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'Here be revisionary metaphysics!' A critique of a concern about process philosophy

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ABSTRACT: In this paper, I argue that John Dupré and Daniel Nicholson's 'process manifesto' is ironically more sympathetic to descriptive metaphysics than to revisionary metaphysics. Focusing on their argument that any process philosophy automatically slides into Whiteheadian obscurantism if it does not just rest content with revealing the problematic features of ordinary language, I argue that their position occludes a logical space, one in which revisionary metaphysics is articulated without any Whiteheadian obscurantism and involves no dereliction of critical/revisionary orientation. I argue that key features of the respective critical social ontologies of Judith Butler and Talia Mae Bettcher occupy such a logical space.

RÉSUMÉ : Dans cet article, je soutiens que le «manifeste du processus» de John Dupré et Daniel Nicholson est ironiquement plus sympathique à la métaphysique descriptive qu'à la métaphysique révisionniste. En me concentrant sur leur argument selon lequel toute philosophie du processus glisse automatiquement dans l'obscurantisme whiteheadien lorsqu'elle ne se contente pas de révéler seulement les caractéristiques problématiques du langage ordinaire, je soutiens que leur position dissimule un espace logique dans lequel la métaphysique révisionniste s'articule sans aucun obscurantisme whiteheadien et n'implique aucun apauvrissement de l'orientation critique/révisionniste. Je soutiens que les caractéristiques clés des ontologies sociales critiques respectives de Judith Butler et Talia Mae Bettcher occupent un tel espace logique.

Keywords: process philosophy, revisionary metaphysics, descriptive metaphysics, gender, critical social ontology, creativity

"Ordinary language is not the last word: in principle it can everywhere be supplemented and improved upon and superseded. Only remember, it is the *first* word." J. L. Austin

I. The process manifesto
In their 2018 'process manifesto,' John Dupré and Daniel Nicholson write that

> process philosophers have frequently felt the need to introduce a new lexicon in order to come to terms with the processual nature of existence. Whitehead, of course, is the most notorious example, and his influence on modern process philosophy, including on how it is perceived by those who oppose it, has been enormous. However … it is not necessary to appeal to neologisms or resort to opaque prose to make the case for process. Thing-locutions, despite their pervasiveness, do not have to be taken at face value. After all, our linguistic conventions are not always aligned with our ontological convictions …. It suffices that we realize that English grammar, like that of other Indo-European languages, exhibits a clear bias towards substances, which may well be rooted, at least in part, in our cognitive dispositions. (Dupré & Nicholson, 2018, p. 38)

As I understand Dupré and Nicholson here, the traditional worry about process philosophy[1] is that it risks sharing the general problem facing "revisionary metaphysics," to use P. F. Strawson's (1959, p. 9) expression. Rather than *describe* our existing conceptual scheme, namely the structure of how we actually make sense of things, revisionary metaphysics recommends wholescale changes to how we actually make sense of things:

> Metaphysics has been often revisionary, and less often descriptive. Descriptive metaphysics is content to describe the actual structure of our thought about the world, revisionary metaphysics is concerned to produce a better structure.[2] (Strawson, 1959, p. 9)

For Strawson, the function of descriptive metaphysical inquiry is "to lay bare the most general features of our conceptual structure" (Strawson, 1959, p. 9). Specifically, the drive underpinning this function is a cognitive orientation towards sense-making at a sufficiently general level, but at a level that is "not general enough and not far-reaching enough to meet the full metaphysical demand for understanding" (Strawson, 1959, p. 10). What I take Strawson to mean here is that descriptive metaphysics is epistemically humble, to the extent that it has a more limited scope than the scope of revisionary metaphysics. Descriptive metaphysics recognizes the bounds of our sense-making and is especially keen to rein in our cognitive propensity for sense-making at the *most* general level. The extent to which descriptive metaphysics does this means that descriptive metaphysics involves a particular type of second-order discourse: it is interested in making sense of how we make sense of things, by revealing the "central core of human thinking" (Strawson, 1959, p. 10).

Descriptive metaphysics, as such, seeks not to provide an explanation of how our conceptual scheme depends on contingent background conditions. Rather, descriptive metaphysics is directed to describing the various interconnections between the fundamental concepts that constitute our ordinary conceptual scheme.[3] Certain categorial features of our ordinary conceptual scheme, so the Kant-inspired story goes, are indispensable, and hence immune to the doubts of sceptics and to the reforms of revisionary metaphysicians: descriptive metaphysical inquiry delegitimizes those sceptical threats seeking to cast doubt on the validity of our ordinary conceptual scheme, because core commitments of our ordinary conceptual scheme are indispensable for intelligible human experience; and descriptive metaphysical inquiry undermines the viability of revisionary metaphysics, because if certain categorial features of our ordinary conceptual scheme are indispensable for human experience, then they cannot be replaced on pain of no longer having intelligible *human* experience.

Indeed, one such reform of revisionary metaphysics Strawson himself is especially keen on countering concerns the possibility of process metaphysics, which he aims to undercut through a descriptive metaphysical argument that only ordinary three-dimensional middle-sized objects (i.e., substances) can serve as the basic intentional objects of our referential practices.[4] Strawson's argument can be formalized in the following way:

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[1] Process philosophy is diametrically opposed to substance as a basic ontological category.

[2] Cf. "Descriptive metaphysics is concerned with the concepts that form the stable core of all human thought" (Glock, 2012, p. 394).

[3] Viz. Strawson, 1959, p. 247.

[4] Viz. Strawson, 1959, pp. 15–39.

- We refer to objects in the world.
- For us to be in a position to refer to objects in the world, a necessary condition for those objects being candidates for reference is that those objects possess the properties of distinguishability and re-identifiability.
- Distinguishability and re-identifiability are conditions of referential identification for language-users, and require a framework that enables language-users to locate particular things.
- A framework that enables language-users to locate particular things must involve entities that are diverse, rich, stable, and that endure.[5]
- Only one category of entities possesses these required features, namely ordinary three-dimensional objects.
- Therefore, material bodies must be basic.

Revisionary metaphysicians, by contrast, repudiate our ordinary conceptual scheme, on the grounds that it is chimerical. Invariably, the revisionary impulse seems to congeal to the point where the practices of articulating a revisionary vocabulary and the Nietzsche-inspired practice of *creating* new (and better) concepts means that, for *les personnages conceptuels*,[6] ordinary vocabulary and discursive formations (i.e., ordinary conceptual frameworks and epistemic practices of inquiry) just will not do. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari express a similar point:

> First, concepts are and remain signed: Aristotle's substance, Descartes's *cogito*, Leibniz's monad, Kant's condition, Schelling's power, Bergson's duration. But also, some concepts must be indicated by an extraordinary and sometimes even barbarous or shocking word, whereas others make do with an ordinary, everyday word that is filled with harmonics so distant that it risks being imperceptible to a nonphilosophical ear. Some concepts call for archaisms, and others for neologisms, shot through with almost crazy etymological exercises …. (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 7–8)

However, if one is increasingly convinced that ordinary conceptual schemes and vocabularies are irredeemably vitiated with errors and even ideological inflections,[7] then it seems the only mode of language available to the revisionary metaphysician is one that, for all its creativity and novelty, is more and more likely to be unintelligible and obscure. For all of the attractiveness of the revisionary metaphysician's insistence on creative discursive experimentation, such creative discursive experimentations without concrete linguistic anchoring may be interesting from a literary perspective, but they are vacuous from a philosophical perspective. For, to quote Bernard Williams, philosophy "… should introduce our ordinary concerns in a humanly recognisable form" (Williams, 2006, p. 206).

From an analytic philosophical perspective, I think reflecting on the following challenge to predicate nominalism is a particularly helpful way of further explicating the general worry about revisionary philosophical language. This is because predicate

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[5] Otherwise, candidates for reference cannot be distinguishable and re-identifiable.
[6] Viz. Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 2.
[7] By this, I mean forms of domination, oppression, marginalization, and violence. Viz. Marcuse, 2003, p. 196.

nominalism, as articulated by W. V. O. Quine (and supported by Michael Devitt (1980, 1997)), seems a paradigmatic instance of revisionary metaphysics.[8] According to Quine:

> One may admit that there are red houses, roses, and sunsets, but deny, except as a popular and misleading manner of speaking, that they have anything in common …. That the houses and roses and sunsets are all of them red may be taken as ultimate and irreducible, and it may be held that McX is no better off, in point of real explanatory power, for all the occult entities which he posits under such names as 'redness' …. We may say, for example, that some dogs are white and not thereby commit ourselves to recognising either doghood or whiteness as entities. 'Some dogs are white' says that some things that are dogs are white; and, in order that this statement be true, the things over which the bound variable 'something' ranges must include some white dogs, but need not include doghood or whiteness …. A theory is committed to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true. (Quine, 1948, pp. 29–30, pp. 32, 33)

For Quine, McX mistakenly thinks that a semantic theory can only do justice to predicate-ascriptions if such a theory takes predicates with great ontological seriousness. In place of McX's traditional construal of ontological commitment, Quine's alternative criterion proposes a revisionary paraphrase: x (some concrete particular) is f (some property), because there exists a term that designates x and that f applies to x.[9] Under such a revisionary paraphrase, which favours desert landscapes and ontological sparsity, one is not ontologically committed to a universal in the regimented sentence, as to make 'x is f' true does not require the existence of a universal.

However, one can claim that it is impossible to find a satisfactory revisionary paraphrase of propositions involving predicate-ascriptions in which reference to universals is eliminated[10]: for, the idea that one can establish the truth-conditions of the proposition 'x is f' by claiming that 'is f' applies to x seems implausible. In resisting a non-nominalist semantic theory, predicate nominalism appears to follow the conduct of an ostrich thrusting its head

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[8] Another, but, of course, very different type of revisionary metaphysics would be Hegel's speculative idealism, which represents a direct response and critical alternative to Kant's proto-descriptive metaphysical insistence that "… the proud name of ontology, which presumes to offer synthetic *a priori* cognitions of things in general … must give way to the more modest title of a transcendental analytic" (Kant, 1781/1787/1998, A247/B304). The essence of Hegel's elaborate post-Kantian speculative system, where the ontological focus is on *becoming* rather than on *being*, is not an endorsement of replacing ontology with the *a priori* science of transcendental judgement — which one can take to be the spirit of the Copernican turn in philosophy — but rather a commitment to the fundamentally self-reflective nature of inquiry. What I mean by this is that the dialectical shift from Leibnizian-Wolffian rationalist metaphysics to transcendental idealism, for Hegel, does not culminate in any kind of eliminativism or 'bald' naturalism. On the contrary, the shift provides inquirers with the clues for seeing how *both* metaphysics *and* transcendental philosophy can *now* be transformed into *speculative philosophy*. As such, when Robert Pippin writes that "thereafter [Kant's *Critique of pure reason*], instead of an *a priori* science of substance, a science of 'how the world must be' … a putative philosophical science was directed to the topic of how any subject must 'for itself' take or construe or *judge the world to be*" (Pippin, 1990, p. 839; cf. Bird, 2006, p. 96), his understanding of the thrust of the post-Kantian directive is too narrow. As Brady Bowman writes, "*Post Kant* is not necessarily *propter Kant*" (Bowman, 2013, p. 3).
[9] Cf. Devitt, 1997, p. 96.
[10] Cf. Armstrong, 1997, pp. 105, 108.

into the sand.[11] Indeed, one could even propose that the notion of 'applying a term/predicate to a subject' involves an ontological commitment to a *relation* — and if that is the case, then Quine's predicate nominalism may well collapse into a form of realism. And if Quine's predicate nominalism may well collapse into a form of realism, not in the least having buckled under the weight of the implausibility of its paraphrasing strategy, then the failure here would provide more than just a cautionary tale to inquirers wishing to make "an imaginative leap" (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 4). Here be revisionary metaphysics!

Now, Dupré and Nicholson, as process philosophers, are *ipso facto* revisionary metaphysicians. I think this point is uncontroversial, and, therefore, does not need a supporting argument. Crucially, however, they recognize problems with construing the task of revisionary metaphysics (in their specific case, process philosophy) in terms of providing a philosophic vocabulary that forces our ordinary discursive architecture — i.e., the overall design of our concepts and the way we make sense of things — out of the picture. In place of such a conception of revisionary discourse, they argue that it is sufficient for revisionary metaphysics (in their specific case, process philosophy) to recognize that ordinary ontological language and technical ontological convictions do not often marry well, that ordinary ontological language, riddled with its bias towards substance and kinds essentialism, is just a popular and misleading manner of speaking.

II. Logical occlusion and discursive conservatism

However, I do not find persuasive Dupré and Nicholson's claim that it is enough for process philosophy (and, therefore, revisionary metaphysics) for inquirers to be aware of problems with ordinary vocabulary, to be aware of problems with ordinary ways of making sense of things, and to recognize the hegemony of substance-discourse.[12] My concern is that a questionable, exhaustive conceptual binary is something to which Dupré and Nicholson are committed. The binary in question regards revisionary metaphysics (in their specific case, process philosophy) *either as comprising Whiteheadian obscurantism, or as involving mere recognition of how ordinary linguistic conventions do not synchronize with ontological convictions*. In this respect, the exhaustive conceptual binary underpinning their position occludes a fertile logical space, one in which revisionary metaphysics (in this specific case, process philosophy) is articulated *without* any Whiteheadian obscurantism and involves no significant dereliction of critical/revisionary orientation and inclination.

Directly connected to this point is, I think, an extra dimension to the charge just levelled against Dupré and Nicholson. Specifically, the extra dimension involves going further than contending that they occlude a fertile conceptual space for revisionary discourse devoid of Whiteheadian levels of obscure neologisms and lexical opacity. In order to articulate this extra dimension, I would like to draw attention to the following arguments by Herbert Marcuse and Adrian Moore respectively:

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[11] The term 'ostrich nominalism' was initially coined by David Armstrong (1978).

[12] The following passages from Johanna Seibt's work are particularly helpful for evidencing the hegemony of the substance-paradigm: "From Aristotle onwards, ontology has been under the spell of what I have called the 'myth of substance' — a set of unreflected presuppositions for ontological theory construction that prescribe a focus on static entities, mainly a dualism of particulars and universals, as the most 'natural' way to describe the structure of the world" (Seibt, 2018b, p. 113). "The myth of substance consists in a network of presuppositions which, in combination, engender the belief that the traditional category dualism of substance and attribute provides the most 'natural' articulation of the ontological commitments of everyday discourse" (Seibt, 1996, p. 121). See also Rescher, 2000, p. 4.

However, what is at stake is not the definition or the dignity of philosophy. It is rather the chance of preserving and protecting the right, the *need* to think and speak in terms other than those of common usage — terms which are meaningful, rational, and valid precisely because they are other terms. What is involved is the spread of a new ideology which undertakes to describe what is happening (and meant) by eliminating the concepts capable of understanding what is happening (and meant). (Marcuse, 2003, p. 183)

Why then should anyone think that, as practising metaphysicians, we are limited to making sense of things in broadly the same way as we already do? Well, the phrase 'as practising metaphysicians' is critical. One view would be the following. Anyone operating at a lower level of generality, attempting to make relatively specific sense of relatively specific things, can have occasion to innovate in all sorts of ways, but the *metaphysician*, responding to nothing but the sheer demand to make sense of things, should be concerned only to protect whatever sense-making is already under way, in particular to protect it from confusion: any innovation not prompted by some specific need merely carries the risk of new confusion. (That is not by any means a crazy view, although it is always in danger of degenerating into a conservative resistance even to *non*-metaphysical innovation — a resistance, more specifically, to any departure, at any level of generality, from 'ordinary language' — which really is crazy.) (Moore, 2012, p. 11)

Why should anyone think that, as practising metaphysicians, we have license to make sense of things in a way that is radically new? Because it is not clear that our most general way of making sense of things cannot be radically improved …. [T]hat is the very simple, very basic reason for taking revisionary metaphysics seriously …. And the point is simply this. It is unclear why we should eschew anything of that sort. It is unclear why we should think that nothing of that sort could ever be to our advantage. (Moore, 2012, pp. 12–13)

The extra dimension to my critique of Dupré and Nicholson is a Frankfurt School critical theoretic-inspired one, namely that their occlusion of a fertile logical space for non-obscurantist revisionary metaphysics risks revealing, what I would like to call, '*discursive conservatism*' on their part. By 'discursive conservatism,' I mean a staunch resistance to radically changing and altering ordinary conceptual schemes and vocabularies, to the point of allowing oneself "… to be frightened off by an initial impression of strangeness" (Frege, 1879/1970/2013, p. 7). For Marcuse — perhaps even more so than Moore, given Marcuse's explicit critical theoretic contention that ordinary language is *ideologically* saturated — discursive conservatism ultimately congeals into a hostile, reactionary attitude. From this perspective, discursive conservatism comprises "the defamation of alternative modes of thought which contradict the established universe of discourse" (Marcuse, 2003, p. 178). In this way, discursive conservatism preserves the discursive *status quo* and counter threats to it.

Under my proposed Frankfurt School critical theoretic-inspired framework, then, there is something especially troubling about Dupré and Nicholson's position. Their contention in their 'process manifesto' — that any revisionary metaphysics that does not just

rest content with recognizing the ways in which ordinary language is problematic automatically slides into obscurantism, opacity, and obfuscation — reveals some type of ironic anxiety, perhaps even an ironic ideological[13] fear of "radically new forms of sense-making" (Moore, 2012, p. 192), an ironic fear of Deleuzean levels of creativity,[14] and an ironic reactionary disposition to genuinely challenging and even overcoming the discursive *status quo*.[15]

      This is a significant point, as the specific kind of transformative revisionary power I have in mind here differs from, for instance, Frege's construal of conceptual innovation through the articulation of formal language. For, Frege — in both the Preface to the *Begriffsschrift* (1879/1970/2013, pp. 6–7) and in *The foundations of arithmetic* (§2) — does not aim to bring about *radical changes* in how we make sense of things. As Moore correctly notes, Frege "intended to exploit, nurture, and consolidate sense-making of ours that is already under way" (Moore 2012, p. 197). He is, therefore, a reformer.[16] However, to use an expression from James Ladyman and Don Ross, process philosophy — as an important instance of revisionary metaphysics — does not seek to nurture or consolidate the substance paradigm: *everything about the substance paradigm must go in this context*. To this extent, then, I think that the process philosopher's goal is a type of creative 'subversion' in Deleuze's technical sense.[17] This is, in part, evidenced by the general processist contention that certain explanatory functions are performed *best* by relational, as opposed to substantival, categories.[18] For, relational, as opposed to substantival, categories enable one to regard "contingency, emergence, novelty, and creativity … among the fundamental categories of metaphysical understanding" (Rescher, 2000, p. 6). Such categories are vital for making sense of the natural and social world. As Johanna Seibt and Dupré & Nicholson respectively write:

> Process ontology … becomes most powerful once it leaves the habitual presumptions of the substance paradigm behind. (Seibt, 2018a, p. 121)

> Process ontology … is far more attuned to and concordant with the understanding of the living world … than is its substantialist rival. (Dupré & Nicholson, 2018, p. 22)

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[13] 'Ideologies,' to use the technical Marxist sense, are practices and modes of thought that present aspects of human existence (political configurations, conceptual schemes, etc.) that are historical and changeable as eternal and unchangeable.

[14] Viz. Bergson, 1922, pp. 209–210. Viz. Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, pp. 2, 82–83. See also Deleuze, 2006, p. 100.

[15] I take my expression 'the discursive *status quo*' as equivalent to Marcuse's expression 'the established universe of discourse.' Under Max Horkheimer's programmatic articulation of a critical theory of society (Horkheimer, 1937/1972), a critical social theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria simultaneously: the theory must be explanatory, practical, and normative. The theory must (1) explain what is wrong (i.e., normatively deficient) with current social reality, (2) clearly identify which agents (and/or social, political, legal, economic institutions) are required to progressively change current social reality, and (3) provide both valid norms for social critique as well as articulate an achievable vision of emancipation from all the circumstances that currently enslave human beings.

[16] To clarify, this is not *necessarily* a bad thing to be.

[17] Viz. Deleuze, 1983, p. 53. There is an interesting question about whether Talia Mae Bettcher's (2013) position is creatively subversive to this extent as well.

[18] See also Bickhard (2003; 2009), Campbell (2015), Geach (1950), Puntel (2007), Rescher (1996; 2000), and Sellars (1960).

Rather than engage in the descriptive metaphysical project of providing a topography of our actual conceptual framework, and then, where possible, offer piecemeal tweaks here-and-there to "the established universe of discourse,"[19] I think a revisionary metaphysician should redesign the way in which we currently make sense of things through the creation and development of a new discursive architecture. For a process philosopher, *tode ti* is ideology; substance is 'crime,' paraphrasing Adolf Loos (1913/1929/2016).[20]

In an ironic way, Dupré and Nicholson's conception of revisionary metaphysics — namely, that it is sufficient for process philosophy to *merely* recognize bias and ideology in our actual conceptual scheme — may be viewed as having more kinship with P. M. S. Hacker's descriptive metaphysical commitment to "concepts and categories that we could not abandon without ceasing to be human" (Hacker, 2001, p. 368) than with the process philosophy of Seibt.

Crucially, in response to Hacker's Wittgensteinian conservatism, while I think it is reasonable to contend that there are concepts and categories we could not abandon without ceasing to be human, I would think a more expressive, revisionary, and — crucially — *politically* sensitive imagination recognizes that there are concepts, categories, and frameworks we must abandon to not simply retain, but more saliently, even *perfect* our humanity. By doing this, following Judith Butler, one is much better equipped to "… produce new forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability" (Butler, 2004, p. 208).[21]

I think the revisionary (specifically, progressive) discourse of producing *new* forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability cannot be overstated. For, producing *new* forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability is a democratic activity in the technical Deweyan sense: John Dewey makes it clear that democracy should not be understood as a *purely political concept*. As he writes:

> A democracy is more than a form of government; it is primarily a mode of associated living, of conjoint communicated experience. The extension in space of the number of individuals who participate in an interest so that each has to refer his own action to that of others, and to consider the action of others to give point and direction to his own, is equivalent to the breaking down of those barriers of class, race, and national territory which kept men from perceiving the full import of their activity. (Dewey, 1916/2004, p. 93)

What democracy involves is more basic than either a type of constitution empowering voters or a type of government typified by majority rule. Democracy, rather, is a set of values

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[19] The core network of categorial concepts and forms of thought would also be equivalent here.

[20] Loos' iconic essay "Ornament and crime" was first published in French ("Ornement et crime") in 1913 in *Les cahiers d'aujourd'hui*. His essay was then published in German ("Ornament und verbrechen") in 1929 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*.

[21] Curiously, Hacker appears much more open to both the possibility and desirability of revisionary theory in practical philosophy, rather than in theoretical philosophy: "in practical philosophy there is room for the introduction of novel first-order concepts and for the remoulding of existing concepts" (Hacker, 2009, p. 150). This is because his revisionism about ethical, social, and political inquiry, but not about metaphysical and scientific inquiry, hinges on the following premise (an unhelpful, outdated bifurcation of theoretical and practical philosophy): "The concepts of concern to theoretical philosophy are employed primarily in the description and explanation of what is (or is not) actually the case. But the central concepts that engage our attention in practical philosophy articulate our conception of the ideal — of what we ought to be and what we ought to do" (Hacker, 2009, p. 150). *Contra* Hacker, the imbrication of power and how we make sense of things means that metaphysical and scientific inquiry can never possibly be value-neutral in the first place.

comprising a particular form of associating with others. For Dewey, democracy is *a way of living*. As Alison Kadlec correctly notes, "democracy, then, cannot be reduced to a set of institutional functions or abstract visions of the state" (Kadlec, 2006, p. 537). Crucially, in Dewey's sense, a democratic way of life is the life of inquiry, where inquiry, *à la* Charles Sanders Peirce, is open, non-dogmatic, inclusive, fallibilist, ceaseless, critical problem-solving experimentation. To this extent, then, the democratic life and the inquiring life are *mutually supportive*, insofar as democratic environments promote and sustain inquiry, and inquiry promotes and sustains democracy.

Understood in such a way, open, non-dogmatic, inclusive, fallibilist, ceaseless, critical problem-solving experimentation is exactly what motivates the revisionary metaphysician. To elaborate my point in some detail, I would like to focus on two recent examples from the philosophical literature on social ontology — Butler's notion of gender as performative activity; and Talia Mae Bettcher's 'multiple-meanings' position. I think these two positions occupy precisely that fertile logical space in which revisionary metaphysics can be articulated *without* any (putative) Whiteheadian obscurantism and involves *no* significant dereliction of critical/revisionary orientation.

(a) Butler

In order to overcome the limitations of traditional theorizing about gender and its corresponding story of border-control political representation and participation, Butler (1992, 2004, 2006) has argued that one ought to adopt a 'performativity thesis' about gender. A performativity thesis necessarily involves understanding, for example, 'woman' as "a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification" (Butler, 2006, p. 43). Crucially, a performativity thesis is decidedly uninterested in making sense of gender by successfully questing for individuating metaphysical properties serving as necessary and sufficient ontological conditions for membership of a gender group. Rather, gender is made sense of *qua* relationally defined and genealogically situated performative acts.[22]

The relationally defined and genealogically situated performative activities sustained by historically mediated practices of recognition are complex through-and-through, to the extent that repetitively produced performative stylized acts are "constellation[s] of ever-changing processes of articulation and organization" (Moore, 2012, p. 546): I think to be gendered, therefore, is not to satisfy a fixed set of biological or cultural criteria, but, *à la* He-Yin Zhen's concept of *nannü*,[23] to be baptized in a system of reproducing symbolic and material power relations imbuing one's body and experiences with social significance.

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[22] For Deleuze and Guattari, the concept 'woman' would be "something indiscernible that is not so much synesthetic [relating to synaesthesia, the neurophenomenological condition where, for example, hearing a sound stimulates taste-sensations as well as visual sensations] as syneidetic [the activity of making normative judgements]" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994, p. 20).

[23] Chinese historians traditionally know He-Yin Zhen (何殷震) as He Zhen (何震). However, as Lydia Liu, Rebecca Karl, and Dorothy Ko note, "[i]n her published works, [she] prefers to sign her name He-Yin Zhen so as to include her mother's maiden name [Yin] in the family name [He]" (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013, p. 2). Therefore, out of respect for her, I use her preferred surname, as do Liu, Karl, and Ko. On the one hand, *nannü* can be legitimately translated as 'gender,' as, for example, in the case of translating *nannü pindeng* ('gender equality') into English. On the other hand, in her essays, He-Yin uses '*nannü*' as both noun and adjective, to the extent that it is a significantly complex political ontological category "that lies at *the foundation of all patriarchal abstractions and markings of distinction*" (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013, p. 11). *Nannü* is, in effect, a totalizing field of power relations responsible for *all* types of Confucian-instituted hierarchy in China. In this respect, *nannü*

Genders and gendered traits (like 'nurturing' or 'ambitious') are the "intended or unintended product[s] of a social practice" (Haslanger, 1995, p. 97). Females *become* women through symbolic and material processes whereby they *acquire* 'womanly' traits and *learn* 'womanly' conduct.[24] Children are often dressed in gender-specific clothes and colours, and parents tend to buy their children gender-specific toys and games. Parents also (regardless of intentions) tend to reaffirm certain 'appropriate' gender-specific behaviours: girls *qua* 'girls' are often discouraged from playing sports like rugby; boys *qua* 'boys' are often told not to cry. As He-Yin writes, "by [saying] 'men' (*nanxing*) and 'women' (*nüxing*) we are not speaking of 'nature,' as each is but the outcome of differing social customs and education" (He-Yin, 1907/2013, p. 184).

In this respect, I think He-Yin would somewhat agree with Butler's post-structuralist position that gender is not "a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow; rather, gender is … instituted … through a *stylized repetition of* [*habitual*] *acts*" (Butler, 2006, p. 179).[25] These habitual acts include wearing certain clothing that *marks* one's gender, moving and positioning one's body in a way that marks one's gender, etc. Understood in such a manner, performativity and its new vocabulary involves, what I would call, 'pragmatic processist constitution': gender is not something one is; gender is something one *does*; it is an integrated sequence of symbolic and material acts functionally linked to one another, a relational , rather than a substantival being.[26] The symbolic and material processes of repeating and institutionalizing these gendering acts crystallizes gender, invariably encouraging people to think of gender as a *natural* kind. This is the root cause of oppressive gender norms. Having discussed important features of Butler's critical social ontology, I now wish to turn attention to Bettcher's position.

(b) Bettcher

Bettcher (2013) has articulated a position illustrating the particular complexity of the metaphysical category of 'woman.' Her position partly comprises an argument against using Jennifer Saul's semantic contextualism[27] for the purpose of establishing the metaphysical claim that trans women are women. According to Bettcher, Saul's contextualist construal of gender terms as indexicals — i.e., construing the extension of 'woman' as operating in the same semantic manner as 'night' — means that a trans woman cannot deny there are contexts in which she is not a woman even though she is a woman in other contexts. For, this is precisely what would have to happen under the indexical framework, since indexicals are subject to context-specific variations — e.g., now it is 20:00 (at T1 [20:00]); now it is 21:00 (at T2 [21:00]). In this way, under semantic contextualism, "trans women come out as marginal

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"exceeds and resists facile rendition into 'man and woman,' 'gender,' 'male/female,' or other familiar English concepts" (Liu, Karl, & Ko, 2013, p. 11). He-Yin is virtually unknown in either analytic or continental feminist circles. See Zarrow (1988) and Liu, Karl, & Ko (2013) for further on this extraordinary anarcho-feminist.

[24] For He-Yin, however, certain *people* (as opposed to simply females) become women through symbolic and material processes whereby they acquire 'womanly' traits and learn 'womanly' conduct, since the distinction between female/woman as categories is not one that she thinks pre-dates dominating gender relations.

[25] I write 'somewhat' because stylized repetition does not quite capture the more explicitly relational way that He-Yin specifically thinks about gender in terms of hierarchical relations of domination. This is partly why she thinks that achieving full relational equality means that the gender categories of *nan* and *nü* will eventually disappear — all of which is, at least in principle, compatible with the survival of stylized repetition of relevant habitual acts.

[26] Cf. Barad, 2003, p. 803.

[27] See Saul (2012).

cases of womanhood" (Ásta, 2018, p. 87). And since they come out as marginal cases, this means, in effect, that trans women are women(ish). Therefore, using semantic contextualism to argue for the metaphysical claim 'trans women are women' falls flat on its face. Because semantic contextualism is incapable of "entirely validating" (Bettcher, 2017, p. 127) trans people, it is neither helpful nor conducive for trans liberation politics; although the semantic contextualist conclusion that trans women are women(ish) does not intend to ontologically (and politically) delegitimate trans women in the overtly reactionary way the proposition 'trans women are not women' functions to do, the semantic contextualist contribution to ameliorative social ontological discourse is, at best, insipid, and, at worst, insincere.

Bettcher's ameliorative[28] 'multiple-meanings' position, which is rooted in the specific ways trans people *themselves* make sense of their own gender identity (in Bettcher's case, the trans activist subcultures of Los Angeles), convincingly articulates how the category 'woman' is highly complex. For, as Bettcher argues, 'woman' *qua* dominant cisnormative forms of life cannot be legitimately applied to trans women (on pain of misgendering, marginalization, and erasure), and 'woman' *qua* trans subculture forms of life cannot be applied to cis women (on pain of the incommensurability involved with a "meaning conflict" (Bettcher, 2013, p. 234) brought about by trans subcultures contesting cisnormativity). Crucially, the articulation of "woman-D" (Bettcher, 2013, p. 244) ('woman' in the *dominant*, cisnormative sense) and "woman-R" (Bettcher, 2013, p. 244) ('woman' in the *resistant*, trans subcultural sense) is no variation of semantic contextualism, insofar as Bettcher's position has no implicit or explicit commitments to a new contextually relative standard of womanhood. Bettcher's position, rather, is in the business of revisionary sense-making, because, as she writes, "[i]t makes more sense to speak of a transformation in meaning or concept than to speak of a new contextualized relative standard" (Bettcher, 2013, p. 244).

I think it is clear that what drives Butler's and Bettcher's respective critical social ontologies is not just "experimental adventure" (Whitehead, 1929/1978, p. 9). Their revisionary — specifically ameliorative — drive aims to *transform* ordinary vocabulary for the emancipatory purpose of ending oppression, domination, and marginalization, and to enable more democratic forms of association:

> For the purposes of a radical democratic transformation, we need to know that *our fundamental categories can and must be expanded to become more inclusive and more responsive to the full range of cultural populations. This* does not mean that a social engineer plots at a distance how best to include everyone in his or her category. It means that *the category itself must be subjected to a reworking from myriad directions, that it must emerge anew as a result of the cultural translations it undergoes*. What moves me politically, and that for which I want to make room, is the moment in which a subject — a person, a collective — asserts a right or entitlement to a liveable life when no such prior authorisation exists, when no clearly enabling convention is in place. (Butler, 2004, pp. 223–224. Emphasis added)

Butler's and Bettcher's respective positions have explicitly concrete anchoring in the struggles of vulnerable social groups to avoid forms of violence on a daily basis, and, in many cases, even the constantly heightened risk of ontological delegitimation and metaphysical

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[28] See Haslanger (2012) for further on amelioration.

degradation. Given the struggles and distress of oppressed and marginalized social groups, it is not sufficient to better carve the social at its joints. One must have in view whether the metaphysical categories we currently use to make sense of gender are not just themselves prone to ideological distortion and vitiation, but that those categories also symbolically and materially harm people. This is why, as Sally Haslanger writes, "[a]t the most general level, the task is to develop accounts of gender … that will be effective in the fight against injustice" (Haslanger, 2012, p. 226).[29]

I have argued against Dupré and Nicholson's contention in their 'process manifesto' that any process philosophy not just resting content with recognizing the ways in which ordinary language is problematic automatically slides into opacity and obfuscation. Specifically, I have argued that their ironic resistance to a genuinely radical revisionary discourse reveals some type of anxiety, perhaps even an ironic fear of radically new forms of sense-making, an ironic fear of Deleuzean levels of creativity, and even a reactionary disposition to genuinely challenging and even overcoming the discursive *status quo*. Dupré and Nicholson's 'process manifesto,' therefore, has ironically more sympathy with Hacker's *descriptive* metaphysical orientation, than with *revisionary* metaphysical orientations, such as Seibt's process ontology and the respective critical social ontologies of Butler and Bettcher.

The respective critical social ontologies of Butler and Bettcher are not dialectically satisfied with acknowledging problems with ordinary ways of making sense of gender and with acknowledging the persistence of ideology in our categorial frameworks and discursive architecture. Their respective revisionary metaphysics occupy precisely that fertile logical space occluded by Dupré and Nicholson's argument in their 'process manifesto' in which revisionary metaphysics can be articulated without any Whiteheadian obscurantism and involves no significant dereliction of critical/revisionary orientation.

Acknowledgements

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[29] Cf. Jones, 2014, p. 101.

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