

The Role of Values in Feminist Metaphysics

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I. Introduction

This paper concerns an apparent tension between the normative political commitments of feminism and the objective truth-seeking aims of metaphysics. Metaphysical theories are essentially descriptive – they are in the business of giving explanatory and descriptively adequate representations of what the world is like. This isn't to say that metaphysics is a value neutral enterprise, but the constitutive aim of descriptive accuracy constrains the sorts of values that are admissible: values are admissible to the extent that they increase proximity to truth. By contrast, feminist metaphysics aims to build theories that are supportive of, and conducive to, feminist justice. When giving metaphysical theories about the nature of gender, sexualities, the self, reason, nature, mind and body, etc. feminists metaphysicians claim that traditional metaphysics has either ignored certain kinds of metaphysical questions or has constructed theories which have been influenced by androcentric and patriarchal values. Metaphysical theories can support or hinder emancipatory social projects and feminist metaphysics aims to furnish us with theories which support such efforts. It must therefore incorporate values which go beyond the abstract values which promote descriptive adequacy and truth.

This invites an important methodological question: doesn't the incorporation of feminist values into the methodological toolkit of metaphysics compromise its status as a descriptive enterprise? We can articulate this worry running in both directions. For feminist metaphysicians, the worry will be that there is a non-contingent hostility from traditional metaphysics to philosophical projects concerned with building theories about the nature of reality which are in the serve of justice. For traditional metaphysicians, the worry will be that taking justice-conduciveness to be a constraint on the construction and acceptability of metaphysical theories mischaracterizes the explanatory, truth-seeking, descriptive nature of metaphysical inquiry.

The aim of this paper is threefold. First, I motivate this apparent tension: we have reason to worry that the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of justice might pull metaphysical theories about the nature of social reality in different directions. Second, I identify two desiderata for any acceptable reconciliation of this putative tension, that are derived from the shortcomings of the pre-existing responses. Previous responses to this tension have either compromised the descriptive ambitions of metaphysics or they have ended up problematically curtailing the force of the relevant feminist commitments. Finally, I articulate a way of dissolving the tension which doesn't compromise the demands of truth or justice. I offer a methodology for social metaphysics which can explain why we should think that truth and justice do not pull theories in different directions.

II. Articulating the Tension

The core concern of this paper is the apparent tension between the political commitments of feminism and the objective truth-seeking aims of metaphysics. Why might someone think that this tension would arise? Clearly the emergence of any tension depends upon the relevant conceptions of both the traditional analytic metaphysical project and feminist metaphysics. I will explain how I'm understanding these in turn.

With respect to how I'm thinking of the aims of traditional analytic metaphysics, I want to be as ecumenical as possible. I take the core commitment of traditional analytic metaphysics to be that its theories are essentially descriptive, in the sense that metaphysical theories are in the business of giving descriptively accurate representations of what the world is like. This calls for some immediate clarification. First, clearly different theorists will place further constraints on what counts as an adequate theory, beyond descriptive accuracy. Maybe the language used to express the theory must be joint-carving, maybe along with descriptive accuracy theories need to be explanatory in some sense (with many different conceptions of explanation to choose from), maybe theories need to be fruitful or underwrite predictive success. There are many potential additions which make a metaphysical theory a good metaphysical theory, but minimally to pass the first hurdle the theory must be descriptively accurate. Second, I've intentionally not expressed this in terms of fundamentality. I think we can accept that you can do the metaphysics of the non-fundamental and still worry that there is something about the methodological commitments of *feminist* metaphysics which don't sit right with the descriptive, truth-seeking constitutive aims of metaphysics.

Third, maybe some *discourses* aren't descriptive. For example, maybe modal discourse isn't descriptive, but rather aims to express prescriptions, or maybe moral discourse isn't descriptive, but rather aims to express sentiments. If modal discourse is about expressing prescriptions not about expressing truth-apt propositions, then a metaphysical theory that aims to find truth-makers for modal utterances will clearly mischaracterise its target. But my claim isn't that all discourses are descriptive, I'm rather making a meta claim about the features of metaphysical theories themselves. It would grossly mischaracterise Thomasson's modal normativism or Ayer's moral expressivism to claim that the discourses that these theories aim to model are themselves descriptive. Nonetheless, inasmuch as their theories aim to accurately model how modal and moral language function, I think in these cases we can still claim that the *theories* are essentially descriptive even if their target discourses are not. Very often of course metaphysicians take themselves to be dealing with truth-apt descriptive discourses. Indeed, I suspect talk of 'discourses' will be fairly alienating to the contemporary robust realist metaphysician, who takes themselves to be concerned with THE WORLD not language. I think we can grant that language doesn't mediate these sorts of metaphysicians' inquiry, whilst still claiming that the *theories* which result from their inquiries are semantic entities which aim to accurately model some part of reality.

Finally, in claiming that metaphysical theories aim at descriptive accuracy I am not claiming that metaphysics is a value neutral enterprise. Values come in many varieties and values can play roles at different levels of inquiry. The most obviously admissible values are those that increase proximity to truth. These values have been typically taken to include being able to provide a unified (non-disjunctive), coherent, non-circular theory, where that theory is simple, parsimonious, non-ad hoc and theoretically rigorous. These are the sorts of constitutive values of a theoretical enterprise aimed at descriptive accuracy. What about moral and political values? Given that the role of these sorts of values is the primary concern of the paper, I will postpone this discussion until the next section.

How am I understanding 'feminist metaphysics'? Feminist metaphysics aims to build theories that are supportive of, and conducive to, feminist justice. When giving metaphysical theories about the nature of gender, sexualities, the self, reason, nature, mind and body, etc. feminists metaphysicians have claimed that traditional metaphysics has not adequately addressed how *bad* values have entered theorising. Traditional metaphysics has either almost completely ignored certain kinds of metaphysical questions, or even if they've developed theories, the construction of those theories has incorporated androcentric and patriarchal assumptions. Feminist metaphysics thus aims to address and rectify these ethically culpable oversights.

But what makes some metaphysical theory count as ‘feminist metaphysics’? Charlotte Witt delineates two ways of responding to this question. First, there is a subject matter conception: a metaphysical theory is a feminist one due to its relevance to and utility for feminist theory and politics. E.g. the metaphysics of gender, sexual orientation, etc. Second, there is a methodological conception: feminist metaphysics is an approach to theorizing characterized by ‘its insistence on new approaches to metaphysical questions, like the employment of new metaphors, language or methods that better express or reflect feminist interests and projects’. (Witt 2011, 3) I take the basic underlying thought to be that metaphysical theories can support or hinder emancipatory social projects and it is therefore the aim of feminist metaphysics is to furnish us with theories which support rather than thwart such efforts. To do this, feminist metaphysicians must incorporate values which go beyond the fairly abstract values which promote descriptive accuracy. Responses to questions about what counts as a legitimate starting place, what counts as evidence, which concepts can serve as primitives of the theory, what counts as relevant for the purposes of explanatory adequacy, etc. will be determined by which starting places, evidence, concepts, etc. are the most relevant and useful for feminist theory and politics. Characterising the precise role of feminist values – where they enter theorising, how they interact with evidential considerations, etc. – is disputed and elucidating the various ways of conceptualising their role already on offer in the literature will be my concern in the following section.

I’m now in a position to articulate the putative tension: doesn’t the incorporation of feminist values into the methodological toolkit of metaphysics compromise its status as a descriptive enterprise? To be clear, this isn’t a merely verbal issue: it isn’t just a concern about whether we get to call feminist metaphysics ‘metaphysics’. It is about how we understand the aims of inquiry and whether the methods that we employ are suitable for those aims. As a toy example, to get a sense of how such a tension might arise, consider the ‘born this way’ narrative concerning sexual orientation. It has arguably been a politically useful narrative for dislodging homophobic ideologies which take non-heteronormative sexual orientations to be expressions of mental illness or bad characters. It resists the idea that being queer is a ‘lifestyle choice’ which can be overcome with willpower, in the same way that one’s eye colour cannot be changed through acts of will. Thus, to make rights conditional upon sexual behaviour would be as unethical as making rights conditional upon eye colour. Especially in the last decade, this narrative has come under criticism for reifying identities which for some may be fluid and so the political utility of this narrative is contested. But we can imagine that at one historical moment this view about the nature of sexual orientation was the most useful political narrative for fighting the injustices and oppression that queer people experienced at that time. Now, the fact that a way of conceptualising some

phenomena is useful might indeed be revelatory of its nature. But if you think that these sorts of facts about political utility might turn out to lead us astray with respect to revealing the nature of sexual orientations, then you probably share the intuition that political utility should not play a decisive methodological role in the construction of metaphysical theories.

So, for the feminist metaphysician who thinks that feminist utility should play a central methodological role, we can pose the following question: why should we think that the theory that is most useful for feminist emancipation will be the theory that most accurately models what reality is like? If we say that considerations of descriptive accuracy are secondary to feminist utility, then in what sense are we still engaged in a traditional analytic metaphysical project? It could contingently turn out to be the case that the most useful feminist theory will be the true theory. But I take it that the feminist metaphysician wants something stronger than that: justice-conduciveness is a legitimate constraint on metaphysical theory construction and choice. Thus, the metaphysician sympathetic to both feminist metaphysics and traditional descriptive metaphysics needs something stronger than mere contingent alignment of aims; they need a story about why we should think that feminist utility and descriptive accuracy do not place competing demands on metaphysical theories.

III. Evaluating the Options

Feminist metaphysicians aim to build theories about the nature of reality that are in the service of justice. Is building theories in the service of justice compatible with the descriptive goal of metaphysics? Certainly, this is not a new worry. Worries about the legitimate role of moral and political values in metaphysics (and science) has received a lot of attention. Some of this discussion is in some sense piecemeal – sometimes the aim is to show how particular approaches to feminist metaphysics can be made compatible with particular approaches to metaphysics more generally. For example, in an exchange between Elizabeth Barnes and Ted Sider, Barnes suggests that there is a non-contingent hostility to feminist metaphysics from fundamentality-style approaches to metaphysics, and Sider in turn suggests that these approaches can be made compatible given Barnes' realist reading of Haslangerian structure and by utilising the notion of relative fundamentality. In a paper on whether the Canberra Plan can build acceptable theories of gender (acceptable by feminist lights), Fletcher argues that they can be made compatible by introducing a new constraint on the common opinion that the Planner needs to analyse. I think

that these piecemeal approaches are promising but I'm interested here if there is anything more general that can be said about why truth and justice ought to pull theory in the same direction.

I think we can find three different sorts of claims about the method of feminist metaphysics in the literature which can be seen as addressing the putative tension between justice-conduciveness and descriptive accuracy: feminist empiricist metaphysics, pragmatism, and ameliorative metaphysics. I increasingly find the boundaries between these approaches somewhat blurry. To some extent, I'm going to have to stereotype these approaches a little in order to clean up the exegesis. But, roughly, here are what I take to be the contours of these positions. For feminist empiricist approaches, normative and evidential considerations *interact* throughout theory construction, so normative considerations play some role in determining the content of our metaphysical theories. For pragmatist approaches to metaphysics, evidential considerations aren't deemed to be contentful absent normative considerations. So, whether some explanation is a good explanation will be determined by whether it satisfies our legitimate explanatory purposes, and, given that these centrally involve considerations of feminist utility, the normative thus takes the lead in determining the content of our metaphysical theories. Finally, ameliorative approaches to feminist metaphysics articulate a similar role for values as pragmatist approaches, but I think often ameliorative approaches identify a different target for theorising: they aim to build a theory about what our kinds should be rather than a theory the natures of our actual kinds.

I'll consider each of these approaches in more detail. However, the headline is that as they stand, they are inadequate responses to this tension for those of us who do not want to compromise on the goals of feminist utility or descriptive accuracy. To be clear, the concerns I'll raise do not mean that I think that these approaches to theorising about reality are not worthwhile philosophical projects. But I think that they all appear to have shortcomings if they are attempting a reconciliation of the dual aims of justice-conduciveness and descriptive accuracy. Considering them in turn is instructive as it points to what an adequate reconciliation would need to be.

Let's first consider the feminist empiricist strategy developed by Mari Mikkola and inspired by Elizabeth Anderson's epistemology of science. According to this approach, metaphysical method involved values all along and these values always outstripped the sorts of constitutive values discussed in the last section. Whilst metaphysical theories certainly aim at truth, they aren't mere laundry lists of true propositions. As Anderson says: scientific inquiry "aims at some "organized" body of truths that can lay claim to "significance"". (Anderson 1995: 37) But if our inquiries always aimed at something more than a laundry list of truths, Anderson claims that there will be "multiple grounds for criticizing, justifying, and choosing theories besides truth" (Anderson 1995:

53). Moral and political values are always going to come into play when adjudicating questions of what counts as ‘organised’ or what counts as ‘significant’, so feminist values don’t *displace* reason and evidence. Rather, normative and evidential considerations interact when constructing and choosing between theories, not merely in the context of discovery but also in the context of justification.

Mikkola has claimed that feminist metaphysicians can piggyback on this model for giving an account of how feminist values can enter *metaphysical* theorising. The idea would be that alongside values taken to be conducive to truth and descriptive accuracy, feminist metaphysicians include feminist values to the method of metaphysics. This is legitimate because social, political, and ethical values always were in play, so feminist metaphysicians aren’t proposing adding something where it doesn’t belong, it is rather calling for a diversification of values. This is justified according to this sort of feminist empiricism because diverse values play a causal role in increasing the likelihood that the resulting theories will converge on the truth. Does this help reconcile the tension? This might depend on your tastes. One initial concern to register is that the attractiveness of a feminist empiricist approach to metaphysics might be conditional upon the attractiveness of empiricist metaphysics more generally. Certainly, some metaphysicians would want to resist such empiricist commitments. However, assuming that the empiricism doesn’t immediately put you off, I think that this response struggles to articulate a sufficiently robust role for feminist values qua feminist values.

What we are looking for is some explanation of why feminist utility and descriptive accuracy align and Intemann provides an interpretation of the feminist empiricist project which suggests that we just do not get that from feminist empiricism. According to Intemann, what we get from the feminist empiricism tradition is that what matters for scientific objectivity is diversity of values and then a sort of marketplace of ideas model. Diverse interests and values in scientific (or metaphysical¹) inquiry “provide a system of checks and balances so as to ensure that the idiosyncratic values or interests of scientists do not inappropriately influence scientific reasoning.” (Intemann 2010, 790) This option shouldn’t satisfy feminist metaphysicians who are cautious of traditional metaphysics, because feminist metaphysicians think that their values are epistemically *better* than the androcentric ones that have previously been operant.

Feminist metaphysicians want it to be the case that feminist values can constrain theory choice and construction, not that these feminist values are mere correctives for other bad values in play.

¹ I’m somewhat sceptical that we can always carry over what we want to say about the method and epistemology of science to the method and epistemology of metaphysics – but this would take us too far afield.

Can't feminist empiricist claim that their feminist values are better than the historically dominant patriarchal and androcentric ones? Intemann claims that feminist empiricism struggles to incorporate feminist values in a way which privileges those values over the patriarchal and androcentric ones because of its solution to the 'bias paradox'. The bias paradox concerns legitimate and illegitimate partiality. The concern is that feminists cannot object to patriarchal or androcentric partiality on the grounds that it involves incorporating political values into theorising, because they too want to be non-partial. So, why are some kinds of partiality (e.g. feminist partiality) acceptable, but not other kinds of partiality (e.g. patriarchal partiality)? Intemann claims that feminist empiricists have responded to this paradox by appealing 'balanced partiality': the diversification of values in communities of inquirers helps to ensure that implicit operative value commitments are made explicit and related assumptions are scrutinised. (Intemann 2010, 792-3) This interpretation of feminist empiricism seems to fit most readily with Longino's views on the social organisation of science (1990): we get bad biases in check through organising inquiry in such a way which makes people with different biases accountable to each other.

Intemann herself suggests that feminist empiricists would do well to incorporate insights from feminist standpoint theory in order to accommodate the idea that some values are epistemically better than others. Campbell thinks that moral and political values have truth-values and so we can articulate a more robust role for feminist values because they are the *right* values. I think that that the solution I propose in section four is consistent with a broadly standpoint epistemology, and with the claim that some values are epistemically better than others, so perhaps a suitably ameliorated moral realist feminist empiricist standpoint theory will turn out to be broadly analogous to my own preferred solution. Nonetheless, I pursue it as an alternative because I think it can stand alone from the other commitments of feminist empiricism, whilst also being more explanatory of why feminist values can play their assigned role.

Before moving on to discuss pragmatist approaches, it is worth pausing because this 'marketplace of ideas' conception of the epistemology of science might strike some as an uncharitable reading of all of the views that fly under the flag of 'feminist empiricism'. Certainly, Antony doesn't think that balanced partiality is the right sort of aim. She thinks that we shouldn't aim to balance competing values, rather she thinks that our values, just like every other part of our theories, must face the tribunal of experience:

We know that human knowledge requires biases; we also know that we have no possibility of getting a priori guarantees that our biases incline us in the right direction. What all this

means is that the “biasedness” of biases drops out as a parameter of epistemic evaluation. There's only one thing to do, and it's the course always counselled by a naturalized approach: We must treat the goodness or badness of particular biases as an empirical question.” (Antony, ‘Quine as Feminist’, 59)

Thus, the vindication of values is something that is sought from within the empirical investigations of science; such vindication is not prior to those investigations. Irrespective of whether this is an attractive model for understanding the role of values in the epistemology of metaphysics, it seems to depart from the thought that in feminist metaphysics it is legitimate for feminist values to play a decisive methodological role. Whilst ‘a priori guarantees’ seems like too strong a requirement, if we want support for the idea that feminist values can play a prescription role in theory construction then we need something stronger than this sort of internal vindication. This view that values are vindicated internally to the operation of science fits nicely with views expressed by Anderson and Longino according to which whether a norm is a good one will be settled by the merits of the theories that it generates. Given underdetermination of theory by evidence, there will be different ways of representing experimental results and some of those may serve our practical aims better than others. This spin on the feminist empiricist project starts to point us towards a more pragmatist reading of the role of values in science. According to this view, normative considerations don’t merely *interact* with evidential ones, rather we ought to resist the idea that such considerations can be articulated in isolation.

So let’s move to consider another sort of approach where feminist moral and political commitments take centre stage. I think this sort of approach can be found in the work of Díaz León and Jenkins and I’m tentatively calling it a pragmatist approach. (Although Díaz León talks about deflationism and Jenkins talks about *theory done in a emancipatory spirit*.) This approach aims to give an account of how pragmatic considerations impact explanatory efficacy. According to this view of explanation, the only way we justify theory choice is by reference to our interests and aims in explanation, and these are subject-specific. This invites a question: if you think that explanations are interest relative, then whose interests make for a good explanation? Given that feminist metaphysicians have feminist interests, the best metaphysical theories will be the ones which are conducive to feminist justice. I take the idea to run something like the following: metaphysics is an explanatory enterprise, but explanation is interest relative, so where those interests are feminist, the best metaphysical explanation will be a feminist one. As Díaz León says: “it makes sense to choose the theory that provides more useful explanations to explain and resist injustice and oppression, precisely because this is the most important explanandum in feminist theory, given our main goals and interests in that inquiry.” (Díaz León 2021, 8)

This response struggles to incorporate feminist values in a non-circular way. Yes, feminist explanations are more useful explanations, given that one accepts that fighting oppression is what matters for *this kind of theorising*. Undoubtedly, for some kinds of theorising the primary aim is to build theories that are useful for fighting oppression. Feminist theory, and certain strands of political and social theory, seem to be intrinsically and primarily in the business of furnishing us with theories that are useful for organising social movements aimed at ending oppression and injustice. But is this the sort of theorising about the world with which metaphysics is engaged? This seems like a restatement of the tension with which I began. Precisely what is at issue for the traditional metaphysician concerned about incorporating feminist values into their methodological tool kit is that the consequent theoretical enterprise might compromise the constitutive aim of descriptive accuracy. I think that philosophers who opt for this sort of feminist pragmatism will be quite unmoved by this worry; that's just not the sort of theoretical projects in which they are engaged. But as a potential way of resolving the tension between the political commitments of feminist metaphysics and the descriptive and truth-seeking aims of metaphysics, this option seems like a nonstarter. We can agree that metaphysics in an explanatory enterprise, and that explanation is a heterogeneous and interest-relative phenomenon, and that when our interests are feminist the best explanations will be ones conducive to fighting oppression. But, this doesn't answer the question of why feminist interests are the right sort of interests to have when trying to build descriptively accurate theories about the nature of reality. What the traditional metaphysical needs is an *epistemic* reason, or at least a story about how political reasons can generate epistemic ones.

Finally, ameliorative approaches to metaphysics deserve a mention when discussing the role of moral and political commitments in metaphysics. We can understand ameliorative philosophical theories as theories which respond to the question: what concept should be we using, given our legitimate purposes? There is a clear theoretical gap between defining/ameliorating a concept and giving a metaphysical theory about some part of reality. So, as I understand it, ameliorative *metaphysics* is concerned with building theories about the nature of reality which serve these legitimate purposes. There's a version of this project which I think collapses into the just discussed pragmatist approach (indeed Jenkins formerly described her metaphysical projects as ameliorative but has subsequently moved to talking about theory done in an emancipatory spirit). But there is another sort of theoretical project which belongs under this heading where the concern seems to be building theories about how reality *ought* to be. Matt Cull (2024) provides a really helpful distinction between two conceptions of ameliorative critique:

Haslanger is pointing to what she takes to be a useful concept for understanding extant oppressive society and asks us to take political action to do away with the social structures

that her concept picks out. This is not a guide for how to organize society in the future (beyond a very limited sense: ‘don’t do things this way!’ seems like a clear conclusion for any reader of Haslanger). The task of thinking about what concepts we want to use in guiding how we organize society in the future, then, can and does come apart from the task of thinking about what concepts allow us to best understand and critique existing society. Let us call the former (interested, as it is, in tearing down an unjust old world) ‘negative critique’ and the latter (interested in building a new, more just, world) ‘positive critique’. (Cull 2024, 18)

This can map onto two quite different sorts of metaphysical project. According to the negative project, feminist metaphysics is concerned with building theories about how the world is, which are useful in the fight against sexist oppression. If this is the conception of amelioration on the table, then this project seems entirely continuous with the pragmatic approach just considered. If it is the latter positive project, then this seems to explicitly reject the project of metaphysics qua descriptive enterprise because the precise aim of positive ameliorative metaphysics is a reorientated approach to theorising and an explicit departure from the traditional descriptive project of building a theory of how the world is. We therefore shouldn’t expect this positive ameliorative project to provide us with resources for reconciling the putative tension between descriptive accuracy and feminist utility because such approaches just aren’t engaged in descriptive metaphysics.²

I think this (admittedly) brief discussion of feminist empiricism, pragmatism, and ameliorative metaphysics now puts me in a position to articulate two desiderata for an adequate reconciliation of the putative tension. First, an adequate reconciliation should produce metaphysical theories that are non-accidentally conducive to feminist justice. Second, an adequate reconciliation should not compromise the descriptive ambitions of metaphysics – the explanatory goal is to capture how reality really is. We want to be able to say – contra (some interpretations of) feminist empiricism – that feminist values can play a *privileged* role in metaphysical inquiry, but they can play this role – contra pragmatism – because they are *epistemically* better not merely because they are more

² I think perhaps there is a way of interpreting these projects where they engaged in a kind descriptive metaphysics: they are engaged in a kind of modal metaphysics where they aim to build a metaphysical theory about the nature of a possible world which is nomologically and historically accessible from ours but which isn’t plagued by injustice and oppression. I’m not sure how charitable it is to these projects to force them into such a interpretation. Indeed, I sometimes worry that the insistence that such projects are metaphysics capitulates to the old chauvinism of thinking that in order for theorising to be important, serious, and legitimate it needs to be identified as belonging to a form of theorising that is already deemed ‘respectable’. We should certainly expand our conception of the sorts of theorising about the world that are legitimate, and I think don’t think we need to think that all such theorising is ‘metaphysics’ in order to do that.

politically useful. An adequate reconciliation should provide an explanation of why we should think that truth and justice do not pull us in different directions.

IV. Towards a Reconciliation

In the last section I canvassed some pre-existing approaches to thinking about the role of feminist values in metaphysics to see if any of them provided an adequate story about why we should think that feminist utility and descriptive accuracy do not place competing demands on metaphysical theories. I tried to show that these approaches - to varying degrees - compromised the commitment to either feminist utility or descriptive accuracy. In this section, I was to sketch what I take to be a promising route to reconciliation. My solution emerges from a background project which explores how pernicious ideologies at once distort our access to the world and also play a productive role in constructing oppressive social realities. Before offering my preferred solution to the tension, therefore, I need to explain some of this background big picture.

I think that recognising and responding to the challenges that ideology poses to the methods and epistemology of social metaphysics is one of the most pressing theoretical projects for the socially-engaged metaphysician. ‘Ideology’ is sometimes used in a nonevaluative sense to just mean a system of thought. However, the sense in which I use it here (following many Critical Theorists) is evaluative: ideologies are epistemically and morally defective systems of belief.³ These systems of belief are widely shared and known to be widely shared; they make up, or result from, a *prima facie* coherent system of thought; and they significantly impact social action and social institutions. Ideologies often present themselves as platitudes of common sense; they are part of the epistemic common ground of a community. For example, the beliefs that women are more nurturing than men, affirmative action undermines meritocracy, and only bad guys need to be afraid of the police, are each “ideological” beliefs. Ideologies are problematic not because they are always straightforwardly false but rather because they present reality through a distorting lens. This is related to the way ideological beliefs are typically held in false consciousness. This means that people who hold ideological beliefs are unaware of their real reasons or motivations for

³ In what follows I adopt Shelby’s critical conception of ideology. I’m actually very sympathetic to Haslanger’s critiques of Shelby that characterising ideology in purely doxastic terms misses some crucial features of ideologies, but for my aims here this doxastic conception is satisfactory.

holding them. Ideologies are also morally defective in that they function to create and sustain systems of social oppression.

‘Social constructionism’ is an approach to theorising about the nature of social reality based on the thought that our beliefs about social reality do not represent an independently existing reality but rather play a constructive role in creating and sustaining the nature of the social world. Widely held beliefs play a role in structuring social institutions, determining social norms, and determining kinds of actions that are possible for an individual in virtue of the social group(s) to which they belong. Because of their social role, these widely held representations can actually make it the case that people have the properties that they are represented as having. Putting this metaphysical view together with the critical conception of ideology suggests that defective systems of social belief play a role in constructing oppressive social realities. For example, an epistemically defective gender ideology might hold that women and men form two exhaustive and exclusive categories, that category membership is entirely determined by natural biological features, and prescribe roles and responsibilities in virtue of category membership. The belief that women are more nurturing than men might in turn function to ensure that women engage in disproportionate amounts of caregiving labour, where they develop sophisticated caregiving capacities which thus make it true that they are in fact more nurturing than men. The modes of social organisation which are made possible by the widely held belief that women are more nurturing than men, even if they are no more ‘naturally’ so, create the conditions whereby that representation becomes at least partly accurate. This makes that gender ideology in one sense less epistemically defective, because the world partly conforms to the way the ideology represents it as being. However, since ideologies represent oppressive social structures and relations as being natural and essential features of the world, ideologies remain epistemically defective.

Whilst social metaphysicians are increasingly interested in how ideologies shape the social world, the metametaphysical issue how the method and epistemology of social metaphysics needs to be revised to accommodate the distorting and productive power of ideologies has been under-theorised. My aim here is not to build a fully-fledged revised methodology for social metaphysics. Fortunately, this – admittedly brief – reflection on the significance of ideology for the method of social metaphysics points toward a way of reconciling the apparent tension between feminist metaphysics and traditional analytic metaphysics. Ideologies are systems of social belief which have both epistemic and political features: they offer distorting and evidence-recalcitrant representations of reality and these distortions function to sustain oppressive social relations. Thus, the epistemic and political features of ideologies support each other. Consider the ideological belief ‘women are good caregivers’ again. Taking that belief to be true supports belief

that women are *essentially* better at taking care of people, and thus that social labour should be divided in such a way that men and women can play their patriarchally assigned roles. This belief therefore serves a function: treating the belief as true serves to maintain, and provide the appearance of legitimacy for, existing patriarchal divisions of labour. But then these patriarchal divisions of labour can in turn make it the case that many women have the property of being good caretakers. But the starting belief masks the fact that this is only contingently the case, and thus it obscures and distorts our understanding of the nature of gender categories.

Why do I think that this background view of ideology helps to resolve the tension? A metaphysical theory which relies on starting points, views of significance or explanatory adequacy, etc. which utilise ideological ways of thinking about the world is not a theory that will capture the way reality actually is. Ideology critique – the sort of genealogical reflection on the origins and functions of our ways of thinking just briefly demonstrated – reveals that the function of many of our beliefs about gender is not to describe reality, but rather the function of these beliefs has been to sustain oppressive social systems. Metaphysicians must therefore evaluate the role that ideology has played in the construction of metaphysical theories, and, where ideology is found the operant, those theories must be revised. I think that the reconciliation of the apparent tension between feminist metaphysics and traditional metaphysics is possible by attending to the role that ideology has played in theory construction and evaluation.

Why would this satisfy the traditional metaphysician? By their nature ideologies are epistemically defective – in a particularly worrying way because they are often resistant to counter-evidence. The demonstration that ideology is operant in theory construction is a demonstration that that process has been/is epistemically flawed. Given that traditional metaphysics aims at objectivity, truth, explanatoriness, it should welcome any methodological tools which root out inaccuracy. I think we should care about the traditional project precisely because we should care about truth. Why would this satisfy the feminist metaphysician? Attending to the role of ideology in theory is to attend to the ways in which distorted ways of thinking cause and sustain oppressive social realities. To build theories which resist the oppressive function of ideologies is to build theories which, in turn, furnish us with understandings of the world suited to resist those systems of oppression. Ideology thus provides a higher-order explanation of why the political values which are useful for fighting injustice can serve as desiderata for metaphysics. It isn't the case that political values are non-truth-conducive considerations which interact with evidential ones. Rather, the desiderata for doing good descriptive metaphysics guide us in the direction of justice. Why? Because ideology critique exposes that politics is revelatory of the nature of our environment; indeed, it isn't merely revelatory of the environment, it shapes it.

I think this proposal is at once more conservative and more radical than the other options considered. It is more conservative of the descriptive truth-seeking aims of traditional metaphysics. But it is more radical because incorporating feminist values isn't merely a matter of finding balance between competing values. This response to the tension gives us the ability to say that certain values are epistemically better. Thus, when developing theories about the nature of gender, we don't need to choose between the demands of truth and the demands of justice. A critical conception of ideology can illuminate why we should think that truth and justice pull metaphysical theories in the same direction.