

Chapter 6

An Explanatory Metametaphysics.

Chapter 5 developed an account of substantivity based on explanatory power. In this chapter I expand the explanatory power approach into a comprehensive metametaphysics and discuss the picture of reality and of metaphysical inquiry that results from embracing this view. The primary outcome is that, while the explanatory power framework has revisionary elements, it can accommodate many standard tools already deployed in analytic metaphysics. For example, the explanatory power metaphysician may adopt a theory of grounding or endorse modal realism, so long as those views display high levels of explanatory power.

I begin by discussing the goals and nature of metaphysics and compare the explanatory power metametaphysics to realist, anti-realist, and deflationist alternatives, in 1. In 2 I turn to examples of metaphysical debates to illustrate how they are treated in the explanatory power framework, including debates about existence questions and about modal and post-modal phenomena. In 3 I consider and respond to three challenges to the explanatory power framework: that it involves a circularity, that it is equivalent to an extant view of abductive metaphysics, and that it permits divergent, incommensurable worlds. I conclude by sketching a metaphysics of *prefiguration* – deliberate, politically-motivated attempts at social construction – to illustrate how the explanatory power approach handles this case, and to offer the beginnings of a metaphysics of prefiguration.

1. The goals and character of metaphysics: realism and explanation

On the explanatory power view metaphysics aims at explanatory power. Just as in the Quinean paradigm metaphysics aims to answer existence questions, and in the grounding paradigm metaphysics targets claims about fundamentality, in this paradigm metaphysics aims at explanation.

On the non-realist view of explanation necessary to avoid the RML Problem, the explanatory power of metametaphysics is non-realist. To illustrate let us return to a distinction introduced in Chapter 3, between realism and alternatives at the first order and realism and alternatives at the second (or metametaphysical) order.¹ First-order realism and anti-realism apply to metaphysical claims and debates; for example, a mathematical Platonist is, as such, a first-order realist about mathematical entities. Second-order, or metametaphysical, realism and anti-realism pertain to the nature of the first-order metaphysical debates. On this taxonomy most mainstream metaphysicians are second-order realists, while deflationists are second-order anti-realists.²

Second-order realism happily combines with first-order anti-realism about various phenomena. Indeed, this is a standard combination, as it is necessary for the second-order realist to avoid endorsing an implausible spread of realism about first-order phenomena. For example, one can combine the second-order realist view that all metaphysical debates are responsive to mind-independent facts about fundamentality with an error theory of morality, in taking the fact that there are no moral properties or facts (say) to be a feature of mind-independent reality. In contemporary metametaphysics the standard alternative to second-order realism is deflationism. In contrast with the second-order realist, the deflationist holds that metaphysical questions can be answered in part by choice, such that in choosing a framing, such as a quantifier or a language, we thereby answer metaphysical questions.³ However, there are other ways to deny metametaphysical realism. One option, somewhat underexplored in contemporary metametaphysics, is to embrace idealism, on which metaphysical debates are responsive to *only* to mind-dependent features of reality.⁴ This is distinct from deflationism, as some deflationists have argued, because the deflationist does not make claims about the ultimate structure of reality.⁵ For the deflationist the metametaphysical idealist and the realist make similar mistakes in taking their

¹ Thanks to Liam O'Brien for helpful discussion. See O'Brien, Liam (manuscript). This is not equivalent to the distinction between first, second, and higher-order metaphysics understood in terms of quantification. See Fritz, Peter & Jones, Nicholas K. eds. (2024)

² See Chalmers, David, et al eds. (2009) for discussion of a range of metametaphysical positions.

³ The choice is about framing *data*, typically empirical. So the answer is not *entirely* determined by the framing choice, as this framing must be applied to the relevant data to generate the result.

⁴ For a rare contemporary analytic treatment of idealism see Hofweber, Thomas (2023)

⁵ For a historical perspective on this see Carnap's discussion of the similarities between the mistakes of the realist and the idealist: *From these questions we must distinguish the external question of the reality of the thing world itself. In contrast to the former questions, this question is raised neither by the man in the street nor by scientists, but only by philosophers. Realists give an affirmative answer, subjective idealists a negative one, and the controversy goes on for centuries without ever being solved. And it cannot be solved because it is framed in a wrong way.* Carnap, Rudolf (1950) pg 22.

views to characterize the deep structure of reality. Another version of second-order anti-realism involves taking metaphysics as a primarily aesthetic and/or imaginative endeavor, rather than an attempt to describe reality.⁶

The explanatory power view is a form of second-order metametaphysical *non-realism*. This means that metaphysical debates are responsive to both mind-independent and mind-dependent factors in so far as those are associated with explanatory power, and the correctness of a given view is determined by considerations about explanatory power. This is compatible with realism at the first-order. The correct first-order views may turn out to be mathematical Platonism, moral realism, and so on, and if so this will be *because* these views display the most explanatory power. This approach permits some features of human inquirers to fund answers to metaphysical questions, which is not permitted by the second-order realist. However, unlike the second-order anti-realist the explanatory power theorist takes themselves to be responsive in part to the structure of mind-independent reality, while taking their subject-matter to also include phenomena that are made and structured by human interests and commitments.

The explanatory power metametaphysics does not demand that any inquirer know or care about explanatory power as they undertake metaphysical inquiry. This is a characteristic feature of other approaches to metametaphysics, such as structure, grounding, and essence. To illustrate consider the case of essence, where inquiry into traditional philosophical topics such as “what is justice?” or “what is consciousness?” are understood as inquiry into the essences of those phenomena. Those engaged in the inquiry need not conceive of themselves as reflecting on essence in order to be doing so, as the metametaphysics operates as a reconstruction of the activity of metaphysics, rather than of the beliefs of those engaged in such tasks.⁷ However, even with this caveat, we can understand the explanatory power framework as offering ways to make sense of the prevalence of explanatory language and metaphor in metaphysical practice.⁸

⁶ As in McSweeney, Michaela Markham (2023)

⁷ See discussion in Rosen, Gideon (2015)

⁸ The “in virtue of” locution has been explored in the grounding literature, but language like “accounts for”, “makes sense of”, and general use of cost-benefit metaphors all reflect the explanatory aims of metaphysics.

On the explanatory power view substantivity comes in degrees because explanatory power comes in degrees. Debates are more or less substantive rather than simply substantive or non-substantive. On a different form of explanation from the one adopted in Chapter 5 this could be altered, as binary standards for explanation and explanatory power will generate a binary standard for substantivity. But I take the fact that substantivity comes in degrees as a helpful feature because it makes intuitive sense of certain debates. In some cases it is not obvious whether an instance of inquiry is substantive, and working out whether it is substantive involves working out whether anything is explanatorily at stake. The idea that substantivity is scalar handles such cases well. For example, consider the question of whether a taco is a sandwich. So far, I have taken this to be a canonical example of non-substantive inquiry, as an issue that can be settled by choice. But there may be more explanatorily at stake than I have acknowledged, in which case this may turn out to be substantive to a low degree. For example, if the history of the taco has important ties to the history of California, say, and a view on which a taco is not a sandwich handles that history more effectively, then the inquiry may be somewhat substantive but not as substantive as inquiry into more explanatorily weighty phenomena, such as the nature and existence of social class.

Philosophers differ on precisely what their views must explain. Some might worry that this introduces another locus of relativism to the explanatory power view, in that our metaphysics will be determined by what we think that metaphysics needs to explain. However, even if this is worrying, it is not a distinctive feature of the explanatory power view because it is a feature of every alternative metametaphysics. Many debates about metaphysical methodology, such as debates about the extent to which metaphysics should be guided by considerations about science, intuitions, language, folk physics, psychology, or politics, just are debates about the data a view should accommodate.⁹ These conversations are a standard, prevalent part of metaphysics, and as such pose no particular challenge to the explanatory power view.

⁹ Consider debates in naturalistic philosophy of science about the extent to which philosophy should be responsive to scientific practice, as in Bryant, Amanda (2021) and French, Steven & McKenzie, Kerry (2012). Alternatively, consider debates about the extent to which survey data should replace appeals to intuition, as in the practice of experimental philosophy. See Knobe, Joshua, et al (2012)

2. Canonical metaphysical questions

With a general sense of the explanatory power metametaphysics in hand, let us now consider how it handles some canonical clusters of metaphysical questions. Here I will focus on existence questions, and questions about modal and post-modal phenomena.

2.1 Existence questions

In the explanatory power framework substantive ontological questions are settled on the basis of considerations about explanatory power. However, some ontological questions are not substantive, in that there is no difference between the explanatory power of rival positions. This piecemeal treatment of existence questions – some substantive, some not – is not standard, as most frameworks tend to offer a unified approach. But I will argue that it offers significant benefits.

To illustrate, consider a debate about the existence of patriarchy. Stipulate that the definition of patriarchy is that patriarchy is a social structure with the function of privileging men and subordinating women. Now consider two views: that patriarchy exists and that it does not. If both can explain the same data with the same level of explanatory power then this debate is non-substantive. In that case, the choice of whether or not to posit patriarchy is rather like choosing a language; we can choose how to describe things and there is little at stake in such choices beyond our descriptive preferences. If there are differences in explanatory power, however, then the debate is substantive. I favor the view that patriarchy exists (though I will not argue for this here), and that this debate is substantive. Considering some reasons in favor of the existence of patriarchy will illustrate the kinds of features that can make a difference to explanatory power.

Consider the various uneven patterns in the distribution of material goods, money, and representation between men and women, such as the gender pay gap, and the comparatively low representation of women in public life.¹⁰ Those who do not posit patriarchy can explain such

¹⁰ For recent statistics on the global situation of women see the UN Women Gender Snapshot. 2024 data here: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2024/09/progress-on-the-sustainable-development-goals-the-gender-snapshot-2024>

patterns only as the product of normal economic and social processes. Those who hold that patriarchy exists can argue that these phenomena depend on and are explained by patriarchy in a range of different ways. For example, they might believe that patriarchy causes these asymmetric patterns, or grounds them, or makes them more likely. One way to take a causal approach to such cases is captured in Ross's account of social structural explanations as identifying causal constraints imposed by social structures on individual actions.¹¹ On this view we might explain an individual receiving a salary lower than their peer's not on the basis of that individual's failure to negotiate effectively, say, but instead on the basis of various constraints imposed on their capacity to negotiate by gendered norms about salary, gratitude, aggression, and so on. Furthermore, Ross's account offers interventionist resources to test when the social structural explanation of a given outcome is better (in my terms, displays more explanatory power) than the individualist explanation of the same outcome. These specifically gendered, structural explanations are not available to those who do not posit patriarchy, because they can only appeal to the individual-level explanation. Of course, one may hold that explanations appealing to patriarchy are not causal, and the explanatory power framework based on non-realist backing permits this. But the causal view illustrates the kind of basis on which the case for an existence claim might be made, and the kinds of features in virtue of which a debate about existence might be substantive.

For a non-social substantive existence question, consider the case of the existence of numbers, which is a central issue in philosophy of mathematics.¹² My aim is to show that, regardless of whether or not ontological questions are the proper basis of a distinction between realism and anti-realism, this ontological question is at least arguably substantive on the explanatory power approach. There is a lot explanatorily at stake in this question including the nature, prevalence, and success of mathematical discourse, the fact that there are mathematical truths, and the apparent indispensability of mathematics to science. Those who hold that numbers exist can offer a range of explanations of these phenomena, backed by various dependence relations that hold between numbers and the explanatory targets. On standard views of the metaphysics of

¹¹ Ross, Lauren N. (2023)

¹² I will focus here on numbers but this could be replaced with other mathematical entities like structures, or sets. Some prefer to frame the distinction between mathematical realism and anti-realism in terms of something other than existence questions, but I will stick with ontology for the moment. For example, Fine suggests framing the debate between mathematical realists and anti-realists in terms of grounding in Fine, Kit (2001)

mathematics such explanations are unlikely to be causal (though some hold that numbers generate explanations by constraint of natural events), but other options include grounding, truthmaking, and conceptual dependence. The proponent of the view that numbers do not exist then faces the challenge of showing that their view offers higher levels of explanatory power. Perhaps they could argue that facts about human conventions offer better explanations of the same phenomena, because those phenomena depend in a similar range of ways on human conventions. Or some might argue that numbers do not exist, but that other mathematical entities, such as structures, do, and that they generate more explanatory power than alternative posits. None of this decisively shows that debates about the existence of numbers are substantive, because that would require a more extensive survey of the targets of explanation and the explanatory resources available from each view. But given the high explanatory stakes and different resources offered by each view, this existence question is *likely* to be substantive on the explanatory power view.

Now consider a non-substantive debate about existence. Take a fairly small group of people hanging out together. We might wonder whether, given that this small group of people has gathered, a party also exists – not whether parties in general exist, but whether in this particular instance, there is a party. We will need to know more about the case to form a judgment about precisely what, explanatorily, is at stake here. For example, if the group are raucously dancing, taking drugs, popping balloons, and so on, then there is more to explain than if they are sitting together quietly. However, this seems at first pass to be a non-substantive debate about existence. We can choose to characterize this situation as instantiating a party or as not, and neither choice is much better at explaining the relevant data.

In permitting some, but not all, ontological debates to be substantive, this view is different from other metametaphysical frameworks. For the Quinean ontologist, such as Van Inwagen, ontological debates are substantive and they are the core subject-matter of metaphysics.¹³ On my view one can make ontological claims without doing substantive metaphysics; sometimes ontological claims are cheap, and the considerations for and against them boil down to personal choice. For the permissivist, such as Schaffer, ontological questions are answered easily and

¹³ See Van Inwagen, Peter (2022)

straightforwardly by consulting ordinary language.¹⁴ As such they are non-substantive; substantive metaphysics concerns the nature of what exists. Sider adopts a hybrid approach on which ontological questions are, generally-speaking, substantive, and that they are made substantive by a combination of the joint-carvingness of the relevant classifications and by joint-carvingness of the relevant quantifier.¹⁵ The existential quantifier of first-order predicate logic is joint-carving, on Sider's view, and so if F is joint-carving, the question "is it the case that $\exists xFx$?" is also substantive.¹⁶ However, under a non-joint-carving quantifier this is not the case, so there may be non-substantive ontological questions asked under non-joint-carving quantifiers. For Sider, once we have decided to speak in an ontologically serious way, and have aligned our quantifiers accordingly, all existence questions are substantive. On my view, the substantivity or otherwise of existence questions is not tied to the joint-carvingness of language, or of quantifiers.

Intuitively, some ontological questions (such as "is there patriarchy?") are substantive, while others ("is there a party?") are not. The explanatory power view captures such differences, unlike approaches that take ontological questions to be unified with respect to substantivity. There are costs associated with this approach, such as that ontological questions are metaphysically disunified, and it is not always obvious from language whether or not they are substantive. However, these costs are fairly minimal.

Some metaphysicians countenance higher-order ontology, which permits ontological questions to be asked and answered at the second, and further, levels of quantification.¹⁷ This inquiry is regimented with higher-order logic in much the same way that Quinean ontology is regimented with first-order logic, and as such presupposes the legitimacy of higher-order quantification. In general, the explanatory power framework is neutral on higher-order ontology, in that it does not rule it out as an approach to ontological questions but also does not require it. In general, some ontological questions pitched at the higher-order may be substantive and others may not, depending on the explanatory stakes and the explanatory resources offered by permitting higher-

¹⁴ Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

¹⁵ See discussion in Sider, Theodore (2011) Chapter 9

¹⁶ See discussion in Sider, Theodore (2011) Section 9.4. It is an open question, on Sider's view, whether the quantifiers of our ordinary language are joint-carving in this way.

¹⁷ Fritz, Peter & Jones, Nicholas K. eds. (2024)

order quantification. This is different from other approaches. For example, on Sider's view higher-order quantifiers must be joint-carving if a higher-order ontological question is to be substantive, such that reality itself must have higher-order quantificational structure.¹⁸ The explanatory power view does not require such commitments for ontological questions at the higher-order to be substantive. The explanatory power framework is also neutral on questions about the logical legitimacy of higher-order quantification, as such questions are to be settled within the relevant domains of logic.

2.2 Modal and Post-modal

Let us now turn to the metaphysics of modality. I will begin by considering attempts to develop a general metaphysics of modality. This includes views such as modal realism, agnosticism, and conventionalism. On the explanatory power framework debates between these positions are settled on the basis of considerations about explanatory power.

To illustrate consider an argument between a modal realist and an actualist. The explanandum data are the modal truths, such as "I could have had eggs for breakfast this morning, although in fact I had oatmeal instead." The modal realist holds that this data is best explained by the view that there are possible worlds, typically combined with counterpart theory.¹⁹ The resulting explanation is robustly metaphysical; truths about modality are made true by facts about real possible worlds. The actualist thinks that there are no real possible worlds, and that we can explain the data in a parsimonious and plausible way only with the resources of actuality.²⁰ The actualist may help themselves to possible worlds talk, but will not commit to a fully realist interpretation of that talk. For the actualist, then, the explanations of modal truths are likely to be very different in format, relying on conceptual or other less robustly worldly forms of dependence. For example, for the conventionalist the facts about possible worlds are made true by facts about human linguistic convention, while for the fictionalist facts about possible worlds are facts about the fiction of modality.²¹ All of this is standard practice in modal metaphysics, as,

¹⁸ Sider, Theodore (forthcoming); Sider, Theodore (2011) Chapter 9

¹⁹ See classic formulations in Lewis, David K. (1973); Lewis, David K. (1986)

²⁰ Such as Adams, Robert Merrihew (1981)

²¹ Sidelle, Alan (1989); Rosen, Gideon (1990) I am talking loosely here in moving between accounts of modality and accounts of possible worlds.

following the influence of David Lewis, the case for a general modal metaphysics is typically made on explanatory grounds.²² Accordingly these debates are comfortably accommodated by the explanatory power framework. Of course, the framework does not settle which views of modal metaphysics are best, because these are substantive questions about the nature of modality. But the explanatory power framework returns a familiar, non-revisionary approach to modal metaphysics.

The explanatory power framework also offers different ways to prioritize modal logic in modal metaphysics.²³ Facts about modal logic can be among the data that a modal metaphysics must explain, in which case any viable view must be explanatorily responsive to such facts. Prioritizing expression in various systems of modal logic can function as an explanatory value, such that one might prefer, as a matter of explanatory values, views of modality associated with a particular formalism and that are generally amenable to formal characterization. And logical and modal dependence can back explanations, so long as the explanation-backing instances display the features of backers outlined in Chapter 5.

Overall, one can endorse the explanatory power framework and end up with fairly standard, familiar views of modality, and choose between them on the basis of fairly standard, familiar considerations.

Now let us move from modal to post-modal metaphysics. The idea that there are fine-grained phenomena that are distinct and yet modally equivalent is a central aspect of 21st century metaphysics, evident in contemporary views of grounding, essence, and identity. As in the case of modal metaphysics, post-modal metaphysics has a double life. It consists of first-order claims about reality, such as that there is worldly hyperintensionality, or that there is grounding, or essence. But post-modal metaphysics also offers a toolkit for addressing metaphysical questions by deploying considerations about these first-order posits. For instance, I may argue for a post-modal notion of essence, and then use it to make sense of and to regiment inquiry into the nature of consciousness, free will, or personhood. Both tasks are elements of post-modal metaphysics.

²² Although this is usually understood in abductive terms, rather than as enshrining commitment to an explanatory metametaphysics.

²³ For defense of a tight relationship between the two, see Williamson, Timothy (2013)

At this point a concern about circularity emerges that is distinctive to the explanatory power framework. Some post-modal posits are potential explanation-backers, such as ground or essential dependence.²⁴ Accordingly these are among the factors that determine explanatory power, and as such the results of metaphysical inquiry. This means that a cluster of metaphysical posits themselves partly determine the results of metaphysical debates, which creates a circle. I will put this serious concern to one side for the moment and return to address it in Section 3.1. For now we can simply recognize that these notions (grounding, essence etc) have the double life described above, and that we can make the case for or against them on the basis of facts about explanatory power.

To illustrate, consider making the case for grounding on the explanatory power framework. Following the standard cases for ground in the literature on these issues, we can take the explanandum data to be an array of phenomena that appear to display non-causal explanatory features and are also worldly.²⁵ Alternatively, we might also include the idea that there appear to be relations between levels in nature that are modally equivalent yet explanatorily distinct.²⁶ Some include the prevalence of “in virtue of” language in philosophy.²⁷ Now let us consider some different attempts to explain these phenomena. One option for a backer is truthmaking. On this approach, the proponent of grounding argues that facts about grounding make true the truths in the target explanandum.²⁸ Another option is a semantic, or conceptual form of dependence, on which the disparate concepts in the target explanandum bottom out into and are united by, through analysis, explication, or some other form of conceptual dependence, the concept of grounding. If the view that there is grounding has the most explanatory power among its rivals, we can then accept it as a first-order view. On the basis of this we can then go on to use grounding as a tool for thinking about other phenomena, such as giving grounding accounts of dispositions, laws, morality, and so on. We can also, more importantly for the explanatory power framework, appeal to the explanatory resources offered by grounding as an explanation-backer. As in the case of modality, so long as the relevant views display a significant level of explanatory

²⁴ See Glazier, Martin (2017) and Dasgupta, Shamik (2014) for discussion of an explanatory role for essence.

²⁵ As in Rosen, Gideon (2010) and Audi, Paul (2013)

²⁶ As in Ney, Alyssa (2016)

²⁷ Audi emphasizes this in Audi, Paul (2013)

²⁸ This obviously would not work on a view on which truthmaking *is* grounding. I use facts here, but could change to truths, or some alternative.

power we can return a fairly non-revisionary set of views, including extant frameworks of ground and the logic of ground already present in the literature.

Note that here I take endorsing a theory of grounding to amount merely to that – holding that there is grounding, that it has a distinctive explanatory role, and that it is instantiated in various cases. This does not amount to commitment to grounding as the basis of a full, exhaustive metametaphysics.²⁹ Here I am presupposing the failure of a general grounding-based metametaphysics to overcome the RML problem, while allowing that we might endorse a theory of grounding for more limited purposes.

Turning to essence. Contemporary accounts of essence, with notable exceptions, tend to involve the following cluster of commitments: that essence is worldly, rather than linguistic or conceptual; that facts about essence are facts about what it is to be a thing or a thing of certain type; that there are two forms of essence, generic and individual; that essence is abundant in that, roughly speaking, every non-contradictory predicate corresponds to an essence; and that facts about essence are responsible for facts about modality rather than the other way around.³⁰ If we were to make the case for essence in the explanatory power framework, it would proceed on broadly explanatory grounds. The target explanandum would include facts about our inquiry into various phenomena such as free will, consciousness, number, and so on, and the inadequacy of other, particularly modal, approaches to that inquiry. Although essence is usually posited as worldly by its defenders, the best explanatory case for essence might involve conceptual dependence – that the facts about inquiry into justice, consciousness, and so on, are conceptually dependent on and bottom out into the concept of essence, because what it is to inquire into such concepts just is to inquire into essence. The case for essence in general would perhaps be distinct from the case for its particular features. For example, we might endorse a view of worldly essence while rejecting the idea that essence is abundant or that essence is prior to and drives modality. But some particular features of essence might also play into the explanatory case for essence itself, such that a modal conception of essence is less explanatorily valuable than a non-modal conception, or a

²⁹ See discussion in Skiles, Alexander & Trogon, Kelly (2020)

³⁰ As in, for example, Correia, Fabrice (2006); Fine, Kit (1994); Rosen, Gideon (2015)

linguistic view of essence is more explanatorily valuable than a more worldly view, depending on how the inquiry unfolds.

As in the case of grounding, once established as a posit, essence can serve as a tool for resolving further metaphysical disputes. Furthermore, essential dependence may function as an explanation-backer, though that will depend on the precise apparatus of essence, ground, truthmaking, and explanation that ends up most explanatorily valuable. Many hold that essences play a distinctive explanatory role, and nothing in principle precludes essential dependence from functioning as an explanation-backer in the explanatory power framework.³¹ Essential dependence can also function as an explanation-backer even if essences turn out to be merely linguistic. On such views essential dependence would be a species of conceptual or semantic dependence, which the non-realist approach to explanatory power can accommodate.

As in the case of grounding, endorsing the view that there are essences does not entail commitment to a fully essentialist metametaphysics, which I reject. While some defend essence as a central part of a more general metametaphysics, this is not required in order to endorse the more limited view that there are essences, and that essentialism offers tools for addressing metaphysical questions.³²

2.3 Moving on

Other metaphysical issues deserve attention here, such as questions about mereology, truthmaking, properties, and the abstract-concrete distinction. However, my goal is not to give an exhaustive account of how the explanatory power approach treats all metaphysical questions, but instead to show how it functions in key cases and thereby illuminate two of its features. First, the explanatory power framework offers a plausible and fruitful way to approach metaphysical questions of many different kinds. Second, the explanatory power framework permits the adoption of standard metaphysical views and tools, so long as those views and tools display the most explanatory power among their rivals. While the explanatory power approach has

³¹ Glazier, Martin (2017); Dasgupta, Shamik (2014)

³² For defense of an essentialist metametaphysics as suited to social metaphysics see Passinsky, Asya (2021). For discussion of the prospects of an essentialist metametaphysics see Chapter 4 and Taylor, Elanor (manuscript)

revisionary elements, if extant views produce the explanatory goods, then we need not abandon them.

3. Challenges

Having seen how the explanatory power approach works in canonical cases, we can now address some concerns about the explanatory power metametaphysics. These include the worry that this approach is circular, that it is equivalent to a standard model of metaphysics as proceeding through inference to the best explanation, and that it generates a pernicious form of relativism.

3.1 Circularity and regress

According to the explanatory power view metaphysical debates are settled by facts about explanatory power. However, on the CPN-Backing view of explanatory power establishing facts about explanatory power often involves making metaphysical claims, because it requires establishing whether a backer is instantiated, and some backers are first-order metaphysical posits. Given this the explanatory power approach appears to be circular, as it unpacks metaphysics in terms of explanatory power, which (in many cases) in turn relies on metaphysics. Furthermore, the explanatory power view of metaphysical inquiry appears to generate a regress, as there is no non-metaphysical vantage point from which to begin metaphysical inquiry.

To illustrate the force of these concerns consider a case discussed in Chapter 5, of a debate between a non-ideal social ontologist and an ideal social ontologist about what explains the existence of the Stockholm housing market.³³ The non-ideal social ontologist argues that we can explain the existence of the Stockholm housing market without positing collective intentions. The ideal social ontologist argues that we cannot, and that we must posit collective intentions to explain the existence of the Stockholm housing market. The circularity worry arises when we consider the basis of the existence claim about collective intentions, and of the potential backing relation between collective intentions and the Stockholm housing market. For the sake of the

³³ I have taken this case study, and the distinction between ideal and non-ideal social ontology, from Burman. See Burman, Åsa (2022)

example take the proposed explanation-backer to be grounding. The ideal social ontologist argues that facts about collective intentions explain the facts about the market, because, they claim, facts about collective intentions partly ground the facts about the housing market. But their case for collective intentions is made on the basis of considerations about explanatory power; indeed, it must be, as it is an existence claim. Their case for grounding must also be made on the basis of considerations about explanatory power. The evaluation of the explanatory power of their view replies upon further layers of considerations about explanatory power. We encounter the danger of circularity – metaphysical claims establishing metaphysical claims – and the danger of regress – there being no point outside of metaphysical inquiry from which to begin metaphysical inquiry.

On the worry about circularity, however, let us note that while making claims about explanatory power (and using these as the basis of metaphysical claims) does often rely on other claims about metaphysics, on this picture, the explanatory targets are sufficiently far apart to avoid a vicious circle. Consider holding that collective intentionality exists *because* it offers a better explanation of the Stockholm housing market, and then using that claim to justify the claim that the ideal social ontologist better explains the Stockholm housing market *because* they can call on the resources of collective intention. *That* would be a bad circle. But this is not what is going on in well-functioning metaphysical debates. Instead we have the case for collective intentionality made on independent explanatory grounds, such as general features of social life and co-ordination, and then, once the existence of collective intentionality is established, it is then called upon for the separate task of explaining the existence and features of the Stockholm housing market. Something similar is true of the way grounding functions in this case. We make the case for grounding in general on the basis of broad, systematic explanatory considerations. We then develop diagnostics for grounding and deploy them to this particular case. The harmfully circular version would be to posit a grounding relation between facts about collective intentions and facts about the Stockholm housing market *merely because* doing so generates better explanatory resources for the ideal social ontologist to explain the Stockholm housing market. *That* would be an illegitimate circularity.

As this example illustrates, viciously circular arguments for metaphysical conclusions are possible on the explanatory power framework. But they are not inevitable, and can be avoided by attending to the independently motivated, non-ad-hoc considerations that enable us to avoid circular arguments in other, similar, contexts.

The concern about regress is related to but distinct from the worry about circularity. The circularity worry is that we must cite considerations about explanatory power to make further claims about explanatory power. I have suggested that, while this is the case, metaphysics need not involve vicious circles as the relevant explanatory claims have different bases, different explanatory targets, and are evaluated on different criteria. The regress worry is slightly different, amounting to the concern that, because we must appeal to explanatory power to make further claims about explanatory power, there is no place beyond metaphysics from which to begin metaphysical inquiry.

The first response to this concern is that we can idealize a place outside of metaphysics where we perform metaphysical system-building tasks in a rational order. This idealization can function as rational reconstruction of a non-regress-generating conception of metaphysics, even if our actual practice is far messier. On this idealized picture we begin by asking and answering very general questions about the different forms of dependence relations that can back explanations. We then develop a complete picture of the explanation-backing dependence relations, and develop diagnostics for them. On the CPN Backing view of explanation and explanatory power we cannot complete this task by attending to explanatory considerations, because explanatory considerations rely on facts about dependence relations. But we can do this work on the basis of standard abductive considerations, such as fruitfulness, simplicity, and so on.³⁴ Once our general picture of backing relations is in place, we can use such considerations in the full explanatory power approach to metaphysics. Understood in this two-stage process there need be no troubling regress.

³⁴ I do not find this picture appealing because it uses IBE at the beginning of metaphysics before switching to a different framework. (See discussion of IBE in 3.2.) I prefer the “second-philosophy” picture described in the next paragraph. But those who worry about the absence of a foundational framework may prefer to allow IBE in this preliminary role.

In reality, of course, metaphysical inquiry is far messier. We deploy all our resources at once, even when those resources are incomplete and sometimes generate large, sometimes small, sometimes harmful, circles. But this is a pervasive feature of metaphysical inquiry (indeed, of all inquiry); the best we can do is avoid the small, vicious circles, and to offer a reconstruction of metaphysics as proceeding through rationally ordered stages, even if in actual practice we do no such thing. Furthermore, there *is* no a-historic, a-perspectival place outside of metaphysics. This is not a distinctive problem for the explanatory power view, as the search for such a place is misguided. This is second philosophy, not first, and as such it has no starting-place.³⁵

Indeed, given that this picture was motivated in part by social metaphysics, it is helpful at this juncture to turn to critical theorists, who grappled with similar concerns. A standard feature of critical theory is its *reflexivity*.³⁶ For a theory to be reflexive is for the theory to cover itself, and as such to explain the emergence, viability, and popularity of itself as a theory. A canonical example is the Marxist explanation of Marxism. The explanatory power metametaphysics does not offer an explanation of its own emergence, uptake, and so on. But it does display a certain kind of reflexivity in that there is no foundational metaphysical point outside the framework from which it can be built. This strikes me a natural implication of human beings in social contexts attempting to build a theory adequate to social subject-matter, rather than a distinctive, undermining problem for the explanatory power view.

3.2 Abductive metametaphysics

A standard methodology for metaphysical inquiry takes it to proceed through inference to the best explanation (IBE). For example, Paul presents a view of “metaphysics as modelling” on which metaphysicians develop models which they compare on the basis of their extra-empirical virtues, including elegance and simplicity. As she puts it, “theories are chosen over their competitors using inference to the best explanation.”³⁷ Sider offers a similar picture of metaphysical theory choice as proceeding through inference to the best explanation (though he goes on to note that this picture generates some concerns): “Their methodology is rather quasi-

³⁵ Maddy, Penelope (2007)

³⁶ Horkheimer, Max (1935); Geuss, Raymond (1981) pg 55 ff; Held, David (1980) pg 191

³⁷ Paul, L. A. (2012) pg 12

scientific. They treat competing positions as tentative hypotheses about the world, and assess them with a loose battery of criteria for theory choice. Match with ordinary usage and belief sometimes plays a role in this assessment, but typically not a dominant one. Theoretical insight, considerations of simplicity, integration with other domains (for instance science, logic, and philosophy of language), and so on, play important roles.”³⁸ On these views metaphysical debates are decided by explanatory considerations. Is this not equivalent to the explanatory power metametaphysics? If so, then it seems that the explanatory power approach offers nothing new.

Precisely how this parallel between abductive metametaphysics and explanatory power metametaphysics functions depends on how we understand inference to the best explanation. If we adopt a realist interpretation of IBE and take it as a guide to purely mind-independent truth and reality, then abductive metametaphysics is not equivalent to the explanatory power framework, and abductive metametaphysics is likely to run into the RML problem. It is worth noting that those who have defended an abductive methodology for metaphysics have traditionally done so through a comparison with scientific realism, and so have taken a realist approach to IBE in metaphysics.³⁹ If we reject this realist view and think of IBE as a form of inference genuinely responsive to both mind-independent and mind-dependent factors (where the mind-dependent factors are not merely taken to be guides to worldly structure), then abductive metametaphysics will be closer to explanatory power metametaphysics. However, the structure of the reasoning that leads us to metaphysical conclusions will be importantly different, even on a non-realist picture. On the explanatory power framework considerations about explanation are tied to facts about the instantiation of explanation-backers. Abductive reasoning cites various explanatory features, such as simplicity, fit with data, and so on, in an inductive case for a conclusion. From the explanatory power perspective, this is like deciding on a view merely on the basis of explanatory values, without taking facts about backers into account. Claims about explanatory power reflect facts about dependence in a way that the standard norms for IBE – the sole focus on extra-empirical values like simplicity – do not permit.⁴⁰

³⁸ Sider, Theodore (2009) pg 2

³⁹ Including the Paul and Sider papers cited above. See also Swoyer, Chris (1999)

⁴⁰ For discussion of the role of explanatory considerations in metaphysics and science see Emery, Nina (2023)

There may be further differences to take into account, such as the idea fact that IBE is often deployed in a holistic manner. Those who promote IBE as a mode of theory choice in metaphysics often take such choices to proceed at the level of exhaustive models, which are compared on the basis of holistic, systemic considerations. We can proceed in this way in the explanatory power framework but we need not, as we can decide upon very fine-grained issues on the basis of explanatory considerations.

3.3 Relativism, incommensurability, and divergent worlds

In this section I will discuss a cluster of problems that belong together because they are generated by the same feature of the explanatory power framework: that different explanatory values will, with certain caveats, generate different, often incommensurable, pictures of reality.

To illustrate, imagine two philosophers. One prioritizes parsimony over all other features of metaphysical views (call her Pars), and the other prioritizes providing deep explanations over all other features of metaphysical views (call her Deep). In saying that Pars and Deep prioritize their favored features, I do not mean that they *only* consider those features when choosing theories. Pars and Deep are responsible metaphysicians, and as such they understand that explanatory values must be balanced against each other. However, they differ in which explanatory values they take to be most significant.

Stipulate that Pars and Deep agree on a lot, including all of the explanation-backers. So they agree that there is ground, causation, essential dependence, conceptual dependence, and so on. (This is unlikely as presumably Pars will want the most parsimonious set of backers possible, whereas Deep will want the widest possible array of explanatory resources, but let us stipulate this for the sake of illustration.) Even given this high level of agreement, their differences in explanatory values will lead to divergent metaphysical views. For example, on the issue of laws of nature Pars is more likely to endorse a Humean approach on which laws are, broadly speaking, patterns in events, while Deep is more likely to prefer a metaphysically robust view such as dispositional essentialism, say. Pars will be more concerned about upholding simplicity than

offering a deep explanation of the apparent data of nomic modality, while Deep will be troubled by the apparent explanatory failings of a Humean view.

So far this is standard practice, and as such not troubling: those who prioritize parsimony endorse views that are more parsimonious than those who prioritize deep explanation. Indeed, this case reflects the actual structure of many debates about laws in contemporary metaphysics of science.⁴¹ The trouble is generated by the fact that the explanatory power framework does not appear to provide resources for breaking a tie. This is an important difference between the explanatory power framework and its alternatives. On a structure-based metametaphysics, for example, one of the views is more structural than the other and therefore correct, or else there is genuine metaphysical indeterminacy. On the explanatory power framework explanatory values play a central role in determining the answers to metaphysical questions, and explanatory values differ across inquirers, so we must countenance divergent results with no apparent tie-breaker. This means either resorting to far more widespread indeterminacy, or else a kind of unpalatable relativism, with divergent versions of reality generated by different values.

Before considering responses to this worry, we should note that while divergence driven by differences in explanatory values may seem radical, it is a widespread feature of metaphysical discourse. While, as above, most metametaphysical frameworks offer some way to resolve tie-breaks, explanatory values lead different metaphysicians to endorse wildly different views in attempts to accommodate roughly similar data. This is so commonplace that we often resort to the language of aesthetic preference to characterize such differences. A famous example is Quine's "taste for desert landscapes", but anyone who has spent time in metaphysics seminars will recognize appeals to aesthetic preference as a standard part of the exchange of ideas, including quasi-aesthetic locutions such as, "if you're into this kind of move." Indeed, in response to these features some defend views of metaphysics as a primarily imaginative and/or aesthetic enterprise.⁴² However, the mere fact that aesthetically-driven divergence in views is an actual feature of metaphysical exchange does not show that it is a *desirable* feature. The explanatory

⁴¹ The literature on these topics is enormous and still growing. An early, influential formulation of a Humean approach is offered by Lewis in Lewis, David (1994), and a more recent formulation of dispositional essentialism defended by Bird in Bird, Alexander (2007). See Demarest for a hybrid view in Demarest, Heather (2017)

⁴² McSweeney, Michaela Markham (2023)

power framework is a non-realist metametaphysics rather than an anti-realist one, so appealing to the idea that metaphysics is primarily for imaginative or aesthetic stimulation does not help the explanatory power metaphysician to handle this concern about tie-breaks and the associated prospect of divergent, incommensurable pictures of reality.

One response is to hold that there is an absolute set of explanatory values, with an absolute order. Precisely what the explanatory values are is an issue about the nature and ethics of inquiry as much as it is about metametaphysics. But if there is an absolute set and order of explanatory values, then we can avoid the issue of divergent results because the one correct metaphysics will follow from the correct set and order of explanatory values (among other considerations, including the instantiation of backers). The absoluteness of the explanatory values could not be decided by purely mind-independent features of the world, because that would constitute a realist metametaphysics subject to the RML problem. But it could be generated by other factors, such as an ethics of inquiry. Indeed, there is a neo-Kantian version of this view on which the absolute explanatory values are generated by necessary conditions for the possibility of experience, agency, and/or inquiry.

However, this is a radical view. I find it implausible to think that there is an absolute set and ordering of explanatory values for *all* metaphysical inquiry. Furthermore, one of the benefits of the explanatory power framework, particularly for social metaphysics (more on this in a moment), is that it permits *some* divergence in light of differences in values. Given this consideration, it seems that we need something in the middle that does not generate a wild and unpalatable relativism, but also does not require either a neo-Kantian or straightforwardly realist commitment to an absolute set of explanatory values.

One appealing strategy is to hold that an absolute set of explanatory values governs some parts of metaphysics but not others. For example, it might be that mereological inquiry is guided by a particular set of values, while various branches of metaphysics of science are not. In such cases we may permit divergent conceptions of reality (generated by divergent sets and orderings of explanatory values) in some cases and not in others. Indeed, in some areas such divergence might be valuable. In the case of social metaphysics it is plausible that processes such as prefiguration

and utopian imagination, which are central to emancipatory politics, rely on our capacity to follow through on divergent conceptions of social reality.

The nature and ethics of inquiry may impose partial constraints on explanatory values. For example, the morally permissible explanatory values might include valuing formal expression or being highly informed by science, while impermissible explanatory values might include preferring views that facilitate the promotion of a political ideology. Depending on our metaethics those constraints may be absolute, without necessarily generating a complete, exhaustive list and ordering of explanatory values. Furthermore, as discussed in Chapter 5, the nature of explanation itself plausibly generates some constraints on explanatory values. Pure aesthetic preference, for example, should arguably have limited influence as an explanatory value, simply because explanation is not a purely aesthetic endeavor.

To summarize the resources for responding to this concern about relativism and the prospect of divergent worlds: initially we may permit that some domains allow for divergence while others do not. We can also note that while there may be divergence, it is not the case that *anything goes* with respect to explanatory values, as they are constrained by the nature of explanation and of inquiry. Furthermore, explanatory values do not in themselves entirely determine the results of debates, because debates are settled in part by the instantiation of explanation-backers. So, even if there is divergence, it will be constrained by domain, by the availability of explanation-backers, and by the nature and explanation and of inquiry. If even this more moderate version of divergence is too much, we can then turn to the idea that there may be absolute explanatory values with an absolute order. This is more extreme and establishing that this is the case will require deep exploration of the nature and ethics of inquiry. But this is one way to block the prospect of divergent metaphysics generated by divergent explanatory values, and divergent orderings of those values.

4. The metaphysics of prefiguration

Having considered some traditional subject-matter for a metametaphysics let us turn to new territory: the case of *prefiguration*.⁴³ Making sense of prefiguration and of prefigurative politics is an ideal target for social metaphysics. Here I will sketch an explanatory power approach to the metaphysics of prefiguration with the twin goals of showing how the framework handles this subject, and of developing the beginnings of a metaphysics of prefiguration.

“Prefiguration” is a political theorist’s term for a familiar idea: deliberately living as if society were different. Building a utopian intentional community can be an act of prefiguration, as can using non-traditional gender classifications, alternative financial systems, and forms of workplace management. Historically the term “prefiguration” (or “prefigurative politics”) is associated with late 19th century anarchist movements, and later with left-wing activists who moved away from more traditional mechanisms such as labor movements to achieve political goals.⁴⁴ Some took prefiguration as a response to the challenges inherent in the lengthy chronology of classic Marxist frameworks because it permits a way to live as if the ends of the political process have already been achieved.⁴⁵ However, prefiguration varies wildly in its nature and goals, so not all who embrace prefigurative politics take it to have this precise function. For example consider the case of the “Race Traitors”, a group of white artists based in Los Angeles in the 1990s and early 2000s who worked and published (including a magazine called *Race Traitor*) with the explicit goal of eradicating whiteness.⁴⁶ Compare this to the Italian autonomist movement of the 1950s which aimed to create communities living outside of existing state and social systems.⁴⁷ Some even hold that practicing vegetarianism can function as an act of prefiguration.

⁴³ Thanks to Abigail Susik for introducing me to the topic of prefiguration, and for helpful discussion. See Susik, Abigail (2021) pg 165, 186, 224, 226 n14; Susik, Abigail (forthcoming)

⁴⁴ See Carl Boggs for discussion of the history and nature of prefiguration in Boggs, Carl (1977) and Boggs, Carl (1977-8). For discussion of prefiguration in contemporary contexts see Wilson, Matthew et al (eds) (2024); Cornish, Flora et al (2016)

⁴⁵ For discussion of this element of prefiguration in Marxist movements see Boggs, Carl (1977)

⁴⁶ More information here: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_Traitor_\(publication\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Race_Traitor_(publication)) Archived magazine site here: <https://web.archive.org/web/20190602031404/http://www.racetractor.org/> Thanks to Abigail Susik for discussion of this case. See Susik, Abigail (forthcoming). Charles Mills alludes to this group in passing in Mills, Charles W. (2000) pg 44

⁴⁷ Boggs, Carl (1977); Boggs, Carl (1978)

Despite this variation across cases of prefigurative politics, some common features are evident. Acts of prefiguration typically involve a kind of utopian imagination - the capacity to envision a different world, captured in the prefigurative slogan *another world is possible*.⁴⁸ Often acts of prefiguration have a performative aspect, in that they are intended to show others that different social arrangements are possible and viable. In some cases prefiguration functions as a deliberate attempt at social construction, by shifting norms and making certain social structures and arrangements more common. Attempts at prefiguration also vary in their levels of success. Many are abject failures, such as the “Race Traitor’s” attempts to eliminate whiteness. But some attempts do succeed in varying degrees, such as by spreading the message that other ways of living are possible, and making the uptake of the practices that facilitate such change no longer beyond the pale. For example, increased openness about practices of non-monogamy has arguably shifted norms about the acceptability of non-monogamous relationships, even among those who do not practice non-monogamy.⁴⁹

The precise boundaries of prefiguration are not clear. For example, consider the Korean “4B” movement, in which women foreswear sex, dating, marriage, and having children with men. Aspects of the 4B movement arguably function as prefigurative in that they aim to change social structure, in some instances towards gender separatism. Sometimes, however, movements like 4B function more as a form of industrial action, or as a mechanism for protection from harms such as violence and coerced reproduction. (These are perhaps better explanations of increased interest in the 4B movement in the USA after the 2024 presidential election.)⁵⁰ However, as with most interesting targets of philosophical inquiry, we do not need a clearly delineated boundary to recognize and engage with questions about prefiguration and to recognize cases.

To avoid being tied to historical interpretative detail while exploring the metaphysics of prefiguration let us consider a hypothetical attempt at prefiguration. Imagine a group of people who join together to form an intentional community. Stipulate that the primary organizing

⁴⁸ For discussion of this slogan in contemporary political contexts see Cornish, Flora et al (2016)

⁴⁹ Empirical research on these issues is far from conclusive, but see Fairbrother, N. et al (2019); Hauptert, M. L., Gesselman, A. N., Moors, A. C., Fisher, H. E., & Garcia, J. R. (2016)

⁵⁰ See 2024 post-election news coverage of interest in 4B: <https://www.cnn.com/2024/11/09/us/4b-movement-trump-south-korea-wellness-cec/index.html>; <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/no-sex-no-dating-no-marriage-no-children-interest-grows-in-4b-movement-to-swear-off-men>

feature of this intentional community is embracing forms of family life beyond the heterosexual nuclear family. People in this community live communally, raise their children in common, and while no one is required or coerced into any particular form of intimate relationship, the community supports and values a range of different family and intimate relationship arrangements including full polyamory. Further stipulate that, while it is an empirical question whether these arrangements are genuinely beneficial to the community members, this organization is not coercive, members are free to leave at any time, it is not violent, the community does not practice child abuse or any kind of implicit or explicit sexual coercion, and the community has a fair and representative demographic balance in its leadership. Call the community *Prefigure*.

Members of Prefigure have a range of goals for their community, and for their own lives in the community. Some wish to live beyond standard family norms as a matter of personal preference, perhaps for the purposes of self-development or on the basis of the belief that doing so is a morally and/or psychologically superior family arrangement. Some parents may prefer the communal approach to raising children as offering more support and community than traditional arrangements, which often leave parents isolated. Group these motivations together under the heading “personal preferences”, because they are generated by individual choices about how to live, rather than deliberate attempts to change society. Other members of Prefigure, however, have broader goals for their participation in this community. One goal is merely to communicate to those outside of Prefigure that alternative family arrangements are possible and desirable. Another is to change family structure in general, shifting the structure of the family away from prioritizing the heterosexual nuclear family to permitting a wider range of options.

The personal preferences of the members of Prefigure are not distinctively metaphysical and as such do not pose challenges for the social metaphysician. But the possibility of changing social structure by living as if it is different, until it is different, does. This is a deliberate attempt to engage in social construction, which begins by adopting strictly false beliefs (such as “this is a normal family unit”). As such, a social metaphysics should offer an interpretation of this case.

Let us begin with the more performative version of life in Prefigure. On this approach the goal of the community is not to change society, but merely to show others that the structure of society is contingent and changeable. Things, in this case family structures, could be different. They *are not*, and the actions and lives of those in Prefigure will not make them so, but they could be different. In this instance, there is nothing distinctively metaphysical about the Prefigure community. Instead, their activities can be understood as an exercise in utopian imagination. They are considering, and displaying, alternative social possibilities. However, it is understood by all involved that they are not changing the truth of claims such as “the throuple is a standard family unit.”

The more metaphysically loaded interpretation of the goals of Prefigure is that they aim to change social structure outside of the community. This begins with the move described above, in which members make literally false assertions about social structure, particularly about family, in order to begin this process. They then publicize how they live and what they believe to people outside of Prefigure. In doing so, the members of Prefigure illustrate a range of social possibilities beyond those typically entertained, and thereby emphasize the contingency of social norms around family.

If uptake of these messages is successful, then the story will proceed as follows: people outside of Prefigure take up this message and come to understand that their own family arrangements are aligned with entirely contingent, and in some cases arbitrary, norms. As more people understand this, they may begin to order their families in different ways. Eventually, through the spread of uptake and understanding of such arrangements, they become part of the normal structure of the family. For example, eventually, over time, it may become true that “a throuple is a standard family unit.” The truth of such assertions comes to be reflected in laws, education, and social policy, as well as in the average person’s judgments of social acceptability. If unsuccessful these messages will simply not be taken up. Or the messages may be taken up, in that people come to understand that the standard arrangements are contingent and that things could be otherwise, but they respond by doubling down on existing norms and make no further changes to social structure.

Metaphysically there are a few different elements to this picture. The first is causation. Choosing to demonstrate the contingency of standard social arrangements is an attempt at causal intervention – exposing people to alternative arrangements, and in doing so spreading the belief that standard arrangements are dispensable, and alternative arrangements desirable. Once they have this belief, the relevant parties might choose to arrange their families differently, and causation will be part of this too (with some people moving in and out of homes, taking over childcare, and so on).

Another element is non-causal metaphysical determination. Depending on how many people are necessary for the purposes of social construction, once a sufficient number of people have a belief such as, “a throuple is a standard family unit”, and once this is recognized in norms, conventions, law, and social policy, the conditions that must be met by a family will literally change. On a grounding view of social construction this means that the members of Prefigure will have intervened on the grounding facts, in that they will have changed what it takes to ground the fact “x is a family unit.”⁵¹

Prefiguration also involves changing relations of conceptual and semantic dependence. The members of Prefigure are negotiating terms with the aim of changing what the word “family” can mean, to something more expansive than previously in use. There are many different ways to understand this kind of semantic intervention, including as metalinguistic negotiation, and I will not decide upon this issue here.⁵² But part of this kind of intervention involves making changes to the meanings of words, and as such changes to relations of semantic and conceptual dependence.

Prefiguration also involves making changes to the probabilities of a range of events. Various phenomena are more likely under the new social structure than the old, such as people raising children in common or living in groups rather than in couples, and not attracting legal or social censure for doing so. There are also changes to facts about counterfactuals, in that by the end of this process various social possibilities are closer to actuality than they were on the previous

⁵¹ One can understand this in Epstein’s terms as a change in the relevant frame principle. See Epstein, Brian (2015) Chapter 6

⁵² For discussion of ways to make sense of such tasks, see Plunkett, David & Sundell, Timothy (2013); Sterken, Rachel Katharine (2019)

arrangements, and part of the process involves making these possibilities closer, even if not in every case actual.

The explanatory power view, understood in terms of CPN backing, offers a rich array of resources to understand and interpret these interventions into social structure. We change what is explained by what by intervening on the backers; through prefiguration we change the grounding facts, change the semantic facts, change the causal facts, and change the probabilities and the possibility spaces. We can achieve this through a range of means, which begins (in part) by making literally false claims about social structure which become accurate, or in some cases more accurate, as society changes. While alternative social metaphysical frameworks offer resources to make sense of some such changes, none offers a unified, systematic approach that can make sense of all of these changes in one framework. The shift from one social structure to another will involve some indeterminacy, in that there will be phases when the truth values of sentences such as, “a throuple is a standard family unit,” will be indeterminate. But this is accurate to the social phenomena themselves rather than an indictment of the view; during widespread social change we do encounter some indeterminacy in social reality.⁵³

Some may worry about the idea that prefiguration begins by adopting literally false views about society. At first pass this looks like a conservative position, in allowing the dominant (and often also unjust) context to decide upon, in this example, what the family is. Surely it would be more emancipatory in spirit to think of the initial stages of prefiguration as involving agents making the family in their own image. But the false-claims view is more accurate to the actual phenomena, and captures the urgency and necessity of such actions, as well as the rationality of understanding of them as acts of resistance. If there were not some broader social reality to change and so no social facts on which to intervene, then there would be nothing to resist and therefore no point to prefiguration.⁵⁴ The widespread instantiation and variety of prefigurative politics counts in favor of the view that prefiguration typically begins with the adoption of, at the time, literally false views.

⁵³ For some helpful resources for making sense of this indeterminacy see Richardson’s work on scalar, continuous models of gender and sexuality in Richardson, Kevin (manuscript)

⁵⁴ Ásta, Jenkins, and Dembroff discuss this problem for the case of describing and opposing oppressive gender structures, though not under the label of prefiguration. See Ásta (2018) Chapter 3; Jenkins, Katharine (2023) Chapter 8; Dembroff, Robin (2018)

6. Summary

In this chapter the explanatory power approach to substantivity was developed into a comprehensive, non-realist metametaphysics. On this approach metaphysics aims at explanatory power, and metaphysical debates are settled by considerations about explanatory power. Because explanatory power combines features of us and features of the world, this view permits human interest a far more significant role in determining the answers to metaphysical questions than is standard. This raises questions about inquiry. What is the proper relationship between inquirers and their subject-matter? How close is too close? Many disciplines, including physics, anthropology, literary studies, psychology, and critical theory have wrestled with such questions. In the next chapter I will consider some answers from a range of disciplines, and the insights they offer for the case of analytic metaphysics.

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