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METAONTOLOGICAL DISMISSIVE STRATEGIES: IMPLICATIONS AND
APPLICATIONS IN METAPHYSICS OF RACE AND GENDER

by

Ethan Stumpp

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Philosophy
in the College of Arts and Humanities
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at the University of Central Florida
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Thesis Chair: Mason Cash, Ph.D.

Abstract

Metaontological discourse, inquiring into the nature, methodology, and aims of ontology, has functioned as the war ground for those skeptical of ontological projects against those who believe that ontological inquiry is substantive (i.e., meaningful, important, worth pursuing). I call the inquiry which engages in determining criteria to distinguish substantive from nonsubstantive inquiry/discourse: “the metaphysics of discourse”. In this project, I identify three frameworks in the metaphysics of discourse: Easy Ontology, The “Merely Verbal” Framework, and Metaphysical Structuralism. My primary concern is to show that these discourse frameworks or dismissive strategies all fail to provide sufficient criteria to properly delineate substantive from non-substantive inquiry. My approach is to accept a dismissive strategy, apply it to disputes in the metaphysics of race and gender, and run through its consequences. Each framework, when applied to disputes in the metaphysics of race and gender, incorrectly renders the disputes non-substantive. These implications are unacceptable, because the disputes in metaphysics of race and gender are prima facie substantive disputes. We find that each application of a dismissive strategy provides us the basis for developing a web of problematic assumptions running throughout the metaphysics of discourse. Namely: 1) that the metaphysics of discourse itself can be robustly normatively neutral, 2) that discovering linguistic defects in an inquiry (often about “the meaning” or “the right meaning” of terms) is sufficient to conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive and that 3) we determine a better candidate for theory choice in substantive inquiry by determining which candidate is more objectively accurate (in a vague sense). I will conclude that these assumptions lead to an oppressive metaphysics of discourse, then I briefly suggest a feminist, pragmatist, and democratic-objective basis for a new one.

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As for my thesis chair Dr. Cash, I should first acknowledge the great opportunity that Dr. Cash gave me, in taking up this project with me, committing much time and energy to ensure my effort and execution were in accordance with my potential (however limited that potential turns out to be). Dr. Cash is an excellent source of both encouragement and constructive criticism. I am constantly awe-struck by Dr. Cash's wealth of knowledge, often making relevant connections between the theoretical and philosophical issues and the practical social realities that are the reasons those issues are worth discussing. Dr. Cash's emphasis on relevant examples, hopefully, prevented my project from dissociating the ideas discussed from the people and lives that are the topic of those discussions.

I want to thank my friends at university; for keeping my spirit light, keeping my time at school full of laughter as well as thoughtful stimulating conversation, and constantly supporting my ends and celebrating my efforts and accomplishments with me, as I should like to do for them as well.

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Table of Contents

0.0 Introduction	1
0.1 Dismissive Strategies	4
0.2 Oppressive Metaphysics of Discourse	13
1.0 Easy Ontology.....	19
1.1 The Easy Ontological Framework	19
1.11 What Ontologists Are Up To.....	23
1.2 Existence and Nature	25
1.3 Eliminativism.....	28
1.4 Semantics and Metaphysics	32
1.41 Semantic and Ontological Justice	35
1.5 Is It Always That Easy?	37
2.0 Merely Verbal Disputes.....	41
2.1 The MVD Framework.....	41
2.2 Methods in Metaphysics of Gender	46
2.21 Classification and Metaphysics.....	47
2.22 The Dismissal.....	53
2.3 Defects and Deflation.....	58
2.31 Rejecting Deflation	59
3.0 Carving Nature at The Joints	65
3.1 What is Metaphysics?	66
3.2 The Joint Carving Framework	67
3.3 Metaphysics and Feminism.....	70
3.31 Pragmatism Strikes Again.....	77
3.4 Linguistic Criteria for Substantivity	78
3.4 The Joints That Matter	84
3.41 “Values and Objectivity”.....	85
3.5 What Could Metaphysics Be?.....	89
4.0 The Metaphysics of Discourse	93

4.1 Carving Out a Position	93
4.2 The Negative Criteria	99
4.3 The New Metaphysics of Discourse	108
References	110

0.0 Introduction

It is the alleged task of the metaphysician to explain the first principles or the fundamental structure of reality. While this project might be doubtful, attempts have been made to find a solid place for metaphysics among philosophical investigations. Many influential philosophers have scorned the metaphysical projects of their time; David Hume (1993), Immanuel Kant (1998), and Rudolf Carnap (1950) all are known for their unwavering criticism of metaphysics. The age-old story of the justification and destruction of metaphysical projects is a cautionary tale with blunders on both ends. The supporters of metaphysics are propelled into better defensive strategies by their desire to make metaphysics legitimate. Those skeptical of metaphysics (I will call them dismissivists) reach new heights of criticism, sometimes ignorant of the consequences of their dismissive framework, to respond to the metaphysician's new attempt at substantive metaphysical inquiry. I believe that this perpetual insecurity of the discipline with its constant barrage of endorsement and criticism has been instrumental in producing distinctive tools, possible safeguards, standards, and criteria for rational inquiry. The value of metaphysics that I am interested in addressing here is not the metaphysician's insights into how reality is, but insights into the justifications for, and the limitation and liberation of rational inquiry, springing from dismissivists in tension with metaphysicians.

Often, it is the metaphysician's *ontology* that bewilders us. While the nature of ontological inquiry is debated, there are some answers which are more influential than others. The now prominent "Neo-Quinean" metaontology (i.e., methodology and aims of ontology) takes it that the essential question of ontology is "What is there?" (Quine, 1948). The basic criterion for ontological commitment (acceptance of a theory of what there is) that Quine leaves theorists with is this: "To

be is to be the value of a variable” (Quine, 1948, 9). When determining whether something exists, according to our best scientific theory, for instance, we determine what that theory has to *quantify* over in order to explain and describe experience and/or the world. This means that when a theory (say in biology) must express that there is something which is a mammal, which is bipedal and rational, then these biological theories are quantifying over humans, or committing themselves to an ontology which says that humans exist. Theorists like Peter van Inwagen (2009) and others have taken up ‘broadly Quinean’ desiderata in metaontology.

So, if we accept Quine’s broad picture, then an ontology is a theory of what there is, or what exists. With such a weighty purported object of study, one would assume that ontological discourse could supply insights for all sorts of important academic endeavors. However, when introduced to some of the most prominent debates in this “mainstream metaphysics”¹, it is common to be baffled by the seemingly trivial and inconsequential topics of debates. Debates between platonists and nominalists about the existence of abstract objects like numbers², and debates about the existence of ordinary mid-sized objects like chairs³ come to mind as paradigm cases of what are (for some) pointless or senseless questions. These debates are frustrating because it seems regardless of which side is right (if there is a right answer), our lives and (possibly) even our best scientific theories about the world remain unaffected. Nothing of significance hangs on the

¹ ‘Mainstream metaphysics’ is a term used by David Manley (2009, 6) and designates those approaches to ontology which were most likely inspired by W.V.O. Quine and persist today.

² For an interesting discussion of platonist versus nominalist disputes, see Stephen Yablo’s “Must Existence Questions Have Answers?” (2009).

³ Debates about mid-sized objects are not simply debates about what constitutes a chair, or if chairs particularly exist. The questions ontologists have about mid-sized objects are usually aiming to answer questions about composition, like the special composition question. That is, the question of the question of when a plurality of objects composes some further object (van Inwagen 1990, 30–31). Peter van Inwagen, for instance, argues that this only occurs when the plurality of objects constitutes a life, or a living thing (1990).

philosopher's verdict in these cases. Scientists are not waiting on philosophers to determine the ontological status of numbers so they can proceed to use mathematics in their empirical studies of the world. Naturally, a lot of philosophers just avoid joining disputes about what exists. Others feel that ignoring the supposed problems that seem to fester in ontology might make them worse.

I want to clarify that I am in no position to judge whether or not disputes over the existence of numbers or chairs are *actually* substantive, meaningful, or important. I highly doubt that the questions in ontology that I have briefly discussed above are particularly important questions for people in the broader community where ontological inquiry takes place. But this is, I think, primarily a contingent matter, and if the broader community did take more of an interest in solving that breed of ontological problems, I think it would be much less simple to downplay the significance of the puzzles and problems that they are trying to solve. Perhaps only a small portion of ontological endeavors in general are relevant for the daily lives of the "ordinary person". But who is this ordinary person? What community could *the* ordinary person represent? We will find that definite articles like 'the' are often used unreflectively to exclude alternative voices that could shape how we see the world: "What is "the" meaning of this term?" or "What is "the" answer to this question?" Well, it depends on who you ask, and what purposes they might have in mind.

For the participants, I am sure that there is something intellectually gratifying to be derived from the inquiry into the existence of abstract objects like numbers and mid-sized objects like chairs that does not necessarily depend on the particular subject matter and its conclusions. The pursuit of knowledge and understanding is perhaps good for its own sake in ontological circles, regardless of the oft-rotten fruit it bears for the practical person. If philosophers were only interested in getting practical results, they would have stopped asking their metaphysical breed of questions a long time ago.

0.1 Dismissive Strategies

I am not concerned with the existential status of mid-sized objects or numbers. What interests me about the progression of ontology and the growing frustration with the questions in ontological circles are the *dismissive strategies* that have grown out of that frustration.⁴ A dismissive strategy is how I will refer to a method by which one attempts to deem a dispute nonsubstantive, meaningless, or confused in its questions or content. Dismissive strategies in ontology and any systematic dismissive strategy in whichever branch of academia it may be found, comprise what I will call the *metaphysics of discourse*. The concern of a discourse metaphysician is to determine which questions and topics are substantive in a field (meaningful, legitimate), and which are nonsubstantive (meaningless, illegitimate). Since I am restricting this project primarily to the questions of ontology, we could consider our subject of study metaontology, or the methods and aims of ontology. However, it should be noted that dismissive strategies are sometimes structured such that they globally dismiss a general type of dispute, regardless of whether it is ontologically focused or not. For this reason, the application of a metaphysics of discourse extends well beyond the bounds of the ontology room.

But let us turn back to disputes about the existence of mid-sized objects like chairs and abstract objects like numbers for a moment. What about these disputes makes people think there is something deeply wrong with them? Well, diagnoses of these ontological questions vary with the dismissive approach one might take up. Dismissers often aim to steer us away from these purportedly nonsubstantive questions, while also diagnosing where the philosophers asking these

⁴ My use of the words ‘dismissivist’, ‘dismissivism’, and ‘dismissive strategy’ are inspired by Karen Bennett’s discussion on dismissivism in “Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology” (2009).

questions went wrong. A number of philosophers have proposed general methods by which to dismiss or deflate a dispute that just so happen to diagnose a frustrating subject in ontology as nonsubstantive.

Most commonly, global dismissive strategies are derived from semantic theories and related ideas about language and our concepts. The dismissers that take this route attempt to provide some semantic criteria to render a dispute easily resolvable or merely verbal. We will be analyzing two approaches with this semantic style. The first is Amie Thomasson's Easy Ontology, which aims to render disputes easily resolvable through conceptual analysis and subsequent empirical investigation. After that, we will look into a category of dismissive strategies I call "MVDs", where the dismitter finds a criterion to determine that a dispute is merely verbal (a dispute merely about how we use terms) and thus the dispute is non-substantive. Another strategy, exemplified by Theodore Sider in "Writing the Book of The World" (2011), attempts to dismiss certain disputes, and justify other ones, by explicating the aims of metaphysics, citing the irrelevance of the target problem/question *for* metaphysics. Sider's suggestion is that substantive questions (in metaphysics/ontology) are questions about joint-carving, or the objective structure of reality. Thus, debates and questions which all candidate meanings of crucial terms equally "carve at nature's joints" are non-substantive (Sider, 46, 2011).

These strategies are globally oriented. They seek to find a method to dismiss (and substantiate) sizable portions of philosophical inquiry with one fell swoop. Furthermore, in determining that debates in their respective fields might suffer from some general defect, they thereby are engaged in determining, in general, what kind of features of a discourse are constitutive of substantive versus non-substantive discourse. The project of demarcating substantive from nonsubstantive discourse (discourse metaphysics) seems as dubious and precarious as that of the

problematic discipline dismissive strategies aim to critique (ontology). If one is skeptical of the use of terms like “exists”, “real”, “substantive” and the like, it is not a large leap to be skeptical of the discourse metaphysician who aims to delineate apparent disputes from real disputes. We cannot dismantle our obsession with “reality” by feeding into it.

While dismissivism is seen as a project of destruction and negation, upon reflection one comes to realize that a negation often constitutes an affirmation i.e., a dismissive project is a *positive and constructive* project which usually has metaphysically loaded assumptions of its own. F.H. Bradley said of deflationary attitudes towards metaphysics, “He is a brother metaphysician with a rival theory of first principles” (1893). Similarly, the positive theses which aim to shed light on the nature of metaphysics often cast an unforgiving shadow. Elizabeth Barnes points this out when she says, “In saying what metaphysics is, we also make judgments about what it is not” (2014, 336). Either way, it seems that one cannot properly substantiate or desubstantiate a kind of metaphysical dispute without *engaging in* the ontological discussion, and thus *becoming* what one attempts to destroy. Perhaps the most effective way to dismiss a dispute is to walk away from the discussion. However, our stubborn and serious discourse metaphysicians cannot in good conscience leave the ontologists behind, groping aimlessly for answers to what the dismissers deem meaningless questions and inquiry.

It would be remiss of me not to mention that the scope of metaphysics extends well beyond the bounds of ontology and disputes about existence. There are healthy (less commonly dismissed, perhaps) branches of metaphysics dealing with causation, emergence, grounding, and all sorts of interesting topics that might not be susceptible to the dismissive strategies applied to ontology here. While these fields are somewhat firmly established, a relatively recent development in metaphysics is a budding interest in what is called ‘social metaphysics’. A social metaphysics,

unsurprisingly, focuses on social phenomena, and explains these phenomena with metaphysical conceptual machinery. Social metaphysics includes but is not limited to gendered phenomena, racial phenomena, “mind-dependent” objects like artifacts, and anything else that seems to be a distinct product/instrument/component of the structures of organized society.

Some social metaphysicians are concerned with distinctly ontological (existence) questions. In the metaphysics of race and gender (MRG, for short), philosophers dispute over ontological and metaphysical questions regarding these categories. Do races and genders exist? What kind of existence do they have? Similar to the mainstream metaphysician’s questions about numbers and chairs, we are surprised by the social ontologists’ answers to these questions. Some theories aim to eliminate race or gender altogether; they argue that these categories are not distinguishing any objective features of reality. For instance, Anthony Appiah argues that races don’t exist, given that no biological theory provides sufficient evidence to properly delineate races into the “folk” categories (e.g., White, Black, Asian, Latino) that we use (2006). This conclusion would be quite surprising to some, since we apparently apply these terms to individuals meaningfully on a daily basis. (Compare this claim to the ontologist’s claim that chairs do not exist.)

Others have theories which drastically reconceive what races and genders *really* are; they have surprising referents, you might say. This, too, is concerning for similar reasons. How could it be that we are drastically mistaken about what races or genders are? To some, these terms are intuitive and straightforward, and perhaps a tad superficial and ‘thin’. A thin term picks out relatively value-neutral descriptive features; features that don’t give one information to be used to determine *how we ought to treat someone*, or *how we ought to behave* given the thin information. So for instance, a thin definition of ‘race’ would be something like: A category that distinguishes

phenotypical properties of individuals like hair texture, facial features, and skin color. The way this definition is phrased gives us no indication of how Black people, for instance, are or are supposed to be treated. These ‘thin’ terms and definitions are distinguished from ‘thick’ ones, which express descriptive contents, but seem to pick out some more robustly *evaluative and normative* properties. Sally Haslanger’s theory of gender, and her theory of race both situate racial and gender ascriptions as ‘thick’ normatively loaded ascriptions (2000, 2012, 2019). For instance, for Haslanger, gender usually functions to mark individuals within a social hierarchy of those with privilege (men) and those who are subordinated (women).

So it seems that social ontology is similar to traditional ontology in many respects. Social metaphysicians are interested in metaphysical and ontological questions, but within the domain of the social: social arrangements, social structures, and social categories. A major difference, however, between the traditional questions of ontology and the questions of social ontology is that the latter, if taken seriously, have a chance of guiding our everyday engagement with the objects of study i.e., with the people that we classify in these ways and with the structures we maintain by adhering to and reacting to the standards of classificatory practices. Whether or not the “ordinary folk” adopt a particular philosophical understanding of gender or race, philosophical and metaphysical considerations for these categories could be instrumental in tackling issues of gendered and racial practices. We can investigate and theorize about the categories for theoretically and practically interesting purposes like fighting injustice and oppression by understanding and confronting how communities view/treat themselves and others.

The reason I have brought social metaphysics into the conversation, is that the discourse metaphysician has overlooked inquiry in MRG, and failed to consider the implications their dismissive strategy might have for MRG. For the reasons I specified above, social metaphysical

debates seem the perfect candidates for evaluating the application of dismissive strategies to determine implications for other metaphysical inquiries. Social metaphysics is just similar enough to traditional metaphysics that the dismissive strategies will still fit when applied, but different enough that we can determine what has been implicit in a given dismissive strategy and the scope and possible limitations of the dismissive strategy.

Perhaps it is not abundantly clear what I mean by “what is implicit in a given dismissive strategy”. Recall that a dismissive attitude is not merely negative but presupposes some positive notion of substantivity. The dismitter is apparently another metaphysician (I want to further say that she is a discourse metaphysician). Yet, these positive theses and metaphysical assumptions are not always explicit in the dismissive strategy. So, a useful method to explicate the assumptions underlying these strategies is to *accept the framework* and *apply* the dismissive strategy to other disputes. We can then run through the consequences of the strategy for the disputes in question. We can be critical of the strategy itself before we apply it, but perhaps the best way to critique a framework in metaphysics of discourse is to accept the framework and run through its consequences. Hopefully, this method will make dismissive strategies more transparent in their motivations, assumptions, and consequences.

So, my aim in this project consists of illuminating the implications of a given dismissive strategy by applying it to inquiry in social metaphysics. I want to discover what a dismissive strategies *commits itself to* when it creates a criterion for dismissal in the metaphysics of discourse. To ground our study, I will restrict the application of the dismissive frameworks to disputes in the metaphysics of race and the metaphysics of gender (MRG). I identify some useful applications for a strategy in MGR. The merely verbal dispute framework, for instance, provides a useful heuristic for identifying *discourse defects* i.e., semantic knots that prevent the inquirers from tackling the

important questions they intend to. Ultimately, we will find that social metaphysics does not fall victim to the same problems that the dismissers originally believed they could diagnose with their dismissive strategy. We also find that when applied to MRG, that there are some problematic assumptions underlying the dismissive strategies.

I am going to present three of the most prominent attempts to dismiss/permit disputes in contemporary metaontology. As I mentioned above these are Amie Thomasson's Easy Ontology, merely verbal dispute frameworks (MVDs), and finally Ted Sider's Structuralism. All three of these approaches are *prima facie* attempts to determine a set of criteria for substantive/actual debates/inquiry, as distinguished from nonsubstantive/apparent debates/inquiry. When considering each approach, I will conduct mini-case studies of particular disputes about race or gender, where I apply a dismissive strategy that attempts to render the dispute insubstantial, easily solvable, or merely verbal. We can then consider whether these consequences are justified. After we run through the dismissive strategies, I will explain how in some way or another, these strategies are being applied with problematic assumptions about *the metaphysics of discourse*, and what it is capable of doing (or what it should do). Ultimately, the way in which these dismissive strategies are employed leads to an oppressive metaphysics of discourse i.e., a metaphysics of discourse that imposes unjust standards on the limits of substantive inquiry.

Throughout the project, I will construct a web of problematic assumptions running through the discourse metaphysicians' frameworks. It will be particularly helpful for the reader to have a keen eye towards the common string of ideas underlying the projects in metaphysics of discourse. The first assumption is that a metaphysics of discourse can be robustly neutral with regard to normative matters. This essentially means that these theorists take it that their answers to what counts as a substantive or non-substantive dispute are devoid of pragmatically normative

assumptions (guided by the values and normative attitudes of the community and its members in which discourse takes place) about what questions we ought to pursue in ontology and elsewhere. The second major thread of assumptions is that discovering linguistic defects in an inquiry (often about “the meaning” or “the right meaning” of terms) is sufficient to conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive. This comes down to the idea that non-substantive discourse can be identified by using some semantic criteria about the truth-conditions for our terms or their application conditions. The third assumption is that we determine a better candidate for theory choice in substantive inquiry by determining which candidate is more objectively accurate (in a vague sense). This suggests a criterion for substantive inquiry: that the end/aim of substantive inquiry is to discover *the truth* in a ‘thick’ (normatively loaded) but vague sense. Without a specification of the aim of inquiry, this vague notion of objectivity or truth (discovering reality) is ultimately an empty notion.

The first assumption will turn out to eliminate the possibility that our notion of substantivity can be accommodated by and informed through community values. An explanation of substantivity cannot be given simply with reference to objectivity or truth in general, but must explain in turn how the given truths that we intend to uncover help us tackle issues which matter to us in the contingent historical socio-political atmosphere in which we are working. This is not to say that there is no room for a discovery of truth for truth’s sake, but simply to acknowledge that there are substantive inquiries that aim to discover truth for the sake of something moral, political, or just something that is subjectively interesting to a community/group. In assuming that substantivity can be characterized neutrally, we risk perpetuating unjust standards of what substantivity is. While there is a need for standards for substantivity, there is also a need for us to

be critical of those standards and who/what voices and truths are being privileged/subordinated when those standards are in place.

Neutrality in the metaphysics of discourse is oppressive in itself. By ignoring the contingent values which in fact shape our idea of substantivity in our communities, we allow for the continued implicit integration of values into that “neutral” and disinterested notion of substantivity. Where discourse is an important medium for social progress and change, being normatively neutral about what counts as substantive means sticking to the status quo. Indifference to one’s context is a deference to that context in shaping and guiding values. Given that we are far from living in the best possible world, deference to norms can quickly turn into deference to injustice. Actively putting into practice the integration of marginalized and underacknowledged voices into discourse, those that are *not the norm* and *resist the norms* because those that set the norms have betrayed them, will provide essential perspectives for shaping discourse that is representative of, and charitable to, the lived experiences of people who are oppressed and marginalized. I recommend that this ‘normatively neutral’ standard be replaced by a pragmatist and feminist standard for substantivity, which adequately accommodates the concerns of new and alternative voices from heterodox communities.

The second assumption need not run us into the same problems with objectivity. Rather, the linguistic assumption is problematic because it is often instrumental in aiding, promoting, and perpetuating oppressive discourse frameworks. I think the distinctively contextual values (Longino, 1990, 4) i.e., personal, political, normative values, which are involved in disputes about race and gender do not allow for such semantic arguments to work. Contextual values are distinguished from constitutive values: the values that are the source of the rules/norms determining what constitutes acceptable practice in inquiry (Longino, 1990, 4). The considerations

I raise for the second assumption are influenced by a pragmatic semantics, which takes the practical significance of terms to outweigh linguistic defects that might hinder an inquiry. We see the assumption that linguistic defects are sufficient to render disputes non-substantive runs through all three approaches. In separate ways, these theories devise semantic criteria to determine whether an inquiry is substantive. While a well-structured semantics can help streamline inquiry, I aim to show that linguistic defects are often insufficient to render disputes nonsubstantive.

The third assumption about objective accuracy is particular to Ted Sider's metaphysical structuralism. In the third chapter, I address the major themes running throughout my entire project. Building on what I derived earlier, I find a crucial tension between traditional metaphysics (and the oppressive metaphysics of discourse) and distinctively feminist and social constructionist inquiry in MRG. These questions seem to not only apply to a metaphysical notion of substantivity, but a discourse metaphysical notion of it as well. What is the nature of objective inquiry? How important is pinpointing objective structures in reality when it comes to theory choice? Is "*the structure of reality*" the only thing that makes an inquiry objective and substantive, or should we consider other criteria? Also, when seemingly equally "accurate" theories are in consideration, how could we possibly determine a criterion to assess which theory to choose?

0.2 Oppressive Metaphysics of Discourse

In Chapter 4, "The Metaphysics of Discourse", I will make a case for why and how these assumptions about discourse constitute an *oppressive metaphysics of discourse*. Oppression is a key notion to understanding both what is at stake at the ground level of inquiry in metaphysics of race and gender and the metaphysics of discourse itself. This is why it is absolutely imperative that we understand the sense in which I employ the word 'oppression' and similar words in this project. The term is not easy to unpack. In what follows, I'll try to get clearer on what I mean by an

“oppressive metaphysics of discourse”. I identify a form of oppression called ‘discursive oppression’, which I take to be undergirding the dismissive frameworks in question here.

The identification of the possibility of discursive oppression starts at the *ground-level* inquiry about race and gender. Theorists in metaphysics of race and gender have to be cognizant of the ways in which the categories of race and gender are and have been used in social structures and in individual contexts to unjustly constrain individuals’ behavior or to do them harm. This is, *prima facie*, a form of oppression. So, their theories of race and gender need to understand what oppression amounts to, so they can identify it and fight it, as well as avoid perpetuating it in their theories.

Similarly, in a metaphysics of discourse, the discourse metaphysician must be cognizant of the relationship between the structure of substantive discourse that they are involved in propagating and those who are engaged in the discourse and inquiry which the discourse framework might apply to. The frameworks in metaphysics of discourse that tell us what is substantive or not can influence decisions about what questions are worth asking and answering. So, they have to be cognizant of the values and interests of the theorists, and how their discourse theories might unjustly constrain what counts as substantive/important inquiry and discourse. The discourse frameworks and standards that I uncover here are oppressive because they wrongly constrain discourse in MRG about important social categories, and risk perpetuating unjust patterns in discourse and unjustly shaping general perspectives on which intellectual voices should be heard, and which voices should be ignored. This further leads to an incapacity for theorists to address the oppression of the people that their theories in MRG apply to, namely those who are oppressed and subordinated on the basis of racial and gender ascriptions. So what I’m calling ‘discursive oppression’ applies *most directly* to theorists, but the primary *concern* is the danger of

affecting the lives of people that the theorists are attempting to understand and possibly change for the better.

It is important, off the bat, to recognize that just because these discourse frameworks are “oppressive” in my sense of the word, it does not mean that those who constructed them are intentional oppressors, or are intentionally unjustly constraining and potentially causing harm or confusion in substantive discourses. That is to say, if they understood that their frameworks had this implication and consequence, they may not approve of the framework, or may not approve of the consequences. Rather, I take it that the oppressive metaphysics of discourse is perpetuated through implicit social structures that theorists are involved in and may be unaware of. Oppression doesn’t require an intentional agent who knows what they are doing. We can unwittingly oppress ourselves or others. The question of how much we are individually responsible for our compliance with unjust social structures and arrangements is a difficult question, and one which I cannot address here. However, there are important ethical considerations about justice and oppression in discourse we *can* address. Part of the aim of this project is to address those issues.

But I want us to get clear on what sense I am using oppression here to describe the metaphysics of discourse. Iris Marion Young’s discussion of oppression in “The Five Faces of Oppression” is a good starting point to understanding unintentional and structural based oppression.

Young notes that, in addition to intentional and “tyrannical” oppression, oppression can refer to:

“...systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few

people's choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (Young, 1990, 56)

This is predominantly the sense of oppression that I want to use throughout this project. The metaphysics of discourse that I am unveiling, operant in metaontological dismissive strategies and metaontological discourse generally, can oppress discourse in a structural sense. It is derived from, i.e., we find its cause in, the unquestioned norms, habits, and assumptions underlying the practices of discourse in academic communities; and particularly in philosophical communities. It is implicit and unintentional: there is no agent or group that is inherently responsible for the unjust constraints to discourse.

This takes care of the question of the *subject* side of oppression i.e., who/what is doing the oppression. It is no one, and everyone. It is the social relations and social structures that we create and perpetuate together. Some of the primary structures we need to focus on are the structures in academic discursive practices. Understanding the dismissive strategies giving broad stories about what makes a question substantive, we can see how there is a possibility that discursive practices could be constrained in ways which threaten theorists' capability to address substantive questions about gender and race i.e., an instance of discursive oppression.

Still, there is a question of what it means to be oppressed, and how this is relevant to discourse. Young identifies five "faces of oppression" or ways in which oppression manifests: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence (1990, 69). I am using the term 'oppression' in this work to primarily pick out marginalization. The most serious and literal cases of marginalization are not about theorists in MRG. My use is perhaps exaggerated

compared to Young's below, but in a sense, the frameworks of discourse that we function under could contribute to marginalization in the most literal and visceral senses of the word.

Young describes marginalization as follows:

“Marginalization is perhaps the most dangerous form of oppression. A whole category of people is expelled from useful participation in social life and thus potentially subjected to severe material deprivation and even extermination. The material deprivation marginalization often causes is certainly unjust, especially in a society where others have plenty” (Young, 1990, 63)

Clearly, MRG theorists and their views are not subject to this kind of marginalization. However, there is a sense in which the metaphysics of discourse can contribute to the expulsion of useful participation in philosophical debates, and the expulsion of theories and frameworks which are not in conformity with the standards for discourse imposed by the metaphysics of discourse. In rendering disputes in the metaphysics of race and gender non-substantive, these discourse frameworks devalue the important social questions that could be addressed in MRG. Again, most of the details won't be clear until we get into the theories themselves and how they function to render disputes nonsubstantive. But preemptively, it is evident to see how if important questions about social categories are rendered nonsubstantive, that we could actually risk the marginalization (in the thick sense) of groups which these theorists are trying to advocate for and help. Namely, those who have become marginalized in some contexts in part because of the ways they are categorized into races or genders in particular and social categories in general.

This project is an attempt to make a case for how the dismissive strategies I analyze here are making assumptions about discourse that could risk discursive oppression. They risk rendering

some questions and problems in MRG as illegitimate and nonsubstantive questions, and contributing to discursive oppression by cornering these positions out of discussions. These are questions asked by theorists in MRG who advocate for those who are marginalized and oppressed in society broadly. If we are to accept that there is a remote possibility that our theories in MRG could not only describe the world but change it for better or worse, then we cannot accept a discourse metaphysics which dismisses the substantivity of MRG's important normative questions and problems.

We cannot, however, set out to destroy the metaphysics of discourse (at least without implicitly suggesting one of our own). Without completely rejecting that a metaphysics of discourse is possible, I suggest a new set of broadly pragmatist, feminist, and socially realist criteria by which to distinguish substantive from nonsubstantive inquiry. The metaphysics of discourse I briefly propose will be pragmatist, in that what distinguishes substantive from nonsubstantive inquiry will be determined in large part by the normative attitudes of those engaged in practices, and how we measure success in a practice. It will be feminist, in that it is guided by the ideal of ending oppression and injustice (liberation through recognition is our measure of success) which includes oppression stemming from the metaphysics of discourse itself. And finally it will be socially realist or objective. This last set of criteria is essentially linked to Helen Longino's criteria for objectivity presented in *Science and Social Knowledge: Values and Objectivity in Scientific Inquiry* (1990). This requires that, among other things, inquiry allows for openness and response to criticism, shared and agreed upon standards of evaluation, and equality of intellectual authority.

1.0 Easy Ontology

In this chapter, I will apply Amie Thomasson’s easy approach to the metaphysical disputes about race. I compare Thomasson’s “easy” way of answering questions about the existence of race or gender to a sect of contemporary discourse on race which focuses primarily on application conditions of racial terms. I argue that this method leads us to unsatisfying conclusions about the status of some debates in metaphysics of race and gender. Namely, by orienting our inquiry towards application conditions, other interesting normative questions about the meaning and use of racial and gender terms might be dismissed prematurely.⁵ Thomasson’s approach also seems to answer these important questions *too easily*. The arguments in this section leave us with the following question: “How can Thomasson’s approach be applied straightforwardly to questions about chairs, but when faced with questions that are laden with contextual values, the solution is not so easy?”. I suggest this can be explained by the easy approach’s implicit adherence to the assumptions that 1) a metaphysics of discourse can be robustly neutral with regard to normative matters, 2) that discovering linguistic defects in an inquiry is sufficient conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive.

1.1 The Easy Ontological Framework

We often get the feeling that disputes about the existence of chairs, or the existence of numbers are just a tad silly. “Of course they exist” some might say. One might suppose that those who debate about whether chairs exist, or whether it is merely the particles that compose them that

⁵ There is, however, an alternative reading of the easy approach when applied to many disputes in the metaphysics of race and gender. A Carnapian-style conclusion that Thomasson herself would probably support is that the disputants are or should be asking the pragmatic “external” question of whether or not we should utilize a certain “racial” linguistic framework. We can further interpret the disputants as engaged in metalinguistic negotiation, a topic which Thomasson considers extensively (2016). These readings of the disputes would consequently excuse the easy approach from being applied to these theories in the way I am applying them.

exist, are nonsubstantive. They are, *prima facie*, not asking a deep question but engaged in a meaningless dispute. Easy ontology is an attempt to justify this dismissive intuition. Amie Thomasson's flavor of dismissivism is permissive of entities while dismissive of disputes. For her, most of the questions that feature in the hard ontology room are resolvable in ways that do not require the distinctly metaphysical considerations that are often thought to be pertinent to answering ontological existence questions. Questions in the ontology room about the existence of numbers or chairs cannot be the deep theoretical questions that ontologists take them to be. The method Thomasson uses to deflate these existence questions is a two-step process. First, determine the "application conditions" for a term. Second, if there are application conditions, determine whether there is anything to which the term properly applies. If there is something to which the term properly applies, then the kind of thing the term corresponds to exists. From there, we can craft an easy argument in favor of the entity's existence, starting from uncontroversial premises to easy resolutions of the dispute.

To begin talking about the easy approach, we have to touch on Rudolf Carnap's views on ontology. The key notion for understanding Carnap's deflationary approach is his notion of a 'linguistic framework'. Introducing new terminology into a language requires introducing "a system of new ways of speaking, subject to new rules" as Carnap says (1950, 22). We define our terms and determine what they apply to by specifying *rules of use* for the terms. We do not introduce all words in a language so formally. This is not the case for most natural language terms, for instance. Terms already in use in natural language receive these determinations by convention. It is only after the convention is established that lexicographers solidify the "official" definition in a dictionary, which are often not remotely indicative of the various ways in which terms can be applied in a context. Still, these terms seem to follow *patterns* of use, some kind of standard

rules/norms for application. This is essentially the most important part of understanding a linguistic framework. It is a set of rules and procedures which establish a somewhat determinate function for a term in some language. Whether these come from convention and are implicit, or they are technical terms with an explicit and rigid application is not our concern.

Now, let us consider what this semantic thesis implies about existence questions. Relative to an existing linguistic framework, Carnap distinguishes between two kinds of existence questions that can be asked: internal and external existence questions. For Thomasson, the distinction between internal and external questions, inspired by Huw Price's (2009) reading of Carnap, is akin to the distinction between questions that *use* a term versus questions that *mention* a term (2014, 36). Using a term *properly* (*with right*) requires following the rules/norms of the framework that make the term meaningful. For many ordinary terms, these semantic rules are implicit, but we have a firm grasp of them. In the case where we accept a framework, then we can begin to use it. For instance, we all accept an ordinary mid-sized objects framework which includes terms like 'apple'. That is, we have rules and norms of use that govern terms for mid-sized objects like apples, and we accept those rules and norms when we talk about apples. I use the word 'apples' when I say "Apples are red" in order to signify a certain edible fruit that grows on trees. But when I say that 'apples' has six letters, I do not say of a certain fruit that it has six letters. This is a case of mentioning a term, where the ordinary rules of use are not considered and rather it is observed as a linguistic item.

A mathematician uses the number framework, for instance, when she asks, "Is there a prime number between 20 and 25?". The use of a term binds us to the semantic rules and norms that govern the term. If we understand these norms for the use of number terms, then we can easily answer this question *within* the number's framework, or while using the framework. There is no

metaphysical debate to be had. From within the framework of numbers the answer is clearly that there is such a number, namely twenty-three. But this is apparently not the kind of question that the ontologist asks. The ontologist, if construed as asking a question which uses the term ‘number’ when asking “Are there numbers?” for instance, should be able to easily resolve the question like we just showed. But the ontologists' questions are apparently deep and difficult to answer. So it must not be this internal question that they are trying to answer.

If it is not the internal question about the term, guided by the semantic rules of use, then it must be an external question that the ontologist is asking. There are, for Carnap, two senses we can give to the expression of an external question, and only one sense that actually is worth considering. Either it is a question about whether the linguistic framework itself exists, which is a pseudo-question, or it is the pragmatic question about which frameworks we should adopt for our purposes (Carnap, 1950, 22-23). Why could the first kind of question not be a genuine question? These are, after all, the questions that ontologists are primarily concerned with, and it seems that their questions are meaningful. The idea for Carnap is that this kind of question severs a term like ‘number’ or ‘chair’ or from its linguistic framework, its established rules of use, or its determinate function in a discourse. Therefore, we cannot ask the question about the existence of numbers from “outside” the numbers framework, or divorced from the rules that govern the terms use.

We can only assess what objectively exists when “inside” or when using a framework, because the framework's established rules determine the meaning of the term. This is not to say that what exists is relative to a framework. What is meant is that in order to talk about what exists in a way which allows for “truth-conditions” and the social proprieties necessary for any kind of knowledge, we need semantic rules and norms that govern the use of our terms for talking about the world. When we use a term, we presuppose these norms. This is distinct from external

questions, where we mention the terms. The only sense we can give to an existence question that we can meaningfully ask when *mentioning* a term from *outside* the framework is the pragmatic question of whether we should adopt some framework, or some convention of rules for use of a term or set of terms.⁶ If we ask whether or not numbers exist from outside the framework, we sever the term from its semantic proprieties, and no sense can be made of the question. Rather than interpreting ontologists as asking a senseless question, Carnap suggests that ontologists “...have perhaps in mind not a theoretical question as their formulation seems to suggest, but rather a practical question, a matter of a practical decision concerning the structure of our language” (1950, 23).

1.11 What Ontologists Are Up To

Thomasson thinks if we accept Carnap’s internal/external distinction, then we should not interpret the ontologists as asking this “nonsensical” external question. And equally it seems implausible that ontologists are attempting to answer a merely pragmatic question about which framework to adopt. So it must be, Thomasson thinks, that ontologists can only be asking the internal existence question. But this has serious implications for ontology as a branch of inquiry, for Thomasson thinks that we can answer these existence questions by (an often painfully trivial) two-step process.

We first engage in a conceptual analysis and determine the application conditions of a general term like ‘chair’. The application conditions of a statement are approximately the conditions under which a given term would be properly applied. Thomasson further says that application conditions are “among the semantic rules established by speakers through their

⁶ Alternatively, we could ask about how we *should* use the terms, and make normative and pragmatic arguments to justify a particular set of rules for application.

normative practices of applying and refusing terms in various circumstances, and approving or correcting others in their use of them” (Thomasson, 2008, 67). So this is not necessarily a matter of if sortal terms like ‘chair’ are “carving nature at the joints” or if our best theory quantifies over chairs or something like that. It is merely a matter of determining the semantic proprieties that are implicit and explicit in our practices of saying things about chairs. Thomasson also emphasizes that these conditions need not be statable by the users, but merely that the rules be mastered by competent speakers (2014, 91-92). The second step is going out into the world and determining whether anything actually fulfills the application conditions. Once we determine the application conditions, then we can investigate the world to determine if our term applies to anything, i.e., we can determine if the application conditions are fulfilled. If the terms application conditions are fulfilled, then the kind of entity in question exists.

Accepting this dismissive framework, we are also provided with the tools to craft ‘easy arguments’ for the existence of an entity in question. If existence questions amount to questions about application conditions and their fulfillment, then we make trivial inferences about what exists that start from uncontroversial premises about the application conditions of our terms (Thomasson, 2014, 129). Thomasson applies this to debates between eliminativists and realists about the existence of tables, for instance. Eliminativism is the view that there are no tables, and only particles arranged-tablewise. There seems to be nothing in virtue of which we can separate the identity of the chair from the smallest particles that compose it. For the eliminativist, what really exists is the particles that compose the chair. Realists, on the other hand, argue against the eliminativists, vindicating our common belief that there are tables. They agree that there are particles arranged table-wise, but argue that the table exists in addition. The tension is that apparently it is theoretically vicious (not virtuous) to assert that both the table and all the things

that compose it exist. A simpler theory (and thus, according to the desiderata of the theorists, a better one) would just posit the particles. Thomasson, like many, thinks that this debate cannot be the metaphysically deep debate that theorists take it to be. With the easy framework, we are in the position to make easy arguments to determine the answer to this question.

Consider this easy argument for the existence of chairs:

1. There are particles arranged chair-wise. (Both realists and eliminativists accept this)
2. If there are particles arranged chair-wise, then ‘There are tables’ is true.
3. Therefore, ‘There are tables’ is true i.e., tables exist.

The premise that eliminativists want to deny is two, since they think that it is a substantive leap from the fact that there are particles arranged table wise to the conclusion that there are tables. However, given the application conditions of ‘table’, competent speakers of English are permitted by the proprieties of their language to infer that there is a table (Thomasson, 2014, 129).

1.2 Existence and Nature

So far, I have presented Thomasson’s framework for answering existence questions in ontological disputes. We are almost in the position to apply the approach to disputes in MRG (Metaphysics of Race and Gender). Before we begin, however, it should be flagged that determining whether races or genders exist is really only one aspect of the metaphysical inquiries concerning race and gender. Similarly, determining if tables and chairs exist is only one aspect of the metaphysical inquiries regarding mid-sized objects.

The *existence* questions of race and gender seem to supply a platform for those who want to deny that races or genders (or sexes), as we now conceive of them, are legitimate categories that we should apply to people. But in addition to this discussion, there are debates about whether the

ways in which we distinguish races/genders could be improved. For instance, one might want to find pragmatic grounds establishing the category of people that are non-binary and trans or provide the basis for nuanced distinctions between races. The disputes we will focus on here are racial eliminativist positions that argue that given the meaning of our racial terms⁷, there is nothing corresponding to them in reality. So finding out what these terms mean, if anything determinate, is a crucial part of this endeavor. The idea for these eliminativists is that the meanings of racial terms are fixed and justified by the linguistic communities' norms and normative attitudes.

This approach, however, has its shortcomings. For instance, we do not really know how we (as a somewhat unified linguistic community, in, say, the United States) conceive of race and gender now. Gender and race terms are particularly fluctuating parts of the social texture of our lives. A similar concern is that “the meaning” of racial terms shifts depending on context. Which is just to say there might not be a reliable way to determine the meaning of racial terms without considering where, when, and how you are using them. Also, the terms seem to change meanings much more rapidly in the same kind of contexts than terms like chair or table. Once you think you get a hold of “the meaning” of a term, the social momentum has shifted its weight so that your meaning is merely the dead forgotten skin of the living, breathing term as it functions in a context.

Consider, for example, the newly arising cases of controversial gender ascriptions of trans-woman athletes, who identify as women, but who also have elevated levels of testosterone. In particular social settings, the level of testosterone that someone has is completely irrelevant to their gender ascription. In most public settings, it seems obvious we should accept self-ascriptions. But

⁷ There are two broad approaches that one may have to actually find out “the meaning” of a term. First, there are internalist theories, that take it that the meaning of terms is most closely associated with internal states of the word-users and their intension and semantic knowledge in using a word. In contrast, one might take an externalist approach to language, by which speaker meaning (internal meaning) does not determine “the meaning” of a term.

as trans-inclusion and solidarity becomes more openly embraced, we now have to consider what this entails for all our practices that have been structured and cultivated with other conceptions of gender categories. When a trans-woman competes in an official sporting event, many organizations (such as the Olympics) will not accept a self-ascription alone (Teetzel, 2017). They might require, in addition, that the athlete disclose some medical information which indicates their hormone levels, which are believed (contestably) to determine physical capabilities and athletic potential. These considerations are not supplied by some investigation into “the ordinary meaning” of ‘woman’. Rather, our decisions about gender practices in these circumstances are informed with new information and new ways of conceiving of gender categories. We can formulate an inductive hypothesis that, given how volatile these terms have been in the past, that we can only expect more change and volatility in the future, and so any theory which purports to tell us what gender refers to definitively and universally will fail in the future.

We should also consider cases of racial ascription for, for instance, affirmative action policies. Is it sufficient for one to be black that they identify as black in these cases? If not, what else might be relevant to a legal policy's determination of such a human categorization? Common ancestry or physical features are assumed as necessary conditions, but there are cases in which these features alone may not be indicative of how one is treated, and how that affects one's opportunities. It would probably be a mistake in our theories of race to make claims about what race is without considering how this understanding of race could play into further treatment of racial discrimination (positive or negative) in policy making. Whether or not races/genders actually exist, these hot button topics have to be addressed, and claiming that races/genders do or do not exist will not help us determine the answers. But the implicit assumption in Thomasson's framework about *how meanings work* might breed some uncritical results for these endeavors.

Rather than asking about *ordinary* application conditions and their fulfillment, the disputants in race and gender debates are usually asking “What *is* race?” and “What *is* gender (and/or sex)?” (Glasgow et al., 2019, 3). This is more than just a question about when we usually apply the term ‘woman’ or ‘black’ to a person, although this may be a component. It is rather a question about what kind of racial and gendered practices particular communities are engaging in, what kind of structures underlie those practices, and finally how we might change those structures to avoid wrongfully privileging/oppressing individuals based in some way upon their social categorizations, some of which are not or should not be indicative of how we treat those people. That is to say, a metaphysics of gender/race approaches (or should approach) gender/racial *practices* with the same rigor as it approaches gender/racial *categorization*. Furthermore, the question of what gender categories and practices we in fact engage in, or which ones we should engage in, are not easily resolvable by a descriptive conceptual analysis. The considerations for a metaphysical theory of race/gender are loaded with contextual values; considerations that do not come up when a metaphysician investigates the existence/non-existence of, say, chairs. Nothing politically significant hangs on a metaphysician's decision to exclude chairs from his theory of everything.

1.3 Eliminativism

Setting aside these difficulties, I think it will be illuminating to apply the easy framework to some disputes in MRG. There is one kind of approach to metaphysics of race that aligns quite nicely with Thomasson's easy dismissivism: Joshua Glasgow's (2019) racial eliminativism. Glasgow's goal is “...to see if the term ‘race’, as it operates in ordinary talk, maps onto anything real” (2019, 122). Glasgow, in Thomassonian terms, is seeking to explicate the application conditions associated with our race terms. Glasgow takes it that the ordinary meaning of race terms suggest

that they are biological (Glasgow et al., 2019, 118). He denies this view, given that our lines of racial demarcation (based on visible traits) are not discovered to be relevant to good biology (2019, 119). He then considers social constructionist views like Sally Haslanger's (2000, 2019), where racial terms like 'Black' are used to indicate perceived or imagined features of a person (skin color, facial features) and marks them as privileged or subordinate partly in virtue of those features. He rejects these views with what he calls the different features problem⁸, where racial categories would remain in place, even when the relevant social features (like subordination) are removed (2019, 131).

Glasgow's account concludes that race is neither biologically nor socially real, and thus there is nothing in the world that these potential concepts of race *correspond* to (2019, 136). Anthony Appiah also argues that races do not exist on similar grounds. He argues for this conclusion on the basis that it is a *part of the meaning* of 'race' in "folk" terms that it corresponds to an essentialized natural kind, and that no such natural kind exists (2006, 381). They both are cognizant, however, of the various ways in which "the ordinary meaning", set by a community's norms and practices, of racial terms could function with false and/or contradictory assumptions from the users of these terms.

For our purposes, we will not need to spend so much time in the "weeds of the arguments" so to speak. All we need to know is the form of the general method these theories take up, and the presumption that a metaphysical or metalinguistic conclusion follows from carrying this method

⁸ Glasgow says "Imagine that we all forgot about race for a few minutes, due to some physical force—imagine the activists infused the global water supply with a different drug. The racial amnesia sets in quickly. We no longer recognize any lines of racial demarcation. We just see a spectrum of individualized traits, not groups based on them. Then after a few minutes our amnesia passes, and we resume classifying ourselves and others racially." (2019, 128). The case relies on the idea that races do not cease to exist because we forget them, or do not use races in categorizations.

out. The method assumes that metaphysical conclusions can be drawn by looking at “the ordinary concept of race”. Determining the ordinary application conditions for this concept, they think, can help us in determining whether or not races exist.

While Glasgow and Appiah’s methods mirror the easy approach in many respects, it is arguable whether Thomasson’s analysis of the application conditions of our racial terms would yield the same result.⁹ Application conditions are “the semantic rules established by speakers through their normative practices of applying and refusing terms in various circumstances and approving or correcting others in their use of them” (Thomasson, 2008, 67). We certainly have long standing practices of applying and refusing racial terms, this is true whether or not we can explicate the semantic rules in these practices. We do consistently correct others' use of these terms as well. We have application conditions for race terms like ‘Black’, ‘White’, ‘Hispanic’, ‘Asian’ and others, regardless of how problematic and controversial these terms may turn out to be.

It has been argued that these terms pick out relatively ‘thin’ i.e., non-normatively loaded properties. We see arising, for instance, a very appealing minimalism about race, which seems to capture a broad range of ways in which racial terms are used in the United States. Michael Hardimon (2017) presents a minimalism about race whereby a race is a group of human beings that:

(M1) as a group is distinguished from other groups of human beings by patterns of visible physical features,

⁹ In this section, I only consider Glasgow’s anti-realist position. In the same chapter of *What is Race?* Glasgow develops a *basic race realism* that would probably align with the conclusions about race drawn from applying the easy approach to the question of if races exist (Glasgow et al, 2019, 138-143).

(M2) whose members are linked by common ancestry peculiar to members of the group,
and

(M3) that originates from a distinctive geographic location.

It seems it would be easy to develop ‘thin’ application conditions for the above listed racial terms (and any others we want to include) that are based around this kind of minimalism about race.

Then again, there are probably people that do not clearly fit into any existing ‘thin’ racial categories. However, this is not to say there are no clear application conditions for our race terms. Terms like table and chair have borderline cases too. We need not deny their existence just because not all furniture falls into the categories we currently have for furniture. So assuming that we are looking for application conditions, one can plausibly argue that we obviously *do* have application conditions for our racial terms, and we apply them with normative force (correctly or incorrectly) consistently based on conventional standards for doing so.

Given the easy ontology framework, this is sufficient to conclude via an easy argument that races exist. There are, in most contexts, paradigm cases of persons belonging to a particular racial category. We might, for instance, find a way to explicate practices of racial categorization with some notion of clusters of descriptions that fit the paradigm cases (a white person is someone with white skin, and certain facial features), and compare less certain cases with reference to the cluster of descriptions we associate with a given category. Most of us have an intuitive agreement, based on our practices of human categorization, on which racial categories we would or should place individuals under. If application conditions and something that fulfills the application conditions is all it takes to determine whether races exist, then for the easy approach, races *do* exist.

The essential question for us is: Are these easy conclusions warranted given the context and normative significance of racial terms? As I mentioned previously, the political significance of racial ascription obliges theorists to consider how the conclusions they come to about race might affect people's lives. The framework comes to conclusions about the existence of race without considering the moral, socio-political consequences. It is, *prima facie*, wrongheaded to easily come to conclusions about racial terms and racial categorization based on descriptive accounts of how the terms are in fact employed. This leads to the second problem. Easy ontology makes substantive assumptions about the nature of language, and what a semantic theory can do for us. I think that part of the reason easy ontology does not work here is because it assumes a "neo-descriptivist" approach to philosophy of language. Essentially, the assumption that there is a common meaning of 'race' and racial terms that we can identify and derive substantive conclusions that races do (or do not) exist is problematic. In what follows, I will uncover some of those descriptivist assumptions and explain how they lead to more serious normative problems for theory choice in metaphysics of race.

1.4 Semantics and Metaphysics

There are compelling reasons to think that the inquiry into the ordinary meaning of race terms is itself fundamentally flawed, or at least has limited authority in arguments for or against a metaphysical theory of race or gender. Assuming that 'race' and 'gender' each have *one* common 'folk' meaning that we can discover is a semantically and metaphysically loaded assumption. Furthermore, even if there was one common meaning or an average meaning for these terms and one thing that average usage objectively refer to, it is problematic to easily come to conclusions about *what exists* or the *nature of the meaning* of these terms on the basis of how ordinary people

use them, or tend to use them. This is particularly true when conclusions are being drawn about the meaning of terms applying to sentient and sapient beings. The semantic assumptions lead to normatively problematic conclusions that I will draw out below. These uncertain conclusions hang on explanatory work to be done in philosophy of language and would require that a “neo-descriptivist” view of ordinary use of terms is the right view to hold. But there are reasons to doubt neo-descriptivism.

Sally Haslanger has outlined some of the problems with (perhaps unwittingly) accepting “neo-descriptivist” assumptions about meaning and reading them into our theories of race and gender (2012). Some of those assumptions are:

- A) For any term (or virtually any term) *t*, there is a set of topic specific assumptions - a speaker's "folk theory" of what *t* purports to pick out - that guides the speaker's application of the term to cases; these assumptions do not vary with the speaker's assumptions about the environment she is in.
- B) The "folk theory," together with information about the speaker's environment, as needed, determines what the speaker refers to using *t*.
- C) Most members of a linguistic community associate the very same "folk theory" with *t*. Competence in the standard use of *t* requires that one employ the (tacit) “folk theory” in one’s application of *t*.

Along with those assumptions, the neo-descriptivist account of meaning accepts a deflated notion of analyticity (statements are *analytic* if and only if their truth conditions are determined solely in virtue of the meanings of the statement in question). Statements articulating the “folk theory” for *t* are analytic i.e., folk beliefs about what a term *t* means are analytic for those who hold them. For instance, a set of folk beliefs might determine that ‘Bachelors are unmarried males’ is analytic for

that folk theory. However, the folk theory of meaning does not give us knowledge of the essence or nature of a thing, only knowledge of a terms “meaning” or “sense” i.e., knowledge of what a term designates (Haslanger, 2012, 432). Here we see the assumption that there is a strict divide between meaning on the one hand and essence or nature on the other. While this seems promising initially, it can lead to problems for theory choice in MRG.

We could read these assumptions into Thomasson’s dismissive approach quite easily. One assumption is that when taking up the linguistic frameworks in our “ordinary language” that are presumed as dominant and active in the context one finds oneself in, and in tacitly understanding the rules/norms for use, one has knowledge of *the meaning* of a term. The meaning determined by the folk theory subsequently determines, for neo-descriptivism, what the speaker *refers to* using a term. Thomasson commits herself to a similar view when she states that application conditions, which are “meaning constitutive” (2014, 89), are determined by our practices of refusing, correcting, and approving each other’s use of the term (2014, 92). Thomasson takes it that determination of meaning of a kind term K yields analytic or conceptual truths about what the term K refers to. After finding something that fulfills these application conditions, we are able to conclude *with right* that the entities in question exist. Thomasson wants to say that this determination of meaning amounts to a determination of reference, and subsequently of existence. For Thomasson, determining that a sortal term K refers is *necessary and sufficient* to determine that a kind K exists (2008, 67). She sometimes prefaces this claim with the qualification that the term K’s meaning remains fixed (2008, 65).¹⁰

¹⁰ It is perhaps worth considering whether the stipulation that the meaning must remain fixed plays a significant role in Thomasson’s conclusions about existence statements from semantic premises.

The problems that Haslanger addresses with descriptivism are related to Quinean¹¹ critiques of analyticity and his emphasis on meaning holism informed by an epistemic responsibility to revise our beliefs in light of new evidence and knowledge (2012, 432-433). The problem with analyticity, according to Haslanger's Quine, is that there is no clear line distinguishing *the meaning of a term* (and the analytic truths that can be drawn from it) from "well-entrenched generalizations about the phenomena in question" (2012, 432). A neo-descriptivist might think this makes language too messy. This, Haslanger says, is a good thing, because semantic beliefs, like any other kind of belief, should be revisable upon new circumstances and new knowledge (2012, 433). This requires that the meaning of terms is not just determined by semantic beliefs. A significant part of an all-encompassing semantic theory in general, and semantic conclusions about race and gender particularly, should be an openness to considering new circumstances and new knowledge and allowing these considerations to shape our application conditions in certain contexts. For racial ascription, this will happen only when we consider new and alternative voices, those who represent alternative and underacknowledged perspectives on the subject.

1.41 Semantic and Ontological Justice

Frameworks like Thomasson's, which accept these neo-descriptivist assumptions about language, will be underwhelmingly moot in answering questions in metaphysics of race (and metaphysics of gender). In fact, I think accepting the kind of neo-descriptivist assumptions that are implicit in Thomasson's easy ontology would actually be harmful when applied to disputes about gender and

¹¹ The Quinean picture that Haslanger is giving us here is based on his influential essay, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (Quine, 1953). Here, W.V. O. Quine questions the notion of analyticity that is often employed in radical reductionist theories of meaning.

race. Firstly, if it is assumed from the outset that there is one meaning of ‘race’ or ‘gender’ that we can discover through conceptual analysis, then we may come to hasty conclusions that forgo consideration of the normative significance of these terms. What if the folk meanings we find for these terms are harmful and problematic? Should we still easily conclude that there are races in the sense defined by a linguistic communities’ folk beliefs about the application conditions of a term? The answer is obviously no. Secondly, we will probably inaccurately represent application conditions of these terms that we intend to find, since their application conditions may shift dramatically from context to context, speaker to speaker, community to community.

Elizabeth Barnes (2019, 712) notes how assuming the metaphysics of *gender* is about application conditions of terms impacts our theory, but I think this critique could apply to MRG as a whole. The point Barnes makes is that, because of the terms’ significance and volatility, these terms and the phenomena associated with them are changing much quicker than terms like ‘table’ or ‘number’. Furthermore, any biological or social account of what race/gender is should not feel the strict need to align their theories with the dominant/orthodox application conditions of race/gender terms. It might turn out that our common concepts of race/gender, if they exist, are fundamentally flawed with respect to an all-encompassing view of gender which considers contextual values. Orthodox perspectives can often drown out less recognized perspectives (unacknowledged by the dominant perspectives operating in a context) which could be useful in addressing the discrepancies between racial/gender categorization as conceived in the dominant social setting versus contested uses of the terms in other settings. The easy framework does not give us the methodological tools to make this separation, since determining whether races exist (which we cannot clearly delineate from how they exist) for easy ontology seems to be a simple matter of determining how terms are used in dominant contexts.

1.5 Is It Always That Easy?

In diagnosing easy ontology's failure to properly apply to debates in race and gender, we might look at some of the assumptions that were uncovered.¹² The most crucial of these assumptions is that the application conditions that are considered to be employed ordinarily can determine the ontological conclusions we draw i.e., ordinary meaning determines reference, which determines existence. When we use a term, there are semantic rules that govern and limit our use of these terms, but they do not automatically determine what the terms might actually correspond to if anything at all. The leap from application conditions to reference is unwarranted when there are political and normative questions about these terms looming in the background.

The neo-descriptivist assumptions about language that Thomasson seems to be employing in her dismissal are not only doubtful but could lead to harmful conclusions when applied to debates about race and gender. Even if we accept a minimalist kind of framework for application conditions of gender or race terms, we might fail to appreciate the political significance of our conclusions about the existence of races or genders. The conclusion itself is less important than the way in which we come to that conclusion. If our reasoning is that races or gender exist because "the ordinary meaning" of the terms (which are doubtful to properly be identified) points to a

¹² Thomasson most likely did not intend for her easy ontology to be applied to some of these debates in MGR. She explicitly regards the race debate as something coming under the purview of "metalinguistic negotiation" (Thomasson, 2016, 17) where we might make normative and pragmatic arguments about how we should use our terms. Certainly it is not that easy to uncontroversially determine if terms like 'black' or 'woman' pick out any particular kind of person. The point of considering easy ontology in these debates is to uncover the implications of the framework.

particular phenomenon, then we not only are making assumptions about meaning, but about gendered/racial practices. In doing so, we might overlook alternative meanings for these terms and how they might better capture the overall picture of racial/gendered practices.

Accepting easy ontology commits us to a view whereby application conditions are determined by semantic rules established by speakers through normative practices, and that mastering these rules for use gives one knowledge of the meaning of terms. The pragmatist like Quine, and the feminist, will want to know what the purposes of establishing those particular semantic rules for the use of terms are, and who has the authority in those circumstances to claim mastery of the terms use. Are these authorities using the meaning of terms to oppress certain groups? We simply cannot understand the use of these terms apart from the nonlinguistic practices in which these terms function. They will also want to know how we can distinguish the meaning of terms from broad generalizations about the phenomenon the terms are supposed to apply to. Are the terms being used to naturalize certain behaviors or social arrangements? These are questions that a semantic theory must address, but approaching existence questions in MRG with the assumption that we have to find “*the* application conditions” for racial or gender terms leave us no means to do so.

This application has also served to elucidate some limitations of such a dismissive strategy as Thomasson’s. Easy ontology does not work well to dismantle the debates about races and genders and their existence. The whole point of Thomasson’s dismissive strategy was to make ontological questions easily resolvable. It is obvious that the terms ‘white person’ or ‘woman’ have more significance and normative implications than ordinary object terms like ‘chair’ or ‘number’. But is that reason enough to say that the underlying reasoning involved in the easy approach does not render disputes in metaphysics of race and gender easily resolvable and thus non-substantive?

It should be considered whether using a methodology in this way creates a double standard for its application. What is the difference between social ontology and ontology *proper* that makes easy ontology so unappealing for the former and so appealing for the latter?

One might challenge Thomasson to explain why easy ontology makes ontological choices about chairs and numbers easy, while when faced with questions of race or gender this methodology is presumably unwarranted. Quite plausibly, the difference lies in what we care about. Seemingly the difference between asking for the application conditions for chairs and the application conditions for Black people is that the latter question is value-laden and cannot be answered straightforwardly by using orthodox semantic proprieties as justification. It requires not only a semantic or metaphysical theory but an ethics; and a concern for the effect the answers put forward to these questions have on our communities and their practices. The easy framework does not give us a straightforward way to discern which questions can be answered easily and which cannot.

Underlying this misapplication of the easy framework, is the assumption that metaphysics of discourse can be neutral towards normative matters and contextual values. If not an underlying assumption, the least that can be said is that the framework does not consider the normative and contextual criteria that a metaphysics of discourse needs. This is perhaps due to the fact that the disputes easy ontology was crafted to target were about mid-sized objects and numbers. Nevertheless, the strategy is presented as a means by which to answer existence questions *in general*, easily. But once we note that existence questions about types of people are reasonably substantiated by contextual values, we might find leverage to suggest that other questions about the existence of other classificatory schemas that concern human interest might not be easily dismissed by easy ontology.

2.0 Merely Verbal Disputes

In this chapter, I apply the merely verbal dispute framework (MVD) to inquiry in the metaphysics of gender. I find a useful application of MVD, which allows us to detect some defects in debates about gender. The problem with the application of MVD to these disputes, however, is that we might be tempted to conclude that because disputes in metaphysics of gender are merely verbal on some level, that the metaphysics of gender itself is fundamentally flawed and non-substantive. This, however, requires making some false assumptions about what some theorists in metaphysics of gender and related fields are trying to do. I argue that the MVD framework is insufficient to render disputes nonsubstantive because the framework is being applied with a problematic assumption. The assumption that is operative in the application of the MVD framework is that discovering linguistic defects in the way parties use terms in an inquiry is sufficient to conclude that the inquiry (or at least the particular question they are asking) is non-substantive. Taking inspiration from Brendan Balcerak-Jackson (2014), I make a case for why this view is problematic for a metaphysics of discourse.

2.1 The MVD Framework

The MVD framework involves finding some criteria to identify a merely verbal dispute, where the interlocutors are simply “talking past each other”. The interlocutors are thought to be using important terminology in the discussion differently. It is the suspicion of the MVD dismitter that there will be no semblance of a substantive/genuine/real disagreement once the verbal confusions are settled. Identifying that a dispute is merely verbal constitutes a good reason by a dismitter’s standards to either significantly reframe the discussion or drop the topic entirely. Theories and discussions of MVDs have been devised by a myriad of philosophers; Hirsch (2009), Chalmers

(2011), Jenkins (2013), Balcerak-Jackson (2014), Vilchis (2021), and others. We will focus on Chalmers' and Balcerak-Jackson's view, which I believe gives us the most straightforward heuristic to diagnose disputes as merely verbal.

Before we move onto characterizing verbal and merely verbal disputes (there is a crucial difference), I want to explain a feature common of what we would intuitively call genuine/substantive disputes and compare this with MVDs. This may be helpful in pinpointing what seems to be missing from merely verbal disputes. We might initially point out that one feature of a genuine i.e. substantive dispute is that the parties seem to be focused on answering the same question. Brendan Balcerak-Jackson goes as far as to say that the identifying feature of *MVDs* is that we cannot determine a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address (2014, 41-42). He goes further to say that "The diagnosis of a dispute as merely verbal is thus a judgment about what is common ground between the two parties, what they intend to communicate, what they take others to intend to communicate, and so on" (2014, 41-42). There is not much more to be said positively about genuine disputes. We will primarily define a genuine dispute by what it is not: an MVD. Now, let us discuss what a verbal dispute is.

Verbal disputes are disputes that are at least in part dependent on a disagreement about the meaning and use of terms: i.e., the dispute hinges on a metalinguistic disagreement. A large part of philosophy consists of negotiations about the way we ought to use our terms (this is sometimes called metalinguistic negotiation). This is explicit when *mentioning* a word with the convention of single quotation marks. For instance, philosophical discussions about truth and the truth predicate are sometimes explicit metalinguistic disputes about the pragmatics and semantics of 'truth' and 'is true' in discourse. These disputes, however, are not wholly verbal, or merely verbal. The debate is often influenced by considerations of whether truth is (or could be or should be) an explanatorily

valuable *property* of beliefs and assertions, which are prima facie disputes about more than mere vocabulary but about the world as well.

There is a sense in which classic Socratic questions like “What is knowledge?” or “What is justice?” are metalinguistic i.e., verbal questions. Finding an answer to what knowledge is would involve questions about what we mean or what we should mean when we attribute ourselves and others with knowledge. This does not, however, warrant the conclusion that disputes concerning these questions are non-substantive and thus not worth our time. Rogelio Vilchis gives us an account of verbal disputes where a verbal dispute can be substantive *when the terms themselves are the subject of discussion* i.e., when there is an explicit metalinguistic negotiation at hand (2021, 480). Many disputes about negotiation of our use of language have important social and theoretical implications. So, verbal disputes are not the target for MVD dismissers.

However, if the parties in the discussion are unaware of the different use of terminology, and unaware that their dispute hinges on disagreements about language, problems can ensue for the productivity of the debate. Implicit metalinguistic disputes are in danger of becoming merely verbal disputes. Vilchis (2021, 481) recognizes that most theories of MVDs share two main features: 1) the apparently disputing parties do not share the same subject matter, and 2) the disputes have the appearance of dealing with a shared subject matter because the parties have been misled by language into believing that they are disputing the same issue. C. S. I. Jenkins (2013, 14) marks two ways of “cashing out” the idea of a nonsubstantive/merely verbal disagreement: “When a dispute is merely verbal the participants have no conflicting beliefs” and “When a dispute is merely verbal the participants agree on all the facts”. The usual charge from the MVD dismitter is that because the parties agree on all the facts or have no conflicting beliefs, there is no substantive disagreement between the two parties e.g., Hirsch (2009) and Chalmers (2011). However, some

analyses of MVDs argue that being an MVD is not sufficient to declare non-substantiveness e.g., Balcerak-Jackson (2014).

How could it be that interlocutors agree on all the facts, but are themselves unaware of this agreement? To understand this, we must begin to spell out some examples of MVDs. Chalmers' (2011) prime example of a merely verbal dispute comes from William James' "Pragmatism" (1907). In this case, a man walks around a tree, while a squirrel moves on the tree trunk. Both the squirrel and the man face the tree trunk, and at all times the tree trunk remains between the man and the squirrel. Two parties argue over whether the man "goes round" the squirrel. James' response is that the debate can be resolved by determining what we mean by "goes round". If we mean that the man changes his position in relation to the squirrel from north to east to south to west, then he does "go round" the squirrel. While if we mean that the man is in front of, then to the right of, then to the left of, then behind the squirrel, then he does not "go round" the squirrel. "Make the distinction..." James says, "...and there is no occasion for any further dispute" (James, 1907, 25). This example shows how two parties can apparently disagree about some statement *S*, but are unaware that their disagreement arises in virtue of an ambiguity or divergence in meaning between a key term. This example also serves to show how, when engaged in a merely verbal dispute, all it takes to resolve the dispute is a clarification of problematic terminology and the dispute is resolved.

Chalmers (2011, 7) considers an MVD a dispute in which there is some expression *T* in a statement *S* where the parties disagree about the meaning of *T* in *S*, and the dispute over *S* arises wholly in virtue of this disagreement regarding *T*. For the dispute about the man and the squirrel, the term is 'goes round' and the statement is 'The man goes round the squirrel'. The dispute between the opposing parties about the truth of "The man goes round the squirrel" arises wholly

in virtue of a difference in the sense in which the parties use the term ‘goes round’. Substantive disputes, Chalmers notes, cannot be resolved like this (2011, 11). He believes that this characterization does not count as necessary and sufficient conditions for a merely verbal dispute, but gives us a useful heuristic to identify a wide swath of merely verbal disputes.

For instance, this heuristic can identify a dispute between two parties P¹ and P² about the truth of a target statement ‘Whales are fish.’ as merely verbal. P¹ asserts that whales are not fish, while P² denies this claim, asserting that whales are fish. P¹ and P² both use ‘fish’ to refer to aquatic vertebrates that live in water and have fins (Both whales and fish fit this description). However, P¹ excludes whales from falling under the category “fish” because P¹ additionally believes that fish, by definition, have gills. P² knows that whales do not have gills, but does not use this metric to distinguish fish from non-fish. P¹ and P² both agree about the non-linguistic facts concerning whales and fish broadly, but have an implicit disagreement about how to apply the term ‘fish’ because of a difference in meaning in the two speakers' mouths. Their dispute arises wholly in virtue of this dispute about the meaning of ‘fish’. Which party is ultimately right does not really matter for our purposes. What matters is that the dispute could easily be resolved by attending to the meaning of our terms, and our common ground of beliefs that is assumed in communication. Once the parties clarify the term ‘fish’ and their own applications of the term, the dispute is resolved, as they both agree about the relevant non-linguistic facts about whales and fish.

Eli Hirsch (2009) has applied a similar framework to disputes in ontology about “which sets of (successions of) bits of matter constitute a unitary physical object” (2009, 232). His criterion for a merely verbal dismissal is as follows: A dispute is merely verbal only if “Each side can plausibly interpret the other side as speaking a language in which the latter’s asserted sentences are true” (2009, 231). Hirsch’s attitude towards ontological disputes is indicative of a wider

movement that Balcerak-Jackson has labeled “linguistic deflationism” (2013, 31). Amie Thomasson’s approach above could be classed in with the motivations and assumptions of linguistic deflationists. The most important underlying assumption of the MVD brand of linguistic deflationism is that diagnosing a dispute as merely verbal warrants the claim that the inquiry is non-substantive, easily resolvable, or nonsensical. But Balcerak-Jackson argues against this characterization of merely verbal disputes. For Balcerak-Jackson, it is possible that each party aims to answer substantive questions, and that mere verbalness does not support any strongly deflationary conclusions (2013, 52). With that being said, let us begin to apply the merely verbal framework to disputes in MRG.

2.2 Methods in Metaphysics of Gender

In this section, I will focus on a set of disputes in the metaphysics of gender involving discussants that aim to answer the question: “What is gender?” in different ways. This difference, however, often goes unnoticed by the parties in the dispute, resulting in the interlocutors talking past each other. I will make the strongest case for the claim that many disputes in metaphysics of gender are merely verbal. Two parties assert syntactically opposed statements: “X is a woman” and “X is not a woman”. Yet, both parties, when charitably interpreted, agree about the underlying proposition that these statements express. For some, this might serve as partial grounds to claim that the metaphysical inquiry into gender itself is non-substantive. With some extra maneuvering, I will show how this full dismissal of metaphysics of gender might be constructed. I will then explore the problematic implications of the MVD dismissal of metaphysics of gender and make a case for why the merely verbal framework does not entail that the metaphysics of gender has no legitimate place among philosophical inquiry. Even if some disputes in metaphysics of gender are confused, this does not mean that each party's inquiry is not substantive in its own right.

2.21 Classification and Metaphysics

Before we jump into the argument, I want to make a few remarks about methodology. While one is analyzing disputes in metaphysics of gender, it is important to keep in mind the varying approaches for giving an account of gender. In order to locate a dismissive argument against disputes in metaphysics of gender, we must distinguish between two kinds of questions that that philosophers might aim to answer:

1) *Classification Metaphysics of Gender* (C-metaphysics): Inquiry into the legitimacy/illegitimacy of a classificatory scheme for gender through an investigation of the metaphysical realities of gender. We also find two subspecies of C-metaphysics arguments:

A) Is-first arguments: Use metaphysical premises about *the way things are* to dispute or support a classificatory scheme (how we ought to classify people) for gender terms.

B) Ought-first arguments: Use premises about how people *should be* classified and treated to dispute or support a metaphysical conclusion about the way things are or should be.

2) *Metaphysics of Gender Structures* (S-metaphysics): Inquiry into the social and/or metaphysical conditions that create the possibility of a given gender classificatory schema, the schema's metaphysical contingencies, and perhaps discovering the material realities that proliferate those schemas.

Both is-first and ought-first approaches are going to try to give accounts of what I call *C-gender*. That is, they combine metaphysics and classification of people in some way to make conclusions either about how people should be classified, or what kind of people there “really are”.

An is-first argument will begin with metaphysical premises about what a gender is, and finish with a prescriptive conclusion of how we should classify people. For instance, one might argue that women are necessarily biological females, and classifying females as women and women as females is justified by the biological reality of sex. This particular argument is almost assuredly false. The biological evidence suggests that sex assignment is much more complicated, and that many people who we classify as women in virtue of their sex and people who identify as women do not follow the “biological rules” of having a certain set of sex characteristics.¹³ However problematic, the biological argument I have presented serves as a good example of an argument with a metaphysical premise (assert that M is the metaphysical reality of gender), plus a normative bridge principle (if this is the metaphysical reality, then we should accord our classificatory practices with it) and a subsequent conclusion about classificatory practices. While this example is problematic, there are many theorists who implicitly use this is-first premise to make conclusions about classification.

Now let us discuss ought-first arguments. Some examples include Sally Haslanger’s (2000) argument that we ought to adopt concepts of gender and race that help identify oppression. One may worry that ought-first arguments seem ad hoc. How else could we argue for a classificatory schema than by referencing some reality that the terms pick out? One might think that metaphysics is always prior to the way we should talk about things. But in C-metaphysics of gender, ought-first arguments are important. This can be explained with reference to the aim of theorizing about C-gender; fighting against oppressive systems of meaning and values. Part of that system of meaning might be an ontology, a theory of what exists. If these systems of meaning are oppressive, then we

¹³ For more information on why women are not all and only adult human females, consider reading “Women Are Not Adult Human Females” by Rebecca Mason (2021).

should not abide by their structure. “But” the skeptic of this approach says, “this would not change *the way things are*”. This skeptic is almost assuredly wrong.

Classificatory schemas might change the way things are. In “The Looping Effects of Human Kinds” (1995), Hacking argues that human categorizations and attempts to classify people often result in a change in their behavior based on this classification (1995, 370). Categorizations and classifications of humans take a different shape than the classification of things because people can respond by leaning into a classification or by resisting it. By leaning in, I mean that, for example when I call someone a philosopher, they might respond by acting like a philosopher and embodying philosopher-like traits. Or they might resist the classification by blatantly changing any behavior that might be taken to exhibit the behavior of a philosopher. This phenomenon, which Hacking calls ‘looping’, is found everywhere in the realm of human classification.

We often use human classifications or “ways of being” to guide ourselves through the social world. There are certain kinds of people you want to be, and others you do not want to be. There are also kinds of people that are misunderstood, and labeled as intrinsically possessing some properties that they do not have. For instance, one might take it that philosophers are essentially boring. It would thus be a contradiction to meet an interesting philosopher. But philosophers themselves might resist this by purposefully acting in eccentric and performative ways, using more elegant and entertaining speech, in order to “move the target” of the classification so to speak. The point is that the way we classify people can affect the way people behave, and thus classification is not merely descriptive but is an active principle in the shaping of people’s lives.

Ought-first and Is-first arguments make up a good portion of the literature on gender, but, crucially, C-metaphysics is not the ubiquitous approach to metaphysics of gender. Others seem to be trying to pinpoint the metaphysical underpinnings of gender without necessarily telling us how

to use terms (S-metaphysics). They will give accounts of what I will call S-gender (S-woman, S-man, etc.). These folks explore the underlying social/metaphysical realities that create and proliferate gender as a concept and the subsequent gender classificatory schema.

Elizabeth Barnes presents such a project in “Gender and Gender Terms” (2019), where she argues that Sally Haslanger’s analysis of gender terms, which may function as an ought-first C-gender account, could be used *without* being seen as straightforwardly giving us application conditions for gender terms. S-gender, for Barnes’ Haslanger, is a social structure that privileges individuals who are believed or perceived to have a male biological role in reproduction, and subordinates individuals who are believed or perceived to play the female’s biological role in reproduction (2012, 132-133). Barnes’ view of what I call S-gender can be taken to be, as Haslanger says, “providing a better explanation of how gender works” (2012, 133-134), as opposed to how it should work.

It is unclear exactly which project (Ought-first, is-first, or S-metaphysics) Haslanger would say she is a part of. I am inclined to say that, primarily, the account functions as a metaphysical explanation of the problematic social realities that contribute to oppression on the basis of race. In addition, however, Haslanger is concerned about undermining ascriptive practices that might be working with implicit is-first assumptions. That is, she seems concerned to undermine is-first arguments by undermining the factual claim about the metaphysical reality of a category. Part of the goal for Haslanger’s project is to *debunk* the assumption that a social category (like gender) is justified by natural or metaphysical facts (2012, 136). This shifts our story of gender from a purely naturalistic narrative to one about the social roles that individuals play. Importantly, it shifts our understanding of gender from natural essences to social contingencies. Given what Haslanger herself says about gender, her theory could be seen as an S-metaphysics, or an ought-first C-

metaphysics (or perhaps some blend of the two). The S-metaphysics part is mostly negative, in denying the legitimacy of the claim of a classification schema's necessity. Barnes (2019, 715) seems to think that Haslanger's theory of gender structures is not about application conditions (normative or descriptive), which automatically excludes it from being a C-metaphysics. Haslanger herself has said that our theorizing about social categories must take into consideration the political advantages and disadvantages of a given theory. This suggests C-metaphysical leanings of the ought-first variety. While not giving a natural story about how gender is realized (is-first), she gives a social constructionist story of how it is realized with normative considerations.

What does it mean to give a social constructionist story of gender? The general form of statements 'X is a social construction' can be taken many ways in many contexts. Whether something that is a social construction is part of one's ontology is a complicated question.¹⁴ If what Haslanger calls "social structures" (i.e., a network of interrelated practices consisting of persons and their social relations) are a part of one's ontology, then social constructions are too. There are some whose metaphysical pictures only include "mind-independent" reality, and these social structures might seem antithetical to an ontology inquiry. This is an assumption which denies the importance of social ontology and social reality, which are important lenses through which we

¹⁴ Another component that complicates the question of social constructions and metaphysics are questions about what metaphysics is, or questions about what it should be. Depending on one's application conditions for 'metaphysics', they might disagree that socially constructed objects are the concern of 'metaphysics'. However, insofar as metaphysics would have to discover the nature of "mind-independent reality" it would also have to discover what is dependent on minds too. Once equipped with the MVD framework, we are tempted to ascribe disputes about what x is as merely verbal. The question of what metaphysics is a case in point. I recommend that we should move the question towards what problems we are interested in solving, rather than trying to find a broad label to encapsulate all of those problems. However, in section three, we will address the possibility that disputes in metaontology, and other higher-level discourse might be engaged in MVD's about the use and application of 'metaphysics'. Ultimately, rendering the question of what is metaphysics as non-substantive because it is merely verbal is ineffective for any purpose. There are ways in which the word 'metaphysics' might be used in philosophical communities such that calling something not a part of metaphysics proper might mean that it is not as important. Alternatively, and more likely, there are many communities in which calling something 'metaphysics' is an insult.

might analyze the world. Social constructionists will affirm that social structures and the socially constructed objects that arise out of them are very real.

There are other S-metaphysical stories about gender besides Haslanger's. For example, Ásta Sveinsdóttir (2011) (who goes by 'Ásta' for short) argues for a conferralism about sex and gender, by which these categories pick out social properties assigned to individuals based on that individual having a grounding property (which they believe gender-sex terms are tracking e.g., tracking people with certain physical features or certain reproductive capacities), where the relevant properties being tracked are relative to a context.¹⁵ McKittrick (2015) has an account of gender by which gender picks out a complex of behavioral dispositions relative to a context. Both of these accounts do not necessarily give us normative standards for practices of ascription, but rather gives us an account of the social conditions that make gender possible. Communities, of course, can be drastically mistaken in what conditions are exactly involved, and thus ascribe genders to people in ways that do not accord with how gender is actually conferred. Consider the difference between instituting a standard, and the rules/norms that constitute that standard. It seems that our racial ascription, and the norms that govern it, are instituted by the community of ascribers. The norms that govern ascription are in part self-made, and thus, in that sense, infallible. If gender and racial ascription depend on and are defined by attitudes of speakers that institute standard for ascription, then those ascriptions are attitude dependent, and infallible. However, they can be wrong about where the force of those normative assessments are coming from. They can think that their normative attitudes toward gender ascription are justified by "the way things are", instead of justified by our attitudes about the way things ought to be.

¹⁵ For instance, in a given context the relevant grounding properties might be sex characteristics (penis, vagina, ovaries, etc...), or they may be facts about one's social role, or facts about what gender the person in question self-identifies as.

Also, the ways gender is conferred (in a context) do not necessarily lead us to any conclusions about how we ought to classify people. In fact, both accounts suggest that there is a social element to gender, by which our social practices can influence the metaphysical reality of gender. Each of these S-metaphysical stories about gender can be taken to give us different ways to pinpoint the underlying social relations that create the possibility of gendering people. Note that because these projects are working within the framework of S-gender, they are not giving application conditions or necessary and sufficient conditions for our practices of classifying people into distinct genders. Some of the stories about the social reality that brings about gender are not justifying gender ascription practices at all, but explaining how and why the practice of gendering people arises, and their authors might condemn oppressive forms of gender ascription practices.

2.22 The Dismissal

Many have taken S-metaphysics and C-metaphysics to be the same thing. This results in conflicting accounts of what a woman is, for instance. One party asserts that “X is not an S-woman”, another asserts that “X is a C-woman”. The problem is that both read the claims as “X is a woman” and “X is not a woman”. This gives parties the illusion of a substantive disagreement. Underlying the syntax of their statements, however, they might agree about the underlying propositions concerning S-women and C-women. A semblance of the MVD (merely verbal disputes) dismissive approach manifests itself in Elizabeth Barnes’ “Gender and Gender Terms” (2019). Barnes explains how many theorists have taken a wrong turn in metaphysics of gender. Barnes says:

“A striking feature of the contemporary metaphysics of gender, though, is that it typically takes the task of explaining gender as the task of explaining what it is to be a woman (or a

man, or genderqueer, or etc.) And thus attempts to give a metaphysics of gender often become attempts to give application conditions for gender terms such as ‘woman’. Likewise, skepticism about the metaphysics of gender often arises from skepticism that there is any specific thing that it is to be a woman, or a to be man, or to be genderqueer, etc.” (2019, 705)

Many theorists take the metaphysics of gender to be the task of explaining what it is to be a certain gender i.e., exclusively C-metaphysics. This results in a considerable amount of literature dedicated to giving application conditions for ‘woman’, or a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for gender terms. For instance, B. R. George & R. A. Briggs argue that “communicated sincere self-identification is *necessary and sufficient* to justify ascription of category membership or non-membership” (*my italics*, 2019, 8). Katherine Jenkins takes it that “S has a female gender identity *if and only if* S’s internal ‘map’ is formed to guide someone classed as a woman through the social or material realities that are, in that context, characteristic of women as a class” (*my italics*, 2016, 410). Both accounts aim to give explanations of *what it is* to fall under a certain gender category that supports the legitimacy of trans-identities. Both also seem to emphasize classificatory justice which is indicative of ought-first metaphysical approaches to gender.

Related to these C-metaphysical pursuits, there have been many objections to S-metaphysical accounts of gender from classificatory premises. These are usually ought-first arguments. For example, some object that Haslanger’s account does not seem to get the descriptive or the prescriptive extension of ‘woman’ right. Katherine Jenkins objects to Haslanger’s analysis since it excludes trans-women, and trans-women ought to be considered women (Jenkins, 2016). Another possible objection, raised by Mari Mikkola (2009) is that people we ordinarily consider

women will be left out of the account. For instance, The Queen of England would not count as a woman under Haslanger's view, apparently because the Queen of England is not subordinated in virtue of her sex characteristics.¹⁶ Admittedly, these objections are rather worrisome for an account of the C-gender terms. It seems strange to say the Queen of England is not a woman. Authors like Jenkins and B. R. George & R. A. Briggs are also going to object that it is plainly false that trans-women are not women.

There is the appearance of a substantive dispute between Haslanger and her opponents. Haslanger's account has the result that trans-women are not women in her technical sense of the word 'woman'. Jenkins and George & Briggs deny that trans-women are not women, i.e., affirm that they are women. Taking our distinction between metaphysical pursuits we can read Haslanger as claiming that "Trans-women are not S-women" and Jenkins (And George & Briggs) claiming that "Trans-women are C-women". These claims are not contradictory. It would be perfectly reasonable to assert that some trans-women are not conferred with the social status of being a woman in oppressive and dominant social contexts, while maintaining that they *should be* women in all social contexts. This dispute is merely verbal, because the two parties are talking about different things, S-gender and C-gender. Haslanger is discussing S-metaphysics: the conditions that create the possibility of gender structures, what confers gender in a context. Jenkins and George & Briggs are discussing C-metaphysics: the justification of a schema for gender classification, how people ought to be classified and how gender ascription ought to unfold in practice.

¹⁶ I don't know the Queen of England, but I would be surprised to find out that she was not treated (in some contexts) as a subordinate in virtue of her sex characteristics. Just because women can hold social, economic, or political positions of power does not necessarily mean that they aren't treated as subordinate along some dimension.

It is disputes like these that create a skeptical attitude towards metaphysics of gender in general. Louise Antony explains the worry for metaphysics of gender and the long history of attempts to define ‘woman’ in her paper “Feminism Without Metaphysics or A Deflationary Account of Gender” (2020). The critique of the project of finding some property that binds all women together begins with the biological critique. There is no biological property that all women share: “neither genetics, endocrinology, nor morphology could be used to define what it is to be a woman” (Antony, 2020, 531). The next attempts made to define ‘woman’ involved grounding womanhood in a common set of experiences or social conditions. These accounts would ultimately exclude issues that pertain to race, sexuality, class and class struggle, and the kinds of feminism in developing regions. Given all these considerations and the “immense variety of women’s situations and experiences”, many theorists thought that any attempt to essentialize *woman* would fail (Antony, 2020, 531).

Antony thinks contemporary debates in analytic feminist metaphysics are making the same mistakes. She cites Sally Haslanger, Charlotte Witt, Ásta, and Elizabeth Barnes as giving substantive accounts of what it is to be a woman (Antony, 2020, 531). Antony argues that there is no practical or political need to answer the metaphysical question of womanhood (Antony, 2020, 531). Explaining the material ground for the system of gender does not entail how gender functions, or how it should function (Antony, 2020, 540-541). This, in essence, is a rejection of the is-first framework, which assumes that a metaphysical premise (about what the world is like) can be used in a classificatory argument. However, Antony fails to recognize an important distinction between S-metaphysics and C-metaphysics. Her dismissal of the metaphysics of gender simpliciter seems to extend to a particular sphere of C-metaphysics of gender only directly: Is-first approaches.

Robin Dembroff targets metaphysics of gender as well, in “Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender” (2018), where she locates the “Real Gender Assumption” and rejects it. This is the assumption that, for example, *S* should be classified as a woman only if *S really is* a woman (Dembroff, 2018, 29). This assumption is not only pervasive in philosophical literature on gender, but functions in many important political contexts in which genders must be defined. It can be harmful to assume that a dominant metaphysical framework justifies a classificatory scheme. This is roughly what Dembroff calls “ontological oppression”, where social kind categories at work in a context “unjustly constrain the behaviors, concepts, or affect of certain groups” (Dembroff, 2018, 21).

It is important to recognize that, firstly, the leap “this is the way things are”, to “this is the way we ought to classify people” is problematic: especially when we are considering the S-metaphysical projects, which are not giving us is-first answers to classification. If we take these S-metaphysical answers to questions of gender to be implicitly making this jump, then we will drastically misunderstand what S-metaphysics is trying to do. Secondly, given considerations about looping effects and kinds of humans raised earlier, it would seem that classification is not merely the task of explaining the metaphysical reality of human kinds but actively shaping the kinds of people that are permitted to exist (ways of being that are recognized as legitimate). So explaining the metaphysical reality of gender will not straightforwardly give us a way to justify our gender classificatory schema. (Note: This may also mean that a morally justified classificatory schema for gender will not necessarily serve as a substantive premise in a metaphysical explanation of gender) Nevertheless, S-metaphysical accounts have to be conscious of the answers that they give to the questions of gender structures, since the way they characterize genders might

influence the way people treat each other. So, the S-metaphysical projects have to bring in normative premises for their arguments about gender structures as well, albeit in different ways.

Both Antony's and Dembroff's discussions of metaphysics and classification, to my mind, give the best support from extant literature for a deflationism about metaphysical inquiry into genders. The dismitter can say, to follow Antony's point, that 1) the metaphysics of gender is not going to give us application conditions that do justice to people's experiences of gender. But for the sake of argument, let us assume that the term 'woman' does (or could, in principle) point to some unified S-metaphysical pattern in a context. This will not lead us, as some theorists suppose, to conclusions about who *should* count as what C-gender. The dismitter can then say, following Dembroff that 2) employing the "Real Gender Assumption" reinforces dominant gender kind categories that are oppressive (Dembroff, 2018, 35). Accepting these premises, we should drop the metaphysical and essentializing questions about gender in our pursuit for the classification of genders.

2.3 Defects and Deflation

The MVD approach aims to dismiss metaphysics of gender as a non-substantive inquiry. However, the dismissal only applies to some problematic confrontations between C-metaphysics and S-metaphysics. While it is true that S-metaphysics and C-metaphysics of gender may collide and engage in merely verbal disputes quite often, it seems that both are engaged in substantive inquiry at bottom. While their surface-level disputes may be defective, both have substantive inquiry to engage in that lies behind some of the more superficial engagements between theorists aiming to answer slightly different questions. That is, the metaphysics of gender is not verbal "all the way down". Haslanger's S-metaphysical project is engaged in determining conditions that lead to the

possibility of racial and gender ascription, with a particular interest in the hierarchical social structures implicit in gender and racial ascription and gendered and racial practices. Jenkins is discussing the harm caused by current gendering practices, and using normative considerations to argue those ascription practices should be changed. The overall dismissive claim of these disputes relies on an interpretation of the MVD framework which assumes that mere verbalness is sufficient for non-substantiveness (Balcerak-Jackson, 2014, 31). This understanding of MVD aligns with a common premise in the metaphysics of discourse: that discovering linguistic defects in an inquiry (often about “the meaning” or “the right meaning” of terms) is sufficient to conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive.

2.31 Rejecting Deflation

Balcerak-Jackson calls MVDs a kind of ‘discourse defect’. The idea here is that “...unlike cases of genuine dispute, we cannot identify a mutually agreed-upon question that both parties attempt to address...” (Balcerak-Jackson, 2014, 42). This seems to be an accurate way to characterize the problems between S-metaphysics and C-metaphysics. Recognizing the difference between accounts of S-gender and C-gender allows us to see how some parties in disputes are attempting to answer different questions. The disputes between these two parties are sometimes defective. Some might be tempted to conclude that this shows that metaphysics of gender itself is founded on some sort of flaw like the “Real Gender Assumption”. Or perhaps that it is founded on the assumption that we could find some property that all women share. While there is certainly evidence that some disputes about gender have been working with these premises, there are many projects that do not need the premises to engage in substantive inquiry about gender.

What the MVD framework cannot do is demonstrate that the inquiry into x is merely verbal ‘all the way down’ so to speak. The most that a merely verbal dismissal can prove is that a dispute is defective because the parties attempt to answer different questions. And our MVD framework has certainly shown this much. The C-metaphysical and the S-metaphysical questions are quite different. As we have shown, classificatory inquiry does not and should not depend on metaphysical arguments. Perhaps the C-metaphysical projects are better off not being classed as metaphysical at all.¹⁷ We can argue about how gender terms ought to be used or how they are used without reference to some metaphysical reality behind the use of the terms.

On the most charitable interpretation, I think Katherine Jenkins’ (2016) and B. R. George & R. A. Briggs’ (2018) are not pursuing a metaphysics of gender at all. These parties seem to be more concerned with how people are classified than anything else. Descriptive metaphysical premises alone cannot do much for determining classification in politically charged settings where people’s lives will be significantly affected. Perhaps there is a defect in the attempted universality of these theories of gender classification. But attempts to find answers to problems with gender classification are not all in vain.

Given the strong deflationary conclusions drawn about metaphysics of gender and classification from Dembroff and Antony, it might be best to dismiss the classificatory pursuit I have called ‘C-metaphysics of gender’ and maintain that these pursuits as *metaphysical* will be misguided. This does not mean, however, that classificatory questions are not extremely important. It simply means that metaphysical-style premises might not be apt to play an inferential role in classificatory conclusions about gender or race. It also means that prescriptive classificatory

¹⁷ I found myself at this point reflecting on the possibility that there is a merely verbal dispute about whether x is metaphysics. While I didn’t find that question to be particularly relevant to this section, I briefly address this question below in Chapter 3.

premises are not always apt to play an inferential role in metaphysical conclusions. That is, determining the way people ought to be classified (application conditions) will not be the primary concern for S-metaphysics, especially when uncovering gender/racial structures is the priority.

For S-metaphysical projects, this demarcation allows some freedom from aligning straightforwardly with is-first classificatory projects. Accounts like Ásta's and Haslanger's can be interpreted as not giving application conditions for gender terms, and so need not worry that their accounts have exclusion problems. Their theories, however, can be taken up to supplement classificatory pursuits, by perhaps pointing out the social contingencies that maintain the physical realities which allow for classificatory structures to be created and perpetuated. The S-metaphysical pictures proposed by Haslanger and Ásta do not tell us how to classify people, but perhaps they can aid in undermining contingent classificatory schemas that are represented as necessary and natural ones.

We find a useful application of the MVD framework in the metaphysics of gender. It has aided in discovering some defective disputes between parties that aimed to answer questions that are obviously related but ultimately distinct. However, problems arise with the MVD dismissal when we take it too far. When we assume that an MVD itself constitutes a complete deflationary attitude towards an inquiry, we have expected the MVD framework to prove too much. It is important when applying the MVD framework to not assume that, for instance, C-Gender can be reduced to S-gender, or that S-gender can be reduced to C-gender. As we have established, both inquiries might be substantive even if disputes about what *gender simpliciter* is, regardless of the aims, might be merely verbal. Rejecting the implication that the diagnosis of an MVD is sufficient to claim an inquiry is non-substantive might be a crucial step in dismantling some of the attacks made on mainstream ontological inquiry as well. Consider Hirsch, who claims that various

ontological disputes about what bits of matter make up an object are merely verbal (2009). This attribution now seems to only imply that their dispute is defective because they are trying to answer different questions. Both of these questions could be substantive in their own right.¹⁸

The moral to be drawn from the MVD framework is that semantics cannot constrain substantivity in the way theorists want it to. To make explicit the pattern running through both easy ontology and the MVD framework, it will be useful to recognize the ways in which these approaches are distinct. First of all, Thomasson's framework led us to try to identify "*the* application conditions" of a term and to render easy answers to prima facie substantive questions about the phenomena that terms refer to. Our application of MVD, in contrast, takes it that theorists in MRG are looking for the application conditions of terms like 'woman', and dismiss this dispute because application conditions for 'woman' are hopelessly vague or context dependent. We can also note that the MVD framework's application included normative premises, like about how classification affects people's lives and how metaphysics is not the be all end all in classification. It is interesting that each of these approaches are working with opposite theories about how language works (pro-universal application conditions versus anti-universal application conditions), but are the same insofar as linguistic defects are applied as evidence that an inquiry is fundamentally misguided or non-substantive. It is also interesting to note that these approaches took quite different stances towards substantivity, one can be normatively loaded (MVD), the other purely descriptive (easy ontology).

¹⁸ I *would* include a brief indication of how this conclusion about MVD might actually shake out for the disputes Hirsch dismisses. Given the aims of this project, this is not something I am worried with proving. Rather, I point the reader again to Balcerak-Jackson (2014) who argues extensively about the limitations of MVDs in applying to metaphysical disputes.

What makes both of these approaches oppressive towards what might be substantive discourse is their assumptions about the linguistic constraints of substantive inquiry. Instead of considering that linguistic defects are surface level, pointing to minor bumps in otherwise substantive fields, the dismissers in both easy ontology and MVD frameworks look for linguistic defects to be substantial evidence to accept a deflationary/dismissive stance towards disputes. This is not always unwarranted. It would seem that there are some disputes that do merely turn on which equally adequate ways we want to speak about something. But to take it that linguistic defects can show the questions these theorists want to answer are non-substantive is taking it too far.

It is important in situations where it is supposed that there is an MVD, or a linguistic defect, to attempt to find a common ground of interests, or a lack of such common ground. This is not a question of a common ground of *language* per se (common meanings, common application conditions for terms), but a question of a common ground in pragmatics. What problems are these theories, when charitably interpreted, trying to solve? What questions are they attempting to answer? If we cannot identify a mutual question the parties are attempting to answer, this does not entail that the parties each have non-substantive problems they want to address. There is a difference between approaching the metaphysics of discourse constructively versus destructively. When semantics holds precedence over pragmatics, there is a risk of running an unnecessarily destructive argument on an inquiry. The mutual question/problem view of MVD's that Balcerak-Jackson gives us is a constructive way to identify discourse defects. While the framework can be applied with normative considerations and without them, the lack of emphasis on the pragmatics of discourse can contribute to an oppressive metaphysics of discourse. The linguistic assumption can be conducive to an oppressive metaphysics of discourse, without necessarily being constitutive of one.

3.0 Carving Nature at The Joints

The final strategy that concerns us is Ted Sider's structuralist metaphysics as it applies to metaphysics of gender and race (MRG). In this chapter, I will introduce Sider's structuralist metaphysical metaontology, and the dismissive framework and metaphysics of discourse that comes with it. I will discuss some important critiques of his view, and the consequences of adopting the framework when applied to MRG. We find that Sider's framework is working with an underlying assumption about the nature of substantive inquiry and about what objective theories must be like. That is, that in substantive metaphysical inquiry, we aim to uncover "the objective structure of reality". While structure *is* important, I will suggest that there are some structures more important than others for theory choice, and when push comes to shove, we may need to include distinctively contextual values into our criteria for theory choice in MRG and other substantive inquiry. I consider how feminist and social constructionist discourse on the one hand, and realist metaphysical discourse on the other, can come to a position of mutual understanding about these matters. Both feminist theorists in MRG and traditional metaphysicians need to find a way to *compromise* if their views on substantivity and the nature of metaphysics and reality are ever going to align.

This chapter functions to put the last piece of the oppressive metaphysics of discourse into place. Sider's structuralist metaphysics turns out to be working within a framework consistent with *all three* of the primary oppressive assumptions that I have identified in metaphysics of discourse. That is, the framework does not necessarily endorse these assumptions, but it does not provide a safeguard against them either. Again, those assumptions are: 1) that the metaphysics of discourse itself can be robustly neutral with regard to normative matters, 2) that discovering linguistic defects

in an inquiry is sufficient to conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive and that 3) we determine a better candidate for theory choice in substantive inquiry by determining which candidate is more objectively accurate (in a vague sense). I intend to show how metaphysical structuralism (The kind that Sider espouses) is consistent with all of these assumptions.

3.1 What is Metaphysics?

The introduction to and application of Ted Sider's structuralist framework is generated primarily from his work *Writing the Book of the World* (2011) but also from Sider's defense of the book's claims from some recent feminist criticism in "Substantivity in feminist metaphysics" (2017). Sider's new project in metaphysics has been the source of both inspiration and distress for philosophers. For instance, David Ludwig (2015) applies Sider's notion of substantivity to dismiss "The New Metaphysics of Race".¹⁹ Others have criticized Sider: Mari Mikkola (2015), Elizabeth Barnes (2014), and Esa Díaz León (2021) have leveled criticisms against Sider's notion of substantivity due to its alleged negative consequences for feminist pursuits in metaphysics such as MRG. I will consider the weight of those critiques, adding some notes of my own, and subsequently determine what consequences Sider's notion of substantivity has for metaphysical inquiry into gender and race.

Before I address the implications that Sider's approach might have for inquiry in MRG, I will give a brief background of Sider's project. Sider presents a novel approach to ontology and metaphysics in which, rather than asking *what there is*, we are to ask *what is fundamental*, casting

¹⁹ In this paper, Ludwig argues that the debate between realists and non-realists about race is "based on a confusion of metaphysical and normative classificatory issues" (2015, 244). He uses Sider's criteria for substantivity, which we will discuss in what follows, to make the claim that debates in the metaphysics of race are non-substantive. I will not be discussing this particular argument because Ludwig's dismissal is particular to some biological conceptions of race that are not the concern of this project. To those who might be interested, Quayshawn Spencer, a biological realist about race, responds to Ludwig's dismissal in "In Defense of the Actual Metaphysics of Race" (2016).

this general question in terms of what the fundamental *structure* of reality is (2011, 1). Questions and claims about what is fundamental are ultimately, for Sider, questions about structure. Discerning structure is a matter of discerning patterns (Sider, 2011, 1). This means recognizing concepts and theories that are better able to describe objective similarities and differences between aspects of reality.

Sider also has expressed structure in terms of “joint-carving”.²⁰ The underlying message with this comparison appears to be that reality has natural objective parts that can be properly or improperly distinguished from each other without convention or contextual values “cooking the results”, so to speak. The aim of metaphysics, according to Sider, is to uncover the structure of reality by advocating theories that best carve at nature's joints or unveil that structure (2011, 1). When presented with two competing conceptions or two competing overall theories for some phenomena, Sider thinks we should judge them by their joint-carving ability (Sider, 2011, 31-32). Sider sometimes compares joint-carving to explanatory-value (2011, 23). He says that “...explanatory theories must be cast in joint-carving terms...” (2011, 27). This plays into his explanation of what counts as substantive metaphysical inquiry, where he takes substantive sentences and questions to be about finding candidate meanings for theories with concepts that carve at the joints (or explain reality) better than others (Sider, 2011, 46).

3.2 The Joint Carving Framework

Here is the explicit formulation of non-substantivity that Sider gives us:

²⁰ The idea of carving nature at its joints goes back to Plato's discussion in Phaedrus(265d-266a). Also, it relates to many discussions of natural kinds. Most prominently, one might look to Quine's discussion of natural kinds in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (1969).

“Sentence S is nonsubstantive if and only if S would have had different truth values under different candidate meanings, i.e., alternate meanings for S that are joint-carving and equally faithful to S’s conceptual role” (2017, 2470).

In this framework, substantive questions, and sentences, as opposed to non-substantive ones, are those which are not sensitive to a choice about equally joint-carving candidate meanings. I will admit, it is not exactly clear how to apply this criterion for substantivity. Esa Díaz-León’s (2021) characterization of Sider’s substantivity has gone a long way in helping me understand the notion and how to apply it to cases. Díaz-León marks out two ways in which a question can be substantive according to Sider’s notion: “either the sentence does not have different truth values for different candidate meanings, or even if it does have different truth values, there is one candidate meaning that is more joint-carving than the alternative” (2021, 559).

We will start with a case in which the sentence does not have different truth-values for different plausible candidate meanings. For example, the sentence ‘There is at least one building on UCF’s campus’ is substantive, because regardless of the plausible candidate meanings for ‘building’ and ‘being on UCF’s campus’, the statement is true. We might debate about different candidates for UCF’s border, but the truth of the above statement will remain constant. There will be at least one building on UCF’s campus regardless of the plausible ways in which we might draw a border to UCF’s campus. This criterion provides a basis for Sider to say that even if candidate meanings are not perfectly-joint carving, that the statements can be substantive. It also prevents terminological disputes about the boundaries of UCF to take away the substantivity from the claim that there is one building within that border.

Cases in which there is one candidate that carves better at the joints are more obvious. Sider cooks up a case about the statement: ‘There is lithium on Mars’. He has us assume that there is

lithium on Mars. From there we consider a community which uses the word lithium “exactly as we do, but with one exception: their word does not apply to the lithium (in our sense of the word) in the region” i.e., they exclude the substance from being lithium when it is on Mars (Sider, 2011, 7). So they answer in the negative that there is lithium on Mars, while the linguistic community we inhabit says that there is lithium on Mars. Since the lithium in the region is just like the lithium elsewhere, the foreign and highly implausible linguistic community “fails badly to carve nature at the joints” (Sider, 2011, 7). The question of whether there is lithium on Mars in this case is substantive because it is not merely about two equally good ways of speaking, says Sider (2011, 7).

Non-substantive questions are those in which the answers (truth-values) turn on equally plausible candidate meanings which carve at the joints equally well. Take, for instance, the question of whether the Pope is a bachelor (Sider, 2011, 6). Sider’s framework renders this question non-substantive because the answer hangs on which equally joint-carving meanings we assign to the property of being a bachelor. Two properties that the predicate of being a bachelor might reasonably pick out, Sider says, are ‘being an unmarried male’ and ‘being an unmarried male eligible for marriage’ (Sider, 2011, 6). While there may be a correct answer depending on which candidate meaning a linguistic community assigns to ‘bachelor’, Sider thinks that the question is non-substantive because neither of the two properties carves at the joints better than the others (2011, 6). The idea is that the truth conditions for the answer to this question are grounded in the conventions of a linguistic community alone. Rather than there being one more explanatorily useful property exemplified with one of the candidate meanings, they all are trivial. To answer the question of whether the Pope is a bachelor, Sider says all we need to do is investigate our concept

of bachelor, and he further states that intuitively all that is at stake is how we use the word bachelor (2011, 5).

3.3 Metaphysics and Feminism

There is a running thread among feminist theorists that the traditional assumptions about the nature of metaphysical inquiry fundamentally conflict with feminist values in analytic philosophy. Haslanger stresses some important questions that relate to this concern: “[I]s there a place within feminist inquiry for metaphysics? Does feminist theory have anything to offer metaphysicians?” (2012, 140). Some think that metaphysics must allow for feminist projects to be included and recognized: among them are Ted Sider (2017), and Elizabeth Barnes (2014). These theorists, however, disagree on the ways in which these two disciplines could be synthesized. Sider seems to allow feminist projects like those in MRG to be substantive just insofar as they align with the standards that his metaphysical project buttresses.

In 2014, Barnes took issue with Sider’s characterization of substantivity since it seems to exclude certain feminist metaphysical inquiry from being substantive (2014, 338). Particularly, she was concerned that Sider’s *Writing the Book of the World*, and the picture of substantive metaphysics that came with it, would reduce all questions about gender in metaphysics to questions about what the most explanatorily useful candidate meaning of ‘gender’ is. She argues that the kinds of explanations that Sider takes to be relevant in metaphysics are not the kinds of explanations that theories (like Sally Haslanger’s theory of gender) give for structures (2014, 338).

Sider emphasizes lawlike explanations (2011, 21), along with a “ready-made world”, independent of our interests (2011, 65). To contrast, Barnes points to the often highly normative nature of inquiry into social reality, which requires the employment of ‘thick’ (normatively loaded) terms such as oppression or subordination, which do not seem to conform to Sider’s joint-carving

conception of substantivity (2014, 338-339). Barnes argues that if explanatory usefulness is understood as lawlike and mind-independent (interest-independent) joint-carving, then inquiry in feminist metaphysics will count as non-substantive (Barnes, 2014, 340). There are many theories that do not define genders in terms of lawlike and interest-independent features/properties. For instance, Haslanger argues that gender is defined in terms of social relations that only hold due to historical contingencies in a context; economic, political, and legal conditions (2012, 185). If gender is the kind of thing Haslanger says it is, then gender is not mind-independent or lawlike in its structure.

Sider responds to Barnes, by addressing what he takes to be the ultimate feminist concern with his metaphysics: that Sider relies on “a picture of inquiry that aims to track the way the world is ‘in and of itself’, independent of human thought, human actions, or human society” (Sider, 2017, 2477). Sider claims that the normative nature of investigation into social reality, in work by Haslanger, is not sufficient to render the investigation non-substantive (2017, 2470-2471).

Take for example, the question of whether gender is distinct from sex. Sider says that “although the subject matter of statements about gender and sex concerns human beings, there is no intrusion of the point of view of the human theorist on the judgment that sex is distinct from gender: that judgment is not a projection of the theorist’s politics or values or outlook, but rather is the objectively correct description of social reality” (Sider, 2017, 2471). Sider also notes that Haslangerian structures could be substantive if they serve as explanations of functional kinds (Sider, 2017, 2472-2473). Sider argues that social functional kinds, for instance, will be eligible for being joint-carving (hence substantive) if they are *causally* relevant (2017, 2472). Causality can be couched in ‘thick’ notions just as well as ‘thin’ ones, he says. Thick functional concepts can

be joint-carving insofar as they serve explanatorily useful purposes for what causes oppression and subordination (Sider, 2017, 2473).

Now, while the spirit of Sider's response is surely well-intended, it does not really address the bigger problems and tensions that exist between feminist inquiry in MRG and a "metaphysics proper", so to speak. Also, I see no reason Sider's above explanation should function as a legitimate vindication of feminist inquiry in MRG. The primary tension persists between Sider and Barnes on *how theorists are to evaluate candidates for theory choice*. Sider claims that a distinction between sex and gender would be warranted and metaphysically substantive just as long as the theorist making the distinction does not allow her "point of view" to intrude on "the objective description of reality" (Sider, 2017, 2477).

A puzzle for Sider is this: If two competing theories were to have equally "joint-carving" theories for gender, which one should we pick? We will see that in Sider's framework, questions like these for theory choice are non-substantive, because metaphysics is about joint-carving, and if they both carve at the joints equally well, then it does not matter which theory we choose. Furthermore, Sider might deny that there could be two theories of gender that are distinct and carve at the joints equally well. But we should be open to the idea that there are multiple equally joint carving lenses through which we can view gender and race, depending on our purposes and the context of inquiry. We need not understand race and gender as unified phenomena regardless of context or our purpose. In fact, we should not do so, for if gender and race are social phenomena, then it is possible that they manifest themselves in drastically different ways in different contexts. Similarly, in a particular context, there might be multiple descriptive angles to take in addressing the issue. We might need to consider which joints are relevant in which contexts and for what

purposes in those contexts. All of these factors and more will influence how we understand racial and gendered phenomena in general.

It is also possible that the way in which we theorize the metaphysics of gender could affect the way gender is understood in the broader community. So which joints we choose to emphasize and for what purposes will depend on a lot more than determining which theory carves at the joints better. Choosing between the different, perhaps equally joint carving (those that seem equally joint carving), methods of analyzing gender will depend on what purposes we have for our theorizing and the context in which that theory is being applied.

The essential question that Sider seems to sidestep is: How normative can metaphysics be, if at all? This is a question of what Sider's view entails with regard to what extent, in which contexts, it is acceptable to incorporate historically, contextually, and politically informed information, often cast in normative terms, when deciding between candidate concepts and theory choices. The inability for a metaphysics of discourse to recognize the normative, ethical, contextual values associated with theory choice in turn presents an oppressive framework for substantivity. Sider seems to assume that his metaphysics of discourse can be robustly neutral concerning these matters.

In the distinctive projects in feminist metaphysics and MRG that Barnes discusses, the candidates for relevant distinctions and classifications are marked out by *tracking* normative relations. All well and good, the structural framework can tell us, (so long as their selections for candidate meanings in theory choice are governed by criteria for picking out the most explanatorily valuable candidates). But consider Haslanger's brand of debunking addressed above. While Sider insists that social theorists like Haslanger are somehow giving a theory with no personal or political intrusion, Haslanger and other social theorists have a much different idea of what they themselves

are up to. They are not *just* in the business of tracking joint-carving social relations but must also consider the political significance of their theory choice. Haslanger says “it is open to the constructionist to maintain that theoretical commitment to certain kinds or categories is at least partly a political choice, especially in the context of a social theory” (2012, 135). This makes complete sense given the nature of social theory and what MRG, particularly constructionist theories in S-metaphysics and ought-first projects in categorization, are doing.

This relates back to Hacking’s idea above that the way we theorize about people will affect people’s lives (1995, 370). If we accept that it is even a remote possibility that our distinctions and theory choices affect the way people see themselves and the lives they live, we must consider what consequences our theories will potentially have for the lives of people that the theory is talking about. We cannot simply cast the inquiry in descriptive terms, but must consider normative questions which filter decisions in theory choice. In other words, the nature of studying human classification and practices requires that the virtues of a theory must be cast in more than one (objective versus subjective) dimension. Sider’s theory admits of a flat, one-dimensional virtue in theory choice: either it carves the joints better, it carves them worse, or it carves them equally. Better or worse joint-carving is about the interest independent considerations and theoretical virtues that shape theory choice, rather than including ethics and justice as equally valid and important dimensions by which to evaluate theory choice. In the case where they are carved equally, Sider rejects that debates about which candidate to choose are substantive.

So, it is fair to conclude that, at least within MRG discourse and feminist S-metaphysics (and is-first classification), theory choice must include a normative dimension as well as an objective one. This means decisions about which theory describes reality better will not be the only ones relevant in MRG. This simple addition, however, opens up a can of worms for theory choice

that some metaphysicians are not willing to acknowledge. Does this mean that structure is relative to our interests? I will address this question below, but I want to continue with the application of Sider's framework to feminist inquiry and social constructionist theories in MRG.

Presumably, there is no neutral fact of the matter about how people ought to be treated. In the introduction, I noted that neutrality in metaphysics of discourse can result in serious problems for fighting social injustices like the problem of marginalization. The way people are classified (i.e., the way people are able to make sense of who they and others are) probably affects the way people treat themselves and others. Recognizing these people as oppressed people should be able to impact how we treat them. But to do that, we have to first recognize ourselves as people who not only care about the truth, but the individual truths of the lives of people who are oppressed. Ignoring the relationship between the theories about gender we espouse and the people that the theories are about could result in marginalization in particular and oppression in general. And ignoring our active role in constructing theories based on our limited perspective could lead to us leaving out people who should be included in our account. This all comes down to our dedication and commitment to end systemic oppression that stems from classificatory practices in communities.

Theorists in MRG have to be sensitive to these issues, and so must not only describe what they take to be the structures of gender and race, but also how the structures we identify will affect those who live in them. So the considerations for theory choice must come from giving an objective description of reality in tandem with considering how the structures we emphasize might affect people. Contrary to Sider's explicit response to Barnes' critique, I think that Sider's framework for substantivity still ultimately ignores the major tensions (about normativity and objectivity) between his metaphysics and feminist constructionist projects in MRG.

I want to address a linguistic elephant in the room. Consider the possibility that the debate between Barnes and Sider is merely terminological: Barnes and Sider are just disputing about how to apply the word ‘metaphysics’. Or perhaps this is a dispute about how to use the word ‘substantive’. Is the verdict in either of these cases really consequential? Does it matter if Sider’s framework renders feminist or social constructionist inquiry in MRG ‘not metaphysical’ or ‘not substantive’. I am inclined to say that many are not concerned about a metaphysician’s views about the substantivity of their inquiry.

But this indifference towards the metaphysics of discourse that Sider is espousing might risk ignoring the major tensions that will persist between metaphysicians like Sider and feminists and social constructionists. These issues of substantivity, that distinguish the questions of the metaphysics of discourse, might play an instrumental role in theorist’s conceptions of the limitations of rational inquiry in general. Also, Sider rightly notices that his verdicts about what metaphysics is could be consequential, due to the esteemed position that metaphysics has within certain academic circles (2017, 2468). I want to briefly suggest that there are related concerns for other important terms. While philosophers hold all sorts of deflated and minimalist views about metaphysics, objectivity, truth, substantivity and the like, there is no doubt that these terms’ employment is often ‘thick’. The barebones ‘meaning’ of the terms will not tell us the whole story. Sider says that counting feminist inquiry in MRG and elsewhere as not metaphysically substantive might have the negative moral consequence that their inquiries would be portrayed as less important (2017, 2468). Similarly, saying something is not true, or not objectively accurate will have moral consequences. Sider’s recognition of the normative significance of employing words like ‘metaphysics’ and ‘non-substantive’ is ironic coming from a *discourse* metaphysician whose metaphysics of discourse will turn out to be highly problematic for MRG. Despite this recognition

by Sider, it is doubtful that the way Sider characterizes metaphysics and substantive inquiry will do justice to the interests of feminist inquiry in MRG.

3.31 Pragmatism Strikes Again

Say you do not buy Barnes's critique that social reality could not be cast in reasonably joint-carving terms. Some might think that the notion of substantivity given above is perfectly adequate and would count many inquiries in MRG that we have discussed so far as substantive. The questions in MRG about classification, and gender structures are not just about conventions for the use of these terms. Sider seems to be able to capture this feature. Esa Díaz-León is one theorist who denies that the objections Barnes raises are sufficient to defeat Sider's framework (2021, 560). Díaz-León thinks that a comparative, but alternative, notion of joint-carving cast in terms of explanatory efficacy *can* capture what many debates in MRG are up to (2021, 561). She still thinks, ultimately, that Sider's framework (as it is) cannot adequately explain and substantiate feminist metaphysical projects like those in MRG. But her reasons for rejecting the view differ slightly from Barnes'. I think both critiques land lethal blows on Sider's framework, but implementing Díaz-León's critique will increase the depth of our analysis.

Díaz-León takes a slightly different route of criticism, insisting that determining the extent to which a candidate meaning 'carves at the joints' will be ambiguous unless we clarify the aims and purposes of our explanations (2021, 560). The problem is not for Díaz-León, as Barnes suggests, that substantivity cast in terms of explanatory value (broadly construed) will render debates in MRG non-substantive. Rather, the problem is that explanatory value is understood by Sider as something interest-independent (2021, 561). Social constructionists are not under the impression that there are no more explanatorily valuable theories to account for gender or race.

Rather, they do not employ the interest-independent notion of explanatory value that Sider suggests would legitimate and substantiate MRG. The solution, says Díaz-León, is to appeal to our interests and contextual values in devising standards for what counts as explanatorily valuable (2021, 563).

3.4 Linguistic Criteria for Substantivity

With that in mind, let us go back to the bachelor case that Sider rendered non-substantive. We cannot so easily dismiss questions about substantivity in these cases. One reason this quick conclusion is problematic is that the property of being a bachelor is applied to normatively significant subjects: human beings. The term ‘bachelor’ might appear to be a relatively ‘thin’ social property, especially when the two very reductive candidate meanings that Sider sites as examples are equally joint-carving, we should consider views in pragmatic linguistics in which the barebones definition of a term is not giving the whole story of how language like ‘bachelor’ functions. The term ‘bachelor’ could be used to reify certain stereotypes about single men and their behavior. Of course, those who use the term this way might give us the ‘thin’ social property when asked to specify their “meaning”, but this does not amount to giving us the function that this term might implicitly be playing in the reification of gender norms and expectations.

While terms like ‘bachelor’ may seem relatively uninteresting for any descriptive purposes in traditional metaphysics, there could be significant normative issues involved in the way we use the word bachelor, and issues with the potential ‘thick’ social properties that the term ‘bachelor’ could be implicitly used to pick out in social contexts. The fact that nothing theoretically interesting hangs on this term’s candidate meanings is contingent upon the contextual values of the people who are theorizing, and the ways in which the word bachelor might be employed *in those contexts*.

Sider seems to recognize this point for other questions when he says:

“Alternatively, we might alter the official account by treating substantivity as a property of question–context pairs, rather than a property of questions simpliciter. The idea would be to make the set of relevant candidate meanings for the question depend on what issues are treated as important in the context” (Sider, 2011, 52)

The *truth* of their statements about Mars are not the only operative factor in discerning substantivity. This is why truth seekers are not just interested in finding truths, but the ones that concern them. Consider the person who constantly remarks that “Grass is green”, speaking a truth, but a relatively uninteresting one. A perfect example of the ideal “disinterested” truth seeker. In what sense can we say that the statement this person utters is substantive?

While Sider at some points recognizes how context and the theorists’ motivations can affect substantivity, interest-dependent considerations are not reflected in Sider’s overall theory and his verdict on cases of non-substantivity. It will always be difficult to discern the descriptive content of a statement from normative implications, broad generalizations, and inferential connections being drawn when speakers use terms. Consider the Quinean critique of neo-descriptivist semantics that we addressed in the chapter on Easy Ontology. It is a substantive and perhaps problematic assumption to take for granted that there is a clear line between “the meaning” of a term and well-entrenched generalizations about the term. In cases where terms apply to people, we must consider the people who it is applied to *and* the people who are given the authority (or who have taken the authority) to decide those to whom it properly applies.

This is why we cannot so easily render *prima facie* non-substantive questions like the bachelor questions as non-substantive. The linguistic assumption about meaning not being influenced by context and broader generalizations seems to be an assumption that Sider is willing to accept. But even if we accept the thin notions (that Sider suggests are equally joint carving), we

run into substantive issues of choice with regards to candidate meanings that are not equally explanatorily valuable. The difference between the Pope being someone who is an unmarried male and someone who is unmarried, male, and seeking romantic and possibly sexual relations (with a woman) is a significant difference. Depending on the purposes of our theorizing, our answer to which of these candidate meanings is better will change. Both candidate meanings can give us equally objective descriptions of the world. But while both might be equally joint-carving, they are not equally explanatorily valuable.

One might object that this critique is too particular to the bachelor case that Sider presents. The thought is that, if he used a case in which humans and human categories were not the subject of discussion, that this argument about ‘thick’ versus ‘thin’ terms could not be applied. That is assuming, however, that there is a way in which we can easily distinguish between terms that are employed in ‘thick’ ways and terms employed in ‘thin’ ways. The fact that the term ‘bachelor’ is applied to human beings is not the only reason that Sider’s example fails to distinguish a substantive from a non-substantive question.

Consider, for example, the question of whether “some nonsense made out of sour green apple liqueur” served in a V-shaped glass is a martini (Bennett, 2009). This question is *most evidently* a question about what constitutes or defines a martini. Sider says explicitly that *this is* what the question is about (2011, 44). But can we necessarily conclude that this is the only way to interpret what this question (this string of words, employed in various contexts) could be about? To assume this much is to assume that joint carving is top priority in all contexts. Sider characterizes the dispute as one centered around joint-carving. One party states that it is not a martini (and, I’ll add, assumes that this is analytically true) because “‘martini’ means ‘drink made of gin or vodka and vermouth with such-and-such proportions.’” (Sider, 2011, 50). Another party

asserts that the constraints on ‘martini’ are not that stringent, and that some nonsense made from sour green apple liqueur does count as a martini. I will admit, this question does seem rather trivial. As Sider says, “But we could have used ‘martini’ differently, so as to include sour apple liqueur drinks, without being semantically alien or carving worse at the joints”.

But without constructing a case in which we understand what the two parties are interested in addressing with their question, we cannot so trivially render this question non-substantive. Put the two interlocutors in the context of a daily situation. The two parties in this dispute are philosophers celebrating the end of a long semester of teaching and research with a drink together (One is a pragmatist, and one is a metaphysician). If we interpret the parties as attempting to answer slightly different questions, we might conclude that their inquiry is substantive.

Recall the target question: ‘Is some nonsense with green sour apple liqueur a martini?’ The pragmatist intends to address this question: ‘Should I order an expensive drink or a cheap one?’ with the assumption that martinis are expensive. The metaphysician assumes that the question is attempting to address the question of what constitutes a martini. While their discussion is defective, the question of whether the pragmatist should order a cheap or expensive drink is substantive. Considering the size of a philosopher’s wallet, it might be paramount for the pragmatist to determine the practical question of whether she should buy a cheap or expensive drink.

Now, if we interpreted the two parties as both asking a question about what constitutes a martini, then still we might consider what the practical consequences are of determining what constitutes a martini. In the case where the pragmatist is allergic to green sour apple liqueur, then the question of what constitutes a martini is substantive. Why? Because of the practical consequences of adopting a particular notion of martinihood. The pragmatist would say “If a drink made with green sour apple liqueur is a martini, then I don’t want to order one”. This thoroughly

addresses why Sider's notion of substantivity cannot easily conclude questions like these are not substantive. Hopefully, this argument will justify my returning back to the bachelor case, which I think is much more interesting. All I intended to show was that answering questions about substantivity cannot be done in a joint-carving vacuum. Since we can be skeptical that all cases of questions about martinis can be answered trivially, I want to return back to more interesting (for my purposes) cases.

I believe theorists like Haslanger would agree that questions similar to 'Is the Pope a bachelor?' could very easily be substantive and important questions when the right social conditions obtain. Haslanger cites an analogous example with the social property of being a widow (Haslanger, 2012, 135). In the case of widowhood, which I think could be analogous to bachelorhood, Haslanger notes that social constructionists are concerned "not only with the nominal classification "widow" or "wife" (etc.), but also in the system or matrix of practices and institutions that create "thick" or "robust" social positions, that is, social positions that entail a broad range of norms, expectations, obligations, entitlements, and so on" (Haslanger, 2012, 126). In communities where widowhood functions, not only to pick out a woman whose husband has died, but functions to subordinate people, the substantivity of the classification in social constructionist theories will depend on identifying the underlying (but often false) rationalizations and explanations for the mistreatment of widows (Haslanger, 2012, 126). Importantly, our theory choice for how we characterize widows and bachelors will be influenced by constitutive *and contextual* values (Haslanger, 2012, 135). That is, by the virtues of theory choice defined by the discipline in which one is working *and* by the values that belong to the social and cultural environment in which the inquiry occurs.

The problems with Sider's substantivity that I raised here, were not only about theory choice, but concern a fundamental assumption about language that Sider seems to employ. Relating back to easy ontology and MVD, Sider's substantivity is working with the assumption that discovering linguistic defects in an inquiry is sufficient to conclude that an inquiry is non-substantive. Sider's linguistic assumptions might include assumptions about dominant/orthodox meanings like those we found that easy ontology to be guilty of. While Sider allows for different candidate meanings to be considered, he still uses linguistic considerations about "the meaning" of terms in problematic ways. The martini and the bachelor case are prime examples. There is no clear way to distinguish what 'bachelor' or 'martini' objectively means as distinct from both well-entrenched generalizations about what the terms apply to, and how the terms are being employed in a context.

The inferential moves that I made to object to Sider's notion of substantivity were moves influenced and informed by a pragmatic semantics. That is, a semantic theory which considers how terms are used, and in what communities they are used, and with what purposes those terms are employed in a context can influence considerations for a theory of meaning. I was inspired by Esa Díaz-León's critique to issue interest-dependent considerations not only for "theory choice" as Díaz-León suggests, but for simple situations in which these terms might be employed in every context. The semantic themes of this project have all been issued with consideration for the pragmatics of language, which seem to be ignored in the dismissive strategies broached here. This suggests that perhaps a better way to capture the substantive disputes in MRG is to look at them through a pragmatic semantic lens. This is a lens which is designed to detect the interests of theorists (and lay-people alike), the questions they are attempting to address, and the problems

they want to solve. Pragmatist semantics in a metaphysics of discourse generally has a way of putting interest-dependent criteria for substantivity on par with accuracy and objectivity.

3.4 The Joints That Matter

Haslanger seems to stray from Sider's substantivity further when she considers the possible candidate meanings for terms that already exist and function in ordinary discourse but could be used for interesting explanation in social theories. She thinks that in tackling issues of subordination in communities where 'widow' is a thick term with oppressive functions, we might decide to define 'widow' thinly, in order to resist the thick normative implications associated with the term. Alternatively, we might want to define the term with the thick social implications and argue for the abolishment of widows i.e., that there should be no more people who are oppressed and treated as those called 'widows' are. There are possibilities to try to reach some middle ground between these two views as well. Most importantly, Haslanger recognizes that each of the potential candidates will not only have theoretical (constitutive) advantages and disadvantages, but political (contextual) advantages or disadvantages which might be relative to the time, place, and values of the broader community in which we are theorizing about widows (2012, 136).

Again, we run into the problem that Sider's substantivity seems to lack the multi-dimensional approach for theory choice that is inherent in questions of MRG. If joint-carving is a matter of giving *the one more explanatorily valuable answer* to a question, or substantivity amounts to questions which pick out *a uniquely better* joint-carving candidate for a concept, then it seems impossible to characterize Haslanger's project (and many MRG projects) as one which counts as substantive by Sider's criteria. In no way is it clear that there is one candidate for terms like 'gender' or 'race' that unqualifiedly 'carve at nature's joints' better than other plausible candidates. Part of the reason to doubt that Sider's framework can account for constructionist

debates in MRG is that there is skepticism that these terms function in constructionist theories to carve at nature's joints, or give a more explanatorily valuable candidate meaning for the terms at all. This, however, does not amount to saying that there are not substantive, deep, or theoretically interesting ways to discuss these terms and their function in social reality. It simply means that Sider's framework does not have a basis for rendering them as substantive.

3.41 "Values and Objectivity"

What seems to be missing from Sider's account is the possibility of explaining how candidate meanings for concepts or truth-evaluation for statements could be evaluated on more than one dimension. When Sider says that metaphysics is about joint-carving, he simplifies evaluation of concepts and questions into an evaluative schema that only admits of a more or a less with regards to structure. Either it carves better at the joints, or it does not. What the feminists and pragmatists implore is that the evaluative standards for a theory, concept, or legitimacy of a question must be analyzed multi-dimensionally, where a key component is understanding the (often conflicting and complicated) contextual values related to an inquiry and the socio-political ramifications for theory choice. This applies to many metaphysical questions just as much as it does others. Consider a theory that not only describes oppressive gender structures, but frames the discussion in such a way, making substantive decisions about which structures to emphasize, that arguably will be more effective in detecting and stopping forms of oppression. Compare this to a theory which equally describes oppressive gender structures, but gives no clues or emphasis on how certain framings might be more beneficial for stopping forms of oppression. These considerations, importantly, do not diminish the value of determining theory choice with constitutive values and a deep commitment to objective and accurate pictures of the world. Rather, they often give the theory more life and add to its importance and relevance for addressing the problems.

The tension between Sider's metaphysical structuralist views and feminist's views on what amounts to a good theory derive from an apparent conflict between being objective and being political. One might assume that Díaz-León and Barnes, in rejecting Sider's joint-carving, are committing themselves to an anti-realism, or anti-objectivity. Conversely, those who agree with Barnes and Díaz-León might do so with the assumption that they are arguing that there is no possibility of objective inquiry, especially within the social world. But our understanding of the relation between objectivity and values should be more nuanced. This tension ultimately comes back to the distinction between constitutive values and contextual values that I mentioned relatively early on in the project. To remind the reader, constitutive values are broadly the values that are the source of the rules determining what constitutes acceptable practice in inquiry (Longino, 1990, 4). Contextual values are the values that belong to the social and cultural environment in which inquiry occurs (Longino, 1990, 4). What we often find in the battle between constructionists or similarly feminists on the one hand, and traditional metaphysicians on the other, is that both sides swing the pendulum of constitutive versus contextual values too far in one direction. Feminists and constructionists are often over-zealously suspicious of "mind-independent" reality or objective truth. In denying that inquiry can be interest-independent, they might risk becoming recklessly anti-realist. Whereas metaphysicians like Sider might be guilty of uncritically accepting a "knee-jerk" realism, without considering the political and contextual values and biases that are cooked into their own theorizing. In denying that their inquiries are interest-independent, they become oblivious to the ways in which they might be capable of inserting their constitutive values into their theories.

Haslanger makes some important arguments that neither feminist nor constructionist theories automatically commit us to some form of anti-realism (2012, 155). I think that when

charitably read, neither Barnes nor Díaz-León's arguments against Sider above commit us to anti-realism. We can accept a form of objectivity, which allows that there are objective forms of categorization and metaphysical theory choice, and still ponder over which are morally and politically significant (Haslanger, 2012, 55-56). Haslanger is a case of a theorist who accepts a middle ground between constitutive and contextual values, allowing for both to figure in theory choice without losing sight of the value of each.

Haslanger's notion of objectivity is not some 'mind-independent' God's eye view of reality that we can access. Instead, she explains her realism through a notion of mediation between the tools we use to describe the world and the world itself. Although our access to the world is always mediated through concepts, language, and theory, it is presumptuous to assume that because we mediate reality that this automatically disqualifies us from experiencing it. Haslanger puts the point rhetorically: "If we are not in a position to compare our experience with the reality "behind it", then is it not as contentious to hold that our experience/discourse is a "further formation" of that reality as it is to say that it aptly captures it?" (Haslanger, 2012, 155). Whatever claims we make about the "unmediated reality" hiding behind our "conceptual scheme" are going to be contentious. These discourses about unmediated reality are too invested in a particular way of viewing the relationship between language and world. Mediation of the world through concepts and language can be a part of the reality we experience, and not only a tool to describe reality or make it more crystalline. But since we have no way of actually crossing the barrier into an unmediated reality, to say that language and culture is a mediation and further formation of unmediated reality is just as contentious. There is nothing more to do in the world with discourse like this, except enjoy its naïve movements.

Aside from these somewhat abstract (but astute) points that Haslanger makes, there are ways in which feminist and constructionist views in MRG can be understood as objective, metaphysically substantive, and interest-dependent simultaneously. This is only possible, however, if metaphysicians like Sider are willing to adopt a relaxed or adapted view of objectivity. Perhaps metaphysics can adopt the view of objectivity espoused by Helen Longino (1990). According to Longino, in order to be objective, an inquiry must allow for recognized avenues for criticism, there must exist shared standards that critics can invoke, the community of inquiry must be responsive to criticism, and intellectual authority must be shared equally among qualified practitioners (1990, 76). This notion allows for theorists to uncover objective structures of reality, while also allowing us to appreciate that some structures are more important to us than others. We cannot make judgments about the world in a vacuum and be valid. Objectivity is a social and normative process of critique by testing claims from different perspectives. A process of critique and testing that aims at explaining phenomena that are verifiable in various contexts and from various perspectives, rather than independent of human interests and social dialogues. While this notion of objectivity surely does not satisfy knee-jerk realism, it is not anti-realist. Longino's objectivity is grounded in social processes that generate agreement among parties through testing and critique.

Without a significant attempt at mediation and common understanding (by both knee-jerk realist metaphysicians and feminist MRG metaphysicians), I see no way that these distinct inquiries can harmonize with each other. It would be preferable if these two fields could unite to tackle the social and metaphysical issues regarding race and gender. Surely, these important projects need all the help they can get. I think a combination of Haslanger's and Longino's view of objectivity points us in the right direction towards a common understanding among feminism and metaphysics.

3.5 What Could Metaphysics Be?

We have now considered what conclusions can be drawn when Sider's framework is applied to MRG. Barnes, Díaz-León, and I take issue with the way in which Sider attempts to substantiate feminist metaphysical projects, like the ones in MRG. Barnes argues that joint carving in terms of explanatory value renders important disputes in MRG nonsubstantive (2014, 341). Sider argues that his framework can adequately characterize the disputes as substantive if they are cast in joint-carving terms (2017, 2472). Sider's response to Barnes still does not address the tensions between feminists/constructivists and realist metaphysicians with regards to the criteria for evaluation of theory choice like political ramifications, which inevitably will play an important role in MRG. I noted the ways in which Sider's framework takes a one-dimensional approach to substantivity, that only admits of more or less joint carving.

What we need for MRG is a multi-dimensional notion of explanatory value. Díaz-León expresses the multi-dimensional aspect of MRG with her pragmatist constraint on Sider's framework. Our notion of explanatory value should come from an understanding of the particular aims and purposes of the projects in which we are engaged. Haslanger gives insight into the tension between feminist constructionists and realist metaphysicians. We can accept that there are structures while understanding the need to privilege some structures that matter more to us. Finally, Helen Longino provides a new democratic framework for objectivity, grounded by social and normative standards influenced by the questions that matter to the communities. The combination of these insights might provide insights for a new direction for metaphysics and MRG particularly. Below I also want to suggest that these considerations will play a crucial role in determining a less oppressive metaphysics of discourse.

The tensions addressed in this chapter all ultimately come down to the underlying assumptions operative in Sider's framework:

1) Sider's metaphysics of discourse i.e., his framework for distinguishing substantive from non-substantive questions, takes a robustly neutral stance with regard to normative matters. I captured this feature of Sider's substantivity with my arguments that his framework is one-dimensional. The only criterion by which we distinguish substantive theories is joint-carving. His theory of substantive statements/questions gives no indication, in cases where "equally joint-carving" terms are at issue, which ones are to be chosen. Presumably, this follows when we assume that a theory of what substantivity in discourse amounts to is not contingent upon the interests of the people making the theories, or the interests of the people to whom the theories will be applied. Theorists like Haslanger, Barnes, and Díaz-León provide insights into the distinctive contextual values that might play a role in theory choice when there is no interest-independent indication that either of the terms "carve at the joints" better than the others.

2) Second, Sider assumes that the linguistic defects he detects are sufficient to render statements and questions non-substantive. Enough strings of statements and questions together constitute a body of discourse. So this is something which applies as a claim about what makes something substantive discourse as well. This aspect of Sider's framework is evident when 'The Pope is a bachelor' is rendered non-substantive due to the possible candidate meanings of the terms. This seems to occur because Sider makes assumptions about what language is for, and what it can do. Linguistic defects in metaphysics, for Sider,

come down to how joint-carving our terms are based on what one takes to be plausible candidate meanings. Considerations about the pragmatics of language show why Sider's notion of substantivity is flawed. When we place meanings of terms into a joint-carving bubble, we are unable to see the ways in which ordinary and seemingly harmless language can be used in problematic ways. Our ignorance of the pragmatics of language is unacceptable given how easy it is for ordinary terms to be used 'thickly', even when their 'thin' definition is seemingly harmless.

- 3) The third assumption arises from Sider's view of objectivity. Recall that the third assumption is that we determine a better candidate for theory choice in substantive inquiry by determining which candidate is more objectively accurate (in a vague sense). The sense in which objectivity is employed is vague because it seems we cannot understand what is objective without understanding the context and values of the broader community in which inquiry takes place. While objectivity is important, and we need to maintain constitutive standards defined by the disciplines we are engaged in, it does not follow that our inquiry's substantivity and objectivity is grounded in uncovering "*the* objective structure of reality". Recall the person who constantly states, "Grass is green". She is speaking truths, but in what sense is she being objective? The substantivity of our inquiry, questions, and statements is not grounded in joint-carvingness alone. Defining objectivity in terms of just "determining the structure" misses out on the notion of objectivity defined in terms of "having an objective" paired with taking up the shared interests and considerations of the communities in which the structure of reality is investigated. Structure and objectivity are important, but some structures are more important than others. Our notion of objectivity

should include criteria to evaluate the relevance of the target question/statement with regard to the interests of the communities in which the inquiry takes place.

4.0 The Metaphysics of Discourse

It is difficult not to “ascend to the heavens” so to speak, when engaged in discourse metaphysics. I admit that my project is guilty of ‘going meta’ far too often, and in unprecedented degrees. However, I assure the reader that there are conclusions to be drawn from this project relevant for those who have practical interests in intellectual freedom. My project has (implicitly) created a virtuous feedback loop for metaphysics of discourse, where the views considered on the “ground-level” of MRG are fed into the views at the meta-level of dismissive strategies in metaontology, which are subsequently taken up at the third level. That is, into metaphysics of discourse.

In this final chapter I want to justify my dual ascension, by showing the positive conclusions we can draw at the third level on its basis. This requires, however, that the views considered at the ground level (in MRG) are taken to be at least plausible. After giving a brief overview of the primarily *destructive* project that I have engaged in, I will suggest the ways in which the negation of oppressive discourse metaphysics has helped us uncover *positive criteria* for substantivity that a new metaphysics of discourse could take up. It turns out I am another discourse metaphysician with first principles of my own. Ultimately, the tentative criteria for the new metaphysics of discourse will be determined as constitutive of *the* metaphysics of discourse only if the principles for discourse I promote are accepted by the wider community that is interested in and affected by the problems that I sought to solve here.

4.1 Carving Out a Position

The first level or ground level of discourse that I analyze in this project is MRG. I discuss disputes about the existence and nature of race and gender, as well as classificatory questions concerning what descriptive and prescriptive criteria that are or should be used for human classification in the

categories of gender and race. Criteria for theory choice, and criteria for engagement in theories in MRG are influenced by the broader views that one can take up in social ontology and ontology generally. Accepting feminist and social constructivist views in MRG will lead one to forgo a more thorough engagement with projects in MRG influenced by naturalistic biological conceptions of these categories, or engagement with ‘ordinary meaning’ theories.

My project admittedly emphasizes these feminist and social constructivist views because I take these projects to be important ones to pursue. I also take these projects to be giving the most effective answers for tackling the questions involved in a metaphysical theory of gender and race. These involve answers to questions about what race/gender is, what kind of social relations maintain so that these oppressive structures are realized and perpetuated, and the inferential moves that certain community members tend to make on the basis of racial/gendered categorization and ascription. Sally Haslanger (2012, 113-138), Elizabeth Barnes (2019), and Ásta (2011) all give broadly social constructionist views of gender and/or race. These figures are looking to identify the social relations and social dynamics that are involved in these categorizations, and how gender/race might be used in communities to unjustly constrain the practices, identities, and values that community members hold dear. They seem to be concerned not only with what race and gender are, but take initiative to show that these categories are not natural or necessary restrictions of our identities placed on us by reality itself. These projects are also broadly pragmatist, since they take it that they are not just identifying social structures, but identifying the ones that matter, and shaping our theories to promote political and social justice in the communities where these gender/race structures might be operant.

So I here have chosen to emphasize these projects when ascending to the metaontological level. That is, my critique of the three views at the metaontological level is fueled by an attempt

to safeguard some social constructionist and feminist projects at the ground-level. However, I acknowledge that I did not give extensive arguments that these views or these approaches to MRG are *the* right ones to hold. I assume that my discussion makes these views seem plausible, and I take for granted that the reader will take me up on this assumption for the purposes of my broader project. This is not to say that I did not seriously consider the other views in MRG and other similar endeavors. I made it a priority to try to point out the different broad approaches in these debates in the midst of my tripartite ascension.

Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted that my emphasis on these feminist and social constructivist projects influenced my position taken in the next level up. If one cannot take it that these ground-level views like Haslanger's, Barnes', or Ásta's (ones I am interested in) are plausible and worth protecting, then one may not be willing to follow me in ascending to the metaontological level. The ascension requires a common ground of sorts. This common ground probably consists of a combination of constitutive commitments towards pursuing what one takes to be a good objective theory, as well as contextual commitments about what one takes to be important issues for their community to address. I hope I have made it possible for this common ground to take place between us.

The ascension to the metaontological level (the methodology and aims of ontology) allows the basis to assume a position which analyzed disputes in metaontology through the same broadly feminist and social constructivist lens that I take to have helpful and constructive perspectives in MRG for fighting category-based oppression and identifying its sources. If you take it that Haslanger's social constructivist project (debunking project, S-metaphysics) is worth pursuing, for instance, then my critiques leveled against the dismissive strategies that render these discourses as nonsubstantive will track.

If I was able to lead you this far, then there are some more commitments at the metaontological level that I have exposed. These are commitments that safeguard substantive inquiries from oppressive standards for substantivity. The two most essential of these commitments are:

- 1) A pragmatic semantics, which is skeptical and critical of linguistic deflationary tactics to dismiss what would otherwise be considered substantive discourse in MRG. Semantic criteria for dismissal of MRG would require not only a semantic problem with the language these theorists employ to discuss gender and race, but a pragmatic problem with the issues that these theorists are ultimately trying to address.
- 2) An interest-dependent criteria for theory choice in ontology. Undertaking this commitment in metaontology means allowing that the standards for theories of ontology, at least in social ontology, are not simply derived from an interest in and commitment to uncovering *the* structure of reality, but uncovering the structures of reality that are important to us at the ground level of inquiry (by “us” I mean the broad community of inquirers in ontology and social ontology).

But these commitments at the metaontological level are in turn influenced by the commitments we already took up at the ground level. For instance, taking it that Balcerak-Jackson’s characterization of MVDs is right required that we take it that the problems that Haslanger and Barnes are trying to solve are indeed substantive (or at least are innocent until proven guilty).

Recall that Balcerak-Jackson gives a broadly pragmatic characterization of MVDs, where the fundamental issue with verbal disputes is that we cannot identify a mutual question the two parties attempt to address (2013, 41-42). If one takes it that the mutual questions that social

constructionists and feminists are trying to address in MRG (i.e., “what is gender?”, “what is race?”) are nonsubstantive for whatever reason, then using Balcerak-Jackson’s framework to defend these inquiries will fail miserably. One might look to the critiques leveled at Haslanger and Barnes by Antony for support. Recall Antony takes it we don’t need a metaphysics of gender because any attempt to define ‘woman’ in terms of common experiences or common features will ultimately fail, and risk marginalizing those women that the theory leaves out (Antony, 2020, 531). However easily I may have glossed over, these are serious considerations for any theory that purports to be involved in studying categories like gender and race.

But again, I rely on support at the ground level to back up my claims at the metaontological level. Antony’s critique and the MVD framework in general cannot render these disputes nonsubstantive because, well, there are substantive questions at the ground-level about how we ought to classify people and how social structures can contribute to discursive oppression by oppressively naturalizing contingent classificatory frameworks. These are real issues that many theorists and many communities care about, and I hope you do too. It may be that the ground-level questions are phrased poorly. Instead of trying to define races or genders, we might try to implement intersectionality into our metaphysical account, by giving explanations of how race, gender, class, and a host of other considerations play a role in constituting one’s social life and the oppression people might face due to these considerations. But we need to start somewhere. Considering whether or not Haslanger’s, Barnes’ or Ásta’s ground-level story is giving the objective and effective explanation, will be constrained by the interest we take in finding out the answers to these questions about classification and social structures. Just because they are not at the finish line doesn’t mean they aren’t headed in the right direction.

The story is similar to the second big commitment I take up in metaontology. Namely, the commitment that we should accept interest-dependent criteria for ontological theory choice. This view, of course, is tied up with the ground-level view that human classification and the practices that surround it can be studied theoretically, taking our inquiry to be guided by feminist values to end oppression, and social constructivist views, like Hacking's, which consider the possibility that our classificatory schemas significantly affect the lives of those that live under those classifications and that the social structures are involved in are responsible for the schemas. If one does not take up these commitments with us, then interest-dependent inquiry might be less appetizing. Especially if one takes it that these commitments incorrectly render ontology to be in the business of considering normative implications for its theory choices, or if one believes that the commitments incorrectly render ontology to be biased towards explanations of reality that are tied up in the contextual values of the broader communities in which ontological theorists are embedded.

We have reached the third-level of abstraction or ascension, not without leaving some respectable folks behind at the other two levels. If you agree with the ground level commitment to social ontology through a social constructivist and feminist lens, then you can ascend to the metaontological level. From there we take up pragmatist and more robustly social constructivist stances on the nature of ontology. We can now ascend to the level of metaphysics of discourse, where we are investigating the broad notion of substantivity, without necessarily considering views towards any particular branch of inquiry. Rather, we are considering commitments about what makes any question, sentence, inquiry, or discourse substantive and what makes one nonsubstantive as well.

In a sense, I have been working at this level all along. At the outset, I distinguished the dismissive strategies I was critiquing as projects aiming at more global dismissals and providing criteria for substantive discourse in general. But in another sense, *we have only just now arrived at this level together*. Because now we are in the position to appreciate the relationships between the various commitments that we have taken at the various levels of abstraction to arrive here. On this journey, I was primarily concerned with negating various positions in MRG, in metaontology, and finally, in metaphysics of discourse. However, as I just demonstrated, I was also building up various positive commitments that we can now hold together at the level of our metaphysics of discourse. With this vantage point, constituted by the various commitments we undertook on the way upward, we have carved out a distinctive positive position in the metaphysics of discourse. And have built a framework in metaphysics of discourse which is capable of explicitly formulating the problematic assumptions made, which contribute to discursive oppression by potentially drowning out important voices who represent those being oppressed and marginalized.

4.2 The Negative Criteria

In the introduction, I suggested that the metaphysics of discourse that I was critiquing is oppressive, that their frameworks constitute a form of discursive oppression. The dismissive strategies purporting to give an account of what makes a question substantive risk marginalization of voices in discourse by rendering their discourse/questions/disputes nonsubstantive. If theorists in MRG are using their academic position to represent and/or try to recognize oppression and marginalization in communities, then discourse frameworks which can render their important discourse/questions/debates nonsubstantive are *prima facie* unacceptable. Recall that the oppression I am locating is structural and unintentional, it is not Sider's view or Thomasson's view,

for instance, that disputes in MRG are nonsubstantive. However, their frameworks don't clearly provide safeguards so that we recognize the theories are substantive, especially in the ways that the theorists themselves think their discourse is substantive. The metaphysics of discourse is powerful and has the potential to cause discursive oppression, where important and significant viewpoints and voices are drowned out because they do not conform to the standards that the discourse metaphysics puts into place. That is why it is important to address the assumptions that have been undergirding the metaphysics of discourse. I will now make clear the sense in which these assumptions together constitute an oppressive discourse metaphysics.

The metaphysics of discourse which I abstracted from the three dismissive strategies was unable to sufficiently recognize (with theory dismissive frameworks alone) the substantivity of the questions and theories that people like me, Haslanger, Barnes, and others hold to be substantive at the ground level of MRG. The metaphysics of discourse that these theories advocate is thus insufficient to justify and substantiate the values that these theorists and I hold dear. Theorists in MRG and other feminist and social constructionists that do not fit the mold for substantivity under the oppressive metaphysics of discourse risk being marginalized under this discourse framework. Thus, the important questions about gender and race risk being unaddressed. If we implicitly accept the assumptions of this framework, we risk theorists being expelled or barred from participation in important philosophical discussions, i.e., we risk discursive oppression. Furthermore, we risk dispelling the distinctive questions and discussion in MRG that require these feminist and social constructionist voices. These frameworks thus constitute an oppressive metaphysics of discourse, in that they cannot substantiate the values or theoretical commitments that the particular community of theorists and thinkers that I and others take themselves to be a

part of. This has the serious potential to lead to marginalization of voices on the ground-level of inquiry.

Of course, this claim's validity seems to be contingent on the agreement that this community's questions are legitimate, that the dismissive strategies actually do render these disputes non-substantive and finally that these two premises necessitate the conclusion that these dismissive strategies are wrong to do so. If you have followed me this far, I take it that this is a plausible argument to make. Once we accept this conclusion, we are in the position to appreciate the broad tensions between the lower-level views and the negative oppressive frameworks and commitments that resisted the ascension. These assumptions were some of the most pertinent obstacles we faced in arriving at the level of metaphysics of discourse. We are now in the position to appreciate why these views and assumptions lead to an oppressive metaphysics of discourse. So here are the negative criteria for metaphysics of discourse.

1. The metaphysics of discourse cannot be normatively neutral: That those who critique discourse and make general claims about substantivity can be neutral with regards to normative considerations was implicit in both structuralist substantivity, and easy ontology.²¹ Both frameworks make it so that that when carving out a position on substantivity, that what ought to be substantive cannot influence our position on what is in fact substantive. Easy ontology is presented as a means by which to answer existence questions *in general*, easily. This permissivism about existence questions suggests that existence questions are trivial. So, *prima facie*, the criteria

²¹ I think the MVD framework could have been instrumental in advocating for a metaphysics of discourse which accepted the other two assumptions, but I choose to apply the approach while denying the first assumption, in order to show that the MVD framework could be used without assuming neutrality. This emphasized the linguistic assumptions implicit in the MVD framework. But we need not have taken this route of argument. Consider the only slight difference between Sider's notion of substantivity and the barebones MVD framework which Chalmers presents.

by which Thomasson renders existence questions about mid-sized objects and numbers easily resolvable also applies to disputes about whether races or genders exist.

If we acknowledge that existence questions about types of people are reasonably substantiated by contextual values, we might find leverage to suggest that other questions about the existence of other classificatory schemas that concern human interest might not be easily dismissed by easy ontology. The problem is not so much in the permissivism about existence questions per se. The approach becomes problematic when assumptions about the nature of language are used to justify the conclusions about what kind of *people* exist.²² Similarly, the metaphysics of discourse that this view suggests is working with the assumption that a metaphysics of discourse itself can be normatively neutral. It asserts a descriptive view on how language works, and makes matter of factual conclusions that follow from it. Thomasson's easy ontology allows us to mistakenly overlook the normative issues in rendering disputes substantive or non-substantive. Thomasson (2016) herself seems to think that existence questions about race and gender can be substantive, deep, and interesting questions when they are questions about how we ought to use terms. The easy dismissive framework, however, is easily applied to disputes about the existence of race, and the framework presents no normative safeguard from this consequence.²³

²² As we saw when analyzing the structuralist framework Sider promoted, some might argue that making broad conclusions about language might be less relevant to dismissive strategies in cases that don't apply to human subjects. I argued that this objection to the linguistic critique of Sider's approach is off base. This same critique could work for easy ontology, since many of the assumptions about analyticity and harmless thin meanings of terms like 'table' and 'chair'. I tried to show that these ordinary terms are only trivially defined and can have thin definitions when we analyze language in a "joint-carving" vacuum, where the only possible interpretation we could have for debates about mid-sized objects (the martini debate). For more on this, I refer the reader back to the section on [Linguistic Criteria for Substantivity in Chapter 3](#).

²³ I think it should be addressed that it is possible that, in applying these frameworks like Thomasson's to MGR, we could be expecting too much of a theorist. It is nearly impossible to consider all the normative, political, and social implications of accepting a dismissive framework. However, I think this gives us all the more reason to be cautious about what we are saying about what makes a question substantive.

Sider, while himself not necessarily dismissive of ontological inquiry in MRG, presents a metaphysics of discourse which appears to be neutral on normative matters as well. The notion of substantivity (i.e., the discourse metaphysics) that the structuralist presents is “one-dimensional” as I say. It considers joint-carving to be a matter of carving out “the structure of reality”. This comes down to discovering theories that, independent of our interests, carve at nature’s joints. While I agree that this is important in constraining our notion of substantivity in some sense, I think that substantive inquiries in social theories, science, and distinctly normative discourse (like ethics) need a normative dimension discourse metaphysics to positively guide theories toward the results that they care about. Without this addition, Sider’s theory (again, not Sider himself) renders important work in social theory and social constructivist metaphysical work non-substantive. Rejecting this view means accepting that the metaphysics of discourse needs to allow structure to also be complemented and guided by the interests of communities. It means allowing structural theories to include constitutive values when theories are equally joint carving, rather than justifying their substantivity with structure alone.

2. The metaphysics of discourse cannot use prior or current semantic propriety to insubstantiate inquiry: All three of the dismissive strategies that I analyzed were working with the assumption that linguistic defects are sufficient to render inquiry in ontology non-substantive. Given the commitments to a pragmatic semantics, it is easy to see why this assumption is flawed and oppressive towards communities which aim to answer substantive questions but are limited linguistically in their capabilities of expressing the broad problems they want to address. There are ways in which semantics limits clarification of the aims of a question or statement, and this can often produce defective conversations, even in academic circles where prescriptive grammar and technical training seem conducive to avoiding disputes that only hang on the use of words.

The reasoning underlying easy ontology is that the semantics it is committed to can be used to justify conclusions about what constitutes substantive/nonsubstantive inquiry. It turns out that the semantics that built the easy ontological framework is severely flawed, because it suggests we take for granted that the dominant meanings in a community i.e., the “ordinary” meanings, are the only ones which the metaphysician can employ when asking ontological questions. Of course, the ordinary application conditions of race and gender terms, if such things can be identified, might render easy “Yes” answers to normatively loaded questions about the existence of race and gender from problematic application conditions. The application conditions we would identify tell us all we need to know to determine whether racial categories refer. Regardless of whether they are legitimate means to distinguish people. The distinctly normative premises that could justify that questions about the existence of race and gender are substantive would need to come from a semantics that is pragmatic and normatively conscious in the consequences of the use of terms. For instance, instead of simply asking what theorists mean by “What is gender?” we need to ask what common problems are theorists trying to solve by asking “What is gender?”

The MVD framework makes a similar assumption, when we interpret debates between classificatory projects and S-metaphysics as taking up the same surface level question, like “What is a woman?”, then we can become skeptical of their projects. This can be our intuition especially when the two disciplines collide, one taking their question to be about how we should classify people, and one taking the question to be about social structures. Some points by [Antony and Dembroff](#) will tempt us to conclude that the metaphysics of gender is non-substantive all the way down. Antony’s point is particularly relevant to the linguistic assumption about substantivity. She takes issue with Haslanger and Barnes’ alleged attempt to rehabilitate metaphysical essentialism about gender i.e., attempts to provide substantive accounts of what it is to be a woman (Antony,

2020, 531). She claims in addition that there is no practical or political need to answer the questions that these philosophers are asking (Antony, 2020, 531). But when we use Brendan Balcerak-Jackson's framework to look at what is going on in the projects, we see that defects in language (defects surrounding the use of the term 'woman') do not straightforwardly render these inquiries non-substantive. We can identify two substantive questions that parties in disputes about gender are asking. There is the question of how we do and should classify individuals in different communities; including what features these classifications do and should pick out, and how the contexts affect the features relevant for the classification. Alternatively, we can ask what broad social structures and relations create and are involved in the way we classify people into genders and races. Are these structures necessary, or are they something we have the power to change if we so choose? While the interactions between theorists attempting to address these two seemingly distinct problems might breed nonsubstantive debates on the surface, there are substantive questions underneath them. My reading is that Balcerak-Jackson's MVD framework is semantically pragmatist because it prioritizes problem solving and an attempt to find a mutual question the parties are trying to answer.

Again, the metaphysical structural framework provided by Sider makes the leap from linguistic defects to non-substantive questions. For Sider, certain questions like 'Is the Pope a bachelor?' or 'Is some nonsense made out of sour green apple liqueur a martini?' are rendered non-substantive, because the framework's approach to language is that defects in communication count towards no substantivity. I have identified a route to critique Sider's approach to these questions by considering the practical consequences that might be involved in asking these questions. Similarly, I tried to show that the attempt to draw a clear line between "the meaning" of bachelor, and the inferential connections and implicit background information about bachelors, is

unwarranted because terms are used in ‘thick’ ways which do not clearly fit with the thin definitions we use to define them.

This applies to disputes in MRG. There is not an easy way in most contexts to distinguish between what various “meanings” there may be for racial/gender terms, and what the natures of race/gender are. Similarly, when we consider a theory explaining race/gender, we cannot assume that just because there are two equally joint-carving potential meanings for a term that the choice between them is arbitrary. There can be substantive questions to be addressed concerning prima facie equally joint-carving meanings, or even meanings that are merely conventional. Consider the difference between choosing to define race (in S-metaphysics) as something that is inherently oppressive (Haslanger, 2012, 236), versus arguing that races (as biological categories, in Is-first C-metaphysics) don’t exist (Glasgow, 2019 and Appiah 2006). Should we argue that races (as conceived biologically in some communities) don’t exist? Or use the term to pick out a ‘thick’ social position and argue that races should not exist (ought-first C-metaphysics). There are good theoretical and evidential reasons to adopt either strategy. The choice between them ultimately becomes practical. Which strategy, we might consider, could be applied in particular communities in order to address the problems involving racial practices in that community?

3. The metaphysics of discourse cannot implement a vague (one-dimensional) notion of objectivity: We discovered that structuralism of the variety that Sider presents gives us a notion of explanatory value, matched with a “knee-jerk” realism, which cannot properly explain the relationship between contextual values and objective inquiry. This is something that I think any overarching account of substantivity needs to address, since we often label objective and important questions as substantive, and merely subjective and uninteresting questions nonsubstantive. Again, Sider’s notion of the interest-independence that substantiates inquiry in MRG like Haslanger’s is

going about it wrong, because his accounts of explanatory value, joint-carving, and substantivity do not explain how substantive questions sometimes deal with what are prima facie equally joint carving options in theory choice. When push comes to shove, we may need to consider which structures that equally display the facts, are the best ones for the interests of the communities and people that we care about protecting. The differences between Sider's "joint-carving meanings" and Sider's notion of explanatory value and objectivity are difficult to distinguish clearly. But there is sense we can make of the problem of objectivity that does not rely on assumptions about language. The third assumption about substantive inquiry is more related the broad framing of our questions. Identifying "the structure of reality" is our aim. Whatever is interest dependent does not *contribute* to the substantivity of our inquiry. Rather, normative and interest dependent considerations are *allowed* to be a part of substantive inquiry just insofar as they are getting at the structure of reality.

When we ask questions about gender and race, the framing matters. The distinctly structure-only metaphysical questions of gender and race are about what these categories pick out in the world, and how they fit into the structure. Importantly for theorists in MRG, we cannot simply ask what structures there are or aren't. We have to consider how the structures (social or natural) that we decide to emphasize, will be taken up in the broader community in which we are theorizing. There is a big difference between simply asking "Who is really a woman?" and "Do races exist?", and asking questions like "How could the framing of the gender/race structures affect policy decision?". There are all kinds of interesting structures that we could potentially emphasize, and which structures we choose will be influenced by the normative and political effects our framing might have.

4.3 The New Metaphysics of Discourse

It may appear that my project was destructive. I attempted to dismantle metaontological strategies that render substantive debates as nonsubstantive. I took up an extra level of abstraction, to show that these theorists make their approaches global enough that significant stances on the nature of substantive inquiry are at least implicit in these metaontological strategies. My negation of the assumptions of these projects constitutes an affirmation of a positive account in metaphysics of discourse. This account has been crafted by undertaking various commitments at different levels of analysis and critique. I outlined those different stages above. Briefly here, I will list the framework for a metaphysics of discourse that is informed by these commitments.

Feminism: This criterion serves as a mark of a metaphysics of discourse that is opposed to and actively engages in fighting all forms of oppression. The new metaphysics of discourse prioritizes dismantling and deconstructing totalitarian and oppressive regimes in any level of discourse and discourse critique. The teleology of a feminist metaphysics of discourse is an expansion of the criteria fit to identify substantive discourse in underheard and underprivileged communities. Of course, this project comes with significant obstacles, since the values of the new communities being absorbed into a metaphysics of discourse will conflict. This is one reason to suppose that accepting feminism (anti-oppression, anti-subordination in general) as a principle means that the metaphysics of discourse might have contradictory views of substantivity that hold simultaneously. But to admit that there are tensions in the principles and values of genuinely substantive discursive communities is an important step in addressing the issues that exist and persist between these discursive communities. Given this, the new metaphysics of discourse should include attempts at mediation between conflicting discursive communities and their distinct values, ensuring that new

voices and new knowledge is able to be disseminated in a discourse without obstacles at the meta-levels of discourse that undermine the discursive communities ground level commitments.

Pragmatism: The new metaphysics of discourse is committed to ensuring that the linguistic proprieties that mark out substantive questions and discourse in one community, are not instrumentalized to declare nonsubstantive questions and discourse in other communities. Commitment to a pragmatic approach to metaphysics of discourse also entails that our notions of substantivity and objectivity are defined in terms of “having an objective” marked by taking up the shared interests and considerations of the community in which one is engaged. This includes the interests of those who are or might be referred to in the discourse in question.

Democratic Objectivity: The principle of objectivity falls in our lap given the other two principles. In taking up feminist concern for the end of oppression, we want to ensure that the standards by which we assess whether or not an inquiry is substantive, and objective, are democratic, giving open access to the community to provide critique of the discourse. Of course, there will be experts in these inquiries whose opinions should be valued more because of their knowledge, but they must still be able to be scrutinized by equally qualified practitioners. Furthermore, the decisions that theorists make often affect how we understand ourselves and the world around us. This means that in undertaking a theoretical project or inquiry, the theorist, when presented with many objective and accurate stories to tell, should try to incorporate the views of the broader community in which they are engaged in inquiry. This includes democratic deliberation in theory choice, where people of different perspectives and values deliberate together to come with a way to preserve the interests of those involved and find procedures for dealing with conflicting values.

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