

Critical Social Metaphysics: Metaphysics for Liberation and Social Science and Theory

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Abstract: There has been considerable new work on the metaphysics of sex and gender, race, sexuality, and disability. The methodology employed in this work varies considerably. In this essay I advocate for a certain conception of doing social metaphysics. This conception involves a descriptive task and a critical task; it requires that we always keep in mind what we want the theory for; and it involves meeting certain epistemic and ethical demands. I conclude by discussing some ways in which social metaphysics of this kind can support political activism and policy making, as well as research in the social sciences.

Keywords: critical social ontology, methodology, metametaphysics, social metaphysics, metaphysics and social science, metaphysics and social theory, conferralism

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1. INTRODUCTION

There has been considerable new work on the metaphysics of sex and gender, race, sexuality, and disability.¹ The methodology employed in this work varies considerably. In this essay I advocate for a certain conception of doing social metaphysics. This conception involves a descriptive task and a critical task; it requires that we always keep in mind what we want the theory for; and it involves meeting certain epistemic and ethical demands. I conclude by discussing some ways in which social metaphysics of this kind can support political activism and policy making, as well as research in social science and theory.

2. MANIFESTO

I intend to carve out a certain conception of doing social metaphysics. This approach is critical, and it is feminist. This will be a manifesto of sorts, but, I believe, a very sensible one.² It will be helpful to focus our attention on gender, although I intend the conception I offer to be more general and suitable for other projects in social metaphysics.³

3. WHAT DO WE WANT THE THEORY FOR?

We have been living through a pandemic. Although the pandemic has biological causes, the various responses to it and the social and material consequences of it bring into relief the various injustices we are and have been living with. The systemic injustices faced by African-Americans in the US has been brought into focus as never before and inspired soul

1 See bibliography for some recent work. Key works here are by Alcoff, Andreasen, Appiah, Ásta, Ayala, Bach, Barnes, Bettcher, Dembroff, Díaz-León, Glasgow, Hardimon, Haslanger, Jeffers, Jenkins, Mallon, McKittrick, Mills, Spencer, Stein, Stoljar, Sundstrom, Wilkerson, Witt, Zach, and others. For an overview see Mikkola 2022 and James 2023.

2 As an anonymous reviewer pointed out, the vision offered here is eminently sensible and familiar from other areas of philosophy. Any controversy regarding the conception is likely due to the subject matter, rather than the methodology. What makes this essay a manifesto is its programmatic nature.

3 I use the term “metaphysics” here, rather than “ontology,” because on a standard understanding ontology is a branch of metaphysics. Using broad strokes, ontology is a study of what there is (and isn’t) and the other branch of metaphysics, which has no specific name, is the study of the nature of that which exists (or doesn’t). I choose to use the term “metaphysics” in the above sense in this essay despite its unpopularity in certain circles (especially empiricist ones) and despite the fact that many philosophers use “metaphysics” and “ontology” interchangeably.

searching in many other countries. Domestic violence has risen sharply in locations with lockdown and other behavior restrictions. And people with care responsibilities, overwhelmingly women, are the pandemic's essential workers who do not get the honor of the name.⁴

Why do I mention this here? I do that because I want us to keep front and center why we are talking about gender, race, disability, and other social categories. I want us to ask ourselves, for example, what we want a theory of gender for? Similarly for the other social categories we may be interested in. But let us linger on gender for now. The concept of gender is a theoretical concept and the sex/gender distinction is a theoretical distinction that nevertheless applies to everyday phenomena. More on that below. What do we want them for? My answer is that we use these sorts of concepts and distinctions to bring into focus phenomena in the world, especially phenomena that are unjust.

One of the things that many feminists care about is patterns. There is a pattern to the distribution of resources in every corner of the world; there is a pattern to the violence that occurs every day; there is a pattern to the respect, the opportunities, and the wellbeing that people enjoy. Many of us feminists care about these patterns. We care about training ourselves to notice these patterns, we care about devising language and concepts to understand the explanations of these patterns and what keeps them in place; and we care about building tools to disrupt them and encourage other patterns that are more just. That is what a feminist like me wants the concept of gender for.

4. THEORY OF GENDER

When we are interested in gender, we can of course be interested in various things. We can be interested in what it is like to have a gender or what it is like to have a particular gender. We can be interested in various epistemic aspects of gender or being gendered. We can be interested in the gendering of norms, ideals, institutions, and practices. These, and more, are all interesting and important matters. But when we are interested in the metaphysics of gender our interest is more focused. We are interested in the question: what is gender? What is it to have a gender? We are enquiring into the nature of gender. But when we ask this fundamental and abstract question, we always should keep in mind why we are asking it; what we want a metaphysics of gender for. The demand that we keep in mind what we want the theory for is not an eccentric demand. Philosophers working in many areas of philosophy will recognize it: What do you want your theory of natural laws to explain?

4 U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2021)

What is a theory of moral motivation to account for?

So here is the general answer I give: I want a theory of gender that can play a role in explaining certain patterns and phenomena that we observe.

But how should we go about giving a metaphysics of gender? What should the methodology be?

In the 20th Century in the analytic tradition, people approached the question by analyzing, via introspection, the concept of gender. As they did with everything else, they proceeded to give necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the concept in question.

If you are in that business then you need to answer the question whether the concept you are analyzing is the folk concept or some other concept. If we are analyzing the folk concept then we face concerns over whether introspection into our own use of a concept gives good evidence of the content of the folk concept. It is also unclear how investigation into folk concepts is useful for social science and theory. And then there is the immediate worry: a member of the “folk” could object to our analysis: they wouldn’t use the concept in that way!

But we need not worry about this if we are not in the business of analyzing folk concepts. We can carve out a concept for theoretical use and the objections of the so called “folk” are then immaterial. It is worth lingering on this because there has been some confusion in the recent literature on gender precisely on this point.

Consider, for example, a recent paper by Bogardus (2020). There Bogardus argues against the sex/gender distinction. He thinks that the arguments feminists have marshaled for the distinction are inadequate and urges us all to adopt what he takes to be the traditional view that being a woman is being an adult human female.

But here is the thing: The sex/gender distinction is a theoretical distinction. As all theoretical distinctions it stands and falls with its usefulness. What is this distinction? Since Beauvoir (1949), feminists have been interested in separating the biological features of a woman and her social ones. Once we do, we can ask the question whether a person with those biological features could have some other social features and stand in different social relationships. If we call the biological classification of a woman’s physical features her “sex” then we can call the social role she plays because of her presumed biological classification her “gender” (cf. Haslanger 2012). Then of course we can ask: what is the relationship between the sex and the gender of a person? Can someone have the same sex but a different gender? Different sex but the same gender? And then, to not get confused, we can agree to use our terms in a

certain way. For example, we can agree to use the term “woman” for people with a gender role traditionally accompanying the body sexed female, and use the term “female” for the physical sex classification. We are, of course, aware that other people may use terms differently, and we may even ourselves use these terms differently in other contexts, but we make a concerted effort to use our terms consistently in this theoretical discussion.

But notice what has happened. We are now engaged in a theoretical discussion where we agree to use our terms, “sex” and “gender,” in a certain way, namely to track sex assignment and social role, respectively. If we now want to inquire into the relationship between sex and gender, so understood, and into whether two people could be of the same sex but different genders, and some other things, we have to use the terms in accordance with the theoretical use introduced. We cannot start using them in a different way, for example, as we might use them when we talk casually with the bartender at the bar. And any evidence and argument we muster to support an opinion we have regarding the relationship between sex and gender needs to respect the theoretical definitions of the terms. So, for example, we cannot conduct thought experiments where we speculate how we might untheoretically use the terms if found in some other possible world. And it does not help to appeal to how people on the street use the terms. We can call this fallacy “ignoring the rules of the game.” Bogardus and Byrne are both guilty of this in recent papers (Bogardus, 2020; Byrne, 2020).

Consider this analogy. You introduce a distinction between narrow and wide content. Then someone thinks you have not given a good argument for the distinction and appeals to the fact that people on the street can’t tell the difference, when asked. Another philosopher devises thought experiments where people use the terms interchangeably. Whatever does such argumentation show? Exactly nothing.

“But, wait a minute!”, you might say. What do you mean when you say that the sex/gender distinction is a theoretical distinction? Do the “folk on the street” not talk about gender and sex? Are we not interested in making an intervention in how “gender” and “sex” and related terms are used in everyday parlance? Is that not unlike the case when we introduce a technical term to talk about a particular enzyme in the stomach, the behavior of which most people otherwise don’t talk about at the pub?

It is true that the introduction of a more precise use of “sex” or “gender” or the introduction of a new technical term is different from the introduction of “pepsin” to talk about an enzyme in the stomach because people already think about various phenomena related to sex and gender and the aim is to

illuminate an aspect of the world people are already deeply enmeshed in. But there is no need to worry about sharpening the conceptual tools we already have or even introducing new ones. We introduce a theoretical term or a theoretical use of a word that is in everyday parlance to make our discussion relating to certain phenomena in the world more precise. People use the words “female” and “woman” in a myriad, often contradictory, ways to talk about people who have a certain status in society, people who have certain physical features, the stereotype of a person with certain physical features, the stereotype of a person with a certain social role, and so on. And often the words are used to gesture at some sort of sex/gender classification, but nothing specific. If we don’t have to be more precise, we aren’t. We do not have need for 40 words for snow if we live in the Sahara desert. In Greenland, on the other hand, describing snow conditions accurately can mean the difference between life and death.

We who care about gender and sex oppression introduce word uses, concepts, and distinctions to focus our attention on particular aspects of sexed and gendered phenomena. Some of these terms are also used in everyday parlance, but we stipulate a certain precise meaning for particular theoretical uses. There is often an overlap between a theoretical use of a term and its use in everyday parlance, but we make a concerted effort to use our terms precisely as we attempt to examine critically and theoretically the various aspects of everyday gender and sex phenomena. If our theorizing is successful then we manage to illuminate the phenomena of interest in a way that is generative and allows for examining critically our gender practices. That may or may not also result in theoretical uses of certain words finding their way back into ordinary discourse, as arguably has happened with the use of “sex” and “gender” in English. But the aim of the theorizing is in the first instance to understand gender practices and structures and only secondarily to understand linguistic or conceptual practices.

If we should not do philosophy of gender and sex in the way I discuss above, how should we do it?

5. DESCRIPTIVE, NORMATIVE, AMELIORATIVE?

Let us distinguish among several different projects in this area. A descriptive theory of gender offers a conception of what gender is and how it functions. For example, you can, as I do, offer a theory of gender such that to have a gender is to have a social status or position in a context. This sort of theory is a metaphysics of gender and the aim is to illuminate an aspect of our world. Such illumination may reveal various sorts of injustices, such as unjust treatment

of people because of their gender or even an injustice in the assignment of gender to a person. For example, in some contexts, trans women may not be assigned the gender status they identify with. But that is the correct result for a descriptive theory. If there is injustice in our gender practices, our descriptive theory should reveal it, not pretend it ain't there. The point of a descriptive theory is *illumination*.

A descriptive theory can then also be accompanied by a normative theory which argues for normative claims regarding gender or gender practices. This normative theory may, for example, articulate the nature of the injustice involved in our gender practices. But the descriptive theory may also stand solo, independent of any normative companion.

Instead of a descriptive theory of gender, one could offer a normative theory of gender, a theory of, for example how gender practices ought to function, or how moral agents should act gender-wise. It could be part of such a normative theory that it is unjust to be assigned a gender one does not identify with, that such a mismatch is unjust. Or one's normative theory could be more radical, where treating people differently because of gender would be unjust or immoral, or even the mere assignment of gender would be unjust.⁵

Both of these sorts of projects presuppose that we carve out concepts of gender, so we can proceed to theorizing at all. Both of these sorts of projects demand that we engage in an ameliorative project in the quite minimal sense that we carve out theoretical concepts for certain specific uses. I consider a lot of current work on gender as really engaged in this preliminary work of carving out a concept that can be of use for liberatory politics and theory, especially trans liberation.⁶ And a lot of the backlash against that relies on evidence from the use of folk concepts, as I mentioned above.

6. DESCRIPTIVE ACCOUNT OF GENDER

So what is it to give a descriptive account of gender? To give a descriptive account of gender is to give an account of phenomena in the world, not, as I have been stressing, to give an account of our concepts of the phenomena. But we define our terms and thereby carve out the concepts we need to do the task. Philosophers have always done this. Philosophers have always done

⁵ I take Kapusta (2016), Dembroff (2018), and Kukla and Lance (2022) to be examples of normative projects.

⁶ Philosophers carving out a concept of gender that can serve trans, feminist, and transfeminist liberation all fall under that hat. I take Bettcher 2013, Saul 2012, Díaz-León 2016, and Jenkins 2016 to be engaged in such projects.

conceptual engineering of this minimal sort. The methodology I favor in giving a descriptive account of gender is vaguely inspired by Aristotle and is like this: the theorist sets their sight on certain phenomena in the world they observe that the theory is to do justice to. Putting aside certain skeptical explanations (that is explanations according to which we seem to observe things but are instead hallucinating or some such thing), the theory of gender is to be a theory of what gender is that can highlight and help us explain the various patterns of violence, patterns in the distribution of resources and opportunities, as well as predictive patterns in outcomes and well-being, among other things.

Perhaps some of you are in fact skeptical. "How can you even offer a descriptive account of gender?", you might ask. Isn't that hopelessly naive? Haven't we learned anything from the revolution that started with Hume (1975) and Kant (1998)? We worry, with the modern philosophers, that our own subjectivity partly shapes or conditions what we have cognitive access to. And we worry, with more recent philosophers, that our own values shape our inquiries (Longino, 1990; Anderson, 1995, 2004). Isn't our inquiry always hopelessly value laden?

But there is no need to despair. Our inquiry is indeed always value laden, just not hopelessly so. This is no different from empirical natural science (Longino, 1990; Anderson, 1995, 2004). We are guided by certain values that we are conscious of and we specify, and we are assuming values we are not even aware of. But that is just the human theoretical predicament. Welcome to the world of humans.

Descriptive does not mean objective in the sense that we are offering a Nagelian view from nowhere (Nagel, 1989). We, the theorists, are situated precisely where we are. This is why we have to keep front and center what we want the theory for. The answer gives us the constraints on our theorizing. If, for example, the theory is to explain some specific range of phenomena then it becomes a part of the conditions of adequacy for the theory that it be able to explain them. What questions we deem important to ask is shaped by our values; what the conditions of adequacy for our theorizing is similarly shaped by our values. But our values do not determine the answers to our questions (Anderson, 1995).

So what is the point of a descriptive theory of social phenomena like gender? And what are its conditions of adequacy?

I think there is room for different descriptive theories of gender, because I think there can be different aims of the theory. When we illuminate an aspect of our world, another aspect of it gets eclipsed by the shadow. This is why it is of utmost importance that we specify what the theory is for and it be clear

what the conditions of adequacy are.

Let's take an example of the conferral theory of gender (Ásta, 2018). On this view, gender is a social status in a context which you get on the basis of being taken to have some other base feature that is important in the context, for example sex assignment or identification with a social role. It is a two tiered account: there is the conferred status and there is the base property. Why is it two tiered? The aim was to offer an account where gender is a social construct that also can explain the appearance that it isn't. It is deeply contextual, because of the datum that in different contexts different qualities of us are socially meaningful and we get assigned a gender status on the basis of different features in different contexts. So here are already two desiderata that the theory is to capture and those get put into the conditions of adequacy. But there are other conditions of adequacy. It is a standard requirement that an account of anything needs to get the paradigm cases right. It is an interesting question to what extent the choice of paradigm examples distorts. Given that we are not looking for necessary and sufficient conditions, however, I think that the use of uncontroversial paradigm cases is a defensible methodological approach and it provides the minimal anchor we need for the theory.⁷ Other things that may be on our list of desiderata would be to make sense of certain observable phenomena, for example, of intersectionality and of passing. And because we want the theory to help us reveal and explain gendered patterns, it will be an important condition of adequacy that the account of gender we offer be up to that task.

When we step back and evaluate the theory, we measure it against the conditions of adequacy we provided. The theory can fall short on its own terms; for example it may not account for some observable phenomena, like passing, very well. Or it may have a hard time explaining some observed patterns. But it can also come up short in a different way. It may utterly fail to explain some phenomena. This can simply be an oversight or it can be because these phenomena are intentionally not among the things the theory is to explain and hence don't figure in its conditions of adequacy. However, other theorists may deem these phenomena essential and when that is the case we have a real disagreement. Such a disagreement concerns what is relevant to the task at hand. In my view metaphysics is unavoidably value laden in this specific sense: guiding us are the values regarding what needs to be explained and what is relevant to that explanation.

7 The anchor ensures that we are giving an account of gender as opposed to some other property in the vicinity.

You will have noticed that some of the things that go into the conditions of adequacy for a theory of a social category like gender are really facts, including empirical facts, such as that some people pass in contexts or that the intersection of various social aspects of us takes a path of its own. This is why social metaphysics needs to be empirically informed. And sometimes the empirical facts that need explaining are results of empirical social science.

Let us see how one would show that a theory meets one of the conditions of adequacy. I said that one of the things we wanted was to give an explanation of certain observed patterns. Let's for example consider a certain pattern in the distribution of wages for the same of job. When we ask about pairs of individuals, why does A1 earn more than B1, A2 more than B2, and so on? The explanation at some level is going to be gender: the As are men and the Bs women. Now, if you held the implausible theory that women were human females and their female essence included features that made them worse at performing the tasks related to said job, then you would not see any reason to inquire further. Thankfully, we have a long history of feminist theory and philosophy that has completely debunked that sort of explanation of the observed pattern. We locate the culprit in the social roles and in the social practices that produce those roles. For example, on the conferralist view, to be a woman is to have a social position in a context that is conferred upon you on the basis of your being taken to have some other feature, for instance sex assignment or identification with a social role. This account of gender allows us to explain the observed pattern of wage distribution but also explain how changes in the constraints and enablements that come with being a woman across time and place result in changed patterns in that wage distribution. An essentialist account of gender could not explain why the wage distribution varied in that way.

The conferral account of gender does not only allow us to explain the pattern in wage distribution and other gender patterns we observe. It illuminates how our practices express value and allows us to question those practices and how we value certain features over others. Why do we as a society care about a particular base feature, such as sex assignment in a particular context? Is valuing that feature in that context justified? On this view genders are a reflection and product of societal values and interests as expressed through social practices. This project of giving a metaphysics of gender turns out to be a debunking project (Haslanger, 2012) that reveals that various gendered patterns that may appear to be grounded in biological facts or processes are in fact the social product of humans' valuing certain features over others. The theory can explain the appearance of the naturalness of our practices, while

casting light on the various places where a normative justification would be needed but isn't on offer.

7. THE METAPHYSICS OF GENDER

The “woman question” in feminist theory is notoriously difficult (Alcoff, 2006; Moi, 1999). Feminist theorists have tried to come up with some property *P* such that to be a woman is to have that *P*:

X is a woman iff X has *P*

We have failed. There is no one property that all and only women have in common, be it being nurturing, having a vagina, or identifying with feminine norms. But that is not because there is some *P* that we have not found yet, and if we just searched harder and longer we would find it. And it is not because to be a woman is to have one of a cluster of properties. No, I contend, a substantive answer to “the woman question” is not to be had; to be a woman is not to have some property *P*, but to stand in certain social relations. Social position accounts of what it is to be a woman all share this view, although they differ on what these relations are and what the mechanisms are.⁸

What is the difference between what the sociologist is doing when they say that to have a gender is to have a social position and what a metaphysician is doing when they say that the answer to “what is a woman?” is that to be a woman is to have a certain a social position?

The sociologist is going to take a certain metaphysical view for granted and use that to pursue some empirical questions. A social theorist may likewise assume a certain view of gender and proceed to explore some other questions. The metaphysician, on the other hand, offers a theory of what gender is and gives arguments in support of that theory. The difference lies in what is taken for granted and what the focus of the argument is.

8. CRITICAL SOCIAL METAPHYSICS

I have spent most of my ink talking about the descriptive task of critical social metaphysics. Why is the conception I advocate worthy of the name “critical”?

Consider again the answer to the woman question on the conferralist account. To be a woman is to have a social status in a context. We may have that

⁸ Alcoff 2006, Haslanger 2012, Witt 2012, Ásta 2018, Barnes 2020 are all examples. In my view, Louise Antony makes the mistake in her 2020 paper of reading all of these accounts as offering a substantive answer to the woman question.

status because we are *taken to have* some property P (being nurturing, having a vagina, identifying with feminine norms, having a feminine gender identity, etc.) in the context, but it would be a mistake to say that, on that account, to be a woman is to have that property P. Having P could be defining for the *ideology* our practices are part of, and we would get a certain social status if we are taken to have P, but that is all. It is in this way that the conferralist account allows us to illuminate our gender practices and the content of the ideology those practices express, but also illuminate them as ideology by exposing that we acquire a gender status because we are taken to have features that are valued (positively or negatively) in the context and exposing that these conferrals are often in dire need of justification. Conferralism illuminates our gender categories as products of our ideologically inflected gender practices.

For the critical metaphysician, answering the question “what is it to be a woman?” is just the beginning step in giving a metaphysics of gender. If we stop there, we are in danger of merely describing the content of the ideology our practices are part of.⁹ Even if we disagree with other theorists at that level we are in danger of just disagreeing over the content of the ideology (is being a woman having P or Q?), and not getting to the deeper questions, such as why being a woman involves having some particular property, what sort of property it is, and whether the features that, given the ideology, make someone a woman, justify a differential treatment at all.

Our social categories are the products of ideologically inflected social practices. This is why our social metaphysics has to be critical in the following sense: We not only have to ask what is taken to justify the conferral of a particular social status on a person. We also have to ask whether the justification stands up to scrutiny. Does the presence of the base property for the conferral justify the treatment of the person? Should some other property be the basis for the conferral? Is it justifiable at all to treat people differently depending on whether they have the base property? For example, with respect to gender, is it justifiable to treat people differently in some particular context on the basis of sex assignment or identification with a societal role?

To give a metaphysics of gender in the way I am advocating is not merely to describe the content of the ideology our gender practices express. It is to illuminate the mechanisms by which our gender categories are produced and their ideological nature.

The conception I advocate for here is in line with other theories broadly labeled as “critical theory” (Bohman, 2021), where the aim of the theorizing

9 For recent work on ideology see Haslanger 2021, Shelby 2003, Jaeggi 2009.

is emancipation. But it is not just the aim that makes the theory critical; there are also methodological components. Critical social metaphysics of this kind is part of ideology critique in the Geussian (1981) sense: we don't only analyze the content of the ideology and reveal internal inconsistencies and lack of justification, but also illuminate its function. Destabilization of that function is achieved by critically evaluating all the aspects of that mechanism. The conferralist framework, in particular, invites us to examine critically the following questions:

1. Is it justifiable to treat people differently on the basis of having property P in a context C?
2. Is the differential treatment proportional? Does having P merit the conferral of status F with the associated constraints and enablements?
3. Should a different property than P be the basis of the conferral of F in C?

I started at the outset with the assertion that a feminist like me cares about certain gendered patterns. These patterns reveal oppressive structures and practices. Critical feminists seek the emancipation of all people from these oppressive structures and practices, but we are guided by the particular harms women of every stripe suffer. Given the intersectional nature of oppressive structures and practices (Crenshaw, 1989), this requires us to care and attend to other oppressive structures and practices and makes us natural allies for adjacent emancipatory projects.

9. ETHICAL QUESTIONS

I've discussed some epistemic methodological issues and laid out an approach to doing social metaphysics in an epistemically respectable way. There can be other ways of doing social metaphysics than the one I have outlined, because there can be different aims, but my goal in this essay was to offer you one specific conception for doing social metaphysics. I think that this methodological approach pertains to social metaphysics in general and is not specific to work on social categories of individuals, such as genders. When we work on social categories of individuals, however, some other methodological issues come up. Are we making claims about people of specific groups? Do these claims concern people's identities or experiences? If so, both epistemic and ethical demands arise.

If we make claims about the identities or experiences of people of specific groups we need to make sure that we are informed by the data pertaining

to those identities and experiences. Sometimes such data is not available, of course. In an emerging field no one may have thought to collect it or didn't have any resources to do it. Anecdotal evidence goes only so far, but sometimes that is the only thing we have, whether it is first or second hand, or gotten from a theorist who is theorizing about their own experience and identity. It is fashionable these days in certain circles to insist that only people with "skin in the game" in that way are in the right epistemic position to theorize about matters pertaining to them. This is a hard or strong version of standpoint theory (Harding, 2004; Fay, 1996), and I don't subscribe to it. I subscribe to a moderate version of standpoint theory for I believe that people with skin in the game may have a particularly heightened awareness of certain things an outsider does not. Where the hard standpoint theory maintains that certain things are epistemically inaccessible because a person isn't situated the right way, a moderate standpoint theory maintains that being situated in a certain way, for example as a member of a particular group, tends to (*ceteris paribus*) facilitate a heightened awareness of, and sensitivity to, certain matters that an outsider may overlook. However, being an insider to certain topics and considerations is a mixed blessing for one can also sometimes be oblivious to how one's own subject position or even injury and trauma may eclipse the view of other matters. The insider is no more immune from ideological distortion than the outsider is. This is why we need both theorists who are insiders, and who are outsiders. But they need to engage with each other; neither can be left out.¹⁰

But methodological considerations are not only of the epistemic variety. There are broadly ethical concerns at play as well. A social scientist, be it a psychologist or qualitative sociologist, needs to consider potential ethical conflicts and problems with their research on subjects. We who do metaphysics of the social world need to attend to those questions as well. When our metaphysical theories concern subjects' identities or experiences we need to tread carefully: we need to be epistemically humble and open to the possibility that our own stance be ignorant in a hurtful way. There is obviously a lot more to say here,¹¹ but I want to turn briefly to the question of the value of this sort

10 Apart from the epistemic virtues of soft standpoint theory over a hard version, it is also politically more promising, as an anonymous reviewer pointed out, as the fostering of allies is grounded in the possibility of shared understanding. On a hard version of standpoint theory, the ally needs to simply take the insider's word for it. However, the political virtues are not what is guiding us in preferring a soft standpoint theory to a hard one, but rather the plausibility of the theses involved.

11 We do well to start with Lugones and Spelman 1983 and Alcoff 1991.

of social metaphysics for social science and theory.

10. THE USE OF WORK IN SOCIAL METAPHYSICS FOR SOCIAL SCIENCE AND THEORY

I said at the outset that when we offer a theory of gender or any other social phenomena, we needed to keep front and center what the theory is for. The sort of social metaphysics I have been advocating is to help us understand the social world we live in better in a way that can be useful for activism, for policy, and for social science and theory.¹² In conclusion, let me illustrate how the theory of gender, that I used as an example, can be useful in this regard.

When we think of gender as a social status that is conferred on the basis of a person's being taken to have another property (the base property), that opens up room to ask for justification at various points. Who should have what gender status in a particular context? What should the base property be? What should having a gender status involve in that context? For example, should someone have the gender status woman on the basis of having a sex assignment female, or perhaps because she has a vagina, or because she identifies with feminine social norms or the social role *woman*? What is the justification for treating people differently on the basis of any of these characteristics? We ask for the justification for each context. For example, we may ask about gender segregation of bathrooms and what, if anything, justifies such segregation. When we advocate for more just policies regarding bathroom arrangements and practices, we ask what the justification for a gender or sex segregation could be. In advocating for reform, we are, in turn, informed by the empirical data on gender and sex based violence, where gender and sexual minorities are shown to be particularly vulnerable (James et al., 2016). Another such example involves gender and sex classification in sports. There the conferralist theory of gender can be of particular value, as we ask: what should the base property be for the sex or gender classification? The answer may vary with sport, and with level (school sport, collegiate, elite), and can be informed by available empirical data on the role of sports in mental and physical health of kids and adults, as well as studies on the impact of physiological changes in puberty on physical characteristics and their role in the elite performance of a particular sport.

This sort of theory of gender does not only provide an opening for normative theorizing, where we ask for moral or legal justifications for arrangements, which can ground activism as well as policy. It can also offer conceptual tools and conceptual frameworks to explain the sorts of patterns

¹² I mean to include both empirical social science and empirically informed social theory.

feminists observe, mentioned at the beginning. When scientists look for explanations for patterns such as gender wage gaps or gender gaps in school math performance,¹³ the conferralist theory of gender provides tools to offer an explanation. Being a girl comes with constraints and enablements in the contexts you travel, and with it come also associated norms for playing the role well and for how others should interact with you. Will you be called on in class? Will you be encouraged to offer an answer to mathematical questions? Do your parents and family encourage you to study mathematics or are you shamed when you show interest? (cf. Manne, 2018) Are resources devoted to the education of girls in the particular community? Is it even legal for a girl to study math beyond basic arithmetic? By attending to the constraints and enablements that being a girl in particular context involves we can locate various factors that may contribute to the performance gap in school math performance. And we can test some of our hypotheses by looking at cross cultural data and others by devising programs that target specific factors and see if we get different results.

As you see, I see the sort of work I have advocated for in this essay as continuous with social science in the following way: On the one hand, in the smithing of the tools, we theorists need to attend to empirical work;¹⁴ on the other hand, philosophical tools, concepts, and claims can be of immense value in empirical work. I have mentioned but one case from the social sciences, but I think critical social metaphysics of the sort I have advocated for can also be of value in, for example, quantitative and qualitative sociology and psychology,¹⁵ although I do not substantiate that claim here.

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13 Global Education Monitoring Report Team 1376, UNESCO (2022). Accessible at <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000381329>

14 Examples of how empirical work has influenced social metaphysics include the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling (1993, 2000). Ásta (2018) explicitly relies on Fausto-Sterling in her argument for the claim that not only is gender socially constructed, but sex is as well.

15 For two such uses see (1) the suggestion that social psychology experiments pay more attention to context and the use of social constructivism in the developments of such experiments, Cikara et al. (2022); and (2) the visual representation of illegalized immigrants in Martinez et al. (2024).

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