Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality
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Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality, by Katharine Jenkins, is a wonderful and engaging book in social ontology. It perfectly wedds a rigorous theoretical account of social kinds with a deep concern for oppressed people. I expect that Jenkins’ book will generate significant conversation about the nature of social kinds and the relation between social ontology (and philosophy in general) and efforts at achieving social justice.

The book centers around the notion of ‘ontic injustice.’ According to Jenkins, one can suffer injustice just by being constructed as a member of certain social kinds, e.g., being a slave. Central to this view is the idea that membership in a social kind is at least partly constituted by “constraints and enablements”. The idea here is that being a member of a social kind (at least partly) consists in being subject to various norms, expectations, rules, ideals, limitations, etc. For Jenkins, these constraints and enablements can be psychological, interpersonal, behavioral, or material. Ontic injustice occurs when a person is a member of a social kind whose constraints and enablements wrong the person. Her central example is the kind being a wife in the context of England and Wales prior to 1991. Under the law at this time, a husband could have sex with his wife without her consent and it would not legally count as rape. Jenkins argues that belonging to this kind (at this place and time) was itself unjust. However, it was not unjust only because it allowed for marital rape or that it exposed women to the likelihood of harmful treatment. Rather, Jenkins argues that was unjust because it subjected women to moral injury. That is, it damaged the realization or actualization of their moral worth. By being subjected to constraints and enablements that make physical or psychological harm more likely, their membership in the kind being a wife damaged the acknowledgement of the value and worth of these women.

Jenkins holds that ontic injustice is a general kind of injustice, under which falls what she calls ‘ontic oppression.’ Ontic oppression occurs when one is constructed as a member of a social kind that involves being subject to constraints and enablements that are systematic and subordinating. They are systematic in the sense that they are linked to other constraints and enablements that function to limit or restrain members of the kind. They are subordinating in that they funnel members of these kinds into social positions that involve exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, violence, etc. The wrong of ontic oppression, she holds, consists in a mismatch between what a person is morally owed and how they are treated. This mismatch constitutes the moral injury mentioned above.

Chapters 3 through 6 dig deeper into what Jenkins calls the ‘Constraint and Enablement Framework’. These chapters contain some of the most original and insightful work in the book. Jenkins develops a framework for articulating the various dimensions of constraints and enablements. First, Jenkins says that to effectively explain the social world, we need to identify the context in which the relevant constraints and enablements (C&E) apply. This is what she calls scope. Second, we need to identity the types of C&Es that are relevant, which is an issue of
She distinguishes four kinds of C&Es: (1) *Interpersonal C&Es* which concern the interpersonal behavior of individuals in a particular social context, (2) *Psychological C&Es* which concern how these individuals’ dispositions, attitudes, and beliefs are shaped, (3) *Bodily C&Es* which concern how their physical bodies are constrained and enabled by and in a social context, and (4) *Material C&Es* which concern how their material environments constrain and enable what they can or cannot do. Finally, Jenkins notes that theorists need to decide how general or specific the relevant C&Es are. This is the question of *granularity*. These distinctions—scope, breadth, and granularity—are immensely important for doing good social theory. Jenkins is to be commended for having such a broad and holistic view. The framework she creates allows us to integrate and organize the work others in social ontology (and social theory more generally) have done on specific kinds of C&Es.

One crucial feature of Jenkins’ view that emerges in chapter 3 is her commitment to pluralism about social kinds. This is the view that there are a plurality of social kinds falling under more general kinds like gender, race, disability, etc. For example, there may be many womanhood kinds depending on how we specify the scope, breadth, and granularity of the constraints and enablers we focus on.

Chapters 4, 5, and 6 concern what she calls “hegemonic social kinds”, “interpersonal social kinds”, and “identity social kinds”, respectively. Hegemonic race and gender kinds have a wide scope, maximally expansive breadth, and are fairly coarse-grained in terms of the C&Es associated with them. Jenkins argues that many hegemonic kinds are ontically oppressive. *Being a woman, being Black, and being queer*, for example, subject their members to C&Es that systemically subordinate them. Interpersonal kinds have a much narrower scope and breadth as they concern the C&Es one is subject to in a particular interpersonal context. She argues that some interpersonal kinds are ontically oppressive, e.g., *being Black in a grammar school context*, but that not all are, e.g., *being Black on the campus of Howard University*.

Finally, identity kinds concern how a person experiences the categories to which they belong. She distinguishes two senses of identity: (a) how one takes the norms of the kind to be relevant to themselves, and (b) how one understands who one is, i.e., the active process of identification. She argues that the first kind of identity kind cannot be ontically oppressive but that the second kind can be. The reason the first sort of identity kind is not ontically oppressive, Jenkins argues, is that merely taking some C&Es to be relevant to oneself does not fix the way in which one takes the norms to be relevant to oneself. For instance, one could take joy in flouting the expectations that come with *being a woman*.

There are aspects of the framework readers will want to know more about. Jenkins says very little, for example, about the relationships between hegemonic, interpersonal, and identity kinds. Are the norms that one takes to be relevant to oneself in belonging to a (norm-relevant) gender identity kind the same norms that constitute hegemonic and interpersonal gender kinds? This question gets at just how much overlap there is between the C&Es that constitute different kinds of social kinds. Another question for Jenkins is how she conceives of the relation between hegemonic kinds, on the one hand, and interpersonal and identity kinds on the other. Hegemonic kinds have C&Es that are wide scope, expansive in breadth, and coarse-grained. That means they apply to many more people across space and time than do interpersonal and identity kinds. So,
are members of hegemonic kinds always also members of interpersonal and identity kinds of the same sort (and vice versa)? Should we treat hegemonic kinds as genera under which fall species (either other hegemonic kinds or interpersonal or identity kinds)? Can one, for example, belong to a hegemonic race kind being Black that is ontically oppressive and also belong to an interpersonal race kind being Black that is liberatory and not ontically oppressive? If so, then why are both of these kinds race kinds in general, and ways of being Black in particular? Obviously, it cannot be the C&Es that constitutes these kinds since in the one case (the hegemonic race kind being Black) the C&Es are oppressive and in the other (a certain interpersonal race kind being Black) the C&Es are liberatory. So, it must be something else (perhaps matters of geographic ancestry and morphology?). All this is to raise questions for Jenkins about how her C&E framework and her social kind pluralism all hang together.¹

Nevertheless, one great virtue of these chapters—and her pluralist framework in general—is that it allows for a much richer and more nuanced discussion of social kinds. So many discussions in both academic and popular venues assumes that gender and race are monolithic: there is one thing it is to be a woman and one thing we mean by ‘woman’. Jenkins’ pluralism aids us in pushing against that reductive approach, asking us to be specific about context and scope, warning us not to generalize over important differences or conflate evidently distinct social phenomena.

Chapter 8 is an important chapter in the book. Her main concern in the chapter is how the notion of ontic oppression might contribute to trans liberation. She considers recent public debates in the UK around gender recognition and policies about who can use what public toilets. She argues that much of the debate—even from the side of trans-inclusive proponents—assumes what she calls the ‘ontology-first approach.’ According to this approach we should first settle the ontological question of, say, what it is to be a woman or a man, and only then decide how to arrange our gendered social practices. Jenkins argues that since many gender kinds are ontically oppressive, there is reason to reject the ontology-first approach: discussions and practices around gender should not be guided by unjust gender categories. Once we reject the ontology-first approach, says Jenkins, we are free to focus on how we should arrange our practices justly. For instance, we are then free to focus on the effects of policies about public toilets on trans and cis women. This chapter is exemplary for demonstrating how social ontology can be relevant to public discussions about important issues. It shows how rigorous philosophical thought can be used to reframe and refocus public debates in a way that promotes justice.

There is so much to commend about this book. I am inspired by Jenkins overall picture and her approach to social theorizing. But I do want to raise several concerns about certain aspects of her framework.

My first worry is about Jenkins’ view that social kinds are ‘explanatory kinds,’ i.e., kinds that can “figure in successful explanations” (2023: 78). She understands explanations to be answers to ‘why’ questions that are context relative. That means that whether a kind is explanatory is relative to the theorist’s explanatory purposes. At one point Jenkins says that certain social kinds

¹ Jenkins takes up a related ‘unification question’ in chapter 7. Her answer there is suggestive but doesn’t address the complex ways hegemonic, interpersonal, and identity kinds interact, e.g., overlap, nullify each other, or bolster each other.
exist because they can have explanatory value (2023: 109). I worry about tying social kinds too closely to the theorist’s interest, pure as they may be. I would think that the existence and value of a social kind lies not in the value that social ontologists or social scientists give it, but in the way that it effects the people who are constructed as members of the kind.

On Jenkins’ picture, there is a vast and complex web of C&Es holding together the social world. It is the theorist’s role to untangle them, to specify the scope, breadth, and granularity of the constrains and enablements. She likens differences in scope, breadth, and granularity to sliders on a sound mixing board (2023: 89). Jenkins writes,

Different combinations of settings will give us different outputs. The [Constraints and Enablements Framework] offers a way of theorizing constitutively constructed human social kinds that can be used to identify many different kinds, according to our different emancipatory purposes. It does this by picking out scope, breadth, and granularity as the important variables, against a background picture of human social kinds as explanatory kinds. (2023: 89)

That analogy, as helpful as it is for understanding the ways these C&Es can combine, suggests that the theorist with their explanatory projects is the one who divides up the social world, who deems some kinds as valuable and worthy of explanation and others not. I don’t for a second think that Jenkins intends to take the focus off oppressed people and put it on the theorist herself. It’s just that her ontology of social kinds leaves it ambiguous who/what is dividing up social reality into real, explanatorily rich, and valuable kinds as opposed to thin, non-explanatory, and non-valuable kinds. Given that theorists themselves tend to belong to privileged groups, it is important that their explanatory interests—precisely because they can be myopic, shortsighted, and ignorant—not overshadow the very real suffering and oppression marginalized people face.

My second concern is about the role of the body in Jenkins’ account. There is so much focus on C&Es that it’s hard to see what role actual bodily features play in the construction of race and gender kinds. Jenkins does have a category of bodily C&Es (2023: 101ff.) and in chapter 5 there is a brief discussion of Ásta’s (2018) conferralist framework where certain bodily features are what people are tracking when the confer social statuses on others. On Jenkins’ view social kinds are at least partly constituted by C&Es. Given her detailed discussions of the different kinds of race and gender kinds (hegemonic, interpersonal, identity) it would have been helpful to know how much of these kinds is constituted by the C&Es vs. actual bodily features. For example, how much of having a disability, e.g., cerebral palsy, is constituted by C&Es and how much is constituted by facts about brain/muscle connections? I realize that may be too much to ask for since Jenkins’ aim is just to provide a framework that can then be used to understand specific social kinds. But even still, the worry is that the material body fades from significance on her account where the emphasis is so heavy on C&Es.

Third, Jenkins justifies the commitment to thinking that social kinds are at least partly constituted by C&Es by noting that it is something of a consensus among social ontologists. Chapter 7, I should note, contains a very illuminating discussion of this commitment and Jenkins does a nice job of handling objections to it. But I do want to probe a bit further about her commitment to the ‘consensus’ view that social kinds are constituted by C&Es. On the face of it,
it’s not clear what it means for a kind to be ‘constituted’ by constraints and enablements. Is it literally made up of those C&E, is it defined by them, or is it in some other way dependent on them? Jenkins is sensitive to these questions. In chapter 7 she explicates the commitment in terms of metaphysical grounding (2023: 183ff.). The idea here is that facts involving a social kind, e.g., the fact that Maria is a woman, is at least partially grounded in facts concerning the C&Es Maria is subject to. Social kinds, then, are constituted by C&Es in the sense that C&Es help ground a social fact involving the relevant social kind.

I worry that this ends up being too strong a commitment. There do seem to be social kinds that are not grounded in C&Es. The fact that a bill is a US dollar is grounded in facts concerning where it was printed and issued, among others. But it doesn’t seem that any C&Es help ground it. The C&Es associated with the use of US dollars must enter into the picture somewhere else. Of course, Jenkins is not focused on such social kinds, but rather human social kinds like race and gender. But here again, I think there is a case to be made that some such kinds are not grounded in C&Es. Take for example, certain legal constructions of race. Suppose some legislators declare that to be Black is to have at least one recent ancestor of African descent. That declaration, when passed into law, determines the grounds for being Black in that context. But those grounds need not contain the sundry C&Es that come with being Black. Such a kind might still have C&E associated with it, but they wouldn’t be constitutive of the kind, in Jenkins’ sense.

Thus, there are other ways to understand how C&Es are related to social kinds beyond constitution, definition, or grounding. We might wonder whether a one size fits all approach to this relation is necessary. Perhaps some human social kinds (in some contexts) are constituted by C&Es and others are not. Jenkins is only committed to saying that some social kinds are ontically unjust, namely those that subject their members to moral injury through their C&Es. But she is clear that not all social kinds are ontically unjust (2023: 153ff.; 169ff.). Perhaps some of those are the ones that are not constituted by C&Es. Such a view would not require her to give up the notion of ontic injustice. Of course, other views might, e.g., a view that said no social kind is constituted by C&Es would entail that there is no ontic injustice. There might be injustice on such a view, but it wouldn’t be ontic.

This raises some interesting questions about how much of a role metaphysics—as opposed to normative considerations viz. C&Es—is playing in emancipatory projects. If social kinds aren’t constituted by their associated C&Es, then a metaphysics of social kinds per se may not play the role that Jenkins envisions for such an account. Of course, that wouldn’t mean that oppression and injustice couldn’t be explained, only that the metaphysics would need supplementation by normative (and empirical) considerations.

What role should we expect metaphysics to play in social justice goals? Jenkins’ writes much about ‘emancipatory theory.’ For her that means that the experiences of the oppressed serve as a central ‘touchstone’ for theorizing about the social world. But it also means that an account of social kinds can help frame, clarify, reformulate, and evaluate our thinking and acting in ways that contribute to achieving justice. Just what that contribution is remains to be seen as it depends upon the actual causal impact such theorizing has on the lived experiences of people. Jenkins is careful, in the end, not to claim too much for metaphysics or philosophy in general. That’s wise since working to end oppression is primarily a ‘boots on the ground’ effort. That said, I hope
others will follow Jenkins’ example of writing socially engaged metaphysics. She shows how the rich resources of social ontology can be used for effective social critique and for envisioning a more just social reality.²

² Huge thanks to Emilie Pagano and Katrina Haaksma for their amazing insights on Jenkins’ book as we read through it together. I especially appreciate the excellent comments Pagano gave on an earlier draft of this review.