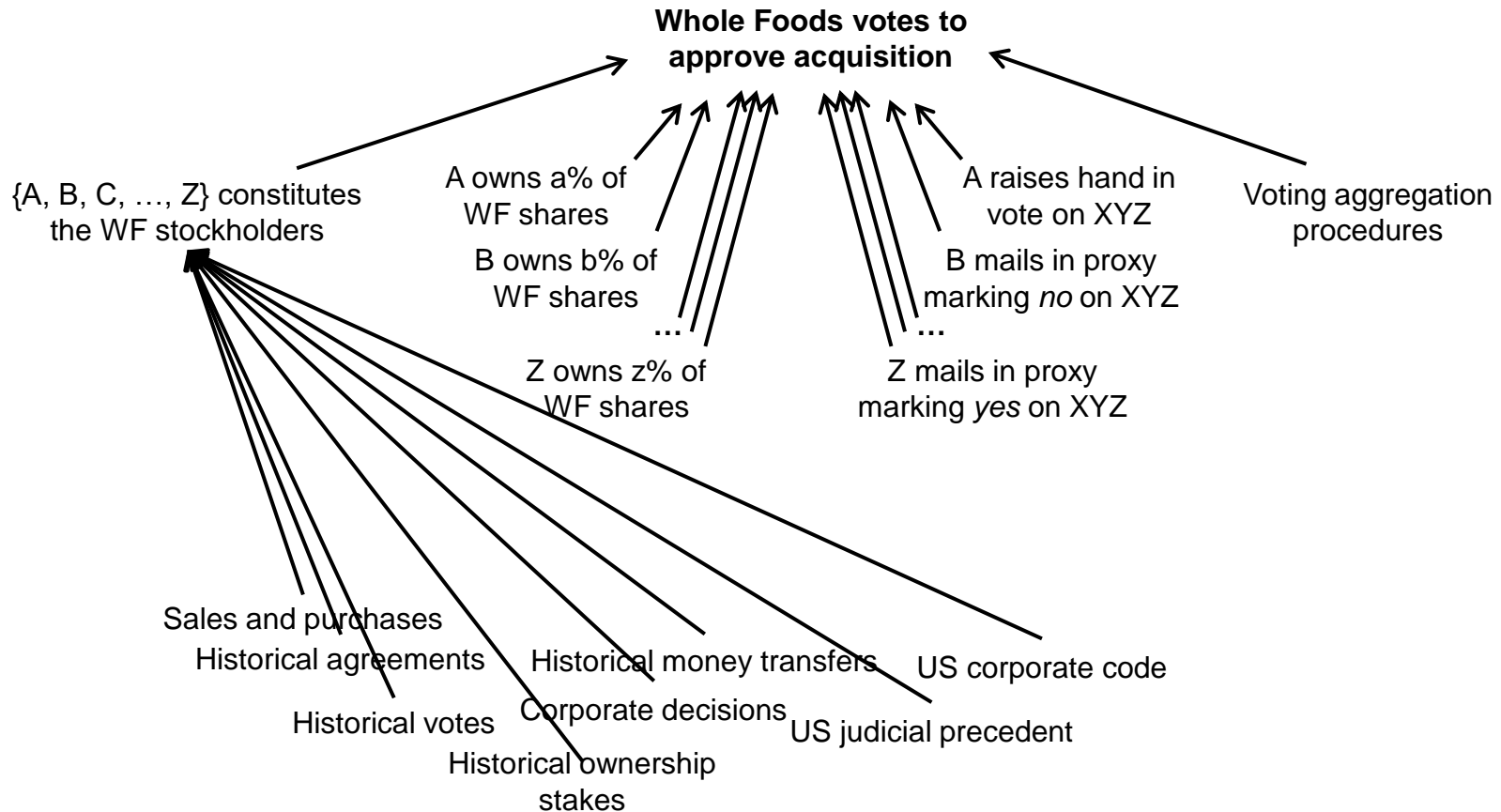
# Grounds of a social fact: Aim for comprehensiveness



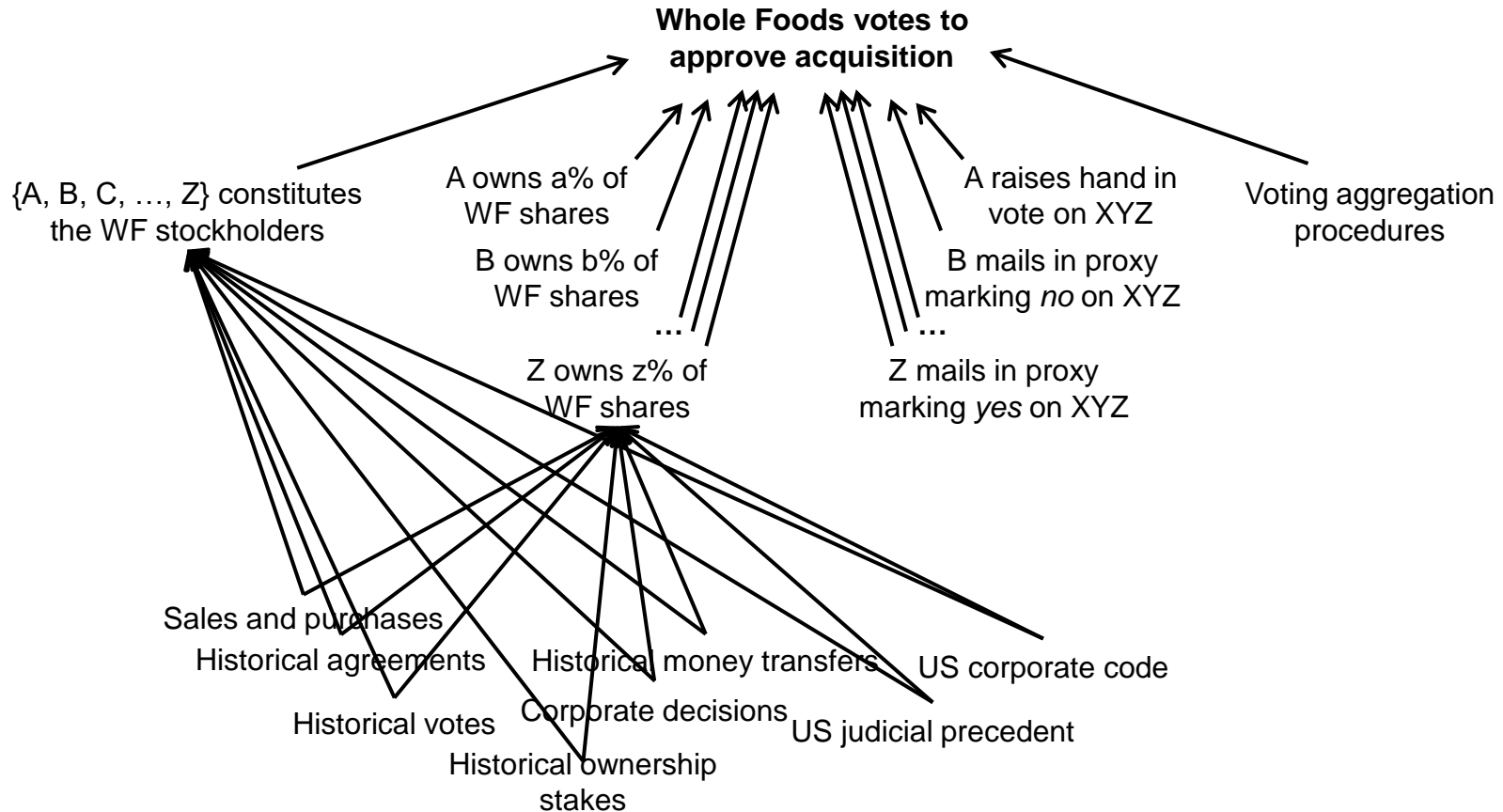
# Grounds of a social fact: Break down into more detail



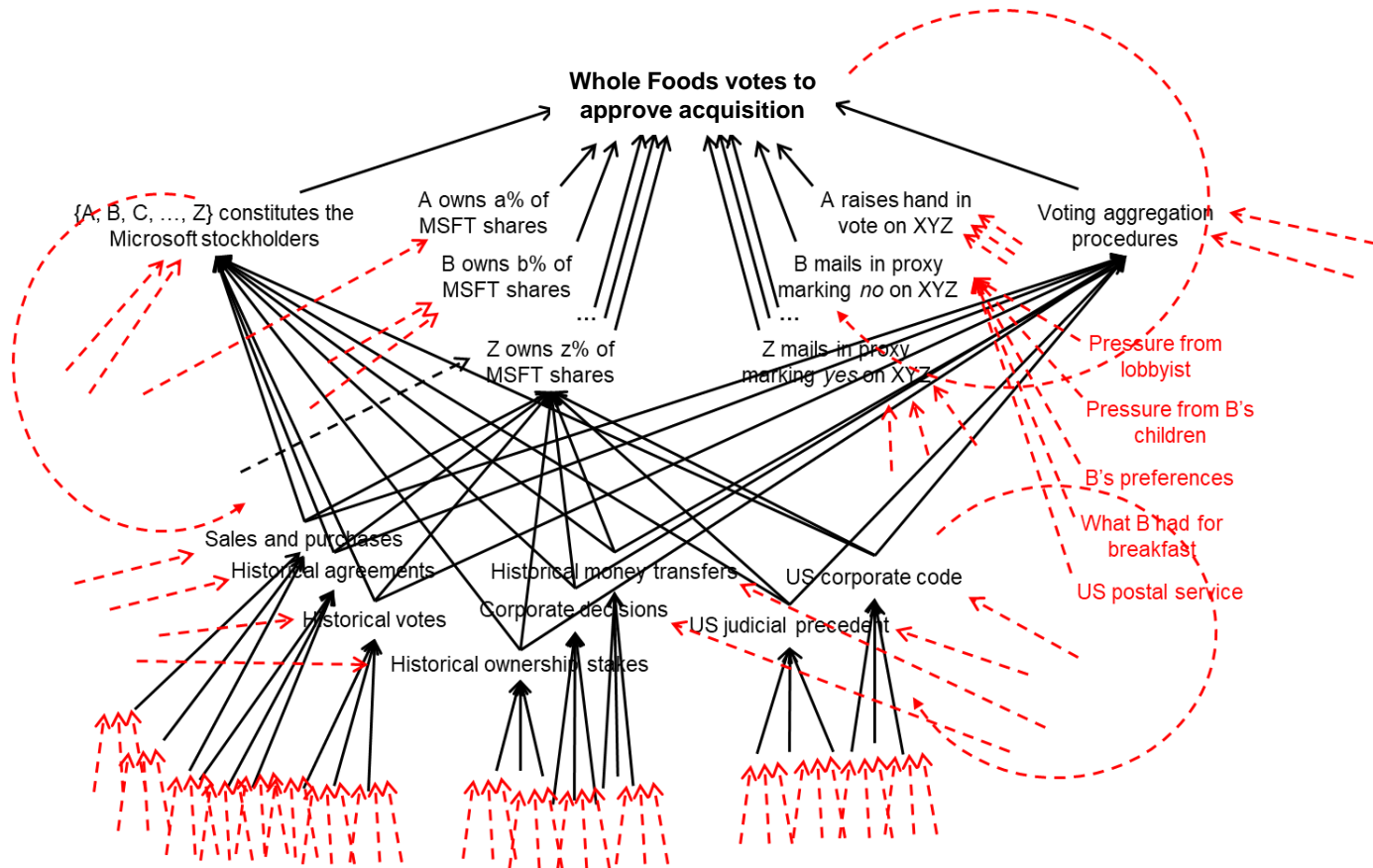
# Grounds of a social fact: Heterogeneous types of grounds



# Grounds of a social fact: Unexpected dependencies



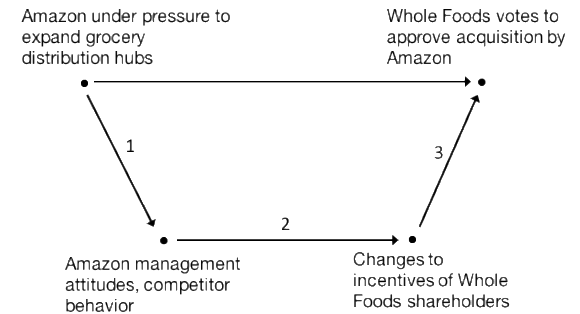
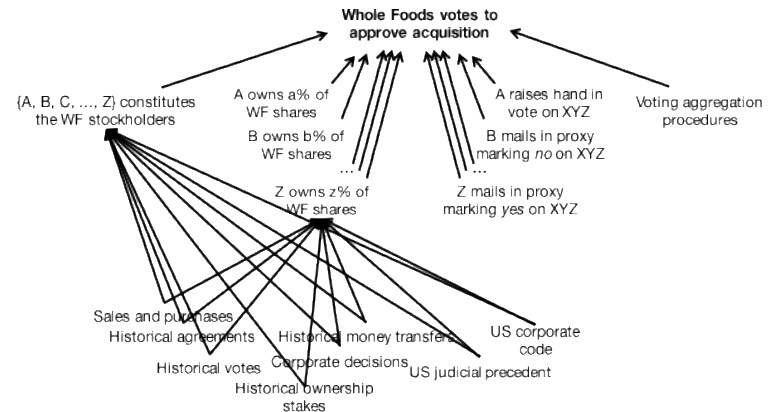
# Causal structure



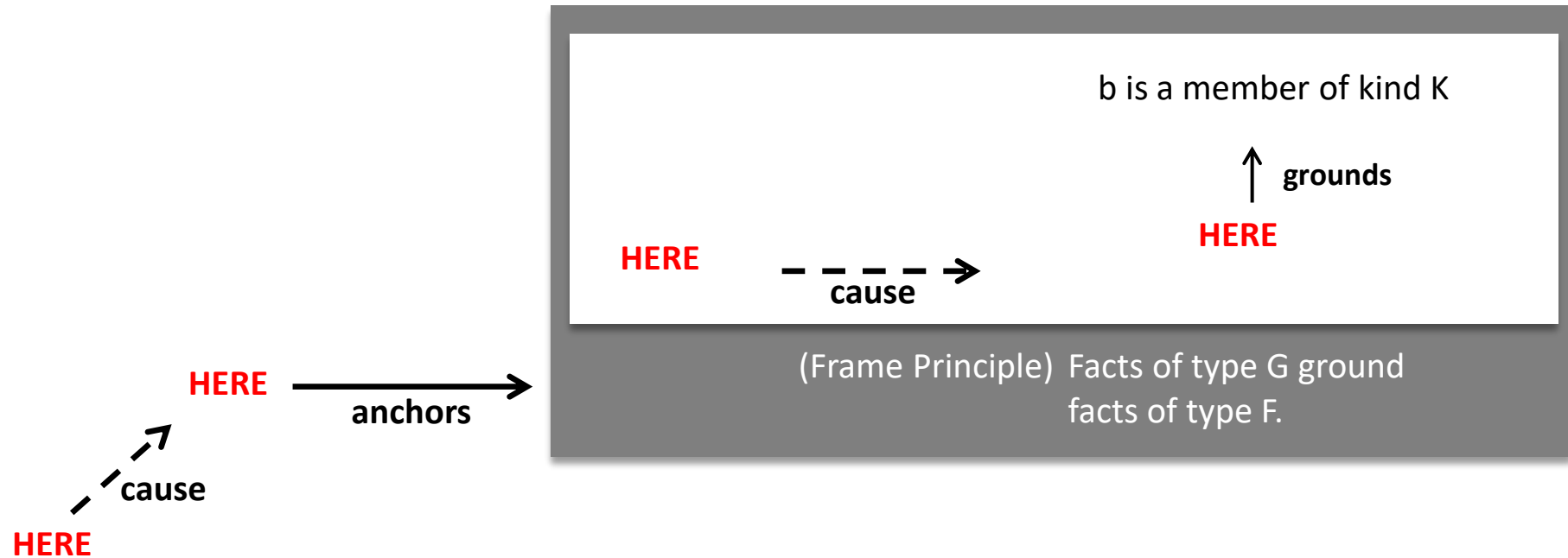
- Causal models are built atop ontological structures
  - Typically tacit

# Dealing with complexity

- Complex structures like this are ubiquitous
- Misleading to start with a shoddy ontology
  - It matters that we get the ontology right
  - Also matters that we include the heterogeneity
- Not arguing against simple models



# More: four potential places where determination-facts can show up



- Anchoring and grounding model
- Anchors “construct” or “set up” the categories in the social world



# Opportunities

- Lots of progress is being made in frameworks for ontology
  - “Post-modal revolution” in last twenty years
  - New focus on the social
- Work on causal and ontological structures informing one another
- Potential for ontological learning?
  - Entirely unexplored

BACKUP

# Example: criminal mischief



- Willfully and maliciously injuring or damaging by any means any real or personal property belonging to another, including, but not limited to, the placement of graffiti thereon or other acts of vandalism thereto.

# The definition gives the building blocks

- Consider act x
- Does x satisfy the legal conditions?
  - (Is x the willful and malicious injuring or damaging by any means any real or personal property belonging to another, including, but not limited to, the placement of graffiti thereon or other acts of vandalism thereto?)
- If so, x is an act of criminal mischief. If not, x is not
- But there is another question to ask:
  - What makes *these* the conditions for criminal mischief?

# “Anchoring” a law



enacts

- **Statute 806.13**  
**Criminal mischief;**  
**penalties; penalty for**  
**minor.**—(1)(a) A person commits the offense of criminal mischief if he or she willfully and maliciously injures or damages by any means any real or personal property belonging to another, including, but not limited to, the placement of graffiti thereon or other acts of vandalism thereto.

# Anchoring

- Features of us and of the world that “create” social categories
  - That put categories such as *criminal mischief* into place
- How do we anchor social categories?

# Also separate the facts from the explanations

	Ontology	Causes
Determination and dependence	(a) What are the ontological relations between social facts and other facts that build them? (e.g., are social facts exhaustively determined by individualistic facts?)	(c) What are the causal relations between social and other facts? (e.g., are social facts caused by individualistic mechanisms?)
Explanations and methodology	(b) Can (and should) we explain the ontological determination of social facts in terms of other facts? (e.g., in terms of individualistic facts?)	(d) Can (and should) we explain the causal mechanisms involving social facts in terms of other facts? (e.g., in terms of individualistic mechanisms?)