COMMENTS ON BARNES AND MIKKOLA*

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1. What counts as metaphysics?

Thanks to the APA for having this session. I’m going to argue that my account of substantivity (from my book Writing the Book of the World) does not imply that questions of feminist metaphysics are nonsubstantive, but I’d like to start with a concession.¹ At various points in my book, particularly at the very beginning, I suggested that the central goal of metaphysics is to inquire into the fundamental nature of reality. Not only does this have the vice of inaccuracy, it also has a moral vice in contexts where being part of metaphysics is taken to be a good thing: feminist metaphysics is portrayed as not being real (or central) metaphysics and thus less valuable.² In fact I think that metaphysics includes many questions other than those about fundamental reality, I think that questions about the nature of race and gender are indeed part of metaphysics, and I wish I hadn’t suggested otherwise. Though I don’t agree that my approach to metaphysics intrinsically renders questions of social metaphysics invisible in the sense of making it in-principle impossible to raise them, I do think that the practice of metaphysics, including partly my own, has sometimes rendered such questions practically invisible, I think that this needs to change, and I appreciate what Barnes and Mikkola and others are doing to bring this about.³

¹Commentary on Elizabeth Barnes, “Realism and Social Structure” and Mari Mikkola, “Non-Ideal Metaphysics: On the Apparent Antagonism between Feminist and Mainstream Metaphysics”.
²See also Merricks (2013) and my reply (2013b).
³See Mikkola’s paper for this symposium, and also Barnes (2014).
⁴For what it’s worth, the offending rhetoric in my book was, in the first instance, directed against competing accounts of a certain portion of metaphysics, and was not meant to exclude other portions of metaphysics. (I may well deserve criticism for implicitly treating that portion as the only one worth discussing, but in any case I did not mean to be asserting this.) The portion of metaphysics I had in mind is that portion which we may call “ultimate metaphysics”, the portion that asks questions like Hobbes versus Berkeley versus Descartes: “Is
2. Realism about structure, and levels

The point of my book is to defend realism about “structure”. In a famous example, Nelson Goodman begins with familiar properties such as green and blue, and defines “cooked up” properties in terms of them. He calls an object grue, for example, if and only if it is green and first observed before a certain time $t$ or blue and not first observed before $t$; but we can play Goodman’s trick with any properties, from properties of physics to properties of economics to properties of social theory; we could consider, for example, the property of being a woman and living in a country whose name begins with ‘A’ or being a man and not living in such a country. The realist about structure says that there is a metaphysically significant, objective distinction between properties that are “cooked up” in this way (like grue) and those that are not. Properties like color and mass and gender that are not cooked up “carve reality at its joints”, to use Plato’s metaphor.\(^4\)

A realist about structure faces several subsequent choice-points. First, amongst the joint-carving properties, is there any distinction to be made between those that are “fundamental” and the others? I say yes; but this is not a forced choice: a realist about structure could be an egalitarian and make no such distinction.

Supposing such a distinction is to be made, there is a second choice: is “higher-level” joint-carving reducible to “lower level” joint-carving (plus other notions)? Supposing concepts of economics to carve at the joints and “grueified” concepts of “schmeconomics” not to carve at the joints, is this fact ultimately reality ultimately material, ultimately mental, or ultimately a mix?”. Others construe questions of ultimate metaphysics as being about ontology or essence or modality, whereas, I was arguing, we should think of them instead as being about structure.

\(^4\)A note on terminology. Sometimes in my book I used ‘joint-carving’ to mean perfectly joint-carving, and sometimes I spoke of “fundamentality” as coming in degrees. Here, to keep things simple, I’ve opted to use ‘joint-carving’ broadly, so as to include concepts that aren’t perfectly joint-carving, and I’ve reserved ‘fundamental’ for perfectly joint-carving, i.e., absolutely fundamental, concepts. Since I’m here treating “joint-carving” as not coming in degrees, there then arises a question of just how joint-carving, in the degreed sense of my book, a concept must be to count as joint-carving simpliciter in the present sense. I’m not going to try to settle that question, but at a minimum, I have in mind that playing a role in an explanatory causal theory is sufficient.

\(^5\)What “reducible to” means here is itself a difficult question.
to be understood in terms of differences in how the concepts of economics and schmeconomics are based in the fundamental joint-carving notions, or is it sui generis? Here I say that higher-level joint-carving does reduce; but again, this is not a forced choice: a realist about structure might hold that higher-level structure in no way boils down to lower-level structure. To summarize:

3. My account of substantivity

A virtue of realism about structure, I argued in my book, is that it helps us understand elusive concepts like those of substantivity, objectivity, and conventionality (chapter 4). A substantive question is one that is not merely verbal;

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6The matter is more complex, since there is a further issue: is joint-carving at the fundamental level sui generis, or does it itself reduce to something else? I myself think the former, which is why I put the second choice in the text as concerning whether higher-level structure is sui generis. Someone who denies that lower-level joint-carving is sui generis could put the second choice as concerning whether higher-level jointcarving has the same status as lower-level jointcarving, i.e., whether higher-level joint-carving is “relatively” sui generis.

its answer is “objective”. A crude, first-pass attempt to characterize nonsubstantivity is the counterfactual test:

**Counterfactual-sensitivity test** Proposition $P$ is nonsubstantive if and only if $P$ would have had a different truth value if we humans had been different, or hadn’t existed.

But this test has a problem of false negatives. Take the fact that Pluto isn’t a planet. In some sense this isn’t a substantive matter; it was (to some degree) a conventional decision to not count Pluto as a ‘planet’. But it may be that given the actual semantics for ‘planet’, Pluto’s planethood passes the counterfactual test. Given what we in fact mean by ‘planet’, the proposition that Pluto is a planet is counterfactually insensitive to the doings of human beings.

(The test also has a more well-known problem, a problem of false positives: it counts any proposition that is about humans—that there exist humans, that humans evolved from apelike ancestors, etc.—as being nonsubstantive. We’ll return to this.)

So I proposed a different test. The first-pass statement is this:

**Candidate-sensitivity test** Sentence $S$ is nonsubstantive if and only if $S$ would have had different truth values under different candidate meanings, i.e., alternate meanings for $S$ that are joint-carving and equally faithful to $S$’s conceptual role.

For example: even if the proposition that is actually expressed by ‘Pluto is a planet’ is insensitive to our doings, it may yet be that there are other joint-carving properties we could have meant by ‘planet’, and under some of those other candidate meanings, ‘Pluto is a planet’ would have been false.

4. **Substantivity of questions of gender**

Barnes and Mikkola both say that my account classifies the questions of feminist metaphysics—for instance questions about gender—as being nonsubstan-
tive. I disagree, and in a bit I’ll say why, but first let me briefly set aside what I think is a misunderstanding—a misunderstanding for which unclarity on my part is to blame. As Barnes mentions, I briefly say that Haslanger’s views about gender and race might be classified as conventionalist in a sense; and I elsewhere say that conventionality is a form of nonsubstantivity. However, the sense in which I called Haslanger’s view “conventionalist” was not my preferred sense of conventionality; and I did not claim that conventionality in this sense is a form of nonsubstantivity; when I said that conventionality is a form of nonsubstantivity I meant conventionality in my preferred sense.

Now to my main points, which are:

1. My account does not imply that the only substantive questions are those that are about fundamental matters.

2. My account allows concepts having to do with higher-level causal structure, including socially constructed kinds, to carve at the joints despite

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8I take Barnes’s point that conventionalist isn’t the right classification here, but set that aside.

9To explain a little more fully: Because the counterfactual test has false negatives (it counts the question of Pluto’s planethood as substantive), I introduced the candidate-sensitivity test. In the spirit of conceptual pluralism, I thought of what I was doing as introducing a notion of substantivity, which I called “candidate selection substantivity”, rather than as analyzing the notion of substantivity; and I left it open that there might be other notions of substantivity. In particular, in a discussion of one particular sort of nonsubstantivity, namely conventionality, I mentioned a notion of “content conventionality”: propositions that are about convention (section 4.3). What I said about views like Haslanger’s is that they should not be classified as candidate-selection conventionalist, but rather as content-conventionalist (p. 56, note 13). (As Barnes points out, this isn’t really accurate, since the relevant social structures for Haslanger aren’t really conventions; but set that aside.) Then, after discussing substantivity, I went on to make a claim of epistemic value: I said that claims that are nonsubstantive are, even if true, deficient along at least one epistemic dimension: in making such claims, we are merely projecting our own categories, our own chosen conceptual structure, and failing to latch onto the world’s structure (section 4.5). But when I was making those claims, I had in mind candidate-selection substantivity—my own preferred notion of substantivity—and not content-conventionality. (Here is where I should have been clearer.) The fact that a proposition is about humans in some way does not on its own make that proposition a less worthy subject of inquiry, or a projection of our own categories rather than the world’s, since the concept of being a human being may itself be one of the world’s categories! Content-conventionality’s failure to imply epistemic disvalue, by the way, is analogous to the false positives problem for the counterfactual test; and indeed, I now wonder whether the notion of content-conventionality (and related notions, like that of content-subjectivity, etc.) are useful concepts at all.
Mikkola says (p. 10) that “For [Sider], objectivity is about being carved in reality’s joints. This rules out the possibility of something being both socially constructed and objective because (everyone agrees) socially constructed entities are not found on the fundamental level.” But my account does not classify a question as being nonsubstantive simply because it is not about the fundamental. It is true that being phrased in fundamental terms is a sufficient condition for being substantive (or near enough, anyway); but it isn’t a necessary condition. The question of whether there is at least one planet orbiting our sun, for example, is not by my lights cast in fundamental terms, but it’s clearly substantive in any reasonable sense. And my account correctly classifies it as such: though there are alternate candidate meanings for ‘planet’ (differing over, for example, whether Pluto counts), they all agree that there is at least one “planet” (Jupiter counts, according to each).

Consider, now, a statement about socially constructed kinds—“Gender is distinct from sex”, say. Suppose this statement is true on all candidate meanings. Then it counts as substantive on my account—just as substantive as the claim that there is at least one planet. Yes, the statement is not about perfectly fundamental matters, but that doesn’t prevent it from being substantive. Yes, the statement is in a sense about human beings, given Haslanger’s and others’ view of the nature of gender and sex, and thus it fails the counterfactual test; but that is not a test I accept.

To take this last point a little further: although the subject matter of statements about gender and sex concerns human beings, there is no intrusion of the point of view of the human theorist in particular on the judgment that sex is distinct from gender: that judgment is not a projection of the theorist’s politics or values or outlook, but rather is the objectively correct description of social reality.

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10 See, for example, Sider (2011, pp. 46–7).
11 Compare Barnes’s complaint that my “overlapping glosses of objectivity, joint carving, realism, etc., all rely on a picture of inquiry that aims to track the way the world is ‘in and of itself’, independent of human thought, human action, or human society”, and thus exclude realist views about those parts of the world that concern humans. I grant that the glosses are imperfect if understood under the counterfactual sense of ‘independent’; but I had in mind the candidate-selectional sense, which I think avoids the problem of false positives. That said, the intuitive glosses may be ill-advised, for the reason that Barnes gives, insofar as they are more naturally understood in the counterfactual sense.
12 Or anyway, there is no need to regard the theorist’s point of view as intruding; there is no
It may be objected: in order for “Gender is distinct from sex” to be substantively true on my view, that sentence must be true on all candidate meanings. But couldn’t we have chosen to use ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ equivalently?

According to Sally Haslanger (2012, pp. 12–16), ‘gender’ and ‘sex’, in the sense relevant to the dispute, are something like theoretical terms in the sense of Putnam (1975a) and Kripke (1972), terms for features that play a causal/explanatory role in explaining, for instance, the existence of certain sorts of oppression. Thus candidate meanings for those terms, if they’re to fit the conceptual role that ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ play, must play that causal/explanatory role. And on Haslanger’s view, any conceptual scheme that fails distinguish gender and sex will be unable to accurately describe these mechanisms of oppression, and so will fail to deliver candidate meanings in the sense relevant to the candidate-selection test. Such a conceptual scheme will simply miss out on an aspect of the world’s causal/explanatory structure, just as do conceptual schemes based on grue or schmeconomics, or on astrological sign. So any pair of candidate meanings for ‘gender’ and ‘sex’ must be distinct.

2. My argument so far has assumed that gender and sex play a role in an explanatory theory of oppression, and I argue in my book that explanations must be cast in joint-carving terms (section 3.1). But can I recognize gender and sex as joint-carving? Barnes argues that I cannot. She says “A central issue here is whether Haslangerian kinds can be said to be reasonably joint-carving in Sider’s sense of joint-carving”.

obstacle to being a realist about these social concepts.

13 Haslanger of course rejects the idea that gender is a “natural kind” in the sense of being rooted in nature and thus inevitable; but higher-level joints need not be “natural” or “fixed” in this sense; they can stand for made or constructed features. Understanding any part of the world requires recognizing the objective facts about that part of the world. If the objective facts about a certain part of the world involve the construction, by humans or groups of humans, of social structures, then an objective account of that part of the world needs to avail itself of concepts of social structures, in which case such concepts will carve at the joints, despite being made and not fixed by “nature”.

14 I would argue that in social theory, as in other higher-level domains, there is always the potential for some nonsubstantive questions. For instance, I would argue that higher level concepts admit indeterminacy, which in turn leads to some nonsubstantive questions of classification: exactly where the borderline of being a woman is to be located need not be regarded as a substantive one. But saying this does not require saying that the central questions of interest about gender are nonsubstantive.
Recall that my brand of realism about joint-carving is based on two non-forced choices, either of which a realist about joint-carving might reject. One might be an egalitarian about joint-carving, or, alternatively, claim that higher-level joint-carving is sui generis; and in either case one could then comfortably admit the existence of joint-carving properties of social construction. But when Barnes stresses “Sider’s sense of joint-carving”, she means in particular my reductionism about higher-level joint-carving; this is what creates the tension. I will argue, though, that despite my reductionism I can admit joint-carving socially constructed kinds.

As Barnes points out, whether a high-level property carves at the joints partially depends, according to me, on how simply it may be “defined” in terms of fundamental properties. (Recall David Lewis’s (1986, p. 61) claim that properties can be more or less “natural” depending on how short and nondisjunctive their “definitions” in terms of the perfectly natural properties are.) But, she says:

>“Haslangerian structures will plausibly have extremely complicated and very long definitions in a fundamental language (and other things we might mean by our gender and race terms might well have simpler such definitions).”

The problem here is not confined to socially constructed kinds, but rather extends to any kinds that are multiply realized in the physical. One might similarly worry that the core concepts of many special sciences—biological, economic, and psychological concepts, for example—lack simple definitions in terms of fundamental notions.

Clearly social, biological, and economic kinds won’t have definitions as simple as chemical kinds have. But this just calls for liberalism in how much complexity is allowed in the definition of a higher-level joint-carving property.

More importantly, the “definitions” can be functional. Definitions of social kinds might well have the form “that which has such-and-such (social) effects and such-and-such causes”. Functional definitions will be much simpler, in

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15See (Sider, 2011, p. 130). Schaffer (2013) raises a concern about my approach; see Sider (2013a) for my reply.
the case of social kinds, than definitions of the form “having parts with so-and-so physical makeup”. (Similar remarks apply to biological, psychological, and economic kinds.)

The parenthetical concern in the quotation from Barnes is also important to address: as she says, maybe Haslangerian gender has a more complex definition than certain competing properties—think: naïve biological sex. That’s right, but it doesn’t challenge what I’m saying. Despite having a simpler basis in the fundamental, the competing properties won’t take part in the same explanatory patterns as does gender.

My defense of joint-carving social kinds so far has amounted to a defense of joint-carving functional kinds in general. But here we must confront a concern that Barnes raises which is specific to social kinds: Haslanger’s explanation of oppression in terms of social structures is different from explanation in the social sciences since it employs thick concepts such as oppression and hierarchy. But what exactly is the problem? Causation itself is not limited in scope to thin notions. So the problem must be in the distinctive causes and effects in a functional definition of a social kind: since those involve thick concepts, they cannot be joint-carving by my lights. Here she mentions an interesting problem of “bootstrapping”: if causation by thick concepts is allowed, then couldn’t just any cluster of concepts be argued to carve at the joints because of putative causal relations amongst the members of the cluster? But why think that causal relations are so cheap? The attempt to bootstrap might fail because the alleged causal relations simply don’t hold.

References


16 And I see no reason in principle why the reductionist about higher-level joint-carving should find broader notions of causation or law, which may be applied to thick concepts as well as thin, as being more problematic than narrower notions of causation or law.


