Metaphysics and Social Justice
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Abstract

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy that aims to give a theoretical account of what there is and what it is like. Social justice movements seek to bring about justice in a society by changing policy, law, practice, and culture. Evidently, these activities are very different from one another. The goal of this article is to identify some positive connections between recent work in metaphysics and social justice movements. I outline three ways in which metaphysical work on social reality can make a contribution to movements seeking social justice, viz. (1) by providing basic categories and concepts useful for clarifying and defending claims made by social justice movements, (2) by offering accounts of the natures of social categories, structures, and institutions that these movements seek to change, and (3) by contributing to 'unmasking' or 'debunking' projects that reveal putatively natural arrangements to be social in nature and hence subject to moral critique, alteration, and possibly eradication.

1. Introduction

What has metaphysics to do with social justice? It is tempting to think that, at best, the two have nothing to do with each other, and, at worst, that the two are inimical. Such a view is understandable. A predominate image of western metaphysics is one of cool-headed objective, disinterested, and socially isolated inquiry into eternal truths, undertaken almost exclusively by affluent white men. The resulting metaphysical theories seem either irrelevant to our complex and messy social lives or implicated in the defense of social arrangements that benefit some (viz. the metaphysician and those like him) and disadvantage others. Another reason for the apparent tension is that the two activities seem to engage the world in opposing ways. In giving a theoretical account

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of the nature and structure of reality, metaphysics abstracts from specific phenomena and experiences. On the other hand, social justice movements are inherently practical and particular; they are born out of and remain engaged with concrete lived situations, viz. specific forms of oppression and possibilities for liberation.

Even if western metaphysics has historically been irrelevant or inimical to social justice movements, this need not be how the two activities relate. Metaphysicians have periodically throughout history, but recently with vigor turned their attention to the social world and to the nature and scope of their own discipline. The turn to social metaphysics in combination with careful reflection on the nature of metaphysical inquiry bodes well for a positive relation between metaphysics and contemporary social justice movements, or so I will argue. In this article, I outline three ways in which recent work in the metaphysics of social reality—i.e., social ontology—can make a contribution to movements seeking social justice, viz. (1) by providing basic categories and concepts useful for clarifying and defending claims made by social justice movements such as Black Lives Matter and Women's March; (2) by offering accounts of the natures of social categories, structures, and institutions that these movements seek to change; (3) by contributing to 'unmasking' or 'debunking' projects that reveal putatively natural arrangements to be social in nature and hence subject to moral critique, alteration, and possibly eradication.

2. Metaphysics and Social Justice

Metaphysics is the branch of philosophy aimed at understanding, in the most general terms possible, what there is and what it is like. Various theoretical inquiries fall under this generic description, such as the inquiries into (a) what entities can and do exist; (b) the basic categories into which actual and possible entities fall; (c) the natures or essences of actual and possible entities; (d)

the basic structure of reality; (e) the presuppositions and first principles of various forms of inquiry (including metaphysics itself) (cf. Haslanger 2012b, 140).

One important aim of metaphysics is to outline the possibilities for how the world is (Lowe 2011, 104). With these possibilities on the table, metaphysicians then offer arguments for why one of the possibilities is the way the world actually is, e.g., that immaterial souls exist or that there are irreducibly temporal properties. Or they argue that certain kinds of entities or phenomena can coexist with each other or not, e.g., God and evil or freedom and determinism. Metaphysicians use a variety of forms of reasoning to reach these conclusions: counterfactual and modal reasoning, thought experiments, inferences to the best explanation, tracking entailment relations and unearthing hidden contradictions, postulating entities to do certain theoretical jobs, weighing theoretical costs and benefits of different views, and reasoning from well-established empirical findings, among others (Bennett 2016, 25).

What is social justice? While conceptions of social justice have varied throughout the history of philosophy, the core concept seems be that of a state of a society in which everyone receives what they morally deserve. Consequently, a just society will not deprive its members of resources, privileges, opportunities, rights, and, in general, what is needed to live a minimally decent life in that society, based on morally irrelevant factors like ability, religion, race, gender, and sexual orientation, among others. Unfortunately, these factors have been and continue to be used to rationalize, institutionalize, replicate, and maintain unfair and inequitable social arrangements. Social justice movements seek to achieve justice for particular groups of people who have not received justice in a society. These movements aim to change policy, law, representation, social practices, and/or culture (including prevalent attitudes, meanings, and values). They do so in a variety of way, e.g., by securing the fair distribution of resources and privileges, by dismantling oppressive social structures, by protesting (violently and non-violently), by rectifying past injustices, by securing rights (human, civil,

and legal) for certain groups of people, among others.[1] Historical examples of social justice movements include the abolitionist movement to end slavery in the 19th century, the women's suffrage movement of the early 20th century, and the Civil Rights movements in the mid-20th century. Black Lives Matter,[2] Women's March,[3] Standing Rock No DAPL Protests,[4] GATE[5], Independent Living[6] and the Humane Society of the United States[7] are examples of (participants in) contemporary social justice movements.

3. Metaphysics' Contribution to Social Justice

The foregoing makes clear that metaphysics and social justice movements have substantially different aims and different orientations towards the world. Nevertheless, metaphysics focused on the social world—social ontology—can still contribute to understanding and realizing the aims of social justice movements. The aim of this form of metaphysical inquiry is to identify the basic categories into which social entities fall and to delineate the organization of the social world in order to understand how it is produced and maintained. Metaphysicians can contribute to social justice movements in three ways: (1) in their capacity as maintainers of the "metaphysical toolbox," i.e., the set of foundational concepts (3.1), (2) with their accounts of the nature and structure of the social world (3.2), and (3) by distinguishing the appearance of the social world from its reality.

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[1] On the philosophy of social movements in general, see Kolers (2016).
2. http://blacklivesmatter.com/about/
3. https://www.womensmarch.com/mission
4. http://standwithstandingrock.net
[5] http://transactivists.org
6. http://www.ncil.org/about/aboutil/
7. http://www.humanesociety.org/about/?credit=web_id93480558.
The scope of social justice is controversial. There is disagreement, for instance, about whether social justice concerns apply to non-human animals, fetuses/unborn children, and eco-systems. For this reason, there is controversy about what issues and coalitions various movements should include, e.g., whether Women's March should include groups like Feminists for Life, a feminist group opposed to abortion.

3.1   The Metaphysical Toolbox

Karen Bennett thinks that "Metaphysics is—largely but not exhaustively—the maintainer of the toolbox. It investigates the categories, tools, and notions upon which other philosophers (and non-philosophers) uncritically rely" (2016, 32). While I doubt that reliance on these tools has been completely uncritical outside of metaphysical circles, Bennett is right that metaphysics offers rigorous conceptions of the basic concepts that are foundational to many endeavors, both practical and theoretical, e.g., cause, kind, essence, substance, property, law, necessity, possibility, dependence, etc. To see this role for metaphysics vis-à-vis social justice, consider the following mission statements from the Black Lives Matter and Women's March movements, respectively (emphasis added):

> Black Lives Matter is an ideological and political intervention in a world where Black lives are *systematically* and intentionally targeted for demise. It is an affirmation of *Black folks' humanity*, our contributions to this society, and our resilience in the face of deadly *oppression.*[8]

> The mission of the Women's March is to harness the political *power* of diverse women and their communities to create *transformative* social change. The Women's March is a *women*-led movement providing *intersectional* education on a diverse range of issues to create entry points for new grassroots activists and organizers to engage in their local communities through trainings, outreach programs and events. Women's March is committed to dismantling *systems of oppression* though nonviolent resistance and building inclusive *structures* guided by *self-determination*, dignity and respect.[9]

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8. https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/herstory/
9. https://march.womensmarch.com/mission-and-principles

These mission statements include or presuppose concepts that can be the focus of metaphysical analysis, e.g., 'social group,' 'social kind,' 'social identity,' 'institution,' 'system,' 'structure,' 'autonomy,' 'self,'[10] 'oppression,'[11] 'power,'[12] 'transformation,'[13] and 'intersectionality.'[14] To understand the notion of a social kind[15], for example, requires an understanding of kinds in general, which is intimately connected to other foundational metaphysical notions such as 'essence,' 'laws,' 'causation,' and 'explanation.' Understanding the connections between the concepts at the base of social justice movements and those in the metaphysician's toolbox can enrich and supplement the former, which are developed out of local, lived experience. Metaphysics, focused on the social world, can help make perspicuous and justify the commitments and aims of social justice movements.

For instance, the mission statements refer to 'Black folks' and 'women,' respectively. Both are concepts of social groups. Metaphysicians have developed detailed accounts of such groups.[16] Ideally, the benefit of such accounts is that they provide ways of determining inclusion in these groups, how these groups change and persist over time, and they shed light on the nature of the oppression facing members of these groups. Take, for example, Natalie Stoljar's (1995) work on the category *women*.[17] She argues that the gender categories should not be understood in terms of

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[10] See Holdroy (2011) and the papers in Mackenzie and Stoljar (2000) for feminist metaphysical approaches to autonomy and self.

[11] See Haslanger (2012c) on oppression.

[12] See Burman (2007) and Searle (2010) on social power.

[13] See Paul (2014) on transformative experience.

[14] See Bernstein (ms) and Ritchie (forthcoming) develop metaphysical accounts of intersectionality

[15] See Mason (2016) for a review of recent work on social kinds. On social kinds in general see Hacking (1995), Khalidi (2013, 2015), Mallon (2016), and Thomasson (2003). For a review of recent work on social groups, see Ritchie (2015). For proposals about the ontology social groups see Effingham (2010), Epstein (2015; forthcoming), Ritchie (2013), Thomasson (2016), Tollefsen (2015), and Uzquiano (2004).

[16] On gender and gender identity see Alcoff (2005; 2006), Ásta (2011, 2013, 2018), Bach (2012), Butler (1990, 1993), Dembroff (forthcoming), Frye (2011), Haslanger (2000), Jenkins (2016), Mikkola (2011), Stoljar (1995), Stone (2004), Witt (2011), and Zack (2005). On race and racial identity see Andreasen (2000), Alcoff (2006), Appiah (1996), Glasgow (2009), Hardimon (2017), Haslanger (2000), Hochman (2017), Jeffers (2013), Mallon (2003; 2016), Mills (1998), Root (2000), Spencer (2014), Sundstrom (2002), Taylor (2000; 2013), and Zack (2002). On sexual orientation see Dembroff (2016). On disability see Ásta (2018) and Barnes (2016).

[17]. See Frye (2011) for a similar approach.

Aristotelian essences. The concept of 'women,' she claims, should be understood as a cluster concept that applies to a resemblance class, i.e., a concept involving a cluster of different features that applies to persons who have enough, but not necessarily all, of those features. Importantly there is no set of particular features necessary and sufficient for category membership on this account. Stoljar claims that this account captures certain key feminist insights and commitments: it allows individuals without female sex characteristics to be women, it allows us to understand gender as a matter of degree, it explains the 'felt similarities' between women, and it can accommodate revisionist conceptions of the category of women.[18]

Having metaphysical accounts of the concepts and categories central to social justice movements can also aid in defending the claims of these movements. Movements, like Black Lives Matter and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow[19], that seek justice for people of color aim at undermining not only interpersonal injustices, but also 'systematic' or 'structural' injustices. Injustice is systematic insofar as it manifests itself at the level of the structure, maintenance, and effects of certain social systems, e.g., the criminal justice system or the education system. But understanding and defending such a claim requires some conception of 'social structure' and 'social institution,' among others.[20] Showing that a structure or institution is racist requires conceptions of these entities on which they are the appropriate bearers of the property *being racist*. If a metaphysical account of these phenomena can contribute to showing how it is possible for a social structure, system, or institution to be racist, then it can contribute to efforts to combat systematic or structural racism.

There is a concern with thinking of metaphysicians as the maintainers of the conceptual and theoretical toolbox Bennett mentions. Audre Lorde famously says that "the master's tools will never

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[18] It is well-know that defining the category *women* is fraught issue in feminist theory. Some are skeptical that it can be done, e.g., Spelman (1988) and Butler (1990, 1993). Mikkola (2016b) argues that attempts to provide a metaphysically robust account of the category *women* are distracting from the political aim of feminism.
19. http://nationinside.org/campaign/campaign-to-end-the-new-jim-crow/
[20] On social structure see Burman (2007), Barnes (2017), Haslanger (2007; 2016), Mills (1997; 1998), Ritchie (forthcoming). On institutions see Burman (2007), Epstein (2015), Guala (2013), Searle (1995; 2010), and Tuomela (2013).

dismantle the master's house" (2007). Lorde's immediate audience was white academic feminists who had not appreciated the importance of differences between women and had not confronted the racist elements of the feminist movement. In our context, the worry with thinking of metaphysicians as maintainers of the toolbox is that these *tools* might harbor the very racist, sexist, abilist, etc. prejudices that social justice movements are fighting against. But perhaps a deeper worry is that the *maintainers* of the toolbox themselves may not be in a position to responsibly maintain the toolbox given that they are by and large privileged in terms of race, gender, class, ability, etc. These are legitimate concerns. Sadly, the history of philosophy offers examples that realize these concerns.[21]

However, neither the toolbox of foundational concepts nor the maintainers of the toolbox are immune from critique or alteration. With regard to maintaining the tools in the toolbox, metaphysicians need not see themselves as embarked on an entirely *a priori*, value-neutral inquiry into the fundamentals of reality that is impervious to outside influence. Haslanger, for example, holds that "the question, the puzzles, and the proposed answers [of metaphysics] arise within our thinking in response to current theoretical and practical demands" (2012b, 146).[22] On this view, the very questions we ask, the concepts we employ, and the factors that influence theory choice are sensitive to and conditioned by our interests, history, and social environments (which need not imply that the answers we come up with are not justified or true). According to these metaphysicians, moral, social, and political values are 'always already' at play in shaping metaphysical inquiry. Insofar as metaphysics is concerned with its own first principles, it can neither ignore these factors nor pretend that they are not shaping its inquiry. Metaphysics, then, has the task of bringing these shaping factors to light and counteracting their shaping force when necessary. Giving rigorous accounts of fundamental notions like 'cause,' 'nature,' 'substance,' 'person,' and 'essence' need not

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[21] For instance, see papers collected in Valls (2005).
[22] Also see Mikkola (2016a, 2016b) on the connection between feminist metaphysics and the methodology of metaphysics. Thomasson (2016) addresses these issues as well.

be done ignorantly of the way in which such notions have played a role in frameworks that help justify inequality or otherwise preclude certain perspectives and concerns.

With regard to the maintainers of the toolbox themselves, metaphysicians qua philosophers are (ideally) in the business of perpetual self-reflection and critique. If metaphysics is to be of support to social justice movements, metaphysicians will have to carefully reflect on (a) how their own identities and attendant privileges shape their maintenance of the toolbox, (b) who is excluded or marginalized from positions of influence and power in the discipline, and (c) what topics and approaches in metaphysics are considered core and which are considered peripheral. Just maintenance of the toolbox may require fundamental change in both the theoretical orientation of metaphysics as well as the composition of the discipline itself.

Another, related, worry is that the metaphysician's toolbox itself poses a problem for making any contribution to social justice movements that are concerned with immensely complex concrete situations that defy abstract classification.[23] It is true that the metaphysician's method to categorize and analyze in terms of fundamental concepts will distort and reduce complex and ambiguous social phenomena when metaphysical theorizing is elevated to the primary mode of engagement with these phenomena. But the metaphysician should not see their tools, methods, or theoretical orientation as primary or privileged when dealing with the oppression and liberation of others. In this context, they should see their metaphysical toolbox as just that; a set of tools that are useful for certain jobs but not others. The metaphysical toolbox can be helpful to pursuits of justice if it is used as auxiliary support for social engagement (viz. in its capacity to clarify, make precise, and offer arguments), rather than as the privileged means by which all theoretical and practical matters are framed and resolved.

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23. Thanks to Matthew Halteman for raising this concern.

Metaphysicians, however, are in a unique position, as maintainers of the foundational toolbox, to critique the ways in which other philosophers and scholars might conceal hidden biases or unfairly exclude certain questions, traditions, and participants. (Of course, they are also in a unique position to misuse the toolbox in just these ways, as was just discussed). For example, the metaphysician is uniquely positioned to critique traditional conceptions of 'essence' (see Witt 1995). They are able to determine what notion of essence, if any, is appropriately applied to social categories like gender and race. They can diagnose when a notion of essence is being assumed by defenders of some philosophical view or social arrangement. And they can evaluate the adequacy of these notions and compare them with other possibilities. Another example is Barnes' (2014) argument that some influential conceptions of the discipline of metaphysics[24] entail that certain questions pertaining to social reality, which are of interest to feminists (and to theorists of race and disability among others) are unsubstantial, trivial, or shallow. Metaphysics provides a powerful toolkit for developing such criticisms.

3.2   The Nature of Social Reality

While having a metaphysical construal of the key concepts of social justice movements is fine and good as far as it goes, there is still the question of how this contributes to the success of social justice movements. Such movements aim at changing social reality in certain respects. By offering accounts of the social realities that these movements seek to change, metaphysics can help pinpoint the features of social reality that need to be altered or eradicated for the relevant social change. Metaphysics can help us identify, as Haslanger puts it, "levers for change" in the social world (2012a, 215).

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24. Those of Sider (2011), Schaffer (2009), and Dorr (2005). See replies from Sider (2017) and Schaffer (2017).

Take, for example, recent work on social kinds and social construction.[25] Inquiry into social

kinds is inquiry into the ontology of the social world, i.e., the basic categories into which social

entities fall. Inquiry into social construction is inquiry into dependence relations between things in

social reality, hence into the general organization or structure of the social world. Both are

quintessential metaphysical inquiries. Social kinds like race, gender, and (dis)ability are kinds or sorts

into which people fall in society. These kinds are thought to be socially constructed in the sense that

whether persons belong to these kinds is at least partly determined by social factors and not merely

by intrinsic or biological features of persons. Having one's race, gender, or (dis)ability constructed in

this manner serves to *position* the person in social reality. That is, it fixes the roles, norms, and

powers for the person in that society. Constructionists highlight the unjust nature of many of these

social positions. Occupying some of these social positions involves, on some accounts (see

Haslanger 2012c), various forms of subordination and oppression. For constructionists, these kinds

are products of patterns of human interaction, including our classificatory practices (e.g., 'you're

white, you're black'), the functioning of certain institutions (e.g., the criminal justice system), social

material environments[26], and common attitudes and beliefs about these identities (e.g., implicit

association of blackness with criminality).

Every social justice movement presupposes some understanding of (i) the group who has

been wronged, (ii) the nature of the wrong, (iii) the source of the wrong, and (iv) how to correct the

wrong. The constructionist approach to racial, gender, and (dis)ability kinds offers an account of the

nature of the groups wronged—(i). But the constructionist approach also helps explain the nature

and sources of the wrongs done to members of the oppressed group—(ii) and (iii). For it identifies

the unique roles, norms, and powers of these identities that help cause or constitute the

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25. For recent work on the metaphysics of social construction see Ásta (2015, 2018), Diaz-Leon (2013), Epstein (2015), Griffith (2018a, 2018b), Haslanger (1995; 2003; 2012a), Hacking (1999), Mallon (2007, 2016), Marques (2017), and Schaffer (2017).
26 See Sundstrom (2003) and Mallon (2018) for discussion vis-à-vis the construction of race.

subordination of those with these identities. Moreover, by identifying the source of these wrongs—i.e., the specific patterns of human interaction that produce or construct these identities—the approach also points us to remedies for these wrongs—(iv). By highlighting the social factors upon which races, genders, and (dis)abilities depend, the approach isolates the social factors that need to be altered or eradicated in order to end the wrongs being done to the members of these groups. By articulating the *kinds* of social factors that produce these unjust arrangements, the metaphysician can help those working on the ground to identify and change *instances* of the social arrangements of those kinds (cf. Diaz Leon 2015).

Constructionists—as explorers of the general structure and organization of the social world—are interested in the *mechanisms* by which social kinds and identities are produced and maintained. That is, they seek to identify the precise ways in which certain social phenomena arise from other social phenomena. Consider, for example, Ásta's (2013; 2018) metaphysical account of the construction of gender. On this account, gender, e.g., *being a woman*, is a 'conferred' property, i.e., a property someone has in virtue of how they are regarded by others. She argues that gender gets conferred by subjects with some standing in a particular context, who are attempting to track certain 'base properties', e.g., anatomical properties, social role, or role in biological reproduction (2018, 74-5). Ásta thinks that in the context of a party, for example, partygoers may confer *being a woman* on other partygoers by perceiving them to have certain base properties. The background social context shapes when and how *being a woman* is conferred insofar as the partygoers 'echo' or 'cite' social standards, expectations, and prohibitions attached to the category of *being a woman* in the partygoers' contexts outside the party. This account illuminates, first, what the category *women* is, second the mechanisms by which womanhood is constructed and hence the possibilities for changing (or even eradicating) womanhood. Insofar as women face oppression as women, understanding how, in what conditions, and against the background of which standards and assumptions womanhood is

conferred can contribute to ending that oppression. In general, social constructionist accounts of social categories can elucidate the nature of, and hence possibilities for, the social structures justice movements seek to challenge and change.

Another example of this role for metaphysics comes from inquiry into the mechanisms by which social institutions and social structures are built and maintained. It is well-documented that the US criminal justice system incarcerates black and brown people at significantly higher proportions than the rest of the population.[27] Groups like Critical Resistance[28], Families Against Mandatory Minimums[29], and the Campaign to End the New Jim Crow[30] all work to end the so-called 'prison-industrial complex' and the disproportionate rates incarceration of black and brown persons. Even when the rules and laws constituting and maintaining the criminal justice system are stated in race neutral language, the effects of the institutions are racially discriminatory. The functioning of the system, then, contributes to a discriminatory social structure—often unnoticed by those in power—in which black and brown persons are positioned in subordinate roles.

Social metaphysicians are concerned with understanding these very dynamics. They ask about the conditions under which institutions like the criminal justice system emerge and about how those conditions are held in place by collective agreements, ingrained social practices and attitudes, as well as aspects of material reality (e.g., the architecture and layout of urban areas).[31] These are not primarily questions about the causal history of such institutions, to which historians or social scientists might provide an answer. Rather, these are metaphysical questions about what the social entities at issue are 'built' out of or consist in. Brian Epstein's (2015, 2016) 'grounding' and 'anchoring' framework provides a way to model these dynamics. On Epstein's account, the grounds

27. See Alexander (2012) and Stevenson (2015) for the legal details.
28. http://criticalresistance.org
29. http://famm.org
30. http://nationinside.org/campaign/campaign-to-end-the-new-jim-crow/
31. See Mallon (2016), Mills (1997; 1998), Taylor (2013), and Sundstrom (2003).

for a social fact are the facts in virtue of which the social fact obtains. The anchors for the social fact fix or put in place the conditions under which facts of one sort ground facts of another sort. Inquiry into both grounds and anchors is, for Epstein, necessary to understand the social world's basic building blocks but also its structure or 'joints,' i.e., the features upon which its very existence and maintenance depend. Once this structure has been made evident, we are then in a better position to track, challenge, and change the patterns of social interaction grounding and anchoring unjust social arrangements. Of course, changing these patterns and institutions requires social and political action from a broad network of individuals, organizations, and institutions. But metaphysicians can contribute by offering precise accounts of the social phenomena that shape our daily lives and that are targets of social justice movements.

3.3 Appearance and Reality

Metaphysics, according to Peter van Inwagen, aims to "get behind all appearances and describe things as they really are" (1998, 11). Above I highlighted the aim of social metaphysics to provide accounts of the nature and structure of social reality. Like other things, our social arrangements can appear to us in certain way, but their reality be quite different from how they appear. 19th century slave owners, for instance, argued that slavery was a natural state for black persons. Gender categories still appear to many today to be completely natural, inevitable categories into which people fall: you have a penis, you're a man; you have a vagina, you're a woman. Similarly, certain physical conditions of a person's body might be regarded as a natural or inevitable state that constitutes a disability insofar as it prevents the person from performing certain actions.

One function of metaphysics with respect to social justice, then, is to distinguish appearance from reality in its account of the social world. Those engaged in the so-called 'debunking' or 'unmasking' project aim to expose what appears to be natural, fixed, and inevitable for what it really

is: social, alterable, and contingent.[32] Unmasking the reality of chattel slavery, for instance, revealed

that that the intuition was actually rooted in economic interest and racial hatred rather than any

natural order in society.[33] Social constructionists about gender, for example, argue that while it

appears to many that feminine attributes, e.g., wearing certain clothes, makeup, having domestic

interests, walking and talking in certain ways, are inevitable consequences of being biologically

female, such attributes are actually products of contingent social standards, expectations, and rules.

Disability offers a similar example. A physical condition that is thought to be a natural disability is

revealed to be social and contingent in nature when the structure and organization of the society is

properly understood: its being a disability is in fact due to how the social environment is currently

arranged, e.g., the architecture of our buildings or the organization of supermarkets and public

spaces (cf. Ásta 2015 and Barnes 2016). Still another example comes from work on the metaphysics

of pregnancy. Kingma (2018) notes that most people have the view that a fetus is distinct from the

mother though contained in the mother's womb during pregnancy. She argues that the relationship

between the fetus and mother is actually part-whole: the fetus is part of the mother until birth when

one organism splits into two.

However, sometimes reality does not 'lie behind' appearance; sometimes appearance creates

reality. Social metaphysicians notice that the social world itself is at least partly dependent upon how

we take it to be. For instance, on Ásta's (2018) conferralist framework, being regarded as a member

of a social category plays a role in one's being a member of that category. Similarly, Searle (1995,

2010) holds that institutional facts are produced by the collective recognition of certain rules stating

that something, e.g., a line of stones, counts as performing a certain function, e.g., being a border

between countries, in a context. Collective recognition has a power on Searle's view to produce and

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32. See Ásta (2018) and Haslanger (2003) on the debunking project. N.B. The debunking project is not always aimed at revealing the natural and inevitable as social and non-inevitable. Sometimes what appears to be social, non-inevitable, or a matter of choice is revealed to be fixed, inevitable, or unchosen. Sexual orientation may be one such example.
33 See Boxill (2001) for discussion.

maintain the social world. Hacking (1995) argues that the natures of human kinds, e.g., refugee or schizophrenic, are constantly changing with our classificatory practices. He writes, "People classified in a certain way tend to conform to or grow into the ways that they are described; but they also evolve in their own ways, so that the classifications and descriptions have to be constantly revised" (1995: 21). For example, people diagnosed with a psychological condition might come to see themselves as having the condition and then conform their actions and thoughts to the diagnosis, thereby confirming the categorization to their doctors and acquaintances. But the self-understanding of categorized people can evolve (via, e.g., intentional resistance, support groups, or public advocacy, etc.), resulting in alterations to how the category itself is understood. With such categories, there is a 'looping effect' in which the category modifies the people categorized, who in turn modify the category itself.

By revealing the true ontology of our social world, social metaphysics helps uncover both sources of injustice and possibilities for a just society. When an unjust arrangement is unmasked as social in nature or is realized to be dependent upon our ways of thinking or acting, it forces us to confront who and what is responsible for that arrangement. It forces us to recognize our individual and collective obligations to right the social wrong. In this way, the contribution of social metaphysics to social justice is not entirely theoretical. Revealing the true nature and structure of social reality is interminably entangled with matters of morality and justice.[34]

4. Conclusion

I have argued here that the discipline of metaphysics (at least in certain applications) has something to offer contemporary social justice movements: It is worth, in closing, to emphasize that this contribution is a modest one. Although academic metaphysics has something unique to offer

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34. See Ásta's interview on the podcast *Elucidations* for this argument.
(https://assets.pippa.io/shows/57b498490b5f3f772a76004a/83578ae8486441af0bbdca82a5aef038.mp3).

social justice movements at the theoretical level, its contribution is largely complementary and auxiliary: it informs and enriches these movements without being indispensable to them. Professional philosophy stands at distance removed from the realities of life. This is not only because the discipline's engagement with the world is primarily through research, writing, and teaching, but also because it remains mostly populated by privileged people. Social justice movements have their origin and motivation in the concrete experience of suffering and oppressed people. Theoretical reflection can aid in understanding, defense and motivation, but is not a substitute for social and political action.[35]

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