



# Critical social ontology

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Received: 23 June 2022 / Accepted: 19 May 2023 / Published online: 5 June 2023  
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## Abstract

Critical social ontology is any study of social ontology that is done in order to critique ideology or end social injustice. The goal of this paper is to outline what I call the fundamentality approach to critical social ontology. On the fundamentality approach, social ontologists are in the business of distinguishing between appearances and (fundamental) reality. Social reality is often obscured by the acceptance of ideology, where an ideology is a distorted system of beliefs that leads people to promote or accept widespread social injustices. Social reality is also obscured in cases where ordinary thought and language simply is not perspicuous enough to represent the social objects, kinds, and structures that are central to understanding social injustice. In both cases, I argue that the critical social ontologist will benefit from using the tools and concepts of fundamental metaphysics.

**Keywords** Social ontology · Ideology · Metametaphysics · Critical theory · Social philosophy

## 1 Introduction

A classic way to understand metaphysics concerns the distinction between appearance and reality. Plato tells us that the world we perceive—the world understood by sense perception, with material objects constantly in flux—is not the way the world *really* is; the real world is understood by reflection and contains eternal unchanging objects—the Forms. Contemporary metaphysicians continue this broad approach to metaphysics, arguing that there is sometimes a substantial difference between how the world appears to ordinary people (“the folk”) and what the world is fundamentally like. Our folk intuitions about ordinary objects, the passage of time, free will, and so on, may be radically wrong. The job of the metaphysician, then, is to penetrate the appearances,

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to grasp fundamental reality where the folk fail to do so. Call this the *fundamentality approach* to metaphysics.

Social ontology is the metaphysics of social objects like social groups, institutions, collective intentions, nations, etc. Critical social ontology is any study of social ontology that is done in order to critique ideology or end social injustice. On one popular approach to critical social ontology, the critical social ontologist seeks to engineer concepts that are useful for the purpose of ending social injustice. Call this the *ameliorative approach* to social ontology. An ameliorative inquiry into race and gender does not identify the actual (or fundamental) concepts of race and gender; rather, the goal is to specify what race and gender concepts we ought to use.

Recently, philosophers have discussed apparent tensions between the methods of critical social ontology—specifically, feminist metaphysics—and fundamental metaphysics.<sup>1</sup> Fundamental metaphysics is thought to be value-neutral and about the fundamental, while critical social ontology is thought to be neither value-neutral nor about the fundamental. The friends of fundamentality have responded to these criticisms by arguing that (a) value-neutrality is not essential to the fundamentality approach and that (b) the fundamentality approach can be about what is relatively (and not absolutely) fundamental. While the friends of fundamentality have done an admirable job in suggesting that fundamental metaphysics is compatible with critical social ontology, I want to explore two aspects of fundamental metaphysics that makes it well-suited for doing critical social ontology.

*First:* by uncovering the fundamental facts about the social world, we can debunk false ideology. An ideology is a distorted system of beliefs that leads people to promote or accept widespread social injustices. Acceptance of ideology tends to be widely distributed throughout societies. Because the fundamentality approach is not excessively deferential to ordinary intuitions about what the social world is like, fundamentality theorists can reject erroneous (and harmful) assumptions about gender, race, sexuality, and so on. The fundamentality approach is naturally a debunking approach.

*Second:* the fundamentality approach makes sense of important aspects of social reality that are not perspicuously talked about in ordinary language. For example, while the folk may talk primarily about gender kinds, it may be more politically useful to have an account of gender structures (or social positions), instead. To theorize about structures, however, we cannot analyze the folk meaning of “gender structures.” There is no such folk meaning. Instead, we can use the fundamentality approach to talk directly about the nature of gendered structures. Critical social ontology benefits from the ability to analyze social kinds, objects, and states of affairs that do not correspond to ordinary terms or concepts.

Here is my plan. I start by outlining fundamental metaphysics (Sect. 2) and critical social ontology (Sect. 3). In the following sections, I explain how to do critical social ontology from a fundamentality perspective. I explain how the fundamentality approach, when applied to the social world, can be a way of debunking false ideology (Sect. 4). I then discuss how the fundamentality approach allows us to analyze social

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<sup>1</sup> Barnes (2014, 2017), Mikkola (2017), Sider (2017), Schaffer (2017), Griffith (2018), Passinsky (2021) and Richardson (2023).

structures that are not perspicuously described in ordinary language, where understanding such structures may be crucial to ending social injustice (Sect. 5). In both cases, I describe the methodology of critical social ontology within the fundamentality framework, and I argue that this methodology is distinct from, yet complementary to, ameliorative analysis.

## 2 The fundamentality approach

Throughout the history of metaphysics, metaphysicians have insisted on the distinction between appearance and fundamental reality. Ancient Greek metaphysicians debated about change. Heraclitus thought that everything was constantly changing, so much so, in fact, that the appearance of non-change was an illusion. In contrast, Parmenides and Plato argued, in different ways, that change was illusory. Parmenides thought there was only one thing, Being, that did not change. Plato thought there were abstract objects—the Forms—that did not change, and that these objects were more fundamental than the material objects that failed to perfectly exemplify them. Despite the differences between their metaphysical views, Heraclitus, Parmenides, and Plato all appeared to believe that (a) the fundamental reality of change can be understood via metaphysical inquiry and (b) ordinary people are (or at least can be) wrong about the fundamental reality of change. This is an early instance of the fundamentality approach.<sup>2</sup>

Fast forward to the present day. We see the fundamentality approach being applied to ontology and metaphysics.

Start with ontology, conceived as the study of what exists. There are metaphysicians who argue that ordinary objects—tables, chairs, you, me—do not really exist.<sup>3</sup> Trenton Merricks starts his eliminativist treatise, *Objects and Persons*, with the following declaration:

In this book I shall show that there are no books. Nor are there statues, rocks, tables, stars, or chairs. Indeed I shall argue that there are no inanimate macrophysical objects at all. Thus I shall argue against the existence of most of the objects alleged to exist by what we might call, to be trendy, ‘folk ontology’.  
(2001, p. 1)

The macrophysical objects that most people take to exist, do not exist. Why not? He gives several arguments, but one is what is sometimes called the argument from causal overdetermination. Here is an extremely rough version of the argument. If a rock  $r$  is composed of more fundamental parts  $r_1$ ,  $r_2$ , and  $r_3$ , then we do not need to posit the existence of the rock in order to explain its causal effects. The rock’s breaking the window will be explained by the way in which its arranged parts contribute to the breaking of the window. So fundamentally speaking, there is no such thing as a rock. Merricks concludes that statements like “The rock broke the window” are literally

<sup>2</sup> This interpretation of ancient Greek metaphysics is essentially the one found in Aristotle (2016, p. A6), but for more recent detailed accounts, see (Dancy, 2004; Irwin, 1977; Silverman, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Here is a small sample of philosophers who argue that ordinary objects do not exist: (Benovsky, 2018; Cowling, 2014; Dorr, 2005; Inwagen, 1990; Merricks, 2001; Turner, 2011).

false but “nearly good as true”; there is a non-ordinary language sentence about the objects  $r_1$ ,  $r_2$ , and  $r_3$  that is true. I take the notion of *nearly good as true* as a way of capturing the fact that ordinary assertions are wrong about fundamental reality but are nonetheless serviceable for practical purposes. The eliminativist is committed to the fundamentality approach because they claim we can discover that there are no ordinary objects—at least fundamentally speaking—by metaphysical reflection about causation (among other things).

Now consider metaphysics, conceived as the study of the nature of things. You can be wrong about the fundamental reality of something by being wrong about its nature, not its existence. Consider animalist theories of persons and personal identity. According to animalism, “each of us is numerically identical with an animal: there is a certain organism, and you and it are one and the same” (Olson, 2007, p. 24). As a consequence, we persist throughout time in virtue of our biological life processes. Suppose the folk conception of personal identity is a psychological, or Lockean theory, on which we persist throughout time in virtue of our psychological capacities. In such a case, the folk will be right about whether there is such a thing as personal identity but wrong about the nature of personal identity.

In full generality, the fundamentality approach says that the fundamental reality of  $X$  can be understood via metaphysical reflection, where ordinary people can be wrong about the fundamental reality of  $X$ . Let me explain each component of this approach in more detail.

What constitutes metaphysical reflection? Traditionally, the fundamentality approach is favored by rationalists who believe that metaphysical reflection consists solely of a priori or armchair judgments (e.g., Lowe (2002)). However, you might be an empiricist who thinks metaphysical reflection at least partially consists of a posteriori or empirically informed judgments (e.g., Ladyman and Ross (2007)).

What is fundamental reality? Intuitively, the fundamental reality of  $X$  is what makes  $X$  what it is. In contemporary analytic metaphysics, it is popular to think that reality has an intrinsic hierarchical structure. For example, you might think the mental facts metaphysically depend on the physical facts, but not vice versa. There are several ways to articulate the structure of reality. The metaphysical grounding theorist says: the mental facts are grounded in the physical facts.<sup>4</sup> The naturalness theorist says: mental properties are less natural than physical properties.<sup>5</sup> And so on,<sup>6</sup>

Many of the aforementioned concepts of fundamentality presuppose the idea that reality has a layered structure. However, the fundamentality approach only presupposes that there is fundamental structure in the sense that: there are objectively better and worse ways of perspicuously describing the world. If you say, “The sun moved behind the elms,” there may be a fact you are describing, but your language does not perspicuously represent that fact.<sup>7</sup> Or consider the truthmaker theorist who thinks that

<sup>4</sup> For surveys of the vast literature on grounding, see Trogon (2013), Raven (2015) and Bliss and Trogon (2014).

<sup>5</sup> Lewis (1983, 1984), Sider (2011) and Dorr and Hawthorne (2013).

<sup>6</sup> There are those who speak in terms of *real definition generic identity*, and *essence*. For a sample of recent literature, see: (Correia & Skiles, 2019; Dorr, 2016; Fine, 2015; Rayo, 2013; Rosen, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Example due to Inwagen (1990, pp. 101–102).

sentences like “the cat is on the mat” can be true even though they do not perspicuously describe the world; there are no cats, only atoms arranged cat-wise.<sup>8</sup> Such a theorist will count as a fundamentality theorist even though they do not appear to think that there are multiple levels of reality. Going forward, I will be neutral about the exact notion of metaphysical fundamentality. I will only assume that some things (or descriptions) are relatively fundamental in relation to others.

What does it mean for ordinary people to be wrong about fundamental reality? In some cases, one can be wrong about the fundamentality of a thing by mistakenly thinking that it exists. In other cases, one’s beliefs and language fail to perspicuously represent fundamental reality. Why does it matter if ordinary people can be wrong about fundamental reality? The possibility of error illustrates that fundamental metaphysics is not a kind of conceptual analysis.<sup>9</sup> The idea is not necessarily that fundamental metaphysics is intended to be a kind of elite inquiry. Rather, the idea is that one’s inquiry into fundamental reality is not limited by the bounds of common sense.

### 3 Critical social ontology

Now I want to contrast the standard cases of the fundamentality approach with recent work in feminist metaphysics.

Feminist metaphysicians theorize with a normative goal in mind: namely, ending gender oppression and promoting gender equality.<sup>10</sup> So feminist metaphysical theories ought to, in some way, contribute to these political goals. For example, consider Sally Haslanger’s definition of *woman*:

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is “marked” as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female’s biological role in reproduction. (2012, p. 230)

This definition entails that women are necessarily subordinated; it lies in the nature of being a woman that you are subordinated economically, politically, socially, and so on.<sup>11</sup> For Haslanger, this definition furthers feminist political values in the following way: if people knew they were women (on her definition), they would realize they should abolish the existence of women by abolishing the gender injustices that create them.

Here is another example of feminist metaphysics. Consider Dembroff (2016)’s *behavioral dispositionalist* theory of sexual orientation. Their account is as follows.

A person S’s sexual orientation is grounded in S’s dispositions to engage in sexual behaviors under the ordinary condition[s] for these dispositions, and which

<sup>8</sup> I am thinking of truthmaker theorists like Cameron (2010), specifically.

<sup>9</sup> See Thomasson (2010) for an account of the conceptual analysis approach.

<sup>10</sup> Witt (2011), Haslanger (2012) and Mikkola (2015, 2016).

<sup>11</sup> See Bettcher (2013) and Dembroff (2018) for further discussion of oppressive gender kinds.

sexual orientation S has is grounded in what sex[es] and gender[s] of persons S is disposed to sexually engage under these conditions. (Dembroff, 2016, p. 18)

Dembroff takes sexual orientation to be a disposition to sexually engage with others on the basis of their sex or gender. What is interesting about their account is that it does not take the gender or sex of the person into consideration, only the gender or sex of the person one is sexually oriented toward. So the theory does not allow one to capture the sexual orientations *heterosexual* and *homosexual*, only orientations like *female-oriented* and *male-oriented*. This is taken to be a feature of their account, not a bug. Dembroff takes themselves to improving upon the concept of sexual orientation for practical purposes. For example, they want to give an account of sexual orientation that “is conducive for establishing legal and social protections for persons who have queer sexual orientations” (2016, p. 5). For these reasons, we ought to use the concepts of male-oriented and female-oriented as opposed to our usual stock of sexual orientation concepts.

Haslanger and Dembroff’s accounts of *woman* and *female-oriented* are examples of ameliorative analysis and critical social ontology. An ameliorative project is a “project that seeks to identify what legitimate purposes we might have (if any) in categorizing people on the basis of race or gender, and to develop concepts that would help us achieve these ends” (Haslanger, 2012, p. 366). For the ameliorative theorist, the goal is to construct or engineer concepts that are useful given the relevant normative values. Following feminist epistemologists and philosophers of science, I will call such moral and political values *contextual values* (Anderson, 1995; Longino, 1990). Contextual values, like the values of political equality and justice, are to be distinguished from standard theoretical values—e.g., simplicity, predictive power, accuracy, etc. Ameliorative analysis can be understood as a kind of conceptual engineering. Conceptual engineering, of the kind relevant here, is a distinctive philosophical methodology.<sup>12</sup>

Conceptual engineers self-consciously aim to assess and improve representational devices. A representational device may be a concept, but there are conceptual engineers who do not strictly believe that one is engineering concepts. For the sake of simplicity, I will take conceptual engineering to consist in either changing what terms mean or introducing new meaningful terms. Representational devices can be assessed by how well they function. The most obvious way for a representational device to function well is for it to accurately represent the world. Consider Scharp (2013)’s assessment of the truth predicate; he takes it to represent nothing because it is snared in contradiction. He recommends replacing the ordinary truth predicate with two different predicates: *ascending truth* and *descending truth*. However, a representational device may be inadequate, not because it fails to accurately represent the world, but because it fails to meet other goals of the conceptual engineer. Haslanger and Dembroff both have broadly political and normative goals that they take the ordinary concepts of gender and sexual orientation to fail to meet.

<sup>12</sup> The conceptual engineering literature is massive. For surveys, see: (Burgess & Plunkett, 2013a, b; Cappelen et al., 2019; Isaac et al., 2022).

It is helpful to distinguish between two types of goals that a conceptual engineer might have: semantic and practical.<sup>13</sup> The semantic goal is to engineer some specific meaning in a specific way. The practical goal concerns why one is engineering a specific meaning; in the case of ameliorative analysis, the practical goal is to promote social justice. Haslanger and Dembroff are doing ameliorative analysis because, in both cases, there is an intentional goal of modifying or creating new concepts for the purpose of satisfying certain practical goals.

I take critical social ontology to be any study of social ontology that is done in order to critique ideology or end social injustice. Broadly speaking, this means that whether a theory of social ontology promotes social justice will count for (or against) the theory. From a historical perspective, critical social ontology embodies the spirit of the Frankfurt school of critical theory,<sup>14</sup> My paradigm example of critical social ontology is feminist metaphysics. Feminist metaphysicians do critical social ontology because their theorizing is broadly motivated by a critique of social injustice.

Admittedly, my definition of critical social ontology is open-ended. This reflects the open-endedness of the literature. While there are thriving methodological discussions of fundamental metaphysics, ameliorative analysis, and feminist metaphysics, the methodology of critical social ontology (in general) is under-discussed.<sup>15</sup> To get a grip on the methodology of critical social ontology, there is a tendency to focus on a specific kind of critical social ontology: namely, ameliorative inquiry. Suppose you have an ameliorative analysis of social concepts that takes as its practical goal the promotion of social justice (or reduction of social injustice). Such an analysis will automatically be a case of critical social ontology. This is what is happening in the case of Haslanger and Dembroff. Ameliorative analysis is a natural methodological fit for critical social ontology, given its goal-driven, value-laden nature.

In contrast, it is hard to see how to do critical social ontology without presupposing an ameliorative approach. For similar reasons, it is not obvious how fundamental metaphysics and critical social ontology can be complementary projects. Some have argued that fundamental metaphysics and critical social ontology—like feminist metaphysics—are either incompatible or irrelevant. The two main charges are that (a) critical social ontology is normatively-laden while fundamental metaphysics is not and (b) critical social ontology is not about the fundamental.<sup>16</sup> Fundamentalists have responded in the defensive.<sup>17</sup> In short, they have argued (a) that fundamentality theorists can also incorporate contextual values into their theorizing<sup>18</sup> and (b) that the fundamentality approach is not just about what is absolutely fundamental, but also what is relatively fundamental.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>13</sup> There is no standard way to make the distinction I am making. Isaac et al. (2022) distinguishes between goals and purposes. Koch (2021) directly distinguishes between semantic and practical goals, though his notion of practical goals is narrower than mine.

<sup>14</sup> Example Marcuse (1955), Horkheimer (1972) and Adorno (1973, 2016).

<sup>15</sup> Though see Burman (2023) for a recent corrective to this trend.

<sup>16</sup> Barnes (2014), Barnes (2017) and Mikkola (2017).

<sup>17</sup> Sider (2017), Schaffer (2017), Griffith (2018) and Passinsky (2021).

<sup>18</sup> See Passinsky (2021) for an articulation of this view.

<sup>19</sup> Sider (2017) and Richardson (2023).

While I agree with fundamentality theorists, I also recognize the need for a more constructive (as opposed to defensive) response to the felt distance between fundamental metaphysics and critical social ontology. Instead of giving reasons why they can be compatible in principle, I will outline natural ways in which critical social ontology can be done within the fundamentality framework.

## 4 Fundamentality and ideology critique

While the fundamentality approach is often divorced from critical social ontology, there are cases in which they go in hand-in-hand. Specifically, the fundamentality approach often supports the critique of ideology. I start by giving concrete examples of how this works (Sect. 4.1). Then I give a rational reconstruction of the fundamentalist's methodology (Sect. 4.2).

### 4.1 Examples

What is ideology? Tommy Shelby provides a useful framework (2002, 2003, 2014). He writes:

An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations. (Shelby, 2014, p. 66)

Ideologies have two components: epistemic and functional.

The epistemic component concerns various beliefs that misrepresent social reality. Economic inequality is justified, the story goes, because people are economically rewarded in proportion to their contributions to society, and greater contributions merit greater economic resources. A similar story can be told about patriarchal ideology; gender inequality is justified because of women's nature, their preference for low-paying jobs, etc. However, the Marxist and feminist both argue that these purported facts are nothing of the sort. Rather, economic inequality is the result of "conquest, enslavement, robbery, murder, in short, force" (1992, p. 874). And gender inequality is similarly propped up by the domination of women by men (MacKinnon, 1989).

This leads us to the functional aspect of ideology. Because ideologies serve to legitimate what would otherwise be considered injustices, they have the function of promoting or sustaining social injustice. If you believe that poor people are poor because they are lazy, and that rich people are rich because they are hard-working, then you are less likely to overturn a social order characterized by extreme poverty coexisting alongside extreme wealth. If you believe that women are paid less because they prefer to stay home and take care of their children, you are less likely to agitate to end the pay gap between genders. The acceptance of ideology by the folk leads to both misrepresentations of social reality and the promotion of social injustice.



I have focused on Shelby's theory of ideology, but there are different theories. For example, Sally Haslanger takes ideologies to involve, not just beliefs, but non-belief-like mental states, representations, and practices. She says that ideology primarily involves "concepts, rules, norms, stereotypes, [and] scripts" (Haslanger, 2017, p. 18). Despite these differences, however, all theorists of ideology take the acceptance of ideologies to partially explain the persistence of social injustice. Acceptance of capitalist ideology explains the persistence of capitalism. Acceptance of patriarchal ideology explains the persistence of sexism. And so on. I should note that ideology theorists take these explanations to be *partial*, not full, explanations of injustice. Social injustice is not driven exclusively by bad ideas; social norms and social structures also contribute.<sup>20</sup>

Some instances of ideology critique are instances of fundamental metaphysics. We see this in the (first?) critic of ideology, Karl Marx. There is clearly a normative motivation for his account of the social world. He thinks capitalism is a terrible economic system. He thinks socialism is a superior alternative. He characterizes the economic world in a way that is vastly different from the descriptions of liberal political economists, as well as folk beliefs about the economy. Not only does Marx think the folk are wrong, but he has an explanation of why they are so wrong: their acceptance of capitalist ideology. Marx writes: "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (1978, p. 173). We can think of capitalist ideology as false ideas that, if taken to be true, justify capitalist practice. So the account of capitalism's peaceful and justified emergence is part of capitalist ideology. And as Marx hints, such myths are propagated by those who benefit from their acceptance. In his reflections on ideology, Stanley (2015, p. 231) writes that "substantive failures of equality will tend to lead those who control the resources to develop a characteristic kind of legitimization myth."

I have sketched an interpretation of Marx in which he is a critical social ontologist that adopts the fundamentality approach toward economic reality. This interpretation of Marx strikes me as plausible. But even if it is inaccurate, it illustrates the way in which a characterization of what the social world is really like can undermine false ideology, which can in turn promote social justice. A more recent instance of the fundamentality approach to critical social ontology can be seen in the debates about essentialism within feminist metaphysics. I will identify three threads of this debate.

The anti-biological thread concerns the rejection of biological essentialism about gender.<sup>21</sup> Biological essentialist accounts of gender were thought to legitimate (or at least explain) certain social and political arrangements. Here is one such explanation: because women are essentially nurturing (or tend toward being nurturing), they are best positioned to handle childcare. This explanation justifies a social world in which women (as opposed to men) are overwhelmingly expected to be responsible for childcare. Other biological essentialist accounts of gender appear to justify other kinds of gender inequality. One might think of biological essentialism as patriarchal ideology.

<sup>20</sup> It is common to require an ideological belief to be caused by the social structures it purports to justify. See Geuss (1981) and Elster (1986, pp. 168–169).

<sup>21</sup> See Stoljar (1995) for a review of this debate.

It gives a false picture of reality, and it principally serves to perpetuate unjust relations of childcare and social reproduction. The critics of biological essentialism, by arguing that there were no such biological essences, were thereby undermining patriarchal ideology.

The diversity thread concerns the rejection of any kind of essentialism about gender kinds for reasons to do with the diversity of gendered individuals.<sup>22</sup> The argument roughly goes like this. All essential properties are necessary properties, so if there is an essence of being a woman, there is a feature shared by all women. But when we consider the various ways in which one can be a woman, it becomes doubtful that there is such a feature. Furthermore, by assuming that there are substantive features that all women have in common, we inadvertently promote a highly selective—white, middle-class, heterosexual—picture of womanhood. You might think that essentialism requires the idea of a universal woman, but such an idea is an artifact of racial and class ideologies. By undermining the essentialist picture wholesale, one takes oneself to undermine the kinds of harmful inferences that belief in gender essences would promote.

The modern essentialist thread concerns the acceptance of sophisticated forms of social essentialism about gender.<sup>23</sup> On such views, there are gendered essences, but those essences are not accompanied by the kinds of assumptions that characterized previous essentialist accounts of gender. There can be essences of gender kinds without those essences being biological. Furthermore, the existence of an essence of a gender kind, like *woman*, does not entail the existence of a prototypical experience shared by all members of that gender kind. Lastly, you may think there are individual essences rather than kind essences. Witt (2011) argues that gender is essential to us *qua* social individuals; we would not be the type of social individual we are without our gender category. All of these ways of spelling out social essentialism are ways that undermine ideological accounts of the nature of gender.

While most feminist metaphysicians have not theorized under the explicit banner of critical social ontology, or fundamental metaphysics, there is clearly a sense in which they are engaging in both practices. They are doing fundamental metaphysics because they are theorizing about what gender is really like, regardless of how gender appears to ordinary people. Most notably, gender may appear natural and biological, but upon metaphysical reflection, we see that it is not. These metaphysicians are engaging in critical social ontology because their inquiry is motivated by contextual values like those of feminism. They are theorizing about the nature of gender because they think such theorizing can help end gender oppression.

It is also worth noting a difference between ideological error and other ways in which reality could be obscured. Some types of error about fundamental reality could be plausibly construed as cognitive limitations of the human mind. So perhaps humans cannot help but experience the world as if ordinary objects are genuine objects even if they are not. Or perhaps we cannot help but experience time as if it passes, even though it does not. In contrast to these potential sources of error, ideological error is more contingent; or at least, ideological error may be easier to correct than some

<sup>22</sup> For this kind of critique of essentialism, see Spelman (1988), Harris (1990) and Grillo (1995).

<sup>23</sup> See Witt (2010), Passinsky (2021) and Mason (2021).

errors that are a standing feature of the human mind. We do not have to see the world in the way that capitalist, patriarchal, or racist ideology dictates. In the case of ideology, fundamental (social) reality is obscured because such obscurity facilitates or enables injustice. The barriers to grasping fundamental social reality often have social causes.

## 4.2 Method

I will now summarize the methodological approach of the fundamentality theorist who aims to do critical social ontology. I will call this method *critical inquiry*, for short.

Critical inquiry begins with a *normatively significant research question*. A research question is normatively significant to the degree that it is relevant to the promotion or expression of practical, ethical, or political values and/or goals. In the case of the fundamentality approach, the normative question makes or presupposes a notion of fundamentality. For example, you may think the question “What is the fundamental reality of gender kinds?” is a research question that is normatively significant because: knowing the answer to this question would, given the appropriate circumstances, reduce gender oppression.

More precisely, we can take critical inquiry as having specific *inputs* to inquiry; these inputs establish the normatively significant research question and thus structure the inquiry. In the cases described in this section, the inputs of critical inquiry are (a) contextual values, (b) evidence of ideology, and (c) some notion of fundamentality. Your contextual values—like those of feminism, social equality, etc—will shape the questions you want to answer. If you have feminist values, for instance, then you will likely be more interested in questions about gender and sexuality than questions about, say, lumber production. Critical inquiry also requires the inquirer to have one to have evidence (or to think that one has evidence) of ideology with respect to a certain subject matter. Finally, you need some notion of fundamentality in mind; in the case of gender essentialism, that concept is essence. You can think of the inputs of a critical inquiry as shaping the normative significant research question.

Just as there is a normatively significant research question, there will be (in successful cases) a normatively significant answer to that question. For example, the normatively significant answer to the question “What is the fundamental reality of gender kinds?” may be: gender kinds are socially constructed kinds. The thought is that knowledge of this could promote or express the relevant feminist values.

The normatively significant research answer can be understood in terms of specific *outputs* of critical inquiry. In general, the outputs will be (a) knowledge of the facts of interest and (b) an improvement in the world that is caused by knowledge of the facts of interest. I call these the theoretical and practical outputs, respectively. Suppose you think there are ideological accounts of gender, and you have feminist values. Then you may have compelling reasons to give an account of the fundamental reality of gender. Knowledge of the fundamental reality of gender will be a theoretical output. There is also a practical output: namely, furthering the liberation of gendered individuals by way of giving an accurate account of the fundamental reality of gender. I should emphasize that the practical output, as I have described it, requires the inquirer to get things right about the world. Critical inquiry is not propaganda.

Notice that conceptual engineering or amelioration is not a goal of critical inquiry. Of course, concepts may be engineered in the course of critical inquiry. But this could be true of philosophical inquiry more generally.<sup>24</sup> Critical inquiry is orthogonal to conceptual engineering, if by conceptual engineering we mean a methodology that philosophers self-consciously employ. By extension, it follows that we can do critical social ontology without doing conceptual engineering. It may often be helpful to do conceptual engineering when doing critical social ontology, but my current suggestion is that there is distance (in principle) between critical social ontology and ameliorative inquiry.

Here is the structure of critical inquiry, so far.

- *Normatively significant question.* Fundamentality question that is useful to answer, given your contextual values. Example: “What is the fundamental reality of gender?”
  - *Inputs.*
    - \* *Values.* Your contextual values. Example: feminist values.
    - \* *Evidence of Ideology.* Reason to think ideology has distorted answers to the question. Example: patriarchal ideology.
    - \* *Tools.* One or more concepts of fundamentality. Example: grounding, essence, etc.
- *Normatively significant answer.* Answer to the research question that is useful, given your contextual values. Example: “gender is fundamentally social”, and knowledge of this truth helps debunk patriarchal ideology.
  - *Outputs.*
    - \* *Theoretical.* A true answer—call it *C*—to the fundamentality question. Example: gender is fundamentally social.
    - \* *Practical.* A practical intervention that is effective in virtue of the truth of *C*. Example: knowing that gender is fundamentally social will show that certain social arrangements are unjustifiable.

Let me summarize. The fundamentality theorist purports to see beneath the appearances. The difference in the social case is that there is an additional reason why the appearances are so difficult to penetrate: namely, the acceptance of ideology. By undermining these appearances, the fundamentality theorist is engaging in ideology critique. But this means that their project is also a form of critical social ontology. By debunking (falsifying) ideological explanations about social reality, fundamentality theorists promote social justice.

## 5 Fundamentality and subject matter

Sometimes the fundamental social reality is obscured due to ideology. However, this may not always be the case. Moreover, critical social ontology is not always about critiquing ideology. A critical social ontologist may simply want to do social ontology in a way that illuminates the possibilities for social justice. Such a project is not

<sup>24</sup> For discussion of this possibility, see Thomasson (2017) and Scharp (2019).

necessarily a debunking project because the relevant social reality may not be distorted by ideology. Reality can be obscured without being distorted. In such cases, the critical inquirer must give an account of the fundamentality reality of things that we normally do not perspicuously talk about. To clarify these ideas, I again start with examples (Sect. 5.1) and later move on to a reconstruction of the method (Sect. 5.2).

## 5.1 Examples

Suppose you are a critical inquirer with feminist values. Further suppose that you think that the metaphysics of gender will advance feminist political goals in some way. You start to inquire about the metaphysics of gender, but you ask yourself: what are we talking about when we talk about gender? It is tempting to think that the metaphysics of gender consists of giving accounts of the metaphysics of gender *kinds*. However, this is a narrow understanding of what gender involves. As Elizabeth Barnes has emphasized, “[gender] also encompasses gender identity, gender expression, and so on” (2020, p. 715).

Suppose we take the metaphysics of gender to encompass, not simply gender kinds, but also a range of gender-relevant objects, properties, and facts. Then we can give metaphysical theories of gender (broadly speaking) that are not theories of gender kinds. For example, given Haslanger’s definition of *woman*, women are necessarily oppressed in virtue of their social position. But Barnes proposes that we instead take Haslanger’s definition to characterize what it is to be *feminized*, where this property is a fact about social position. She writes:

A social position account can say that the various aspects of gender are ultimately explained by a social structure that imposes norms and expectations (and which privileges some and disadvantages others) based on perceived biological sex and biological reproductive capacity. But a social position account isn’t thereby committed to saying that such a social structure is everything there is to gender, or straightforwardly yields the extensions of our terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’, and so on (2020, p. 717).

Barnes’ point is that the metaphysics of gender need not consist exclusively in the metaphysics of gender kinds like *woman* and *man*. For example, there may be kinds, like *feminized*, that are part of the metaphysics of gender yet are not, at least in some sense, gender kinds. To be clear: the various things that make up the subject matter of gender will be related. The current point is that they can also be distinct in important ways.

We want to further understand the property *feminized*. Notice: we cannot appeal to the folk conception of *feminized*.<sup>25</sup> It is not that the folk have the wrong view of

<sup>25</sup> Or at least, we cannot appeal to the folk notion of *feminized* in a context in which there is no such notion publicly available. However, as a reviewer points out, the folk may well begin talking about the property *feminized*. The fact that the folk are not currently talking about a property does not mean that they can never talk or have intuitions about it. My claim is twofold: (i) that we do not have to wait on the folk to start talking about *feminized* in order to theorize about it, in fundamental terms; (ii) even if the folk had intuitions about *feminized*, we may want an analysis of *feminized*, in which case the fundamentality approach would be useful.

the property. Rather, they have no (semantically or conceptually articulated) view of the property at all.<sup>26</sup> One might concede that folk beliefs about gender kinds should constrain theorizing about the nature of gender. However, it does not follow that folk beliefs should constrain the nature of being feminized. Rather, we must begin theorizing directly about the world, and this is where the fundamentality framework comes into play. The fundamentality theorist can now pose questions about what grounds *feminized*, what is the essence or real definition of *feminized*, or whether *feminized* is a relatively natural property. When the properties we are interested in outstrip the capabilities of ordinary (non-theoretical) language, we can use the language of fundamentality to think about those properties.

The kind of approach I have in mind is exhibited by Passinsky (2021) in her recent paper on gender essentialism. Passinsky works within a Finean essentialist framework. In that framework, one asks about the real definition (or essence) of a given kind. What is the essence of *X*? Passinsky notes that, if one is a feminist metaphysician with distinctive contextual values, then the essentialist procedure is complicated in two ways. Considering the case of gender, she writes:

First, that the question ‘What is the real definition of gender?’ may be understood in various ways. And second, that the contextual values and interests of inquirers play a role in determining how this question is to be understood within a given context. (Passinsky, 2021, p. 951)

So in the case of two kinds of gender, the ordinary kind referred to by ordinary language, and the ameliorative kind singled out by ameliorative inquiry, we actually have two essentialist inquiries to consider. Whether we consider one inquiry as opposed to another will depend on our values and the context. But in both cases, we are employing a version of the fundamentality approach.

It is important to distinguish between this application of the fundamentality approach and a more simplistic approach. I will use the naturalness framework, specifically, to illustrate. You might think the metaphysical naturalness framework recommends the following procedure: when you are faced with the prospects of theorizing about two properties *X* and *Y*, then you ought to only discuss the most natural property. On this view, commitment to metaphysical naturalness requires that we always prioritize what is relatively natural.

This is *not* the methodological approach that is recommended here. The problem with this approach is that we might have reasons to talk about property *X* rather than property *Y*, even if (a) *X* and *Y* are equally naturally or (b) *Y* is more natural than *X*.<sup>27</sup> You might want to focus on one property rather than the other because one property is more politically useful to understand. For example, *feminized* might be less natural than other properties in the vicinity of gender, but a critical inquirer might take knowledge of the kind *feminized* to be the key to promoting social justice. Perhaps *feminized* better explains relevant facts about gender oppression, facts that will be

<sup>26</sup> As a reviewer noted: it may not be that people have folk views about gender kinds, either. In such a case, the things I say about the fundamentality approach will apply to the case of gender kinds.

<sup>27</sup> Barnes (2017, p. 2428) explicitly discusses the case of equistructurality and takes it to count against the naturalness framework. Though see Sider (2017) and Richardson (2023) for responses.

useful to understand if we are to combat said oppression. In general, you might think that learning that one property is more natural than another should not automatically constrain what aspects of social reality that we should theorize about (*qua* critical inquirers).

I agree. It is a mistake to think that what is (relatively) metaphysically fundamental will always be what is (relatively) fundamental for theorizing.<sup>28</sup> The fundamentality theorist is not primarily in the business of determining which properties are more fundamental than others; rather, the fundamentality theorist holds fixed some entity they are interested in and then attempts to specify what is the fundamental reality of that entity.

As I have described the case, the fundamentality theorist is certainly giving an account of the fundamental reality of something. But what is the connection between fundamentality and the classical idea of “going beyond the appearances”? The connection is as follows. The appearances can obscure reality, not only because they mislead you about what reality is like, but also because the appearances underdetermine what different aspects of reality you may want to talk about.

## 5.2 Methods

Here is the situation, abstractly characterized. We begin our critical inquiry broadly guided by the thought that we need to do the metaphysics of *X*. However, we may discover that the metaphysics of *X* constitutes a broad subject matter, where ordinary language imperfectly describes the more fine-grained subject matters— $X_1$ ,  $X_2$ —that are of interest to us. These fine-grained subject matters may not correspond to any terms in ordinary language. Alternatively, ordinary language may simply make it difficult to discern these subject matters.

Subject matters, as I understand them, are topics of a conversation; they are what conversations are about.<sup>29</sup> We can speak of the subject matter of a specific proposition, like *the cat is on the mat*. We can also speak directly of a subject matter. For example, the proposition *the cat is on the mat* is partly about cats. Let *cats* be its own subject matter, consisting of all the various cat-related states of affairs. Similarly, we can talk about the subject matter *gender*. This encompasses not simply gender kinds, but also gendered structures, practices, norms, and so on. When we are engaging in critical inquiry, we do not always have a fine-grained subject matter to work with. When we inquire, we have a hunch of what subject matter will be important, but it is not always the case that we know what part of the subject matter will be most important or relevant. So while we start critical inquiry with the assumption that *gender* will be broadly important for our critical purposes, inquiry may reveal that only part of the subject matter—like *gender structure*—will be of interest to us. Once we identify the

<sup>28</sup> Fine (2017a, p. 106) criticizes the tendency of fundamentality theorists to speak as if fundamentality inquiry is the only or most important form of metaphysical theorizing. I suspect such a tendency is responsibility for the common equivocation of what is metaphysically fundamental and what is theoretically fundamental (for metaphysicians).

<sup>29</sup> For recent discussions of subject matter, see Yablo (2014, pp. 23–44), Fine (2017b) and Brast-McKie (2021).

relevant subject matter, we can then apply the fundamentality framework to gender structures.

Here is how to understand critical inquiry, in full generality. Critical inquiry takes the same contextual values and notions of fundamentality as inputs, but instead of taking evidence of ideology as an input, critical inquiry takes the input to be evidence of a useful subject matter. The case of ideology is a special case of the general phenomenon. A subject matter beset by ideology may be useful. In addition, a subject matter can be useful if it is broadly relevant to the kind of political and social goals one has in mind.

To summarize, here is the final model of critical inquiry.

- *Normatively significant question.* Fundamentality question that is useful to answer, given your contextual values.
  - *Inputs.*
    - \* *Values.* Your contextual values.
    - \* *Subject Matter.* A subject matter  $S$  that may be practically useful, given your values.
    - \* *Tools.* One or more concepts of fundamentality.
- *Normatively significant answer.* Answer to the research question that is useful, given your contextual values.
  - *Outputs.*
    - \* *Theoretical.* A true account  $C$  of the fundamentality reality of some part of the subject matter  $S$ .
    - \* *Practical.* A practical intervention that is effective in virtue of the truth of  $C$ .

I take this to be an account of how critical inquiry works, on the fundamentality approach. Though we could take it to be an account of critical theory, more generally, if we removed the reference to notions of fundamentality.

Before concluding, I should note two connections between critical inquiry and conceptual engineering. The conceptual engineer and fundamentality theorist have overlapping interests.

Consider the following scenario: there are properties  $P_1$  and  $P_2$  that are encompassed by a subject matter  $P$ ; property  $P_2$  is practically important, but it is not a property that corresponds to any common natural language expression. The fundamentality theorist finds it useful to give an account of the fundamental reality of  $P_2$ , in some sense. A separate but compatible project, however, is to develop a concept that refers to or expresses the property  $P_2$ . For example, the fundamentality theorist may give an account of the essence of *feminized*, while the conceptual engineer might introduce the term “feminized” into popular parlance. These projects are compatible and complementary, but nonetheless different.

Diaz-Leon (2019) has directly theorized about the relationship between fundamentality and ameliorative analysis in this way. She points out that: in the naturalness framework, you may have cases in which a predicate corresponds to two equally natural properties. In such cases, you cannot rely purely on metaphysical naturalness to guide your choice of which property corresponds to the predicate. Rather, you must use other considerations, like ethical and political considerations, to decide which property to talk about. This can be understood as a kind of conceptual engineering. As



described, this project complements the fundamentality approach. There is still work for the fundamentality theorist to do, because there is still some property that can be further analyzed.

## 6 Conclusion

I have described the fundamentality approach to critical social ontology. Critical inquirers begin with a normatively significant question that is shaped by their values, a subject matter of interest, and a notion of fundamentality. They end with a normatively significant answer to that question, which is both true of the world and practically useful (at least partly) because it is true of the world.

I do not think that the fundamentality approach is the only or uniquely best way to do critical social ontology. However, I do think it is a clear and fruitful way to do critical social ontology. And while there is more to be said about the framework I have proposed, the true test of a metametaphysical framework is the results it produces in practice. In non-social metaphysics, the fundamentality approach has worked well. If we are open-minded about methodology, we might discover that it works well for critical social ontology, too.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

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