

Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics¹

Feminist metaphysics can be a lonely undertaking. On the one side, feminist philosophers are often skeptical that metaphysics, with all its esoterica and abstractness, has anything to offer feminist philosophy. On the other side, metaphysicians are often skeptical that feminist philosophy, concerned as it is with social injustice and patriarchy, has anything to offer metaphysics. And yet in recent years there has been surge of interest in feminist metaphysics, with philosophers like Sally Haslanger, Rae Langton, Charlotte Witt, Ásta Sveinsdóttir, Mari Mikkola, and Esa Diaz-Leon, among many others, carving out novel positions in metaphysics that are distinctively feminist.

In what way are they feminist? What does it mean for metaphysics to be *feminist* metaphysics? There are many potential answers to that question, but one very simple way in which metaphysics can be feminist is by usefully applying the tools of metaphysics to topics traditionally of interest to feminist philosophy.² Metaphysics has spent a lot of time asking whether there are tables, rather less time asking whether there are genders. Metaphysics has spent a lot of effort wondering what it would be to say that there are shadows, rather less effort wondering what it would be to say that there are social structures. In many cases, the goal of feminist metaphysics has been to argue that there are important areas of metaphysical enquiry - and that metaphysical tools can help us make progress - on topics like gender and social structure. In arguing this, they are saying both that metaphysics is of use to feminist philosophy, and that the realm of 'proper' metaphysical enquiry extends beyond simples, tables, and holes, to include social entities.

But alongside the growth of feminist metaphysics, another trend has emerged. People working in metaphysics increasingly try to explain *what metaphysics is* - what it is about, why and how it is legitimate, what its explanations consist in, etc. And these efforts are often restrictive. In saying what metaphysics is, we also make judgements about what it is *not*. In what follows, I'll argue that many of the most influential of such projects in recent (meta)metaphysics rule out - often without comment - the prospect of feminist metaphysics.

¹ Many thanks for helpful feedback and discussion to Ross Cameron, Katharine Jenkins, Jennifer Saul, Jonathan Schaffer, Ted Sider, Jason Turner, Robbie Williams and audiences at Leeds University, Cambridge University, Stirling University, and the Aristotelian Society.

² This characterization of feminist metaphysics is defended in, for example, Haslanger and Sveinsdoittir (2011) and Witt (2011).

I. Sider on Structure

According to Ted Sider (2011, p. 1), ‘metaphysics, at bottom, is about the fundamental nature of reality. . .The ultimate goal is insight into what the world is like at the most fundamental level.’ Based on this view of metaphysics, Sider (p. 44) gives an account of what it is for a question in metaphysics to be *substantive* (‘deep, objective, nonconventional, about the world’), which is contrasted with questions which are *nonsubstantive* (‘shallow, non-objective, conventional, terminological’).

And given Sider’s account of substantivity, almost all the main issues in feminist metaphysics turn out to be nonsubstantive. Feminists debating the correct metaphysics of gender become like people in a bar arguing over whether “some nonsense made out of sour green apple liqueur”, served in a v-shaped glass, is a martini.’³ By Sider’s lights, a question is nonsubstantive if its ‘answer depends on which various candidate meanings we adopt, where the candidates are equally joint-carving and where no other candidate is more joint-carving’ (p. 129). And Sider uses the locution of ‘joint carving’ interchangeably with ‘fundamental’ and ‘part of reality’s structure’ (p. 5). So a question is nonsubstantive if its answer turns on which of a range of candidate meanings we adopt, where the candidates are all equally fundamental.

Now consider the view of gender held by Sally Haslanger - who is also interested in structure, but structure of a rather different kind. The question of what genders are is not, for Haslanger, a question (even to a degree) about what’s fundamental or part of reality’s basic structure.⁴ Haslanger (2011) describes her position as a type of social constructivism, characterizing it as an attempt ‘to make explicit how the world we respond to, the world that triggers our schemas, is shaped by us and is not inevitable, natural, or ‘given.’” Gender, according to Haslanger (2000) and (2010), is a system of embedded hierarchies - based on normative assumptions of perceived sex characteristics and their assumed role in reproduction - within a social structure.

The reality of social structures plays a crucial role in Haslanger’s metaphysics of gender. Social structures are created by complex, repeated patterns of human social interaction. These patterns are highly contingent - we could’ve organized ourselves

³ This example is originally due to Bennett (2009) as a paradigm case of a merely verbal dispute. It appears in Sider (2011) p. 44 as a paradigm example of a nonsubstantive dispute.

⁴ At least if we read ‘basic’ as meaning something along the lines of ‘fundamental’, ‘natural’, ‘mind-independent’, etc.

differently, and there's nothing intrinsically privileged about the way we in fact organize ourselves. But once a structure is created from those patterns, it is something 'over and above' those sets of social interactions. Once social structures exist, they constrain the options and choices of individuals, and they help to reinforce and perpetuate the patterns of social interaction on which they are based (Haslanger 2011). Social structures are real, according to Haslanger - but they are *made*. We could've made them differently, and maybe someday we'll unmake them. But that doesn't make them any less real.

And thus social kinds and social structures are not, according to Haslanger, subjective - at least not on any of the familiar meanings of 'subjective'.⁵ They're not the product of our opinions, decisions, or projections. They are real, they are part of the world, and they have causal efficacy. But they are not fundamental and they are not part of the natural world (that is, they don't exist independently of human society and human social interaction).⁶

Let's return to Sider. It looks as though, based on Sider's characterization of joint-carving, Haslangerian social structure aren't joint-carving. They certainly aren't perfectly joint-carving. But Sider also allows that things can be partially joint-carving. According to Sider, joint carving can come in degrees. Something is perfectly joint carving only if it is fundamental or structural. But things which aren't perfectly joint-carving can nevertheless be partially joint-carving. Partial joint-carving is, according to Sider, a function of three things: relative fundamentality (or naturalness), lawlikeness, and a further 'class of elements' from philosophy of science to do with causal or explanatory efficacy (pg. 131). Sider's notion of partial joint carving is thus highly scientific. The kinds of explanations that can

⁵ See especially Haslanger (2011). Sider seems to assume - from his remarks in note 13 (pg. 56) - that social constructivism about kinds like race and gender is a type of conventionalism. But this is incorrect - at least on most of the standard interpretations of conventionalism. The main issue here is similar to that of 'downward causation' as discussed in the literature on emergence. Social kinds and structures are in part caused (and perhaps sustained) by social conventions. But once they exist, they are distinct from those convention, and they play a role in perpetuating those conventions.

⁶ Importantly, Haslanger wants to tease apart the objective/subjective distinction from the natural/non-natural distinction. Social kinds are not natural - the world doesn't come ready made with them, and they don't exist independently of us - but that doesn't make them subjective. See, for example, Haslanger (2011) and (2006).

The view is somewhat analogous to positions sometimes defended in the philosophy of economics. On some views of the ontology of economics, the entities of the economic realm - especially entities like markets - are real, and exists as something over and above economic patterns. But the economic realm is not natural - it is made. See, for example, the discussion of markets in O'Neill (1995).

contribute to joint carving, for example, are broadly scientific explanations that are themselves cast in reasonably joint carving terms (pg. 64-5).

Are Haslangerian structures partially joint-carving in this sense? Certainly feminist metaphysicians would agree that a metaphysics of gender is required to give a good explanation of the social world. But the *kinds* of explanations that they give are not the kinds of explanations that Sider suggests contribute to joint-carving. For example, explanations in feminist metaphysics typically appeal to normative or 'thick' concepts such as subordination, injustice, etc.⁷ And social categories certainly don't seem to be lawlike (as basic reflections on intersectionality show). Haslangerian structures thus fail to meet each of the three criteria Sider lays out for partial joint-carving: they aren't particularly fundamental/natural, they aren't lawlike, and they don't feature in the kinds of explanations Sider describes. Haslanger is arguing that the important questions of what there is and how it is must extend beyond the places where reality is 'carved at the joints'.

And yet, for Sider, the very substantivity of disputes in metaphysics is inextricably tied to fundamentality and joint-carving. There can be interesting, worthwhile debates in the special sciences, Sider maintains, but they gain their substantivity by proxy - a debate can be substantive insofar as it is couched in terms that are partially joint-carving. Likewise, he takes the substantiveness of debates in philosophy of perception to hinge on joint-carving:

[The debate over the content of visual experience] can seem puzzling to outsiders; how is the meaning of 'the content of visual experience' to be fixed so that the questions remain open? The answer *must be* [my emphasis] that the participants in this debate are attempting to carve the subject matter of perception at its joints. Substantivity in these questions. . .turns on the nature of reality's joints (pp. 78).⁸

⁷ Mari Mikkola has argued persuasively that the types of explanation employed in feminist metaphysics are often broader than those of most contemporary ontology, and can't be well captured by a scientific approach to metaphysics. See especially Mikkola (MS). There seems to be good reason, however, for Sider to restrict the kinds of explanations he allows to contribute to joint-carving. Were he more liberal, he'd face worries about the following kind of 'bootstrapping' argument for joint-carving. "Aesthetic properties are (partially) joint-carving. They're joint-carving because of their explanatory role. Of course, the kinds of explanations they feature in are aesthetic explanations. But they're very important to those explanations, so they must be joint-carving."

⁸ Similar remarks are also made for the semantics/pragmatics distinction.

And, similarly, although he maintains a deflationary story about metaphysical modality, he claims that we can still have substantive debates *involving* modality because:

the substantivity of claims and disputes involving modality is rescued by restrictions on metaphysical possibility which are themselves (partially) joint-carving - it seems that substantivity (*interest, non-arbitrariness*) [my emphasis] can only be rescued (directly or otherwise) by appeal to 'carving at the joints' (pp. 290).

Finally, we might rescue a type of substantivity - or at least interest - for debates where we're just not sure whether there's joint-carving going on. According to Sider, the reason we're interested in giving a philosophical definition of 'cause' is because 'it's a live issue whether causation is part of the fundamental furniture of the universe.' Conversely, we're not interested in the philosophical definition of 'candy' precisely because 'no one seriously contemplates fundamental candy' (pp. 118).

When it comes to substantivity in metaphysics, the message is clear: go joint-carving or go home. To be fair, Sider distinguishes between *metaphysical* substantivity and *conceptual* substantivity, and grants that many of the issues he's claiming are metaphysically nonsubstantive are nevertheless conceptually substantive. But his notion of conceptual substantivity doesn't capture what's going on in the debate between, for example, Sally Haslanger and Asta Sveinsdottir over the metaphysics of gender. Both Haslanger and Sveinsdottir agree that gender does not 'carve at the joints' - but they also agree that they are not trying to give an account of 'our concept' of gender or our use of the term 'gender'. Sider says that an issue can be conceptually substantive insofar as it tells us about our concepts, our use of a term, our mental lives, etc. Haslanger and Sveinsdottir aren't trying to do this. They're trying to say *what gender is*.

Haslanger and Sveinsdottir have very different - very interestingly different - theories of gender. In contrast to Haslanger's theory of social structures, Sveinsdottir (2011) endorses a type of projectivism about gender ('gender conferralism'). According to Sveinsdottir, gender is determined by (highly contextual) facts about our beliefs about social status, social role, etc. And so her view is less inflationary than Haslanger's - she doesn't appeal to a complicated metaphysics of social structures. Both Haslanger and Sveinsdottir have presented candidate meanings for 'gender'. And adopting either candidate will give us different answers to the question 'what is gender?'. Haslanger says that 'gender'

refers to a hierarchical social structure, and Sveinsdottir says that ‘gender’ refers to patterns of belief about social role and status. Neither candidate meaning is more joint-carving than the other - they are equally non-fundamental. The answer to the question ‘what is gender?’ turns on what the (non-natural) social world is like, not on which candidate is more joint-carving or fundamental. By Sider’s lights, then, this debate is nonsubstantive (‘shallow’, ‘terminological’).

In disputes in feminist metaphysics, questions like ‘what is gender?’ are assumed to be substantive. Yet we can’t account for this substantivity in terms of (partial) joint-carving. The candidate metaphysics of gender are almost all equally (not very) joint-carving. More generally, fundamentality is hardly ever at issue in these debates; all parties are assuming that gender is not fundamental, and is highly non-joint-carving.⁹ What they are further assuming is that social metaphysics is legitimate - that there are substantive questions to be asked that aren’t resolved by joint-carving. On Sider’s view, this is a mistake. Social metaphysics is ruled out because metaphysics is about the fundamental and the social is - by stipulation - not fundamental.

And it then follows for Sider that we can all relax a bit about issues like gender. If we believe a debate is nonsubstantive, we thereby reduce ‘the urgency of finding the truth’. Indeed, according to Sider, ‘giving up on joint-carving. . . *diminishes the value of truth*’ (pp. 62, my emphasis). I’m sure I’m not alone in thinking that joint carving has very little to do with the urgency of or value in finding the truth about gender. Indeed, if anything my interest in getting to the truth about gender has been inversely correlated with my belief that gender is at least partly structural or joint carving. It was once I become convinced that the way genders are isn’t natural or inevitable - that the way genders are isn’t the way they have to be - that I felt the urgency of figuring out what gender (actually, presently) is.

2. Schaffer on grounding

⁹ Might this simply be a terminological dispute? Perhaps feminist philosophers are reluctant to call genders ‘fundamental’ because genders aren’t natural. But maybe one upshot of feminist metaphysics ought to be that what is fundamental can extend beyond what is natural. Perhaps this might be right - although it would require a revision of many of the ways that ‘fundamental’ is typically glossed in contemporary metaphysics (and might create the worry that ‘fundamental’ just means ‘stuff we care about in metaphysics’). Sider, however, can’t diagnose the disagreement in this way because of his ‘purity’ constraint (pp. 106-9). For Sider, the fundamental/joint-carving elements of a metaphysical theory must be explained entirely in terms which are themselves fundamental/joint-carving. And so genders - which are explained in part by complex interpersonal social interactions - cannot be fundamental on Sider’s picture.

According to Jonathan Schaffer (2009, pp. 347), ‘metaphysics is about what grounds what’. The substantial questions of metaphysics are not existence questions - which often have more or less trivial answers - but questions about what is fundamental. For Schaffer, when we’re doing metaphysics, we should be less concerned with what exists and more concerned with how it exists: whether it is grounded, and what (if anything) it is grounded by. Questions in metaphysics are questions of grounding.

On the face of it, this picture is more amenable to social ontology and social metaphysics than Sider’s. Schaffer is happy to grant that we can make serious, substantive metaphysical claims when we say that genders exist, even if genders are not remotely fundamental. But there are many substantial claims and debates in social metaphysics that are invisible (or possibly nonsensical) on Schaffer’s picture, once again because of the focus on fundamentality.

According to Schaffer (2009b), ‘metaphysics—as Aristotle said from the start—is about the primary substances which provide the ground of being’ (pp. 157). Again, we have a ‘metaphysics is about. . .’ claim that focuses exclusively on the fundamental. Schaffer, a permissivist about existence questions, would presumably be happy to grant that genders exist, just as he is happy to grant that numbers exist, galaxies exist, etc. But it doesn’t follow that they are therefore the subject of interesting metaphysics. It is questions of fundamentality, Schaffer (2009b) maintains, that are ‘deep and substantive’ (p. 157).

Existence questions, according to Schaffer (2009), are ‘shallow’ and often have trivial answers. Grounding questions - what is fundamental, and how the non-fundamental connects to the fundamental - are the ‘deep’ questions. Schaffer claims that it is simply obvious that tables exist. Perhaps it is equally obvious that genders exist. But it’s less obvious to me whether Haslangerian social structures exist. Arguing that they do - as Haslanger’s body of work shows - is a substantial undertaking, and commitment to them isn’t well-characterized as metaphysically ‘shallow’, their non-fundamentality notwithstanding.

Existence questions are ‘shallow’ for Schaffer (2009) because on his view the existence of everything but the fundamental is an ‘ontological free lunch’. What really matters to metaphysics - what does the ultimate explanatory work, what we are primarily interested in qua metaphysicians, etc - is the fundamental (the ‘basic substances’). Schaffer can easily grant that there are genders because it’s no cost to say that there are genders - since genders are not fundamental, genders are cheap. But it’s important to note the fallout from this. Although Schaffer can easily grant that there are genders, he can’t grant that there are *Haslangerian* genders. Indeed,

Haslangerian genders - which are not fundamental, but are also not fully explained by the fundamental - don't make any sense on Schaffer's view. Schaffer's permissivism about non-fundamental existence arises precisely because of the explanatory weight he places on the fundamental; we can be liberal about the existence of the non-fundamental because our non-fundamental ontological commitments are 'shallow' and 'cheap'. The idea of *substantial, non-shallow* questions of existence that are not questions about fundamental existence is ruled out.

Moreover, it isn't obvious how to extend Schaffer's permissivism more broadly within social ontology. Suppose Schaffer is right that it's simply obvious that there are tables, cats, and galaxies. Suppose we further take it as obvious that there are genders. *Which* genders are there? And how many? Are there distinct genders corresponding to every gender identification or gender term? Do genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, adrogyne, bigender, and genderfuck all exist as distinct social categories? It doesn't seem, at least to me, that it is *obvious* what genders there are, nor that it is *obvious* that binary theories of gender are false. (And those who do think that binary theories of gender are obviously false don't tend to do so because of their metametaphysical commitments.) The realm of social ontology is one in which many existence questions don't look obvious or shallow.

Nor can we, on Schaffer's picture, appeal to considerations like parsimony in our decisions about what genders there are. Parsimony, Schaffer maintains, applies only to the fundamental; non-fundamental entities (like genders) are 'an ontological free lunch', and thus adding them is no theoretical cost. People working in feminist metaphysics, despite not being concerned with the fundamental, certainly do make appeals to parsimony.¹⁰ But if Schaffer is right this appeal is a mistake.

According to Schaffer, the 'deep' metaphysical questions are not what exists, but *how* things exist. And by 'how things exist' Schaffer means which things are fundamental, and how the non-fundamental is grounded in the fundamental. But this conception of metaphysics is too coarse-grained to accommodate most conversations in feminist metaphysics. Again, the metaphysics of gender is illustrative. Fundamentality is not typically at issue - most everyone agrees that gender is not fundamental. What's more, in many cases facts about grounding don't appear to be at issue either. Most anyone who accepts a broadly social constructivist account of gender will agree on what grounds gender: the collective social practices of human beings. So we agree on whether gender is fundamental

¹⁰ See especially Asta Sveinsdoittor's (2011) critical discussion of Charlotte Witt's *A Metaphysics of Gender* for a prime example.

and we agree on how gender is grounded. We agree, as Schaffer might put it, about where gender is located 'in the great tree of being'. On Schaffer's picture of metaphysics, that should exhaust our metaphysical enquiry into gender, because questions in metaphysics are questions of fundamentality and grounding. But it does not exhaust our enquiry - we still need to figure out *what gender is*.

Consider the criticism of Sally Haslanger's view of gender presented by Katharine Jenkins (MS). Jenkins and Haslanger agree that gender is grounded in social structure - specifically, they both agree that gender is grounded in the complex hierarchical social roles (which disenfranchise some and privilege others) which are based on normative assumptions about perceived bodily sex characteristics. But they disagree about what gender is. Jenkins argues that the Haslangerian theory of gender needs to be modified to accommodate trans women who do not always 'pass' as cis women. According to Jenkins, we need to divide gender into two distinct categories: gender-class and gender-identity. Some trans women may not be members of the relevant gender-class, but they are nevertheless members of the relevant gender-identity. So Jenkins' account of gender is more complex than Haslanger's. But this is not a dispute about grounding¹¹, and it is not a dispute about fundamentality. Jenkins and Haslanger can - as far as their accounts of gender go - agree entirely on what ultimate grounds there are. They could agree, for example, that everything is ultimately grounded in the microphysical, and share exactly the same fundamental microphysical ontological commitments. And yet they disagree about what the world is like, because they disagree about what gender is.

The orthodoxy in contemporary metaphysics is that such disagreements don't make sense; once you've fixed the fundamental facts, you've thereby fixed all the facts there are. But the prospect of serious metaphysics of social kinds draws this orthodoxy into question. A major part of the project of feminist metaphysics is to argue that what is real (what is objective, even) goes beyond what is fundamental. It's no surprise that once we admit that what's real goes beyond the fundamental, the supervenience base for facts about what there is and how it is likewise needs to go beyond the fundamental. To insist otherwise seems - at least absent further argument - to beg the question against the legitimacy of social ontology.

¹¹ Objection: it *is* a dispute about grounding! Jenkins' gender categories are partially grounded in the experience of some trans women that don't ground Haslanger's gender category.

I don't think this is right. Neither Haslanger nor Jenkins think that individuals ground genders. Genders are grounded by a complex network of interpersonal social hierarchies. Jenkins' agrees with Haslanger about what that complex network of social hierarchies is, but then maintains that a single gender category is too coarse grained to capture it - thus arguing that we need gender-class and gender-identity.

The dispute between Haslanger and Jenkins is not about whether or how genders are grounded. It's a dispute about what genders are and what they are like. And yet, on Schaffer's conception of metaphysics, this dispute doesn't count as among the things that 'metaphysics is about'.

3. Dorr on Ontologese

In order to develop a response to arguments for deflationism about metaphysics - like those of Amie Thomasson (2006) and Eli Hirsch (2002) - Cian Dorr (2005), (2008) argues that we need to distinguish between *superficial* and *non-superficial* uses of existentially quantified statements. We can make claims like 'There are tables' and perhaps 'There are genders', but 'when we use these sentences superficially, we assert boring, well-known truths' (Dorr (2008), p. 23). How do we make our (apparently) ontological claims less boring? By making them about the fundamental, of course. The 'superficial' use of such claims is contrasted to the 'fundamental' use, in which speakers are trying to make claims 'about the ultimate furniture of reality' (Dorr (2008), p. 23). It is this fundamental use - and only this fundamental use - which can, according to Dorr (2008), 'express substantive metaphysical claims' (p. 24). So Dorr gives us quite a stark dichotomy for existence claims: either we are trying to describe the 'ultimate furniture of the universe', or we are expressing superficialities.

Most existentially quantified statements expressed in English are not, Dorr (2005) argues, attempts to limn the basic structure of reality. Suppose people commonly assert claims such as 'There are tables'. According to Dorr, the correct methodology for assessing such claims is 'the methodology of ordinary language philosophy'. Do speakers of English typically use claims like 'There are tables' to communicate useful information? Do patterns of assent suggest that ordinary speakers take 'There are tables' to be a true sentence of English? Would they react with confusion to the negation of this sentence? If so, then 'There are tables' is a true sentence of English.

But, as Dorr (2005) notes, most ontologists don't take themselves to be doing ordinary language philosophy. When they make claims about what there is - and what there isn't - they take themselves to be doing 'something much less parochial.' We can prevent the conclusion that ontologists are mistaken about their own practice, Dorr argues, by taking them to be speaking a language other than English (a language which has now earned the perhaps infamous label 'Ontologese'). When we are doing 'serious metaphysics', we are speaking this specialist language, whose

quantifiers only range over the fundamental. Thus when a metaphysician asserts ‘in the ontology room’ that there are no tables, she’s not saying anything that conflicts with the truth of the ordinary English claim ‘There are tables’. What she is saying, instead, is that tables are not part of the basic furniture (sorry!) of the universe.¹²

Again, this is a picture that leaves little room for a sensible metaphysics of social kinds. When we are making claims about genders, races, social types, and social structures, we’re not speaking ‘Ontologese’ - we’re not trying to limn the fundamental structure of the universe. But neither are we doing ordinary language philosophy. We’re not asking how ordinary speakers use gender and race terms, or whether ordinary speakers quantify over social kinds.¹³

It’s perhaps worth saying more explicitly why the big issues in feminist metaphysics shouldn’t be interpreted as a kind of ordinary language philosophy. As already mentioned, it’s a central tenet in many of these discussions that what, e.g., genders are isn’t determined solely by how people use gender terms. Trans women are women, whether or not ordinary speakers are happy to apply the term ‘woman’ to them. Genders are not biological, whether or not the folk theory of gender assumes that genders are co-extensive with (and perhaps identical to) biological sex categories. And so on.

The big-picture issue here is what Sally Haslanger (2011) calls ‘ideology critique’. We want to be able to push back against common assumptions about kinds like gender. We want to be able to say that the folk are misapplying gender terms. We want, in short, to be able say that ordinary language users are *getting it wrong*.

A key component of this resistance to dominant social schemas and ideologies is, according to Haslanger (2010), semantic externalism. Ordinary speakers can introduce a term like ‘mammal’ to refer to a particular kind - in this case, a kind of animal. But they can then be wrong, even systematically wrong, about the term’s extension and application. They can, for example, be disposed to say that aquatic creatures such as whales and dolphins are not mammals, but it still be true that

¹² Dorr uses the term ‘foundational ontologist’ to refer to someone trying to make claims in the specialist language of ontology. But we can’t then conclude that feminist metaphysicians are simply ontologists who are not ‘foundational ontologists’. Dorr labels anyone who doesn’t think they are doing ordinary language philosophy (when making existence claims) as a ‘foundational ontologist’. Dorr, ‘What We Disagree About’

¹³ Sally Haslanger has persuasively argued that in cases where discussion has verged into ordinary language-style philosophy - in particular in debates about whether and what races are - this has been a serious misstep. See Haslanger (2010).

whales and dolphins are mammals. And that's because meaning is 'not just in the head' - what our terms mean is at least partly determined by what the world is like. When we introduced the term 'mammal', we latched on to a particular biological kind. What that kind is like is part of what determines what 'mammal' means.

Haslanger (2011) argues that this externalist picture needs to be extended to include social kinds. Sometimes what determines the meaning of our words is correspondence to natural kinds - to 'joints in nature', as Sider would have it. But sometimes, the meaning is determined by social kinds - social kinds which can be real and objective, but are not part of 'the basic furniture of the universe'. But to be able to say this - to engage in substantial ideology critique - we need a robust metaphysics of social kinds.

It doesn't follow, of course, that we need to claim that social kinds are fundamental. But on a picture like Dorr's, we have only these two stark options: either we are making claims about the fundamental, or we are doing ordinary language philosophy. No room is left for a middle ground, for an interesting, substantial metaphysics of the non-fundamental.

4. Feminist Metaphysics as Metaphysics

There has been a lot of recent hand-wringing about metaphysics. In response to criticisms that metaphysics is somehow confused or illegitimate, proponents of the discipline have tried to characterize *what metaphysics is* in a way that avoids such skepticism. Many attempts to do this have focused extensively - in various ways - on the idea of fundamentality. And such attempts have made the discipline increasingly hostile to the prospect of feminist metaphysics - inadvertently hostile, I suspect, but still hostile.¹⁴

Don't get me wrong: I see absolutely no problem with anyone making metaphysical commitments that are in fact incompatible with much of what goes on in feminist philosophy. As metaphysicians, we should expect to disagree about what there is and how it is. What I object to - very strongly - are sweeping claims about what 'metaphysics is' or 'metaphysics is about' that rule out any prospect of sensible feminist metaphysics. I'm happy to grant that Sally Haslanger might be wrong when she says that there are social structures; I'm much more skeptical of the claim that she is wrong when she describes herself as doing metaphysics. To describe the

¹⁴ More generally, just as it might be a bad idea to rigidly define what counts as philosophy (as Kristie Dotson (2012) persuasively argues), we might have reservations about the very project of categorizing or defining metaphysics.

whole of Haslanger's *Resisting Reality* or Witt's *The Metaphysics of Gender* as nonsubstantive, superficial, 'just talk', etc simply because they don't focus on the fundamental structure of reality seems to suggest a strange, and perhaps worrying, sort of parochialism about a very specific way of approaching metaphysics.

I am not alone in feeling skepticism for sweeping claims about the nature of metaphysics. Trenton Merricks (2013), for example, responds to Sider's claim that metaphysics is ultimately about fundamental structure by considering the metaphysics of persons:

I think that this topic is important. But I do not conclude that this topic is important as a result of the following reasoning: this topic is metaphysical; all metaphysical topics, at bottom, are about a single thing (such as structure) that is important; therefore, this topic is important. Rather, the nature of human persons strikes me as important all on its own. And so it goes for many other metaphysical topics.

But feminist metaphysics gives us a particularly interesting foil for characterizations of metaphysics that privilege - to the exclusion of all else - the fundamental. And that's because feminist metaphysics presents a range of cases in which all (or almost all) parties to the debate agree that the subject matter is *not* fundamental, and yet seem to be doing interesting metaphysics - interesting metaphysics that can't simply be recast as philosophy of language or conceptual analysis.

Many familiar debates in metaphysics - personal identity, free will, constitution, etc - don't fit neatly into a fundamentality-centric framework. And yet, with a bit of wrangling, defenders of fundamentality-centric metaphysics can argue that those debates are actually, in some sense, debates about fundamentality. That option simply isn't available, though, for most feminist metaphysics. Feminist metaphysics is explicitly - and deliberately - not about the fundamental.

Yet if we rule out feminist metaphysics as being 'really metaphysics', we rule out some of the most interesting and innovative work in contemporary metaphysics as being 'really metaphysics'. Attempts to get to grips with social kinds and social structures - with the social world that shapes our daily lives - are a fascinating part of metaphysical inquiry. They are important questions in metaphysics that go beyond - and perhaps have nothing to do with - the fundamental.

But treating feminist metaphysics as 'really metaphysics' is not important merely as a way to avoid overly restrictive, parochial conceptions of what metaphysics is. It's

also important because - a those doing feminist metaphysics have taken great pains to argue - feminist philosophy needs metaphysics.¹⁵ Familiar concepts and tools in metaphysics - structure, essence, dependence, categories, types - are an important part of enquiry in feminist philosophy, and can help make progress on debates that feminist philosophers engage in. Contemporary accounts of what metaphysics is seem, in many cases, to want to slap a 'For Fundamentals Only' label on the metaphysician's toolkit. But to do so does a disservice both to metaphysics and to feminist philosophy.

¹⁵ Indeed, you might argue that there's just as much of a problem for the deflationists and dismissivists about metaphysics - who want to construe all debates in metaphysics as ordinary language philosophy at best, misguided semantic confusions at worst - as there is for the fundamentality-centric approaches I've been criticizing. Those happy to say that people debating over the correct theory of composition are merely confused or talking past each other might be less happy to say that those debating issues of gender are simply confused or talking past each other. Or maybe they would be just as happy to be dismissive about both cases. I don't know. Someone should ask them.

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