

Chapter 5

Explanatory Substantivity

A central element of a metametaphysics is an account of *substantivity*. In this chapter I show that an account of substantivity defined in terms of *explanatory power* can avoid the RML problem. I develop this account, explore its features, and argue that it works well for social metaphysics and for other areas, including metaphysics of science.

1. Substantivity: Motivations and Roles

For insight into the work of an account of substantivity, consider some ways inquiry can fail to be genuine. It can be merely conventional, merely verbal, insufficiently responsive to reality, ask unanswerable questions, or use tools inappropriate to its subject-matter. If I can settle a line of questioning by choosing an answer, rather than by discovering that the answer is correct, then my inquiry is not genuine. If I use the wrong methods, like attempting to find a nearby grocery store with purely a priori reasoning, then my inquiry is not genuine. And if my inquiry pretends to be something it is not, such as if it appears deeper or more responsive to reality than it in fact is, then it is not genuine. An account of substantivity tells us what it is for inquiry to *not* be like these cases.¹

Here I will focus on substantivity as a feature only of metaphysics, rather than of inquiry more generally, though the view may extend to other forms of inquiry too. I take the substantivity of debates to be roughly equivalent to the substantivity of inquiry, in that what makes inquiry substantive also makes substantive debate possible.² Understood as such, an account of the substantivity of metaphysics must play a range of roles.

¹ See Chalmers, David, Manley, David & Wasserman, Ryan eds. (2009) for a range of papers engaging with questions about the substantivity of metaphysics.

² Importantly this excludes forms of inquiry that can be settled by choices made by inquirers. I include conceptual engineering in this category (although some proponents of conceptual engineering might argue that their project is more constrained). I take there to be serious conceptual inquiry but it is not covered by this definition of substantivity, which is designed for forms of inquiry that cannot be settled by choices on the part of inquirers.

One is to articulate the nature and goals of metaphysics. For example, you might believe that the task of metaphysics is to answer questions about existence, or building, or essence, or fundamentality, or some combination of these.³ Each option tells us what metaphysics aims at, and the features in virtue of which it is genuine inquiry. If we want to know what exists, for example, and believe that what exists is an objective matter rather than something we can decide upon on the basis of preference, say, then we have gone some way towards a view of metaphysical inquiry as legitimate.

A related role is to protect metaphysics from the threat of undermining critique. For example, consider Carnap's challenge, revived by contemporary deflationists, that metaphysical debates are settled by framing choices such as the choice of a language, or of a quantifier.⁴ Given that such choices are arbitrary with respect to the structure of reality, if this challenge is legitimate then metaphysics is pseudo-inquiry. Original versions of this argument targeted debates about existence, but contemporary philosophers have pressed it against other projects including modal and permissivist metaphysics.⁵ Distinct concerns are rolled together here. One worry is that metaphysics looks genuine but is in fact pseudo-inquiry. Another is that metaphysical debates can be settled by selecting a framework, and that such choices are arbitrary with respect to the metaphysician's purported goal of characterizing reality.⁶

Meeting these three criteria – articulating the targets of metaphysical inquiry, showing that metaphysical debates are authentic, and that they cannot be settled merely by selecting a framing device – is the primary work of an account of substantivity. However, a further cluster of roles are motivated by such worries as that metaphysics asks unanswerable questions, or questions more properly addressed by the sciences.

To illustrate how contemporary accounts perform this work consider the *structure* view, according to which a debate is substantive, roughly speaking, if and only if the rival views differ in their

³ As in, respectively, Van Inwagen, Peter (1998); Bennett, Karen (2017); Fine, Kit (1994); Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

⁴ For the historic version see Carnap, Rudolf (1950). For contemporary versions, see Hirsch, Eli (2002); Sidelle, Alan (2002); Thomasson, Amie (2014)

⁵ Such as Thomasson in Thomasson, Amie (2017) and (2020)

⁶ I treat these concerns as distinct because inquiry may be inauthentic without being decided upon by selecting a framing. In canonical critiques of metaphysics the latter functions as a determinate of the former.

joint-carvingness.⁷ Joint-carvingness is defined in terms of a primitive notion of structure, a descendant of Lewisian naturalness that plays a role in reference such that some meanings of a term may be more eligible than others in virtue of being more structural. Accordingly this is a metalinguistic view of substantivity, on which the substantivity of a debate is determined by one side's being characterized in language with more structurally eligible referents than the other. The structure view easily fulfills the main criteria for substantivity. On this view the goal of metaphysics is to capture facts about structure, and metaphysics is more successful the closer it gets to those facts. Given this, metaphysics is genuine, authentic inquiry. Facts about structure are objective facts about mind-independent reality, and so cannot be determined by selecting a framework. Because structure is epistemically accessible through scientific and other branches of inquiry, this approach also offers resources to address concerns about epistemology and answerability, and about the relationship between science and metaphysics.

Alternatively, consider the *grounding* view, on which fundamentality is the locus of substantivity.⁸ On this approach metaphysical debates are substantive in so far as they respond to facts about absolute and relative fundamentality, and the rival views differ in how well they capture such facts. This view also easily fulfills the three desiderata. It portrays the goal of metaphysics as to find out about fundamentality. Given that facts about fundamentality are objective and mind-independent, such inquiry cannot be settled by a choice of framing.⁹ Furthermore, beyond the primary criteria, there are diagnostics for grounding which make those facts epistemically accessible, and this picture gives a central, though not exhaustive, role for science in metaphysics, as science can illuminate what grounds what.

Other views of metaphysics bring associated (though sometimes only implied) accounts of substantivity, including essentialist metaphysics, metaphysics pursued through modal logic, and metaphysics centered around building.¹⁰ For the moment, however, I will focus on the structure and fundamentality views because they have received the most attention from social

⁷ Defended by Sider in Sider, Theodore (2011) Chapter 4

⁸ Defended by Schaffer in Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

⁹ See discussion in Chapter 4 about this element of the grounding view. There I argue that this element is required for a realist metametaphysics but that its negation is required to permit cases of social grounding, and so that this instantiates the RML problem.

¹⁰ Fine, Kit (1994); Williamson, Timothy (2013); Bennett, Karen (2017)

metaphysicians, and because the salient feature of these views is shared by other approaches: they locate substantivity in responsiveness to entirely mind-independent, objective aspects of reality. As discussed in Chapter 4 this feature generates an RML problem for social metaphysics. Accordingly, we need a new theory of substantivity to accommodate social metaphysics, and it must perform the traditional work of substantivity while avoiding the RML problem. To avoid the RML problem, substantivity cannot be defined in terms of responsiveness to only mind-independent features. It may turn out that all substantive debates are responsive to and settled by facts about purely mind-independent features, but if so, this will be a finding, rather than a matter of definition.

Together, the traditional roles for substantivity and the need to avoid the RML problem motivate at least four criteria for a new account of substantivity:

Goals: The account must articulate the broad goals of metaphysics.

Genuine: Substantive debates must be genuine.

Non-arbitrary: Substantive debates cannot be settled by arbitrary framing choices.

RML-avoidance: Substantivity cannot be defined in terms of mind-independence.

Responding to other challenges is desirable too, such as resolving concerns about unanswerability, indeterminacy, meaninglessness, and the relationship between science and metaphysics. But overall, these four criteria are the core desiderata.

2. Explanation and Explanatory Power

Responding to the RML Problem requires resources that can incorporate responsiveness to mind-independent and mind-dependent features where appropriate, in an appropriately unified way. Philosophical work on explanation is an ideal place to look for such resources. Explanation has subjective, mind-dependent aspects and objective, mind-independent aspects, and balancing these is much of the work of an account of explanation. In this section I will take up this line of thought and offer an account of substantivity defined in terms of explanatory power, which I will argue offers a plausible basis for metametaphysics. I will not argue that this is the *only* adequate

account of substantivity that can avoid the RML problem. Instead, my aim is simply to show that this approach works, and that it meets the criteria.

This view has nested components: an account of explanation, which forms the basis of the account of explanatory power, which forms the basis of the account of substantivity. Accordingly there are various points to get off the bus. You might accept the diagnosis of the problems for social metaphysics as instances of the RML Problem, without also thinking that an appeal to explanation is the best way to solve it. Or, you may agree that an explanation-based metametaphysics offers a good response, but prefer one based on a different notion of explanation. You might disagree with some details of my proposed account of explanation (how it handles explanation by constraint, for example) while still accepting the overall package. With these caveats in mind I will offer an account of explanation, of explanatory power, and of substantivity as a package, to show how social metaphysics might be accommodated while avoiding the RML Problem.

2.1 Explanation

To meet the standards given here the account of explanation must be *non-realist*. To meet the requirement of RML-avoidance explanation and hence explanatory power cannot be determined purely by mind-independent, objective features. But for metaphysical inquiry to be genuine and non-arbitrary, explanation and hence explanatory power cannot be understood in entirely anti-realist terms either. Here I will sketch a view of explanation that can play this role: Contextualist Pluralist Non-realist Backing (CPN Backing).¹¹ As I will show, this particular account suits the task well, but alternative non-realist views of explanation may work in its place.¹²

¹¹ I have developed this view in a series of papers including Taylor, Elanor (forthcoming), (2023), (2022), (2018)

¹² Not many fully articulated versions of non-realism are defended in the literature on explanation in metaphysics. Schnieder allows for non-realist backing by permitting conceptual explanations in Schnieder, Benjamin (2006). Miller & Norton defend a psychologically-oriented approach to metaphysical explanation in Miller, Kristie & Norton, James (2017), (2019), and (2020), and Thompson defends irrealism about grounding in Thompson, Naomi (2016) and (2018). Kovacs defends explanatory idealism about grounding, which differs from CPN-Backing because it is not a backing view, but shares some other similarities (including the pluralism), in Kovacs, David (2021)

The name of the view is a guide to its features. CPN Backing is a *backing model* of explanation.¹³ Backing models portray explanation as a relation between two propositions or sets of propositions, an explanans and explanandum. Explanations report on underlying “backing” relations or “backers”, instances of dependence that support explanation but are not themselves explanations. A canonical example of a backer is causation. To illustrate, imagine that I want to explain why the table moved by citing the event of a person, Elizabeth, shoving it, and that both events did take place. On this approach the explanans proposition,

P1 “Elizabeth shoved the table.”

explains the explanandum proposition,

P2 “The table moved.”

because P1 describes the cause of what is described in P2. The causal relation is the backer, and together P1 and P2 constitute an explanation. As we can see, the structure of the explanation roughly mirrors the structure of the backer, such that (in this causal example) the explanatory *because* tracks the causal *because*.

Many philosophers endorse backing models of explanation.¹⁴ However, traditionally backing models have been *realist* in that backers are restricted to instances of metaphysical determination: worldly forms of metaphysical responsibility. Typically this means that backers are restricted to causation and grounding.¹⁵ Accordingly, realist backing models portray explanation as highly unified, and as intimately connected to metaphysical determination. However, avoiding the RML problem requires a non-realist view, so a realist backing model cannot form the basis of a viable account of substantivity. CPN Backing is a non-realist view on which some explanations may report on worldly forms of metaphysical determination, while other, equally legitimate explanations are backed by mind-dependent forms of dependence. These include conceptual dependence, motivational dependence, and any dependence relation conceived of in anti-realist terms. For example, causation can back explanation even for anti-realists about causation, as can mathematical dependence, grounding, and probabilistic dependence. This is a non-realist view because it permits explanations to report on metaphysical determination without making this

¹³ Defenses of backing models include Audi, Paul (2015); Kim, Jaegwon (2005); Ruben, David-Hillel (1990); Schaffer, Jonathan (2017a) and (2017b); Wilhelm, Issac (2020); Wilson, Alastair (2018)

¹⁴ See footnote 10.

¹⁵ In light of this similarity and others Wilson suggests that grounding is a distinctively metaphysical form of causation, in Wilson, Alastair (2018)

essential to explanation, while avoiding anti-realism in not having explanation be determined entirely by the needs and interests of inquirers. The *pluralism* of CPN Backing lies the fact that it permits an array of backers, which as we have seen includes traditional metaphysical backers such as causation, grounding, and mereological relations, alongside others such as conceptual, logical, probabilistic, and motivational dependence.¹⁶

A final element of this model, featured in the name, is that explanation is *contextual*. In particular, which backer it is appropriate to cite, and how, varies depending on features of the explanatory context, understood in terms of the needs and interests of the audience for the explanation. To illustrate the difference that contextual appropriateness makes, consider a range of ways to explain my car's being parked illegally. For example, a grounding explanation of the fact that it is parked illegally will give information about the local parking bylaws and about the location of the car. A causal explanation of the event of my car coming to be parked in that location will give information about what caused it to be parked there, and it may be pitched at a mechanical level, or at a level of detail that facilitates attributing responsibility for illegal parking. All are legitimate explanations but only one will meet the requirements of a given context, and hence be contextually appropriate.

Explanatory values govern contextual appropriateness, in that they summarize what the audience for the explanation needs and wants. These include familiar examples such as parsimony and fruitfulness, alongside preferences for explanations of particular types, or explanations suited to particular scientific, legal, or political goals.

On some views contextual appropriateness is almost all there is to explanation.¹⁷ On CPN Backing this is not the case, as there are significant non-contextual constraints on explanation. Explanation is *factive* in that an explanation must give information about a backer. The dependence facts must obtain for the explanation to succeed, so no explanation can get off the ground without reporting correctly on the instantiation of a dependence relation. But how that

¹⁶ For defense of non-realism as a viable backing model see Taylor, Elanor (2022)

¹⁷ As in Achinstein's view of explanation as a contextually-appropriate speech-act. Achinstein, Peter (1983)

reporting should be achieved, and which relation should be cited, will vary depending on the needs and interests of those who form and seek the explanation.

On this view backing relations are less unified than they are on realist approaches. However, the backers are unified first by the fact that they are instances of dependence, and by the features they inherit from the features of explanation.¹⁸ Before turning to those, a note about how this inheritance works. This model does not require that every relation instances of which are backers must itself have all the required features of backers. To illustrate, say for the sake of argument that there are circles of ground, while there are no circles of explanation.¹⁹ On the CPN Backing model this apparent clash does not preclude instances of grounding serving as backers, because the definition of backing does not force requirements onto the more general kinds that backers belong to. These features are part of a definition of backing and not of causation, grounding, conceptual or motivational dependence, and so on. This feature is unusual among backing models as it is more typical to take the features of backers to tightly mirror the features of explanation, but, as I will show, it offers some benefits over the alternative.

Here I will summarize some standard features of explanation that backers share on the CPN Backing model, and some that they do not. This is not an exhaustive list and does not amount to a defense of the model.²⁰ Some features (such as transitivity) raise particular problems for a non-realist approach, such that full exposition of the model will require more detail. My goal here is simply to sketch enough of the primary features of CPN Backing to use as the basis of an account of explanatory power.

It is widely-accepted that explanation is asymmetric, such that if A explains B, then B does not explain A. If explanation is asymmetric, then we need asymmetry from backing too. However, given the caveats above, it does not follow from the view that backing is asymmetric that the *kind* of relation that a backer instantiates must also be asymmetric. A useful example is logical entailment. Entailment is not asymmetric, but on this view, some instances of entailment may

¹⁸ This strategy of taking the features of backers to be inherited from the structural features of explanation is similar to Kovacs's explanatory idealism about grounding, though CPN-Backing is not an idealist view. See Kovacs, David (2021)

¹⁹ For discussion of this prospect see Bliss, Ricki (2014)

²⁰ For a defense of explanatory non-realism and non-realist backing, see Taylor, Elanor (2018), (2022)

back explanation. The requirement of irreflexivity, that A cannot explain A, follows from asymmetry but is an important feature of explanation in its own right, motivated by distinct considerations.²¹ Explanation is also non-monotonic, in that it does not follow from the fact that A and B explain C that the combination of A and B with some further factor D will also explain C, and so backing is too.

Explanation can obtain between modally indistinguishable relata, and as such is hyperintensional. Many mathematical, logical, and otherwise non-causal explanations display this feature. A benefit of non-realist backing is that we do not have to settle questions about whether or not hyperintensionality is merely a feature of representations or whether there is worldly hyperintensionality in order to endorse the view that backing is hyperintensional.²² Finally, many, indeed perhaps most, explanations are partial.²³ For example, my explaining that the window broke because I threw a rock at it can be adequate even if many details about the causal history of the event, such as facts about air friction, gravity, the velocity of the rock, and the precise facts about the fragility of the glass, are missing.

Having sketched some canonical features of explanation that, given the structural mirroring between explanation and backing, we need to see in backers, we can now consider some features that explanation does not need from backers.

Given that this is a non-realist model, backers need not be instances of metaphysical determination. On realist backing models all explanation is backed by metaphysical determination, where the defining feature of metaphysical determination is that these are forms of “directed determination” which are mind-independent in that the relations themselves do not depend on human thought for their instantiation.²⁴ However, as noted before, on a non-realist backing model other relations can back explanation, including conceptual and justificatory dependence; not just the kinds of dependence that structure the mind-independent world.

²¹ See Taylor, Elanor (2023)

²² See discussion in Nolan, Daniel (2014), Williamson, Timothy (2021)

²³ As Lewis noted about causal explanation in Lewis, David (1986) pg 219.

²⁴ See discussion of directed determination in Audi, Paul (2015)

Some hold that necessitation is required for explanation, but this is not required by CPN Backing. If there is worldly indeterminism then it is important to preserve the possibility of non-necessitating explanation, but this is an important feature of a naturalistic account of explanation regardless of the correct metaphysics of chance because of the prevalence of probabilistic scientific explanation.²⁵ The non-realism of CPN Backing permits us to take probabilistic dependence as a backer without endorsing any particular view on the metaphysics of chance.²⁶

Overall, according to CPN-Backing, backing is asymmetric, irreflexive, non-monotonic, hyperintensional, and permits partial versions. This allows dependence of many different forms to back explanations. For example, the entailment of [A or B] by A, the rockfall causing the landslide, the justification of my action by my reason, and the conceptual association between bachelors and being unmarried, can all serve as backers.

As mentioned earlier, CPN Backing does not require that every relation instances of which are backers must itself have all required features of backers. This is not a standard aspect of backing models, but it offers some benefits over the alternative. First, it is more accurate to our explanatory practices. Consider the example from earlier of explaining by citing logical entailment. When I explain that I pay a certain tax rate by noting that I fall into a particular tax bracket, and everyone in that bracket pays that rate, I cite an entailment through the principle of instantiation. This is perfectly explanatory, and plausibly the backer is logical entailment.²⁷ However, I cannot explain A by citing A. If we accept this instance of explanation backed by entailment, while accepting that A does not explain A, then we must hold that some instances of entailment can serve as backers while others cannot.

Second, this approach avoids a problem, widely discussed in the grounding literature, generated by the expectation of close mirroring between features of backers and of explanation. Given the presupposition that features of explanation should mirror the features of backers and vice-versa,

²⁵ I will leave aside questions about the high and low probability explanation here, but overall endorse the view that there are low-probability explanations. See discussion in Clatterbuck, Hayley (2020)

²⁶ Thereby avoiding problems such as those pressed by Lange & Elliott against Woodward in Elliott, Katrina, & Lange, Marc (2022)

²⁷ Some treat this as a grounding explanation. For arguments against a grounding treatment of such cases see McSweeney, Michaela (2020)

every apparent mismatch generates significant metaphysical and explanatory consequences. For example, some argued that if there are circles of ground then there must be circular explanations, and that if there are symmetric explanations, then causation must be symmetric, and so on.²⁸ This view avoids such problems by taking the mirroring between explanation and backing to obtain only at the level of particular instances of backers, rather than in general.

2.2 Explanatory Power

Explanatory power is the measure of how well an explanation explains. Here I will give an account of explanatory power based on CPN Backing.

To explain we must give information about a backer, where backing is understood in non-realist terms. To meet a minimal condition for explanatory power, then, the explanans must describe whatever what is described in the explanandum depends upon. This is the factive aspect of explanation, in that accurate information about backing must be given.

To have explanatory power an explanation must be contextually appropriate. That is to say, the backer cited must be contextually appropriate, and the expression of the explanation must be contextually appropriate. On the first, when there is an array of backers to select from, the relevant backer must be appropriate to the needs of those seeking the explanation. For example, an audience seeking a causal or motivational explanation should not be given a grounding explanation. On the second, issues such as the level of grain, language, simplicity, and so on, influence whether or not information about a backer is explanatorily valuable to its audience. For example, a causal explanation may differ considerably depending on whether it is being offered to an engineer or to a judge, if both want the causal story about what happened, but the engineer wants to understand the mechanism behind the events, while the judge wants to attribute legal responsibility. The explanation will be more or less contextually appropriate given how appropriate the cited backer, and its presentation, is to the needs and goals of the audience.

²⁸ For discussion of this kind of problem in the case of grounding, see Bliss, Ricki (2014); Maurin, Anna-Sofia (2019); Skiles, Alexander, & Trogon, Kelly (2021); Thompson, Naomi (2016)

Valuing explanations with particular features, such as facilitating certain goals, or being given in a certain language, is to have explanatory values.

Measuring contextual appropriateness is more of an art than a science, as is reflected in the failure even of more formal models of explanation to capture analogous features.²⁹ However, as I will discuss in Section 5, we often deploy considerations about explanatory context and explanatory values in our everyday lives, and as such have a good intuitive grasp of which explanations are contextually appropriate and which are not.

To summarize, to display any explanatory power at all an explanation must offer information about a backer, such that the explanans gives information about whatever what is described in the explanandum depends on. This is the factive aspect of explanation, in that the information must be correct and the dependence relation must genuinely obtain. Explanatory power is a measure of how contextually appropriate the explanation is once it meets this minimum standard.

3. Substantivity as Explanatory Power

I propose that for a debate to be substantive is for the rival answers to differ in their explanatory power. Substantive debates are settled by which answer has the highest level of explanatory power. On this view, metaphysics aims at explanation, and facts about explanation determine the answers to metaphysical questions. I will explicate this proposal through a series of cases.

First-order inquiry into the metaphysics of gender is a motivating case for discussion of the substantivity of social metaphysics.³⁰ For a case study, then, consider a debate about the nature of gender. I will construct an idealized example for the sake of simple exposition, beginning with the facts that must be explained. Note that what must be explained by any proposal will be subject to as much discussion as what best explains those facts, as is the case in other areas of metaphysics.

²⁹ For example, consider the difficulties involved in specifying what it is for a causal model to be apt. See discussion in Jansson, Lina (2018)

³⁰ Examples of social metaphysicians conducting first-order work in the metaphysics of gender include Ásta in Ásta (2018), Dembroff in Dembroff, Robin (2018), Haslanger in Haslanger, Sally (2000) and (2012), and Jenkins in Jenkins, Katharine (2016), (2023)

Stipulate that we must explain only the following clusters of empirical facts with an account of gender:

Facts about the psychology of gender identity.

Facts about the history of gendered oppression and violence.

Now consider two simple proposals: a MacKinnon-style constructivism on which gender is constituted by unjust sexual dominance, and an identity-based criterion on which gender is constituted by gender identity.³¹ How might these proposals explain the target phenomena?

Take the gender pay gap, which is part of the history of gendered oppression. I will presume that the explanandum is not the mere financial distribution of women being paid less than men, but also that this fact is a robust generalization rather than a mere accident. The proposal that gender is unjust sexual dominance offers an explanation of the gender pay gap. Indeed, on this proposal it is arguable that the explanans partly grounds the explanandum (or, more correctly, gives information about what partly grounds what is described in the explanandum), and so offers a particularly metaphysical kind of explanation, backed by partial grounding. On this view, gender being unjust sexual dominance is among the facts non-causally metaphysically responsible for the gender pay gap.³² Presume that is the case, in which case partial grounding is our backer:

“Gender is unjust dominance” EXPLAINS “Gender pay gap” (between propositions)

Because

[Gender is unjust dominance] PARTLY GROUNDS [Gender pay gap.] (between facts)

One might disagree that there is partial grounding in this case, in which case our conversation would return to the case for partial grounding. For the moment, however, I will presume that this claim is correct. We have not heard much about why we want the explanation, so contextual appropriateness is a little harder to evaluate. But this explanation citing the nature of gender as unjust dominance is understandable, is communicable in natural language, and so on, and as such it is fairly contextually appropriate.

³¹ The constructivist view is a rough reconstruction of MacKinnon’s view of sex differences in MacKinnon, Catharine (1987) Chapter 2.

³² The framing of the explanandum is important here as the grounds of the simple financial distribution just are the facts about which individuals are paid which amounts. When the explanandum includes this non-accidental aspect we arguably need to cite more than the mere financial distribution to explain the pay gap.

However, this is only one part of the cluster of facts that need explained in this case, and we will have a harder time explaining facts about the psychology of gender identification on this unjust dominance view. For example, take the fact that gender identity does not always track facts about the body, in that some people have a gender identity that effectively floats free of facts about their body. The proposal that gender identity determines gender explains this, because, on standard assumptions about the terms involved, it is to be expected because the proposal portrays gender as not essentially tied to facts about the body. Accordingly, this proposal confers probability on the outcome that for at least some people, gender and the body will come apart:

“Gender is identity” EXPLAINS “ID doesn’t track the body” (between propositions)

Because

[Gender is identity] CONFERS PROBABILITY [ID doesn’t track the body] (between facts)

Again, one might not agree that conferring probability is the correct backer here, and so we could return to further debate about the case for probability conferral. But a nice feature of non-realist backing is that we do not have to endorse the view that there is objective chance or worldly probabilistic causation to take probability conferral as a backer.

Each proposal involves nested metaphysical claims, and differences in explanatory power will reflect how many of these are established and shared. For example, if participants in the first debate accept that the pay gap and unjust dominance exist and stand in a relation of partial ground, then evaluating the proposal about gender amounts to asking how plausible it is to identify unjust dominance *with* gender, and thereby inherit those explanatory resources, while also (presumably, in this case) adding unification across other phenomena. However, if there is no such a thing as unjust dominance then the pay gap cannot depend upon it, and the explanation cannot get off the ground.³³ (And if there is no such thing as the pay gap, then there is nothing in this instance to explain.) Furthermore, there is an “as if” element to the final stage of the evaluation. Once facts about the backers are established, to evaluate the explanatory power

³³ For further discussion of these features, including replies to concerns about circularity, see Chapter 6 Section 3.

of a given proposal is to consider what explanatory power *would* be available *were* we to adopt the view.

At this point, even in this idealized example, we see the standard pattern of assessing which views best explain the phenomena that must be explained, as we would expect in any metaphysical debate. To continue with the inquiry into gender, we would perhaps consider how well the identity proposal explains the pay gap explanandum, how well the constructivist proposal explains the psychological explanandum, consider other targets for explanation such as facts about the body, or about sexuality, more detailed considerations about contextual appropriateness, the explanatory merits of pluralism, and so on.³⁴ Evaluating explanatory power will amount to identifying what explanations each view offers of what needs explained, and how contextually appropriate each explanation is. We can evaluate how well a proposal explains an individual, isolated explanandum and how well it explains wider bodies of data, in which we may take values like unification and systematicity into account. Given that these are debates about which proposals display the most explanatory power, this inquiry into the metaphysics of gender is straightforwardly classified as substantive.

Some hold that social metaphysics is ameliorative, in that theory choice can be guided by moral and political considerations. This is a controversial feature, and how it works is open to debate even among those who endorse amelioration.³⁵ This view can accommodate most versions of amelioration as an explanatory value, and hence as an acceptable feature of substantive metaphysical inquiry. For example, for someone who wants to resist ontic injustice and ontic oppression, a view of gender that is useful for those purposes will be more explanatorily powerful than one that is not. Which explanatory values we should have is a serious philosophical question that this account of substantivity does not attempt to answer. But if we do have ameliorative goals, then this account can accommodate them, and can reconstruct inquiry guided by these considerations as substantive.

³⁴ Jenkins makes the case for pluralism about gender in Jenkins, Katherine (2023)

³⁵ Haslanger and Jenkins both explicitly identify this as a goal for their accounts of race and gender, in Haslanger, Sally (2000) and (2012), and Jenkins, Katharine (2016) and (2023). Louise Antony argues “against amelioration” in Antony, Louise (2022)

One might worry that this is an unrealistic picture of metaphysics because metaphysicians simply do not take themselves to be comparing explanation-backers on the basis of their contextual appropriateness. So how can explanatory power, especially understood in terms of this very specific view of explanation, function as the basis of an account of substantivity? In response, consider how accounts of substantivity tend to function. In endorsing a view of substantivity based on structure, for example, I do not thereby claim (or worse, require) that metaphysicians consciously reflect on how structural their views are, on pain of their work not counting as metaphysics proper. Instead, the metametaphysics functions as a reconstruction of the nature and legitimacy of the inquiry, such that it aims at and is guided by facts about structure. Sometimes explicit reflection on the central notion of a metametaphysics may feature in metaphysical inquiry, but this need never happen for the metametaphysics to be successful. One way to conceive of the explanatory power framework is through the comparison with structure, such that on this view, metaphysics aims at and is guided by facts about explanatory power, in much the same way that the structure view portrays metaphysics as aiming at and guided by facts about structure.

Consider another case from social metaphysics. Burman argues against *ideal social ontology*.³⁶ Proponents of ideal social ontology take collective intentionality to be the basis of social reality, and Burman argues that they idealize their models of social phenomena with respect to features including the presence of oppressive power dynamics. In place of ideal social ontology Burman recommends *non-ideal social ontology*, which is not idealized, rejects the centrality of collective intentionality, and attributes a central role to power and class in the social world.³⁷

To situate this research in the explanatory power framework I will focus on one of Burman's specific claims, that collective intentionality is not necessary to the existence of institutions.³⁸ Burman takes the Stockholm housing market as an example, arguing that a combination of

³⁶ Burman, Åsa (2023) The ideal/non-ideal distinction comes from Charles Mills' work on non-ideal political philosophy. See Mills, Charles (2005). "Social ontology" is the traditional term for inquiry into the social world as undertaken by proponents of what Burman calls the "ideal standard model." I prefer the term 'social metaphysics' because ontology is restricted to existence questions whereas metaphysics is broader, but I use "social ontology" while discussing Burman's views in keeping with the history of Burman's exchange with proponents of the ideal standard model.

³⁷ Burman, Åsa (2023) Chapter 2

³⁸ Burman, Åsa (2023) Section 2.2.3

individual intentionality and common knowledge explains the existence of the Stockholm housing market (and of private property more generally) without positing collective intentionality as it is understood in the ideal standard model.³⁹ A plausible backer in this instance is partial composition, such that the Stockholm housing market is partly composed by individual intentions and common knowledge, whereas the Stockholm housing market does not depend at all on collective intentionality.

Because, as Burman argues, the Stockholm housing market does not depend on collective intentionality, there is no backer for the ideal social ontologist to cite. (As in the previous cases, this claim about explanatory power relies on prior claims about backers.) Furthermore, the individual intentionality/common-ground explanation is more parsimonious than the collective intentionality explanation, and does not involve the idealizations inherent in the ideal standard model, which Burman argues distort our understanding of social phenomena.⁴⁰ Overall, the existence of the Stockholm housing market is explained in a contextually appropriate way by the non-ideal approach. The explanatory power view of substantivity classifies this inquiry into the relative merits of each proposal as substantive metaphysics.

More generally Burman suggests that non-ideal social ontology is more explanatorily powerful than the ideal standard model. The role of contextual appropriateness is notable here. Straightforward explanatory and modal claims, such as the claim that collective intentionality is not essential to institutions, can be accommodated in alternative metametaphysical frameworks. But the idea that there may be good political or more broadly pragmatic reasons to accept Burman's framework, such as eschewing an idealized view of society as only rarely shaped by injustice, which render the non-ideal approach more contextually appropriate, can be captured in the explanatory power framework but not in alternatives.⁴¹

These cases are from social metaphysics because considerations about social metaphysics motivated the discussion. But an account of substantivity is part of a general metametaphysics, so

³⁹ Burman, Åsa (2023) pg 92

⁴⁰ Burman, Åsa (2023) Section 2.3

⁴¹ Though Burman is cautious about embracing a fully, as she puts it, "emancipatory" social metaphysics as endorsed by Jenkins, for example, in Jenkins, Katharine (2023). See discussion in Burman, Åsa (2023) pg 173

it is worth considering whether the explanatory power approach works beyond the specifically social cases. I propose that it does.

To illustrate, consider debates about the metaphysics of laws of nature, which, as discussed in Chapter 3, generate instances of the RML problem. There is much at stake in these discussions, with explanatory targets including the distinction between laws and contingent generalizations, the nature of nomic necessity, and the nature and authority of science. Accordingly, these debates are classified as substantive metaphysics by the explanatory power approach. Furthermore, through the role of contextual appropriateness this view allows pragmatic considerations to guide, though not entirely determine, theory choice. A metaphysics of science is in part an interpretation of the nature of scientific practice, and one goal for a metaphysics of laws is to account for the various roles that laws play in science, including in theories, predictions, and explanations.⁴² However, some views of laws permit that even in a final, ideal science our inquiry may never lead us to the actual laws, which presents a challenge to realism.⁴³ On the explanatory power view we can take considerations about how well a view captures the role of laws in scientific practice into account, through the significance of contextual appropriateness. We can prefer an account of laws that does not leave open the possibility of mismatch, say, as a matter of explanatory values, rather than through a commitment to anti-realism about laws of nature. While there is more to say about this example, it indicates that the explanatory power view of substantivity not only can handle metaphysics beyond the social, but also offers resources for accommodating pragmatic features of theory choice that are unavailable from alternative frameworks.

Let us return to the criteria for an account of substantivity and consider how well the explanatory power view meets them. The criteria are:

Goals: The account must articulate the broad goals of metaphysics.

Genuine: Substantive debates must be genuine.

⁴² For example, see Loewer, Barry (2021) for defense of an account of laws that, as Loewer puts it, “prioritizes the aims and practices of science.”

⁴³ For example, Van Fraassen argues that Lewis’ Best Systems Account of laws faces the problem of “mismatch” because of the role of naturalness in lawhood, in Van Fraassen, Bas (1989) Chapter 2 Section 5. See discussion in Demarest, Heather (2017). For discussion of the prospect of the failure of science to identify one determinate set of laws, see Lettie, Jacob (manuscript)

Non-arbitrary: Substantive debates cannot be settled by arbitrary framing choices.

RML-avoidance: Substantivity cannot be defined in terms of mind-independence.

To take these in turn, the explanatory power view tells us that metaphysics aims at explanatory power. There are facts about whether or not an explanation gives information about a backer, and about whether or not a given explanation is contextually appropriate, so which view displays most explanatory power can only be settled through genuine inquiry. Although explanatory values play a role in determining explanatory power (more on these in Section 4), debates cannot be completely settled by deciding upon a set of explanatory values, which means that metaphysical debates cannot be settled by selecting an arbitrary framing. And finally, because CPN Backing permits backers that are not forms of metaphysical determination and because contextual appropriateness is central to explanatory power, substantivity is not defined in terms of mind-independence, thereby avoiding the RML Problem.

4. Explanatory Values

This view gives a central role to contextual appropriateness. Once the basic standard of citing a backer has been met, whether or not an explanation is contextually appropriate depends on the explanatory values operative in the context in which the explanation is formulated and received. Explanatory values are desiderata for the style, nature, format, and so on, of an explanation. Standard extra-empirical virtues like simplicity and fruitfulness are explanatory values, as is the idea that explanations ought to be presented in a formal language, or the ameliorative idea that we should seek explanations suited to various moral and political ends.

An important feature of explanatory values is that it is not the case that *anything goes*. There are constraints on explanatory values, generated by the nature of explanation and of inquiry. For example, even without a definition of explanatory values, we can recognize that *parsimony* is an explanatory value, while *being emotionally satisfying to a particular person* is not, because emotional satisfaction has no tie to explanation, while parsimony arguably does. Explanatory values function as heuristics, balanced against each other. Explanatory values often cited in metaphysics include parsimony, fruitfulness, aligning with commonsense intuitions, closely following and

vindicating scientific results, and being amenable to precise characterization in formal as well as natural language.⁴⁴

However, beyond recognizing that there are canonical explanatory values and that they are constrained by the nature of explanation and of inquiry, the explanatory power framework says little about which values we should have. This is because the selection of explanatory values is part of the ongoing practice of metaphysics, and of inquiry more generally, and it would be an overreach for an account of substantivity to settle them. As a descriptive claim this is vindicated by the prevalence of conversations about which explanatory values should guide metaphysics, including debates about the extent to which our metaphysical claims should be close to and informed by science, or the extent to which they should be regimented or driven by modal or higher-order logic. We can see it also in historical shifts in explanatory values in similar subject-matter.⁴⁵ However, I present this quietism not merely as a descriptive claim but also as a prescription. Much as scientists cannot avoid reflecting on and engaging in discourse about their explanatory values, metaphysicians must also be willing to take on these questions. Accordingly, an account of substantivity ought not tell metaphysicians which values should guide their research.

This quietism extends to the case of political and ethical amelioration in social metaphysics. If social metaphysics should be guided by ameliorative considerations then the explanatory power framework can accommodate that without returning the result that inquiry guided by such considerations is non-substantive. But the framework does not tell us whether or not social metaphysics should give a central role to moral and political considerations. And that seems right, given controversy about the precise role that political and moral values should play in metaphysics and science, and historical variation in the centrality of such considerations to metaphysics.

⁴⁴ For example, Williamson argues for formal precision as an explanatory value in Williamson, Timothy (2007), Afterword. Bryant sketches a program for metaphysics with a close relationship to scientific practice in Bryant, Amanda (2021). For discussion of extra-empirical and explanatory virtues in metaphysics, see Emery, Nina (2023) Chapter 3.

⁴⁵ For example, being amenable to expression in formal logic is taken by many as a desirable feature of views in 21st century metaphysics, but was not typically taken as a virtue of 19th century metaphysics in the post-Kantian tradition. For a survey of historical changes in the explanatory values of metaphysics, see Moore, Adrian W. (2012)

However, acknowledging a central role for explanatory values while remaining quiet about what they should be leaves open the possibility of metaphysics governed by bad values. One might worry about the prospect of morally bad metaphysics, such as racist or misogynist metaphysics. Or one might worry about metaphysics guided by intellectually irresponsible values, such as prioritizing astrological explanations or explanations that appeal to the “law of attraction.”

In response, note that there are constraints on explanation beyond explanatory values, and that these rule out the worst cases. To display explanatory power a view must explain relevant phenomena, and that requires citing facts about dependence relations. Those claims must be accurate; one cannot explain by positing structure that is not there. An astrological explanation attributes causal connections between the positions of the planets and individual character traits, among other things, that do not obtain, so it cannot meet even this preliminary standard for explanation. Similarly, the racist metaphysician is likely to make false claims about dependence, such as claiming that facts about cultural and historical phenomena are grounded in facts about biological racial essences.⁴⁶ These basic criteria rule out cases that involve purported explanations based on false claims.

Some cases meet this first test of offering an explanation, yet are still worrying. For instance, consider a person who insists on giving and receiving only grounding explanations. When asked even a simple explanatory question this person will give only a grounding explanation, and they will countenance only grounding explanations in response to their own explanatory demands. This case differs from the previous ones because here there are explanations available, although they are inappropriate to their context. But this case and others like it can be avoided through appeal to common-sense considerations about explanatory values. It is implausible to think that this person is actually motivated by considerations about explanation as opposed to some other goal, such as affiliating themselves with a particular style of metaphysics. A person seeking the best explanation for their purposes would not behave in this way, because sometimes we need to do things like explain ourselves, or give causal explanations that facilitate causal interventions.

⁴⁶ For example, see Charles Mills’s discussion of the racial realist in Mills, Charles (2000), or Appiah’s discussion of racialism in Appiah, Kwame Anthony & Gutmann, Amy (1996)

Such considerations tell against taking this person to maintain the preference for grounding explanations as an explanatory value, rather than some other kind of preference.

There are further problem cases, however, in which there are dependence relations to cite, and an inquirer has genuine explanatory values. For example, consider a person with ideological political purposes who seeks whatever (genuine) explanations promote those purposes. The explanatory power framework does not tell us what to do with this person. Although this may seem troubling, as before, this quietism is appropriate. These are in part moral questions, and we should not expect a metametaphysics (of this non-Kantian kind) to answer moral questions. We should guard against having our inquiry guided by bad values, but the explanatory power framework will not show us what they are, or how to protect ourselves against them. Thankfully, however, there are other resources to address these questions, including moral and political philosophy.

5. Realism, Anti-Realism, Deflationism

These considerations about explanatory values lead to a further, general question about the explanatory power framework: is this a realist view? At this point I am tempted to recommend abandoning talk of a general distinction between realism and anti-realism. It is not a unified distinction but a cluster of different distinctions lying in different loci, so asking in general whether a view is realist or not can obfuscate important detail. But on reflection I will countenance talk of realism; after all, I have been using it myself throughout. The answer is that this is neither a wholly realist nor a wholly anti-realist view.

This is not a realist metametaphysics of the kind on which metaphysical inquiry is all and only targeted at entirely mind-independent phenomena. On my view, metaphysics *can* aim at mind-independent features of the world, but theory choice can also be influenced by features such as the needs and values of inquirers, which may include moral and political concerns. Metaphysics can also tell us about dependence relations that are thoroughly mind-dependent, such as subjective probability-raising, or conceptual associations, or causation understood in anti-realist

terms. The explanatory power framework permits flexibility as to how prominent these factors should be in metaphysics, but it permits them, unlike standard forms of realism.

On the other hand, this is not an anti-realist proposal. Metaphysical debates are not decided entirely by features of inquirers or of context, and metaphysics is responsive to more than those features. There is room, on this framework, for thoroughly realist views of first-order phenomena, so long as those views display the most explanatory power. Furthermore, this is not a deflationary metametaphysics, because the facts about which backing relations are instantiated are not determined by choosing a framing such as a language, or choosing how to understand the existential quantifier. Indeed, even explanatory values are fairly constrained, and explanatory power is not entirely determined by a choice of explanatory values.

Accordingly, *non-realist* is the best term for this approach. On the explanatory power view, metaphysics is responsive to mind-independent and mind-dependent phenomena. Metaphysical debates can be settled by mind-independent and mind-dependent factors. And explanatory power ties these aspects together.

6. Summary

In Chapter 4 I offered a diagnosis of the problems for social metametaphysics as an instance of the RML Problem, and argued for a solution that separates the connection between the legitimacy of metaphysics and its responsiveness to purely mind-independent features. In this chapter I articulated the first, most central part of this new strategy: *substantivity as explanatory power*. This view locates substantivity in explanatory power, conceived of in non-realist terms, and performs the traditional motivating work for an account of substantivity while accommodating social metaphysics. However, an account of substantivity is only one part of a metametaphysics. In Chapter 6 I will develop the explanatory power approach to substantivity into a general metametaphysics.

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