CrossMark

Social construction as grounding; or: fundamentality for feminists, a reply to Barnes and Mikkola

Jonathan Schaffer[1]

Abstract Feminist metaphysics is guided by the insight that gender is socially constructed, yet the metaphysics behind social construction remains obscure. Barnes and Mikkola charge that current metaphysical frameworks—including my grounding framework—are hostile to feminist metaphysics. I argue that not only is a grounding framework hospitable to feminist metaphysics, but also that a grounding framework can help shed light on the metaphysics behind social construction. By treating social construction claims as grounding claims, the feminist metaphysician and the social ontologist both gain a way to integrate social construction claims into a general metaphysics, while accounting for the inferential connections between social construction and attendant notions such as dependence and explanation. So I conclude that a grounding framework can be helpful for feminist metaphysics and social ontology.

Keywords Feminist metaphysics · Social construction · Grounding · Gender

> Social ontologists standardly aim to provide non-causal explanations of dependence…—they are in the business of limning the structure of social reality. This is also the task of feminist metaphysics with respect to specific phenomena that matter for gender justice… [O]ne might think that contemporary grounding debates will be hugely beneficial and deeply significant for social ontological investigations. (Mikkola 2015: 7)

Feminist metaphysics is guided by the insight that *gender is socially constructed*. Barnes (2014: 342; cf. Barnes 2016, Mikkola 2015, 2016) criticizes current metaphysical frameworks—including my (2009, 2016) grounding framework—for

---

✉ Jonathan Schaffer
jonathanschaffer0@gmail.com

[1] Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

✦ Springer

rendering feminist insights "invisible (or possibly nonsensical)" due to "the focus on fundamentality." I agree with Barnes (2014: 344) that metaphysics should help one "figure out *what gender is*," I agree with Mikkola (2016) that metaphysics should thereby "go beyond the fundamental," and we all agree that a metaphysical framework should be helpful for feminist metaphysics. But I claim that a grounding framework does go beyond the fundamental, and can help clarify the idea of social construction.

The idea of social construction matters not just to feminist metaphysics but to social ontology generally. Yet the metaphysics behind social construction remains, as Mallon (2013: §1.3) observes, "obscure." In particular, it remains unclear how to integrate social construction into a general metaphysics, and how to account for the inferential connections between social construction and attendant notions such as dependence and explanation.

My core claim is that *to be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns*. This claim clarifies the underlying metaphysics of social construction by integrating it into a general metaphysics of grounding. And it accounts for inferences from being socially constructed to being non-fundamental, and being generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social patterns, since the grounded generally is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of its grounds. So I say that a grounding framework can be helpful for feminist metaphysics and social ontology.

I do not say that my core claim is the only way or even the best way to understand the underlying metaphysics of social construction. But I say that it is a way to understand it. Those who would reject grounding should treat this discussion as an invitation to find a better alternative.

1 Towards a feminist metaphysics

1.1 The role of social construction (or: how to be helpful)

An adequate metaphysical framework must allow one to make sense of every aspect of reality, including social reality, and so including gender. Indeed, gender is profoundly important to our lives, and so demands the most careful attention.

All parties to the discussion—including Barnes, Mikkola, and myself—endorse the following guiding feminist insight about gender:

Gender: Gender is socially constructed.

Gender traces back to the foundational feminist work of de Beauvoir (2011 [1949]: 283), who proclaims:

One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; it is civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.

Gender may be understood in contrast with the naïve idea that gender is a natural given. Thus Haslanger (1995: 130) labels gender "a constitutive social construction," clarifying: "Gender should be understood as a social category whose definition makes reference to a broad network of social relations, and it is not simply a matter of anatomical differences."

Gender may also be understood via the widely held distinction between sex and gender, with sex viewed as biological and gender as social. Though one may accept *Gender* while denying that sex is simply biological, or otherwise questioning the sex/gender distinction.[1] One may also allow that gender has some biological or otherwise not-socially-constructed aspects.[2] For present purposes it would be enough to say that gender is *at least partly* socially constructed. (Since I work with a notion of partial grounding, when I say that gender is grounded in distinctive social patterns I only make a partial grounding claim.) Indeed, for present purposes it would be enough merely to admit that *Gender* is a coherent idea. Even the person who thinks that gender is not even partly socially constructed but wholly biological should want to understand *Gender*, if only to understand what she is denying.

Anyone who accepts or even understands *Gender* is committed to understanding its constituent concepts, and so a metaphysical framework may prove helpful:

Helpful: A metaphysical framework is helpful if it can clarify the idea of social construction.

So far I take myself to be in agreement with Barnes and with Mikkola, who (2016: §2) writes: "The metaphysics of gender—what gender is—demonstrates the centrality of the notion of social construction in feminist work."

Moreover, *Gender* is just one of many social construction claims found in social ontology. As Hacking (1999: 1–2) details, social construction claims arise across diverse topics ranging from (A)uthorship to (Z)ulu nationalism, and from quarks to queerness. Anyone who accepts or even understands even one of these claims is committed to understanding the idea of social construction. So a framework that fits *Helpful* is helpful not just to feminist metaphysics but to social ontology generally.

1.2 The obscurity of social construction (or: what is needed)

Although social construction claims are central to feminist metaphysics and common in social ontology, the metaphysics behind social construction remains obscure. It is now standard in the literature to distinguish the *causal* from the *constitutive* conceptions of social construction. On the causal conception, the relevant claim is that some features of reality are caused by social patterns; while on the constitutive conception, the relevant claim is that some features of reality are "constituted" by social patterns, where this is some sort of synchronic relation of directed dependence.

---

[1] In this vein Butler (1990: 7; cf. Ásta 2011) says: "Perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender… with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all." Thus Butler accepts *Gender* but holds that sex is socially constructed too.

[2] For instance, Alcoff (2006: 172) holds that gender has a partly biological basis.

Most discussants note the distinction, say that the constitutive conception is intended (Haslanger 1995: 130; Kukla 2013: 23), and then wade into the details of the relevant domain (e.g., gender) without saying much more about the metaphysical underpinnings of the constitutive conception. This is not a criticism: it is perfectly legitimate to focus on other matters. It just means that the metaphysics behind the constitutive conception of social construction could use further clarification.

Indeed, it is fairly standard in metaphysics to use 'constitution' for the relation between the statue and the clay from which it is molded. Perhaps this holds some appeal as a metaphor for the relationship between gender (the statue) and society (the clay), but at any rate it should be clear that gender is not exactly a physical artifact molded by an artist out of clay.

By way of analogy, consider debates as to the physical basis for consciousness. Many discussants in this debate are focused on specific hypotheses as to how exactly consciousness is based in the physical, and one can engage in these debates without saying much about the general idea of something being "based" in something else. Or consider debates as to the causal aetiology of lung cancer. Discussants might focus on specific mechanisms as to how exactly lung cancer is triggered, without saying much about the general nature of causation. This is not a criticism: indeed, usually the general nature of causation is not at issue in such disputes. It just means that there is further work to do, complementary to these debates, in clarifying their background metaphysics.

I think that at least two things are needed to properly clarify the metaphysics behind social construction (on the intended constitutive reading—I omit this qualifier hereafter). First, social construction must be subsumed under a general metaphysical relationship, and thereby integrated into a systematic account of how reality is structured. Social construction is not magic; nor is it plausible to posit a primitive *sui generis* relationship triggered just between social patterns and what they construct.

Secondly and relatedly, the inferential role of social construction must be accounted for. It is usually said that the socially constructed is non-fundamental, and that it is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social patterns, as per:

> *Role, social construction*: The socially constructed is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social patterns.

One should clarify why social construction connects to these further notions in these ways. For instance, what is it about social construction that allows it to back explanation? Very few relations possess the power to back explanation. Why think social construction is among them?

Putting this together, here is what is needed to clarify the metaphysics behind social construction:

> *Needed*: Social construction should be subsumed under a general relationship which accounts for its inferential role (as per *Role, social construction*).

(Perhaps more is needed: I am just saying that this much is needed.) *Needed* provides a crucial counterpart to *Helpful*, specifying the ways in which a metaphysical framework can prove helpful. I am claiming that a grounding framework can fit *Helpful* by providing what is *Needed*.

2 Social construction as grounding

2.1 Grounding

My (Schaffer 2009, 2016) preferred metaphysical framework begins from a primitive relation of partial grounding, linking a more fundamental input to a less fundamental output. Frameworks incorporating a notion of grounding have been championed by others including Fine (2001, 2012), Correia (2005), Rosen (2010), Bennett (2011a, b), and Audi (2012). We grounding theorists do not agree on all details, and so I speak just for myself. As I see it, if one only lists what there is, including various particles, chemicals, and animals, etc., one will have missed the further matter that *some entities are more fundamental than others*. For instance, particles are more fundamental than chemicals, and chemicals are more fundamental than animals. Once one distinguishes the more from the less fundamental, it is natural to posit a generative relation of "metaphysical causation" from the more fundamental to the less fundamental. This is grounding.[3]

For present purposes, it is most important to articulate the inferential role of grounding. To begin with, grounding entails *the non-fundamentality of the grounded*. The grounding input may or may not itself be fundamental. But the grounded output is less fundamental than the grounding input, so the grounded output is guaranteed to be non-fundamental.

Secondly, grounding—as a relation of "metaphysical causation"—entails *the generation of the grounded from the grounds*. The more fundamental input generates the less fundamental output much like a cause generates an effect. (Fundamental entities are like uncaused initial conditions.) Formally speaking, grounding is well-modeled by the same structural equation models that prove so useful for studying causal structure, and that are generally apt for modeling asymmetric dependence (Schaffer 2016).

Thirdly, grounding—as a successor notion to "supervenience"—entails *the dependence of the grounded on the grounds*. It is now widely acknowledged that the modal notion of supervenience is not apt for understanding dependence, since supervenience is a reflexive, non-asymmetric, and merely intensional notion. As Kim (1993: 167) notes:

> Supervenience itself is not an explanatory relation. It is not a "deep" metaphysical relation; rather, it is a "surface" relation that reports a pattern of property covariation, suggesting the presence of an interesting dependency relation that might explain it.

So grounding may be understood as the "deep" dependency relation underlying supervenience correlations. In my view, one of the morals of the failure of the supervenience analysis of dependence is that grounding is a needed but unanalyzable notion, and hence best treated as primitive.[4]

---

[3] For a more detailed discussion of this notion of grounding, see Schaffer (2009) and (2016). See Koslicki (2016) for critical discussion. See also Wilson (2014) (and the follow-up debate in Schaffer forthcoming and Wilson forthcoming) for concerns about the unity of grounding.

[4] Of course I cannot prove the negative existential that there is no reductive conceptual analysis of grounding to be found (though when has reductive conceptual analysis ever succeeded?) I only mean to say that it is legitimate to use the concept regardless, without any such analysis to hand.

Fourthly, grounding—as a form of dependence—entails *the explicability of the grounded on the basis of the grounds*. If one wants to understand, for instance, why there is an H_2O molecule present, then one good partial explanation for this fact would cite the fact that there is an O atom present. This is not a diachronic causal explanation. (A diachronic causal explanation would presumably involve previous events, such as the events in which hydrogen and oxygen gasses were combined and exposed to a spark.) It is rather a synchronic metaphysical explanation, citing a more fundamental source at the time. Just as causation provides the direction and the linkage needed for causal explanation, so grounding provides the direction and the linkage needed for metaphysical explanation. The reason why the presence of the O atom partly explains the presence of the H_2O molecule is that the O atom partly grounds the H_2O molecule.[5]

Putting this together, some of the key aspects of the inferential role of grounding are:

Role, grounding: The grounded is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of the grounds.

The attentive reader may note the striking parallels between *Role, social construction* and *Role, grounding*.

2.2 Social construction as grounding (or: the main thesis)

I am now ready to state my main claim, which is:

Socially constructed: To be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns.

Given that grounding is a relation linking a more fundamental input to a less fundamental output (Sect. 2.1), *Socially constructed* is the claim that the social patterns are a generating input to the socially constructed (e.g., gender). Just as one might think that usage patterns in a given linguistic community ground meaning, so one might think that patterns of social interaction in the community ground social roles and categories.[6]

Three points of clarification are in order: Firstly, the 'distinctive' in *Socially constructed* is intended as a placeholder, since not every way of being grounded in society qualifies as being "socially constructed" in the way in which the latter term

---

[5] According to Kim (1994; cf. Salmon 1984), the lesson to be drawn from the failure of deductive-nomological accounts of explanation is that explanations must be backed by *dependencies*, to provide direction and linkage. Grounding is a form of dependence. In this vein Audi (2012: 104) says: "The reason we must countenance grounding is that it is indispensable to certain important explanations."

[6] I think that *Socially constructed* fits Haslanger's (1995: 30) description of gender as "a constitutive social construction," Haslanger and Ásta's (2011: §2.3) notion of "social constitution," and Ásta's (2011, 2013) notion of gender as "conferred," by which she means (2011: 62) that gender is "dependent in some way on human thoughts, attitudes, and practices," and (2013: 219) that gender is "a property that something has in virtue of some attitude, action, or state of subjects, or group of subjects." On this point I agree with Mikkola (2015: 8), who comments: "rewriting Haslanger's definition in grounding terms (I submit) is faithful to the original." I also think that *Socially constructed* fits Bennett's (Bennett 2011a) general conception of a "building" relation, where being constructed is equated with being built.

is usually used. For instance, the set {American society} is presumably grounded in American society, but that hardly looks like a case of social construction as usually understood. I intend to leave open, as a matter for further discussion, what exactly makes a case of grounding in society into a case of social construction.[7]

Secondly, *Socially constructed* is neutral as to the ways and extent to which a given phenomenon like gender is socially constructed. It is neutral on which practices contribute to the social construction of gender (see Ásta 2011, esp. §3A), neutral on whether gender so constructed should be considered a "projection" (Langton 2004) or something more substantial, and neutral on whether there are additional factors—perhaps biological factors—which are not social constructions but also partly ground gender (Alcoff 2006: 172). It is also neutral on whether the "social patterns" at issue can be understood purely in terms of displayed behaviors, or must be understood in terms of intentions. This is all as it should be: social constructionism is a big tent, and I am trying to explicate an idea shared by theorists who dispute these further matters.

Thirdly, *Socially constructed* is neutral on key historical and political questions, such as whether the norms and practices in question are socially contingent and historically variable, whether the construction in question causes injustice, oppression, or any other morally objectionable harm, and whether this harm can be corrected by political action. This is also as it should be. Social construction claims in some domains (e.g., quarks) are not obviously of any direct political moment. And even in the case of gender, one should at least make theoretical room to state the view that gender is socially constructed but not in any way that can vary across societies, or not in any way that is harmful, or not in any way that is correctable. I and many other feminists (see Diaz-Leon 2013) would also endorse:

> *Gender, ameliorative*: Gender is socially constructed in a contingent and historically variable way which leads to oppression and injustice, and which may be de-constructed through political action.

But it is theoretically useful to distinguish a baseline claim (e.g., *Gender*) that a phenomenon is socially constructed, from further claims (e.g., *Gender, ameliorative*) that the construction in question is also contingent, concerning, and correctable.

2.3 Providing what is needed

So far I have said what is needed to shed light on social construction, which was:

> *Needed*: Social construction should be subsumed under a general relationship which accounts for its inferential role (as per *Role, social construction*).

---

[7] Thus Barnes (2014: 337) explains Haslanger's view as follows: "Social structures are created by complex, repeated patterns of human social interaction." Barnes (2016: §4.2) gives the causal analogy of wheel ruts. The connection between American society and {American society} is more of an automatic mathematical relation, and has nothing much to do with complex, repeated patterns of social interaction which constitute social routines.

And I have put forward the claim:

> *Socially constructed*: To be socially constructed is to be grounded in distinctive social patterns.

I am now ready to show that *Socially constructed* provides what is needed.

First, *Socially constructed* subsumes social construction under the general relationship of grounding. This is a relationship which—on my view—is also found in such diverse domains as the relation between nonempty sets and their members, truths and their truthmakers, and higher-level scientific entities and their lower-level realizers. Grounding is the central structuring notion of metaphysical inquiry into "what grounds what." Instead of treating social construction as magic, or as some *sui generis* relationship known only to social ontology, *Socially constructed* integrates social construction into a systematic account of how reality is structured.

Moreover, *Socially constructed* accounts for the inferential role of social construction, as can be seen by comparing:

> *Role, social construction*: The socially constructed is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of social patterns.

With:

> *Role, grounding*: The grounded is non-fundamental, and is generated by, dependent upon, and explicable on the basis of the grounds.

So for instance, the reason why social construction can back explanation is that it a case of grounding, and grounding—as a relation of metaphysical dependence—has the general power to back explanation. *Social construction paddles, waddles, and quacks likes a case of grounding*.

Thus *Socially constructed* can fit *Helpful* by satisfying *Needed*, and so I conclude that a grounding framework can be helpful for feminist metaphysics and social ontology, through clarifying the metaphysics behind social construction. I am not alone in seeing how closely claims of social construction fit the mold of grounding. Mikkola herself (2015: 7; see opening quote) acknowledges as much, as do allies such as Epstein (2015), Griffith (manuscript), and Passinsky (manuscript).[8] Those who would reject grounding should treat this as an invitation to find another way to understand the metaphysics behind social construction, which can also claim to subsume social construction under a general relationship, and to account for its inferential role.

---

[8] Work on social ontology before the (re-)turn to grounding (e.g., Searle 1995) makes use of inadequate conceptions of dependence like supervenience. But insofar as grounding supersedes supervenience (Sect. 2.1), such work can be understood to be pointing towards a grounding based approach.

3 Replies to Barnes and Mikkola

So far I have argued that a grounding framework can help feminist metaphysics and social ontology by clarifying the metaphysics behind social construction. In what remains I consider objections from Barnes (2014, 2016) and from Mikkola (2015, 2016), which claim that a grounding framework is harmful for feminist metaphysics. Of course a framework may be helpful in some respects and harmful in others. But I do not think that either Barnes or Mikkola has identified any real harm. Also: neither offers a better way to understand the metaphysics behind social construction.

3.1 Privileging the fundamental?

A first concern, raised by Mikkola (2016: §3) in a section entitled "Going Beyond the Fundamental," is that current metaphysical frameworks—allegedly including my own—privilege the fundamental, which has "problematic results for feminist investigations," threatening to demote feminist metaphysics insofar as "feminist metaphysics does *not* focus on fundamentality and it does not consider gender or sex to be fundamental." Similarly Barnes (2014: 347–8) says that various metaphysical frameworks defended by Dorr (2005), Sider (2011), and Schaffer (2009) focus "on the idea of fundamentality" in ways that "have made the discipline increasingly hostile to the prospect of feminist metaphysics." Presumably the same demotion concern could be raised with respect to any non-fundamental aspects of reality including chemistry, but the concern has special sting for feminism and other causes of justice which deserve our moral care.

I understand why Barnes and Mikkola object to the radically minimal and reductive frameworks of Dorr, Sider, and others such as Cameron (2008) and Horgan and Potrč (2012), which posit only fundamental entities.[9] But I am baffled at finding myself lumped in with that crowd. My grounding framework (alongside the "building" framework of Bennett 2011a) stands opposed to these radically minimal and reductive frameworks, and happily wallows in the muddy reality of the non-fundamental.[10] Also, as the present discussion should make clear, I have no hostility to feminist metaphysics or social ontology, but embrace these inquiries. (I think I am an ally.)

More carefully, a metaphysical framework might privilege the fundamental *ideologically* by taking the notion of fundamentality as primitive, or *ontologically* by positing only fundamental entities. My grounding framework does neither. Ideologically, my primitive is not "fundamental" but "grounding" (Sect. 2.1:

---

[9] See Sider (2016) for his reply to these concerns.

[10] For instance, Horgan and Potrč (2012) and I (Schaffer 2012) debate whether—on the shared "monistic" premise that the whole cosmos is fundamental—one should also posit non-fundamental parts to the cosmos. I argue for parts, to support Moorean truisms about hands, and provide extensions for referential semantics. And elsewhere I object to Sider's (2011) refusal of non-fundamental entities, arguing (2013: 750) that "Nonfundamental entities are explanatorily fruitful posits."

contrast Sider 2011 and Wilson 2014: 560–2), where grounding relations have a slot for the more and for the less fundamental equally. Indeed, the bumper sticker slogan for my view is that metaphysics is about "what grounds what," which speaks equally of both grounds and grounded.

Ontologically, I reject the view—which Bennett (2011b: 27–8) labels "flat-worldism," and which Dorr, Sider, Cameron, Horgan & Potrč and our rivals endorse—that posits only fundamental entities. My view is not the flatworlder view but rather the layered view that fundamental and non-fundamental entities both exist (equally, in the one and only sense of 'exist'). Grounding then serves to account for how and why non-fundamental entities exist. For instance, I believe that here is one hand and here is another. Also, I believe that there are human beings who are gendered in various complex ways, and privileged and oppressed in various depressing ways, because of underlying social patterns. In this vein Barnes (2014: 341) allows that:

> [Schaffer's view is] more amenable to social ontology and social metaphysics than Sider's. Schaffer is happy to grant that we can make serious, substantive metaphysical claims when we say that genders exist, even if genders are not remotely fundamental.

So is there any residual "privileging" concern for my grounding framework, if it does not treat fundamentality as ideologically primitive, or deny existence to non-fundamental entities? Mikkola (2016: §3) thinks that I still treat the existence of derivative entities as of secondary importance: "Others accept the existence of derivative phenomena, but take this to be secondary to an ontological inquiry into what *grounds* what (Schaffer 2009)." But this is a misunderstanding: by my lights inquiry into what grounds what is not distinct from inquiry into the derivative, but is the basis for determining what derivative entities exist, and how and why they do so. One cannot inquire into the derivative without a relation of derivation. At any rate, by my lights inquiry into what grounds what includes inquiry into how gender derives from social patterns, which Mikkola herself (2016: §2) regards as central to feminist metaphysics.

In a different vein, Barnes (2016: §6) coins a notion of "metaphysical significance" and claims that I am committed to the "insignificance" of the non-fundamental:

> The root of Schaffer's permissivism is the claim that non-fundamental (=grounded) entities are 'an ontological free lunch'. And the motivation for this claim stems from the idea that entities which are non-fundamental (=grounded) are in an important sense not metaphysically significant. The fundamental (=ungrounded) entities explain everything else. They are the reason the world is the way it is—everything else 'flows from' them. If God wants to create a world like this, all she has to do is create the fundamental entities, and she'll then get all the non-fundamental by default.

She (this volume: §6) thinks that this stands in some sort of tension with social ontology:

> Why accept the principle that only fundamental entities are metaphysically significant/explanatory…, rather than simply reject the principle about the unique significance of fundamental entities? One upshot of careful work on social ontology is plausibly that there are quite a lot of interesting questions in metaphysics that aren't really concerned with fundamentality.

I think that Barnes's notion of "significance" conflates distinct ideas, and only thereby allows her to link the plausible claim that everything flows from the fundamental entities, to the wild conclusion that there are no interesting questions of social ontology. It is one thing to be "insignificant" in the minor sense of flowing from other entities, and quite another thing to be "insignificant" in the sense of giving rise to no interesting questions.

I accept the idea—which traces back to Lewis's (1986) idea of the perfectly natural providing a complete way to characterize reality, and is analogous to Kim's (1998) claim that the physical realm is "causally complete"—that one can give sufficient explanations for all phenomena from the fundamental (e.g., from particles/fields). But I take pains to argue that this idea is *compatible* with robust realism for the non-fundamental including:

- Non-fundamental entities exist (fully, and in the one and only sense of 'exist').
- Non-fundamental entities have causal powers.
- Non-fundamental entities play a role in causal and metaphysical explanations.

As should already be clear, I think that sufficient explanation from particles/fields is also compatible with:

- Feminist metaphysics and social ontology are deeply significant and interesting.

Perhaps the best analogy for the role of "fundamental entities" in my grounding framework is that of "initial conditions" in a deterministic causal model (cf. Schaffer 2016). From the causally initial conditions, the world unrolls "horizontally" across time; likewise, from the fundamental conditions, the world ascends "vertically" up levels. So everything else "flows from" the initial/fundamental conditions. But no one would conclude, from the idea that there are causally initial conditions (e.g., the Big Bang), that the subsequent history of the world is devoid of significance or interest; likewise no one should conclude, from the idea that there are fundamental conditions, that the derivative layers of reality are devoid of significance or interest.

Before leaving this section, there is one more misunderstanding I want to address. I have sometimes heard it said in conversation that even using the word 'fundamental' is already problematic for in some way suggesting that the non-fundamental deserves secondary attention, and thereby degrading the derivative by connotation. Obviously one can change the labels if one likes. But no one should object to the philosopher of language who speaks of some sentences as meaningful, for degrading the rest of reality as meaningless. No one should object to the ethicist who speaks of some actions as required, for degrading the rest of reality as optional.

And no one should object to the philosopher of mind who speaks of some properties as phenomenal, for degrading the rest of reality as mediocre.

Rather one should recognize many important and cross-cutting distinctions. One should distinguish the metaphysically fundamental from the non-fundamental (indeed we feminists need this to understand the claim that gender is non-fundamental). One should also distinguish the politically urgent from the non-urgent. It happens that the politically urgent generally concerns (not metaphysically fundamental particles/fields but) metaphysically non-fundamental persons, who are the proper locus of our care. True concern for fighting oppression and true care for persons may be fostered by finding inspiring labels for politically urgent ideas. It is not helped by erasing useful labels elsewhere.

3.2 Debating the nature of gender

Barnes has a second concern with my grounding framework. She thinks that it cannot make sense of substantive debates between social constructivists as to the specific nature of gender. For instance, Haslanger's (2004: 19; cf. 2000: 39) account of gender entails that, if sexist oppression were to end, there would be no more men and women: "'after the revolution' we should anticipate that there will be no men and women, but there will be males and females (and herms, merms, ferms, etc.), and these sexual differences will have distinct but egalitarian implications." Stone (2007: 162; cf. Mikkola 2011) holds instead that "women can be women without thereby being subordinate." Here is a live (and significant, and deeply interesting) debate over the nature of gender, yet both parties seem—in Barnes's (2014: 344) phrasing—to "agree entirely on what ultimate grounds there are" and to agree that gender is "grounded by a complex network of interpersonal social hierarchies." So what by my lights could be in dispute?[11] Likewise Ásta (2008) includes a *conferral* element in her grounding story, and so goes in for a more "projectivist" story than Haslanger. So, Barnes writes:

> Schaffer-style grounding seems like too coarse of a tool to properly describe debates about realism in social ontology… [M]any parties—including both realists and anti-realists—seem to agree on questions of grounding. So, for example, [Ásta] would agree with Haslanger that gender is grounded in a complex network of human thought, behavior, and norms. But [Ásta]'s account of gender is much more deflationist that Haslanger's—she is (more or less) a projectivist about gender. And [Ásta]'s view is plausibly characterized as a type of metaphysical anti-realism: gender is constituted by, and in a real sense 'constructed by' our collective patterns of thought and behavior.

I agree with Barnes that an adequate framework for feminist metaphysics should make sense of key debates including the Haslanger-Stone and the Haslanger-Ásta debates. But by way of reply, I think that both of these debates can be understood as

---

[11] I have changed the example. Barnes (2014: 342–5) considers a debate between Haslanger and Jenkins as to the status of trans women who do not "pass" as cis women. But the underlying point should be the same.

grounding debates. Barnes is right that "[Ásta] would agree with Haslanger that gender is grounded in a complex network of human thought, behavior, and norms." Indeed everyone—even the opponent of *Gender* and any form of social constructionism—should agree that gender is ultimately grounded in particles/fields. *But that does not mean that everyone will agree on how the intermediate grounding steps run*. The social constructionist adds that the intermediate grounding steps run through social patterns, and by my lights the Haslanger-Stone and Haslanger-Ásta debates are more fine-grained debates about how these intermediate grounding steps run through social patterns up to gender.[12]

Starting with the Haslanger-Ásta debate, what is distinctive about Ásta's account which lends it a projectivist flavor is her idea (2008: 137; 2013: 719) that gender is "conferred" in much the way that a baseball umpire confers "being a strike" on a pitch just by calling it such: "[T]here is not a fact of the matter as to whether the pitch is a strike or not independent of the judgment of the umpire, but rather it is the umpire's judgment as to the trajectory of the ball that confers on the pitch the property of being a strike." More precisely, Ásta's view (2013: 723–4) is that gender is the social significance of a contextually salient base property (e.g., sex assignment, social role, etc.), being conferred on those taken to have the base property.[13] Haslanger, in contrast, holds that gender is grounded in more large-scale and enduring social structures. So for Ásta you can change your gender just by going to the right bar; for Haslanger it requires a political revolution. This is a dispute over what grounds gender: for Ásta but not for Haslanger it can be sufficient grounds for being a woman (in the right context) that you dress like one.

Turning to the Haslanger-Stone debate, again this is a debate over whether the property of oppression figures in the intermediate grounding story for being a woman. For Haslanger you can change your gender by igniting a political revolution; for Stone this would not be enough. For Stone a change of gender may require highly invasive surgeries and treatments which alter one's anatomy.[14]

Perhaps there are other debates among social constructionists that are substantive but that cannot be understood as grounding debates. But for present purposes I can only say that grounding is not "too coarse of a tool" for the examples Barnes raises.

---

[12] I was initially inclined to be more concessionary to Barnes with respect to the Haslanger-Stone debate, but I thank Asya Passinsky (*personal communication*) for convincing me that the "intermediate grounding steps move" works there too.

[13] My thanks to Ásta Sveinsdóttir (*personal communication*) for helping me get the details right.

[14] Witt (2011) embraces the gender essentialist view that one's gender is part of what makes one the social individual one is. So for Witt one cannot endure changing one's gender at all. (For her successful gender reassignment surgery would destroy the old social individual and create a distinct social individual.) So Witt too comes out as holding a distinctive position on the grounds of gender. (*Two caveats*: first, Witt considers the idea that "transgender" may count as a third gender, in which case a transgendered social individual may preserve their gender; secondly, Witt distinguishes the social individual from both the human organism and the person, so she can allow that the human organism and person survive even if the old social individual does not.) What matters for present purposes is that a grounding framework can succeed in distinguishing different views about the nature of gender.

3.3 Grounding the grounding facts, and going pragmatic

Mikkola (2015: 23; see §3.2) floats the idea that "grounding is potentially very fruitful for social explanations" but concludes that "a detailed examination of grounding relative to social phenomena dampened this initial optimism." She allows her optimism to be dampened through considering the question of "what grounds the grounding facts" (Sider 2011: 107). She criticizes one style of answer (from Bennett 2011b, and deRosset 2013), and concludes (2015: 23) that one must thus "give up the view that grounding is unified and uniform." She then brings in the feminist/pragmatist idea of value-laden inquiry (see Anderson 1995) on which normative considerations play a truth-conducive role in metaphysical theory choice, to suggest (2015: 25) using "a disjunctive theory that posits different kinds of grounding relations relative to different, and yet, legitimate background interests" which is said to put "pressure on the view that elucidating grounding is central to the business of metaphysics" and ultimately (2015: 21) to vindicate "the sceptics of grounding."

I am not persuaded by Mikkola's objection to the Bennett-deRosset view of what grounds the grounding facts.[15] Also, I do not understand how Mikkola moves from her objection to any claimed disunity for grounding, or any bolstered role for normative considerations.[16] But leave all that aside. For regardless of how she got there, Mikkola (2015: 4–6) is ultimately inspired to uphold value-laden inquiry which takes into consideration "political, moral and practical values that come 'from outside' and from the broader social context." On this approach, a theory that that does "ethical justice to the subject matter" is more likely to be *true* (Mikkola 2015: 5; cf. 24–25). She says that this feminist/pragmatist idea is already in conflict with a grounding framework. If so that itself would make the grounding framework a bad fit, at least for certain sorts of feminists, independently of any technical concerns as to what grounds the grounding facts.

But I see no conflict whatsoever between a grounding framework and value-laden inquiry. The grounding theorist can simply view any normative factors involved in a given truth as extra partial grounds for that truth. For instance, if part of the basis for the truth that quarks have fractional spin is that this helps promote liberty, then the grounding theorist may say that that this truth about quarks is partly grounded in the tendency of the claim to promote liberty. More seriously, if part of the basis for the truth that gender is socially constructed is that this helps promote equality, then the

---

[15] In a nutshell, Bennett and deRosset accept that the whole grounds necessitate the grounded output, while Mikkola argues that the relevant social relations are contingent. After all, she (2015: 12) reasons: "Perhaps all money has been abolished via political–institutional means even though (in the short run) the appropriate acceptance-dependence still obtains: we accept that certain pieces of paper count as money; the revolution simply destroyed all those pieces of paper!" But I think that Mikkola simply has not specified the whole social grounds fully. The whole grounds must include the political-institutional matters as well, since (by hypothesis) this is a further matter on which the existence of money depends.

[16] One immediate problem is that there are other views of what grounds the grounding facts that Mikkola does not consider (cf. Dasgupta 2014). But for me the deeper problem is that I just don't see a connection between any alleged failure of the Bennett-deRosset view, and the claim that grounding is normatively loaded.

grounding theorist could say that this truth about gender is partly grounded in the tendency of the claim to promote equality. *There is nothing in a grounding based framework that demands a metaphysically realist or an epistemically objectivist perspective.* (Mikkola would be right to point out that I and other grounding theorists do not usually endorse value-laden inquiry. I am only saying that this is not built into the grounding framework itself.)

There are some deep sociological divides in the vicinity. Crudely speaking, metaphysicians nowadays tend towards metaphysical realism (cf. Sider 2011: 18 on "knee-jerk realism") and epistemic objectivism, while at least some feminists have tended more to antirealism and to thinking of inquiry as value-laden (cf. Longino 1990 on the role of social and political values in scientific theory evaluation). I am saying that the grounding framework itself is strictly neutral on these controversies. But also: insofar as both sides want to be able to understand metaphysical realism and antirealism, both sides will need to make sense of the core notion of *mind-dependence*, and thus need the ideology of dependence. The realism-antirealism debate is just one more of the many examples where the concept of grounding plays a needed role for both sides. Likewise the feminist/pragmatist idea of value-laden inquiry is itself a hypothesis of *norm-dependence*, and presupposes a viable notion of dependence. If a theorist wishes to accept (or even understand) claims of society-dependence, mind-dependence, and/or norm-dependence, she had better be able to make sense of the notion of dependence involved. If she can do so without grounding, I should like to know how.

So I conclude that a grounding framework does not privilege the fundamental, collapse needed distinctions, or conflict with value-laden inquiry. And overall I conclude that a grounding framework is helpful for feminist metaphysics and social ontology, since it can help clarify the previously obscure metaphysics behind social construction, by subsuming social construction under a general relationship which accounts for its inferential role. Those who would reject grounding are invited to do better.[17]

References

Alcoff, L. (2006). *Visible identities*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Anderson, E. (1995). Knowledge, human interests, and objectivity in feminist epistemology. *Philosophical Topics, 23*, 27–58.

Ásta, S. (2008). Essentially conferred. *Philosophical Studies, 140*, 135–148.

Ásta, S. (2011). The metaphysics of sex and gender. In C. Witt (Ed.), *Feminist metaphysics: Explorations in the ontology of sex, gender and the self* (pp. 47–66). New York: Springer.

Ásta, S. (2013). The social construction of human kinds. *Hypatia, 28*, 716–732.

Audi, P. (2012). A clarification and defense of the notion of grounding. In F. Correia & B. Schnieder (Eds.), *Metaphysical grounding: Understanding the structure of reality* (pp. 101–121). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barnes, E. (2014). Going beyond the fundamental: Feminism in contemporary metaphysics. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, 114*, 335–351.

Barnes, E. (2016). Realism and social structure. *Philosophical Studies*. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0743-y.

Bennett, K. (2011a). Construction area (no hard hat required). *Philosophical Studies, 154*, 79–104.

Bennett, K. (2011b). By our bootstraps. *Philosophical Perspectives, 25*, 27–41.

Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Londone: Routledge.

Cameron, R. (2008). Truthmakers and ontological commitment: Or how to deal with complex objects and mathematical ontology without getting into trouble. *Philosophical Studies, 140*, 1–18.

Correia, F. (2005). *Existential dependence and cognate notions*. Munich: Philosophia Verlag.

Dasgupta, S. (2014). The possibility of physicalism. *Journal of Philosophy, 111*, 557–592.

de Beauvoir, S. (2011) [1949]. *The second sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier. Vintage Books.

deRosset, L. (2013). Grounding explanations. *Philosophers' Imprint, 13*, 1–26.

Diaz-Leon, E. (2013). What is social construction? *European Journal of Philosophy*. doi:10.1111/ejop.12033.

Dorr, C. (2005). What we disagree about when we disagree about ontology. In M. E. Kalderon (Ed.), *Factionalism in metaphysics* (pp. 234–286). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Epstein, B. (2015). *The ant trap: Rebuilding the foundations of the social sciences*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Fine, K. (2001). The question of realism. *Philosophers' Imprint, 1*, 1–30.

Fine, K. (2012). Guide to ground. In F. Correia & B. Schnieder (Eds.), *Metaphysical grounding: Understanding the structure of reality* (pp. 37–80). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Griffith, A. (manuscript). Social construction and grounding.

Hacking, I. (1999). *The social construction of what?*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Haslanger, S. (1995). Ontology and social construction. *Philosophical Topics, 23*, 95–125.

Haslanger, S. (2000). Gender, race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? *Nous, 34*, 31–55.

Haslanger, S. (2004). Future genders? Future races? *Philosophical Exchange, 34*, 5–27.

Haslanger, S. (2011). Ideology, generics, and common ground. In C. Witt (Ed.), *Feminist metaphysics: Explorations in the ontology of sex, gender and the self* (pp. 179–208). New York: Springer.

Haslanger, S., & Sveinsdóttir, Á. (2011). Feminist metaphysics. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-metaphysics/.

Horgan, T., & Potrč, M. (2012). Existence monism trumps priority monism. In P. Goff (Ed.), *Spinoza on monism* (pp. 51–76). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kim, J. (Ed.). (1993). Postscripts on supervenience. In *Supervenience and mind: Selected philosophical essays* (pp. 161–74). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kim, J. (1994). Explanatory knowledge and metaphysical dependence. *Philosophical Issues, 5*, 51–69.

Kim, J. (1998). *Mind in a physical world*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Koslicki, K. (2016). Where grounding and causation part ways: Comments on Schaffer. *Philosophical Studies, 173*, 101–112.

Kukla, A. (2013). *Social constructivism and the philosophy of science*. Londone: Routledge.

Langton, R. (2004). Projection and objectification. In B. Leiter (Ed.), *The future for philosophy* (pp. 285–303). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Lewis, D. (1986). *On the plurality of worlds*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Longino, H. (1990). *Science as social knowledge: Values and objectivity in scientific inquiry*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Mallon, R. (2013). Naturalistic approaches to social construction. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/social-construction-naturalistic/.

Mikkola, M. (2011). Ontological commitments, sex and gender. In C. Witt (Ed.), *Feminist metaphysics: Explorations in the ontology of sex, gender and the self* (pp. 67–84). New York: Springer.

Mikkola, M. (2015). Doing ontology and doing justice: What feminist philosophy can teach us about meta-metaphysics. *Inquiry*. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2015.1083469.

Mikkola, M. (2016). Non-ideal metaphysics: On the apparent antagonism between feminist and mainstream metaphysics. *Philosophical Studies*. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0732-1.

Passinsky, A. (manuscript). Plenitude, normativity and social objects.

Rosen, G. (2010). Metaphysical dependence: Grounding and reduction. In B. Hale & A. Hoffmann (Eds.), *Modality: Metaphysics, logic, and epistemology* (pp. 109–136). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Salmon, W. (1984). *Scientific explanation and the causal structure of the world*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Schaffer, J. (2009). On what grounds what. In D. Chalmers, D. Manley, & R. Wasserman (Eds.), *Metametaphysics: New essays on the foundations of ontology* (pp. 347–383). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schaffer, J. (2012). Why the world has parts: Reply to Horgan and Potrè. In P. Goff (Ed.), *Spinoza on monism* (pp. 77–91). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Schaffer, J. (2013). Metaphysical semantics meets multiple realizability. *Analysis Reviews, 73*, 736–751.

Schaffer, J. (2016). Grounding in the image of causation. *Philosophical Studies, 173*, 49–100.

Schaffer, J. (forthcoming). Ground rules: Lessons from Wilson. In: K. Aizawa & C. Gillett (Eds.), *Composition and ground*. Palgrave-MacMillan.

Searle, J. (1995). *The social construction of reality*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Sider, T. (2011). *Writing the book of the world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sider, T. (2016). Comments on Barnes and Mikkola. *Philosophical Studies*. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0739-7.

Stone, A. (2007). *An introduction to feminist philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Wilson, J. (2014). No work for a theory of grounding. *Inquiry, 57*, 535–579.

Wilson, J. (forthcoming). The priority and unity arguments for grounding. In K. Aizawa, & C. Gillett (Eds.), *Scientific composition and metaphysical ground*. Palgrave-MacMillan.

Witt, C. (2011). What is gender essentialism? In C. Witt (Ed.), *Feminist metaphysics: Explorations in the ontology of sex, gender and the self* (pp. 11–26). New York: Springer.