

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Faculty Publications - Department of Philosophy

Philosophy, Department of

2018

Feminist Metaphysics: Can This Marriage be Saved?

Jennifer McKittrick

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/philosfacpub>

 Part of the [Feminist Philosophy Commons](#)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Philosophy, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of Philosophy by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Feminist Metaphysics: Can This Marriage be Saved?

Jennifer McKittrick

1 Introduction

Feminist metaphysics is simultaneously feminist theorizing and metaphysics. Part of feminist metaphysics concerns social ontology and considers such questions as, What is the nature of social kinds, such as genders? Feminist metaphysicians also consider whether gendered perspectives influence metaphysical theorizing; for example, have approaches to the nature of the self or free will been conducted from a masculinist perspective, and would a feminist perspective yield different theories? Some feminist metaphysicians develop metaphysical theories with the aim of furthering certain social goals, such as gender equality.

Despite these and other intriguing research projects, feminist metaphysics faces challenges from two flanks: one might argue that “feminist metaphysics” is not metaphysics, or one might argue that it is not feminist. Recently, Elizabeth Barnes (2014) has made the case that, since contemporary accounts of the nature of metaphysics focus primarily on the fundamental, they have the problematic implication that feminist metaphysics is not, properly speaking, metaphysics. However, less emphasis has been paid, of late, to the idea that major strands of feminist thought also problematize feminist metaphysics. I will briefly

assess the metaphysician's case against feminist metaphysics in Section 2 of this chapter. Then, in Section 3, I will examine in more detail possible feminist concerns over metaphysics. In Section 4, I sketch a different conception of metaphysics that avoids both mainstream and feminist challenges to feminist metaphysics.

2 Metaphysicians against feminist metaphysics

Metaphysics that ignores feminist concerns is often called "traditional" or "mainstream" metaphysics—a label which already suggests that, even if feminist metaphysics is possible, it flouts philosophical traditions and is outside of the mainstream. I do not agree, but I'll use these terms to mark the contrast. Let me start with the charge that whatever feminist philosophers are doing it cannot be metaphysics. I know of no mainstream metaphysician who explicitly makes this claim, but arguably it follows from what many take metaphysics to be.¹ One could argue that mainstream metaphysics has a number of features which make it incompatible with feminist theory: mind-independence, a focus on fundamentality, realism, and value neutrality. In the next subsection, I elaborate these features and explore their implications for feminist metaphysics.

2.1 Characteristics of "mainstream" metaphysics

a. Mind-independence

First, the subject matter of metaphysics is said to be mind-independent reality. Agents with minds, and everything that depends, for its existence, on agents with minds, are not part of mind-independent reality. Social kinds are, by definition, constituted or constructed by communities of entities with minds. Consequently, any investigation into the nature of social kinds would not be a metaphysical project, nor would any attempt to give a social constructivist account of any phenomenon.

1. Barnes argues mainstream characterizations of metaphysics, such as those of Theodore Sider and Jonathan Schaffer, rule out feminist metaphysics. However, both Sider and Schaffer argue that their views are amenable to feminist metaphysics. See Sider (2016) and Schaffer (2016).

b. Focus on fundamentality

Second, as Barnes stresses in her 2014 article “Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics,” the subject matter of metaphysics is said to be fundamental reality—things like indivisible simple particulars and their perfectly natural properties. Complex entities such as people and social groups, and their features such as genders and social structures, again, are just outside of this domain.

c. Realism

Third, much of mainstream metaphysics, in the analytical tradition at any rate, is regarded as a realist endeavor by its practitioners, in that it aspires to provide a true description of reality. Furthermore, this commitment to realism is often coupled with a particular understanding of what realism entails, which connects with the first two features of mainstream metaphysics. What is real is thought to be mind-independent, that is, not the result of any sort of fiction, pretense, or convention. Some go further and argue that only the fundamental is real, and consequently, realist metaphysics exclusively concerns the fundamental (Fine 2002; Heil 2012). By these lights, feminist metaphysics is anti-realist and not, properly speaking, metaphysics.

d. Value neutrality

Fourth, metaphysics is supposed to be a value-neutral, apolitical endeavor. Consequently, when considering legitimate reasons for or against any particular metaphysical theory, one’s social standing or political perspective is deemed to be irrelevant. For instance, whether one is a masculinist or a feminist has no bearing on whether objects are bundles of properties, or whether they have substrata.

Value neutrality, together with mind-independence and realism, entails that metaphysics aspires to be objective, both in its methods and its results. Arguably, a feminist perspective compromises this objectivity, as would any political perspective. And insofar as feminist theorists aim to advance certain social goals, they abandon the objectivity that is the hallmark of realist metaphysics. Consequently, whatever

feminist philosophers are doing, it is not metaphysics, it is not relevant to metaphysics, and so there can be no feminist metaphysics. Or so one might argue.

2.2 The narrowness of the “mainstream” conception

The characterization of mainstream metaphysics given above can be rejected as too narrow, for reasons independent of feminist concerns. Clearly, it leaves more than feminist issues out of the domain of metaphysics. Consider the philosophy of color—red, green, blue, and so forth. Many theorists about color hold that color properties are not perfectly natural, fundamental mind-independent properties, but, rather that the identities of color properties depend on the natures of the visual systems of perceiving agents (Byrne and Hilbert 2003). Furthermore, some argue that color discrimination capacities, and consequently color itself, vary across populations and are culturally relative (Roberson et al. 2005). These ideas concern not just our knowledge about colors, but what colors essentially are—an apparently metaphysical issue. However, it follows from the characterization of metaphysics given above that an investigation into the nature of color properties is not a metaphysical project. In fact, John Heil argues that color predicates do not denote properties, and consequently color properties are absent from “serious ontology” (2012: 153).

But arguably, *he* is the one who is out of step with traditional metaphysics, since the nature of color has been discussed under the rubric of metaphysics for centuries, and continues to be so (Jackson 1929; Guerlac 1986; Puryear 2013). Colors are a paradigm case of the so-called secondary qualities, whose ontological status and connection to primary qualities has been debated since at least the Early Modern era. Lawrence Nolan, author of *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*, writes: “nature of color is presently one of the most contentious topics in *metaphysics*” (2011: 2; my emphasis). And philosophy of color is just one example. Free will, personal identity, and the relation between mind and body have traditionally been considered metaphysical topics. Restricting the subject matter of metaphysics to fundamental ontology would rule out these topics as well, since discussion of these topics necessarily involves entities with minds, which are presumably

non-fundamental. So, if such mainstream challenges purport to distinguish “traditional” metaphysics from feminist theory, they begin by redefining the tradition.

2.3 Terminological or substantive?

Another response to the traditionalist challenge to feminist metaphysics is to claim that it is mere terminological quibbling. One may wonder, what’s in a name? What hangs on a subdiscipline being called “metaphysics”? Perhaps, if you want, you could draw a distinction between metaphysics about the fundamental stuff on the one hand and applied metaphysics on the other. So it seems that some of the traditionalist considerations against feminist metaphysics are more relevant to what it’s called, rather than its status as a worthwhile endeavor.

However, other traditionalist considerations against feminist metaphysics go deeper. Recall that, from a traditionalist point of view, when metaphysics is done correctly, it is objective, and political and social values are deemed irrelevant. Consequently, evaluating traditional metaphysics from a feminist perspective would be considered off base, and developing metaphysical theories from a feminist perspective would be problematic. So, a traditionalist may argue, whether or not we call the endeavor metaphysics, the methodology is suspect, and so are its conclusions. (I will address this charge in Section 4.)

Recently, Theodore Sider defended his conception of substantive metaphysics from the complaint that it renders feminist metaphysics non-substantive. He clarifies that being about the fundamental is sufficient for being a substantive metaphysical issue, but it is not necessary. Furthermore, he notes an ambiguity in the claim that substantive metaphysics is mind-independent. It could mean that mind-dependent phenomena are not part of the subject matter of metaphysics, or it could mean that the correct account of any phenomena should not depend on the minds of those considering it. Sider only endorses the latter. He writes: “what is demanded is that the *theorist’s* point of view should not intrude into an objective description of reality, not that facts about the dependence of phenomena on human activity must be banned from the *content* of the description” (2016: 13, emphasis in original).

As applied to feminist metaphysics, Sider argues that it could be independent of human thought in the following sense:

Although the *subject matter* of statements about gender and sex concerns human beings, there is no intrusion of the point of view of the human *theorist* on the judgment that sex is distinct from gender: that judgment is not a projection of the theorist's politics or values or outlook, but rather is the objectively correct description of social reality. (2016: 5-6, emphasis in original)

So, Sider's metaphysics avoid two points of apparent conflict with feminist metaphysics-fundamentality and mind-independence. However, note that he steers headlong into a third-value neutrality. The idea that metaphysics can be done from a feminist point of view is apparently ruled out by Sider's clarified characterization of what it means for metaphysics to be substantive. I will address this concern in Section 4, but first let's consider some *feminist* reasons to be wary of feminist metaphysics.

3 Feminists against feminist metaphysics

Why would anyone think that "feminist metaphysics" isn't feminist? Using the label "feminist theory" for feminist scholarship broadly construed, the following question can be posed: does feminist theory include feminist metaphysics, or is the nature of metaphysics such that it has no place in feminist theory? Feminists may have various concerns about feminist metaphysics. One concern is that the subject matter of metaphysics is so different from that of feminist theory that, insofar as a philosopher is doing metaphysics, she is contributing little or nothing to feminist theory. Note that feminists with such concerns can remain neutral about the merits of metaphysical inquiry per se, and would probably be more open to being convinced of the relevance of metaphysics to feminism. A more serious feminist concern about feminist metaphysics stems from a general suspicion about any attempt to describe objective reality. Insofar as feminist metaphysicians are attempting to describe objective reality, some feminists will regard their projects with suspicion.

A major source of tension between mainstream metaphysics and feminist theory is the feminists' emphasis on social construction. As noted above, the mainstream metaphysician can argue that social constructivist accounts are not realist, or they have a different subject matter than metaphysics. However, some feminists *also* seem to think that the role that social construction plays in feminist theory makes it incompatible with metaphysics. On the assumption that social construction is a pervasive phenomenon, any endeavor that aims to discover the nature of mind-independent reality is suspect. I disagree. Not only can metaphysics concern social realities, but also theorizing about asocial reality is not as problematic as some social constructivists suggest.

3.1 What is not socially constructed?

To investigate asocial reality is essentially to ask: What is not socially constructed? What is it like? To adequately address these questions, one must have some understanding of what it means for something to be socially constructed. There has been substantial work in feminist metaphysics developing various accounts of what it means to say that something is socially constructed, what ontological categories socially constructed things belong to, who or what does the constructing, and how the construction is accomplished (Haslanger 1995; Asta 2013; Diaz-Leon 2015). I'm not going to assume or advocate a particular account of social construction, but merely make what I take to be a modest assumption: If something is socially constructed, then some social entity is necessary for that thing to be what it is. So, socially constructed things cannot predate societies. If the universe predates society, there was a time when nothing was socially constructed.

The idea that some things, such as marriages, money, and universities are socially constructed is uncontroversial. It's an interesting question how construction works even in these obvious cases (Searle 1995). But where social constructivist accounts have the most impact, I think, is where they show that something we thought was independent from social forces is, in fact, dependent upon and determined by them. The most interesting social constructivist claims are surprising-something that we thought was always and necessarily a certain way turns out to be a human invention of sorts. If there was a pre-social past, and social constructivist claims are correct,

none of the socially constructed things were there, no marriages or money, of course, but perhaps no men, women, males, females, or even people. What could such a world be like? What were things like before social construction?

In addition to this very general question, theorists can also ask a number of related questions when considering what is not socially constructed. We need not restrict the inquiry to what things were like before any social construction whatsoever, but rather, before construction of some particular kind. For example, one could ask “what were things like before the construction of gender?” without supposing that nothing had been socially constructed previous to the construction of gender. Furthermore, questions about the past before social construction have analogues that are not historical or diachronic, but concern currently existing things. These questions include “What is given?,” “What is natural?,” “What are socially constructed things constructed out of?,” and “What nonsocial facts ground the social facts?” For example, suppose that some nonsocial biological fact grounds a certain social fact. Grounding is a synchronic relation between facts that hold concurrently. So, while this biological fact would be “prior to” the social fact, in an ontological sense, it need not be temporally prior.

For the most part, I am not distinguishing between the synchronic and diachronic senses in which something could be “prior to” social reality. More importantly, in this section, I am not trying to *answer* questions about what is not socially constructed. Rather, I want to assess the prospects for answering them. In particular, I am interested in reasons for dismissing or resisting them. Is there something wrong with trying to answer such questions? Is there something wrong with theorizing about the unconstructed or asocial world? In what follows, I identify four feminist objections to theorizing about unconstructed reality. Metaphysicians should be cognizant of these worries. However, I will try to show that, while theorizing about what is prior to social construction presents various challenges, these challenges do not constitute conclusive reasons to refrain from addressing such questions. But I begin with a brief exploration of the potentially positive role of theorizing about what is not socially constructed.

3.2 *The role of counter-narratives*

The realization that something has been socially constructed should prompt us not only to question the idea that the status quo is unchangeable, but also to revise the ways we think about the distant past and the natural world. If surprising social constructivist claims are correct, then we've been believing false origin stories. Without a counter-narrative, there's a vacuum where those beliefs used to be, and things that seemed to have a satisfying causal explanation no longer have any.

Questions about the natural world and the distant past are often addressed empirically. Some of the research in biology, archaeology, and anthropology tries to determine what things were like, independent of social influences. Concerns about such research projects have been discussed by feminist philosophers of science, such as Sandra Harding (1986) and Alison Wylie (2002), as well as the biologist Anne Fausto-Sterling (1992). However, feminist scholars also offer alternative views about nature or the past, which are at least as well supported as rival explanations. For example, Fausto-Sterling argues that the idea that there are only two distinct biological sexes is socially constructed (1993: 20-24). To make her case, she shows that the biological evidence does not substantiate the male/female binary. She goes on to suggest that the biological data could equally support an alternative taxonomy according to which there are at least five sexes.

Metaphysics can also play a role in exploring the possibilities that conflict with our current socially constructed reality. If I come to believe that a certain kind of entity depends on a certain kind of society for its existence, I can try to conceptualize models of worlds that don't include those kinds of entities. This would not only make possible a theory about the distant past, but could open up conceptual possibilities about the future. If theorizing about which is prior to, or independent of, social construction is possible, it could reveal untapped potentialities and strengthen the sense that things don't have to be the way that they are.

Traditionally, theorizing about how things might have been in the distant past, prior to the construction of our current social realities, has taken the form of hypotheses about the state of nature. According to some Early Modern Social Contractarians, in the state of nature,

the independent and self-sufficient noble savage roamed the wilderness before deciding to better his life by cooperating with other people. As Thomas Hobbes famously wrote, “Let us consider men ... as if ... sprung out of the earth, and suddenly, like mushrooms, come to full maturity, without all kind of engagement to each other” (Hobbes 1651: Chapter VIII, section 1). This arguably has the consequence of justifying the status quo as that which has been agreed to by equal and autonomous individuals. But many of the assumptions of social contractarians have been challenged by feminists, such as the economist Julie Nelson, who writes, “Humans do not simply spring out of the earth. Humans are born of women, nurtured and cared for as dependent children and when aged or ill, socialized into family and community groups, and are perpetually dependent on nourishment and a home to sustain life ... the areas of life thought of as ‘women’s work’” (Nelson 1995: 135). Nelson rejects the Hobbesian origin story as empirically implausible, thus undermining its justificatory force. In its place, she envisions a more realistic state of nature that includes human beings at different stages of life with various dependencies and attachments.

One can see a similar rejection and replacement strategy at work in Catherine MacKinnon’s paper “Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination:’ MacKinnon writes that underlying what she calls “the difference approach” to sex discrimination law is a false story about the distant past, “Its underlying story is this: on the first day, difference was; on the second day, a division was created upon it; on the third day, irrational instances of dominance arose. Division may be rational or irrational. Dominance either seems or is justified. Difference *is*” (1987: 34). MacKinnon suggests that, according to this story, difference predated social construction. In the context, it is clear that the narrative MacKinnon is considering is one in which prehistoric males and females were naturally different in ways that provided a legitimate basis for distinguishing between them. This enabled one group, presumably the physically stronger males, to dominate over the relatively weaker females. MacKinnon goes on to argue that this narrative has problematic political implications, and so she offers a counter-narrative:

Here, on the first day that matters, dominance was achieved, probably by force. By the second day, division along the same

lines had to be relatively firmly in place. On the third day, if not sooner, differences were demarcated, together with social systems to exaggerate them in perception and in fact, *because* the systematically differential delivery of benefits and deprivations required making no mistake about who was who. (1987: 40, emphasis in original)

To be clear, I do not think that MacKinnon intended this story to be any less political or any more objective than the one it replaces. But it is a description of possible circumstances prior to the construction of gender.

So, feminists occasionally offer counter-narratives or theorize about what things are like, or were like, independent of the construction of our current social reality. Nevertheless, feminists also raise a number of objections to doing so.

3.3 Feminist objections to theorizing about what is prior to social construction

In feminist literature, one can discern suspicion of metaphysical projects which aim to describe things as they are objectively or independently of social construction. I identify four lines of objection: that these projects lack relevance, that they are viciously circular, that they presuppose false dichotomies, and that they have a hidden agenda.

a. Relevance

Reconsider MacKinnon's counter-narrative about difference and dominance. Someone who is interested in developing a coherent theory about the distant past might ask the following questions about MacKinnon's story: What were things like before dominance? Doesn't domination require a division between the dominators and the dominated? Was there anything different about those who achieved dominance? But MacKinnon isn't interested in such questions. Were told that the day that dominance was achieved was "the first day that matters." It follows that whatever came before that day does not matter. So, while MacKinnon offers a hypothetical characterization of the distant past, she also suggests a limitation to this line of inquiry to "what matters."

Elsewhere, MacKinnon makes clear her impatience with philosophical debates that are deemed to be irrelevant. “Take the problem of ‘is there a reality and how do I know I’m right about it?’ The ‘is there a there there?’ business. How do we deal in the face of Cartesian-updated as existential-doubt? Women know the world is out there. Women know the world is out there because it hits us in the face. Literally” (1987: 59).

A stalwart mainstream metaphysician might insist that sensory experiences, no matter how painful, are not conclusive evidence about the nature of fundamental reality. But if the asocial, mind-independent reality that metaphysicians are concerned about is necessarily outside of our conscious experience, then arguably it shouldn’t matter to feminists. If the goal of feminism is social change, arcane debates over the nature of fundamental reality seem irrelevant. What matters is our lived experiences, our social realities, and the levers of social change. Some feminist philosophers argue that, insofar as philosophy is feminist, it should advance feminist goals, and the futile quest for knowledge of objective truth about fundamental reality is irrelevant.

Granted, metaphysics does little to advance some very important social goals. Furthermore, certain scholarly research projects have no reason to delve into metaphysical questions. Take, for example, the ethnomethodological approach of Stoller, Garfinkel, and Rosen (1960). They ask us to bracket our “natural attitude” — the beliefs we unreflectively possess about a mind-independent external world. Instead of taking any position about the external world, they investigate what we do to make it real for ourselves. For example, they ask, how does an individual produce the reality of being a woman for others? Trying to describe mind-independent reality just isn’t part of this project.² Similarly, in her essay “What Is a Woman?” Toril Moi does not reject the distinction between sex and gender according to which sex is biological while gender is social, but she argues that it is not relevant to the account of embodied subjectivity that she wants to develop (2001: 4). This charge of irrelevance suggests that the subject matter of metaphysics is too far removed from that of feminist theory for feminist metaphysics to be possible.

2. For discussion of Stoller and Garfinkel’s views, see Warnke (2010: 53).

b. Circularity

A second reason against theorizing about what is outside of our socially constructed reality is that doing so involves inescapable circularity. Because we only have our socially constructed concepts to work with, it is impossible to grasp or describe anything other than that which is socially constructed. Any description we try to give of reality will be put in terms of our language, organized according to our current categories. You can find this idea in Foucault's *History of Sexuality*. On the prospects of an objective investigation into the nature of sexuality, he writes:

One must not suppose that there exists a certain sphere of sexuality that would be the legitimate concern of a free and disinterested scientific inquiry were it not the object of mechanisms of prohibition brought to bear by the economic or ideological requirements of power. If sexuality was constituted as an area of investigation, this was only because relations of power had established it as a possible object. (Foucault 1980: 98)

As I interpret Foucault here, he is criticizing the view that we can investigate sexuality as it occurs naturally, free of the influence of ideology. To suppose otherwise is to suppose that there is something-natural sexuality-that would exist and have a certain nature, in the absence of social forces. Foucault rejects this assumption. According to Foucault, if we think that we are investigating natural sexuality, we have, instead, imported our concept of sexuality into a context where it would not otherwise exist. Consequently, if we proceed as though there is something that answers to our concept to be investigated, what we learn about it tends to cohere with our preexisting notions.

To put the circularity objection in more abstract terms, suppose that I was trying to understand the present Fs, and I endeavor to do so by researching the past Fs. I then marshal my evidence about the past Fs and offer an explanation of why the present Fs are the way that they are. According to the circularity objection, my interpretation of all evidence relevant to the existence and nature of the past Fs is shaped by my "F" concept, and the arguments I give in support of

my claims about the nature of Fs are implicitly circular arguments. In short, when we try to think about what is not constructed, we think socially constructed thoughts. Insofar as metaphysics is about what is not socially constructed, it seems impossible.

c. False dichotomies

A third concern about trying to investigate what nonsocial things are like is that doing so presupposes a false distinction between what is social and what is natural. We find this view in Merleau-Ponty, who says “everything is both manufactured and natural in man” (1967: 198), and Donna Haraway (2013), who argues that there is no clear boundary between what is natural and what is constructed. Similarly, in *Sexing the Body*, Fausto-Sterling argues against natural/social dualism, particularly with respect to sex and gender. She writes, “The more we look for a simple physical basis for ‘sex,’ the more it becomes clear that ‘sex’ is not a pure physical category. What bodily signals and functions we define as male or female come already entangled in our ideas about gender” (2000: 4). Insofar as the subject matter of metaphysics is the natural, nonsocial world, the metaphysician assumes that we are capable of distinguishing the natural from the social. If this “false dichotomy” objection is correct, then we can make no such distinction, and metaphysics is impossible.

d. Hidden agendas

A fourth reason to resist addressing metaphysical questions about what is prior to social construction is that the answers are inevitably self-serving; they mask ideology and socially constructed reality as given. The combination of masking social construction and associating naturalness with inevitability, permanence, and normativity can be especially problematic. As Judith Butler writes, “Ontology is, thus, not a foundation, but a normative injunction that operates insidiously by installing itself into political discourse as its necessary ground” (2011: 203). (I will discuss Butler’s suspicions about ontology further in Section 4.)

To illustrate the way political interests can shape inquiry, let’s suppose that a certain social group is regarded as naturally suited for a

certain role. It then becomes easier to believe that they inevitably play that role, that they will always play that role, and that this is a good thing. Those that benefit from this social arrangement have every incentive to believe and perpetuate those ideas. In this case, pointing out what's socially constructed is an act of resistance.

But suppose that, after we discover that the group members' suitability for a certain role was socially constructed, we then ask "well, what social role *are* these people naturally suited for?" The question itself is rife with socially inculcated assumptions—that the expression "these people" refers to a homogeneous group, that the members of this group have similar capabilities, and that there is a reliable correspondence between social roles and natural talents. But in addition, the answer to this question is just as fraught with the potential for contributing to oppression as the view that it would replace. It might be better not to try to answer or even ask that question. Likewise, if metaphysics is a Trojan horse which sneaks a political agenda into our worldview, perhaps it is better not to do it at all.

3.4 Defending metaphysics against feminist objections

These are four lines of argument that one can find in feminist and social construction literature which implicitly problematize metaphysics. Obviously, there is some overlap between them in practice, and there may be others. However, I will briefly respond to the objections as I laid them out above.

a. Response to the relevance objection.

I would not argue that every feminist philosopher should theorize about what is prior to social construction, nor would I argue that doing so would advance their particular goals. I'm more interested in whether those feminists who are curious about asocial reality, or alternative realities, have a reason to refrain from pursuing that curiosity. The fact that asocial metaphysics is not relevant to every research project does not provide such a reason. But note that there is a tension between the idea that metaphysics is incapable of having consequences of any significance and the "hidden agenda" objection, according to which traditional metaphysics advances a certain

worldview that has problematic consequences. If traditional metaphysics has served the interests of the status quo, there's no reason to think that feminist metaphysics is irrelevant or incapable of serving different interests.

As I argued in Section 2.3, there might be positive reasons, from a feminist perspective, to be interested in theorizing about what exists independently of our current socially constructed reality. As we saw with Fausto-Sterling's account of the sexes, Nelson's reflections on the state of nature, and MacKinnon's story about difference and dominance, there can be power in positing an alternative account, or a counter-narrative. If we merely negate our old beliefs about the distant past or the natural world, we are left with a vacuum where satisfying explanations had been. I think that it would strengthen the social constructivist account to posit a plausible characterization of the world without the socially constructed entities in question, as well as an alternative account of their origin.

b. Response to the circularity objection

According to the circularity objection, theorizing about asocial reality is pointless because the necessary use of socially constructed concepts makes it impossible to acquire any information about how reality is, or how the past was, in itself, mind-independently. But I disagree. It seems that the objection places the standards for legitimate inquiry impossibly high. It effectively rests on the following sort of assumptions:

- A. *Unless a line of inquiry will result in answers that are definitive and certain, then it should not be pursued. Since we can never be sure that we are accurately describing objective reality, we should refrain from attempting to do so.*
- B. *To the extent that something is seen from a perspective, it is not seen for what it is, as it is in itself. And, if you are not seeing a thing as it is in itself, then you have no information about it.*
- C. *To the extent that you describe something according to the concepts that you possess, you are not describing it as it is itself. And if you cannot describe something as it is in itself, your description is illegitimate.*

I think that these assumptions can be challenged on a number of grounds. There can be benefits to having answers that are partial, plausible, or worthy contenders as compared to other available answers. It can be worthwhile to try to view something even if you can't see all sides at once. Descriptions of things can be better or worse, even if they are all incomplete and not fully accurate. As Sally Haslanger puts it in "Feminism in Metaphysics: Negotiating the Natural":

There is a temptation to think that if we cannot "get outside" of ourselves to test our beliefs against reality, then there's nothing further we can do epistemically to regulate belief; were left with only political negotiation. But there are other epistemic considerations that can be brought to bear on belief, and provide grounds for claims to truth, for example coherence, evidential support, fruitfulness, and so on. (2012: 155)

The Foucauldian account of the circularity of our reasoning is unduly pessimistic about the prospects of human inquiry. While people do have a problematic tendency toward confirmation bias, we are nevertheless capable of recognizing evidence that defies our conceptual schemes, as well as revising those schemes accordingly.

c. Response to the false dichotomy objection

According to the third objection, theorizing about asocial reality relies on an untenable natural/social distinction. To respond, I need to make an awkward distinction-between being able to make a distinction and being able to apply a distinction. We might not be able to apply the natural/social distinction in certain cases, for example, to determine which aspects of a man are natural and which are social. Maybe they are too intertwined, or maybe all of his features are both natural and social. But showing that something is both natural and social does not refute the idea that there is a difference between being natural and being social. We are able to understand the distinction and apply it in at least some cases.

Analogously, consider the alcohol/water distinction. If you have a mixture of alcohol and water in a glass, you might not be able to

distinguish the water from the alcohol. They might mix in a way it is practically impossible to say which part is alcohol and which part is water. But that does not go to show that there is no difference between being water and being alcohol. So, perhaps even if we cannot tell, which, if any, aspects of a man are natural, we can still make the natural! social distinction.

One might ask: if we can't apply the distinction, how can we investigate it? Here, I think it matters whether the investigation is about the present or the past. If I am asking which aspects of a currently living human being are natural and which are social, then the objection has some force. But if I am asking about the distant past that preceded society, no aspect of it is even partially social.

One possible reply on behalf of those who deny the natural/social distinction is that the bounds of the social and the natural are still unclear in the distant past. Would small groups of prehistoric humans count as social? What about a parent and their offspring? What about similar groups of nonhuman ancestors? What about other nonhuman animals commonly described as "social animals"? Where do you draw the line?

What this reply suggests, quite plausibly, is that humanity is on a continuum with the rest of the natural world. Perhaps humans evolved as social beings, and no pre-social humans ever existed. And perhaps we have been mistaken in thinking of natural and social as opposites. In this light, it is plausible that some ways of being social are in fact natural. If so, showing that something is social does not show that it is not natural. But fortunately, if "natural" does not mean "nonsocial," investigating asocial reality does not, in fact, need to rely on the natural/social distinction after all. Granted, we are still left with the fact that there is no clear point at which the world went from being non-social to being social. But this does not necessarily preclude investigating the asocial. Again, one can ask more targeted questions such as "what were things like before the social construction of gender?" or any concept or entity of particular interest. Also, we could theorize about the time well before the fuzzy boundary that is the dawn of society.

I think that one who opposes theorizing about asocial reality would make the following retort: even if! grant you that there was nothing social in the pre-social past, your conception of the past and your

description of it will necessarily be shaped by your concepts and your language, which are shaped by social factors. Your conception and description of the past will be entirely infused with social influences, and so you won't be able to apply the natural/social distinction to it. However, if this is the crux of the objection, it is in fact another articulation of the circularity objection discussed earlier.

d. Response to the hidden agenda objection

It was argued that doing metaphysics can conceal hidden agendas and be politically problematic. But typically, the fact that some philosophers have given politically problematic answers to certain metaphysical questions is not taken to be a reason to be disinterested in those questions. For example, suppose that you think that certain organized religions have been politically problematic and have used the threat of eternal damnation as a means of social control. Much ink has been spilled defending the metaphysical views in service of those institutions – the separability of the mind and the body, the existence of an uncaused cause or a being that exists necessarily, the possibility of ultimate moral responsibility. But secular philosophers do not take this to be a reason not to discuss the mind-body problem, modality, or free will. Likewise, if metaphysical views have served patriarchy, that is not a decisive reason to refrain from proposing alternatives.

Furthermore, there is no necessary connection between what is natural or nonsocial and what is inevitable, permanent, or good. If staph infections were naturally occurring and plagued organisms since before social construction, it wouldn't follow that antibiotics are not possible or should not be used. If the universe predates society, *something* came before social construction, even if we know not what. If the past or the natural world somehow determines and constrains our possibilities, not knowing about the asocial won't change that fact. If we want to resist the idea that the status quo is permanent and morally unproblematic, it's hard to see how not thinking about asocial reality would help. If we reject the connection between natural, necessary, and good, we should not worry that an account of the past, the natural world, or fundamental reality will worsen our ability to challenge the status quo.

4 A different conception of metaphysics

While I defended metaphysics against feminist objections in the previous section, there's more that needs to be said in defense of specifically *feminist* metaphysics. Ironically, the feminist challenges and the metaphysical challenges to feminist metaphysics share some common assumptions about the aims of metaphysics. They both assume that the aim of metaphysics is to provide an aperspectival description of mind-independent, fundamental reality. As we saw in Section 2, the metaphysical critic thinks that feminist theorists do not share that aim, and consequently they fail to be proper metaphysicians. Meanwhile, Section 3 showed that the feminist critic thinks that *all* metaphysicians fail to achieve the aim of providing an aperspectival description of mind-independent fundamental reality, and their illusions or pretenses to the contrary are problematic. In sum, the metaphysical critic holds that metaphysics has certain goals that feminist theory lacks, and that these goals are worthwhile, while the feminist critic holds that metaphysics has certain goals that feminist theory lacks, and that these goals are *not* worthwhile. Despite their different value judgments, the metaphysical critic and the feminist critic are in broad agreement. If these critics are correct, feminists and metaphysicians should agree to disagree about the merits of metaphysical inquiry and go their separate ways, annulling the proffered coupling of feminism and metaphysics that would be feminist metaphysics.

Given these challenges, a defender of feminist metaphysics must offer a different conception of metaphysics. This conception need not be antithetical to philosophical traditions, nor outside of the mainstream. A conception of metaphysics that has had adherents throughout the history of philosophy is the idea that metaphysics is about what kinds of things exist, their natures, and how they are related. If, as Barnes argues, metaphysics goes beyond the fundamental, then it extends to theories of ordinary objects, people, and complex social entities. Furthermore, if composite and complex entities are real, metaphysical theorizing about such entities can be realist. Feminist metaphysicians can aspire to provide accurate characterizations of things that exist. (Granted, some feminist philosophers do not describe themselves as realists, so I am not speaking for, defending, or criticizing their views here.)

While I do not think realist aspirations are futile, I think that a heavy dose of epistemic modesty is called for. These considerations might be familiar from discussions in feminist epistemology and feminist philosophy of science (Longino 1990; Alcoff and Potter 2013), but they bear repeating as applied to feminist metaphysics. The way that you characterize things that exist is liable to be colored by your perspective. Furthermore, no one has a view from nowhere, and so absence of perspective is not possible. You can attempt to transcend your particular perspective, but doing so is difficult. Furthermore, there are various social factors that exacerbate this difficulty. If you do not hear other people's ideas, you are liable to assume that your perspective is universal or not a perspective at all. If you surround yourself exclusively with like-minded people, your false confidence is reinforced and your awareness of your own perspective is diminished. Consequently, while absence of perspective is not possible, a plurality of perspectives is possible and advantageous.

Traditional metaphysicians cannot be faulted for having approached metaphysical questions from the social perspective that they happened to have. However, to the extent that their philosophical conversations excluded women and people from different cultures, their investigations were impoverished. They did not take sufficient steps to test their assumption that their perspective was representative and universal. Feminist critiques of traditional metaphysics provide such a step. For truth-seekers, they should be welcomed as a test of the objectivity of their methods and theories. For mainstream metaphysicians, feminist theories of metaphysical subjects can facilitate an awareness of their own perspective, and that of others.

Furthermore, metaphysicians need not disavow political commitments in order to fruitfully engage in metaphysical inquiry. In fact, proclamation of one's ideology can be helpful. It's not as if people with unspoken ideologies have no biases. Presumably, some metaphysicians argue for entelechies, haecceities, or nonphysical substances because of their personal faith. But metaphysicians aren't typically craven opportunists either. Realists want to believe that their reasoning is bringing them closer to truth. But somehow, it's easier to believe things that favor your interests or fit with your preconceived notions. In this light, it is difficult to see why awareness of ideological or political commitments would be a hindrance to realist aspirations.

One methodological tool that can be useful for feminist metaphysics is model-building (Paul 2012: 9). When you build a model, you might begin with fundamental building blocks, but you don't end there. You also arrange them and identify relationships and composite structures. Rival metaphysical models can be compared relative to various criteria such as internal coherence, consistency with well-supported phenomena, and explanatory power. It can also be argued or disputed whether the model has any normative or political implications.

Here's a brief sketch of how comparing metaphysical models could be a fruitful project in feminist metaphysics. As noted above, Judith Butler criticizes traditional metaphysics for the way it insidiously installs itself into political discourse (2006: 23). More specifically, she focuses on a particular paradigm in metaphysics: hylomorphism — the view that substance and form are the two fundamental ontological categories. She claims that this view is an artifact of language, particularly the subject-predicate grammatical structure which dominates most languages (2011b: 28). She also argues that identification of discrete substances is arbitrary, and that the idea of discrete substances existing mind-independently is undermined by considerations of vagueness (2011a: xi; see also 2011b: 182). She goes on to suggest that the substance-attribute paradigm supports the idea that the universe is populated with subjects that have essential natures, and their defining activities flow from these natures. Selves with innate gender identities and sexual orientations are at home in this universe. In short, she claims that heteronormativity is supported by dubious metaphysical assumptions.

While Butler professes to eschew metaphysics altogether, you can also interpret her as inviting us to contemplate a metaphysical model that is an alternative to hylomorphism. On this alternative model, activities are more fundamental than actors (2006: 34). Selves and identities are constructed from patterns of activity that are shaped by social forces. One could try to construct a metaphysical model consistent with these ideas—perhaps akin to process ontology (Whitehead 1929). This model could then be compared to hylomorphic models, and evaluated according to various criteria for theory choice, as well as the extent to which either model can be used to support or undermine social structures that may privilege or disadvantage certain social groups.

5 Conclusion

So, yes, the marriage of feminism and metaphysics can be saved. One can simultaneously be doing feminist theory and metaphysics. However, doing so means rejecting the restriction of metaphysics to the contemplation of fundamental, mind-independent reality. It also means rejecting the idea that having a perspective or an agenda is disqualifying. However, doing feminist metaphysics does not require abandoning objectivity, nor the aspiration to provide true descriptions of both asocial realities and socially constructed realities.

References

- Alcoff, Linda, and Elizabeth Potter (2013), *Feminist Epistemologies*, London: Routledge.
- Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir (2013), "The Social Construction of Human Kinds," *Hypatia* 28 (4): 716–732.
- Barnes, Elizabeth (2014), "Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* cxiv (3): 335–351.
- Butler, Judith (2006), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith (2011), *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, New York: Routledge.
- Byrne, Alex, and David R. Hilbert (2003), "Color Realism Redux," *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 26 (01): 52–59.
- Diaz-Leon, Esa (2015), "What Is Social Construction?," *European Journal of Philosophy* 23 (4): 1137–52.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (1992), *Myths of Gender: Biological Theories About Women and Men*, New York: Basic Books.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (1993), "The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough," *The Sciences* 33 (2): 20–24.
- Fausto-Sterling, Anne (2000), *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, New York: Basic Books.
- Fine, Kit (2002), "The Question of Realism," in Andrea Clemente Bottani, Massimiliano Carrara, and P. Giaretta (eds.), *Individuals, Essence and Identity*, 3–48, Dordrecht: Springer.
- Foucault, Michel (1980), *History of Sexuality*, Vols. 1–3, New York: Vintage.
- Guerlac, Henry (1986), "Can There Be Colors in the Dark? Physical Color Theory Before Newton," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 47 (1): 3–20.
- Haraway, Donna (2013), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Routledge.

- Harding, Sandra G. (1986), *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Haslanger, Sally (1995), "Ontology and Social Construction," *Philosophical Topics* 23 (2): 95-125.
- Haslanger, Sally (2012), *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Heil, John (2012), *The Universe as We Find It*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hobbes, Thomas (1651), *De Cive*, Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing.
- Jackson, Reginald (1929), "Locke's Distinction Between Primary and Secondary Qualities," *Mind* 38 (149): 56-76.
- Longino, Helen E. (1990), *Science as Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MacKinnon, Catharine A. (1987), *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice (1967), *The Structure of Behavior*, Boston: Beacon Press.
- Moi, Toril (2001), *What Is a Woman? and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Nelson, Julie A. (1995), "Feminism and Economics," *The Journal of Economic Perspectives* 9 (2): 131-148.
- Nolan, Lawrence (2011), *Primary and Secondary Qualities: The Historical and Ongoing Debate*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Paul, Laurie (2012), "Metaphysics as Modeling: The Handmaiden's Tale," *Philosophical Studies* 160 (1): 1-29.
- Puryear, Stephen (2013), "Leibniz on the Metaphysics of Color," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 86 (2): 319-346.
- Roberson, Debi, Jules Davidoff, Ian R. L. Davies, Laura R. Shapiro (2005), "Color Categories: Evidence for the Cultural Relativity Hypothesis," *Cognitive Psychology* 50 (4): 378-411.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2017), "Social Construction as Grounding; or: Fundamentality for Feminists, a Reply to Barnes and Mikkola," *Philosophical Studies* 174: 2449-2465.
- Searle, John R. (1995), *The Construction of Social Reality*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Sider, Theodore (2017), "Substantivity in Feminist Metaphysics," *Philosophical Studies* 174 (10): 2467-78.
- Stoller, Robert J., Harold Garfinkel, and Alexander C. Rosen (1960), "Passing and the Maintenance of Sexual Identification in an Intersexed Patient," *AMA Archives of General Psychiatry* 2 (4): 379-84.
- Warnke, Georgia (2010), *Debating Sex and Gender*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Whitehead, Alfred N. (1929), *Process and Reality: An Essay in Cosmology*, New York: Macmillan.
- Wylie, Alison (2002), *Thinking from Things: Essays in the Philosophy of Archaeology*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.