

Runner-up of the ISOS Essay Prize 2025

Normative Social Ontology

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Abstract: This is a paper about the role of value in projects in social ontology. In it, I do three things: first, I argue that much like work in mainstream metaphysics, values play a central role in projects in social ontology. And much like work in mainstream metaphysics, we are not in a position to justify that role (Dasgupta 2018). Second, I argue that this illuminates much of what goes on in methodological debates between realists and deflationists in social ontology. Third, I argue that this also illuminates a source of the radical pluralism that we see in some literatures in social ontology, like the ontology of gender. These are the more specific tasks of this essay, but on a more general level, my aim is to map problems of value in social ontology on a continuum with those that affect projects in the more “mainstream” metaphysics literature. All of us have value problems, and there’s as much to be learned from what we share in common as there is to be learned from what we don’t.

Keywords: analytic ontology, methodology

1. INTRODUCTION

There are at least two kinds of questions that we care about in social ontology. On the one hand, there are what we might call *first-order questions* in social ontology. These are questions like “what is money?”, “what is gender?”, or “what is it to be an athlete?”. These first-order questions are often about the nature and existence of particular social entities—for example, they are questions about social properties

10.25365/jso-2025-9812

Published online July 17, 2026

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like *being money*, social kinds like *Gender*, social systems like economies, and social structures like patriarchy.

My own sense is that a majority of projects in social ontology are primarily concerned with first-order questions. But these aren't the only sorts of questions that we ask in this literature. More specifically, these questions can be distinguished from what we might call *second-order questions* in social ontology: these are questions about how first-order inquiry in this discipline is conducted or otherwise ought to be conducted. In other words, these second-order questions are questions about *methodology*. And when it comes to these debates over methodology, there are two major contenders here: metaphysical realists and metaphysical deflationists.

Deflationists and realists adopt different approaches to doing social ontology—i.e., different metaphysical methodologies. Moreover, differences between realist and deflationist views typically result in differences in the way first-order questions in social ontology are asked and answered. In other words, whether someone is a realist or a deflationist can make a significant difference to what they think about the nature of money, gender, patriarchy, and so on. This is at least one reason to think that the debate between realists and deflationists is relevant to a great many projects in social ontology.

What are these second-order views, and how exactly do they differ? In general, the difference between them can be roughly understood as a difference in views about the objective structure of metaphysical reality, and the relationship between that structure and our representations of the world—our language, our concepts, our systems of classification, and the like.

What is often meant by “objectivity” here is a very general notion of *mind-independent reality* (Dasgupta 2018, Dorr 2024, Sider 2011). This distinction between “objective/non-objective” reality is left very general because these discussions are often trying to get at an intuitive difference between those things that we (humans) put into the world, and what was already there to start with. So, when it comes to the argument between realists and deflationists: to debate objective facts about structure is to debate whether there are mind-independent facts about how reality is organized, facts that might be more-or-less accurately reflected by our theories of the world.¹

¹ These debates also often concern whether such mind-independent facts about structure are *accessible* to us, and thus, how we might come to know them (Thomasson 2015). Of course, there are many ways that one might take issue with this sort of “view from nowhere” characterization of objectivity, and this general notion does not take an opinionated stance on debates regarding the relationship between e.g., objectivity and explanatory power, or objectivity and value (Reiss & Sprenger 2020). These are sophisticated discussions in the philosophy of science and epistemology, but I remain neutral on them in this paper primarily for reasons of space, and because this is how the metaphysics literature that I’m working with here tends to proceed.

Metaphysical deflationists in this literature are characteristically “light” on structure (Carnap 1956; Thomasson 2015; Díaz-León 2018). There are many ways to fill in the details of this view of course, but most deflationists either deny the existence of objective metaphysical structure altogether, or are willing to say that it exists only to a very minimal extent. On the deflationist view, we (humans, philosophers) bring structure to the world with our representations (e.g., with our language and concepts). But in general, there is no robust, objective structure that we can do a better-or-worse job of tracking with those representations.²

By contrast, metaphysical realists are characteristically “heavy” on structure (Barnes 2017; Sider 2011). Again, there are many ways to fill in the details of this view, but most realists argue that the world is objectively structured to some significant degree, and the nature of this structure is independent of how we represent it. On the realist picture, we can do a better-or-worse job of tracking this objective structure with our representations, and so, there is a sense in which some representational systems are objectively better than others insofar as they more accurately reflect the structure of reality.

This is a paper about the role of value in metaphysical methodology, and specifically, it’s about the role of value in our methods in social ontology. Ultimately, my argument is that values are central to these projects, but also, that it’s practically impossible to *justify* our value choices in metaphysics. This is a familiar problem in the more “mainstream” literatures—for example, it is the same as that which Shamik Dasgupta has recently named *the Problem of Missing Value* (Dasgupta 2018)—but this problem takes on a unique flavor in social metaphysics, where our projects are often political.

My hope is that a few things will come out of this discussion. On a very basic level, this argument extends a problem from mainstream metaphysics into social metaphysics. Of course, that this should happen is not hugely surprising, given that the latter is a sub-field of the former. But the Problem of Missing Value is *harder* in social metaphysics, or so I will argue.

However, that this problem applies to projects in social metaphysics is also illuminating, because it helps us to better understand some of the debates that are already happening in this literature. For example, this problem is relevant to the methodological debates between realists and deflationists over how questions in social

2 Importantly, this means that deflationists are not always “anti-realists,” in the sense that anti-realists in metaphysics are sometimes taken to deny the existence of mind-independent external reality altogether. Most deflationists think there’s a world out there to be represented, and that the nature of external reality does make a difference to how we represent it. What they deny is that the nature of external reality is objectively structured to an extent sufficient to deliver a social ontology.

ontology are best asked and answered. And once we see this, the shape of those debates changes significantly (§3).

In addition to this, the nature and difficulty of this problem does something to explain the radical pluralism which characterizes some literatures in social ontology—literatures which tend to focus on first-order questions, but where the outcomes of those first-order inquiries are strongly informed by methodology (as is often the case). Take the ontology of gender, for example: Why is it so hard to show that a particular theory of gender is decisively false? Why are so many theories of gender radically disjunctive? The answers to these questions have something to do with the Problem of Missing Value, as it manifests in social ontology (§4).

So, I think we can learn some interesting and important things from an examination of this problem about value in the context of social ontology. And in a nutshell, those insights are what made this paper worth writing, on my end. My hope is that these same things will make it worth reading, on yours. I'll begin in the next section by characterizing the Problem of Missing Value (§2) and argue from there that this problem shows up in social ontology as well, in at least two places: in debates about metaphysical methodology (§3 and §4) and in debates regarding the ontology of gender (§5).

2. THE PROBLEM OF MISSING VALUE

Every theory has to start somewhere. In particular, every theory begins from some fundamental building blocks—starting assumptions, primitive notions, basic axioms—which the theory takes for granted. The Problem of Missing Value is essentially a problem about these starting points, and the particular challenges associated with taking *values* for granted as our starting points in metaphysical theorizing.

To get a sense for the problems here, we can begin with the observation that many metaphysical projects posit what we might call “elite” entities, where a metaphysical entity is elite just in case it's something that our theorizing *should* center around (Dasgupta 2018, p. 281). So, for example: natural properties are elite entities in this sense—many realist projects in metaphysics centrally incorporate a notion of naturalness and argue that the best theories of the world are those formulated in terms of natural properties (Lewis 1983, Sider 2011). In this case, a metaphysical entity (like a property) may be elite because it is natural.

Importantly, naturalness is largely understood to be an objective phenomenon, in the sense that entities are natural for reasons that are independent of our contingent, human interests (Dorr 2024). But this is just one example, and there are other ways that metaphysical entities can be elite. Take for example Goodman's (1955) view that facts about linguistic history single out some properties as distinctly theory-guiding.

On that sort of view, metaphysical entities are elite for reasons that are at least partly dependent on human interests.

In other words, eliteness doesn't have to be an "objective" phenomenon, in the sense that facts about eliteness must be mind-independent, or otherwise independent of what we care about. There are elite entities on realist worldviews (Lewis 1983, Sider 2011) and there are also elite entities on what we might call "non-realist" worldviews, as well (where the term 'non-realist' here encompasses anti-realist views like Goodman's (1955) as well as deflationary views, like those mentioned in the introduction). ³The important thing is that elite entities are *theory-guiding*—they are entities that our metaphysical theories should center around. And in this sense, eliteness itself is a normative notion: "to be theory-guiding is to play a normative role in theorizing" (Dasgupta 2018, p. 290).

The Problem of Missing Value is essentially the problem of justifying eliteness, on both realist and non-realist worldviews. *What ultimately justifies our choice to treat particular entities as "elite" and thereby center our theories around them?* That is Dasgupta's question and ultimately, he argues that no one in metaphysics has the resources to answer it.

It won't work, for instance, for realists like Sider (2011) to reply that he's chosen to theorize in terms of these properties because they are natural. In Dasgupta's words:

The realist posits a primitive property of "naturalness" that some sets have and other sets lack. But the question is why our theorizing should be guided by this primitive property. *What would explain why it is better to theorize in terms of sets with the primitive property at the expense of others?* The objection is that there is no answer. (Dasgupta 2018, p. 288; emphasis mine)

Now, there's an additional response that Sider (and other realists) might give here. That is, Sider can say that he's *interested* in what fundamental reality is like, and that's what justifies the value-theoretic claim at the heart of his project (namely: that naturalness matters). The idea is that philosophers interested in the objective structure of reality should theorize in terms of natural properties.^{4 5}

³ In Dasgupta's terms, the difference between realist and deflationist views is effectively a difference in what makes these properties elite. For realists like Sider, a property is elite in virtue of facts independent of us (facts about the objective structure of metaphysical reality). On the other hand, for deflationists like Thomasson (2015), a property is elite in virtue of facts about our context-relative interests.

⁴ In fact, my sense is that this is how Sider frames the project of his (2011) book, starting in the introduction: *if you're interested in the philosophical project of investigating the nature of objective metaphysical reality, then here's a guide for how to proceed!*

⁵ Importantly, this sort of response doesn't necessarily amount to Sider giving up on his commitment to realism, either. I take one of the upshots of Dasgupta's discussion to be that the central difference

But recall that the general question Dasgupta poses for all metaphysical projects is as follows: *what justifies our theorizing on the basis of one specific set of interests, over another?* In the event that realists like Sider explain their choice to theorize in terms of naturalness by appealing to a more general interest in the structure of reality, Dasgupta's question simply shifts back a level, to target this more general interest in structure. In other words, the conversation proceeds as follows—

Question: Why should we theorize in terms of natural properties? Answer: Because naturalness is theory-guiding. *Why* is naturalness theory-guiding? Because we're interested in the objective structure of metaphysical reality. And what justifies *that* interest? Well, it's very hard—if not impossible—to say.

If we're metaphysical realists, then these questions will target our interests in the objective nature of reality. And if we're deflationists, then these questions will target whichever contextual pragmatic/normative interests we've decided bear on metaphysical inquiry. But regardless of which worldview we favor, it turns out that Dasgupta's question is deceptively difficult to answer. For every way of answering it seems to presuppose a background commitment to a further set of interests. But of course, if that's right, then Dasgupta can just pose his question again for those further interests, and so on and so forth (Dasgupta 2018, §8). And that, in essence, is the Problem of Missing Value: regardless of whether we are realists or deflationists, the value claims at the heart of our favored worldview looks extremely difficult, if not practically impossible, to justify.⁶

Now, some metaphysicians (mainly non-realists) won't be too troubled by this, largely because they were already comfortable treating undefended value assumptions

between metaphysical realists and deflationists does *not* amount to the role that value plays on each picture. Instead, the difference here amounts to their respective commitments to objective structure: realists think metaphysical reality is objectively structured to some significant degree; deflationists disagree. And importantly, it's one thing to say the world is objectively structured and we're interested in that objective structure (realist); it's another to say that the nature of metaphysical structure *is informed by* our interest in it (deflationist).

⁶ This problem applies equally to those projects in metaphysics which incorporate a notion of *sparseness*, as it applies to properties as well as to things like predicates, concepts, and sets. Dasgupta acknowledges this, arguing that the problem can be translated into the language of sparseness, insofar as sparseness theorists “may be tempted to say that what makes ‘green’ elite is that it corresponds to a property (as opposed to, say, a mere set). But this just parallels the Siderian view ... that what makes ‘green’ elite is that it corresponds to a natural property (as opposed to a mere property). [This discussion] can be translated *mutatis mutandis* as applying to both views” (Dasgupta 2018, p. 285 fn. 11).

See also Taylor (2024) for further discussion about debates over sparseness and abundance—in particular, I suspect that the Problem of Missing Value can be well-understood as among those issues Taylor calls “problems of abundance,” or “sceptical problems generated by the worry that some central aspect of thought and inquiry requires justification for honing in on one set of properties over another, but that this justification appears to be unavailable” (Taylor 2024, p. 2).

as starting points in their metaphysical theorizing.⁷ I think Dasgupta realizes this as well—his paper is titled “*Realism and the Absence of Value*” after all—but he spends the final section of his essay discussing applications of this problem to deflationary projects, which tend to be more value-conscious.

My own sense is that Dasgupta does this because there is a significant difference between *the choice* to begin from undefended value assumptions, and the fact of *being required to do so* by the nature of metaphysical inquiry itself. And if Dasgupta is right, then everyone is in that second boat, regardless of how transparent we are about the role of value in our projects.

In other words: no metaphysician truly “chooses” to begin from undefended assumptions about what matters—everyone does this, and what’s more, no one is in a position to justify their choice to theorize from one set of values as opposed to any other. And that second claim is what’s supposed to be equally troubling for realists and non-realists alike: If there are any genuine choices to be made here, they simply concern which values will guide our projects. But when it comes to *whether* metaphysics will be guided by value in the first place, and how those value choices might ultimately be *justified*, none of us has anything to say.

3. THE PROBLEM OF MISSING VALUE IN SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

The Problem of Missing Value affects projects in social ontology as well. In this section and the next, I’ll discuss how that happens and argue that appreciating the role of this problem illuminates some crucial (but often overlooked!) elements of existing methodological debates in this literature.

3.1. Simplifying the Problem

Let’s begin by simplifying the Problem of Missing Value just a bit. We can start here with a general claim about an elite entity. For example, something like this:

A. F is an elite property.

⁷ In fact, there is a sense in which this outcome will be quite unsurprising for any feminist philosophers in the audience, and especially for anyone with a background in feminist philosophy of science. Feminist empiricists like Elizabeth Anderson (1995) and Helen Longino (1990) have been arguing for a long time that empirical (and metaphysical) inquiry is necessarily value-laden, and so there is a sense in which this element of Dasgupta’s (2018) project simply presents the same result in the context of realist projects in contemporary metaphysics.

Again, “eliteness” is just a label that Dasgupta has introduced to describe metaphysical entities that play a particular normative role in theorizing. In other words, (A) is equivalent to the following:

B. F is a property that our metaphysical theorizing should center around.

What justifies (B)? Well, as we know from the previous section, that’s the million-dollar question. But in general, the answer will always look something like this:

C. (B) is the case given our underlying values, *V*.

And again, Dasgupta’s (2018) argument is that our choice of values is ultimately unjustifiable.

3.2. Parallel Problems in Social Ontology: The Direction of Explanation Objection

What I want to point out now is that this series of methodological moves—which Dasgupta argues is characteristic of nearly *all* realist and non-realist projects in mainstream metaphysics—is also characteristic of projects in social ontology. Again, this should be unsurprising if we understand social ontology to be a subfield of metaphysics (and if we grant that Dasgupta has successfully described an issue that faces all metaphysical projects, across the board).

But here’s something interesting: this series of moves has already been identified as an issue for projects in social ontology! However, it has not been framed as an extension of a more general issue for projects in metaphysics. Instead, it has been cast as a challenge which *uniquely* faces projects in social ontology, because social ontologists have allegedly adopted some unorthodox methods by the standards of mainstream metaphysics.

What I have in mind here are discussions which concern the so-called *Direction of Explanation Objection*, as it has been presented against certain projects in social ontology. This objection has been addressed to deflationary projects in particular, and so it is one point at which realists working in this literature have claimed the advantage. In general, the concern is that deflationism turns out to be a view on which descriptive truths about what *is* the case follow from normative claims about what *should* be the case.

So for example, according to this methodology the question of whether Secretariat is an athlete is settled by whether he should be, given what we ultimately care about when it comes to athletics; likewise, the question of whether gender is a matter of self-identification is settled by whether it should be, given what ultimately matters when it comes to determining the boundaries of personally and politically

significant social categories. And so on and so forth. But importantly, this move from what should be the case to what's actually true is concerning because, in general, it's very hard to see how a relationship like that hold.

For example, here's how Elizabeth Barnes (2017) has stated the problem, for deflationary projects in the ontology of gender:

A deflationist approach ... seems to confuse direction of explanation for some questions of social justice. A successful account of gender ought to say that trans women are women; it would be unjust not to classify trans women as women. But at least part of that injustice, on most accounts, consists in failing to treat trans women as what they are. That is, it's unjust to say that trans women aren't women because trans women really are women. But the [deflationist] approach seems to get the direction of explanation the wrong way around. It would say that it's a constraint on a theory of gender to have the claim 'trans women are women' be true (only) because it serves our social and political goals to treat trans women as women. (Barnes 2017, p. 2420)

Barnes frames this problem in terms of a specific discussion in the philosophy of gender, but the issue she's describing here is more general: on the deflationist worldview, claims about what's true follow from claims about what *should* be true. And, Barnes objects, a relationship like that is extremely difficult (if not impossible!) to justify.

Now, perhaps this language is already sounding familiar, given the problems that have been discussed in this paper so far. But here, we can be more specific. Mirroring the discussion above, consider a general claim like this:

A. F is a gender property.

Again, if we're deflationists about this, then F is a gender property because we *should* treat F as such in our theorizing about the social world. In other words:

B. F is a property that our theorizing about gender should center around.

Why? There are many different ways to answer this question, of course, but in general, if we're deflationists then the answer here will centrally have to do with our values:

C. (B) is the case given our underlying values, V.

The Direction of Explanation Objection essentially presents deflationary projects in social ontology with the challenge of explaining how it is that claims about how we *should* theorize about gender take us to claims about which properties are, in fact,

gender properties (or gender kinds or categories or however we prefer to think about the basic elements of ontology here). But the point is: The Direction of Explanation Objection has the same structure as the Problem of Missing Value. Both objections charge metaphysicians with the task of justifying the value claims central to their projects.

I've presented things this way in order to make the similarities between these two discussions as transparent as possible. But it can be difficult to see these symmetries outside of this framing, mainly because the Direction of Explanation Objection seems to concern the relationship between (A) and (B): How is it that a property *F* *is* elite, given that *F* *should be* theory-guiding? That is Barnes's question, for example, when it comes to deflationary projects in the ontology of gender.

Dasgupta doesn't puzzle over this same "ought implies is" relationship, however, because he begins by defining eliteness as a value-theoretic phenomenon, from the start: to be elite is to be something our theorizing should center around. So, the pressing question for him becomes *why* our theorizing should center around this property, rather than *how* we could make this jump from a normative claim to a non-normative one.

3.3. Deflationism and Eliteness in the Social Ontology

In comparing these two discussions, then, the relevant question seems to be as follows: is being a gender property one way of being an elite property, on these deflationary views in social ontology? Put somewhat differently: do those properties designated as "gender" properties play a normative, theory-guiding role within these projects? Are they defined as properties which our theories should center around?⁸

Well, pick pretty much any deflationary project in the ontology of gender, and I think the answer here is clearly *yes*. And this is because most deflationists working in the ontology of gender (and social ontology, more generally) endorse what we might call broad-scope neo-Carnapian ontological deflationism (Carnap 1950/1956), roughly the same as that which Amie Thomasson (2015) has called "easy ontology."

This is, generally, the form of deflationism described in the introduction of this paper (§1), and it is an approach to metaphysics which recommends treating ontological questions about things like gender from the angle of ordinary language. On this framework, ontological existence questions (questions like: "what is it to be

⁸ Dasgupta glosses his notion of eliteness as theory-guidance in a few different ways. Generally, he writes that "eliteness is a standard of 'correctness' of belief" which can be glossed in an evaluative sense ("elite beliefs are better than non-elite ones"), as well as in a normative sense ("when investigating the world one should aim to amass beliefs that are true and elite") as well as in a sense that directly concerns rationality ("a rational agent seeks to amass beliefs that are true and elite") (Dasgupta 2018, p. 291).

a woman?") are treated at two levels. On the first and most immediate level, they are treated as what Carnap called *internal existence questions*, so-called because we pose the question internal to a particular linguistic framework. We do this by using the relevant terms of that framework, as those terms are characterized within the framework (Price 2009; Thomasson 2015). Asked from within a linguistic framework, the relevant terms (in this case, terms like 'woman') are characterized by particular rules of application, rules which are effectively a guide to reference.

So for example: when we ask, "what is it to be a woman?" as an internal existence question, we're basically asking what it is that 'woman' refers to, as the term is characterized internal to whichever particular linguistic framework we used when we posed the question. Understood this way, answering metaphysical questions about gender is just a matter of (i) grasping the rules of application associated with terms like 'woman' on our chosen linguistic framework, and (ii) doing a bit of empirical investigation to determine whether the term, so characterized, refers to anything in the world.

There is another level to metaphysical inquiry on the neo-Carnapian picture, however. For, we might wonder whether the linguistic framework we've adopted is the one we *should* have adopted in posing questions about gender. The idea is that there might be better/worse ways of characterizing the application conditions for gender terms like 'woman' and of course, different ways of characterizing the term will yield different metaphysical outcomes, on this deflationary metaphysics. In other words, there is a second kind of question here, what Carnap calls *external existence questions*, about which linguistic frameworks we ought to employ when conducting ontological inquiry. Traditionally, this is where pragmatic considerations have entered the equation, for neo-Carnapians. The rough idea is that the objective structure of metaphysical reality cannot answer external existence questions for us, and so contextual, pragmatic considerations must be brought to bear on inquiry, in order to decide between linguistic frameworks which are otherwise on a par.

It follows from a methodology like this that gender properties are elite properties. Simply put, this is because something is a gender property just in case it is a proper referent of our term 'gender.' And it is a proper referent of our term 'gender' just in case it is singled out as such by our values—that is, just in case it's singled out as an entity that we should be theorizing about. And that's just what it is for a property to be elite! It follows that any deflationary project in the ontology of gender which adopts this methodology will be one according to which gender properties are elite properties. And again, that's pretty much every deflationary project in this literature.⁹

⁹ It is, for example, the methodology that Esa Díaz-León adopts in her response to Barnes' objection (Díaz-León 2018, p. 203; 2021).

3.4. Why This Matters

What does all of this mean for the Direction of Explanation Objection? Well, it means at least three things—

First, it means that deflationists working in social ontology have a ready response to the objection, as Barnes (2017) formulates it. Namely, they can remind realists of the fact that, as Carnapian deflationists, claims like “F is a gender property” are equivalent to “F is a property that our theorizing about gender should center around, given our values.” So, there is no jump here from an “ought” to an “is”. In fact, this is one way of being an ontological pragmatist, and it is how deflationists working in the more mainstream literatures have responded to similar challenges.

For example, this is how Thomasson (2015) handles this worry. And importantly, if we endorse this sort of ontological pragmatism, then there is no jump from what ought to be the case (pragmatically speaking) to what is the case (descriptively speaking)—it’s just value claims all the way through. Because again, we’ve defined eliteness as a value-theoretic phenomenon, from the start. Thomasson argues that this is the way to do ontology, because this is the best (and perhaps, only) way we can achieve metaphysical knowledge. The general idea is that we have ready access to our own interests—what is good and useful and pragmatically helpful for us—but we do not have similarly ready access to anything like the deep structure of metaphysical reality. Moreover, if this is correct, then we are best served by a metaphysics underwritten by this sort of pragmatism, because it’s only when ontological inquiry proceeds in this way that we can actually obtain knowledge of the world around us (Thomasson 2015, ch. 11).

The second thing this means for the Direction of Explanation Objection is that it is equivalent to the Problem of Missing Value. Because again, if we define eliteness as a value-theoretic phenomenon, then (returning to the schemas above) the issue is *not* how one might move between step (A) and step (B). The problem is instead how value claims about what our theories should center around could ever be justified (C).

In fact, I think there is a way of understanding Barnes’s original worry as one which is ultimately motivated by this concern. We can see this by thinking about how these value claims function: *what sort of work do they do, for projects in metaphysics?* And the answer is that they work to single out the entities that matter to us and to discard the rest. When Barnes asks how this “ought implies is” relationship works, I think she cares about that question because she (appropriately) demands some form of justification for the alleged specialness of some properties, and the discounting of others. Which, of course, is precisely what’s at issue with the Problem of Missing Value. And so, I maintain, the two objections are the same.

Third and finally, if these two objections are the same, then the Direction of Explanation Objection does *not* identify a problem uniquely faced by projects in social ontology because we adopt unorthodox methodology. Everyone in metaphysics faces this problem, and social ontologists do not have to grapple with it because we've somehow gone off script. However, I am concerned that we will have a harder time *answering* this issue, given the often political nature of projects in this literature (§5).

4. REALISM IN SOCIAL ONTOLOGY AND THE PROBLEM OF MISSING VALUE

In the previous section, I argued that the Problem of Missing Value and the Direction of Explanation Objection identify the same concern. And again, this matters because it means that the Direction of Explanation Objection doesn't identify a problem which somehow uniquely afflicts social ontologists, and so equally, it doesn't indicate that something about our methodology in this literature has gone awry, at least in this respect. And that's important, I think, given that at the time of writing, this discipline is still quite young and is in some ways still working to establish itself.

In this section, I'm going to say a bit more about how the argument of the foregoing section works to illuminate some of what's already been going on in social ontology. Succinctly put: given that the Direction of Explanation Objection and the Problem of Missing Value are the same, and given that the latter poses a challenge for realists and deflationists alike, we should expect that the Direction of Explanation Objection will also pose a problem for realist projects in social ontology. In this section, I'm going to give you just one example of what that can look like.

4.1. Haslanger's Gender Realism

To begin, I expect many metaphysical realists will be dissatisfied with the reply from deflationists, offered in the previous section. That is: it would be nice if we could proceed with inquiry in social ontology in a way that didn't *require* pragmatism about ontological truths. And, insofar as metaphysical realism doesn't require pragmatism, perhaps realists can claim the advantage here. Of course, a deflationist like Thomasson will respond to this with epistemic arguments against the realist worldview (we ought to prefer pragmatism over epistemic darkness!), but those debates have been held elsewhere and won't concern me so much in this section (Sider 2011; Thomasson 2015, 2017, 2018).

Instead, here I'm interested in the question of whether realist projects in social ontology genuinely don't require this sort of pragmatism. *Is that true?* Unfortunately,

probably not. And we can see this when we understand that the Direction of Explanation Objection is really just the Problem of Missing Value, in another guise.

Here it will be helpful to work with the details of a particular realist project in social ontology. So, consider a realist reading of Sally Haslanger's work in the philosophy of gender (Barnes 2017; Haslanger 2012). Haslanger has argued for a social position account of gender. Very generally, on her view, someone is a woman just in case they are subordinated in certain ways because they are taken to be biologically female, and someone is a man just in case they are privileged in certain ways because they are taken to be biologically male (Haslanger 2000, 2012). Haslanger argues that these social position properties are *gender* properties in virtue of the explanatory roles they play within certain hierarchical social structures. And importantly, it is because those properties play those explanatory roles that they are among the meanings of our gender terms 'woman' and 'man' (Haslanger 2012, ch. 3).¹⁰

Of interest to us here is how Haslanger singles out the particular explanatory roles played by these properties. For, one might ask: given that there are *many* explanatory roles to pick from in the general vicinity, why should we care about *these particular* explanatory roles when it comes to metaphysical inquiry into gender? Crucially, Haslanger's answer to this question is that these are the explanatory roles that feminists *should* care about, given our collective political interest in bringing about just world (Haslanger 2012; Mikkola 2016, 2017). In other words, these explanatory roles matter given Haslanger's background normative and political commitments.

But this raises a question: is there a version of the Direction of Explanation worry which faces realist accounts like Haslanger's? For, one way of understanding the role of normative commitments on the realist picture just described is that our commitment to justice illuminates which explanatory roles we *should* care about, and those roles are a guide to the actual, metaphysical reality of gender. In other words,

10 There is some disagreement over how Haslanger's original definition is best interpreted, but in a (2014) symposium piece in *Krisis*, Haslanger clarifies that her (2000) definitions of gender are meant to be understood as real definitions for properties (and not as definitions for terms or concepts):

"The project is one of 'real definition' rather than 'nominal definition' (Rosen 2015)... Although we begin our inquiry by employing the concept as we understand it, we may learn that we are confused or misled about relevant reality; in other words, the division(s) we take our concept to track may not be the division(s) that are worth tracking. We discover the divisions worth tracking not just by a priori inquiry, but by methods that also include empirical inquiry. The goal of analysis, on this view, is to explicate and improve our understanding of a domain by mapping the systematic relationships in reality that our language aims to trace. *My core-dependent accounts of gender and race are attempts at real definition not conceptual analysis in the traditional sense.*" (Haslanger 2014, p. 5–6; emphasis mine).

This matters because it means that a realist interpretation of Haslanger's project will be one according to which values inform descriptive truths about ontology (and not, say, truths just about concepts or semantics).

this looks like a case where what we *should* care about (normatively/pragmatically speaking) is a guide to what *is* true (descriptively).

4.2. Responding to the Problem: Explanatory & Expressive Criteria

I anticipate pushback against this reading of Haslanger's realist metaphysics. For example, one might argue that Haslanger isn't moving from claims about what we should care about, to descriptive claims about what is the case. Instead, perhaps her normative commitments are better understood as constraints on what it takes for a theory of gender to be expressively and explanatorily adequate (Barnes 2017, p. 2421).

The idea here is that theories of gender (like any theory of anything!) will be assessed with respect to certain explanatory and expressive criteria; if a given theory fails with respect to those criteria, that's a mark against (the truth of) that theory. And then, among those things we want to explain/express with a theory of gender are facts about social inequality, the distribution of valuable goods and resources, patterns of social behavior, and the like. Of course, these things are plausibly relevant to social justice! But it's one thing to say that any good theory of gender will explain the distribution of important material goods and resources, and quite another to say that these theories should explain those distributions *because that's what's just*.

I think this is a fair reply, but it doesn't answer the worry I've posed here. For we might ask: *why* are those the relevant explanatory/expressive criteria for theories of gender? And in general, Haslanger's answer seems to be: because we're feminists! And we care about justice. More carefully: our commitment to justice leads us to endorse these as the explanatory/expressive criteria that *should* matter for theories of gender. And again, if a theory satisfies those criteria, that's a strong reason to endorse it, and so a reason to believe the ontological claims made by that theory are *true*. In other words, the move to describe Haslanger's normative and political commitments in terms of explanatory and expressive criteria provides an alternative way to characterize the point at which these normative and political commitments enter Haslanger's metaphysics. But crucially, those commitments stand in the same *relationship* to ontological truth on this interpretation, and it's that relationship which concerns us here.

4.3. Responding to the Problem: Establishing a Connection Between Value and Truth

Let's consider two more ways that realists working in social ontology might try to answer or otherwise avoid the Direction of Explanation Objection—

First, it could turn out that the normative and political commitments that guide theories like Haslanger's are *truth-tracking*, such that theories guided by a commitment to e.g., justice are theories which better aim at descriptive truth. One way to argue for this view might be to characterize values like justice on model that resembles standard approaches to theoretical virtues like simplicity, where the latter are often taken to bear some important relationship to truth (Lewis 1983; Longino 1990; Mikkola 2017). If this approach succeeds, it could be a real silver bullet for both realists and deflationists at this juncture, as the relationship between claims about what should be the case and claims about what's actually true might be less mysterious.

There are good reasons to be skeptical here, however. For one thing, there are reasons to worry that the relationship which more traditional theoretical virtues bear to truth is already tenuous (Lewis 1983; Dorr 2024). Furthermore, even if those existing challenges can be surmounted, what the realist needs here is an analysis of the relationship between truth and values like justice which accounts for how normative claims about what should be the case might *make true*, or otherwise generate, truth-apt ontological existence claims. Suffice it to say that it would be nice if there were another way to answer the Direction of Explanation Objection.

4.4. Responding to the Problem: Feminist Empiricism

Bracketing the project of establishing a direct link between descriptive truth and justice, we might understand Haslanger's project here as backgrounding a methodology similar to that articulated by feminist empiricists like Helen Longino (1990) and Elizabeth Anderson (1995, 2004). Anderson in particular has argued for what she calls value-laden approaches to theory selection. This is a methodology according to which, roughly, empirical truths taken alone underdetermine theory choice, and context-dependent values must be added to the mix in order to justify the choice of a given theory over available alternatives. This value-laden methodology seeks to answer our question regarding the relationship between normative commitments and ontological truth with a distinction between truth and *justification* in the context of theory choice.

The general idea is this: in investigating the nature of things like gender we want true, *justified* theories. Metaphysical information alone can offer us a range of candidate equally true theories, but won't uniquely privilege any one view above the rest. Our contextual values—our underlying normative commitments—do the work of justifying, and so singling out, a particular theory over available alternatives. So, where our question is one of how normative truths might deliver ontological ones, according to this approach, the answer is that normative truths justify the theories according to which those ontological claims hold.

Haslanger herself cites Anderson and other feminist empiricists in some of her early work on the philosophy of gender (Haslanger 2000, 2012), and so I don't think it's a stretch to say that something like the feminist empiricist approach to theory selection is at work in at least an early version of Haslanger's project. However, I do worry that this way of responding to the Direction of Explanation Objection is essentially a way of interpreting Haslanger as a metaphysical deflationist. To see this, consider—

Let's say that we arrive at a theory of gender via Anderson's methodology for theory choice. Importantly, according to Anderson, values enter into our theorizing at a number of different places. For instance: in our decision to theorize about gender in the first place; in our formulation of the questions which frame our inquiry; in our approach to collecting and analyzing evidence and relating it back to our starting hypothesis; in formulating the content and consequences of the resulting theory; and in evaluating that theory with respect to available alternatives.

Let's say we take all of that into account, and via this process, arrive at a particular theory of gender, Φ . But in what sense do these values make Φ our theory of gender? Note that this question concerns what it is for value claims to *justify* theories, if we aren't supposed to understand that justification in terms of either truth or a further normative claim (e.g., something like Φ should be true or Φ should be our theory of gender). That is, on Anderson's view: for a set of values V to justify a theory Φ is not for V to support the *truth* of Φ , nor for V to support claims about how Φ *should* be employed, but something else.

Some of Anderson's later arguments suggest that for Φ to be justified by V is for Φ to be the most *useful* theory given V , insofar as Φ promises to be e.g., empirically fruitful and pragmatically helpful in certain respects that matter to us, given our values (Anderson 2004). Crucially then: on this approach, particular facts about gender are true because they hold according to our most useful theory of gender. So, this looks like another case in which our value claims take us to ontological claims, where those ontological claims are claims about the ways it's most *useful* for us to divide up reality—i.e., deflationary ontological pragmatism (§3).

In sum: if it's right to read Anderson as a deflationist, then the suggestion that Haslanger adopts Anderson's methodology is just the suggestion that Haslanger is an ontological pragmatist about gender. Of course, that is an available reply! But it's not particularly good news for realists who were hoping to come out on top of this exchange by *avoiding* a pragmatist outcome.

4.5. Outcomes

At this point, we've considered three options: (i) realists could try packaging their normative/political commitments into explanatory and expressive criteria; (ii) they could hold out for the possibility of establishing a direct link between descriptive truth and values like justice; or (iii) they could become deflationists, and appeal to the pragmatist solution outlined previously. And briefly: the first reply doesn't answer our worry here, insofar as it only interacts with the position at which value enters, and not with the relationship those values bear to truth; and the third reply won't appeal to any realist who wants to remain a realist.

The second reply involves holding out for a direct link between descriptive truth and value. Of course, we already know there is one way to do this: namely, we can define the relevant properties as normative, and in doing so, build values into their nature. For Haslanger's project, this would involve defining her selected properties as properly theory-guiding.¹¹ But here, I'll remind the audience that this is precisely what we've been trying to *avoid* doing, because the realist has been trying to avoid the result that claims like "Michelle is a woman" are equivalent to "We should treat Michelle as though she is a woman." But given how things currently stand, that outcome looks hard to avoid.

At a much more general level, what this discussion shows us is that realists working in social ontology are no better off than deflationists, when it comes to the Direction of Explanation Objection. Realist projects in social ontology also afford a central role to value, and the relationship between those values and the descriptive claims posited by these theories is difficult to understand, if it is supposed to be something other than constitutive definition. Again, this is also what deflationists have to do, and so it would seem we have a nice and level playing field once more.

But the value problems aren't over: the fundamental issue of *justifying* our value choices still looms. I'll turn to that next, and to the observation that while this problem afflicts all projects in metaphysics, it may be especially difficult to answer, for many social ontologists.

11 And here, I cannot resist adding that doing this is especially straight-forward and so satisfying on a view like Haslanger's, given that she's already talking in terms of defining essences and real definition (Haslanger 2014).

5. METHODOLOGIES IN METAPHYSICS: WHAT WE (DON'T) SHARE IN COMMON

We can now ask two questions: first, is there any way to avoid the Problem of Missing Value, in general? And if so, will those same solutions work equally well for projects in social ontology?

Dasgupta offers metaphysicians an olive branch here. At the end of his paper, he argues that, while the Problem of Missing Value may be practically unanswerable, that might be ok (at least, for now). In general, this is because we're often not *actually* in positions where we need to justify our theoretical interests, largely because we tend to share those interests in common with a significant plurality of other theorists (and plausibly, we share these same interests with a significant plurality of humanity). If that's right, then the demand to justify these value-theoretic claims won't arise very often (if at all!) in practice, and it's only when we indulge in hypotheticals about e.g., different species with extremely different value systems that this demand for justification becomes salient, and so, problematic (Dasgupta 2018, §8). But in general, most people seem to be interested in what objective reality is like (good news for realists!) or else, most people seem to share practical/normative interests which support dividing up the world in certain ways (good news for deflationists!), and so in our day-to-day lives as metaphysicians we can responsibly set the Problem of Missing Value aside.

Now, perhaps this solution will serve metaphysicians working in the more mainstream literatures. But it's unlikely that social ontologists can responsibly set this problem aside on similar grounds. To be clear: setting this problem aside effectively amounts to treating these value-theoretic claims as *axiomatic*—as foundational, unjustified assumptions. And it's ok to do this insofar as one can safely assume that most people already take these value-theoretic assumptions on board. Dasgupta's claim is that this seems like a fair assessment, when it comes to whether most people already work with the value assumptions common to “mainstream” metaphysics. But do most people already work with the value assumptions common to social ontology?

This is an empirical question, in part. But it's also worth noting that a lot of work in social ontology already suggests that we should be skeptical on this point. For example, consider so-called ameliorative projects in social ontology (Haslanger 2000; 2012). Central to these projects is the general idea that many people get facts about the social world *wrong*, and so there's important work to be done here by philosophers, when it comes to revealing the true nature of social reality. And crucially, a lot of the work involved in unmasking the true nature of the social domain involves what Haslanger (2020, 2007) and others have called *ideology critique*—where among other things, ideology critique involves thinking about the world with certain values

which *differ from* (and many times, seem to be at odds with!) the values characteristic of mainstream society. In other words, it looks like the project of ideology critique embeds the assumption that most people *are not* thinking about e.g., gender, race, sexuality in a way that backgrounds the values common to many projects in social ontology (for of course, if they were, then ideology critique would seem unnecessary!).

Among other things, I think this means that the Problem of Missing Value has an especially sharp edge for social ontologists. For, just like work in mainstream metaphysics, our theories in social ontology also centrally incorporate value-theoretic assumptions, and we also cannot justify those assumptions. But crucially: in this literature, the value assumptions we make are often *controversial*, at least insofar as they aren't shared by most people. And this means that Dasgupta's solution—that we just treat these value claims as axiomatic and move on—will not work equally well for social ontologists. The demand to justify these value claims *will* predictably arise in practice, for us. We don't need to indulge in hypotheticals about extraterrestrials in order for this justificatory demand to be both salient and challenging.

6. APPLICATIONS: PLURALISM IN THE PHILOSOPHY OF GENDER

I'd like to take a moment to illustrate how this challenge can manifest in practice. That is: how this demand to justify the value claims central to projects in social ontology can be especially salient for work in this field, and what the consequences of that can look like when it comes to particular projects, and even when it comes to the general shape of entire literatures.

Recall that this paper began with a distinction between first- and second-order questions in social ontology, and the observation that answers to first-order questions in this literature are strongly informed by the methodologies we adopt, i.e., by our stance on the relevant second-order questions (§1). And for at least this reason, many times first-order debates in social ontology can turn into second-order debates, over how we approach inquiry.

The philosophy of gender is one area of social ontology where this move, from first-order questions to second-order questions, is especially apparent: many first-order debates about the nature of gender (e.g., debates over what it is to be a woman, man, nonbinary) quickly become debates over how questions about gender *should* be answered, what sorts of considerations *ought* to inform inquiry, and how those considerations are *best* factored into a theory of gender. In other words, philosophical debates about the nature of gender very often involve debates about methodology.

Moreover, I think it's plausible that the methodological aspects of these debates center around value-theoretic claims. For, in asking after what sorts of considerations ought to inform inquiry into the nature of gender, we're often asking after *value*

considerations. For example, in assessing the truth of sentences like ‘X is a woman,’ Esa Díaz-León (2016) argues that the relevant standards here will involve our practical purposes, “where these are broadly conceived to include theoretical, prudential, moral, political, and even aesthetic *values*” (Díaz-León 2016, p. 249; emphasis mine). For Díaz-León then, part of the debate about the extension of gender terms like ‘woman’ will involve determining—and we might imagine, *justifying*—which of these value considerations is relevant to inquiry (in a given context) and how.¹²

And this is not unique to Díaz-León’s work—*many* projects in the philosophy of gender proceed from value commitments in this way.¹³ In fact, I don’t think it’s a stretch to say that this is characteristic of work in this field, insofar as the vast majority of projects in the philosophy of gender are also works of feminist philosophy, which itself is a value-laden enterprise (Garry 2022; Mikkola 2016, 2017).

Ok, so let’s assume that’s right: many debates in the philosophy of gender have a strong methodological component, and the methodological elements of those debates tend to center around value-theoretic claims. Now, as we’ve just seen, these value-theoretic claims are practically impossible to justify, and that’s why Problem of Missing Value looks intractable. Now, if it’s right that many debates in the philosophy of gender center around these value-theoretic claims, that may shed some light on why these debates can feel uniquely challenging at times.

To see what I mean here, consider: there’s a real question in this literature regarding what it takes for a theory of gender to be *false*. Of course, there are well-known objections to particular theories of gender. For example, we know that social position views of gender tend to struggle with the commonality problem, or the problem of correctly categorizing all putative members of a particular gender kind as members of that kind (Spelman 1988; Haslanger 2000). But social position views also have important explanatory advantages, when it comes to capturing aspects of gender oppression which have to do with how a person is related to their external environment (Barnes 2019, 2022). So, it seems we cannot completely do away with social position views of gender. On the other hand, self-identification views seem sufficiently inclusive in some places where social position views traditionally fall short (Jenkins 2016), but these views also face a version of the commonality problem (Barnes 2022).

So, what do we do? Interestingly, the consensus in this literature seems to be that we should endorse a kind of *pluralism* about gender, according to which no one

¹² And again, Díaz-León is a deflationist, so when she makes these semantic arguments, she takes them to have ontological consequences (Díaz-León 2016, 2018).

¹³ See for example Barnes (2019), Dembroff (2018), Haslanger (2012), Jenkins (2016), or Saul (2012) for just a few examples of projects in which normative and pragmatic values more-or-less explicitly inform inquiry in the philosophy of gender.

analysis of gender gets it completely wrong, but no analysis gets it completely right, either. These pluralistic strategies take a number of different forms: semantic (Bettcher 2013, Saul 2012), representational (Mikkola 2011), and metaphysical (Ásta 2018, Barnes 2022). But common among them is the idea that our best theories of gender—theories which seek to explain what it is to be a woman, a man, nonbinary—are characteristically *disjunctive*.

So, for example: perhaps what it is to be a woman is to occupy a particular place in a social hierarchy *or* it is to self-identify in a particular way (Barnes 2022, Jenkins 2016). But relevantly, theories of gender are rarely determined to be *false*, with this methodology. Even biological views of gender arguably have important things to offer us, if we restrict our attention to e.g., particular medical and healthcare contexts (Díaz-León 2016; Saul 2012). In fact, it's these sorts of considerations which have traditionally led some theorists to the conclusion that it's impossible to define gender, or otherwise give a comprehensive theory of it (Mikkola 2011, Spelman 1988).

Now, if value-theoretic claims are central to these disagreements about gender, that would go some way toward explaining why the literature on the nature of gender has proceeded in this way. In particular, it would explain part of why it's so difficult to show that a particular theory of gender is definitively true or false.¹⁴ *For, doing this would require sufficient justification for why it's better to theorize about gender from one particular set of values in one particular way, as opposed to alternatives.* And again, the worry is that task is practically impossible.

To appreciate this challenge further, it may be helpful to look at a particular debate, between two specific views in the philosophy of gender. Consider Katharine Jenkins' (2016) critique of Haslanger's (2000) view of gender: Jenkins argues that Haslanger's view is problematically trans-exclusionary, and in this way, it is *unjust*. Jenkins' project incorporates a background value-theoretic commitment to justice: we should theorize about gender in view of the demands of justice, and importantly, those demands require trans-inclusivity (Jenkins 2016, p. 396). A significant part of Jenkins' critique of Haslanger, then, has to do with a conflict between their value commitments.

But *why* is Haslanger's view problematically exclusive, according to Jenkins? Jenkins argues that this happens because Haslanger's view is either (i) guided by the wrong values, or (ii) guided by the right values, but in the wrong ways (Jenkins 2016, §4). Regarding this second point, I take Jenkins' objection to be that Haslanger's view fails by the lights of her own commitment to justice, for a truly just theory of gender would be trans-inclusive.

14 Or, if we're pragmatists: why it's so difficult to show that a particular theory of gender is definitively more useful or otherwise preferable to another.

Now here's what's important: this objection effectively charges Haslanger with the task of justifying why a theory of gender should background the values she's chosen, in the way she's chosen to background them. In other words, Jenkins is asking Haslanger to justify the value-theoretic claim at the heart of her view. But again, if Dasgupta is right, then the task of giving that sort of justification is practically impossible. And this isn't just a problem for Haslanger in this exchange—it's a problem for Jenkins as well! That is, Jenkins *also* faces the task of justifying the value-theoretic claims at the heart of her view and arguing for them over Haslanger's. And again, we have good reasons to think that task is practically impossible.

So where does this leave us? I think the intractability of this problem does something to explain the way that Jenkins ultimately resolves this dispute. For, perhaps surprisingly, she doesn't wind up arguing that Haslanger's view of gender is *false*! Instead, Jenkins proposes a hybrid, disjunctive view—a combination of Haslanger's materialist, social position approach, together with a self-identification view of gender (Jenkins 2016, §3).

7. CONCLUSION

Now, it's possible to read the foregoing discussion about the philosophy of gender in a way that reflects poorly on that literature. But I think that would be a mistake. Instead, this discussion shows that philosophers of gender have been grappling with a very real problem, one common to work across all of metaphysics. It's just that, given the political nature of the subject matter in that field, those philosophers cannot afford to ignore this problem, or otherwise set it aside—for unlike in mainstream metaphysics, where oftentimes debates have no real political or moral consequences, questions about the nature of gender, race, and sexuality can have especially high stakes.

As social ontologists have acknowledged for some time now, value plays a powerful and salient role in our work: in some ways, we work with value in a manner that is continuous with methodology in the more mainstream literatures; but in other ways, what we do is unique, and is accompanied by its own challenges.

Among other things, I think this shows that the real Problem of Missing Value is the one that rears its head in contexts where *values themselves* are at issue: where the first-order debates in metaphysics take us to second-order debates, and those second-order debates directly concern our values. So far, we've seen two ways that metaphysicians can go at this juncture: we can argue that there really is no disagreement about value after all and try to set the problem aside; or we can acknowledge our differences and attempt to build theories which disjunctively incorporate different (and at times, conflicting!) value-theoretic commitments.

Interestingly, both strategies involve attempts to avoid conflict. The first strategy effectively amounts to sticking our heads in the sand and hoping there's no real danger; and the second amounts to hoping we can transform conflicting views into consistent ones. But in the event that we're faced with a worldview that we *genuinely* cannot abide—a view based in values we clearly do not share, which we wouldn't want to make consistent with our own (and where that conciliatory task would predictably fail if we tried)—I worry we'll be in real trouble. And unlike Dasgupta, I worry this possibility is very close to becoming a reality, if isn't already.

So, what's the solution? This is a difficult question. But to my mind, there are at least two options here. On the one hand, it may be tempting to think that if these value-theoretic commitments truly cannot be justified by reason, then force presents an attractive option, especially when the stakes of inquiry are high. Here I have in mind something like ideological pressure of the sort that, at its worst, is characteristically maligned as dogmatism. This is the point at which reason fails, and we default to simply imposing our values on an unwitting and unwilling audience—because we are *right*, after all, and they are *wrong*. But this surely cannot be the way that philosophy proceeds.

There is another option here, however, one more faithful to the spirit of this discipline generally, and to social ontology in particular. For, if it's right that the real challenges here concern negotiating the role of value and which value commitments we ought to hold, then this strikes me as a place where metaphysicians would do well to seek assistance from both metaethics and epistemology, and those literatures where questions about value have historically been addressed in detail.

Social ontology has always been unique in the way that various elements from across philosophy inform inquiry in this field. In social metaphysics, we regularly work with considerations from philosophy of language, political philosophy, and normative ethics. And so, it wouldn't be at all surprising to learn that metaethics and epistemology have a central role to play here as well, when it comes to constructing theories about the nature of the social world.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks go out to Matthew Andler, Elizabeth Barnes, Rebecca Chan, Jade Fletcher, Carolina Flores, Theodore Locke, Trenton Merricks, Asya Passinsky, Kevin Richardson, Matthew Duncan, members of the Georgetown Philosophy Department, participants at the 2nd SoCal Metaphysics Network Conference, friends at the 4th Annual Social Metaphysics Workshop, as well as the two anonymous referees at the Journal of Social Ontology for their many helpful contributions to various versions of this project.

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