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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

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Toward the "overthrow of Platonism": Processist critical social ontology and ameliorative discourse

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that, for the purpose of developing an effective critical social ontology about gender groups, it is not simply sufficient to carve gender groups at their joints: one must have in view whether the metaphysical categories we use to make sense of gender groups are prone to ideological distortion and vitiation. The norms underpinning a gender group's constitution as a type of social class and the norms involved in gender identity attributions, I propose, provide compelling reason to think *critical* social ontological discourse is more processist-orientated, rather than substantival-orientated. The advantages of a processist critical social ontology of gender groups are that, unlike substance-discourse, process-discourse recognizes how gender group talk and gender identity talk are often messy and therefore require a conceptual scheme that can transform vocabulary for the emancipatory purpose of ending oppression, domination, and marginalization.

1 | I

In the Anglo-American philosophic tradition at least, science is often gauged by how well it can "carve nature at its joints"[1]—by how well it purely describes and explains nature.[2] If one applies the arresting Platonic metaphor to the function of delineating an *ontology*, then it seems reasonable to understand the function of such theory articulation in terms of carving *reality at the most general level at its joints*. The best ontologies, under this logic, then, are especially dextrous at general metaphysical carving.[3] Taking all this into consideration, if one now turns to social ontology, the best social ontologies are particularly skillful at carving *social reality at its joints*.

A basic feature of discourse about social reality[4] is the ubiquity of social group talk in a typical natural language speech and written propositions. For, expressions such as "women," "the Black Panthers," "vegans," and so on permeate one's ordinary way of talking about and making sense of social reality. On this point, Katherine Ritchie (2015, 2018, 2020) has very recently articulated a helpful metaphysical distinction between two *types* of social group, to which one is ontologically committed under the Quinean criterion, given how these social groups often serve as the bound variables of typical natural language sentences about the social world:

- "Organized social groups" (OSG), like sports teams, committees, and clubs, typified by a *formal structure*.
- "Feature social groups" (FSG), such as racial groups, gender groups, disabled groups, and sexual orientation groups, constituted by a respective *shared feature*.

Given Ritchie's distinction and what it means for how social ontology is practiced, I think social ontology may be said to involve three basic questions:

A. To paraphrase Ian Hacking, what I shall call, "[the] gentle metaphysical question"[5] of social ontology: *"Do social groups exist?"*
B. What I shall call, "the stern metaphysical question of social ontology": *"What makes OSG and/or FSG groups?"*[6]
C. What I shall call, "the sterner metaphysical question of social ontology": *"What constitutes the individual member-identity and the formation of an FSG group-identity?"*[7]

My focus in this article is on (C). I think (C) is the most difficult (or less resolved) question of the three questions,[8] in part because the sterner question's interest in the metaphysics of FSG reveals the extent to which there are high socio-political stakes directly attached to FSG ontological constitution. As Iris Marion Young writes,

> [s]ocial groups of this sort are not simply collections of people, for they are more fundamentally intertwined with the identities of the people described as belonging to them. They are a specific kind of collectivity, with specific consequences for how people understand one another and themselves.[9]

I take what Young remarks as alluding to an additional substantive philosophical point, namely that as soon as one engages with (C), one is thrown into a particular type of discursive space that is morphologically different to the kind of discursive space concerning (A) and (B). This, of course, needs some unpacking.

The project of carving *x* (nature/reality in general/social reality) at its joints may be said to involve describing and explaining *x*. Indeed, there is good reason to suppose that both (A) and (B) are part and parcel of the carving project, since these questions are solely structured around the epistemic interest of purely describing and explaining the ontological furniture of social reality. On this point, the gentle question seems restricted to the level of description and the stern question restricted to the level of explanation. However, the sterner question prima facie suggests (C) is not merely in the business of description and explanation. To see why this is the case, I think one needs to have Wilfrid Sellars's concept of *persons* in view.[10]

According to Sellars, persons are a type of complex normative category manifestly different from those typical natural kinds (e.g., H_2O) of direct interest to the scientific image. Making sense of persons (and their interrelated normative categories, such as agency and knowledge) necessarily means that our sense-making framework in *this* intellectual context is not in the business of describing and explaining. As Sellars argues,

> Now, the fundamental principles of a community, which define what is "correct" or "incorrect," "right" or "wrong," "done" or "not done" are the most general common *intentions* of that community with respect to the behaviour of the members of the group. It follows that to recognise a featherless biped or dolphin or Martian as a person requires that one think thoughts of the form "We (one) shall

do (or abstain from doing) actions of kind *A* in circumstances of kind *C*." To think thoughts of this kind is not to *classify* or *explain*, but to *rehearse an intention*.[11]

In Hegelian-pragmatist fashion, Sellars holds that persons are individuated not just by a description of person practices, but also (and principally) by an account of how these social-epistemic practices convey persons' sensitivity to a normative community; the ways in which persons are sensitive to fellow language-using, norm-bearing agents; the ways in which, so to speak, persons occupy a recognizable standing *in the logical space of reasons*. As Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) and Mark Lance point out,

> Sellars is getting at the point that recognising someone as a person is not merely an observative act, but also a practical act of the second kind … We become and remain the types of beings that have specific, agent-relative engagements with others through an ongoing network of hails and acknowledgments ….[12]

To this extent, then, I think engagement with (C) involves recognition that (C) puts significant pressure on the suitability and appropriateness of just carving FSG at their joints as a way of facing up to (C).

The descriptive-explanatory carving project concerns whether joints are there independently of our categorization, whether joints are there ready to be discovered and described by our categories. In such an intellectual context, the debate is centered on the dispute between those who argue that the joints are *determined by* categorization (nominalism), and those who argue that the joints are *determined independently of* categorization (realism). However, the discursive morphology of (C) regards purely describing and explaining gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability groups and identities as unsuitable and inappropriate for facing up to (C) and making sense of things in play here. This is because gender, race, class, sexuality, and disability belong to the complex normative category of persons, the principal subjects of the logical space of reasons (as opposed to the logical space of nature). Making sense of persons is the business of normative discourse not because persons are "emergent" kinds over and above the descriptive-explanatory categories of science, *but because persons, as normative categories, are not of interest to descriptive and explanatory projects in the first place*. To quote Sellars here, "[when making sense of a normative category as a *normative* category] we are not giving an empirical description … we are placing it in the logical space of reasons, of justifying and being able to justify what one says."[13] Therefore, for social ontology to face up to (C), social ontologists must do something more than carve FSG at their joints.

If one accepts that it is not discursively, and above all, not politically, sufficient to carve FSG at their joints, it seems reasonable to contend that facing up to (C) means one must predominantly have in view whether the metaphysical categories and conceptual scheme *we actually use* to make sense of FSG are prone to ideological distortion and vitiation. In other words, facing up to (C) means one must prepare to not only recognize that existing and established vocabulary and discursive formations for talking about gender groups and other FSG as a type of social and practical identity are not fit for purpose but to also transform actual vocabulary and discursive formations for *emancipatory* purposes.

Construed in such a manner, there is a formal parallelism between the general interest and methodology of critical social theory and the general interest and methodology of critical social ontology: just as the critical social theorist begins by acknowledging that current social reality is normatively deficient in some way—whether this is due to an exploitative mode of production, to the hegemony of instrumental reason, to the colonization of the lifeworld, or to systemic practices of misrecognition and nonrecognition—the critical social ontologist begins by acknowledging that current social metaphysical vocabulary is normatively deficient in some way (as I will elaborate in II(a)). Critical social ontology, as such, does something more than carve FSG at their joints: our best (social) ontologies are going to be those which are particularly proficient *not* at metaphysical carving but at articulating metaphysical "accounts of gender and race that will be effective in the fight against injustice," as Sally Haslanger contends.[14]

In what follows, I argue that the norms underpinning gender attributions seem to reveal the metaphysics of gender[15] as processist. For, the processist idea that genders and the corresponding ways in which gender identities are attributed to people are *(re-)formed*, *(re-)moulded*, *(re-)developed*, and *(re-)contested* implies that traditional social

ontological vocabulary rests on a mistake. The advantages of a processist critical social ontology are that, unlike substance-discourse, process-discourse recognizes how gender and gender identity[16] are welcomely "messy," "non-innocent" concepts and therefore require a discursive formation that can sensitively do justice to the complex phenomenological and hermeneutic textures indicative of sexed bodies and gendered experiences for emancipatory purposes.

2 | II(A)

A long-standing critical theoretic worry about FSG talk is the propensity for construing FSG *qua* simple, fixed blocs[17]: for example, on the specific subject of gender groups, such as "women," Catharine MacKinnon conceives of "women"[18] as a unitary and univocal scripted collective. In doing so, her way of making sense of women as a social group regrettably narrows the conceptual field and fails to take differences among women into account, thus non-recognizing "the multiplicity of cultural, social, and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed."[19] The apparent blindness to complexity, plurality, and difference in "women" is caused by generally making sense of FSG *qua* a juridical logic in which the vocabulary for generally making sense of FSG is ideological.[20] As Linda Nicholson writes,

> [unitary discourse] operate[s] as a policing force which generates and legitimises certain conditions, experiences, practices, etc., and curtails and delegitimises others."[21]

In other words, even feminist identity politics,[22] since it is organized around women as a unitary and univocal collective, involves symbolic violence with material effects, insofar as "women" *qua* a totalized FSG comprising "unity-through-domination or unity-through-incorporation"[23] can *never* be defined in a way that does not suggest—either implicitly or explicitly—some "unspoken normative requirements"[24] to which all women should conform as a condition of being deemed real, ontologically legitimate women. This "normativity problem" is eloquently expressed by Judith Butler and Susan Strickland respectively[25]:

> [T]he premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism, understood as a seamless category of women, inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. These domains of exclusion reveal the coercive and regulatory consequences of that construction ... Indeed, the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from "women" whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics.[26] If a stable notion of gender no longer proves to be the foundational premise of feminist politics, perhaps a new sort of feminist politics is now desirable to contest the very reifications of gender and identity, one that will take the variable construction of identity as both a methodological and normative prerequisite, if not a political goal ....[27]

> [D]ominant theories and categories were wrong not simply in universalising beyond their scope, that is, that they were partial in the sense of being limited, not universally applicable, but that they were also partial in the sense of being ideological, interested and distorted; in short to a greater or lesser extent false ... The assertion of feminist "difference" was and is, basically a challenge and critique.[28]

One can, therefore, see that the propensity for construing FSG as simple, fixed blocs involves at least two inter-related cognitive pathologies:

- naturalizing socially mediated and genealogically constituted gendered bodies and experiences, such that a gender group becomes totalized, metaphysically mutating into a natural kind[29];

- rendering inquirers discursively blind to the complex processes involved in gender identity attribution discourse and to the genealogical backdrop for developing an approach to gender as a "hermeneutic sphere."

Rather than questing for some "golden nugget of womanness"[30] as a means of finding out what it is to *be* a woman, a "hermeneutic sphere" involves conceptualizing "woman" through a processist prism that refers to the Bacchanalian blooming buzzing confusion of historical, sociological, cultural, psychological, psychoanalytic, and anthropological backdrops serving as the crucible in which gender groups (and other FSG) are (re-)formed, (re-)moulded, (re-)developed, and (re-)contested.[31] This is, in part, what I take Simone de Beauvoir to mean when she asserts that "[o]ne is not born, but rather *becomes*, woman."[32]

The notion of a hermeneutic sphere begins critical social ontological inquiry by regarding gender groups and gender identity as irreducibly complex through-and-through. For, one cannot help but be immediately struck by how complex FSG and FSG identity are at both the symbolic and material level, so much so that one may legitimately balk[33] at the urge to reduce gender groups and gender identity in "an all or nothing way."[34]

On this subject, Talia Bettcher (2013) has recently illustrated the complexity of "woman" specifically. Her position partly comprises an argument against using Jennifer Saul's semantic contextualism[35] for the purpose of establishing the metaphysical claim "trans women are women." According to Bettcher, Saul's contextualist construal of gender terms as indexicals—that is, 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. In other words, using semantic contextualism to argue for the metaphysical claim "trans women are women" falls flat on its face. Therefore, semantic contextualism is not capable of "entirely validating"[36] trans people, and, as such, is neither helpful nor conducive for Trans Liberation politics.

Bettcher's ameliorative "multiple-meanings" position, which is rooted in the specific ways trans people *themselves* make sense of gender identity—in Bettcher's case, the trans activist subcultures of Los Angeles—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"[37] brought about by trans subcultures contesting cisnormativity).

Crucially, the articulation of "woman-D"[38] ("woman" in the *dominant*, cisnormative sense) and "woman-D"[39] ("woman" in the *resistant*, trans subcultural sense) is not a variation of semantic contextualism, insofar as Bettcher's "multiple-meanings" position has no implicit or explicit commitments to a new contextually relative standard of womanhood. Bettcher's position, rather, is in the business of *radical 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 contextualised relative standard."[40]

One significant methodological lesson to learn from Bettcher's position is the following maxim for critical social ontology, which I would like to call "The Reciprocity Principle": *the explanans must be as complex as the explanandum*. The justification for my claim that an equally complex *explanans* is required to properly make sense of a complex *explanandum* lies in that if one accepts John Dewey's point that "... the social, in its human sense, is the richest, fullest and most delicately subtle of any mode of experience,"[41] then one needs to have discursive resources and sense-making frameworks to do justice to the particularly high levels of richness, fullness, and delicate subtlety.

I think one discursive resource and sense-making framework that does such justice is a process metaphysics foregrounding a Hegelian-pragmatist notion of recognition, one which deems collective life as emblematic of the social domain (*des Geistigen*).[42] However, before I turn to detailing the Hegelian-pragmatist notion of recognition in question, it is important to flesh out The Reciprocity Principle a little more, at least with respect to two points: (1) the appropriate methodology to which it is specifically committed and (2) the conditions of the methodology's adequacy.

Starting with (1), the Reciprocity Principle, understood as a methodological maxim for critical social ontology, is inherently hostile to ideal theory, the still-dominant methodology of Anglo-American political philosophy.

This hostility is evident not simply from how the Reciprocity Principle is logically bound up with the basic post-Kantian commitment to embodied and socio-historically embedded subjectivity,[43] but also—and I would say more importantly—by how, as a maxim for critical social ontology, the Reciprocity Principle functions to confront the complexities of contemporary social reality head-on. For, one is, by default, baptized as embodied and embedded in various social environments structured by multiple and intersecting power relations and norms of material production, gender, race, sexuality, class, and (dis)ability.

Ideal theory involves "strict compliance,"[44] namely first deducing pure (ideal) principles of justice and the like, which are justified *in abstracto*. As John Rawls writes,[45]

> [a] conception of justice must specify the requisite structural principles and point to the overall direction of political action. In the absence of such an ideal form for background institutions, there is no rational basis for continually adjusting the social process so as to preserve background justice, nor for eliminating justice. Thus, ideal theory, which defines a perfectly just basic structure, is a necessary complement to non-ideal theory without which the desire for change lacks an aim.[46]

Ideal theory is, in effect, a methodological version of Kant's claim in the *Critique of Pure Reason* that "intuitions without concepts are blind"[47]: just as, for Kant, the pure concepts of the understanding are transcendental intellective conditions for making the objects of possible experience intelligible to us, the ideal theorist regards pure models as providing the formal-transcendental structure that appraises contemporary socio-political reality. Under this model, then, political models with no ideal principles are directionless and ineffective. To quote Rawls, "[t]he reason for beginning with ideal theory is that it provides, I believe, the only basis for the systematic grasp of [contemporary socio-political] problems."[48]

Ideal theory, as is well-known, has come under a near-constant stream of vitriolic critique from pragmatism and political realism,[49] as well as a plethora of critical theoretic traditions from postcolonialism, the Frankfurt School, poststructuralism, intersectional feminism to queer theory. To my mind, part of what helps brings these different traditions together—and central to the idea of doing justice to the particularly high levels of richness, fullness, and delicate subtlety in the social world—is viewing the inquirer as a "phenomenologically oriented sociologist,"[50] rather than as an ontological carver.

Confronting the complexities of contemporary social reality head-on as a phenomenologically oriented sociologist involves a commitment to a "bottom-up" method of social analysis, under which the inquirer's normative interests are vested in not only establishing what specific values social institutions profess to promote and embody but also in detailing *the actual experiences of actual people*, to see if, and to what extent, these specific values are genuinely instituted and embodied. On this point, there is compelling reason to believe that socio-political models divorced from both the material and phenomenological content of the contemporary socio-political world are directionless and ineffective. As Charles Mills expresses the point,

> [h]ow in God's name could anybody think that this is the appropriate way to do ethics? ... Why should anyone think that abstaining from theorising about oppression and its consequences is the best way to bring about an end to oppression? Isn't this, on the face of it, just completely implausible?"[51]

This brings me now to (2), the conditions of the Reciprocity Principle's adequacy. To do justice to the particularly high levels of richness, fullness, and delicate subtlety in the social world requires carefully detailing the actual experiences of actual people. This is not least because the actual experiences of actual people are irreducibly complex through-and-through. Indeed, it seems reasonable here to contend that if the actual experiences of actual people are not carefully, sensitively, and meticulously detailed by inquirers, if actual testimonial reports of actual people are not fully captured and made sense of on *speakers' own terms* (namely, without any presence of testimonial smothering

pressures, which vulnerable speakers often internalize due to cultural hegemonic ideological power relations), then it is increasingly unlikely—if not impossible—to legitimately identify if, and to what extent, alleged progressive values are genuinely instituted and embodied in the social spheres in question. In other words, the test of adequacy is how communicatively sensitive inquirers' models are to the dynamics of the real experiences of real people. More bluntly put, the failure to be communicatively sensitive and accurate risks leaving inquirers' explanatory models as inflected by epistemic violence.

Having articulated the methodological commitments of the Reciprocity Principle and its adequacy conditions, I now turn to detailing the Hegelian-pragmatist notion of recognition that appears to satisfy Dewey's point.

3 | II(B)

If one accepts the idea that gender group categories (such as "women," "men," "nonbinary folk") are (re-)formed, (re-)moulded, (re)developed, and (re-)contested, then not only is the metaphysics of gender never fixed, insofar as—for example—what it is to be a woman is not ontologically set in stone but *a fortiori* gender identity is also never fixed. On the subject of gender identity, specifically, it seems reasonable to claim that identifying as a woman may involve agonistic negotiation,[52] an intersubjective play of intentionality, where mutual recognition between individuals involves practices of acts and summons in a shared, reflective, (ideally) symmetrical social space. The dynamical process of intersubjective recognition, where intersubjective recognition itself presupposes that all practical identities are inherently vulnerable through-and-through, is mediated by a dialogically structured logical space of reasons—the "network of discursive holdings,"[53] where, for example, normative discourse about gender, racial, sexual, and disability identity takes place.

From this perspective, *S*'s identifying as a woman, for example, involves *S*'s self-focused psychosocial tracking relations of gender conferral.[54] This is established by the intersubjective "looping-effect"[55] practices between *S* and other agents in the logical space of reasons. Indeed, the authority, legitimacy, and validity of gender identity attributions to oneself and others stem from metaphysical claims being assented to and acknowledged by a community of discursive agents engaging in "active interrogation of the [social] world."[56] Since gender identity attribution is a normative social practice enriched by a myriad of processes, it is reasonable to contend that "[t]his field of possibilities is not static or singular but rather is a dynamic and contingent multiplicity."[57]

The idea of formation, reformation, molding, development, redevelopment, and contestation shows the extent to which gender categories "simply won't stay put," given their processist constitution.[58] In this respect, then, the notion of a hermeneutic sphere and its processist inflections combined with a Hegelian-pragmatist notion of recognition give reason to contend that certain explanatory functions are *adequately* performed *only* by relational-processist, as opposed to substantival, ontological categories.[59] For, *only* relational-processist, as opposed to substantival, ontological categories can *sensitively* make sense of blooming buzzing confusion, volatility, "contingency, emergence, novelty, and creativity … among the fundamental categories of metaphysical understanding."[60] As Johanna Seibt, and John Dupré & Daniel Nicholson respectively claim,

> [p]rocess ontology … becomes most powerful once it leaves the habitual presumptions of the substance paradigm behind.[61]

> Process ontology … is far more attuned to and concordant with the understanding of the living world … than is its substantialist rival.[62]

When applied to the domain of FSG, I take these remarks to signify that traditional social ontological vocabulary rests on a mistake:

- *Traditional* social ontology is "apollonian" and 'static', as illustrated by the practice of carving FSG (and OSG) at their joints.
- *Traditional* social ontology mistakenly rests on construing FSG group membership in substantival manners.
- *Traditional* social ontology mistakenly rests on the metaphysics of sortals.
- *Traditional* social ontology mistakenly rests on reifying FSG.[63]
- *Traditional* social ontology mistakenly rests on, what Seibt has dubbed, "The Myth of Substance":

> 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.[64]

> 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.[65]

One ground for suspicion of traditional social ontology is that it presupposes conceptions of FSG that are "remarkably unsubtle"[66] in their understandings of the intersubjective processes through which FSG categories and practices of gender identification develop. Paraphrasing Henri Bergson, traditional social ontology, so skillful in carving substances, is awkward the moment it touches processes. Traditional social ontology proceeds with the rigor, the stiffness and the brutality of a conceptual scheme not designed for such use.[67]

While natural language speech acts and written sentences aim to make sense of FSG, natural language speech acts and written sentences often seem to make sense of FSG in a reifying manner.[68] This is because the explanatory power of carving FSG at their joints appears to rest on a conceptual framework in which FSG are sortal substances. FSG membership, then, is disciplined by sortal identification and constitution *qua* some set of predicables that, for example, all women *qua* women supposedly share and that are necessary and sufficient for their membership of their shared gender group. In this respect, when Christine Overall voices alarm that, "[a]s a member of the social group 'women', I find this idea frightening",[69] she is not wrong.

Traditional social ontology's reliance on the substance paradigm and the Platonic metaphor means that it cannot help *but* talk about gender group (and other FSG) membership in terms of sortals. And this means traditional social ontology construes the metaphysics of gender groups juridically, since, as Butler observes, "the subjects regulated by such structures are, by virtue of being subjected to them, formed, defined, and reproduced in accordance with the requirements of those structures."[70]

Facing up to (C) enables one to see that FSG, as Young rightly argues, "are real not as substances, but as forms of social relations."[71] FSG are neither simple nor complex "things"—they are not "things" *simpliciter*. FSG are complex sites of complex processes. Reconceptualizing FSG talk *qua* the logic of relationality, recognition, and processist determination is, therefore, transformative and ameliorative.[72] Understood in such a manner, I would argue that a processist critical social ontology aims, following Young,

> to disengage social group difference from a logic of identity, in two ways. First, we should conceptualise social groups according to a relational rather than a substanstialist logic. Secondly, we should affirm that groups do not have identities as such, but rather that individuals construct their own identities on the basis of social group positioning.[73]

To overcome the limitations of traditional social ontological theorizing about gender and its corresponding story of border-control political representation and participation, Butler has argued one ought to adopt a "performativity thesis."[74] A performativity thesis necessarily involves understanding "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.[75]

Crucially, a performativity thesis *eo ipso* is decidedly uninterested in making sense of "woman" by successfully questing for sortal properties. Rather, gender and gender identity are respectively made sense of *qua* relationally defined and genealogically situated performative acts.

The relationally defined and genealogically situated performative activities sustained by practices of recognition are very complex through-and-through, to the extent that repetitively produced performative stylized acts are "constellations of ever-changing processes of articulation and organization"[76]: to be gendered thus-and-so, therefore, is not to satisfy a fixed set of biological or cultural criteria, but, thinking in terms of He-Yin Zhen's concept of *nannü*,[77] to be baptized in a system of fluctuating symbolic and material power relations imbuing one's sexed body and experiences with social significance.

Genders and gendered traits (like "nurturing" or "ambitious") are the "intended or unintended product[s] of a social practice."[78] Females, under such an account, *become* women through symbolic and material processes whereby they *acquire* "womanly" traits and *learn* "womanly" conduct.[79] Indeed, children are often dressed in gender-specific clothes and colors, and parents tend to buy their children gender-specific toys and games. Parents also (regardless of intentions) tend to reaffirm certain "appropriate" gender-specific behaviors. For example, 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."[80]

In this respect, I think He-Yin would somewhat agree with the poststructuralist 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."[81] These habitual acts include wearing certain clothing that marks one's gender, moving and positioning one's body that marks one's gender, etc. Understood in such a manner, performativity and its new vocabulary involve pragmatic processist constitution: gender is something one *does* – it is an integrated sequence of symbolic and material acts functionally linked to one another; gender is a relational doing rather than a substantival being.[82] The symbolic and material processes of repeating and institutionalizing gendering acts crystallizes gender, as for example in the case of normalizing discourse that "boys don't cry," invariably encourages people to think of gender groups as natural kinds. This may be identified as a root cause of oppressive gender norms and ideological gender identity attribution practices.

So, what does all this mean for the discipline of social ontology itself? Focusing on the processes involved in the agonistic production and reproduction of gender norms and gender identity attributions has many similarities with Bernard Williams's "post-analytic" answer to the question "what might philosophy become?" For Williams, the move away from predominantly using the vocabulary and discursive formations of the natural sciences to make sense of "thick" concepts expands and enriches one's conceptual scheme. I think sundering FSG individual member-identity and sundering FSG group-identity (i.e., a processist critical social ontology of FSG identity) indeed expands and enriches one's conceptual scheme, for sundering identity is better suited to grasp the highly complex and intricate phenomenological and hermeneutic dimensions of gender and gender identity. Above all, these theoretical gains have an important transformative and emancipatory advantage: sundering identity enables more democratic forms of association through the production of "new forms of intimacy, alliance, and communicability."[83]

Moving toward a processist critical social ontology of gender, as a way of facing up to (C), is prompted by a specific need: to get things not just descriptively, but politically right, since the metaphysics of gender has vital political implications. Our best social ontologies, therefore, contribute to the "overthrow of Platonism,"[84] insofar as they are going to be *critical* ones which are particularly proficient at ameliorative metaphysical discourse, rather than metaphysical carving. Such a claim may find support from Donna Haraway, who argues that.

the acid tools of postmodernist theory and the constructive tools of ontological discourse about revolutionary subjects might be seen as ironic allies in dissolving Western selves in the interests of survival … In the fraying of identities and in history the reflexive strategies for constructing them, the possibility opens up for weaving something other than a shroud for the day after the apocalypse that so prophetically ends salvation history.[85]

By way of replying to what I have argued thus far, I wish to construct and then consider two possible objections to my account. This is not to suggest there are only two possible objections to my position but rather that the two possible objections I wish to articulate and then reply to here represent a substantive challenge to what I have put forward in this article.

4 | II(C)

First, while it is reasonable to think that the development of *gender identity* takes place in the logical space of reasons (or if not the logical space of reasons itself at least something like it), when it comes to talking about the development of *gender as a social status*, where arguably people find themselves thrown into roles without their engaging in any cognitive activity like identification or self-identification, it would not be reasonable to deem the logical space of reasons as the location of such development.

In response, though I agree it would not be reasonable to identify the logical space of reasons as the site for the development of gender as a *social status*, insofar as, for example, the privileges ideologically accorded to "man" may be constituted orthogonally to the multiple ways in which a person may be identified as a man, I do not think the objection invalidates my *general* point about pragmatic processist constitution. For, one can be wedded to a processist account of the development of gender identity and wedded to a processist account of the development of gender as a social status without seeing those two processist accounts collapse into each other. This is because the two accounts, even though they bear on one another in various ways, have different interrogative concerns: when inquiring into gender identity, one focuses on high-level cognitive activities such as self-identification and self-reflection as developing out of multiple intersubjective processes in the network of discursive holdings, a set of processes and practices unique to the logical space of reasons and its communicative dynamics; when inquiring into *gender as a social status*, specifically with respect to, for example, how the status of "man" is often privileged unlike other gender statuses, one attends to how the status develops out of a different set of processes and power relational practices, namely ones that contribute to/responsible for gender-hierarchical and supremacist structuring.

Second, in the wake of recent anti-Platonic work on the metaphysics of FSG by Linda Martín Alcoff, Ásta, Elizabeth Barnes, Bettcher, Robin Dembroff, Haslanger, Mari Mikkola, and Charlotte Witt (to name but a few), there seems to be reason to deem my own critical social ontological position as guilty of overdetermination, since there is now a quite well-established and strong shift in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy towards ameliorative analysis, so much so that traditional social ontology is no longer seriously practiced. To put the second objection another way, my efforts in this article appear more characteristic of feeding a fed horse.

By way of reply here, I think the charge of overdetermination is not legitimate. No one can plausibly deny that the recent work of feminist metaphysicians and theorists has helped change the social ontological conversations for the better. However, at the same time, I think *novel, complementary* critical social ontological work can and should be carried out, not least because ideology—when disclosed—tends to slither away and reproduce as a metaphysical, epistemological, and social zombie. This is where the processist discourse I have expounded as a particular type of revisionary metaphysics comes into the picture because (a) the processist discourse I have put forward elaborates Young's claim that FSG are real *as forms of social relations (rather than substances)*, (b) the processist discourse's metaphysical commitments complement Butler's view about performativity and antiessentialism, (c) the processist discourse aims to be *even more* critical of traditional social ontology than Witt et al., and (d) the processist discourse

helps carve out logical space for discursive allyship between feminist metaphysicians and process metaphysicians, two types of theorist who, as far as I can tell, have yet to interact and pool their resources together.

To conclude this article, I think is worth emphasizing the revisionary metaphysical angle of my position. For that matter, the following passages by Herbert Marcuse and Adrian Moore are instructive about the advantages of revisionary metaphysics:

> 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).[86]

> 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.)[87]

> 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.[88]

From a descriptive metaphysical perspective, it seems that substance is one of those "concepts and categories that we could not abandon without ceasing to be human."[89] However, while there may well be concepts and categories we could not abandon without ceasing to be human, it seems to me the revisionary metaphysical, 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.[90] This is a lot more than "experimental adventure."[91] It is innovation prompted by a specific need: to end cruelty.[92]

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ENDNOTES

[1] Plato, 1997 *Phaedrus*: 265e.

[2] See Campbell, O'Rourke, and Slater (2011).

[3] From a Quinean perspective, ontologies would be assessed by how well they read off the entailments of our regimented best current scientific theories and describe and explain what there is.

[4] This may be interchangeable with "the social world."

[5] Hacking 1990:135.

[6] See Effingham (2010) for an excellent study on the metaphysics of groups.

[7] Following Michel Foucault and his concept of reverse discourse, the question *"What constitutes the group-identity of an FSG?"* can be understood two-fold: i) a discourse from an oppressive power regime which describes the marginalised class of an FSG; ii) a positive, or resilient or resistant in-group politicised understanding of an FSG.

[8] I deem (A) the "gentle" question, because answering (A) is less controversial: one may reasonably, if not even baldly, claim that social groups exist, given the social ontological commitments embedded in our ordinary (as well as scientific) vocabulary. For that matter, one might even go so far as to say that important contemporary debates in social ontology tend not to include questions about *whether* social groups exist. Rather, important contemporary debates in social ontology tend to include questions about *what* social groups are. In this respect, then, "social groups exist" is presupposed.

However, I recognise some social ontologists may insist that (A) involves a substantive debate between group realists (who posit the existence of groups) and group eliminativists (who deny the existence of groups and aim to re-translate talk of groups). For different defences of group realism, see Putnam (1979), Quine (1976), Díaz-León (2013, 2015), Haslanger (1995, 2000, 2003, 2005, 2012), and Ásta (2011, 2013, 2015, 2018). For defences of group eliminativism, see Quinton (1975), and Appiah (2002).

One might be inclined to answer (B) by arguing that, for example, OSG are sets. See Uzquiano (2004) for an objection to set-based responses. Because answering (B) involves greater difficulty than answering (A), I think it is reasonable to label (B) as a "stern" question.

[9] Young, 1990:43.

[10] See Giladi (2021a).

[11] Sellars, 1963:169.

[12] Kukla & Lance, 2009:180–181.

[13] Sellars, 1963:169.

[14] Haslanger, 2012:226. Cf. Jones, 2014:101.

[15] Questions concerning the metaphysics of gender involve questions such as "What is to *be* a woman?", "What is it to *be* a man?", "What is to *be* non-binary?", "What enables S to *be* part of the FSG 'women'?", "What enables T to *be* part of the FSG 'men'?", "What enables R to *be* part of the FSG 'non-binary'?".

[16] "Gender identity" is typically characterised expansively in terms of "[o]ne's innermost concept of self as male, female, a blend of both or neither – how individuals perceive themselves and what they call themselves" (http://www.hrc.org/resources/sexual-orientation-and-gender-identity-terminology-and-definitions). (Sally Haslanger, interestingly, contends that having a "feminine gender identity (at least in one sense of the term) is a psychological orientation to the world that includes the internalisation of feminine norms" (Haslanger, 2012: 228n9). This approach is noticeably not just more political but also more controversial than the general notion of gender identity quoted earlier, in that Haslanger's analytic feminist position is inflected with a particular type of social concern, namely the putative status of women *qua* women as *victims* under patriarchal oppression and sexist-misogynist lifeworlds.)

As I see it, questions about gender identity and questions about gender bear on another in at least two ways. First, a woman's own intimate reflection on her own experiences and body for the purpose of identifying as a woman can give clues as to how exactly people are gendered – for example, S identifies as a woman, because S has legitimate reason to think and feel that her own experiences and sexed body involve the performed stylised repetitive acts constitutive of the FSG "women"; or, under Haslanger's view at least, S identifies as a woman, because S has legitimate reason to think and feel that she occupies a social position of subordination in part due to the ways in which her body is sexed. Second, ways in which people are gendered can give clues as to why people identify with a specific gender (or set of genders) – for example, if gender is a type of "social class" (Haslanger, 2012:228), then this can partly explain why someone identifying as non-binary does so insofar as they may think and feel comparatively more marginalised and oppressed in some ways than someone who identifies as a man; or if gender is "a megasocial role" (Witt, 2011:92), then this can partly explain why someone identifying as a woman does so insofar as, under uniessentialism, she may rightly think and feel her achievements and her practical relation-to-self cannot be rendered fully intelligible to herself and others by bracketing her gender.

[17] Viz. Appiah (1994), Butler (1999), Haraway (2016), Spelman (1988), and Strickland (1994).

[18] See MacKinnon (1982, 1987).

[19] Butler, 1999:19–20.

[20] This is ironic in MacKinnon's case, considering her self-described characterisation as a radical feminist.

[21] Nicholson, 1998:293. Cf. Haraway, 2016:19.

[22] See Alcoff (1997, 2006a, 2006b).

[23] Haraway, 2016:20.

[24] Butler, 1999:9.

[25] Cf. Haraway, 2016:16–17.

[26] Ibid., p. 7–8.

[27] Ibid., p. 9.

[28] Strickland, 1994:267.

[29] Cf. Haraway, 2016:22; 23–5.

[30] Spelman, 1988:159.

[31] Cf. Williams, 1991:129–30.

[32] Beauvoir 1949/de Beauvoir, 2010:273 – emphasis added. See Mann and Ferrari (2017).

[33] Cf. Stoljar, 2011:40. Cf. Mikkola, 2006:92.

[34] Armstrong, 1978:54.

[35] See Saul (2012).

[36] Bettcher, 2017:127.

[37] Better 2013:234.

[38] Ibid., p. 244.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid.

[41] Dewey 1948:44.

[42] See Ikäheimo and Laitenen (2011).

[43] This basic post-Kantian commitment is something to which *all* critical theorists sign up.

[44] Viz. "I shall assume that … the nature and aims of a perfectly just society is the fundamental part of the theory of justice" (Rawls, 1971:9).

[45] Though Rawls, historically speaking, is the leading exponent of ideal theory, one must not equivocate Rawlsianism with ideal theory. Equivocating the two conflates ideal theory with liberal egalitarianism: crucially, ideal theory – as a method for normative political theorising – is also practised by philosophers of a very different political-ideological persuasion to Rawls and Brian Barry. For example, Allen Buchanan, Joshua Cohen, G.A. Cohen, Ronald Dworkin, David Miller, and Robert Nozick – in their own respective ways with differing political-ideological commitments to Rawls (and Barry) – are all ideal theorists.

[46] Rawls, 1993:285.

[47] Kant 1781/1787/Kant, 1998: A51/B76.

[48] Rawls, 1971:8.

[49] Viz. Geuss (2001, 2008).

[50] Horkheimer 2002:192.

[51] Mills, 2005:169, 171. Cf. "What is characteristically liberal is the attempt always to see society *sub specie consensus*. This approach, however, is completely misguided" (Geuss, 2001:4); Cf. Geuss, 2008:6–7.

[52] Cf. Ozturk (2017) and Ásta (2018).

[53] Kukla & Lance, 2009:192.

[54] See Ásta, 2018:73–77.
See also Bettcher (2013, 2017), Butler (1991, 1999), Witt (2011), Haslanger (1995, 2000, 2012), and Alcoff (2006a, b).

[55] Viz. Hacking (1999).

[56] Stout 2018:8.

[57] Barad 2003:819. Cf. Connolly 2002:64.

[58] Bettcher 2013:246.

[59] See also Geach (1950), Sellars (1960), Puntel (2002), Laycock (2006), Rescher (1996, 2000), Bickhard (2003, 2009), and Campbell (2015).

[60] Rescher 2000:6.

[61] Seibt 2018a: 121.

[62] Dupré & Nicholson 2018:22.

[63] Cf. Whitehead 1929/1978:7.

[64] Seibt 1996:121. Cf. Rescher 2000:4.

[65] Seibt 2018b: 113.

[66] Appiah 1994:156.

[67] Viz. Bergson 1944:181.

[68] Cf. Rescher 2000:6. Cf. Marcuse 2002:186.

[69] Overall 2009:14.

[70] Butler 1999:4.

[71] Young 1990:44. Cf. May 1987:22–23.
Cf. Whitehead 1929/1978:41.

[72] Cf. Bettcher 2013:241.

[73] Young 2000:82. Cf. Kukla and Lance 2009:192.

[74] I also make this point in Giladi (2021b).

[75] Butler 1999:43.

[76] Moore 2012:546.

[77] 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 2013:2). 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. However, in her essays, He-Yin Zhen 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 2013:11). *Nannü* is, in effect, a totalising field of power relations responsible for *all* types of Confucian-instituted hierarchy in China. In this respect, *nannü* "exceeds and resists facile rendition into "man and woman," "gender," "male/female," or other familiar English concepts" (Liu, Karl, & Ko 2013:11).
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.

[78] Haslanger 1995:97.

[79] 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.

[80] He-Yin 1907/2013:184.

[81] Butler 1999:179.
I write "somewhat", because stylised 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 stylised repetition of relevant habitual acts.

[82] Cf. Barad 2003:803.

[83] Butler 2004:208.

[84] Deleuze 1983:56.

[85] Haraway 2016:20; 21.

[86] Marcuse 2003:183.

[87] Moore 2012:11.

[88] Ibid., pp. 12–13.

[89] Hacker 2001:368.

P.F. Strawson aims to undercut the possibility of process metaphysics via 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. Strawson's argument (viz. Strawson 1959:15–39) can be formalised in the following way:

1. We refer to objects in the world.
2. 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.
3. Distinguishability and re-identifiability are conditions of referential identification for language-users and require a framework that enables language-users to locate particular things.
4. A framework that enables language-users to locate particular things must involve entities that are diverse, rich, stable, and that endure, otherwise, candidates for reference cannot be distinguishable and re-identifiable.
5. Only one category of entities possesses these required features, namely ordinary three-dimensional objects.
6. Therefore, material bodies must be basic.

[90] I make a similar claim in Giladi (2021b).

[91] Whitehead 1929/1978:9.

[92] I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for their perceptive remarks and requests that I clarify some key terms. I would also like to thank Katherine O'Donnell, who read an earlier draft of this paper, for her constructive criticisms.

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