

Emancipatory Methodology¹

Abstract. Philosophy is often political - this is not new. But within some strands of contemporary feminist and social philosophy, there is a growing trend toward viewing the political ramifications of a philosophical theory as part of the success conditions for that theory. Katharine Jenkins, in her recent book *Ontology and Oppression*, outlines and defends this approach to doing philosophy, which she calls ‘emancipatory theorizing’. On this approach, which we will call ‘emancipatory methodology’, the success of our theories—and on a plausible reading, the *truth* of the claims made by those theories—is at least partly dependent upon the extent to which those theories serve our political aims. In this paper, we first argue that emancipatory methodology is a much stronger - and more distinctive - claim about the relationship between philosophy and political aims than other, more familiar approaches. We then argue that the resulting framework proposed by emancipatory methodology faces serious problems: it is very hard to clarify what the approach recommends, and attempts to actually apply it seem to obscure important options in the theoretical landscape. We contrast Jenkins’ (2023) project to another recent book on gender - R. Brigg’s and B. George’s *What Even is Gender?* - to highlight that the key problems arise specifically from the combination of emancipatory methodology with the aims of analytic philosophy.

§1. Introduction

Analytic feminist philosophy is a political discipline. And, as a subfield of analytic feminism, feminist metaphysics and feminist approaches to social ontology, are also often political. In giving a theory of the social world, we’re doing something that is, at least in some sense, inherently political: we’re attempting to give theories of topics like gender, race, sexuality, and oppression—topics which are of deep political significance. But many people argue that the political dimensions of these debates should go beyond their topics — feminist philosophers, they argue, should do philosophy *in a political way*. But what is it, exactly, to develop a philosophical theory “in a political way”? That, in a nutshell, is the primary question we’re asking in this paper.

We take as our focus the methodology employed and elucidated by Katherine Jenkins in her excellent recent book, *Ontology and Oppression*.² Jenkins describes her book a form of *emancipatory theorizing*, and following Jenkins we will call this general approach ‘emancipatory methodology’. For Jenkins, the success of our theories in feminist metaphysics—and, on a fairly straightforward reading, the *truth* of the claims made by those theories—depends (at least in part) on the extent to which those theories serve our political aims, as feminists. This methodology has become increasingly popular in social philosophy. And yet it remains difficult to see how this methodology is supposed to *work*, exactly.

In this paper, we argue that the opacity of this methodology presents an especially pressing problem for philosophers giving theories which aim to make truth-apt ontological claims about social reality - about what social structures, kinds, categories, etc. shape our social world. This is a context in which we are attempting to describe the nature of social reality, and so it’s especially important to clarify how our political interests and aims are related to the truth of the claims we make and the success of the descriptions we offer.

In her recent book, Jenkins offers what is perhaps the most careful and direct treatment of emancipatory methodology to date. In the next section (§2), we work through the details of her methodological framework, which serves as the foundation for the rest of our discussion in this paper. We highlight in (§3) that versions of emancipatory methodology are widely employed throughout recent feminist philosophy, although often with relatively little explanation. In (§4), we argue that this methodology can’t be fully explicated in terms of some *prima facie* similar methodological moves made in moral and political theory, and in philosophy of science. We then argue, in (§5,) that - although easily run together - the claims of emancipatory methodology do not directly follow from popular approaches to ‘ameliorative’ analysis. In (§6), we use the example case of the social model of disability to work through specific problems for employing emancipatory methodology; we argue both that it’s unclear how we should interpret the idea that real-world

political impact is part of the success of the theory, and that the potential impact of the theory seems orthogonal to the question of whether that theory is *true*. In (§7), we precisify the target of our worries by comparing Jenkins' approach to that of R. Briggs and B. George in their recent book *What Even is Gender?*.³ We argue that is because Jenkins - and others employing the same type of 'emancipatory' viewpoint - are engaged in academic debate about which theories best describe social reality that the core problems emerge. And finally, in (§8), we offer a brief summary of our worries: emancipatory methodology, we suggest, is unclear (in content and in application), and has the potential to rule out important options in philosophical discussion.

§2. Jenkins' Emancipatory Theory

In *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality*, Katharine Jenkins contributes a rich and expansive ontological picture to the field of feminist philosophy. The framework she offers is one designed to illuminate the nuances of the many social kinds that populate and shape the social sphere, kinds which also bear intimate relationships to individual experience, and to the politics and harms of oppression.

On Jenkins view, social kinds consist in sets of what she calls "constraints and enablements" —properties the possession of which constrain/enable members of these social kinds in various respects throughout the social domain. It is possible to be wronged by these constraints and enablements however, and when this happens, Jenkins argues that people constructed as members of these social kinds suffer an *ontic injustice*, which for Jenkins is a distinctive way of being harmed.⁴ Furthermore, if those constraints and enablements wrong someone in a manner which is systematic —in a manner which steers them toward "social positions characterized by . . . exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, violence, and communicative curtailment"⁵ — then that individual suffers the more serious wrong of *ontic oppression*, the distinctive harm of which is a specific form of *moral injury*.⁶ In this way, Jenkins' metaphysics of social kinds is designed to bring out the tight relationships between these kinds, and the structure and wrongs of oppression.

And indeed, throughout the book Jenkins is focused primarily on what she calls *explanatory kinds*, kinds that “we can use in the process of developing explanations, predictions, and interventions in the social world”.⁷ For, there are many, *many* social kinds, in Jenkins view, but only some of them matter to the project of explaining and countering oppression. And this focus on explanatory kinds brings out a crucial characteristic of Jenkins’ overarching methodology: with this view, she is not just offering us a metaphysics of social kinds designed for theory, she’s also offering us a framework designed to apply directly to political discourse about e.g., gender and race kinds, as these debates are held in practice.⁸ In her own words, Jenkins offers us this framework as a form of *emancipatory theory*.⁹ Specifically: this is a metaphysics of kinds which is informed by particular normative commitments to intervening on oppression, commitments which Jenkins’ argues ought to guide our theoretical aims as emancipatory theorists, aims that inform which kinds might be explanatorily useful (and how), when it comes to the real-world political project of resisting oppression.¹⁰

Jenkins’ book offers many engaging discussions and arguments, but it is this aspect of Jenkins’ methodology— her use of what she calls *emancipatory theorizing* — that we want to focus on.

As Jenkins describes it, an emancipatory methodology involves a commitment to the idea that:

as well as being socially situated and motivated by emancipatory interest, emancipatory theory is often understood as an attempt to actually *effect* emancipatory social change. The theoretical contribution is conceived of as an intervention in the social context in which it is developed, not merely a reflection on it, and this gives the theory its central purpose and a key touchstone for success.¹¹

This idea draws from a rich tradition in critical theory. Figures like Raymond Geuss and Iris Marion Young, for example, have famously argued that theories of oppression should aim to combat the oppression they theorize, and be judged as successful to the extent to which they can do so.¹² Perhaps the clearest encapsulation of this methodological stance comes from Max Horkheimer:

according to Horkheimer, a critical theory is one which seeks, not merely to comment on oppression, but to liberate people from oppressive conditions.¹³ As Sally Haslanger describes it: “Critical social theory begins with a commitment to a political movement. . . Its concepts and theories are adequate only if they contribute to that movement”.¹⁴

This emancipatory methodological stance is employed throughout Jenkins’ book, but comes to the fore most prominently in the final chapter, where Jenkins considers the potential impact that her view might have in contemporary political debates over trans rights—particularly as those debates are actually playing out in the UK and US. In that chapter, Jenkins argues that her view stands to be materially useful to those arguing for trans rights, and in that sense it is “conducive to trans liberation” within these specific debates and particular contexts. Importantly, Jenkins presents this as a major reason to think that her view is correct. Indeed, she seems to suggest that if she is *wrong* about this—i.e., if her view were to prove unhelpful in this respect, or if it were used to support positions she considers harmful— that would weigh significantly against her view. And in making this claim, Jenkins doesn’t seem to be suggesting that potential negative political impact would be a reason to add additional claims to her theory, or to contextualize what she is saying more thoroughly; rather, she seems to consider ‘the political implications of putting forward an account of gender that does not ontologically guarantee the falsity of misgendering utterances’ as a serious potential counterexample to her view, and a potential reason to favor a (very different, incompatible) rival.¹⁵ Likewise, she explicitly appeals to the potential political benefit of her approach as a reason to accept specific truth-apt claims about social ontology (such as pluralism about gender kinds¹⁶). And, in a similar vein, she contrasts rival accounts of the social ontology of gender which are incompatible (if her view is true, the rival is false, and vice versa), and appeals to the potential real-world impact of her own view in her immediate political context as a reason to prefer it.¹⁷

But Jenkins is admirably cautious in her discussion of this framing. She clearly points out that there is a significant gap between academic theorizing and real-world progress, and that it over-

inflates the role of academic philosophy to suggest that it might be a lynchpin in social progress. This caution notwithstanding, she maintains that emancipatory theorists would do well to consider the specific implications of their views *as those views might be used in the current political context*, for the success or failure of work in this area crucially depends on these sorts of practical implications.

We're assuming here that for this approach to be viable, the implications in question *must be* counterfactual or potential. Almost all views within academic philosophy have a very limited readership, and whether a view receives wider uptake often depends heavily on factors like the prestige of the university that employs the author (factors which we'd hope are irrelevant to the success of a philosophical theory). But - as we'll emphasize in §6 - it's unclear how we should understand the counterfactual/potential element implicit in the emancipatory approach.

As Jenkins herself highlights, emancipatory methodology will likely strike many analytic philosophers as odd. However, this approach to theorizing is becoming increasingly common within the field of *analytic feminism*, and it is especially common within the growing areas of social ontology and feminist metaphysics. And it is this audience that Jenkins seems to have in mind from the outset, when she describes her book as being “for my fellow travelers in analytic emancipatory theory, and for those of all persuasions who are willing to come along for the ride”.¹⁸

We very much agree with Jenkins that this type of methodological stance is becoming increasingly popular. We also agree that this methodology has received relatively little discussion within analytic feminism, and that relatively little focus has been given to how it might be combined with the methodologies of analytic philosophy.

Now, to be clear: we do not advance an account of that sort of relationship below. (As we hope will become apparent, we suspect that giving an account like that will actually be quite difficult!). Instead, our project in this paper is to emphasize that an account of this relationship (i) so far seems to be absent in the existing literature, and yet (ii) seems necessary to understand and evaluate the dialectical moves being made. This means that Jenkins' project— because of the way

she clearly articulates her commitment to this emancipatory stance— serves as an ideal case study for us.

§3. Emancipatory Methodology in Feminist Philosophy

As Jenkins points out, when reading analytic feminist philosophy, it's increasingly common to see the immediate practical implications of a view within the current political context presented as reasons to accept or reject that view. And it's partly due to this growing popularity that we think this methodological stance deserves careful examination. We highlight a few examples here - not in any way trying to give an exhaustive overview, but rather to illustrate a range of ways in which emancipatory methodology is employed.

Jennifer Saul, for example, drawing from Sally Haslanger's discussion of the aims of critical social theory, discusses the worry that philosophical discussions of implicit bias "will not contribute to feminist and anti-racist projects, or—worse yet— that they might hamper such projects".¹⁹ Saul then argues that Tamar Gendler's view of pragmatic encroachment could be used to support right wing tropes according to which "politically correct thought police [attempt] to prevent people from facing up to important truths".²⁰ This potential boost to conservative political projects, which Saul is clear that Gendler herself does not endorse (and which would be a twisting of her view), is then taken to be a reason to reject Gendler's view, nonetheless. Whether Saul thinks this potential use of Gendler's view means that Gendler's view is *false* is a little unclear; but she treats it as a reason to think the view is incorrect or unsuccessful in some significant way.

Mari Mikkola argues that our theories of gender categories such as 'woman' are adequate only insofar as they "serve the goal of fighting gender injustice".²¹ And since, she argues, our gender theories often don't effectively serve this goal, feminist philosophers should move on to different debates.

Erin Beeghly, drawing from Iris Marion Young and bell hooks, objects to Haslanger's view of social cognition based in part on its obscurity and complexity.²² Good feminist theories, Beeghly

argues, must be accessible—and they must be accessible in order to persuade and convert others to the political goals feminism.

Serene Khader argues against characterizing adaptive preferences (that is, preferences which detract from our wellbeing which are formed in response to oppressive circumstances) in terms of autonomy deficits, because this sort of view encourages us to think about the problems here as lying within oppressed individuals.²³ When we think that way, Khader argues, we tend to blame people for their own oppression, and we tend to interact with them in condescending ways—things which actually stand to *entrench*, rather than alleviate, oppressive conditions.²⁴ Khader's conclusion then seems to be that inappropriately adaptive preferences *are not* autonomy deficits, at least in part because, again, if they were, that would be an obstacle to helping people, and to resisting oppression more generally.²⁵

Robin Dembroff argues against what they call the “real gender assumption,” or the idea that gender category membership ought to be determined by the gender kinds constructed in dominant social contexts.²⁶ Importantly, Dembroff's ultimate conclusion isn't that gender categorization comes apart from the metaphysics of gender kinds all together—instead, they defend what is effectively a modified version of the real gender assumption: that gender category membership ought to be determined by the gender kinds constructed in marginalized, subversive social contexts, instead. And importantly, Dembroff argues that gender categorization should be determined in this second way because it is more conducive to social justice.

And finally, lest we exempt ourselves from our own critique: consider Robin Dembroff and Dee Payton's argument for an asymmetry between so called “transracial” and transgender identity.²⁷ The gist of their argument is that our interest in combatting injustice supports treating self-identification as sufficient for *gender* category membership, but it does not equally support treating self-identification as sufficient for *racial* category membership. And so, they conclude, our interest in combatting injustice supports thinking about the metaphysics of gender and racial categories

differently.

Again, these examples span a wide range of subfields within feminist philosophy. For our purposes here, though, we want to focus on the use of this kind of methodology within social ontology. It's here, we suggest, that the claim is strongest and most striking. We'll also argue that it's the place where it encounters perhaps the most substantial problems.

§4. What Emancipatory Methodology is Not

Following Jenkins use of 'emancipatory theorizing', we'll characterize this distinctive focus on the political implications of philosophical theories as, broadly, *emancipatory methodology*.²⁸ In this section, we'll argue that this methodological stance is a significantly stronger - and more striking - approach than both the views to which Jenkins compares it and views which share some *prima facie* similarities.

We take it that the core claim of emancipatory methodology is something like this:

Emancipatory methodology: The practical role that theories of the social world play in helping us achieve social progress is (at least part of) what determines the success of those theories.

Operating within this methodology, Jenkins' approach also seems to endorse and employ something we'll call *emancipatory truthmaking*. Roughly, this amounts to the following claim:

Emancipatory truthmaking: Part of what determines the *truth/falsity* of our philosophical claims about social reality is their real-world political impact.

Emancipatory *truthmaking* is a stronger position than emancipatory methodology - especially since, as we'll discuss in §5, there are ways that we can evaluate the success of a theory that go beyond whether the claims it makes are true. Many of the arguments we'll give below target both claims. But we suggest that Jenkins - and many others making similar methodological moves - are at least tacitly endorsing emancipatory truthmaking. They often, for example, seem to consider potential negative political impact of a claim not just as a reason to elaborate or contextualize it, but as reason to

accept a strictly incompatible alternative; likewise, they often offer the potential political benefits of a claim as a reason to prefer it over its (strictly incompatible) rivals.²⁹

In much of what follows, we'll discuss emancipatory methodology and truthmaking specifically when applied to making truth-apt claims in social ontology, but we should note that most of the criticisms we raise here would also apply to similar moves that are sometimes described as 'conceptual engineering'. Our broad target is simply this: that the truth/falsity of the claims we're making (whether conceptual, ontological, or otherwise), and the success of theories built on those claims, is at least in part determined by their political impact.³⁰

It's worth emphasizing just how distinctive this approach is. In introducing the idea of emancipatory methodology, Jenkins' draws comparisons to multiple familiar aspects of philosophical methodology, including (a) the context-sensitivity of our moral and political claims, (b) the fact that our motivation to study oppression can be rooted in a desire to combat that oppression, (c) the claim that we should develop "non-ideal" political theories, and (d) the principles of standpoint epistemology. Jenkins is right to observe that this is all well-trodden philosophical ground. But it seems that emancipatory methodology, as she both describes and employs it, is doing something decidedly stronger than (or at least different from) any of these more familiar options.

Consider the idea that social kinds are context-sensitive. In feminist and social ontology, it is widely accepted that our theories of social kinds (and our theories of oppression that are based on social kinds) need to reflect the realities of the radically different contexts within which these kinds are constructed. For example, someone who is racialized as white in Mexico might not be racialized as white in the United States—and it's natural to think that any theory of racial kinds and racialization ought to reflect this difference. Along with this, it's also common to think that what counts as oppression, who oppression targets, and how it functions will doubtless be contingent on the specifics of our social context. But importantly, someone giving a theory of social kinds could easily grant all of this without committing to the emancipatory claim. There's a difference between

saying that our theories should be sensitive to and informed by the real-world specifics of oppression and saying that our theories should *themselves* actively combat that oppression (or, even more strongly, that the extent to which our theories accomplish this is part of how we judge their success).

Likewise, we could grant the core insights of standpoint theory and argue, as a result, that any theory of social kinds or social kind-based oppression should be adequately informed by those who are members of that kind and targeted by that oppression. Standpoint theory tells us that members of marginalized social kinds will have unique epistemic insight and, in many cases, better understanding, such that we cannot adequately build a theory without incorporating their distinctive epistemic standpoint. But it doesn't claim that theories based on this insight will, in and of themselves, be useful in combatting oppression. It seems perfectly possible, for example, that adequately incorporating a social standpoint could support a "black pill" theory of some form of social oppression, according to which there is no solution to the problem and no point in trying for one.

And finally, a deep desire to combat oppression might be part of what *motivates* us to give philosophical theories of oppression. But of course, it doesn't follow that the theories themselves are in any way useful in combatting oppression, or that these theories ought to be evaluated in view of their usefulness in this respect. Consider an analogous case from moral philosophy: we might be deeply motivated by a desire to be good people, and that motivation might lead us to study the nature of moral praiseworthiness. It doesn't follow that our theory is *itself* an act of moral goodness or praiseworthiness, however. And it likewise doesn't follow that our theory will help us or anyone else to actually become more praiseworthy. It might be consistent with our theory, for example, that what most often motivates people to do praiseworthy things is empathetic appeal, rather than careful philosophical analysis of our moral lives. There is a crucial distinction between what *motivates* us to theorize about something, and the metric by which we *evaluate* any theory that results. And

importantly, our motivations don't (and surely shouldn't!) always double as metrics, in this respect.

Jenkins' employment of emancipatory methodology thus appears importantly distinct from some of the glosses she gives. However, if doing emancipatory theory doesn't (simply) amount to making our theories context-sensitive; if it doesn't amount to incorporating the insights of standpoint epistemology, or to having just motivations, then what *does* it amount to, exactly?

Notably, whatever emancipatory theory turns out to be, it's also importantly distinct from more familiar ways we might consider the ethical or political implications of a theory in evaluating whether that theory is true. Suppose we were political philosophers arguing for a theory of open borders. We might argue that open borders would make life better for refugees, and use that claim about the implications of open borders as support for our view. In some sense, then, we're saying that the implication of our theory is part of what determines the success of that theory. But in making this claim, our theory would be saying that borders *should be* open; we wouldn't be arguing that borders are *in fact* open because we believe that open borders would be better for refugees. There is an aspect of our social world— borders— that is in some sense “socially constructed”, and which relies on our collective social agreement in order to have the character it has. It would be a standard philosophical move to suggest that we *should* adopt a different collective agreement than our current one— one in which borders are open— because doing so would promote justice. But it would be a very different claim indeed to suggest that, because we believe that open borders would be better for refugees, we thus correctly describe social reality if we say that borders are, in fact, open.

Jenkins' book is devoted to giving a theory of social categories as they actually exist. She's not (or not merely) making a claim about what women *could be* or *ought to be* or how we could change society in order to create more just gender categories; rather, she's making claims about *what it is* to be a woman, and how we should understand social kinds like gender as they actually exist. (Indeed, a major component of her view is that social kinds, as they actually exist, are oppressive, and this is

what gives rise to the phenomenon she calls ‘ontic oppression’). In employing emancipatory methodology in this context, she’s thus saying that part of what determines the success of a theory of gender (of what gender actually is, in our current social circumstances) is its emancipatory function: whether it helps or harms our political goals.

To be fair, there is nothing particularly unusual about considering the moral implications of our metaphysics in evaluating whether we think a particular theory is true. If we argue that there are no such things as persons, for example, you might object that we have special moral duties to persons, and that person-eliminativism fails to allow for or explain this.³¹ But in making this move, the realist about personhood isn’t thereby employing something like emancipatory methodology. Rather, they’re engaged in the much more mundane process of reflective equilibrium and theory choice. They think it’s true that we have special moral duties to persons— and they believe this strongly enough that they’re willing to hold it fixed as one of the data points that needs to be explained by a successful theory. They’re not arguing that we should think that there are such things as persons because we would treat each other more equitably if that were the case. (Nor do they seem to be committed to the idea that, by endorsing an eliminativist theory according to which there is no such thing as personhood, we are thereby doing something morally wrong, or are more likely to treat others badly.)

Similarly, you might argue for the existence of moral facts because you think that such facts are indispensable to our moral reasoning. Again, though, in making this argument you don’t need to claim that a moral realism which posits moral facts is a true theory of moral reality because it would make us better people or because it would help us to act better. Rather, you’re making a kind of indispensability argument— you’re saying that many of the claims we make when moralizing are in fact true, and that their truth requires us to posit the existence of moral facts.

Perhaps a closer analogy can be found in philosophy of science. Some philosophers of science argue that scientific theories don’t aim to truly describe the world, but rather to successfully

make predictions. The success of a scientific theory, on such a conception, should be judged on its ability to make useful and accurate predictions, rather than on its ability to truly describe reality. But the idea here is not that philosophical theories of the nature of science should *themselves* be judged according to their usefulness. Theories in philosophy of science don't themselves make empirically measurable predictions, and the reasons that philosophers of science often give for assessing empirical theories based on their predictive accuracy don't obviously translate to philosophical views. Moreover, when philosophers of science argue that we should judge scientific theories by their predictive power and predictive accuracy, they're not typically saying that working scientists need to internalize this view of scientific theorizing in order to make scientific progress. It's entirely compatible with scientific anti-realism, for example, that you think that scientists are best served by believing that they are trying to truly describe mind-independent reality. Likewise, you might think that Quine offered a decisive refutation of Popper's account of falsifiability in scientific theory choice, and yet think that many working scientists would be well served by viewing themselves as attempting to falsify theories.³²

In sum: it looks like emancipatory methodology doesn't amount to engaging in a process of reflective equilibrium, one which requires us to hold fixed certain data points about the nature of the social world. Additionally, it seems that emancipatory theories are not simply those which make indispensability arguments regarding which sorts of facts our theories of the social domain simply cannot do without. And finally, emancipatory methodology doesn't seem to be a particular instance of a more general methodology, adopted in the philosophy of science and elsewhere, according to which theories aim to make predictions, and thereby ought to be judged according to the utility of the predictions they make.

Perhaps, instead, we should view emancipatory methodology as a type of philosophical pragmatism. Pragmatists of various stripes often argue that the "how well does it work?" standard should also be our measure for assessing philosophical theories. So, for example, someone who

defends pragmatist approaches to political philosophy might argue that we shouldn't ask, in evaluating a theory of justice, whether it conforms to a timeless and absolute account of justice; rather, we should ask whether it's working for us, in our real-world political circumstances. A theory of justice needs to be useful to us, in our current and actual social circumstances, as we try to make the world a better place. And its ability to help us make progress on the pressing questions of material inequality that we find ourselves facing in our specific circumstances will be part of what determines whether it is the correct account of justice - for us, right now. But in different circumstances (characterized in part by different needs that a theory of justice might serve) a different account might work better, and thus be the correct account in those circumstances and for those purposes.³³

We will return to the difficulties of evaluating whether a philosophical theory "works" for us in (§6). But for now, let's observe that pragmatism about theories of social justice and pragmatism about theories of social ontology are two very different things. When we're theorizing about justice, there are versions of the pragmatic approach which are relatively straightforward. For example: a true theory of justice and what justice demands might be little more than an accurate description of how we can currently arrange our social systems, given our circumstances, to promote the most good and cause the least harm. Elizabeth Anderson, for example, argues for a social contract view of justice according to which what is just are simply those social arrangements and practices that people could collectively will to be the case, given their actual material circumstances and limitations.³⁴

But this claim becomes significantly stronger when we combine it with the idea of emancipatory truthmaking, in the context of making metaphysical and ontological claims.³⁵ In doing that, we are saying that part of what determines the *truth* of an account of social kinds (of what gender is, or what race is, etc) are the immediate practical implications of adopting such a view. That is, we're saying that the truth of claims about what the social world (actually, currently) is like are at

least partly determined by what would happen if there was widespread endorsement of those claims.

Given this distinctive take on social ontology, it's worth considering one final interpretation of the emancipatory approach: the particular form of pragmatic metaphysics which emerges from deflationary, Neo-Carnapian approaches to (meta)ontology.³⁶ Very generally, on this picture, ontological truths follow from certain semantic claims about proper reference. To appreciate how this might work, consider: if, as deflationists, we're curious about the nature of the metaphysical kind *woman*, all we've got to do is ask after the proper referent(s) of the gender term 'woman'. This is what Thomasson has called "easy ontology"—easy, because on this approach, a lot of ontological questions can be answered via some combination of conceptual analysis and straight-forward empirical investigation. Additionally, it's important that we're concerned with *proper* reference here—i.e., what the term 'woman' *should* refer to—as this is where pragmatism enters.³⁷ In answering ontological questions, the Neo-Carnapian is typically interested in what our terms should refer to, given certain pragmatic considerations. And in feminist metaphysics, such pragmatic considerations for gender terms like 'woman' have been extended to include normative and political considerations.³⁸ The metaphysical reality of womanhood is then taken to follow from whichever semantics of 'woman' is best supported by these sorts of considerations.

On this deflationary framework, then, emancipatory truthmaking is effectively a claim about *language selection*—i.e., which language we ought to speak, in a given context. And that selection process is informed, at least in part, by appeal to (what we take to be) the real-world political impact of a certain linguistic framework, in practice.³⁹ So, roughly, here's how emancipatory truthmaking could work, framed in terms of deflationary metaphysical inquiry into a gender kind like *woman*. Given two linguistic frameworks, L and L^* , where according to the rules of L the term 'woman' refers to W , and according to the rules of L^* , 'woman' refers to W^* : If it's plausible that using 'woman' to refer to W rather than W^* would, on the whole, have better political consequences than the alternative, then we ought to use L . And of course, if we use L , then 'woman' refers to W , and

so, the metaphysical reality of womanhood is W. This is roughly how political commitments can inform our ontological commitments, on the deflationary approach, and this is also how the claim of emancipatory truthmaking might be fitted (quite naturally!) into this sort of Neo-Carnapian metaphysics.

But notably, this view doesn't resolve the mystery of emancipatory truthmaking, or emancipatory methodology more broadly. It is still difficult to see how a normative claim about which language might be *best* translates into an ontological claim about which kinds *actually exist* (not: which kinds *should* exist, or *ought* to exist—but really do exist). The alleged connection between social ontology and the just consequences of a theory remains opaque. The deflationary approach described here doesn't illuminate the nature of this relationship, but rather re-casts it as one between political consequences and truths about linguistic reference. But if that's right, then this move only reframes, rather than resolves, our question.⁴⁰ Likewise, nothing about the deflationist approach tells us how, exactly, we are supposed to assess the political impacts of a theory, or why that potential impact should be part of its success as a philosophical theory (more on this in §6.)

§5. Political and Social Goals in Analytic Feminism

In the previous section we discussed several different glosses and analogies often used to explain emancipatory methodology and argued that each interpretation fails to illuminate the core claims of emancipatory theory. We now want to argue that emancipatory methodology is a much stronger commitment than the idea that our political goals can helpfully influence our theorizing.

Within feminist philosophy, it's commonly argued that construction of our theories should involve our political and moral goals. Again, this idea has roots in critical social theory, but perhaps its most prominent defender within analytic philosophy is Sally Haslanger.⁴¹ Haslanger has argued - drawing from the work of Elizabeth Anderson⁴² - that we can develop philosophical theories as 'ameliorative projects'. For Haslanger, part of how we develop our theories can include reference to

our (legitimate) political and social goals.

By itself, though, this claim doesn't entail that the actual, likely, or even purely counterfactual political impact of our theories *themselves* partly determines the success of those theories. Likewise, it doesn't entail that political impact should influence whether we think a theory is *true*. Our political goals can influence how we approach and develop our theories; but that's very different from thinking that *the impact of the theory itself on those very goals* is part of what determines the success of that theory.

As Anderson points out, our political goals might influence how we evaluate the success of a theory in many ways other than assessing whether that theory is true.⁴³ After all, a theory can consist entirely of true claims, and yet not be useful or explanatory. Suppose we say that our theory of what it is to be a woman is as follows: someone is a woman iff they are a member of the social kind 'woman'. That might be true. It's not explanatory, useful, illuminating, or in any other way helpful, though, so of course it's not a successful theory. Philosophical explanation aims at more than truth. Similarly, as Anderson points out, we can criticize theories which make only true claims, and some of that criticism might be political in nature. We could argue that a theory is biased in what it leaves out, or that the truths it states aren't addressing the issues that matter most, or that it applies only to a very narrow context in a way that's exclusionary, or even that it's presented in a way and with a focus that is likely to be harmful.

In this section, we want to highlight two ways in which you could engage in what Haslanger calls 'ameliorative analysis'— analysis influenced by your political and social goals— which involve significantly weaker commitments than those of emancipatory methodology. We'll refer to these ways of engaging in ameliorative analysis as *unmasking projects* and *salience projects*.⁴⁴ We draw both of these approaches from Haslanger's work, but we should emphasize that we do not offer them as interpretations of what Haslanger herself intends.⁴⁵ Ultimately, we present these two approaches to

ameliorative analysis with the aim of contrasting them against emancipatory methodology.⁴⁶ It's very easy, we suggest, to slide between these various methodologies — but they're not equivalent, and commitment to the weaker claims doesn't itself support commitment to the stronger, emancipatory version.

Let's begin with *unmasking projects*.⁴⁷ The unmasking project involves the attempt to criticize a dominant viewpoint by highlighting ways in which it is distorting, inaccurate, or otherwise misleading. In her own account of race as a social position based on perceived genetic origin, Haslanger argues against the “naturalizing” assumption that commonly appears in folk conceptions of race. As part of this, she outlines the dominant norms that shape our understanding of racial categories (norms which, she argues, rest on assumptions that are *false*), and then she argues that those norms themselves (and the social positions that are created by them) explain the way that race functions as a social category in our society.

Now, in a project like this, there is no guarantee that the resulting view will be accepted by people who face racialized oppression. Moreover, even if they do accept this view, there is also no guarantee that this will automatically help them combat the material realities of that oppression.⁴⁸ Rather, the hope—and it is at most a hope—is that the more we can push back against ideas we think are harmful *and false*, the better, at the end of the day, for our pursuit of justice.

But, importantly, the truth or falsity of the claims which you are “unmasking” doesn't rest on how immediately *useful* it would be to unmask them. Either dominant beliefs misdescribe the social world, or they don't. We suspect they do, and we hope that showing the ways in which they do — including what we think is actually *true* about the social world— will be part of what helps us to make social progress. In other words: we hope that defending important-but-surprising truths will help us to combat harmful falsehoods. Of course, we don't know whether this would actually be the immediate impact, but we can still endorse an “unmasking” theory in the absence of knowing.⁴⁹

In a similar vein, a *salience project* seeks to draw attention to particular questions or problems.

As Haslanger notes, for many social kinds, concepts, and terms, there is probably no one thing that they are, or indeed, no single question that we might ask when inquiring into things like e.g., the nature of gender.⁵⁰ In other words, there are often many different questions that we can ask, in pursuing more-or-less the same line of inquiry. This means, among other things, that we get to choose which questions to focus on (and so, which to neglect). And importantly, as Anderson emphasizes, our reasons for making certain questions especially salient in our theories might be, at least in part, *political*⁵¹ - e.g., we might think that certain questions are central to our understanding of justice, or are especially relevant to political ends we care about, or are often overlooked because of our biases.⁵² And whether a particular theory is successful will partly depend on which question(s) we decide to focus on with our inquiry.

Haslanger, for example, argues for a social position theory of gender - to have a gender, on this view, is to occupy a position in a specific, hierarchical social structure.⁵³ Haslanger is clear that there are many other things that might shape the overall social character of gender (and, indeed, she expresses skepticism that there is any one thing that gender is). She also acknowledges that there are many true claims about the world - including sex differences, gender self-identification, gendered self-expression and behavior, etc. - which her theory doesn't canvas. She argues, however, that focusing on social structure when giving a theory of gender helps us to draw attention to the (too often overlooked) material inequalities that, on her view, are fundamental to gender, and which lie at the heart of the sex/gender distinction.

Crucially, though, in making this claim, Haslanger isn't arguing that we should think that this social structure exists because positing it would help us address material inequalities. Rather, she thinks that the social structure exists, and that it explains a lot about gender in our social world. And it's because of that - because she thinks this structure is out there, and that it independently explains a lot - that she argues for the political importance of making it salient in giving a theory of gender.

We can - and many do - dispute whether Haslanger's resulting theory is adequate. We might

argue that there are true things about the world which her account leaves out in a way that makes it unable to fully explain gender. And part of that criticism might be political - we might argue that it's harmful to ignore internally-felt aspects of gender and focus solely on social position, or harmful to make gender something that is entirely oppressive, or etc. But again, to make these criticisms we don't need to commit to emancipatory methodology. We might just think that her theory doesn't adequately describe or explain the social world, partly because of the (independently) true things that it leaves out. That is, a criticism of Haslanger might incorporate exactly the same salience reasoning that Haslanger herself employs.

As we understand it, the claims of emancipatory methodology— and most especially, emancipatory truthmaking—are not elements of either of these two versions of ameliorative analysis. For again, salience projects involve focusing on certain questions to the exclusion of others, often for political reasons; but these projects do not involve a commitment to evaluating the resulting answers on the basis of how well those answers serve our political ends. Similarly, while unmasking projects involve bringing our political values to bear on the exercise of unveiling the harsh realities of the social domain, these projects do not incorporate a commitment to the idea that what has been unmasked counts as *truth* (or as a successful theory of reality) only insofar as it serves our political goals.

Political aims and goals can influence both how we construct and how we evaluate our philosophical theories in many ways, but as we've just seen, most of them are *significantly less* committal than the idea that our theories should *themselves* combat oppression, or that their success/truth in part depends on the extent to which they do so. We don't object to the broad idea of ameliorative analysis— indeed, we are both fans of it. But the claims of ameliorative analysts are, by and large, far more modest than those of emancipatory theorists. And so, it won't work for the latter to motivate their methodology by claiming to share the successes of ameliorative inquiry— if the promises of emancipatory methodology are to be borne out, there must be another way to make

this case.

§6. The Social Model of Disability: A Case Study in Emancipatory Theory

So far, we've been focused on saying what emancipatory methodology is *not* - it's not quite the glosses Jenkins' gives, it's not equivalent to some commonly drawn analogies, and it's stronger than the general idea that we can give 'ameliorative' analyses. In this section, we turn to the inherent complexities of employing this kind of methodology, and to its implications in practice: how is this approach supposed to *work*, exactly? Whether you interpret emancipatory methodology as a form of 'conceptual engineering', a way of determining the ontological structure of the social world, or something in between, we think that serious problems arise. To illustrate this, we'll use an extended example: the 'social model' of disability.

The social model of disability is more of a family of views, rather than a single view or single set of commitments.⁵⁴ But for our purposes here, we're going to consider the social model as a commitment to two basic claims, which together give the foundations for a theory of disability:

- (i) *Disability vs Impairment*: An impairment is a specific biological or psychological condition; disability is the disadvantage caused by living with an impairment in our broader social environment.
- (ii) *Social Disadvantage*: The harms that constitute disability are due to injustice and unfairness in how our social environment is constructed; in a world with fairer social arrangements, people would still have impairments, but those impairments would not create significant social disadvantage.

The social model is a claim about *what it is* to have a disability. Note that we might be motivated to pursue something like the social model for both "unmasking"- and "salience"-type reasons. We could think that we inaccurately view disability as a primarily medical or biological phenomenon, when in fact much or all of it is social in nature. And we could likewise think that "unmasking" this social nature— and combatting the assumption that disability is an individual medical problem—

will ultimately be good for disabled people. Likewise, we could focus specifically on the social aspects of disability because they are so often overlooked, and that making them salient is especially important for understanding the nature of disability.

Either way, it's still an open question whether the social model is a good theory (and whether the claims it's making are true). And, crucially, two people with all the same political motivations and all the same views about its potential political impact could easily disagree on whether they think the theory accurately and adequately explains the nature of disability.

But if we take seriously the claims of emancipatory methodology, we have to go further. Whether the social model is successful— and, indeed, whether the claims it is making about the nature of disability are correct — will depend at least in part on the real-world political impact of the theory itself.

A very basic concern, at this point, is that it is far from obvious how we even assess such a criterion. Again, consider the analogy to scientific theories. Scientific theories make specific predictions, and those predictions are empirically testable; a scientific theory “works for us” insofar as it makes accurate predictions. The goal posts are straightforward, as is how we assess whether something clears those goal posts. (Likewise, there's a specific case to be made for *why* those are the goal posts.) However, it's not clear that the social model makes predictions which are empirically testable; and equally, it's unclear what the relevant goal posts are here.⁵⁵

What would it be for us to assess a view like the social model according to its potential impact? What would it mean for something like the social model to “work” for us? Undoubtedly, the social model has admirable aims— it's trying to destigmatize disability, to draw attention to social inequality, to highlight the importance of achievable material interventions like ramps and curb cuts. But the relationship it has to achieving those aims— and achieving good outcomes— is far more obscure.

A scientific theory makes empirical predictions, and we can test those predictions. The

philosophical advocate of open borders is recommending a particular political policy, and we can understand what it would be for governments and nation-states to implement that policy. But what would it be for the social model— a specific theory about the nature of disability— to be implemented? The criteria can't be that it gains widespread adoption and endorsement, given that esoteric theories about the nature of social kinds are never going to receive such uptake. Perhaps, instead, the thought is something like this: to implement the social model, activists and those working for disability rights would need to generally endorse it (at varying levels of detail), and people in general would need to accept its basic framework and recommendations (e.g., that we need to focus on social rather than medical solutions to improve disabled people's lives, that being disadvantaged due to disability is more like being disadvantaged due to sexuality or sexual orientation than like a problem you would see your doctor for, that lack of accommodation and not physical limitation is what disadvantages people, and so on). So, let's assume that something in this neighborhood is what it would mean for the social model to be implemented. How, then, would we assess whether the social model is “emancipatory”?

People can, and have, used the social model to argue for important social change. It's not at all clear, though, whether the same social change couldn't have been achieved with a different theoretical background, or whether the social model is better than rivals in helping to achieve good outcomes. Whether the social model might be helpful also seems to depend on what and who we're talking about. Using it to argue for classroom accommodations for students with ADHD seems relatively innocuous, and possibly beneficial. (Perhaps unsurprisingly, the social model often has broad uptake within accommodation programs in higher education.)

The same model would be rather disastrous, though, if applied to a disease like ALS. There is, of course, a social element to living with a disease like ALS, and it's important not to overlook the ways in which that social element can be harmful. But we suggest that the most disadvantageous thing about ALS is that over a very short period your body rapidly loses motor function until you

die. It's an impairment that causes significant social impact and social disadvantage, but the social model looks absurd at best, and cruel at worst, when applied to it. Likewise, for an impairment like ALS, it really does seem like potential medical interventions are far more likely to reduce its negative impacts than social interventions, even while allowing that social interventions are crucial in promoting justice for people with the disease.

In many ways, the social model represents the classic case of a *limited strategy*— it has been highly influential within disability rights communities, and the framework it offers for thinking about disability has proven useful in arguing for legal rights to accommodation and accessibility. But it has also proven alienating for many people with disabilities, especially those whose disabilities are medically complex, degenerative, or painful. Likewise, it's perhaps too easy for medical professionals to dismiss, given the relative unimportance it gives to (often significant and ongoing) biomedical aspects of disability. And its critics argue that it risks creating hierarchies within disability communities — privileging those whose disabilities really would be little more than an inconvenience in a more accessible world —and likes makes it harder to speak openly about the harsh biomedical realities of some impairments.⁵⁶

It's hard to see what emancipatory methodology would recommend in a case like this. Is the social model “conducive to disability liberation”? To some extent, the answer here seems to be “yes”, for some disabled people. But more significantly, this seems to us to be a very different question from whether the social model is *true*, and whether it's offered a successful theory of the nature of disability. As it happens, we think the social model is false. We think it relies on an unworkable distinction between the social and the biological, that it misdescribes the nature of some of the harms associated with disability, and that the account it offers is too over-simplified to accurately describe the complexity of a social kind like disability.

In many ways, though, some of the philosophical gripes we have with the social model are part of what make it (somewhat) effective. It's too over-simplified to be an adequate philosophical

theory, but that same simplification makes it great for slogans, for example.⁵⁷ And much to our continued disappointment, catchy slogans are often more politically effective than careful philosophical theorizing.

It's also worth noting that many disability activists— even when employing the social model directly— don't really care that much whether the model is, strictly speaking, *true*. It's a useful oppositional strategy, stated as a bold claim partly in an effort to shift the Overton Window. (Anecdotally, it seems common for people to allow that the model is oversimplified, and yet still useful in some political contexts.) But it seems that employing the claims of emancipatory methodology— and especially emancipatory truthmaking— obscures this possibility. The very act of using a theory for effective change, even on the assumption that it's a kind of convenient fiction or noble lie, would, if we appeal to emancipatory truthmaking, be an argument for that theory's *truth*.

But let's leave aside epistemic worries about how emancipatory methodology might be implemented. Our deeper worry lies with the basic idea at the foundation of the emancipatory stance: that the political effectiveness of a theory is part of what makes it philosophically successful, and that theories which are politically ineffective for us are unsuccessful. Honest philosophical theorizing, we suggest, must be open to the possibility that reality is politically inconvenient;; sometimes, descriptive truth simply isn't politically useful in the ways that we want it to be, and the philosophical methodologies we adopt ought to leave space for that possibility.⁵⁸ Indeed, one of the things we admire most about Jenkins' work is that she, in places, seems highly attuned to this possibility - the very idea of *ontically unjust* kinds can be read as a description of a politically inconvenient social reality. But it's difficult to see how this possibility coheres with the emancipatory project.

Again, the example of disability is apt. The social model is genuinely useful in advocating for disability rights; it can help to destigmatize disability, to more effectively argue for accessibility, to

draw attention to the often-overlooked social dimensions of disability. And in many ways, the case for all these (important, necessary) things would be easier to make if the social model was true. But the social model isn't true. The reality of disability is in many ways politically *inconvenient*— even in a fully accessible society, there will still be distinctive ways in which (some) disabled people suffer and are harmed; the biomedical reality of at least some disabilities would present significant social disadvantages even with full access and accommodation; despite the noble aims of universal design the accessibility needs of some disabilities would still conflict with each other, and so on. And that's before we even get to the thorny issue of whether there really is anything like a social category 'disability', or whether it makes sense to group together the wide variation of mental and physical experiences we might sometimes label 'disability'.

Building this complexity into our theories arguably won't make them better tools for advocacy. And it's entirely possible that such complexity could be used, in the short term, to argue for political goals we don't endorse. And yet if we're genuinely trying to understand the social world, it seems imperative that we be at least willing to entertain theories which maintain that social reality is inconvenient for our goals. Likewise, we must also be at least willing to entertain theories that, if true, imply that we should revise, amend, or otherwise contextualize those goals.

§7. A Contrast Case: Briggs and George

Although we've argued that there are serious problems with emancipatory methodology, it's important to note that these problems aren't criticisms of a broadly 'emancipatory' approach in general. Rather, they're problems that specifically arise when this emancipatory approach is combined with the norms of analytic philosophy. To illustrate this, we now want to contrast how Jenkins describes her methodological approach to the stance taken by another recent discussion of gender categories: R. Briggs and B. George's *What Even is Gender?*

By their own description, this project - which is published as a crossover trade book rather than an academic monograph - isn't engaged in the same methods, or targeting the same goals, as a

typical philosophy book. To begin with, Briggs and George are clear that their target audience is not, at least primarily, other philosophers.⁵⁹ Likewise, they make clear that they are not, at least primarily, engaged in the project of trying to refute opposing arguments, or of giving ‘a sharp set of criteria’ for, e.g., what it is to be a member of the social category *trans*.⁶⁰

Rather, although they are clearly influenced by and drawing from the methods of analytic philosophy, Briggs and George describe the aims of their project in primarily therapeutic terms. The book, they say, is ‘in an important sense written for our past selves. . . We’ve tried to write a book that would have been useful to us, and saved us a certain amount of pain and regret’.⁶¹ They expand this aim by writing that:

Our target audience is composed of people whose perspective bears some resemblance to our perspective in various life stages. If you are in the sort of place that we once were in — wondering ‘Am I trans?’ Or ‘why doesn’t this ‘gender’ talk make more logical sense?’ - we hope this book will be useful to you.⁶²

Likewise, they write that:

Regardless of where you’re coming from, if you are trying to make sense of your own relationship with one or more of the things called ‘gender’, we hope this book will help you to look beyond stock narratives about gendered life. . . Whoever you are, we hope this book can help you in some way to shape a gendered (or relatively ungendered) life that works for you (p. 5).

Briggs and George thus have as their aim something explicitly ‘emancipatory’ in a way that resonates with classic characterizations of critical theory - they want the experience of reading their book to be liberatory in some way.

In the subsequent view they construct, Briggs and George argue for an irreducible range of gender categories, based on what they characterize as ‘gender feels’.⁶³ And in developing this position, they make moves similar to those we’ve been highlighting as the core parts of

emancipatory methodology. For example, they develop their view as an attempt to validate and explain the idea of ‘gender self-determination’.⁶⁴ Gender self-determination, as they describe it, is a *norm*— it is based on the idea of respect, consent, and individual rights to self-actualization.⁶⁵ Briggs and George then argue for the existence of irreducible gender categories in order to uphold this norm. “The main motivation for our approach,” they write, “is political: we believe in a principle of self-determination with respect to gender.”⁶⁶ And crucially, they argue that if their view works as designed—if it does, in fact, serve to uphold this political norm— then that is a significant reason to accept their view, and to think it is successful. They are, in this way, making a move quite similar to the kind that Jenkins makes - moving from a political desiderata (which they value primarily because of its use to trans people) to an ontological claim about the nature of gender categories.

But it’s important to read all of this in the context of their stated aims. And in light of those aims, Briggs and George say, for example, that they are providing “one example of a trans friendly ontology,”⁶⁷ but suggest that other (seemingly contrasting) approaches could also be viable. In the subsequent discussion, they’re then explicitly less focused on the theoretical details of their approach - and on providing reasons to prefer their own approach over alternatives - and more focused on showing how certain ideas can potentially be reconciled, put into conversation with each other, and applied to real life circumstances.

We thus take Briggs and George to be engaged in a slightly different kind of project than is Jenkins, despite the similar subject matter. Jenkins’ book is trying to give a theory of the nature of social categories. Jenkins thinks there is such a thing as ontological oppression. She thinks that understanding how social categories create distinctively ontological oppression helps us fully understand and describe our social world. That is, Jenkins (and most parties to this debate), at least appear to be making truth-apt claims about the sort of structures, categories, kinds, properties, concepts, etc. that make up our social world.

It’s not clear whether this is what Briggs and George are up to - or at the very least, it’s clear

that it's not their primary aim. They're using the tools of philosophy to try to help people think through their own lives. This is a laudable aim, and a valuable one. But it's not typically, we suggest, the aim of debates in analytic philosophy.

Here is another way of putting the contrast. Briggs and George target their book specifically to those facing the same kind of social experience that they themselves have faced, not to other academics. And the 'emancipatory' work of the book then *just is* reading the book and thinking through the ideas; they hope it will help people in the same kinds of confusion they found themselves in. Jenkins, in contrast, is primarily engaged in an academic debate. To assess the 'emancipatory' impact of her view we would have to consider something like the counterfactual: what would be the case were this view to receive broad uptake within the current UK/US debate over trans rights? And it's unclear not only how we would assess that (inherently counterfactual) implication, and why such impact should be related to the truth of the claims Jenkins is making.

We have both, at times, found Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean to be morally helpful, even therapeutic. Perhaps not uncommonly for those attracted to philosophy, we can be prone to extremes, or to black-and-white thinking, or to following a chain of reasoning farther than it actually leads. Aristotle's view can be, at times, an important way of finding balance.

By itself, that makes Aristotle's view valuable. But it doesn't mean that Aristotle's view is *true*. When we step into the philosophy seminar, we worry that Aristotle's view is subject to counterexamples, or too vague to be fully explanatory, or based on an improbable theory of virtue, or etc. None of this matters much to us in our daily lives, when we're trying to reign ourselves in and be sensible. But it matters a great deal when we're considering whether Aristotle has in fact given us a successful theory of virtue and right action.

It's thus specifically in the context in which we're evaluating theories qua philosophy theories that we think the main problems of emancipatory methodology arise. To return to the previous example, the social model of disability might at times help us to feel better, or to shake up our

thinking, or challenge us. But that doesn't make it, once we put our philosopher hats on, a successful theory.

§8. Summing Up

Within feminist philosophy, there is justified skepticism of the kind of stance which, while making claims that pose potential material harm to vulnerable people, insists it is “just following the argument where it leads” or “just asking questions”. But we suggest that there should also be skepticism for a stance which allows us to discard a theory because it is politically inconvenient. And we are likewise skeptical of the stronger stance — often implicit in these discussions — that a claim's being conducive to our current political goals is at least part of what makes it *true*.

Social metaphysics includes many theories which could plausibly be used to argue for political ends we think are harmful. Will Wilkerson argues that sexual orientation is a choice.⁶⁸ Quashawn Spencer argues for a version of genetic realism about racial categories.⁶⁹ Heather Logue argues that gender is a fiction.⁷⁰ Jenkins herself argues that social reality can force us into social category membership which we don't endorse. And so on. Less nuanced and careful versions of these same claims are often right-wing talking points. You could easily imagine someone taking up the same views and arguing for all sorts of damaging conclusions (just as Saul imagines the twisting of Gendler's view on pragmatic encroachment)⁷¹. And yet we think that all these views are interesting, compelling philosophical theories which deserve discussion on their own merits. And more strongly, it seems that the potential immediate political impact of such views shouldn't be a part of how we assess those merits. “Born this way” was doubtless an effective political strategy, and the idea that sexual orientation is voluntary was used to cause material harm to gay people. And yet Wilkerson might be right.

The danger of the emancipatory stance is that it obscures from the theoretical landscape things that should be live options. And because of the way in which it does this, it has the potential to reinforce the current moral and political status quo. If we hold fixed our goals, and then maintain

that successful theories are those which assist us in those goals, we create a methodology in which we can dismiss, without further argument, things which might be inconvenient to those goals. But when we consider who the “we” in question is – disproportionality western, wealthy, highly educated people spending their time talking about the esoterica of critical social theory— we should surely be worried about the epistemic bubble this creates (and reinforces). We might be wrong. Our goals might be misguided. The world might be entirely stranger, weirder, and less amenable to theorizing than we’d hoped.

There are, of course, many ways in which theorizing can be valuable, and analytic philosophy doesn’t have a monopoly on the aims of building theories. Critical social theories can help us imagine new possibilities and perspectives, they can help us access new phenomenological insight in thinking about oppression, they can encourage reflection. All of these are valuable methodological goals, and arguably goals that aren’t (at least typically) best achieved by the tools and methods of analytic philosophy. But we also think analytic methodology has its own distinctive value. In aiming at truth, clarity, precision, and argument, we think we’re doing something of particular significance, while allowing that there are many other equally important ways of approaching the same issues.

And it’s the combination of analytic philosophy with emancipatory methodology that we think deserves closer examination, especially as it becomes more commonly employed. We don’t, of course, take ourselves to have given decisive criticisms here. But we hope that in making these criticisms, we can further an important conversation. Philosophy is very often political. Philosophy is very often imbued with values and norms, and motivated by values and norms. But the way in which it is political, and the intersection of our norms, values, and motivations with a philosophical search for truth deserves careful scrutiny. Careful scrutiny, luckily, is what philosophers are all about.

¹ Thanks to Ásta, Liam Kofi Bright, Ross Cameron, Sally Haslanger, Mike Rea, and Jason Turner for helpful discussion on the ideas in this paper. Special thanks to Alex King and Daniel Wodak for their careful and insightful editorial comments. And extra-special thanks to Katharine Jenkins for writing such a great book, and for generously helping us to clarify points of disagreement.

² Katherine Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023).

³ R.A. Briggs and B.R. George, *What Even Is Gender?* (New York: Routledge, 2023).

⁴ Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression*, 24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸ *Ibid.*, ch. 8.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁰ Ibid., ch. 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 13.

¹² See Raymond Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory: Habermas and the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981); and Iris Marion Young, “Throwing like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment Motility and Spatiality,” *Human Studies* 3, no. 1 (1980): 137–56.

¹³ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972).

¹⁴ Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 22.

¹⁵ Jenkins, *Ontology and Oppression*, 197.

¹⁶ Ibid., 220-224.

¹⁷ Ibid., 215-225.

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

¹⁹ Jennifer Saul, “(How) Should We Tell Implicit Bias Stories?,” *Disputatio* 10, no. 50 (2018): 217–44, 219. Saul is drawing on Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*.

²⁰ Saul, “(How) Should We Tell Implicit Bias Stories?,” 238. See Tamar Szabó Gendler, “On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias,” *Philosophical Studies* 156, no. 1 (2011): 33–63.

²¹ Mari Mikkola, *The Wrong of Injustice: Dehumanization and Its Role in Feminist Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 84.

²² Erin Beeghly, “Embodiment and Oppression: Reflections of Haslanger, Gender, and Race,” in *The Logic of Racial Practice: Explorations in the Habituation of Racism*, ed. Brock Bahler (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2021), 121–42.

²³ Serene J. Khader, *Adaptive Preferences and Women’s Empowerment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²⁴ Ibid., 82.

²⁵ Ibid., ch. 2.

²⁶ Robin Dembroff, “Real Talk on the Metaphysics of Gender,” *Philosophical Topics* 46, no. 2 (2018): 21–50.

²⁷ Robin Dembroff and Dee Payton, “Why We Shouldn’t Compare Transracial to Transgender Identity,” *Boston Review*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.bostonreview.net/articles/robin-dembroff-dee-payton-breaking-analogy-between-race-and-gender/>.

²⁸ Notably, Jenkins herself draws this terminology from Geuss, *The Idea of a Critical Theory*.

²⁹ At the very least, we think that it’s incumbent on those who make moves like ‘claim P might have negative political impact, therefore we should reject claim P’ to provide an account of what their target is other than the truth/falsity of these claims, and likewise an account of both (i) how we’re meant to assess that potential impact; (ii) why it is relevant to whether the claim should be rejected.

³⁰ See especially §6 for a discussion of problems in evaluating the political impact of a theory of social kinds, regardless of how you’re interpreting the nature of that theory.

³¹ As in Peter Van Inwagen, *Material Beings* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1990).

³² Willard Van Orman Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” *Philosophical Review* 60, no. 1 (1951): 20–43.

³³ Whether the pragmatist will say that a theory of justice helping us to navigate our immediate circumstances is part of what makes that theory *true* is a more complicated question, which we won’t address here.

³⁴ So, for example: “I propose that we view the contractualist formula as a tool for critical empirical inquiry into the justice of existing or prospective practices. Inquiry into whether we can freely will together the operative principles of our established institutions can proceed empirically.” Elizabeth Anderson, “The Epistemology of Justice,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 58, no. 1 (2020): 6–29, 10.

³⁵ Importantly, Anderson herself does not appear to endorse the claims of emancipatory methodology—and specifically she doesn't seem to endorse emancipatory truthmaking. See Elizabeth Anderson, "Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and Defense," *Hypatia* 10, no. 3 (1995): 50–84; Elizabeth Anderson, "Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology," *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (1995): 27–58; and Elizabeth Anderson, "Uses of Value Judgments in Science: A General Argument, with Lessons from a Case Study of Feminist Research on Divorce," *Hypatia* 19, no. 1 (2004): 1–21.

³⁶ See Rudolf Carnap, "Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology," in *Meaning and Necessity*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1950); Amie Thomasson, *Ontology Made Easy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Amie Thomasson, "Metaphysical Disputes and Metalinguistic Negotiation," *Analytic Philosophy* 57, no. 4 (2016): 1–28.

³⁷ Note that this is a somewhat different issue than the question of whether gendered language is itself a type of normative language. Both Rach Cosker-Rowland and Sarah McGrath, for example, have recently argued that gendered language is normative. (See Rach Cosker-Rowland, "The Normativity of Gender," *Noûs* 58 (2024): 244–70; and Sarah McGrath, "The Metaethics of Gender," in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, ed. Russ Shafer-Landau, vol. 16 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 27–53.) And insofar as this is a descriptive claim, it is perfectly consistent with everything we're saying here. Our criticism focuses on the idea that our political goals and norms should help us to decide the success of a descriptive account of gender, or be part of how we assess whether the claims we're making about gender are true.

³⁸ See Esa Díaz-León, "On Haslanger's Meta-Metaphysics: Social Structures and Metaphysical Deflationism," *Disputatio* 10, no. 50 (2018): 201–16; and Esa Díaz-León, "Substantive Metaphysical Debates about Gender and Race: Verbal Disputes and Metaphysical Deflationism," *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53, no. 4 (2021): 556–74.

³⁹ Crucially, this sort of normative consideration (i.e., one which makes appeal to something like the expected political consequences of a theory in practice) does *not* seem to be one which has traditionally factored into language selection, when it comes to how deflationary frameworks have been characterized in the mainstream literatures. This is important, because if that observation is correct, then it means the challenges of emancipatory methodology may be unique to deflationary projects in feminist metaphysics.

⁴⁰ See Dee Payton, “Feminism, Ontological Deflationism, and Normative Structure” (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), typescript; and Dee Payton, “Normative Metaphysics” (unpublished manuscript, n.d.), typescript; for extended discussion on this reframing, and for discussion of the role of normative considerations on deflationary views in feminist metaphysics, more generally. Notably: one way out of the worry considered here is to deflate truth itself to something like pragmatic utility. For, it’s no mystery how normative claims about which language is best might be employed to support claims about which gender semantics is the most useful. But note that this move won’t help us so much in the present context, as it effectively changes the subject by taking us outside the space of emancipatory methodology (which is concerned with truth/falsity of ontological claims, understood in the traditional sense).

⁴¹ See, for example, Sally Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?,” *Noûs* 34, no. 1 (2000): 31–55; and Sally Haslanger, “What Good Are Our Intuitions: Philosophical Analysis and Social Kinds,” *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 80, no. 1 (2006): 89–118.

⁴² See Anderson, “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology.”

⁴³ In Anderson, “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology.”

⁴⁴ We should note that these two projects we’ll outline are compatible, and could easily be employed in tandem.

⁴⁵ As Haslanger herself readily admits (see Haslanger, “Gender and Race”), the idea of ameliorative analysis is somewhat opaque, and admits of many different interpretations. So we consider these views broadly ‘Haslangerian’ in spirit, but we don’t want to suggest that they are what Haslanger herself thinks.

⁴⁶ Although we should note that Jenkins herself seems to employ moves like this in her book - so perhaps she doesn’t need to commit to something as strong as her characterization of emancipatory theorizing to do much of the work she wants to do.

⁴⁷ Here we draw from, inter alia, Haslanger, “What Good Are Our Intuitions”; Sally Haslanger, “Social Construction: The ‘Debunking’ Project,” in *Socializing Metaphysics: The Nature of Social Reality*, ed. Frederick F. Schmitt (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 301-325; and Sally Haslanger, “What Are We Talking about? The Semantics and Politics of Social Kinds,” *Hypatia* 20, no. 4 (2005): 10–26.

⁴⁸ Haslanger herself acknowledges this in the introduction to Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*.

⁴⁹ And, more strongly, we could endorse an ‘unmasking theory’ even in the face of evidence that its immediate political impact was negative.

⁵⁰ See Haslanger, “Gender and Race” and Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*.

⁵¹ See Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology”.

⁵² This is similar to the methodological approach outlined in Ásta, *Categories We Live By* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018). Ásta takes herself ‘to be accountable to’ feminists and the goals of feminism, insofar as what questions she is considering, and the way in which she is considering them (including being sensitive to potential harms, paying attention to and incorporating the perspectives of people targeted by oppression, etc) are influenced by feminist values.

⁵³ Haslanger, “Gender and Race”; Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*.

⁵⁴ For an overview and introduction, see Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1990); and Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability,” in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006), 197–204.

⁵⁵ That is, it’s really hard to specify metrics according to which the predictions of the social model would need to score well, in order for this to count as a successful theory.

⁵⁶ See, e.g., Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability”; and Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling With Cure* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

⁵⁷ In a sense, then, part of our concern is that emancipatory methodology overweights theoretical simplicity. But this isn’t quite the full worry - theoretical simplicity and slogan-style simplicity are importantly different things. Quine’s ‘to be is to be the value of a bound variable’ is a theoretically simple explanation; it’s less likely, however, to be lovingly misquoted by undergrads than is Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am.’

⁵⁸ See Payton, “Feminism, Ontological Deflationism, and Normative Structure” and Payton, “Normative Metaphysics” for extended discussion on the relationship between truth and justice, as it has been treated in feminist metaphysics.

⁵⁹ Briggs and George, *What Even Is Gender?*, 3.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 131-136.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 136-138.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 132-135.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 132.

⁶⁸ William S. Wilkerson, “Is It a Choice? Sexual Orientation as Interpretation,” *Journal of Social Philosophy* 40, no. 1 (2009): 97–116.

⁶⁹ Quayshawn Spencer, “What ‘biological Racial Realism’ Should Mean,” *Philosophical Studies* 159, no. 2 (2012): 181–204.

⁷⁰ Heather Logue, “Gender Fictionalism,” *Ergo* 8 (2022): 125–62.

⁷¹ See Saul, “(How) Should We Tell Implicit Bias Stories?” and Gendler, “On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias.”