Barnes's "Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics"

Metaphysics Seminar, April 13th, 2016

Preview: Barnes argues that recent attempts to answer the question, "what is metaphysics?" leave no room for feminist metaphysics. In other words, they maintain that feminist metaphysics is not metaphysics. Barnes examines Sider's views concerning structure, Schaffer's views concerning grounding, and Dorr's views on "Ontologese". In "Substantivity in Feminist Metaphysics", Sider responds to this charge and argues that his view does treat questions in feminist metaphysics as substantive metaphysical questions.

1 What is Feminist Metaphysics?

Barnes: "One very simple way in which metaphysics can be feminist is by usefully applying the tools of metaphysics to topics traditionally of interest to feminist philosophy." (1).

Examples of Feminist Metaphysical Questions:

- What is gender?

- Does gender supervene on psychological/biological/political features?

- What is patriarchy?

2 Sider and Gender

2.1 Sider on Structure: Some Sider Review

According to Sider, some notions carve nature at its joints. These notions pick out objective structure. He says, "The truly central question of metaphysics is that of what is most fundamental. So in my terms, we must ask which notions carve perfectly at the joints." (5)

2.1.1 Sider on Substantive/Non-Substantive Questions

Nonsubstantive Question (Unrefined version): "For one or more expressions E (e.g. 'bachelor') in a nonsubstantive question, the semantic candidates for E (unmarried-adult-male, unmarried-adult-male-eligible-for- marriage, etc.) are such that i) each opposing view about the question comes out true on some candidate; and ii) no candidate carves at the joints better than the others. Substantive questions are those that are not nonsubstantive.

What counts as a candidate? "A candidate meaning m needn't perfectly match our usage of E; but the mismatch can't be too severe. If a linguistic community, roughly in our circumstances, could have used E to mean m without seeming "semantically alien"–could have used E to reach "the same semantic goal" as we use E to reach, albeit perhaps by a different route then m is a candidate for E." (59).

2.2 Interlude on Haslanger on Gender

For Haslanger, gender isn't fundamental. She has a social constructivist position. "Gender, according to Haslanger (2000, 2010), is a system of embedded hierarchies–based on normative assumptions of perceived sex characteristics and their assumed role in reproduction–within a social structure." (337)

Social structures are real, according to Haslanger, but they "are created by complex, repeated patterns of human social interaction." (337)

2.3   Back to Sider

Barnes thinks that, for Sider, Haslangerian 'gender' is not a joint-carving concept. But can 'gender' be "relatively" or "partially joint-carving" for Sider? "Partial joint-carving is, according to Sider, a function of three things: relative fundamentality (or naturalness), lawlikeness, and a further class of elements from philosophy of science to do with causal or explanatory efficacy (Sider 2011, p. 131)."

Barnes thinks Haslangerian gender cannot be partially joint-carving in Sider's sense because the kinds of explanations these genders are used in are not ones Sider cares about; Barnes thinks that Haslangerian genders fail to meet any of the three criteria above.

Moreover, Barnes thinks questions like "What is gender?" will be non-substantive on Sider's account. Why? Consider two conceptions of gender, one that invokes social structures (like Haslanger's above), and another, put forth by Sveinsdottir:

> "According to Sveinsdottir, gender is determined by (highly contextual) facts about our beliefs about social status, social role, etc. And so her view is less inflationary than Haslanger's–she doesn't appeal to a complicated metaphysics of social structures." (340)

Barnes (I think) will maintain that Haslanger's and Sveinsdottir's accounts provide equally joint-carving candidates for "gender" that yield different answers to the question "What is gender?"

Sider can allow for debates about gender to be conceptually substantive if not metaphysically substantive, but this does not seem to be good enough.

3   Schaffer and Gender

For Schaffer, metaphysics concerns what grounds what. He thinks existence questions can be settled on the cheap. So, according to Barnes, Schaffer can easily maintain that there are genders, but:

3.1   First Problem for Schaffer

> "Although Schaffer can easily grant that there are genders, he can't grant that there are Haslangerian genders. Indeed, Haslangerian genders–which are not fundamental, but are also not fully explained by the fundamental–dont make any sense on Schaffers view."

A Few Questions

1. Is Haslanger really committed to the idea that gender isn't fully explained by the fundamental?

2. What constitutes a "full explanation" in this context?

3. What would happen if we bring in Fine's resources from "The Question of Realism?"

3.2   Second Problem for Schaffer

Remember that Schaffer is a permissivist about existence. Tables exist, genders exist, numbers exist, etc. Barnes thinks that even if we are permissivist about many existence questions, there are others that are less obvious:

> "Which genders are there? And how many? Are there distinct genders corresponding to every gender identification or gender term? Do genderqueer, non-binary, genderfluid, adrogyne, bigender and genderfuck all exist as distinct social categories? It doesnt seem, at least to me, that it is obvious what genders there are, nor that it is obvious that binary theories of gender are false. (And those who do think that binary theories of gender are obviously false dont tend to do so because of their metametaphysical commitments.) The realm of social ontology is one in which many existence questions dont look obvious or shallow."

Questions:

1. Are these really existence questions or are they identity questions (or essence questions, even?)?

2. If they are identity questions, can we understand them in terms of ground?

3.3 Third Problem for Schaffer

In debates concerning gender, some philosophers (Sveinsdottir) appeal to parsimony considerations that Schaffer seemingly wouldn't countenance as important. For Schaffer, it's only important to be parsimonious about the fundamental entities, but Sveinsdottir, suggests parsimony concerning certain non-fundamental entities. Here is Sveinsdottir replying to a proposal by Witt:

> "Consider Anna, Witt's daughter. On Witt's view, in the spatiotemporal location where we look for Anna, we will find three entities. Apart from the human being and the person, we also have the social individual. It isn't that I'm against there being many different objects of different kinds in the spatiotemporal region. I'm quite happy with having Anna as well as Anna's body cohabiting, just as I am happy to have Venus de Milo and the hunk of marble it is made of happily cohabiting in the Louvre. My worry is that the entities Witt wants to cohabit seem to me not to be clearly different kinds. In particular they all seem agents to me. (NDPR, Review of Witt's "The Metaphysics of Gender")

3.4 Fourth Problem for Schaffer

What about people who agree about the grounds but disagree about what is grounded?

According to Barnes, Haslanger and Jenkins agree that "gender is grounded in social structure–specifically, they both agree that gender is grounded in the complex hierarchical social roles (which disenfranchise some and privilege others) which are based on normative assumptions about perceived bodily sex characteristics."

But Jenkins does not think Haslanger's account treats all trans-women as women. So, Jenkins proposes a modification to Haslanger's view. Jenkins distinguishes between gender-class and gender identity. Some women may not belong to the "women" gender class on this account but they do belong to the "women" gender identity.

But since Jenkins and Haslanger agree on what grounds gender, we cannot characterize their disagreement as one about grounds. (Let's look at Barnes's footnote 10)

4 Dorr and Gender

On Dorr's view, sometimes we speak in "ontologese" where our quantifiers range over the fundamental. Other times we employ a "superficial use" of quantifiers to talk about tables, and other ordinary objects.

> "Suppose people commonly assert claims such as 'There are tables'. According to Dorr, the correct methodology for assessing such claims is the methodology of ordinary language philosophy (2005, p. 248). Do speakers of English typically use claims like 'There are tables' to communicate useful information? Do patterns of assent suggest that ordinary speakers take 'There are tables' to be a true sentence of English? Would they react with confusion to the negation of this sentence? If so, then 'There are tables' is a true sentence of English." (345)

Since the quantifiers of ontologese range only over the fundamental, it seems like when we discuss gender, we are engage in the superficial use of the quantifier, and the correct methodology for addressing claims about gender will be that of "ordinary language philosophy" above. Why don't debates about gender just count as ordinary language philosophy? Barnes: Because "we're not asking how ordinary speakers use gender and race terms, or whether ordinary speakers quantify over social kinds." We want to be able to assert that (at least some of) the ordinary folk are getting some things wrong.

5　Mini-Conclusion

Barnes's Overall Point:

> "Many familiar debates in metaphysics–personal identity, free will, constitution, etc. – dont fit neatly into a fundamentality- centric framework. And yet, with a bit of wrangling, defenders of fundamentality-centric metaphysics can argue that those debates are actually, in some sense, debates about fundamentality. That option simply isnt available, though, for most feminist metaphysics. Feminist metaphysics is explicitly–and deliberately–not about the fundamental."

6　Sider's Response

Sider denies that his account renders questions in feminist philosophy as non-substantive and he makes this case here.

First, let's suppose that "gender" is not a joint-carving notion. Would it follow that questions concerning gender are non-substantive? No, thinks Sider.

He considers the example, "Is gender distinct from sex?" He thinks that any of the candidates for "gender" will render sex as distinct from gender. These are theoretical terms (on Haslanger's picture, Sider thinks) that must play certain (distinct) causal and explanatory roles. According to any eligible candidate for "gender", then, the answer to this question will be "yes". So the question is substantive.

(Sider clarifies that there are still some questions which may be non-substantive.)

7　Can Sider treat 'gender' as joint-carving? As partially joint-carving?

Is Sider committed to denying that "gender" is joint-carving? Sider thinks there is no barrier to taking these terms to be joint-carving if one is an "egalitarian" about joint-carving or if there is sui-generis higher-level joint-carvingness. But what if higher-level joint-carving is supposed to be reduced to/understood in terms of lower-level joint-carving?

Recall that Sider thinks that we can determine relative joint-carving-ness by how short and non-disjunctive the definition is in terms of the fundamental joint-carving notions. But Haslangerian definitions will turn out to be long!

Here Sider allows some definitions to be functional ones. Definitions of social kinds may have the form: " 'that which has such-and-such (social) effects and such-and-such causes.' Functional definitions of this sort don't mention any particular fundamental basis, and thus can be realized by any properties with appropriate causes and effects. Such definitions will be much simpler, in the case of social kinds, than definitions of the form 'having parts with thus-and-so physical makeup' ". (7)

Question: Are these definitions supposed to themselves be joint-carving? If so, how are we supposed to reconcile these functional definitions with the purity constraint?

Question from Barnes: But the kind of causation invoked in these functional definitions involves "thick" concepts/ Should we allow this kind of causation? Barnes's bootstrapping concern: if causation by thick concepts is allowed, then couldn't just any cluster of concepts be argued to carve at the joints because of putative causal relations amongst the members of the cluster?

Sider's response: Just because there are some causal explanations involving thick concepts, this doesn't mean that the causation relation is "cheap".

8   Ontological Realism and Social Structures

Ontological Realism: Questions about existence, about which entities there are, are (mostly) substantive. (Sider thinks there is a single joint-carving existential quantifier and a non-joint-carving one.)

8.1   Gender and the non-joint-carving existential quantifier

If "gender" is not joint-carving (and thus, the joint-carving existential quantifier does not range over genders), that doesn't prohibit questions from gender from counting as substantive. Thus, Sider can still be an ontological realist about gender.

Question: What if there are multiple non-joint-carving existential quantifiers?

8.2   Gender and the joint-carving existential quantifier

Sider also entertains the idea that "gender" is joint-carving. Perhaps the fundamental quantifier does range over genders and social structures.

Barnes: "It's hard to see how Haslangerian social structures could fall in the domain of the most fundamental quantifier. They are unnatural, created things based on relatively arbitrary distinctions between groups of people." (10)

Sider considers two ways the fundamental quantifier could range over gender:

1. We can embrace a picture that takes "the distinctive objects from theoretical disciplines at all levels (but no other entities)" to count as joint-carving.

2. The "Chocka" World (p.12)