

# ON THE APPARENT ANTAGONISM BETWEEN FEMINIST AND MAINSTREAM METAPHYSICS

## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, feminist philosophy has become recognised as a philosophical sub-discipline in its own right. Feminist philosophers aim both to critique patriarchal social structures by utilising mainstream philosophical tools, and to shape mainstream philosophy with the help of feminist political insights. Feminist philosophy is typically distinctive in being framed around specific concepts and background beliefs, which are sensitive to concerns about gender justice. From this perspective, feminist philosophers have advanced influential arguments in ethics, aesthetics, epistemology and political philosophy.

Until relatively recently, nonetheless, the situation in metaphysics – one of the ‘core’ areas of philosophy – has been quite different.<sup>1</sup> First, metaphysics typically investigates the basic structure of reality (what really or fundamentally *exists*) and its nature (what *kinds* of entities exist). The task is to uncover and elucidate reality’s putative building blocks or basic structure carved in ‘nature’s joints’. And, for this task, feminist insights appear simply irrelevant. Second, metaphysics seems to be a paradigm value-neutral endeavour. But this is *prima facie* incompatible with feminism’s explicitly normative stance and its emphasis on how gender makes a difference to philosophical inquiry. Thus, the prospects of combining feminism and metaphysics look grim.

Nonetheless, feminist philosophers have in recent years increasingly taken up explicitly metaphysical investigations, to which the first ever collection on the topic – *Feminist Metaphysics* edited by Charlotte Witt (2011a) – attests. The key ideas behind feminist metaphysics can be summed up as follows: feminist metaphysics is concerned with negotiating the natural (Haslanger 2000a) and going beyond the fundamental (Barnes 2014). Feminist metaphysics places prime importance on examining “to what extent the central concepts and categories of metaphysics, in terms of which we make sense of our reality, could be value-laden in ways that are particularly gendered” (Haslanger and Sveinsdóttir 2011). Feminist investigations have expanded the scope of metaphysics in holding that metaphysical tools can help advance debates on topics outside of traditional metaphysical inquiry (e.g. the

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is hard to find an outright dismissal of feminist metaphysics in press, one sometimes hears it disparaged in conversation. And despite recent work on feminist metaphysics, some feminist philosophers have been deeply suspicious of the value of metaphysics. For more on the unhappy relationship of feminism and metaphysics, see Battersby (1998).

nature of gender, sex or sexuality). Feminist philosophers have also discussed common metaphysical topics like properties, relations, the self, nature, essence and identity from a feminist perspective (Alcoff 2006; Antony 1998; Heinämaa 2011; Meyers 1997; Sveinsdóttir 2011, 2013; Warnke 2008; Witt 1993, 1995, 2011c). Moreover, feminist philosophers typically bring new methodological insights to bear on traditional ways of doing philosophy. Feminist metaphysicians have also recently begun interrogating the methods of metaphysics and they have raised questions about what metaphysics as a discipline is in the business of doing (Barnes 2014; Haslanger 2012; Mikkola 2015).

In discussing such methodological issues, Elizabeth Barnes (2014) has recently argued that some prevalent conceptions of metaphysics rule out feminist metaphysics from the start and render it impossible. This is bad news for self-proclaimed feminist metaphysicians in suggesting that we are simply confused and mistaken about what we are doing. With this worry in mind, this paper asks: how does feminist metaphysics fare relative to ‘mainstream’ metaphysics? More specifically, I will consider how feminist and ‘mainstream’ debates intersect, and whether feminist metaphysics qualifies as metaphysics ‘proper’. I will first outline briefly how feminist philosophy has expanded the scope of metaphysics (§2). (For a detailed outline of topics in feminist metaphysics, see Haslanger & Sveinsdóttir 2011.) I will next consider methodological issues and why the two philosophical areas are *prima facie* incompatible (§3). In the following section, I will explore in more detail whether this is in fact the case, and on precisely what grounds to feminist and ‘mainstream’ metaphysics apparently diverge (§4). I end with some reflections about whether feminist metaphysics qualifies as metaphysics ‘proper’ (§5).

## **2. Negotiating the Natural**

Much of feminist metaphysics has aimed to demonstrate how certain putatively ‘natural’ properties and relations are in fact socially constructed (Antony 1998; Haslanger 1995, 2000a, 2000b, 2003). Social relations that are oppressive have sometimes been justified on the grounds that they mirror our ‘human natures’. By contrast, feminist metaphysicians have shown that our identification of putatively natural ‘facts’ is socially motivated. To illustrate, consider feminist work on gender (Mikkola 2012). Ordinary speakers typically take ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ to be coextensive and interchangeable: women and men are human females and males, respectively. Feminists typically disagree and many have endorsed a sex/ gender distinction. Its standard formulation holds that ‘sex’ denotes a biological classification of human females and males on the basis of chromosomes, sex organs, hormones, or other

anatomical features. By contrast, ‘gender’ denotes a social classification of women and men, which depends on factors like social roles, positions, behaviour and self-ascription. The main motivation for making the distinction was to counter biological determinism: the view that one’s sex determines one’s social role and cultural traits. Gender differences (feminists argue) are socially constructed, not carved in nature’s joints. One task of feminist metaphysics, then, is to debunk supposed ‘natural facts’ in order to uncover their social nature (Haslanger 2003), and to show that classifications central to feminist concerns are in fact *constitutively constructed* (Haslanger 1995): e.g. in defining genders we must make reference to social factors. Of course, which social factors fix gender is an on-going debate within feminist philosophy (Frye 1996, 2011; Haslanger 2000b; Mikkola 2009, 2011; Stoljar 1995, 2011; Sveinsdóttir 2011; Young 1997; Witt 2011b).

The metaphysics of gender – what gender is – demonstrates the centrality of the notion of social construction in feminist work. There are, however, many ways in which we can understand this notion and feminist metaphysicians have done painstaking work in recent years to elucidate it (Diaz-Leon 2013; Haslanger 1995; Mallon 2007). Consider another example from feminist discussions to illustrate further how something can be socially constructed. Many people, including many feminists, have taken sex ascriptions to be solely a matter of biology with no social or cultural dimension, and it is commonplace to think that there are only two sexes. By contrast, feminist philosophers and biologists have disputed this and argued that sex classification is not a non-evaluative matter. To elucidate this, let’s distinguish object- and idea-construction (Haslanger 2003): ideological forces and material social conditions can be said to construct certain kinds of objects (e.g. sexed bodies) and certain kinds of ideas (e.g. sex concepts).

Let’s begin with the object-construction of sexed bodies. Surgical interventions offer the most explicit demonstration of how sex can be ‘made’ by us. But there are other, subtler ways such construction takes place. Secondary sex characteristics are affected by material social practices. In some societies, females’ lower social status has resulted in them receiving less to eat and this lack of nutrition (among other factors) has had the effect of making women relatively smaller in size (Jaggar 1983). Uniformity in muscular shape, size and strength within sex categories is not straightforwardly caused by genes and hormones, but depends heavily on nutrition and exercise opportunities. Were such opportunities equalised, it is thought that bodily dimorphism would diminish (Fausto-Sterling 1993). These examples suggest that sex-specific features thought not to be affected by social and cultural factors are causally constructed (Haslanger 1995): social forces and beliefs (e.g. about food and exercise)

have causal efficacy in shaping the way we are *qua* females and males. Furthermore, causal construction of sex takes place against the backdrop of what is attributed to us by others as exemplars of supposedly dimorphic sex categories. In this sense, sex is also discursively constructed (Haslanger 1995). Social influences and beliefs send implicit and explicit messages about what is expected of us as females and males. For instance, girls and women are attributed relative bodily weakness due to their smaller size and they are not expected to do weight-lifting sports. They may thus be discouraged from doing such sports, which is likely to make them relatively smaller in size. This appears to render the original attribution of bodily weakness appropriate, when in fact we are shaped in ways that make us fit prior expectations and attributions.

Feminist work also examines the idea-construction of sex concepts (Butler 1990, 1993; Stone 2007). The concept of *sex* is said to be socially produced in the sense that what *counts as* sex depends on what we take to be socially meaningful in particular contexts. What properties we take to be definitive of sex results in different classificatory systems, and there may be no conceptual-scheme independent way to settle the issue. In this case, our sex classificatory scheme is a strong pragmatic construction: social factors wholly determine our use of the scheme and the scheme fails to represent accurately any independent ‘facts of the matter’ (Haslanger 1995, 100). This is reminiscent of Hilary Putnam’s (1981, 1996) ‘internal realism’ and his example of counting objects. A common-sense realist and a “mereologist” encounter entities *x*, *y*, and *z*. How many objects are there? For the former, there are just three. But for the latter, there are seven (or eight depending on one’s flavour of mereology): in addition to those mentioned, there are the mereological sums of *x+y*, *y+z*, *x+z*, and *x+y+z*. Now, how many objects are there *really* or which conceptual scheme is *the true* one? For Putnam, these questions cannot be answered. Doing so would require an impossible ‘God’s Eye’ perspective on reality from which we look ‘in’ while standing outside. And so, to think that there is some scheme-independent way of counting objects is an illusion. The situation with sex is similar. The ordinary conception has it that there are only two sex categories (male and female). This conception, however, fails to accommodate intersexed people and trans\* people. ‘Our’ conceptions of sex vary relative to what we think of as significant and salient for the task at hand, and there is no obvious way to settle what sex amounts to that is ‘carved in nature’s joints’. In fact, interests and prior beliefs have an important impact on our choice of conceptual schemes. Feminist metaphysics, then, aims to make explicit how putatively natural classifications are actually social by unmasking politically and morally suspect interests and biases that ground various classificatory systems. Sally Haslanger calls this form

of social constructionism ‘critical social realism’ (hereafter, CSR), which aims to reveal real differences that are “socially constituted but not recognized, or fully recognized, to be so ... [where] calling attention to this will ... provide critical leverage in challenging how we think and act” (2012, 197).

### 3. Going Beyond the Fundamental

The above showed that feminists have extended the scope of metaphysics. However, their work ill fits what many take to be the central task and methodology of metaphysics. On some prevalent contemporary views, metaphysics is in the business of elucidating the *fundamental* structure of reality. For instance, Ted Sider holds that metaphysics is about “figuring out the right categories [carved in reality’s joints] for describing the world” (2011, 1). As he sees it:

The joint-carving notions are fundamental notions; a fact is fundamental when it is stated in joint-carving terms. A central task of metaphysics has always been to discern the ultimate or fundamental [structure of] reality underlying the appearances. (2011, vii)

The name of the metaphysical game is: how can we elucidate reality’s fundamental structure while positing the fewest number of kinds of entities? The prevalent way of doing contemporary metaphysics is not via conceptual analysis, but via quasi-scientific means. Contemporary metaphysics takes different ontological positions to be competing hypotheses about reality’s fundamental structure. Those positions are then assessed with a “loose battery of criteria for theory choice. Match with ordinary usage and belief sometimes plays a role in this assessment, but typically not a dominant one” (Sider 2009, 385; see also Sider 2011, 12). As I see it, this loose battery of criteria makes up the *constitutive* values of contemporary analytical metaphysics (thus guiding theory choices) and it conceivably includes: being able to provide a unified (non-disjunctive), coherent, non-circular total theory of some subject matter that purports to tell us truths, where our theory is simple, parsimonious, non-ad hoc and theoretically rigorous – akin to and continuous with science. Consequently, some deny the existence of tables, chairs and other middle-sized goods: only fundamental particles arranged table- and chair-wise exist since only they are needed for adequate explanations and it is unparsimonious to posit the existence of derivative entities (e.g. van Inwagen 1990; Merricks 2001). Others accept the existence of derivative phenomena, but take this to be secondary to an ontological inquiry into what *grounds* what (Schaffer 2009).

Serious and ‘deep’ metaphysics should involve substantive disputes and questions,

instead of superficial and verbal ones.<sup>2</sup> “Is the Pope a bachelor?” is a merely conceptual question; by contrast, “Is there lithium on Mars?” is a substantive one (Sider 2011). Whether a question is substantive depends on “the extent to which its terms carve at the joints [of nature]; that is, that the question concerns the world’s fundamental structure” (Sider 2011, 6). A question is non-substantive 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” (Sider 2011, 129). The importance of substantive questions allegedly hinges on epistemic value. As Sider puts it, it is “*better* to think and speak in joint-carving terms” (2011, 61). This is because the goal of inquiry requires that we grasp the world ‘in its own terms’, which means carving the world at its joints. Thus, “[w]ielders of non-joint-carving concepts are worse inquirers” (Sider 2011, 61). Such inquirers are apparently *missing out* on some important knowledge. Not all non-substantive debates are worthless: they may be metaphysically shallow, but conceptually deep in revealing something important about our conceptual scheme (Sider 2011, 70). But metaphysics proper is about deep, substantive questions and superficial debates simply fail to qualify.

This way of demarcating the task of metaphysics has problematic results for feminist investigations. First, feminist metaphysics is *not* about fundamentality and it does not consider gender or sex to be fundamental – the nature of gender is not carved in reality’s joints (for a notable exception, see Bach 2012). Disputes about what gender is seem to be straightforwardly non-substantive and fall outside of metaphysics proper. As Barnes (2014) has recently argued, if metaphysics is about the fundamental and feminist metaphysics is about the non-fundamental, the latter is simply impossible. This is bad news: feminist metaphysicians turn out to be confused in taking debates about gender and sex to be substantive when they are just conventional, terminological disputes. If Sider is right, feminist metaphysicians are mistaken about the *metaphysical* status of their work. For Barnes, this is deeply unsatisfying since Sider’s approach excludes feminist metaphysics by straightforward definitional fiat. She further argues that the same is true of Schaffer (2009) and Dorr’s (2005) elucidations of metaphysics in terms of fundamentality. The focus on fundamentality, then, results in an odd parochialism about the task of metaphysics to which Barnes strongly objects.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Sider talks mainly about substantive and verbal *questions*. I will talk in terms of ‘disputes’ and ‘questions’, but I do not take there to be significant difference between the two. Bluntly put, ontologically substantive disputes ask ontologically substantive (rather than merely verbal) questions.

<sup>3</sup> Of course, we could reject Sider’s characterisation of the substantive/ superficial distinction. I will accept it for now in order to discuss whether (as Barnes’s holds) his view does exclude feminist metaphysics.

Second, feminist metaphysics appears problematic given its meta-philosophical commitments. Earlier, I noted certain seemingly discipline-defining constitutive values of metaphysics (e.g., seeking to elucidate the fundamental as parsimoniously as possible). Such theoretically constitutive values can be distinguished from what Helen Longino (1994) calls ‘contextual values’ of a practice: the political and moral values embedded in the social context of an inquiry. Now, even though metaphysicians may be frank about some meta-metaphysical commitments (e.g. whether one’s meta-metaphysical commitments admit the existence of abstract entities, composites, or just simples/ particulars), bringing in contextual values is usually not viewed as an acceptable move when thinking about metaphysical theory choice. The apparent impossibility of feminist metaphysics may then be further explained as follows: feminist metaphysics aims to bring in contextual values; but since these are inadmissible when making metaphysical theory choices, there is no reason to take feminist insights seriously. So, what sets feminist metaphysics apart from ‘metaphysics proper’ are: the subject matter (fundamental vs. non-fundamental, substantive vs. merely conceptual questions) and methodology (quasi-scientific vs. normative inquiry, constitutive vs. contextual values). With these in mind, I will consider next how far apart the two ‘camps’ really are and why.<sup>4</sup>

#### **4. Exploring the Antagonisms**

Let’s start by considering some apparently common ground. In an effort to convince mainstream philosophers of the valuable insights that constructionist approaches can offer, Haslanger has recently argued that Critical Social Realism (CSR) is *compatible* with forms of realism, objectivism, and naturalism. To recap, the goal of CSR is “to locate the (often obscure) mechanisms of injustice and the levers for social change” (Haslanger 2012, 184-5), which involves unmasking (e.g. showing that gender and race are not ‘natural’ but social categories). Much of this involves (re-)classifying entities so that our classificatory schemes better facilitate social justice. Feminist metaphysics and social constructionism ask “of a classification whether and how a distinction serves our purposes (and, more specifically, whose purposes it serves) because classification is a goal-oriented activity at which we can do better or worse, both in formulating the goal and figuring out how to achieve it” (Haslanger 2012, 190). In this sense, feminist metaphysics is aiming to do the same as ‘mainstream’

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<sup>4</sup> I will not consider here the view that contextual values are inadmissible when making metaphysical theory choices. I do so elsewhere (2015).

metaphysics: to uncover and limn the structure of reality by figuring out the right categories for describing it (cf. Schaffer 2009; Sider 2011). The subject matters of feminist and mainstream metaphysics are seemingly closer to one another than it might at first seem.

Furthermore, both sides tend to reject traditional conceptual analysis that turns on ordinary intuitions. If we wish to explicate the fundamental building blocks of reality, reflecting on what we (the competent speakers of a language) mean when we talk about fundamentality and reality seems wrongheaded. Or rather, this alone cannot settle metaphysical questions. Conceptual analysis may be appropriate for fixing the *ideology* of our theories in Quine's (1951) sense: those conceptual presuppositions and decisions underlying our (best) theories. But ultimately metaphysical theory-choice turns on quasi-scientific considerations, like simplicity, explanatory power and fit with other theories. Contemporary metaphysics of gender typically also rejects apriori conceptual analysis. For instance, Haslanger (2000b, 2006) and Saul (2006) argue that ordinary intuitions should not be used to investigate what gender is. Intuitions are simply too unreliable—they encode the wrong conditions (by conflating gender with sex) and are too idiosyncratic – different speakers take gender classifications to depend on different features. Therefore, traditional forms of conceptual analysis that hinge on ordinary intuitions cannot do the work of finding out what gender is (for opposing views, however, see Diaz-Leon 2012; Mikkola 2011). *Contra* first appearances, the methods of feminist metaphysics are closer to mainstream methods in that both typically reject intuition-based conceptual analysis.

However, despite some common ground, there are significant differences. Although both camps aim to limn the structure of reality, they disagree on what counts as *reality*. For mainstream metaphysicians like Sider (and not all metaphysicians agree), only that which is fundamental does; for feminists like Haslanger, whatever has causal efficacy counts as real. So, we have a dispute over what counts as *real*, and our resulting metaphysical theories depend on which conceptual scheme we adopt (in this case, whether we accept Sider's or Haslanger's scheme). Metaphysicians like Sider are doing (what Thomas Hofweber calls) 'esoteric metaphysics' that takes "the questions metaphysics aims to answer [to] involve distinctly metaphysical terms" (2009, 267). By contrast, feminist metaphysicians are not typically aiming to engage in esoteric metaphysics. Rather, when they aim to limn the structure of reality, they are largely engaging in egalitarian metaphysics (cf. Hofweber 2009, 266): metaphysical questions about reality can be expressed in ordinary, everyday terms that does not require specialist knowledge of some *metaphysical* ways of understanding (e.g.)



‘real’. Feminist and mainstream metaphysics equivocate on ‘reality’; thus, their subject matters do come apart.

The important question now becomes: is the above dispute substantive or superficial? If the dispute between (say) Sider and Haslanger is substantive, there is no reason to hold that feminist metaphysics is impossible. Nor is there reason to think it falls outside the scope of metaphysics proper. In order to examine this further, consider Haslanger’s argument that CSR is compatible with objectivism. Socially constructed types are typically thought to be opposed to objective types. But Haslanger disagrees. For her, “[t]he existence of types ... depends on members of a set of things having some degree of unity” (2012, 202). Now, what makes a type objective? In short: “To say that some thing or feature is metaphysically objective is to say that it is real ... So objective types are types that can be found in the real world” (Haslanger 2012, 203). And for Haslanger, to be real means that the type’s boundaries correspond to real differences – “there is something about how things are in virtue of which the members of the type differ from non-members” (2012, 203). Real differences are ‘in the world’ and something that we can discover through ordinary empirical and normative inquiry (Haslanger 2012, 198). For instance, landlords make up an objective type because the type is real insofar as its boundaries correspond to a real difference between landlords and non-landlords (the former rent properties owned, the latter do not). Nothing in this conception of objectivism rules out social constructivism for Haslanger. Sider would disagree, however. For him, objectivity is about being carved in reality’s joints. This rules out the *possibility* of something being both socially constructed and objective because (everyone agrees) socially constructed entities are not found on the fundamental level. *Contra* Sider, Haslanger’s conception of metaphysical objectivity is highly permissive (which she admits). After all, if to be metaphysically objective just is to be real, then the existence of some *F* is sufficient for objectivity (Haslanger 2012, 204). But is this dispute substantive? On Sider’s criterion, it seems to be so. After all, a non-substantive dispute is one where no one candidate meaning is more joint-carving than others. But since Sider defines objectivity in terms of joint-carving, his conception is more joint-carving than Haslanger’s. The dispute over objectivity is not merely verbal, though it is substantive due to mere definitional fiat. Nevertheless, this (perhaps surprisingly) vindicates feminist metaphysics.

The above conclusion may be too quick though. Faced with her permissive view of objectivity, Haslanger considers whether we should instead frame the issue in terms of mind-dependence: the objective world is that which exists ‘independent of us’. In this case, socially constructed types cannot be objective because they are mind-dependent. However, Haslanger

finds this proposal deeply problematic: nothing ends up being real because almost everything depends on us in some sense. And this would be an absurd result, unless ‘independent’ has some “special meaning” (Haslanger 2012, 204). In fact, I contend, this is precisely the case: ‘independent of us’ has a special meaning for metaphysicians like Sider, who are invested in elucidating the fundamental structure of reality. Mind-independence is about metaphysical self-sufficiency in a special sense: in being carved in reality’s joints. Although it is not entirely clear whether only that which is carved in reality’s joints is mind-independent, if anything on a realist metaphysics is mind-independent, then surely the fundamental is. Again, metaphysicians who understand ‘independent of us’ in a special sense are doing esoteric metaphysics and employing a special sort of language in their investigations (sometimes referred to as ‘ontologese’ [Dorr 2005]). Feminists typically engage in a different kind of metaphysics. But now the dispute between feminist and mainstream metaphysics starts looking less substantive (if Sider is right about the distinction between substantive and merely verbal disputes). The basic point of contention turns on different metaphysical ‘languages’ – and questions about our conceptual choices surely are conventional if any are.

That said, the above exploration still does not quite home in on what the real dispute between feminist and ‘mainstream’ metaphysics amounts to. In order to get a clearer view of this, let me take a brief digression to Haslanger’s CSR and ask whether one should focus on fundamentality to being with, as Sider does. Haslanger attempts to bridge the gap between CSR and naturalism: in short, to show that the two are compatible contra first appearances. Naturalism is

[A] commitment to seeing ourselves as parts of a universe in which all things are interdependent. Naturalism does not entail that there are only physical things, but if there are non-physical things, they must be part of the causal order, that is, they must either have causes and effects, or must supervene on things that do. (Haslanger 2012, 210)

Constructionism is more usually coupled with anti-naturalism, which Haslanger describes as most basically holding the following: if some *F*s are socially constructed, then “the being an *F* is non-natural” matter, or being an *F* is “not caused by natural processes” (Haslanger 2012, 211). In other words, *F*s are the way they are by virtue of social factors, and they come to be *F*s through social processes. Haslanger aims to show that, although constructionism in general is taken to be an anti-naturalist position, not all forms of constructionism are necessarily at odds with naturalism: CSR being a case in point. So, surprisingly, two positions typically

taken to be at odds with one another (naturalism and anti-naturalist constructivism) are compatible.

Now, I will not spell out Haslanger's argument for the supposed compatibility in detail. But this is because I do not see any tension between naturalism and anti-naturalism as Haslanger defines them to begin with. And spelling out why, helps to clarify (what I contend is) the real dispute between feminist and Sider-type 'mainstream' metaphysics, and why the focus on fundamentality may not be so helpful. Naturalism is defined relative to a physical/non-physical distinction, whereas anti-naturalism is about the natural/non-natural distinction. But clearly non-physical things can be non-natural (they can exist and have their natures due to social factors) *and* exert causal influence on reality. (Bluntly: just think of laws causing people to be incarcerated.) So, Haslanger's naturalism is indeed compatible with constructionism – but neither social constructionists nor metaphysical realists/naturalists appear to deny this compatibility thesis. Social constructionists usually accept the existence of physical and non-physical things, and that both are part of the causal order (they do not deny Haslanger-naturalism). And naturalists do not deny Haslanger-anti-naturalism: they can accept that some non-physical *Fs* (e.g. laws or 'market forces') are part of the causal order or supervene on things that are, and that they are socially constructed.

However, the above points to something that naturalists/anti-naturalists and feminist/'mainstream' metaphysicians typically do disagree on. The real dispute (I submit) is about *metaphysical primacy*. Metaphysical realists/naturalists might (and do) hold that, ontologically speaking, socially constructed and derivative *Fs* are secondary. What matters is the supervenience base that grounds the non-physical/-natural *Fs*. They can accept the *existence* of ontologically non-self-sufficient derivative entities and still hold that really it is the non-constructed, fundamental grounding layer that matters. By contrast, social constructionists (like feminist metaphysicians) deny this privileging. The dispute is not about what exists (whether non-natural, constructed *Fs* exist), but about whether to focus on the 'big', macro-level phenomena or on the 'small', micro-level entities that ground the bigger picture. Focusing on the micro-level does not typically satisfy feminist metaphysicians because reducing our social explanations to 'ultimate' grounds may well miss something crucial and flatten out our explanations in problematic ways.

To illustrate, consider the following example. Bluntly put, social facts obtain (at least partly) due to human agents' attitudes and actions in social contexts. A reductionist micro-theory would aim to reduce social facts to some psychological antecedents (like the intentional mental states of social agents). But doing so plausibly loses sight of something

important in our explanations. Take the claim that the rise of capitalism in modern Europe derives from a Protestant ethic (cf. Jackson & Pettit 1992, 102). Now, Protestant ethic may explain the rise of capitalism in a number of more specific ways: perhaps it “condemned activities inimical to capitalism; ... encouraged the relationships between people which capitalism requires; ... gave people a goal which inspired capitalist activity as a means” (Jackson & Pettit 1992, 103). But Protestant ethic is unlikely to involve a set of psychological antecedents that alone make good the explanandum. Or, to put the point differently: if we find that the rise of capitalism reduces to some psychological antecedents and intentional mental states, we are likely to miss something important along the way (e.g. that Protestant ethic encouraged forms of relationships conducive to capitalism). This suggests that Sider is wrong about the value of joint-carving when he claims that non-joint-carvers miss out on something important. In fact, feminist insights may suggest that in metaphysical disputes over big-versus-small, we should (at least sometimes) favour the former.<sup>5</sup>

## 5. Conclusion

The above argued that a major difference between feminist and ‘mainstream’ metaphysics pertains to our choice of what level of ‘reality’ we should ontologically privilege. With this in mind, consider again whether feminist metaphysicians *really* are doing metaphysics? I think so. First, some mainstream metaphysicians have argued for expanding the proper scope of ontological inquiry to include ordinary objects and social entities (most notably, Baker 2007 and Thomasson 2007). Thomasson, for instance, has no qualms *per se* with the task of serious, Sider-style metaphysics. But, in her view, there are other good and acceptable metaphysical tasks that should be not be reduced to or confused with the business of ‘deep’ metaphysics (2007, 194). Elucidating the fundamental is not the only or central task of metaphysics, but merely one amongst many. And so, in focusing on the ‘big’ as opposed to the ‘small’ feminist metaphysics is on a par with some other enquires that are accepted as metaphysics ‘proper’.

Second, *contra* Barnes, my contention is that Sider’s position does not ultimately undermine feminist metaphysics. It may rule out some disputes *within* feminist metaphysics

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<sup>5</sup> One might hold that although epistemically speaking reductionism would not yield helpful results, nevertheless, metaphysically speaking only the fundamental level is important. This would undermine the claim that feminist insights demonstrate the value of the macro-level. But, then, Sider’s justification for why the fundamental matters becomes puzzling since he appeals to epistemic considerations. It seems that whatever we give priority to should yield *both* epistemic *and* metaphysical benefits. And this undercuts the view that epistemic benefits of feminism are unimportant.

(like those over the metaphysics of gender), but it does not render feminist metaphysics *per se* impossible. Even Sider contends that those who reject joint-carving are doing metaphysics: an austere critic could oppose metaphysics “by rejecting the realism about joint-carving ... But this rejection of joint-carving is just more metaphysics” (2011, 83). So, feminist interventions that negotiate the natural and go beyond the fundamental do not fall outside the purview of metaphysics. Even anti-realist investigations that deny joint-carving are *investigations of* the fundamental structure. Thus, feminist metaphysics that aims to debunk certain categories (like gender and race) engages in an investigation of the fundamental structure. This is good news for feminist metaphysicians: we are not confused after all. That said, it is not such good news for Sider: his conception of metaphysics is rather innocuous and somewhat puzzling since every investigation that somehow addresses the fundamental counts as metaphysics. Nonetheless, if my argument here is right and feminist metaphysics is vindicated as part of metaphysics proper, Barnes’s worries about the status of feminist metaphysics (at least relative to Sider) are not that pressing.

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