

Sally Haslanger, 'Feminism in metaphysics: Negotiating the natural'

I. The project

(1) Defending metaphysics to feminists (who typically see metaphysics as irrelevant, intellectually dubious and politically pernicious).

(2) Defending feminism to metaphysicians (who are typically suspicious of any attempt to suggest that an inquiry into the nature and structure of reality could have anything to do with the social and political values we bring to it).

So: '... is there a place within [Anglo-American] feminist inquiry for metaphysics? Does [Anglo-American] feminist theory have anything to offer metaphysicians?' (107-8)

II. Androcentrism

Some ways in which feminism already engages with metaphysics: the charge of androcentrism.

'... a theory is androcentric if it takes males or masculinity to be the norm against which females and femininity are considered deviant, or if it considers its subject matter from the point of view of men and simply ignores women or women's perspective.'
(109)

Metaphysics often 'draw[s] uncritically on experiences and patterns of thought that are characteristically male or masculine, and ignores or devalues those that are characteristically female or feminine' (110)

But: the problem of diversity and essentialism (pp. 110-1): what is the 'characteristically' masculine or feminine? Perhaps these can be defined in terms of different patterns of socialisation. Thus, *contextual* androcentrism still a problem.

III. Method.

Feminists commonly take issue with the 'foundationalist' methodology of metaphysics. Two strands of objection:

(1) 'Do we have direct access to reality, e.g. unmediated by gender socialization or other cultural norms, and does the project of metaphysics assume that we do?' (113)

(2) 'Does metaphysics function to constrain our theorizing within patriarchal limits by setting unquestioned and unquestionable starting points?' (113)

Taken together, 'this poses a very serious problem for any effort to overcome oppressive attitudes and practices' (113).

But is metaphysics committed to such a methodology – e.g. ordinary language philosophy, or post-Quinean debate.

Or, the 'aporematic' approach of much contemporary metaphysics where 'one begins inquiry by asking a question and looking for answers. Theorizing starts when one finds a particular puzzle, tension, or contradiction in the answers, either in one's beliefs on the question or, more generally, in the claims made on a certain topic.' (113)

Cf David Lewis: 'One comes to philosophy already endowed with a stock of opinions. It is not the business of philosophy either to undermine or to justify these preexisting opinions, to any great extent, but only to try to discover ways of expanding them into an orderly system.' (*Counterfactuals*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973: p. 88) Or indeed Aristotle: 'We must, as in the other cases, set the appearances before us and, after first discussing the difficulties, go on to prove, if possible, the truth of all the common opinions (endoxa) ... or, failing this, of the greater number and the most authoritative' (*EN* 1145b1-6)

Aporematic metaphysics can be one or more of: (1) immanent, (2) holist, (3) fallibilist.

It does not assume unmediated access to reality. Nor is it *in principle* unresponsive to 'a broad range of experience as well as theoretical pressures from other domains, including normative inquiry in epistemology and moral theory' (114). But in practice, 'the common strategy of "analytic" philosophy to break down questions to simpler ones and to focus on everyday examples masks the selectivity involved in prioritizing the phenomena the theory needs to accommodate' (114).

Best to acknowledge, honestly, that 'what questions we ask, and what puzzles arise in our attempts to give answers is going to be, to some significant extent, a parochial matter: it will depend on cultural and historical context, broader theoretical needs, etc.' (115) What goes into that 'etc'? Certainly, Haslanger would want to say: our social and political needs.

If the metaphysician grants this much, then (1) feminist work in other areas of philosophy 'may have repercussions that must be accommodated in our metaphysics' (115), and (2) 'feminist insights into the cultural/historical context of the metaphysical puzzles we consider may defuse and/or replace them' (115).

IV. Realism

'In ... feminist theory, *realism* ... is generally assumed not to be an option. Forms of scepticism and nominalism are by far the preferred positions. This, I think, is a mistake' (117).

Haslanger offers a model for the defence of a (qualified, modest) realism compatible with feminism in a critique of an argument of Judith Butler's for the view that 'we're not (or not simply?) mapping nature's joints in distinguishing males and females; we're enforcing a political regime' (119), which seems to rest on a bold metaphysical view denying 'extra-discursive' objects.

Butler's argument, Haslanger says, relies on ignoring 'a crucial scope distinction' that allows her to slide from the (likely true?) claim that 'our acts of reference depend upon often problematic background presuppositions' to the (likely false, certainly not adequately argued for in the quoted passage) denial of the claim that at least 'some things and some kinds have objective boundaries' (121). Feminists 'can eagerly develop the political potential of [the former claim], without relinquishing the belief that the world includes some 'pregiven' and 'extra-discursive' objects.

This echoes certain of Martha Nussbaum's complaints about Butler (<http://www.akad.se/Nussbaum.pdf>) and other theorists in the Foucauldian tradition dressing up deeply conservative, pessimistic, conclusions in radical garb. It is also commendably restrained in not explicitly mentioning the features of Butler's prose style that allow her, and her readers, to pass over the ambiguity. Does Butler have a response? Is the argument sound after all? Is this just the old smug complacency about analytic philosophy's vaunted stylistic virtues? And even if the argument is unsound, does Butler have other arguments for the strong conclusion?

Haslanger suspects that many feminist worries about metaphysics rest on the (mistaken) assumption that accepting objective types means accepting a reactionary politics. But (crudely): *ontology underdetermines politics*. 'Even if there are objective types, the question remains which of them are morally and politically relevant' (123).

V. Metametaphysics

'Even the most extreme realist about classification may grant that social factors play a role in determining what classification scheme we use, and that it is appropriate that they do so' (124)

Cf Adrian Moore on Ted Sider's *Writing the Book of the World*, Oxford, 2011 (*London Review of Books*, Vol. 34 No. 16, 30 August 2012: 21-23)

'Sider observes "many expressions that fail to carve at the joints are embedded in our conceptual lives in important ways." He goes on to cite an example about which he says that, in learning how best to answer the question involved in the example, "we are primarily learning something about ourselves," then adds, "but we're learning something important about ourselves." Quite.'

I take it Haslanger would agree. It is likely also that she would challenge any too-stark distinction between objectivism and subjectivism about the structure of reality. Reality – or some substantial part thereof – may be what it is independent of the interests we bring to it, but the aspects of it in which we take an interest could still – compatibly with realism – reflect our values and sometimes parochial concerns.

Some more general remarks from Adrian Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*, Cambridge, 2011.

'... how is metaphysics able to make a difference? Once simple way ... is by combating the confusion to which we are prone when we indulge the urge that we already have to make the most general sense of things. In other words, metaphysics can fulfil the function of rectifying bad metaphysics.' (17)

This might speak to the first of Haslanger's projects. This is why feminists might have reason to pay attention to metaphysics: to expose and correct the bad metaphysics of both androcentric metaphysicians and feminist theory.

'... the most important and the most exciting way in which [metaphysics] can make a difference is by enabling us to make radically new sense of things, or more specifically ... by providing us with radically new concepts by which to live. ... metaphysics can have, does have, and had better have, repercussions for what we think and do beyond metaphysics.' (600)

Metaphysicians have effected shifts in human self-conceptions before, for good or ill – Augustine, Descartes, Hume, Leibniz, Marx... – and there is no reason to think they cannot continue to do this, this time in response to a new set of political concerns. This suggests yet another way to think about what feminism has to offer to metaphysics: the possibility of new inspirations for *revisionary* metaphysics.