

This is a pre-print. Please cite the final version.

## **Explanatory Substantivity**

**Elanor Taylor**

**Johns Hopkins University**

In light of concerns that extant accounts of substantivity do not accommodate social metaphysics I develop an account of substantivity as determined by explanatory power. I show that this approach accommodates social metaphysics and offers a plausible basis for a general metametaphysics.

Keywords: Social Metaphysics, Metametaphysics, Explanation

### 1. Introduction

Metaphysicians are often asked to defend the legitimacy of metaphysics. Common critiques of metaphysics include that its language is meaningless, its debates merely verbal, and its practitioners bad artists masquerading as theoreticians.<sup>1</sup> In response, metaphysicians have defended their discipline.<sup>2</sup> A central component of such defences is an account of *substantivity*, the feature in virtue of which metaphysical inquiry is genuine.

Recently, challenges to the legitimacy of metaphysics have come from an unexpected place: social metaphysics. Social metaphysicians do not argue that metaphysics is pseudo-inquiry; social metaphysics is, after all, a branch of metaphysics. But some argue that traditional accounts of

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, see Carnap, Rudolf (1959); Carnap, Rudolf (1950); Hirsch, Eli (2002); Ladyman, James, Ross, Don, Spurrett, David, & Collier, John (2007)

<sup>2</sup> Sider, Theodore (2011); Though Bennett argues that metaphysics faces no distinctive challenge in Bennett, Karen (2016). See Chalmers, David, Manley, David & Wasserman, Ryan eds. (2009) for a range of papers about challenges to and defenses of metaphysics.

substantivity generate bad results in the social domain, and that a new approach is required to accommodate social metaphysics.<sup>3</sup> Here, I take up this task.

I develop an account of substantivity defined in terms of explanatory power and show that it accommodates social metaphysics while performing the traditional work of an account of substantivity. I begin (in 2) by motivating criteria for an account of substantivity, including requirements generated by the need to accommodate social metaphysics. In 3 I give an account of explanation and of explanatory power, and in 4 use these as the basis of an account of substantivity as determined by explanatory power. In 5 I discuss the role of explanatory values, and compare the explanatory power proposal to realist, anti-realist, and deflationary alternatives. I conclude that the explanatory power view meets the criteria for an account of substantivity, accommodates social metaphysics, and offers a promising basis for a general metametaphysics.

## 2. Substantivity: Motivations and Roles

For insight into the work of an account of substantivity, consider an intuitive picture of metaphysics as inquiry into the nature and structure of reality. On this picture, when we ask, say, whether or not numbers are real, or what causation is, we ask what the world is like. If metaphysics is not substantive, however, then this task is impossible, because metaphysical questions are settled by our choices rather than by features of reality. Canonical cases of non-substantive inquiry include questions like, ‘Is a taco a sandwich?’ or, ‘Is an appletini a martini?’<sup>4</sup> Reality does not demand a particular answer to these questions (though we may have practical reasons to pick one definition over another), so we may choose the answer we prefer. For metaphysics to be nonsubstantive is for it to be like this, such that metaphysical questions can only be answered by choices made by inquirers. For metaphysics to be substantive is for it to *not* be like this, such that the answers to metaphysical questions are determined not by choices made by inquirers, but instead by features of reality.

---

<sup>3</sup> Barnes, Elizabeth (2014); Barnes, Elizabeth (2017); Díaz-León, Esa (2018); Mikkola, Mari (2017); Taylor, Elanor (2023b)

<sup>4</sup> The martini case is discussed by Bennett in Bennett, Karen (2009)

Here I will focus on substantivity as a feature only of metaphysics, rather than of inquiry more generally. The restriction to metaphysics is important as some ways in which metaphysics fails to be genuine may amount to legitimate inquiry of other kinds. For example, metaphysical questions cannot be settled by choices made by inquirers, but some serious inquiry is settled by choice, as in some cases of conceptual engineering.<sup>5</sup> I will take the substantivity of metaphysical debates to be roughly equivalent to the substantivity of metaphysical inquiry, in that what makes inquiry substantive also makes substantive debate possible.<sup>6</sup> Understood as such, an account of substantivity must play a range of roles.

One is to articulate the nature and goals of metaphysics. For example, you might believe that the task of metaphysics is to answer questions about existence, or building, or essence, or fundamentality, or some combination of these.<sup>7</sup> Each option tells us about not only what metaphysics aims at, but also the features in virtue of which it is genuine. If we want to know what exists, for example, and believe that what exists is an objective matter rather than something we can decide upon on the basis of preference, then we have gone some way towards a view of metaphysical inquiry as legitimate.

A related role is to protect metaphysics from the threat of undermining critique. A canonical challenge, sketched above, was pressed by Carnap and revived by contemporary deflationists: that metaphysical debates can be settled by framing choices such as the choice of a language, or of a quantifier.<sup>8</sup> On this view, metaphysical questions may appear deep but are actually like the question, ‘is an appletini a martini?’ in that we can resolve them by choosing, in this case how to define ‘martini’. Given that such choices are arbitrary with respect to the structure of reality, if

---

<sup>5</sup> This language is not uncontroversial as some describe entirely conceptual projects as metaphysics, such as Amie Thomasson, who argues that we can understand metaphysics as metalinguistic negotiation in Thomasson, Amie (2017)

<sup>6</sup> This is an idealization because the two differ. For example, debate is more directly contrastive than inquiry. However, arguably whatever makes philosophical inquiry genuine is what makes philosophical debates genuine, and much philosophical inquiry proceeds through debate.

<sup>7</sup> As in, respectively, Van Inwagen, Peter (1998); Bennett, Karen (2017); Fine, Kit (1994); Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

<sup>8</sup> For the historic version see Carnap, Rudolf (1950). For contemporary versions, see Hirsch, Eli (2002); Sidelle, Alan (2002); Thomasson, Amie (2014)

this challenge is legitimate then metaphysics is pseudo-inquiry, pretending to be deeper than it in fact is.<sup>9</sup>

We have so far motivated two roles for an account of substantivity. The first is prior to any challenge to metaphysics: to articulate the targets of metaphysical inquiry. The next is a direct response to the deflationist challenge: to show that metaphysical debates are authentic in that they cannot be settled by selecting a framing. Meeting these criteria is the primary work of an account of substantivity, though a further cluster of roles are motivated by such worries as that metaphysics asks unanswerable questions, or questions more properly addressed by the sciences.<sup>10</sup>

To illustrate how contemporary accounts perform this work consider the *structure* view on which what it is for a debate to be substantive is for the rival views to differ in their joint-carvingness.<sup>11</sup> Joint-carvingness is defined in terms of a primitive notion of structure, a descendant of Lewisian naturalness that plays a role in reference such that some meanings of a term may be more eligible than others in virtue of being more structural. Accordingly, this is a metalinguistic view of substantivity, on which the substantivity of a debate is determined by one side's being characterized in language with more structurally eligible referents than the other. The structure view easily fulfills the main criteria. The goal of metaphysics is to capture facts about structure, and metaphysics is more successful the closer it gets to those facts. Facts about structure are objective facts about mind-independent reality, and so cannot be determined by selecting a representational framing. Because structure is epistemically accessible through scientific and other branches of inquiry, this approach also offers resources to address concerns about epistemology and answerability, and about the relationship between science and metaphysics.

---

<sup>9</sup> Original versions of this criticism targeted debates about existence but contemporary philosophers have pressed it against projects including modal and permissivist metaphysics, such as Thomasson in Thomasson, Amie (2017) and (2020)

<sup>10</sup> See Ladyman, James, Ross, Don, Spurrett, David, & Collier, John (2007) for discussion of the latter.

<sup>11</sup> Defended by Sider in Sider, Theodore (2011) Chapter 4. Sider offers the most explicit and thorough articulation of substantivity, but the general idea of giving a view of the nature and goals of metaphysics, and with it a response to the Carnapian concern, has been taken up by other authors including Schaffer. Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

Alternatively, consider the *grounding* view, on which fundamentality is the locus of substantivity.<sup>12</sup> On this approach metaphysical debates are substantive in so far as they respond to facts about absolute and relative fundamentality, and the rival views differ in how well they capture such facts. This view also easily fulfills the desiderata. It portrays the goal of metaphysics as to find out about fundamentality. Given that facts about fundamentality are objective and mind-independent, such inquiry cannot be settled by a framing choice. Furthermore, beyond the primary criteria, diagnostics for grounding make those facts epistemically accessible, and this picture gives a central, though not exhaustive, role for science in metaphysics, as science can illuminate what grounds what.

Other views of metaphysics bring associated (though sometimes only implied) accounts of substantivity, including essentialist metaphysics, metaphysics pursued through modal logic, and metaphysics centred around building.<sup>13</sup> For the moment, however, I will focus on the structure and fundamentality views because their most salient feature is shared by the other approaches: they locate substantivity in responsiveness to entirely mind-independent, objective aspects of reality.<sup>14</sup> These views have also received the most attention from social metaphysicians concerned about metametaphysics.

Some social metaphysicians argue that standard approaches to substantivity, including the structure and grounding views, do not properly accommodate social metaphysics. They argue that such accounts portray canonical first-order debates in social metaphysics as nonsubstantive, and that they fail to make room for amelioration, the idea that moral and political considerations can drive theory choice.<sup>15</sup> Extensive discussion has followed, with authors exploring responses

---

<sup>12</sup> Defended by Schaffer in Schaffer, Jonathan (2009)

<sup>13</sup> Fine, Kit (1994); Williamson, Timothy (2013); Bennett, Karen (2017). As before, these authors vary in the generality of their views of metaphysics and the level of attention they give to metametaphysical questions and to the issue of substantivity. But they share a view of metaphysics as inquiry into the nature and structure of reality, and as such not subject to the Carnapian critique.

<sup>14</sup> These views have also received the most attention from social metaphysicians. For example, see Barnes, Elizabeth (2014); Barnes, Elizabeth (2017); Mikkola, Mari (2017)

<sup>15</sup> Barnes, Elizabeth (2014); Barnes, Elizabeth (2017); Díaz-León, Esa (2018); Mikkola, Mari (2017); Taylor, Elanor (2023b)

including defending the traditional frameworks, reconceptualizing realism, and arguing for deflationist alternatives.<sup>16</sup>

In other work I diagnose these apparent clashes between social metaphysics and traditional metametaphysical frameworks as instantiating the *Realism-Mind-Independence-Legitimacy Problem* (RML Problem).<sup>17</sup> This is a widespread problem that appears when attempts to align realism, mind-independence, and the legitimacy of inquiry face counterexamples from inquiry responsive to relevantly mind-dependent phenomena. In realist metametaphysics the legitimacy of metaphysics, its substantivity, is defined in terms of responsiveness to entirely objective, mind-independent features, such as structure or fundamentality. Accordingly, these frameworks struggle to accommodate metaphysics that is responsive to relevantly mind-dependent phenomena, including views that are made correct by features such as norms, collectively-held beliefs, or moral and political considerations.

There are various ways to avoid the RML Problem. We can reject metametaphysical realism, perhaps by embracing deflationism, or idealism.<sup>18</sup> We can sever the connection between realism and mind-independence, perhaps by thinking of realism only in terms of truth.<sup>19</sup> We can deny the cases, thereby denying that social metaphysics generates metametaphysical challenges.<sup>20</sup> Each of these faces significant problems.<sup>21</sup> The final, most promising option is to sever the connection between realism and the legitimacy of inquiry, and this is the option I will pursue. This strategy requires a new account of the substantivity of metaphysics as not purely determined by mind-independent factors.

This diagnosis is not my subject here, but before moving on, two quick notes about it. First, I am not arguing that we *should* define realism in terms of mind-independence and then define the

---

<sup>16</sup> For example, see Díaz-León, Esa (2018); Griffith, Aaron (2018); Mason, Rebecca & Ritchie, Katherine (2020); Passinsky, Asya (2021); Richardson, Kevin (2022); Schaffer, Jonathan (2017b); Sider, Theodore (2017)

<sup>17</sup> Taylor, Elanor (2023b)

<sup>18</sup> As in Díaz-León, Esa (2018), Díaz-León, Esa (2020)

<sup>19</sup> Mason & Ritchie argue for this view about social entities in Mason, Rebecca & Ritchie, Katherine (2020)

<sup>20</sup> For example, Griffith defends a grounding-based view of social construction in Griffith, Aaron (2018), and Richardson defends a structure-based approach to the metaphysics of gender in Richardson, Kevin (2022). Schaffer and Sider defend their views in Schaffer, Jonathan (2017b) and Sider, Theodore (2017)

<sup>21</sup> See Taylor, Elanor (2023b)

legitimacy of inquiry in terms of how it responds to those mind-independent features. Furthermore, there is no clear, unified definition of mind-independence, realism, or inquiry, at work across philosophy. In endorsing the RML diagnosis I merely descriptively report on a tendency to tie these ideas together, such that a standard theoretical role for realism involves a connection to some notion of mind-independence and a connection to the legitimacy of inquiry.

Second, one might worry that the legitimacy of metaphysics of mind and metaphysics of fiction, among other areas, undermines this diagnosis, because these are areas of metaphysics responsive to mind-dependent phenomena. In response note that this instance of the RML problem is generated not merely by recognizing mentality. Instead it is generated by the core posit at the heart of the metametaphysics that is used to define substantivity. Those posits are traditionally mind-independent even when they relate or otherwise regiment mental phenomena. For example, if physicalism is true then it is also the most structural position, on a structure-based metametaphysics, and it's being most structural is a fact about mind-independent reality. The mind-independence of the metametaphysics generates this problem, rather simply acknowledging the existence of mental phenomena.

There is much more to say about the RML Problem, but for the purposes of space I will presuppose that these challenges are serious and that this diagnosis is correct. We need a new theory of substantivity to accommodate social metaphysics.<sup>22</sup> To avoid the RML problem, substantivity cannot be defined in terms of responsiveness to only mind-independent features, like structure or fundamentality. It may turn out that all substantive debates are responsive to and settled by facts about purely mind-independent features, but if so, this will be a finding, rather than a matter of definition.

Together, the traditional roles for substantivity and the need to avoid the RML problem motivate at least the following three criteria for a new account of substantivity:

- Goals: The account must articulate the broad goals of metaphysics.
- Genuine: Substantive debates cannot be settled by arbitrary framing choices.
- RML-avoidance: Substantivity cannot be defined in terms of mind-independence.

---

<sup>22</sup> For an alternative response to the RML Problem see Thompson, Naomi (2025)

Responding to other challenges is desirable too, such as resolving concerns about unanswerability, indeterminacy, meaninglessness, and the relationship between science and metaphysics. But overall, these are the core desiderata.

### 3. Explanation and Explanatory Power

Responding to the RML Problem requires resources that can incorporate responsiveness to mind-independent and mind-dependent features where appropriate, in an appropriately unified way. Philosophical work on explanation is an ideal place to look for such resources.<sup>23</sup>

Explanation has subjective, mind-dependent aspects and objective, mind-independent aspects, and balancing these is much of the work of an account of explanation. In this section I will follow this line of reasoning and offer an account of substantivity defined in terms of explanatory power, arguing that it offers a plausible basis for metametaphysics. This view has nested components: an account of explanation, which forms the basis of the account of explanatory power, which forms the basis of the account of substantivity.

#### 3.1. Explanation

To meet the standards given here the account of explanation must be *non-realist*. To meet the requirement of RML-avoidance explanation and explanatory power cannot be determined purely by mind-independent, objective features. But for metaphysical inquiry to be genuine and non-arbitrary, explanation and explanatory power cannot be understood in entirely anti-realist terms either. Here I will sketch a view of explanation that can play this role: Contextualist Pluralist Non-realist Backing (CPN Backing).<sup>24</sup> As I will show, this particular account suits the task well, but alternative non-realist views of explanation may work in its place.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> This appeal to explanatory power in this role is not novel, as Esa Díaz-León has argued for a deflationary metametaphysics based on explanatory power in Díaz-León, Esa (2018). See also Díaz-León, Esa (2020) This is an explicitly deflationary conception of metametaphysics, however, and I will return to discuss the difference between deflationism and the current, non-realist proposal in Section 5.

<sup>24</sup> I defend this view in Taylor, Elanor (2018), (2022), (2023a), (2024)

<sup>25</sup> Not many fully articulated versions of non-realism are defended in the literature on explanation in metaphysics. Schnieder allows for non-realist backing by permitting conceptual explanations in Schnieder, Benjamin (2006). Miller & Norton defend a psychologically-oriented approach to metaphysical explanation in Miller, Kristie & Norton, James (2017), (2019), and (2020), and Thompson defends irrealism about grounding in Thompson, Naomi

The name of the view is a guide to its features. First, CPN Backing is a *backing model* of explanation.<sup>26</sup> Backing models portray explanation as a relation between two propositions or sets of propositions, an explanans and explanandum. Explanations report on underlying ‘backing’ relations or ‘backers’, instances of dependence that support explanation but are not themselves explanations. A canonical example of a backer is causation. To illustrate, imagine that I want to explain why the table moved by citing the event of a person, Elizabeth, shoving it, and that both events did take place. On this approach the explanans proposition,

P1 ‘Elizabeth shoved the table.’

explains the explanandum proposition,

P2 ‘The table moved.’

because P1 describes the cause of what is described in P2. The causal relation is the backer, and together P1 and P2 constitute an explanation. As we can see, the structure of the explanation mirrors the structure of the backer, such that (in this causal example) the explanatory *because* tracks the causal *because*.

Many philosophers endorse backing models of explanation. However, traditionally backing models have been *realist* in that backers are restricted to instances of metaphysical determination: worldly forms of metaphysical responsibility.<sup>27</sup> Accordingly, realist backing models portray explanation as highly unified, and as intimately connected to metaphysical determination. However, avoiding the RML problem requires a non-realist view, so a realist backing model cannot form the basis of a viable account of substantivity. CPN Backing is a non-realist view on which some explanations may report on worldly forms of metaphysical determination, while other, equally legitimate explanations are backed by mind-dependent forms of dependence. These include conceptual dependence, motivational dependence, and any dependence relation conceived of in anti-realist terms.<sup>28</sup> For example, causation can back explanation even for anti-realists about causation, as can mathematical dependence, grounding, and probabilistic

---

(2016) and (2018). Kovacs defends explanatory idealism about grounding, which differs from CPN-Backing because it is not a backing view, but shares some other similarities (including the pluralism), in Kovacs, David (2021)

<sup>26</sup> Defenses of backing models include Audi, Paul (2015); Kim, Jaegwon (2005); Ruben, David-Hillel (1990); Schaffer, Jonathan (2017a) and (2017b); Wilhelm, Issac (2020); Wilson, Alastair (2018)

<sup>27</sup> Typically this means that backers are restricted to causation and grounding. In light of this similarity and others Wilson suggests that grounding is a distinctively metaphysical form of causation, in Wilson, Alastair (2018)

<sup>28</sup> See Taylor, Elanor (2018), (2022) for discussion of non-realist backers.

dependence. This is a non-realist view because it permits explanations to report on metaphysical determination without making this essential to explanation, while avoiding anti-realism in not having explanation be determined entirely by the needs and interests of inquirers. The *pluralism* of CPN Backing lies the fact that it permits an array of backers, which as we have seen includes traditional metaphysical backers such as causation, grounding, and mereological relations, alongside others such as conceptual, logical, probabilistic, and motivational dependence.<sup>29</sup>

A final element of this model, featured in the name, is that explanation is *contextual*. In particular, which backing relation it is appropriate to cite, and how, varies depending on features of the explanatory context, understood in terms of the needs and interests of the audience for the explanation. To illustrate the difference that contextual appropriateness makes, consider a range of ways to explain my car's being parked illegally. For example, a grounding explanation of the fact that it is parked illegally will give information about the local parking bylaws and about the location of the car. A causal explanation of the event of my car coming to be parked in that location will give information about what caused it to be parked there, and it may be pitched at a mechanical level, or at a level of detail that facilitates attributing responsibility for illegal parking. All are legitimate explanations but only one will meet the requirements of a given context, and hence be contextually appropriate.

*Explanatory values* govern contextual appropriateness, in that they summarize what the explanatory context demands, which includes the goals of the audience for the explanation and of those who formulate it. These values include familiar examples like parsimony and fruitfulness, and preferences for explanations of particular types, or explanations suited to particular scientific, legal, or political goals.

On some views contextual appropriateness is almost all there is to explanation.<sup>30</sup> On CPN Backing this is not the case, as there are significant non-contextual constraints on explanation. Explanation is factive in that an explanation must give information about a backer. The dependence facts must obtain for the explanation to succeed, so no explanation can get off the

---

<sup>29</sup> For defense of non-realism as a viable backing model, see Taylor, Elanor (2022)

<sup>30</sup> As in Achinstein's view of explanation as a contextually-appropriate speech-act. Achinstein, Peter (1983)

ground without reporting correctly on the instantiation of a dependence relation. But how that reporting should be achieved, and which relation should be cited, will vary depending on the needs and interests of those who form and seek the explanation.<sup>31</sup>

Here I will summarize some standard features of explanation that backers share on the CPN Backing model, and some that they do not. This is not an exhaustive list as some features (such as transitivity) raise problems for a non-realist, such that full exposition will require more detail. My goal here is not to offer a full defence of the model, but merely to sketch enough of the features of CPN Backing to use as the basis of an account of explanatory power.

It is widely-accepted that explanation is asymmetric, such that if A explains B, then B does not explain A. If explanation is asymmetric, then we need asymmetry from backing too. The requirement of irreflexivity, that A cannot explain A, follows from asymmetry but is an important feature of explanation in its own right, motivated by distinct considerations.<sup>32</sup> Explanation is also non-monotonic, in that it does not follow from the fact that A and B explain C that the combination of A and B with some further factor D will also explain C, and so backing is too. Explanation can obtain between modally indistinguishable relata, and as such is hyperintensional. A benefit of non-realist backing is that we do not have to settle questions about whether or not hyperintensionality is merely a feature of representations or whether there is worldly hyperintensionality in order to endorse the view that backing is hyperintensional.<sup>33</sup> Finally, many, indeed perhaps most, explanations are partial.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup> On this view backing relations are less unified than they are on realist approaches. However, the backers are unified first by the fact that they are instances of dependence, and by the features they inherit from the features of explanation. (This strategy of taking the features of backers to be inherited from the structural features of explanation is similar to Kovacs's explanatory idealism about grounding, though CPN-Backing is not an idealist view. See Kovacs, David (2021)) This model does not require that every relation instances of which are backers must itself have all the required features of backers. To illustrate, say that there are circles of ground, while there are no circles of explanation. On the CPN Backing model this apparent clash does not preclude instances of grounding serving as backers, because the definition of backing does not force requirements onto the more general kinds that backers belong to. For discussion of this kind of case see Bliss, Ricki (2014); Maurin, Anna-Sofia (2019); Skiles, Alexander, & Trogdon, Kelly (2021); Thompson, Naomi (2016)

<sup>32</sup> Such as considerations about what I call 'explanatory distance.' Taylor, Elanor (2023a)

<sup>33</sup> See discussion in Nolan, Daniel (2014), Williamson, Timothy (2021)

<sup>34</sup> As Lewis noted about causal explanation in Lewis, David (1986) pg 219

Given that this is a non-realist model, backers need not be instances of metaphysical determination. On realist backing models all explanation is backed by metaphysical determination, where the defining feature of metaphysical determination is that these are forms of ‘directed determination’ which are mind-independent in that the relations themselves do not depend on human thought for their instantiation.<sup>35</sup> However, as noted before, on a non-realist backing model other relations can back explanation, including conceptual and justificatory dependence; not just the kinds of dependence that structure the mind-independent world. Some hold that necessitation is required for explanation, but this is not required by CPN Backing. If there is worldly indeterminism then it is important to preserve the possibility of non-necessitating explanation, but this is an important feature of a naturalistic account of explanation regardless of the correct metaphysics of chance because of the prevalence of probabilistic scientific explanation.<sup>36</sup> The non-realism of CPN Backing permits us to take probabilistic dependence as a backer without endorsing any particular view on the metaphysics of chance.<sup>37</sup>

Overall, according to CPN-Backing, backing is asymmetric, irreflexive, non-monotonic, hyperintensional, and permits partial versions. This allows dependence of many different forms to back explanations. For example, the entailment of [A or B] by A, the rockfall causing the landslide, the justification of my action by my reason, and the conceptual association between bachelors and being unmarried, can all serve as backers.

### 3.2 Explanatory Power

Explanatory power is the measure of how well an explanation explains. Here I will give an account of explanatory power based on CPN Backing.

To explain we must give information about a backer, where backing is understood in non-realist terms. To meet a minimal condition for explanatory power, then, the explanans must describe

---

<sup>35</sup> See discussion of directed determination in Audi, Paul (2015)

<sup>36</sup> I will leave aside questions about the high and low probability explanation here, but overall endorse the view that there are low-probability explanations. See discussion in Clatterbuck, Hayley (2020)

<sup>37</sup> Thereby avoiding problems such as those pressed by Lange & Elliott against Woodward in Elliott, Katrina, & Lange, Marc (2022)

whatever what is described in the explanandum depends upon. This is the factive aspect of explanation, in that accurate information about backing must be given.

To have explanatory power an explanation must also be contextually appropriate. That is to say, the backer cited must be contextually appropriate, and the expression of the explanation must be contextually appropriate. On the first, when there is an array of backers to select from, the relevant backer must be appropriate to the needs of those seeking the explanation. For example, an audience seeking a causal or motivational explanation should not be given a grounding explanation. On the second, issues such as the level of grain, language, simplicity, and so on, influence whether or not information about a backer is explanatorily valuable to its audience. For example, a causal explanation may differ considerably depending on whether it is being offered to an engineer or to a judge, if both want the causal story about what happened, but the engineer wants to understand the mechanism behind the events, while the judge wants to attribute legal responsibility. The explanation will be more or less contextually appropriate given how appropriate the cited backer, and its presentation, is to the needs and goals of the audience. Valuing explanations with particular features, such as facilitating certain goals, or being given in a certain language, is to have explanatory values. Measuring contextual appropriateness is more an art than a science, as is reflected in the failure even of more formal models of explanation to capture analogous features. For example, consider the difficulties involved in specifying what it is for a causal model to be apt.<sup>38</sup> However, we often deploy considerations about explanatory context in our everyday lives, and as such have an intuitive grasp of which explanations are contextually appropriate and which are not.

To summarize, to display any explanatory power at all an explanation must give information about a backer, such that the explanans gives information about whatever what is described in the explanandum depends on. This is the factive aspect of explanation, in that the information must be correct and the relevant instance of dependence must genuinely obtain. Explanatory power is a measure of how contextually appropriate the explanation is once it meets this minimum standard.

---

<sup>38</sup> See discussion in Jansson, Lina (2018)

#### 4. Substantivity as Explanatory Power

I propose that for a debate to be substantive is for the rival answers to differ in their explanatory power. Substantive debates are settled by which answer has the highest level of explanatory power. On this view, metaphysics aims at explanation, and facts about explanation determine the answers to metaphysical questions.

First-order inquiry into the metaphysics of gender is a motivating case for concerns about the substantivity of social metaphysics.<sup>39</sup> For a case study, then, consider a debate about the nature of gender. Let's consider an idealized example for the sake of simple exposition, beginning with the facts that must be explained. What must be explained by any proposal will be subject to as much discussion as what best explains those facts, as is the case in other areas of metaphysics. Stipulate that we must explain only the following clusters of empirical facts with an account of gender:

Facts about the psychology of gender identity.

Facts about the history of gendered oppression and violence.

Now consider two simple proposals: a MacKinnon-style constructivism on which gender is constituted by unjust sexual dominance, and an identity-based criterion on which gender is constituted by gender identity.<sup>40</sup> How might these proposals explain the target phenomena?

Take the gender pay gap, which is part of the history of gendered oppression. The proposal that gender is unjust sexual dominance offers an explanation of the gender pay gap. Indeed, on this proposal it is arguable that the explanans partly grounds the explanandum (or, more correctly, gives information about what partly grounds what is described in the explanandum), and so offers a particularly metaphysical kind of explanation, backed by partial grounding. On this view, gender being unjust sexual dominance is among the facts non-causally metaphysically responsible for the gender pay gap. Presume that is the case, in which case partial grounding is our backer:

‘Gender is unjust dominance’ EXPLAINS ‘Gender pay gap’ (between propositions)

---

<sup>39</sup> Examples of social metaphysicians conducting first-order work in the metaphysics of gender include Ásta in Ásta (2018), Dembroff in Dembroff, Robin (2018), Haslanger in Haslanger, Sally (2000) and (2012), and Jenkins in Jenkins, Katharine (2016), (2023)

<sup>40</sup> The constructivist view is a rough reconstruction of MacKinnon's view of sex differences in MacKinnon, Catharine (1987) Chapter 2

Because

[Gender is unjust dominance] PARTLY GROUNDS [Gender pay gap] (between facts)

One might disagree that there is partial grounding in this case, in which case our conversation would return to the case for partial grounding. (For instance, some might hold that the direction of determination is the other way round, such that the pay gap partly grounds the dominance.)

We have not heard much about why we want the explanation, so contextual appropriateness is a little harder to evaluate. But this explanation citing the nature of gender as unjust dominance is understandable and communicable in natural language, and as such is fairly contextually appropriate.

However, this is only one part of the cluster of facts that need explained in this case, and we will have a harder time explaining facts about the psychology of gender identification on this unjust dominance view. For example, take the fact that gender identity does not always track facts about the body, in that some people have a gender identity that effectively floats free of facts about their body. The proposal that gender identity determines gender explains this, because, on standard assumptions about the terms involved, it is to be expected because the proposal portrays gender as not essentially tied to facts about the body. Accordingly, this proposal confers probability on the outcome that for at least some people, gender and the body will come apart:

‘Gender is identity’ EXPLAINS ‘ID doesn’t track the body’ (between propositions)

Because

[Gender is identity] CONFERS PROBABILITY [ID doesn’t track the body] (between facts)

Again, one might not agree that conferring probability is the correct backer, in which case we could return to the case for probability conferral. But a nice feature of non-realist backing is that we do not have to endorse the view that there is objective chance or worldly probabilistic causation to take probability conferral as a backer.

Each proposal involves nested metaphysical claims, and differences in explanatory power will reflect how many of these are established and shared. For example, if participants in the first debate accept that the pay gap and unjust dominance exist and that facts about them stand in a relation of partial ground, then evaluating the proposal about gender amounts to asking how plausible it is to identify unjust dominance *with* gender, and thereby inherit those explanatory resources, while (presumably, in this case) adding unification across other phenomena. However, if there is no such a thing as unjust dominance then the pay gap cannot depend upon it, and the explanation cannot get off the ground. And if there is no such thing as the pay gap, then there is nothing in this instance to explain. Furthermore, there is a hypothetical, ‘as if’ element to the final stage of evaluation. Once facts about the backers are established, to evaluate the explanatory power of a given proposal is to consider what explanatory power *would* be available *were* we to adopt the view.

At this point, even in this idealized example, we see the standard pattern of assessing which views best explain the phenomena that must be explained, as we would expect in any metaphysical debate. To continue with the inquiry into gender, we would perhaps consider how well the identity proposal explains the pay gap explanandum, how well the constructivist proposal explains the psychological explanandum, consider other targets for explanation, more detailed considerations about contextual appropriateness, the explanatory merits of pluralism, and so on.<sup>41</sup> We can evaluate how well a proposal explains an individual, isolated explanandum, and also how well it explains wider bodies of data, in which we may take values like unification and systematicity into account. Given that these are debates about which proposals display the most explanatory power, this inquiry into the metaphysics of gender is straightforwardly classified as substantive.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> In debates about metaphysics of gender some have recently argued for pluralism, the view that multiple forms of gender, including gender as class and gender as identity, are equally explanatorily powerful. A defense of pluralism on explanatory grounds will appeal to holistic considerations, such as unification and systematicity, as well as considerations about explaining individual, isolated phenomena. Jenkins makes the case for pluralism about gender in Jenkins, Katherine (2023), as does Dembroff in Dembroff, Robin (2018)

<sup>42</sup> One might worry that this is an unrealistic picture of metaphysics because metaphysicians do not take themselves to be comparing explanation-backers on the basis of their contextual appropriateness. In response, consider how accounts of substantivity tend to function. In endorsing a view of substantivity based on structure, for example, I do not thereby claim that metaphysicians consciously reflect on how structural their views are, on pain of their work not counting as metaphysics proper. Instead, the metametaphysics functions as a reconstruction of the nature and legitimacy of the inquiry, such that it aims at and is guided by facts about structure.

Some hold that social metaphysics is ameliorative, in that theory choice can be guided by moral and political considerations. This is a controversial feature, and how it works is open to debate even among those who endorse amelioration.<sup>43</sup> This view can accommodate most versions of amelioration as an explanatory value, and hence as an acceptable feature of substantive metaphysical inquiry. For example, for someone who wants to resist ontic injustice and ontic oppression, a view of gender that is useful for those purposes will be more explanatorily powerful than one that is not. Which explanatory values we should have is a serious question that this account of substantivity does not attempt to answer. But if we do have ameliorative goals then this account can accommodate them, and can reconstruct inquiry guided by these considerations as substantive.

Consider another case from social metaphysics. Burman argues against *ideal social ontology*.<sup>44</sup> Proponents of ideal social ontology take collective intentionality to be the basis of social reality, and Burman argues that they idealize their models of social phenomena with respect to features including the presence of oppressive power dynamics. In place of ideal social ontology Burman recommends *non-ideal social ontology*, which is not idealized, rejects the centrality of collective intentionality, and attributes a central role to power and class in the social world.<sup>45</sup>

To situate this research in the explanatory power framework consider Burman's specific claim that collective intentionality is not necessary to the existence of institutions.<sup>46</sup> Burman takes the Stockholm housing market as an example, arguing that a combination of individual intentionality and common knowledge explains the existence of the Stockholm housing market (and of private property in general) without positing collective intentionality as understood in the ideal standard

---

<sup>43</sup> Haslanger and Jenkins both explicitly identify this as a goal for their accounts of race and gender, in Haslanger, Sally (2000) and (2012), and Jenkins, Katharine (2016) and (2023). Louise Antony argues 'against amelioration' in Antony, Louise (2022) For further discussion of amelioration see Passinsky, Asya (ms), and Barnes, Elizabeth & Payton, Dee (2025)

<sup>44</sup> Burman, Åsa (2023) The ideal/non-ideal distinction comes from Charles Mills' work on non-ideal political philosophy. See Mills, Charles (2005). 'Social ontology' is the traditional term for inquiry into the social world as undertaken by proponents of what Burman calls the 'ideal standard model.' I prefer the label 'social metaphysics' because ontology is restricted to existence questions whereas metaphysics is broader, but I use 'social ontology' while discussing Burman's views in keeping with the history of Burman's exchange with proponents of the ideal standard model.

<sup>45</sup> Burman, Åsa (2023) Chapter 2

<sup>46</sup> Burman, Åsa (2023) Section 2.2.3

model.<sup>47</sup> A plausible backer in this instance is partial composition, such that the Stockholm housing market is partly composed by individual intentions and common knowledge, whereas the Stockholm housing market does not depend at all on collective intentionality.

Because, as Burman argues, the Stockholm housing market does not depend on collective intentionality, there is no backer for the ideal social ontologist to cite. Furthermore, the individual intentionality/common-ground explanation is more parsimonious than the collective intentionality explanation, and does not involve the idealizations inherent in the ideal standard model, which Burman argues distort our understanding of social phenomena.<sup>48</sup> Overall, the existence of the Stockholm housing market is explained in a contextually appropriate way by the non-ideal approach. The explanatory power view of substantivity classifies this inquiry into the relative merits of each proposal as substantive metaphysics.

More generally Burman suggests that non-ideal social ontology is more explanatorily powerful than the ideal standard model. The role of contextual appropriateness is notable here. Straightforward modal and post-modal claims, such as that collective intentionality is not essential to institutions, can be accommodated in alternative metametaphysical frameworks. But the idea that there may be good political or more broadly pragmatic reasons to accept Burman's views, such as eschewing an idealized view of society as only rarely shaped by injustice, which render the non-ideal approach more contextually appropriate, can be captured in the explanatory power framework but not in alternatives.<sup>49</sup>

These cases are from social metaphysics because considerations about social metaphysics motivated the discussion. But an account of substantivity is part of a general metametaphysics, so it is worth considering whether the explanatory power approach works beyond the specifically social cases. I propose that it does.

---

<sup>47</sup> Burman, Åsa (2023) pg 92

<sup>48</sup> Burman, Åsa (2023) Section 2.3

<sup>49</sup> Though Burman is cautious about embracing a fully, as she puts it, 'emancipatory' social metaphysics as endorsed by Jenkins, for example, in Jenkins, Katharine (2023). See discussion in Burman, Åsa (2023) pg 173

To illustrate, consider debates about the metaphysics of laws of nature. There is much at stake in these discussions, with explanatory targets including the distinction between laws and contingent generalizations, the nature of nomic necessity, and the nature and authority of science.

Accordingly, these debates are classified as substantive metaphysics by the explanatory power approach. Furthermore, through the role of contextual appropriateness this view allows pragmatic considerations to guide, though not entirely determine, theory choice. A metaphysics of science is in part an interpretation of the nature of scientific practice, and one goal for a metaphysics of laws is to account for the various roles that laws play in science, including in theories, predictions, and explanations.<sup>50</sup> However, some views of laws permit that even in a final, ideal science our inquiry may never lead us to the actual laws, which presents a challenge to realism.<sup>51</sup> On the explanatory power view we can take considerations about how well a view captures the role of laws in scientific practice into account, through the significance of contextual appropriateness. We can ask for an account of laws that does not leave open the possibility of mismatch, say, as a matter of explanatory values. While there is more to say about this example, it indicates that the explanatory power view of substantivity not only can handle metaphysics beyond the social, but also offers resources for accommodating pragmatic features of theory choice that are unavailable from alternative metametaphysical frameworks.

Some might worry that this view fails to perform the work of an account of substantivity because it is permissive in that a wide array of debates may count as substantive. For example, even the original contrast cases, ‘is a taco a sandwich?’, or ‘is an appletini a martini?’ may turn out to be substantive on this approach, if there are differences in explanatory power between the rival views. In response, note first that in anchoring explanatory power in a specific account of explanation, as in Section 3, we avoid settling questions by appealing to intuitive difference in explanatory power, which would be easy to trivialize. But overall, this view does count a wider array of debates as substantive, and I take this to be a benefit, rather than a downside. Which debates deserve social metaphysical attention may change depending on changes to social structure, and this feature can be captured on the explanatory power approach but not on rival

---

<sup>50</sup> For example, see Loewer, Barry (2021) for defense of an account of laws that, as Loewer puts it, ‘prioritizes the aims and practices of science.’

<sup>51</sup> For example, Van Fraassen argues that Lewis’ Best Systems Account of laws faces the problem of ‘mismatch’ because of the role of naturalness in lawhood, in Van Fraassen, Bas (1989) Chapter 2 Section 5. See discussion in Demarest, Heather (2017), and in Lettie, Jacob (ms)

views. For example, it may turn out that the taco question has deep implications for the history of Californian food, such that one side clearly explanatorily outweighs the other. If this is the case, then the debate is substantive, even though this is a contingent, historical issue, and its being substantive is not a trivial matter when there are genuine explanatory differences at stake. Furthermore, attending to questions about what should be explained by any given view offers resources to avoid artificially generating trivial explanatory differences between views, and thereby trivializing substantivity. For example, one might adopt a view on which *what my cousin Andy thinks* about an issue is an important piece of data that must be explained. On this view, debates about any subject on which cousin Andy has an opinion will automatically be substantive. But clearly this is a poorly-motivated criterion, and this potential trivialization (and others like it) can be blocked with a reasonable standard for what should be explained.

Let us return to the criteria for an account of substantivity and consider how well the explanatory power view meets them. The criteria are:

Goals: The account must articulate the broad goals of metaphysics.

Genuine: Substantive debates cannot be settled by arbitrary framing choices.

RML-avoidance: Substantivity cannot be defined in terms of mind-independence.

To take these in turn, the explanatory power view tells us that metaphysics aims at explanatory power. There are facts about whether or not an explanation gives information about a backer, and about whether or not a given explanation is contextually appropriate, so which view displays most explanatory power can only be settled through genuine inquiry. Although explanatory values play a role in determining explanatory power debates cannot be completely settled by deciding upon a set of explanatory values, which means that metaphysical debates cannot be settled by selecting an arbitrary framing. And finally, because CPN Backing permits backers that are not forms of metaphysical determination and because contextual appropriateness is central to explanatory power, substantivity is not defined in terms of mind-independence, thereby avoiding the RML Problem.

## 5. Explanatory Values, Realism, and Alternatives

This view of substantivity gives a central role to contextual appropriateness. Once the basic standard of citing a backer has been met, whether or not an explanation is contextually appropriate depends on the explanatory values operative in the context in which the explanation is formulated and received. Explanatory values are desiderata for the style, nature, format, and so on, of an explanation, and they function as heuristics, balanced against each other. Values often cited in metaphysics include parsimony, fruitfulness, aligning with commonsense intuitions, closely following and vindicating scientific results, and being amenable to precise characterization in formal as well as natural language.<sup>52</sup>

An important feature of explanatory values is that it is not the case that *anything goes*. There are constraints on explanatory values, generated by the nature of explanation and of inquiry. For example, even without a definition of explanatory values, we can recognize that *parsimony* is an explanatory value, while *being emotionally satisfying to a particular person* is not. However, beyond recognizing that there are canonical explanatory values and that they are constrained by the nature of explanation and of inquiry, the explanatory power view says little about which explanatory values we should have. Because the selection of explanatory values is part of the practice of metaphysics, and of inquiry more generally, it would be an overreach for an account of substantivity to settle them.<sup>53</sup>

This quietism extends to the case of political and ethical amelioration in social metaphysics. If social metaphysics should be guided by ameliorative considerations then the explanatory power framework can accommodate that without returning the result that inquiry guided by such

---

<sup>52</sup> For example, Williamson argues for formal precision as an explanatory value in Williamson, Timothy (2007), Afterword. Bryant sketches a program for metaphysics with a close relationship to scientific practice in Bryant, Amanda (2021). For discussion of extra-empirical and explanatory virtues in metaphysics, see Emery, Nina (2023) Chapter 3.

<sup>53</sup> As a descriptive claim this is vindicated by the prevalence of conversations about which explanatory values should guide metaphysics, including debates about the extent to which our metaphysical claims should be close to and informed by science or by theology, and the extent to which they should be regimented or driven by modal or higher-order logic. We can see this also in historical shifts in explanatory values in similar subject-matter. For example, being amenable to expression in formal logic is a desirable feature of views in 21<sup>st</sup> century metaphysics, but was not typically taken as a virtue of 19<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics in the post-Kantian tradition. For a survey of historical changes in the guiding values of metaphysics, see Moore, Adrian W. (2012)

considerations is non-substantive. But the framework does not tell us whether or not social metaphysics should give a central role to moral and political considerations. And that seems right, given controversy about the precise role that political and moral values should play in metaphysics and science, and historical variation in the centrality of such considerations to metaphysics.

These considerations about explanatory values lead to a further, general question about the explanatory power framework: is this realism? The answer is that this is neither a wholly realist nor a wholly anti-realist view.

This is not a realist metametaphysics of the kind on which metaphysical inquiry is all and only targeted at entirely mind-independent phenomena. Consider a grounding approach to social phenomena, on which questions about social metaphysics can be answered by attending to facts about grounding, or a natural kinds approach, on which social kinds are Boydian natural kinds.<sup>54</sup> On these views, the answers to questions about social metaphysics are located in mind-independent features of reality, grounding and natural kinds respectively. On the explanatory power view, on the other hand, metaphysics *can* aim at mind-independent features of the world, but theory choice can also be influenced by features such as the needs and values of inquirers, which may include moral and political concerns. Metaphysics can also tell us about dependence relations that are thoroughly mind-dependent, such as subjective probability-raising, or conceptual associations, or causation understood in anti-realist terms. The explanatory power framework permits flexibility as to how prominent these factors should be in metaphysics, but it permits them, unlike standard forms of realism.

On the other hand, this is not an anti-realist proposal. Metaphysical debates are not decided entirely by features of inquirers or of context, and metaphysics is responsive to more than those features. There is room, on this framework, for thoroughly realist views of first-order phenomena, so long as they display the most explanatory power. For example, one could adopt the explanatory power view and also embrace modal realism, moral non-naturalism, mathematical Platonism, and so on, so long as those views display the most explanatory power. Furthermore

---

<sup>54</sup> As in Schaffer, Jonathan (2017b); Griffith, Aaron (2018); Mallon, Ron (2016)

this is not a deflationary metametaphysics, because the facts about which backing relations are instantiated are not determined by choosing a framing such as a language, or choosing how to understand the existential quantifier. Indeed, as we saw in 5, even explanatory values are fairly constrained, and explanatory power is not entirely determined by a choice of explanatory values. Compare this to, for example, Thomasson's proposal that metaphysical disputes can be understood in terms of metalinguistic negotiation.<sup>55</sup> Metalinguistic negotiation is serious inquiry, but its results amount to decisions to adopt certain conceptual frameworks, whereas on the explanatory power view the results of metaphysical inquiry are not decisions.

Accordingly, *non-realist* is the best term for this approach. On the explanatory power view, metaphysics is responsive to mind-independent and mind-dependent phenomena. Metaphysical debates can be settled by mind-independent and mind-dependent factors. Explanatory power ties these aspects together.

## 7. Conclusion

In light of calls for an account of substantivity that can accommodate social metaphysics, I have defended *substantivity as explanatory power*. This view locates substantivity in explanatory power, conceived of in non-realist terms, and performs the traditional motivating work for an account of substantivity while accommodating social metaphysics.

## Acknowledgements

For helpful discussion and feedback thanks to Social Ontology 2023, the WiM research group, the National Humanities Center, Duke University Philosophy Department, Johns Hopkins University Philosophy Department, the University of British Columbia Philosophy Department, the Philosophy Mountain Workshop, the SoCal Metaphysics Network, the College of William & Mary Philosophy Department, the Mind-Dependence Workshop at St Johns' College, University of Oxford, and the Social Metametaphysics Workshop at the University of St Andrews. Thanks also to the organizers and participants of Metaphysical Mayhem 2025 at Rutgers University, and to the participants of my 2025 graduate seminar on Social Metaphysics at Johns Hopkins University. Particular thanks to Fatema Amijee, Jamin Asay, Ásta, John Bengson, Shamik Dasgupta, Louis deRosset, Nina Emery, Maegan Fairchild, Jade Fletcher, Marc Fiocco, Christopher Frugé, Aaron Griffith, Carrie Jenkins, Katharine Jenkins, Jacob Lettie, Annina

---

<sup>55</sup> Thomasson, Amie (2017)

Loets, Asya Passinsky, David Plunkett, Kevin Richardson, Katherine Ritchie, Gideon Rosen, and Naomi Thompson for helpful discussion.

### **Funding Information**

This research was supported by a fellowship at the National Humanities Centre in 2023-4.

### **ORCID**

Elanor Taylor 0000-0002-1961-3195

### **References**

- Achinstein, Peter (1983) *The Nature of Explanation*. Oxford University Press.
- Antony, Louise (2022) ‘Against Amelioration or: Don't Hire Any Conceptual Engineers Without Talking to Me First’, *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* **96**:168—85.
- Appiah, Kwame Anthony and Amy Gutmann (1996) *Colour Conscious*. Princeton University Press.
- Audi, Paul (2015) ‘Explanation and Explication’, In Chris Daly ed. *The Palgrave Handbook on Philosophical Methods*. 208—230. Palgrave Macmillan. doi:10.1057/9781137344557\_9.
- Barnes, Elizabeth (2014) ‘Going Beyond the Fundamental: Feminism in Contemporary Metaphysics’, *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* Vol. **114**: 335—351. doi:10.1111/j.1467-9264.2014.00376.x.
- Barnes, Elizabeth (2017) ‘Realism and Social Structure’, *Philosophical Studies* **174**: 2417—2433. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0743-y.
- Barnes, Elizabeth and Dee Payton (2025) ‘Emancipatory Methodology’, *Ethics* **135**: 560—588 doi:10.1086/733913.
- Bennett, Karen (2009) ‘Composition, Colocation, and Metaontology’, in David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman eds. *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. 38—76. Oxford University Press.
- Bennett, Karen (2016) ‘There is No Special Problem with Metaphysics’, *Philosophical Studies* **173**: 21—37. doi:10.1007/s11098-014-0439-0.
- Bennett, Karen (2017) *Making Things Up*. Oxford University Press.
- Bliss, Ricki (2014) ‘Viciousness and Circles of Ground’, *Metaphilosophy* **45**: 245—256. doi:10.1111/meta.12072.

- Bryant, Amanda (2021) 'Epistemic Infrastructure for a Scientific Metaphysics', *Grazer Philosophische Studien* **98**:27—49. doi:10.1163/18756735-000096.
- Burman, Åsa (2023) *Nonideal Social Ontology*. Oxford University Press.
- Carnap, Rudolf (1950) 'Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology', *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* **4**:20—40.
- Carnap, Rudolf (1959) 'The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language', Arthur Pap, trans. In Alfred J. Ayer ed. *Logical Positivism*. 60—81. The Free Press.
- Chalmers, David, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman eds. (2009) *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. Oxford University Press.
- Clatterbuck Hayley (2020) 'A Defense of Low-Probability Scientific Explanations', *Philosophy of Science* **87**:91—112. doi:10.1086/706082.
- Demarest, Heather (2017) 'Powerful Properties, Powerless Laws', in Jonathan D. Jacobs ed. *Causal Powers*. 38—53. Oxford University Press.
- Dembroff, Robin (2018) 'Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender.' *Philosophical Topics* **46**:21—50. doi:10.5840/philtopics201846212.
- Díaz-León, Esa (2018) 'On Haslanger's Meta-Metaphysics: Social Structures and Metaphysical Deflationism', *Disputatio* **10**: 201—216. doi:10.2478/disp-2018-0013.
- Díaz-León, Esa (2020) 'Substantive metaphysical debates about gender and race: Verbal disputes and metaphysical deflationism', *Journal of Social Philosophy* **53**:556—574. doi:10.1111/josp.12394.
- Elliott, Katrina and Marc Lange (2022) 'Running it up the Flagpole to see if anyone Salutes: A response to Woodward on causal and explanatory asymmetries', *Theoria* **37**:53—62. doi:10.1111/theoria.22351.
- Emery, Nina (2023) *Naturalism Beyond the Limits of Science*. Oxford University Press.
- Fine, Kit (1994) 'Essence and Modality', *Philosophical Perspectives* **8**:1—16. doi:10.2307/2214160.
- Griffith, Aaron (2018) 'Social Construction and Grounding', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **97**:393—409. doi: 10.1111/phpr.12376.
- Haslanger, Sally (2000) 'Race and Gender: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?', *Noûs* **34**:31—55. doi:10.1111/0029-4624.00201.
- Haslanger, Sally (2012) *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford University Press.

- Hirsch, Eli (2002) ‘Quantifier Variance and Realism.’ *Philosophical Issues* **12**:51—73. doi:10.1111/1468-0068.36.s1.2.
- Jansson, Lina (2018) ‘When are Structural Equation Models Apt? Causation versus Grounding’, in Alexander Ruetlinger and Juha Saatsi eds. *Explanation Beyond Causation: Philosophical Perspectives on Non-Causal Explanations*. 250—266. Oxford University Press.
- Jenkins, Katharine (2016) ‘Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman’, *Ethics* **126**:394—421. doi:10.1086/683535.
- Jenkins, Katharine (2023) *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality*. Oxford University Press.
- Kim, Jaegwon (2005) *Physicalism, or Something Near Enough*. Princeton University Press.
- Kovacs, David (2021) ‘An Explanatory Idealist Theory of Grounding’, *Nous* **56**:530—553. doi:10.1111/nous.12368.
- Ladyman, James, Don Ross, David Spurrett, and John Collier, (2007) *Every Thing Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*. Oxford University Press.
- Lettie, Jacob (ms) “No Unique Best System: Not a Skeptical Hypothesis.”
- Lewis, David (1986) ‘Causal Explanation’, in *Philosophical Papers Volume II*. 214—240. Oxford University Press.
- Loewer, Barry (2021) ‘The Package Deal Account of Laws and Properties (PDA)’, *Synthese* **199**:1065—1089. doi:10.1007/s11229-020-02765-2.
- MacKinnon, Catharine (1987) *Feminism Unmodified*. Harvard University Press.
- Mallon, Ron (2016) *The Construction of Human Kinds*. Oxford University Press.
- Mason, Rebecca and Katherine Ritchie (2020) ‘Social Ontology’, in Bliss, Ricki and Miller, James eds. *Routledge Handbook of Metametaphysics*. 312—324. Routledge.
- Maurin, Anna-Sofia (2019) ‘Grounding and Metaphysical Explanation: It’s Complicated’, *Philosophical Studies* **176**:1573—1594. doi:10.1007/s11098-018-1080-0.
- Mills, Charles (1998) ‘But What Are You Really?: The Metaphysics of Race’ in *Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race*. 41-66. Cornell University Press.
- Mills, Charles (2005) ‘Ideal Theory as Ideology’, *Hypatia* **20**:165—184. doi:10.1111/j.1527-2001.2005.tb00493.x.
- McSweeney, Michaela (2020) ‘Debunking Logical Ground: Distinguishing Metaphysics from Semantics’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* **6**:156—170. doi:10.1017/apa.2019.40

- Mikkola, Mari (2017) ‘On the Apparent Antagonism Between Feminist and Mainstream Metaphysics.’ *Philosophical Studies* **174**:2435—2448. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0732-1.
- Miller, Kristie and James Norton (2017) ‘Grounding: It’s (Probably) All in the Head’, *Philosophical Studies* **174**: 3059—81. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0846-5.
- Miller, Kristie and James Norton (2019) ‘A Psychologistic Account of Metaphysical Explanation’, *Synthese* **196**: 2777—2802. doi:10.1007/s11229-017-1566-x.
- Miller, Kristie and James Norton (2020) *Everyday Metaphysical Explanation*. Oxford University Press.
- Moore, Adrian W. (2012) *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things*. Cambridge University Press.
- Nolan, Daniel (2014) ‘Hyperintensional Metaphysics’, *Philosophical Studies* **171**:149—160. doi:10.1007/s11098-013-0251-2.
- Passinsky, Asya (2021) ‘Finean Feminist Metaphysics’, *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* **64**:937—954. doi:10.1080/0020174X.2019.1669984.
- Passinsky, Asya (ms) ‘Pluralism and Amelioration.’
- Richardson, Kevin (2022) ‘The Metaphysics of Gender is (Relatively) Substantial’, *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* **107**:192—207. doi:10.1111/phpr.12916.
- Ruben, David-Hillel (1990) *Explaining Explanation*. Routledge.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2009) ‘On What Grounds What’, in David Chalmers, David Manley, and Ryan Wasserman eds. *Metametaphysics: New Essays on the Foundations of Ontology*. 347—383. Oxford University Press.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2016) ‘Grounding in the Image of Causation?’ *Philosophical Studies* **173**:49—100. doi:10.1007/s11098-014-0438-1
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2017a) ‘The Ground Between the Gaps’, *Philosopher’s Imprint* **17**:1—26.
- Schaffer, Jonathan (2017b) ‘Social Construction as Grounding; Or: Fundamentality for Feminists, a Reply to Barnes and Mikkola’, *Philosophical Studies* **174**:2449—2465. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0738-8.
- Schnieder, Benjamin (2006) ‘A Certain Kind of Trinity: Dependence, Substance, Explanation’, *Philosophical Studies* **129**:393—419. doi:10.1007/s11098-005-4636-8.
- Sidelle, Alan (2002) ‘Is There a True Metaphysics of Material Objects?’ *Philosophical Issues* **12**:118—145. doi:10.1111/j.1758-2237.2002.tb00064.x.

- Sider, Theodore (2011) *Writing the Book of the World*. Oxford University Press.
- Sider, Theodore (2017) ‘Substantivity in Feminist Metaphysics’, *Philosophical Studies* **174**:2467—2478. doi:10.1007/s11098-016-0739-7.
- Skiles, Alexander and Kelly Trogdon (2021) ‘Should Explanation be a Guide to Ground?’, *Philosophical Studies* **178**:4083—4098. doi:10.1007/s11098-021-01637-w.
- Taylor, Elanor (2018) ‘Against Explanatory Realism’, *Philosophical Studies* **175**:197—219. doi:10.1007/s11098-017-0862-0.
- Taylor, Elanor (2022) ‘Backing Without Realism’, *Erkenntnis* **87**:1295—1315. doi:10.1007/s10670-020-00249-w.
- Taylor, Elanor (2023a) ‘Explanatory Distance’, *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* **74**:221—239. doi:10.1086/714788.
- Taylor, Elanor (2023b) ‘Substantive Social Metaphysics’, *Philosophers’ Imprint* **23**:1—18. doi:10.3998/phimp.1972.
- Taylor, Elanor (2024) ‘A Dormitive Virtue Puzzle’, in Katie Robertson and Alastair Wilson eds. *Levels of Explanation*. 310—328. Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, Amie (2014) *Ontology Made Easy*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomasson, Amie (2017) ‘Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation’, *Analytic Philosophy* **58**:1—28. doi:10.1111/phib.12087.
- Thomasson, Amie (2020) *Norms and Necessity*. Oxford University Press.
- Thompson, Naomi (2016) ‘Grounding and Metaphysical Explanation.’ *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* **116**:395–402. doi:10.1093/arisoc/aow012.
- Thompson, Naomi (2018) ‘Irrealism about Grounding’, *Royal Institute of Philosophy Supplement* **82**:23—44. doi:10.1017/S1358246118000206.
- Thompson, Naomi (2025) ‘Mind-Independence, Realism, and Reality’, *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* **11**:524–541. doi:10.1017/apa.2025.2.
- Van Fraassen, Bas (1989) *Laws and Symmetries*. Oxford University Press.
- Van Inwagen, Peter (1998) ‘Meta-Ontology’, *Erkenntnis* **48**:233–50. doi:10.1023/A:1005323618026.
- Wilhelm, Issac (2021) ‘Explanatory Priority Monism’, *Philosophical Studies* **178**:1339—1359. doi:10.1007/s11098-020-01478-z.

Williamson, Timothy (2013) *Modal Logic as Metaphysics*. Oxford University Press.

Williamson, Timothy (2021) 'Degrees of Freedom: Is Good Philosophy Bad Science?', *Disputatio* **13**:73—94. doi:10.2478/disp-2021-0005.

Wilson, Alastair (2018) 'Metaphysical Causation', *Nous* **52**:723–751. doi:10.1111/nous.12190.