

Social Ontology

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Abstract: Traditionally, social entities (i.e., social properties, facts, kinds, groups, institutions, and structures) have not fallen within the purview of mainstream metaphysics. In this chapter, we consider whether the exclusion of social entities from mainstream metaphysics is philosophically warranted or if it instead rests on historical accident or bias. We examine three ways one might attempt to justify excluding social metaphysics from the domain of metaphysical inquiry and argue that each fails. Thus, we conclude that social entities are not justifiably excluded from metaphysical inquiry. Finally, we ask how focusing on social entities could change the character of metaphysical inquiry. We suggest that starting from examples of social entities might lead metaphysicians to rethink the assumption that describing reality in terms of intrinsic, independent, and individualistic features is preferable to describing it in terms of relational, dependent, and non-individualistic features.

Traditionally, social entities have not fallen within the purview of mainstream metaphysics. For example, very few original research articles on social metaphysics have been published in top philosophy journals.¹ Moreover, only one metaphysics textbook includes social metaphysics as a topic.² This is particularly striking in view of the fact that there has been work on social ontology for decades.³ Here, in addition to surveying the field of social ontology, we consider whether the

¹ This claim is easily verified by searching keywords such as “social,” “social kind,” “social group,” etc., top philosophy journals (e.g., *Philosophical Review*, *the Journal of Philosophy*, *Mind*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, *Nous*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophical Studies*, etc.).

² For example, see Carroll and Markosian 2010; Conee and Sider 2014; Crane and Farkas 2004; Effingham 2013; Kim, Korman, and Sosa 2011; Koons and Pickavance 2015, 2017; Loux and Crisp 2017; Loux 2008; Lowe 2002; Mumford 2012; Sider, Hawthorne, Zimmerman 2007; Tahko 2016; van Inwagen 2014; van Inwagen and Zimmerman 2008. Most of these titles were published well after the inception of social metaphysics in analytic philosophy. NB: Ney’s (2014) introductory metaphysics textbook includes a chapter on the metaphysics of race.

³ For instance, Ruben 1985; Gilbert 1989; Tuomela 1989; and Searle 1990, 1995, 2010; Hacking 1996, 1999; Haslanger 1995; Burman (Andersson) 2007, in addition to more than 30 years of work on the metaphysics of race and gender (e.g., Appiah 1985). Other work on collective

exclusion of social entities from mainstream metaphysics is philosophically warranted or if it instead rests on historical accident or bias.

We examine three ways one might attempt to justify excluding social metaphysics from the domain of metaphysical inquiry. Metaphysical inquiry, as we construe it, includes both first-order metaphysics and metametaphysical questions about the nature of metaphysics. Given this construal, we argue that each of the arguments fails and conclude that the exclusion of social entities, properties, kinds, and facts from mainstream metaphysics is unjustified. Further, we show that broadening the scope of metaphysics to include a focus on the social requires us to rethink some commonplace metaphysical assumptions.

The article is structured as follows. In sections *I-III*, we outline arguments from the literature that might be used to provide justification for the view that metaphysics need not focus on social entities. With respect to each argument, we show that it fails to justify the exclusion of social entities from metaphysical inquiry. In *I* we consider whether eliminativism or reductionism about social entities is true. If either is true, one might think that metaphysics ought not focus on the social, for there are no (irreducible) social entities on which to focus. In *II* we consider whether metaphysics ought to focus exclusively on fundamental entities. Since social entities are plausibly not fundamental, this could be used to justify the exclusion of social entities. In *III* we consider the view that metaphysics should focus on natural kinds. Finally, in *IV*, we consider what metaphysical inquiry that includes social entities as central examples would look like. We gesture towards the view that starting from examples of social entities leads us to rethink the assumption that describing reality in terms of intrinsic, independent, and individualistic features is preferable to describing it in terms of relational, dependent, and non-individualistic features.

Before turning to our main arguments, we outline two general ways social entities might depend on social factors and set out a range of examples of social entities. Social entities might depend on social factors causally or constitutively. The following theses (adapted from definitions of forms of social construction from Haslanger 2003 and Mallon 2014) give a feel for the difference:

Causal Dependence: X (being F) is *causally* dependent on social factors if and only if social factors (partially) cause X to exist (as F).

Constitutive Dependence: X (being F) *constitutively* depends on social factors just in case (i) in defining what it is to be X (or for X to be F) reference must be made to some social

intentionality also focuses in part on social ontology. See Schweikard and Schmid 2013 for an overview.

factors or (ii) social factors are metaphysically necessary for X to exist (as an F) or (iii) social factors ground the existence of X (or the fact that X is F).⁴

An entity might causally depend on social factors like human behavior, practices, beliefs, and so on without constitutively depending on social factors. For instance, compounds that are synthesized in a chemistry lab are causally dependent on social practices. Yet, such compounds are plausibly not constitutively dependent on social factors. That is, they are definable without reference to social factors, social factors are not metaphysically necessary for the compound to exist, and the existence of the compound is not grounded in social factors. In contrast, universities, gender, and inflation might be both causally and constitutively dependent on social factors.

When we use “social entity” we intend for it to be broadly construed so as to include entities of the following sorts:

Social properties and relations (e.g., being married, being a U.S. citizen, being a manager, having more buying power than);

Social facts (e.g., that the Supreme Court exists, that Kai has four hundred dollars in her bank account, that the United States has a larger military than Gambia);

Social kinds (e.g., money and marriage, war and women, capitalists and cartels, races, recessions, and refugees);

Social groups (e.g., racial and gender groups, the Minnesota Twins, the Supreme Court, Migos);

Social institutions (e.g., universities, corporations);

Social structures (e.g., capitalist power structures, oppressive gender structures, the structure of the U.S. government).

In what follows, we note when arguments apply to some and not other social entities.

I. Eliminativism and Reduction

Our world appears to include primates, pears, and paper, trees, telephones, and tapirs. It also seems to include ethnic groups, parliaments, nations, bands, and sports teams. Common sense and our everyday experiences seem to confirm that there are social entities. Are appearances misleading? That is, are there any social entities?

⁴ There are various ways one can spell out constitutive dependence. We do not wish to take a stand on the issue here, hence the disjunctive definition. For discussion of various ways social entities might be “held together” see Epstein (2015).

Eliminativists about Fs hold that there are no Fs. Eliminativism about social entities has been argued for in three main ways. First, one might be motivated to reject social entities given social analogs to puzzles about composition (e.g., Sorites paradoxes, Ship of Theseus puzzles, the puzzle of the statue and the clay). If one is inclined to hold that ships, cups, and dogs do not exist due to these puzzles, one might be similarly inclined to argue that social groups and at least some other social entities do not exist (van Inwagen 1990; Unger 1980).

However, many philosophers reject drawing nihilist or eliminativist conclusions from these puzzles. For instance, some argue that puzzles about composition motivate accepting mereological universalism (Lewis 1991; Sider 2001). Others argue that the puzzles can be solved while maintaining a restricted, “common sense” ontological view (Korman 2015; Markosian 1998, 2008). Whichever view one is inclined to adopt in the realm of non-social material objects one will plausibly be inclined to adopt for material social entities as well.

Second, one might hold eliminativist views about specific social entities. Some argue that there are no racial groups because there are no biological racial essences (Appiah 1996; Zack 1993, 2002). For instance, Appiah argues that there are not racial groups whose members share “fundamental, heritable, physical, moral, intellectual, and cultural characteristics with one another” (1996, 54). He argues that the existence of races relies on there being biological racial essences. Thus, the lack of shared, biological racial essences entails that there are no races. Similar arguments might be posed for gender, ethnic, sexuality, and other sorts of social groups.

The second eliminativist argument is also widely disputed. Many argue that racial, gender, and other groups exist, but maintain that the existence of such groups does not rely on there being shared, biological essences. On some views concepts for social kinds are taken to be cluster concepts, so that there need not be *an* essence to a kind (Stoljar 1995, 2011; Outlaw 1996; Hale 1996; Corvino 2000; Heyes 2000). Much of the work on social construction in philosophy involves arguing that there are social kinds, but they are dependent on social practices not on shared biological essences (Alcoff 2006; Blum 2010; Diaz-Leon 2015a, 2015b; Haslanger 2000, 2003, 2012; Jeffers 2013; Mallon 2006, 2016; Mills 1997, 1998; Sundstrom 2002; Taylor 2004). For instance, Blum argues that “racialized groups are characterized by forms of experience they have undergone and a sociohistorical identity that they possess *because of* the false attributions to them ... of innate biobehavioral tendencies” (2010, 300). Similarly, Haslanger argues that a view of gender groups should acknowledge “the causal impact of classification” (2003, 315). Hacking’s (1996, 1999) notion of looping effects on human kinds is one way to understand the effect of classification. He takes classifying to potentially elicit changes in behavior and self-conception thereby modifying the nature of the kind which leads to another “loop” which can elicit further behavioral changes.

Moreover, it is possible that although racial, gender, and other social groups do not have shared, biological essences, they have shared, non-biological essences (Witt 1995, 2011a, 2011b). Charlotte Witt argues that we should not conflate essentialism with biologism because biological descriptions are only one way of specifying the essence of these groups. Further, she argues that social construction is compatible with essentialism (1995). It follows that by demonstrating that social groups are not unified by shared, biological essences one does not thereby demonstrate that those groups do not exist.

Third, individualists in the social sciences (Weber 1922/2013; Hayek 1955; Popper 1966) have argued that social entities are not required for explanation and that there are no irreducible social entities. Explanatory or methodological individualists hold that explanations can be given solely in terms of individuals and their actions rather than “spooky” social forces. Ontological individualists argue that there are no irreducible social entities.

Arguments relying on ontological and methodological individualism are distinct from the other eliminativist arguments we considered because they potentially eliminate *all* social entities. In contrast, arguments based on puzzles of composition apply only to material social objects (e.g., groups). They do not apply, for instance, to social facts or properties.⁵ Arguments based on essentialism apply only to racial, gender, and other social kinds that are the locus of oppression and possible sites for social justice projects. However, an explanatory individualist aims to show that all social entities including social facts, properties, and so on are explanatorily superfluous. An ontological individualist might argue that there are no social entities whatsoever.⁶

In their strongest forms, both individualist theses rely on reduction.⁷ On a reductive view about Fs, there are Fs, but they are nothing “over and above” some other things G. For instance, according to identity theory in philosophy of mind there are mental states, but they just are brain states (i.e., they are identical to brain states). According to individualists, social facts or other social entities are nothing over and above non-social facts or entities.

The success of explanatory individualism relies on the reduction of social facts to non-social facts. The success of ontological individualism, which need not be paired with explanatory individualism, requires that all purported social entities can be successfully reduced to individuals. Ruben (1985) considers various non-social reduction bases for nations and finds each wanting. Epstein (2009, 2015) argues that even a weaker version of individualism relying on

⁵ This is because arrangements of simples could instantiate social properties and thereby ground social facts. For instance, atoms arranged shell-wise could have the property of being money and this could ground the truth of the social fact that atoms arranged shell-wise are money.

⁶ See Greenwood (2003) and Epstein (2015) for discussion of forms of individualism and social explanation.

⁷ A weaker version of either thesis might rely on supervenience.

supervenience rather than reduction fails. He cites cases of supervenience failing for certain social groups.

Note further that a noncircular definition of ‘social’ appears to be required if individualist theses are to get off the ground. We will not canvass an array of definitions of ‘social’ that could be offered, but a successful definition will need to be broad enough to capture the range of social entities like those listed above, as well as social beliefs, actions, habits, desires, and so on.

Several philosophers have expressed skepticism about drawing a sharp distinction between social and non-social individualistic facts. For instance, Haslanger holds that the possibility of giving a non-circular definition of ‘social’ is unlikely (2016, fn 8). Similarly, Epstein (2015, 102) states that he is “not confident” that a clear distinction can be drawn. He notes that individualism is viable only if there is a clear distinction “[o]therwise, it is pointless for [an individualist] to assert that the social facts are exhaustively “built out of” the individualistic ones” (ibid.). If no sharp distinction can be drawn, the potential for the success of individualism is undermined.

While we have offered criticisms against eliminativist and reductionist strategies, notice that if a reductionist argument is successful, the exclusion of social metaphysics from metaphysical inquiry is not warranted. For instance, suppose social entities are identical to some non-social entities (i.e., a social version of identity theory is true). On this view, social entities are still part of metaphysics. The claim is that they are identical to non-social entities, not that they fail to exist. Further, even if one posits that certain social kinds do not exist, that does not mean that questions about *whether* they exist fall outside of metaphysical inquiry. For instance, the view that there are no racial groups is a metaphysical view. In engaging in metaontological or metametaphysical inquiry about what exists, one is engaged in ontological and metaphysical inquiry. So, if one wants to argue for eliminativism about social entities one is doing both metaphysics and social ontology. Eliminativism does not provide a reason to exclude questions of social ontology from broader metaphysical inquiry, even if ultimately one wants to argue that there are no social entities.

While ontological questions about the existence of certain sorts of entities have been common in metaphysics, they have fallen somewhat out of favor in contemporary metaphysics, which favors asking questions about fundamentality, grounding, and dependence, rather than existence. Thus, we next consider views according to which Fs exist but are not fundamental or independent. We consider these views next.

II. Fundamentality and Mind-Dependence

Another reason for excluding social entities from metaphysics is the view that metaphysics is or should be solely concerned with entities that are metaphysically fundamental. For example, one

might characterize metaphysics as the study of the *fundamental structure* of reality (Sider 2011).⁸ If metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality, and social entities are not fundamental, then they have been excluded from metaphysical inquiry for good reason. There are, however, several problems with this line of argument.

First, many traditional metaphysical disputes are about *whether* some phenomenon is fundamental (Bennett 2017, 232). If metaphysics is only concerned with fundamentalia, then the question of whether these debates have a metaphysical subject matter depends on who is correct about the fundamentality of the entities in question. This is extremely counterintuitive. For example, consider the question of whether grounding is a fundamental relation. It is not the case that grounding falls within the domain metaphysical inquiry only if the answer to this question is yes! The dispute itself is metaphysical either way. To put the point another way, when engaged in metametaphysics about the features of the entities in one's ontology or the nature of a particular entity one is engaged in metaphysics.

However, let's set that consideration aside for the moment. Instead, suppose that the aforementioned characterization of metaphysics is correct. That is, suppose that metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality. It does not immediately follow that social entities can be excluded from the domain of metaphysics on these grounds because it is possible that social entities *are* metaphysically fundamental. That is, if metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality, but social entities turn out to be fundamental, then social entities are a proper topic of metaphysical investigation.

To illustrate this possibility we consider two views according to which social entities can be fundamental. First, Barnes (2012) develops a view of ontological emergence according to which emergent entities are those that are dependent, but fundamental. While this view of emergence is controversial, it demonstrates the possibility that social entities are fundamental even though they are dependent. Barnes applies her characterization of ontological emergence to debates about minds, living beings and persons, composite objects in gunky ontologies, tropes, and certain quantum phenomena (e.g., quantum entanglement). However, she indicates that entities and phenomena other than these could be characterized as ontologically emergent in ways that are both unmysterious and theoretically useful. Indeed, elsewhere Barnes suggests that one way of understanding Haslanger's constructionist account of social structures is that some of their properties are emergent (Barnes 2017, 2424). On an emergentist interpretation of Haslanger's view, certain properties of social structures emerge from, and depend on, our thoughts and

⁸ Trenton Merricks (2013) expresses skepticism about Sider's claim that this is what metaphysics is about: "metaphysics is not – not even 'at bottom' – about only one thing, and so not – not even 'at bottom' – about only the fundamental structure of reality" (722). Elizabeth Barnes (2014, 2017) argues against the fundamentalist conception of metaphysics on the grounds that it illegitimately rules out feminist metaphysics. Sider responds to the worry in his (2017).

practices. That is, they are constructed from complex patterns of social interaction—but the structures themselves are ontologically fundamental.

Second, Sara Bernstein (forthcoming) argues that “middleism” (the thesis that some middle level is fundamental), is at least as plausible as “topism” (the thesis that top-most level is fundamental, e.g., the cosmos) and “bottomism” (the thesis that the bottom-most level is fundamental, e.g., mereological atoms). She develops middleism with respect to middle-sized dry goods, but notes that her arguments apply *mutatis mutandis* to any entities which do not inhabit the top-most or bottom-most level. Since social entities occupy neither the top-most or the bottom-most level, then, according to middleism, they are candidates for being fundamental. If either Barnes’s or Bernstein’s views are viable, then social entities fall within the purview of metaphysics even when it is defined as the study of the fundamental structure of reality.

Nevertheless, there are other reasons why we should reject the idea that metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality. First, suppose that priority monism is true. In that case, the only fundamental entity is the entire cosmos (Schaffer 2010). It would not follow that the cosmos in its entirety is the only proper subject of metaphysical investigation. Presumably, there would still be a wide variety of phenomena for metaphysicians to investigate other than this maximally inclusive whole—namely, its proper parts, and their relationships to each other and the whole.

Second, it is at least epistemically possible that there are no entities that are metaphysically fundamental. That is, it’s possible that there are no fundamentalia (Lewis 1991, Sider 1993, Schaffer 2003). If metaphysics is the study of the fundamental structure of reality, and there are no fundamentalia, then metaphysics lacks a subject matter. But presumably the discovery that reality lacks a fundamental structure would not thereby eliminate the subject matter of metaphysics. Karen Bennett puts the point vividly: if it turns out that there are no fundamentalia “metaphysicians will certainly take notice—but they will not *give* notice, and resign their jobs” (2017, 231). Thus, metaphysics should not be characterized as the study of the fundamental structure of reality.

Furthermore, it is plain that metaphysics is *not* solely concerned with entities that are metaphysically fundamental. Many traditional metaphysical questions obviously concern nonfundamentalia. For example: Do persons have free will? What is the relationship between a statue and the lump of clay that constitutes it? Are biological species individuals or kinds? Are mental states identical to physical states of the brain? These questions concern entities that are on many accounts nonfundamental, i.e., persons, statues, biological species, and mental states. If metaphysics actually answers questions about nonfundamental entities then metaphysics does not exclusively concern the fundamental structure of reality.

Moreover, there are various alternative conceptions of metaphysics on offer that include social entities. For example, building on a tradition going back to Aristotle, Jonathan Schaffer argues “metaphysics is about what grounds what” (2009, 347). On his view, grounded—that is, nonfundamental—entities are not outside of the metaphysical domain. Similarly, Bennett argues that “the proper topic of metaphysics is the fundamental structure of reality, whether there are any less fundamental entities, how they are built from the fundamental, *and* at least some of those nonfundamental entities themselves” (2017, 2014). On both of these views of metaphysics, social entities do not fall outside of the metaphysical domain.

A related reason for excluding social entities from the domain of metaphysics rests on the view that metaphysics should be concerned with describing the mind-independent nature of reality. According to this proposal, the subject matter of metaphysics does not exclude all dependent entities; rather, it excludes only those that depend on our mental states in particular. Plausibly, all social entities are mind-dependent. Therefore, on this proposal, metaphysics does not include them.

However, we argue that there are problems with this characterization of metaphysics as well. Mental states are mind dependent. According to intuitionists (e.g., Brouwer 1981), mathematical entities are too. Yet, inquiry into these entities clearly falls within the domain of metaphysics. Furthermore, secondary qualities and response-dependent properties are mind-dependent, but are likewise proper subjects of metaphysical inquiry.

We conclude that social entities cannot be justifiably excluded from metaphysics because they fail to be fundamental. First, it is possible that social entities are fundamental. Second, and more importantly, it is not the case that metaphysics is merely the study of the fundamental structure of reality. Traditionally, metaphysicians have investigated both fundamental and nonfundamental entities. Moreover, the question of whether some entities are fundamental is a properly metaphysical one. Finally, we argued that social entities cannot be justifiably excluded on the basis of being mind-dependent. Metaphysicians have long been concerned to investigate mind-dependent entities. In the next section, we consider whether social entities can be justifiably excluded because they fail to be natural.

III. Naturalness

So far we have argued that social entities cannot be excluded from the domain of metaphysics on the grounds that they are not fundamental or mind-independent. Eliminativism and reductionism about social entities also fail to justify the exclusion of social ontology from metaphysical inquiry. In this section, we consider whether social entities can be justifiably excluded because they fail to be *natural* in some sense (Thomasson 2003, Khalidi 2015). We argue that this strategy also fails to justify the exclusion of social entities from the domain of metaphysics.

A naturalistically inclined philosopher might argue that social entities are not legitimate subjects of metaphysical inquiry because metaphysicians should be concerned with investigating all and only those entities to which our best-confirmed scientific theories are ontologically committed (Quine 1969, Putnam 1972, Colyvan 2001). On this view, the question of whether social entities fall within the purview of metaphysics turns on the question of which scientific theories are best confirmed. Now, if physics is the only scientific theory which passes muster, then this would give us a reason to exclude social entities from metaphysical inquiry. However, if social scientific theories are sufficiently well-confirmed, then metaphysicians should be concerned with social entities after all. This is because social scientists clearly theorize about them. For example, economists, sociologists, and anthropologists theorize about social entities such as money and refugees.

However, even if social scientific theories are sufficiently well-confirmed, and even if they are about social entities, there is reason to believe that we should not delimit metaphysics in this way. There is no well-confirmed scientific theory that is ontologically committed to the existence of God, and yet whether God exists is a metaphysical question if there ever was one. More generally, metaphysicians ought to be engaged in the project of determining which entities exist, whether or not the best-confirmed scientific theories are committed to them.

Yet another way to exclude social entities from metaphysics is by arguing that metaphysicians should restrict their attention to natural kinds.⁹ If social kinds fail to be natural kinds, then perhaps metaphysicians should not be concerned with them. We think that this proposal likewise fails to justifiably exclude social entities for two reasons.

First, this strategy only purports to exclude social *kinds* from metaphysical theorizing, and not other social entities (e.g., social groups, social facts, or social events). Moreover, a clear contrast between social and natural kinds is difficult to draw. It is obvious that social kinds are not found “in nature” so to speak. However, many paradigmatically natural kinds are not found “in nature” either, e.g., synthetically produced chemical compounds like polyethylene and PTFE (Teflon).

Furthermore, social kinds do not contrast with natural kinds in the sense that the former are *supernatural*. Social kinds, like the human beings who create them, are occupants of the natural world, and are subject to the same physical laws that govern the behavior of everything from planets to protons.¹⁰ Moreover, social kinds are susceptible to empirical investigation. Indeed,

⁹ Another way of developing this objection is by appeal to perfectly natural properties (Dorr and Hawthorne 2013; Schaffer 2004; Lewis 1983).

¹⁰ It is a separate question whether social kinds figure in laws of nature *qua* social kinds, or whether all social scientific laws are reducible to physical laws.

they form the subject matter of a wide-variety of scientific disciplines including sociology, anthropology, history, economics, and psychology.

Finally, if natural kinds are just those kinds which enable us to successfully predict and explain empirical phenomena (that is, if natural kinds are those kinds that license inductive inferences, warrant empirical generalizations, and feature in fruitful explanations), there is reason to believe that social kinds are natural in the relevant sense (Bach 2012; Boyd 1999; Griffiths 1999; Khalidi 2013, 2015, 2018; Mallon 2003, 2016; Mason 2016). For example, Ron Mallon argues that social constructionist explanations are a species of causal explanation. On his view, social roles like being a stay-at-home father or being a CEO are loci of predictive and explanatory potential. For instance, the fact that individuals occupy these roles enables us to predict and explain many of the properties they instantiate.

We conclude that social entities should not be excluded from metaphysics on the grounds that they fail to be natural in any of the aforementioned ways.

IV. Conclusion

We have argued that there is no good reason to think that social entities do not fall within the purview of metaphysics. In particular, they cannot be excluded on the basis of being nonfundamental, mind-dependent, nonnatural, or reducible. And even if there are not social entities, it is still an metaphysical question which falls within general metaphysical inquiry whether certain social entities exist.

Some topics in social metaphysics lie at the intersection of metaphysics and other areas of philosophy, for example political philosophy, feminist philosophy, or ethics (e.g., the metaphysics of race, and gender). But, as Bennett puts it, “lying at the intersection of A and B does not mean lying in neither A nor B, but in both” (2017, 233). Moreover, philosophers have more permissive attitudes with respect to other metaphysical intersections. For example, many questions concerning the nature of mental phenomena fall at the intersection of metaphysics and philosophy of mind. Indeed, many questions lie at the intersection of metaphysics and empirical disciplines like chemistry and physics. But no one seriously thinks that these questions *really* belong to solely to these other disciplines, and not to metaphysics. For instance, many metaphysicians hold naturalistic views informed by and intersecting with various scientific disciplines (Ladyman and Ross 2007; Ney and Albert 2013).

Our view is that the exclusion of social entities from metaphysics has more to do with the interests and preoccupations of metaphysicians than the unsuitability of social entities themselves. Once these are taken account, we hold that there is no compelling philosophical reason, for example, why metaphysics should include an investigation of the existence and nature of holes

and time but not corporations and races. It is just that most metaphysicians, for whatever reason, have been more interested in investigating the former than latter.

By way of concluding, we would like to consider what attending to social metaphysics means for the nature of metaphysics. In particular, we consider to what extent our metaphysical intuitions have been conditioned by a historically contingent focus on certain types of entities (e.g., *fundamentalia*), to the exclusion of others (e.g., social groups). What would our metaphysical commitments be like if metaphysicians focused on social entities rather than the more traditional targets of metaphysical inquiry?

First, focusing on social entities indicates that the metaphysician's preference for describing reality in terms of features that are independent, individualistic, intrinsic, universal, ahistorical, and non-normative is not well founded. The preference for describing reality in terms of these features is bound up with the sorts of metaphysical commitments addressed in the previous sections of this paper. If one has a radically eliminativist ontology, or if one endorses a fundamentalist conception of metaphysics according to which metaphysics is *really* about describing the fundamental structure of reality, which consists exclusively of simples or spacetime points, then perhaps there is good reason to prefer a characterization of reality exclusively in terms of these features. But we have argued that metaphysics should not be characterized in these ways and that plenty of plainly metaphysical subjects cannot be so characterized. Today metaphysics has a greater focus on dependence or "building" relations or on "what grounds what." Social metaphysics highlights the importance of dependent and relational features of reality, positioning it squarely within contemporary metaphysics.

Social metaphysics leads us to describe reality in ways that are dependent, anti-individualistic, relational, particular, historical, and normatively-laden. For instance, many social entities are spatiotemporally restricted, and so are neither ahistorical nor universal. It is plausible that races and genders came into existence at a particular period in time, and may be found only in the small corner of the universe inhabited by human beings. On some views they are historical or sociohistorical kinds (Bach 2012; Du Bois 1897/1996; Mallon 2016, 2003; Diaz-Leon 2015b; Jeffers 2013; Taylor 2000, see Appiah 1985 for criticism of race as a historical kind). Focusing on social entities also reveals that some entities could have normative natures. For instance, being part of a social group might depend on being bound by particular social conventions or norms, perhaps as part of an overarching social structure (e.g., Ásta 2018; Thomasson forthcoming; Ritchie forthcoming).

Social metaphysics also helps to show how normative considerations are relevant to theory choice. For example, feminist metaphysicians argue that metaphysical theories should not simply explain how big things are built from little ones, or how one event causes another. They also ought to incorporate moral and political values (Barnes 2014, 2016, 2017; Haslanger 2012;

Haslanger and Ásta 2017; Mikkola 2015, 2017). That is, we should prefer theories that not only describe the world correctly, but can perform the relevant normative work. For example, an adequate theory of race and gender ought to enable us to accomplish our goal of eliminating racial and gender injustice and oppression. One motivation for an intersectional framework is that a single-axis analysis of oppression (e.g., an analysis focused just on sexism) can mask and reinforce oppression (Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 2000; Spelman 1988). A focus on social entities allows one to see ways that descriptive and normative projects function in tandem.

The inclusion of social metaphysics also has important diversifying effects. By excluding the investigation of social entities from metaphysics we thereby exclude the work of many philosophers who are women, transgender, non-binary, and people of color in an area of philosophy that is particularly white and male-dominated.

Social entities not only have a place in metaphysical inquiry, they deserve a place of prominence. Just as feminist and critical race theory have encouraged philosophers of science and epistemologists to reconsider their starting assumptions, social metaphysics forces metaphysicians to reconsider the vantage points and inherent biases in certain metaphysical and theoretical predilections.

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