Social Meaning and Philosophical Method

Sally Haslanger

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

"[P]olitical subversion presupposes cognitive subversion, a conversion of the vision of the world."

– Pierre Bourdieu[1]

1. PREAMBLE

There are special challenges in writing a presidential address: you want to address a very broad group of philosophers with knowledge and abilities that far exceed your own, and you want to say something that will be as engaging as possible. Philosophers have addressed a great many issues, with different methods, and I want there to be space in our discipline for all of them. I myself love arcane philosophical topics—put me in a world where I could spend my time poring over Aristotle's *Metaphysics* and I'd be happy—and I believe that philosophy yields knowledge and that is intrinsically valuable. I also love kinds of philosophy that many would not regard as philosophy at all: philosophy as it emerges in thinking about personal and family issues, philosophy in the context of political activism, and philosophy that is inextricable from empirical research.

However, I am also critical of philosophy as a discipline. The way I would like to frame my critique, at least today, is not in terms of what is included in philosophy, but in terms of what is often left out or devalued. The spirit behind my talk is one of invitation: an invitation to think about more issues, to explore different histories, topics, and methods deserving of philosophical attention. There are many philosophers who are already engaged in the project that I will describe, so I'm not just sketching *my* research agenda. Rather, I will be attempting to frame research that some are already doing in a new light. I hope this will encourage others to appreciate it in ways they haven't before, and potentially inspire them to contribute.

2. SOCIAL JUSTICE

Feminist philosophers and critical race theorists have complained that contemporary Anglophone philosophy, although sometimes useful, is not as valuable as it might be for our projects. A primary concern is that analytic philosophy is overly *individualistic*. Another is that it is insufficiently sensitive to the *context* of theorizing, e.g., the social and political facts that give rise to the questions we ask (and don't ask), the methods we endorse (and don't), and the implications of our theories for living together. A theme in both of these concerns is that there is a lack of attention to the *social domain*, both as a subject for our theorizing and its influence on us as theorizers. Today I would like to explore these concerns and to consider how analytic philosophy might contribute more fruitfully to efforts to achieve social justice.

Where should we look for a theory of social justice? On the one hand, mainstream analytic political philosophers spend a lot of time thinking about the State and institutions that form the "basic structure" of society, but (perhaps due to the influence of political liberalism) do not consider the micro-politics embedded in the practices of everyday life. Ethicists, on the other hand, tend to focus on individual action (character, will) and often don't even consider that an agent, in acting, is engaged in a social practice. This may be a serious misrepresentation of recent history of philosophy. However, even if it is a distortion, I think it is worth making a case for more systematic attention to the domain of *social justice*, i.e., the domain that we have reason to think is outside the state's purview, but where we are talking about structures and practices and not just individual thoughts and actions.

Although the Women's Movement and the Civil Rights Movement achieved great gains in the twentieth century, and the LGBT Rights Movement and Disability Rights Movement are doing so in the twenty-first, our societies remain unjustly stratified. Racial and ethnic minorities, women, LGBTQ communities, non-citizens, the disabled, the poor, and others, are categorically disadvantaged; and this disadvantage is *systematic* and *durable*.[2] There is no doubt that both individuals and social institutions play a role in causing this stratification. But persistent inequality is not simply a result of the bad or unjust actions of individuals or badly structured institutions.

Individuals obviously play a role in causing injustice, but a set of good or morally responsible individuals doesn't necessarily make a just society. Good people can behave in ways that are individually permissible, but nevertheless their actions result in outcomes that are unjust:

> The cumulative effects of a series of transactions, each of which satisfies the local criteria of justice, and which begins from a just starting point, may be disastrous. Asset markets can suffer from speculative booms and busts that throw millions of innocent people out of work and into poverty.[3]

One source of this problem is that good individuals can suffer from blameless ignorance about the context and the consequences of their actions.

Moreover, morally responsible individuals sometimes live in badly organized societies, so given their feasible options, they cannot avoid contributing to injustice. No matter how morally scrupulous, a poor person may have no choice but to purchase food and clothing that are produced unjustly; a wealthy person may pay taxes that are used for corrupt or unjust purposes. Under conditions of oppression, groups are systematically positioned in relations that are morally problematic, e.g., a group may be exploited or culturally marginalized.[4] Such positioning is typically the result of broad social forces that are not under any individual's control. As Charles Tilly puts it,

> whatever else we have learned about inequality, social scientists have made clear that a great deal of social inequality results from indirect, unintended, collective, and environmentally mediated effects.[5]

It is important to recognize that the wrongfulness of a structure goes beyond individual wrongdoing. Oppressive structures organize social life so there are entrenched roles that require whoever occupies them to wrong or harm others.[6] We may grant that individuals who occupy such roles do wrong, but to point only to the individual actions is to miss the fact that the structure will find ways to position someone or other in that role. For example, in oppressive work conditions, a manager will be responsible for many unjust hardships the employees face. But even if a particular manager quits, there will be others who replace him or her, since the broader social structure may offer few options for those who reasonably seek to avoid poverty or to develop their talents. Even if we suppose that each of the individual managers acts badly, there is a further bad or wrong in the structure of the workplace and the broader society. (Note also that good structures likewise provide roles for people to do good; structures can facilitate, by the roles they make available, vision, creativity, generosity, leadership, and other good things.)

Unfortunately, justice is not simply a matter of well-structured institutions either. Let us assume for the purposes of argument that Rawls's theory of justice is a good example of a theory that applies to the basic structure of society. G. A. Cohen has argued that a just structure is not enough to achieve justice, for legitimate choices and preferences within a just structure can tilt it towards injustice:

> A society that is just within the terms of the difference principle, so we may conclude, requires not simply just coercive rules, but also an ethos of justice that informs individual choices. In the absence of such an ethos, inequalities will obtain that are not necessary to enhance the condition of the worst off: the required ethos promotes a distribution more just than what the rules of the economic game by themselves can secure.[7]

Cohen frames his critique of Rawls by echoing the feminist slogan "the personal is political." But note that Cohen's observation is that the additional condition necessary for justice lies in the social *ethos*. The idea seems to be that culture matters, and further, culture is not just a matter of individual psychology or political institutions. Even if Cohen's critique of Rawls is not wholly persuasive, he is right to draw attention to culture as a further site of moral concern.

Is there really a separate domain of social justice? One might object from two sides, the individual and the political. On the individual side, the claim would be that good people arrange themselves in ways that prevent injustice, so if there is injustice, *some* people must not really be doing the right thing. On the political side the claim is that if you have justice in the basic institutions of society—usually understood these days in Rawlsian terms—then that's all *justice* requires. Under such conditions things might not be perfect, but that's due to moral wrongdoing. It isn't injustice.

I find both of these arguments startling. If the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Movement of the late twentieth century taught us anything, they taught us that state action cannot reach many sources of bias that are responsible for persistent inequality, and this persistent inequality is unjust. The state can't tell us whom to love, trust, or admire; it can't tell us what to aspire to, where to live, what to care about. But these issues aren't just a matter of individual psychology and individual agency either, for who we are and how we live is conditioned by the social practices and social meanings that structure our lives. As individuals, we aren't responsible for social meanings (though we must constantly

navigate them) or social practices (though we can act to resist or sustain them). Good people enact problematic practices: they may enact them unintentionally or without awareness; they may even think that the behavior in question is entirely natural and they have no choice; or they may not be in a position to have any idea they are problematic. Many of the practices in question cannot be ruled out by state intervention and so could occur even within a politically just society.[8]

Maybe the suggestion that "good people arrange themselves in ways that prevent injustice" is exactly the problem. Good people are, by the time they are socialized, already arranged. We are embedded in social meanings. We live in a social world structured by practices. It is true, of course, that these meanings and practices can change. But the change must be social change, collective change, cultural change.

These broad considerations introduce several aspects of *social* justice worth considering.

- *Collective responsibility.* Because we together constitute the social world, we are responsible for the injustices it embodies. But it may be that none of us is individually (or the state, given the limits of its purview) is responsible for the injustice.

- *Collective action.* Society depends on social coordination, and the terms of that coordination may be unjust. My being morally perfect may do nothing to change the terms of coordination that dominate the social context. (In order to make a difference, we must *organize*.) And many forms of social coordination are not apt for state management.

- *Socially embedded agency.* The terms of our action and interaction are not up to us as individuals. What is valuable, what is acceptable, even what we do, and want, and think, depend on cultural frameworks of meaning.

In this essay, I will focus on the third aspect. Given that all action—by individuals or the state—occurs within a cultural context that gives it meaning, one might argue that individual and institutional injustice are just the tip of the iceberg. These injustices are the manifestation of deeper and less tractable sources of inequality in culture, or social meaning. But what exactly is social meaning?

3. SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The concepts of social structure, social practices, and social relations are not common sense concepts. As I use them, anyway, they are theoretical notions. They enable us to identify and explain certain persistent patterns and dependencies in human interaction. Social structures, on the view I endorse, are networks of social relations. For example, domestic life is structured by family and kinship relations (between spouses, children, pets, extended family, other sorts of chosen family and friends), relations to property (a home, a car, food), and, in some cases, employees who contribute to caregiving and upkeep. These relations take different forms depending on the cultural context and family history.

On the account I favor, social relations need not be intentional or conscious. For example, a sequence of individual owners of a car, or employees sequentially holding a position in a company, may constitute a vacancy chain, without knowing each other;[9] individuals within these chains stand in a social relation, and such chains may (or may not) come to have significance for an insurance company or a corporate manager. One may stand in complex kinship relations to others one has never heard of (having never heard of the kinds of kinship relations in question, or the individual others). We each stand in multiple civic relationships to members of city, state, and federal government without knowledge or intention.

Social relations need not be transparent either: I may not understand the nature of my relations with others and may actually misunderstand our relationship. For example, I may think of the group I am part of to be united by virtue of being God's chosen people. But there may be no God, and even if there is, God may not have established a special covenant with any group. Nevertheless, the social group could exist in spite of such false beliefs. In fact, an explanatory social theory may explicitly debunk social self-understandings by re-describing our social relations in terms we, the participants, would reject.

In core cases, social relations are constituted through practices.[10] There are many different accounts of what it is to be a practice, and they seem to fall on continuum between "thin" and "thick" conceptions. On the thinnest conception, practices are simply patterns of interaction, regularities in our behavior. One kind of thick conception focuses on a subset of these patterns, in particular, those that emerge because the participants "understand their normative responsibility to act in a certain way."[11] Different thick conceptions vary, e.g., with respect to whether only intentional actions count as performances of a practice (and how

intentional), the degree of common knowledge of the norms or of other participants is required, the kind of normativity at issue, etc. If one adopts a thick conception of practices according to which the existence of a practice depends on shared expectations, and if one builds social relations and social structure from this base, then social structure is ultimately a matter of shared expectations, leaving no gap "between the subjective conceptions of actors and the action patterns that an analysis might uncover."[12] If we want to allow the theoretical possibility that agents can be confused or misled about the social structures that they enact, then we must either adopt a conception of practice on the thinner end of the spectrum, or deny that structures are built up from practices.

I take it as a broadly shared background assumption that social structures don't exist apart from our collective behavior. Their existence depends on our actions and interactions. However, because the notions of social structure and social relations are introduced to be explanatory, we should not take them to be just any regularities in behavior. Certain regularities, especially certain robust regularities, are what we want explained. Moreover, as suggested above, we also want to allow that we participate in structures and, in doing so, partly constitute them, without an awareness of what we are doing, and without intending to.[13] Structures that we constitute in and through our behavior can be revealed to us. So the thicker conceptions of practice are not apt for our purposes. It seems promising, then, to develop a notion of practice— falling somewhere between the thickest and thinnest—according to which they give rise to social relations and structures, but need not be intentionally loaded.[14]

Let us consider some examples. Our practices relate us to each other and to the material world; they situate us at nodes in the structure. Consider cooking:

> Cooking rice is an instance of a more general practice of cooking, and regular engagement in the practice is constitutive of a social role: cook. Being a cook relates one in specific ways to other persons (not only the customer or family, but also the farmer, grocer, garbage collector, sources of recipes, including traditions, cookbooks, etc.), and also relates one in specific ways to things (foodstuffs, sources of heat, water, utensils). Cooking is only possible within a social structure that provides the ingredients, skills, tools; the norms for taste, texture and ingredients; the distribution of labor of cooks and consumers, etc.

Keeping examples such as these in mind, how should we characterize a practice? Social *practices* are, in the central cases, ways of organizing ourselves either towards some end or goal, or in response to a coordination or access problem. To say that our responses are "organized" is not to say that anyone organized them. The practice may have evolved through trials and errors. But practices will typically be, to some degree, self-sustaining. As a result, over time a practice may become congealed and dissociated from the interests and functions that were their original impetus.

Another example is traffic management. Traffic management poses a coordination problem. The road is a resource that provides passable public access to destinations. Many people have an interest in access to the road. If we don't organize access, we have destructive chaos. So there are practices that enable us to share the road effectively: in the United States we drive on the right; we stop and go in response to traffic lights. Local regions develop their own micro-practices, e.g., in Boston, if you stop at a yellow light, you are likely to be rear-ended.

Although driving on the right is a convention, practices are not always conventional. For example, on Lewis's classic view, conventions are *arbitrary* solutions to coordination problems that are *mutually beneficial* (this explains their stability) and are *common knowledge* among the participants. However, practices may not be arbitrary: cooking is a practice, but it is not arbitrary how or what we cook. Moreover, there may not be, in any meaningful sense, common knowledge among participants what the coordination problem is or how it is being solved. It may be that the participants can't properly be said even to *know* what to do in order to follow the practice, for they may do so habitually or guided by sub-personal systems.[15]

Further, although practices are stable patterns of behavior, a practice may not be rational or mutually advantageous. Practices of food distribution that require women to wait until men have taken what they want is not mutually advantageous and may be practically irrational depending on the circumstances, e.g., during women's childbearing years, if fertility and healthy offspring are desired. There are many (and better) ways to explain the origin and stability of practices other than rational choice theory. And it is implausible that the mutual satisfaction of preferences is adequate to explain the origin of a practice, for a meaningful sense of preference with respect to the resource in question may be constituted only through the practices that organize our responses. For example, what sort of practice will best organize our access to food? Our relationship to food is already mediated by cultural practices that shape

our preferences; there is no culturally unmediated position from which we can judge what is tasty or disgusting, filling or taboo.

But even returning to the conventional practices of traffic management, it is important to note that in organizing ourselves to make effective use of the road, we don't simply agree upon public rules that users of the road are expected learn, but also create an infrastructure that guides our use: we create laws, signs, traffic lights, cross-walks and bike lanes, maps, cars with turn signals and brake lights, a licensing and ticketing system for drivers, and such. In engaging in a practice we interact, often spontaneously, with parts of the world that have been molded to be used by the practice. Practices are materially realized.

These observations support a conception of practice that is common in contemporary anthropology (and social science more broadly),

> *Practices consist of interdependent schemas and resources* "*when they mutually imply and sustain each other over time.*"[16]

Roughly, schemas consist in clusters of culturally shared concepts, beliefs, and other attitudes that enable us to interpret and organize information and coordinate action, thought, and affect. Both concepts and beliefs, in the sense intended, store information and are the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Although schemas are variable and evolve across time and context, their elements are sticky and resist updating.

Resources are things of all sorts—human, nonhuman, animate, or not— that are taken to have some (including negative) value (practical, moral, aesthetic, religious, etc.). In social reality, schemas and resources are both causally and constitutively interdependent. Consider food, e.g., corn:

> An ear of corn can be viewed as something to eat, as a commodity to be sold, as a religious symbol. In other words, we can apply different schemas to the object, and the schemas frame our consciousness and evaluation of the object. The different schemas not only offer modes of interpretation but license different ways of interacting with the corn. Actions based on these different schemas have an effect on the ear of corn *qua* resource, e.g., it might be cooked for food, or the kernels removed to be shipped, or it might be dried and hung in a prominent

place to be worshipped. The effects of our actions then influence the schema. If the corn sells for a good price, its value is enhanced and the farmer may seek ways to grow it more efficiently, possibly investing in new and different varieties.

On this model:

- Social practices establish patterns in our interaction with a part of the world by tuning our collective responses to it and molding it to our responses.

- Social *relations* are established by entrenched and repeated practices.

- Systems of interdependent practices/relations are *structures*.

- A social *group*—e.g., a gender, a race, but also farmers, nurses, the unemployed—is a set of people who function at a node (or set of nodes) in a structure.

- Schemas are the basis for social meaning.

5. SOCIAL MEANING

What is social meaning?[17] Lawrence Lessig has done important work to clarify the notion:

> Any society or social context has what I call here social meanings—the semiotic content attached to various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context . . . [the point is to] find a way to speak of the frameworks of understanding within which individuals live; a way to describe what they take or *understand* various actions, or inactions, or statuses to be; and a way to understand how the understandings change.[18]

The point of saying that an action has a social meaning is to understand it as having a significance by virtue of collective understandings, not just the personal meaning given to it by the agent (or patient).[19] Extending Lessig's suggestion, we should allow that not only actions/inactions and statuses have social meanings, but also include things such as corn, traffic signals, money, jewelry. After all, pink *means* girl and blue *means* boy, right? Importantly, Lessig points out,

> [Social meanings] change, they are contested, and they differ across communities and individuals. But we can speak of social meaning, and meaning management, I suggest, without believing that there is a single, agreed upon point for any social act. . . . Even if there is no single meaning, there is a range or distribution of meanings, and the question we ask here is how that range gets made, and, more importantly, changed.[20]

Semiotics, at least on one understanding, is the study of such social meanings, what they are, how they are created, reproduced, disrupted. On the picture I am developing, social meanings are embedded in our practices: they are included in the schemas by which we interpret resources and which guide our interaction with each other and with the material world.[21]

How are social meanings relevant to social justice? In spite of the possibility of change and contestation, the effects of social meaning are "in an important way, non-optional. They empower or constrain individuals, whether or not the individual choses the power or constraints."[22] They are the cultural backdrop for action. Although both individual actions and institutions are sources of injustice, injustice is learned and lived through culture. Insofar as social meanings partly constitute our social practices, and internalized meanings guide our interactions, social justice requires attention to—and changes to—social meanings.

Let me offer two sorts of examples: (a) social stigma and (b) social ideals.

a) Elizabeth Anderson characterizes racial stigmatization during Jim Crow:

> The condition of racial stigmatization consists of public, dishonorable, practically engaged representations of a racial group with the following contents: (1) *racial stereotypes*, (2) *racial attributions* or explanations of why members of the racial group tend to fit their stereotypes, that rationalized and motivate (3) *derogatory evaluations* of and (4) *demeaning or antipathetic attitudes* (such as hatred contempt, pity, condescension, disgust, aversion, envy, distrust, and willful indifference) towards the target group and its members.[23]

Stigma, like other social meanings, and like linguistic meanings, are collective and public. Although Anderson emphasizes the representational aspect of stigmatization, racial stigma depends on schemas to focus attention, coordinate expectations, sift evidence, and rationalize behavioral and emotional dispositions. Such meanings affect us and our interactions even if we reject their content: Claude Steele gives an example of a friend, Brent Staples, whistling Vivaldi while walking down the street in Chicago in order to counter racial stereotypes of black men and to reassure white folks who may encounter him.[24] By choosing what music to whistle or listen to, what to wear, how to cut or style our hair, what we eat, and, in cases where we have options, how we decorate our home and spend our free time, we are navigating social meaning. Although stigmatization involves ascribing to and imposing on a group a negative meaning, not all social meaning is negative or oppressive. Social meanings give shape to our lives and negotiating them is an inevitable part of living in a culture.

b) Social meanings offer resources to idealize groups as well. George Lakoff offers an analysis of our ideal of *mother* in terms of five overlapping cognitive models based on birth, genetics, nurturance, marriage, and genealogy.[25] He says,

> . . . more than one of these models contributes to the characterization of a *real* mother, and any one of them may be absent from such a characterization. Still, the very idea that there is such a thing as a *real mother* seems to require a choice among models where they diverge.[26]

> When the situation is such that the models for *mother* do not pick out a single individual, we get compound expressions like *stepmother*, *surrogate mother*, *adoptive mother*, *foster mother*, *biological mother*, *donor mother* and so on. Such compounds, of course, do not represent simple subcategories, that is, kinds of ordinary mothers.[27]

> The central case [is] where all the models converge. This includes a mother who is and has always been female, and who gave birth to the child, supplied her half of child's genes, nurtured the child, is married to the father, is one generation older than the child, and is the child's legal guardian.[28]

Lakoff argues that further complexity is added by metonymy: the housewife-mother is, in a particular socio-cultural context, taken to stand for the category as a whole. Thus, we get further categories: *unwed mother, working mother*, etc., and a "representativeness structure" encoding a central ideal and norms explicable in terms of variation from the core.[29]

As Lakoff goes on to note, the sub-categories of mother are historically and culturally specific. But we should also note that even the core models depend on the availability of knowledge (genetics) and social practices (marriage). "There is no general rule for generating kinds of mothers. They are culturally defined and have to be learned. They are by no means the same in all cultures."[30]

6. SCHEMAS AND LANGUAGE

> By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of this world...
>
> – Pierre Bourdieu[31]

I've suggested that social meanings can be understood as schemas that are culturally assigned to actions, objects, events, and such. Internalized schemas provide recognitional capacities, store information, and are the basis for various behavioral and emotional dispositions. Importantly, schemas are learned and triggered by language, especially (but not only) the language of classification. Consider the effects of describing someone, say, Chris, as a woman, or a mother, or a slut. Language is a social resource. It encodes the schemas that govern social life, and does so in a way that establishes them as "common sense," seemingly inevitable.[32]

As we have seen, schemas can be problematic in a variety of ways. They may incorporate false normative or descriptive beliefs; they may be the basis for dispositions that are morally questionable. However, they may also fail because they rely on *inapt concepts*. Concepts are neither true nor false, but they can be evaluated: Do we have reason to track the distinction drawn by the concept? Should we have this or that concept in our repertoire at all? If so, how we should construe it? What alternative concepts might we deploy instead?[33]

Consider, for example: "slut," "mother," "woman." Such terms are used to carve out an extension, to invoke a schema that attributes features

to the members of the extension, to establish links to other concepts, and guide our responses.[34] Suppose that through normative inquiry we determine that a particular social practice is misguided or unjust. One question we should ask is how our *discursive* practices are implicated: How does our language support the categorization that the social practice relies on? Does it prime us to respond in ways that are problematic, e.g., to stigmatize or idealize?

There is an obvious cultural stigmatization of sexually promiscuous women ("sluts") in contrast to the glorification of sexually promiscuous men (and the related blaming of rape on women). A standard response to such shaming, of course, is to reject the term "slut" because it is demeaning and serves to create a distinction that we have no good reason to mark. Recently, however, some feminist activists have organized "slut walks" to challenge the evaluative content of the slut-schema: even sexually active and "provocatively" clad women are not "asking to be raped." According to the *Toronto Observer*, the organizers of the original walk wanted to "reclaim the definition of 'slut' as someone who is in control of their own sexuality."[35] One might not agree with this tactic, but it would miss the point entirely to claim that the effort is misguided because "that's just not what 'slut' means."

What is going on here? I tentatively propose that in a particular social context the norms governing default inferences and apt (affective, behavioral) responses depend substantively on the schemas that are dominant in the context. The schemas "license" what cognitive, behavioral, and emotional responses are appropriate, given a conceptualization of something *as an F*. Slut walks target our schemas, the social meanings.[36]

Putnam makes a related point: that in order to acquire a word, one must learn a stereotype associated with its extension. The content of the stereotype is determined by the linguistic community:

> The nature of the required minimum level of competence depends heavily upon both the culture and the topic, however. In our culture speakers are required to know what tigers look like (if they acquire the word "tiger," and this is virtually obligatory); they are not required to know the fine details (such as leaf shape) of what an elm tree looks like. English speakers are required by their linguistic community to be able to tell tigers from leopards; they are not required to be able to tell elm trees from beech trees.[37]

> The theoretical account of what it is to be a stereotype proceeds in terms of the notion of linguistic obligation; a notion which we believe to be fundamental to linguistics and which we shall not attempt to explicate here. What it means to say that being striped is part of the (linguistic) stereotype of "tiger" is that it is obligatory to acquire the information that stereotypical tigers are striped if one acquires "tiger."[38]

In short, to learn a language is not just a matter of learning what terms refer to what. We also internalize associated schemas that guide perception, cognition, and behavior. In speaking of "social meaning," I am suggesting something similar, but extending it in two ways: the "stereotype" is not just a set of beliefs about the extension of the term, but can include a broader range of cognitive/affective/behavioral elements. And I'm not just concerned with terms, i.e., linguistic or specifically communicative items, but also social items more generally (as Lessig suggests, "various actions, or inactions, or statuses, within a particular context," and, as we saw before, objects, properties, and potentially, it seems, virtually everything).

The act of "defining," of assigning a stereotype or schema to an expression, of deciding which words to include (or not) in our vocabulary are political acts. This is not just true of terms such as "slut." Consider "mother." Women's lives are substantially organized around practices of—in anticipation, in avoidance, in enactment, in resistance. But why do we employ the concept(s) of *mother*? What is a mother? The Lakoff discussion in the previous section shows that there isn't a simple answer to that question. For example, why do we persist in thinking that one's sex is relevant to one's parental nurturing? How we define "mother" and whether we continue to categorize people as mothers are political choices. There is more than one way to refuse to be a mother: one is to avoid becoming a parent. Another is to embrace "parenting" rather than "mothering" as the apt description of one's activities.[39]

The schemas assigned to expressions are subject to moral and political evaluation, and controversy over the schemas often yields controversy over the associated language, e.g., what do we really mean by the term in question? What are we trying to capture, and why? In some cases social critique will require a change of schema, but will leave the term's extension intact. This may be the strategy behind the slut walks: "You call me/us a 'slut'? Well yes, I'm a slut and I'm proud." In other cases, social critique demands a rethinking of the extension: "You call me a 'slut'? Well you're wrong, because no woman is a slut." Or "Yes, we are

both his (real) mother. He has two mothers." In yet other cases, social critique renders the extension irrelevant: "You could call me his mother, but what difference does that make? I am his parent." Or "I'm happy to become a parent, but I refuse to be a mother."

 A different, perhaps more Quinean, way of putting the point I'm driving at would be to say that there isn't a sharp line between linguistic meaning and social meaning, even between descriptive terms and slurs. Words mean what we use them to mean. Language is a social practice that requires coordination in order to take advantage of the resource of signs to communicate.

If there is no clear line between linguistic/conceptual meaning and social meaning, then it isn't entirely clear what we are doing when we attempt philosophical analysis, especially of concepts that have social implications for action and affect. This is a remix of Quine's point about the web of belief. We rely on a web of schemas to communicate and coordinate. Instead of observation statements at the periphery, this web's periphery consists of schemas that guide action directly. Revision is permissible throughout the web, and is called for when the social practices constituted by the schemas are problematic. (We might call this *social meaning holism*.) How we revise schemas—whether we discard or modify the concepts, core beliefs, evaluations, emotive scripts—must be justified holistically and in terms of the impact on social practices.

The elucidation and evaluation of a schema that constitutes a practice is not feasible without close attention to the particular social contexts in which the schema is deployed. The particular configuration of concepts, beliefs, evaluations, and dispositions that make up the schematic element of our practices is historically specific. And any improvement on this particular configuration will have to take into account the ways in which our social world has already been constituted by these practices and the social/political/rhetorical options available. This can't happen from the armchair.

7. PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS

> Even the most strictly constative scientific description is always open to the possibility of functioning in a prescriptive way, capable of contributing to its own verification by exercising a theory-effect through which it helps to bring about that which it declares.

> – Pierre Bourdieu[40]

So far I have suggested that an action is meaningful in relation to a social practice. This challenges an individualism that, e.g., treats actions simply as outputs from an agent's beliefs and desires. I've also suggested that our conceptual repertoire is embedded in cultural schemas that organize our life together. Because many of the social practices/structures within which action is meaningful are unjust, we should subject the schemas to a form of critique that depends on rich empirical investigation. Note, however, that our theorizing itself a social practice, so should also be subjected to critique.

Analytic philosophy, at least in some forms, aims to provide analyses of our concepts and the relations between them. But it should be clear by now that from the point of view of those working on social justice, this is woefully inadequate. We can do so much more. For example,

> (i) We need more in the way of a social philosophy of language/mind, epistemology, ontology. We need a systematic account of social meaning and meaning change; a more detailed account of how individual thought and action both depend on collective understandings and also constitute collective understandings; a theory of aptness. We need more attention to the ontology and epistemology of social structures and the structural explanation of human action.

> (ii) We need critique, critique of ordinary schemas, but also philosophical schemas. Philosophical concepts don't exist in a vacuum. They not only organize our thinking but are also enacted in our social world; they are embedded in our social practices; they structure our lives. So we need to critique *the very philosophical concepts we study*, and not just take them as given. Consider, e.g., *knowledge*, *mind*, *body(!)*, *person*, *nature*, *objectivity*, *justice*, *responsibility*, *freedom*, *agency*, *autonomy*, *morality* in addition to the thicker concepts we use in everyday life: *family, mother/father, abortion*.[41]

Without critique of the schemas that constitute our social practices, philosophy takes the status quo as given. For those of us who find the status quo intolerable, philosophy is implicated in the injustices we face. We do need to understand the schemas that structure our lives— both the concepts and the core beliefs—so explication is valuable. But

without critique, our efforts are dogmatic. Even if a concept is valuable and worth preserving, philosophy needs to explain why.

It may be tempting to suggest that in the case of philosophical inquiry we are just concerned with truth. Does a bare concern with truth provide a basis for our inquiry? The simple answer is no. Truths can be expressed with inapt concepts (*grue?*). But inapt concepts don't make good theory (or even knowledge?). Moreover, in the social domain, discourse structures reality; simply describing that reality is insufficient. Dogmatism is not the only danger: our inquiry may, in fact, undergird schemas that we should reject. An uncritical acceptance of truths and the concepts they depend on may actually cause systematic harm.

But how should we judge the aptness of our *philosophical* concepts and the schemas that embed them? Undoubtedly, many philosophical schemas lie close to the core of the web and there are ways to preserve them, even in the face of critique. However, as in any inquiry, aptness of concepts should be evaluated relative to the purposes of the theorizing (medicine: pathogen). Philosophy is many things, answers many different questions, has multiple purposes. But in central cases, philosophical inquiry is an inquiry into the concepts we (collectively) ought to use. It differs from scientific inquiry in that it aims to provide us with the basic tools we need to live together, tools that are transposable across different domains. So we should be asking not simply what concepts track truth, even fundamental truth, but rather, What distinctions and classifications should we use to organize ourselves collectively? What social meanings should we endorse? Determining what is required for knowledge, or virtue, or autonomy, is not just a matter of describing reality for, as noted before, definition is a political act. And it is so whether we acknowledge it or not. Philosophy has the power to create culture; we are not just bystanders but producers. I urge you to attend to social meaning in your philosophical work, recognize its import for philosophy, and help us understand it better in the hope that this will serve the cause of social justice.

NOTES

1. Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 127-28.

2. Charles Tilly, *Durable Inequality*.

3. Elizabeth Anderson, "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions," 164.

4. Iris Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*.

5. Charles Tilly, *Stories, Identity, and Political Change*, 28.

6. Thanks very much to Tom Dougherty for making this point in conversation and pushing me to develop it. My point here draws on Haslanger, "Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect."

7. G. A. Cohen, "Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice," 10; G. A. Cohen, *If You Are an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?*, 199–23.

8. Cohen, "Where the Action Is"; Cohen, *If You Are an Egalitarian*.

9. John Levi Martin, *Social Structures*, 9.

10. I am not aiming to provide necessary and sufficient conditions for social relations, social practices, social structures, and the like. I favor a focal approach to most concepts and the first step is to identify the cases that are central for the theoretical purposes at hand. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*, 7, 21, 228.

11. Martin, *Social Structures*, 7.

12. Ibid., 6. Christina Bicchieri (*The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*, 11) defines social norms in terms of shared expectations. If one also holds that practices are patterns of behavior guided by social norms, then one seems to assume transparency.

13. It is also significant that nonhuman animals seem to live in social structures without a capacity for sophisticated intentional agency.

14. It is not part of my project to insist that we use the term "practice" for the notion I am developing. Within the "practice tradition" in social science, I believe that this thinner notion is common, but some philosophers clearly use the term in a thicker sense.

15. Tyler Burge, "On Knowledge and Convention"; Ruth Millikan, "A Difference of Some Consequence between Conventions and Rules."

16. William Sewell, "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation," 13.

17. In this section I draw on Haslanger, "Studying While Black."

18. Lawrence Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," 951-52.

19. The emphasis on the social collective rather than the individual, and on the background symbolic resources rather than speech events, also distinguishes a semiotic approach from a speech act approach to social meaning. The speech act approach can be extremely helpful in analyzing the social import of action, and has been developed in brilliant ways by Rae Langton, *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*, Jennifer Hornsby, "Feminism in Philosophy of Language: Communicative Speech Acts," Mary Kate McGowan, "Conversational Exercitives: Something Else We Do with Our Words," Mary Kate McGowan, "Oppressive Speech," and others. I don't see these two approaches as competing, but as complementary.

20. Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," 954-55.

21. At this point it is unclear to me exactly how to understand the relationship between schemas, ideology, and social meaning. In my recent work I have suggested that a group's ideology—in the relevant sense of ideology—consists in its shared cultural schemas (allowing that groups much smaller than "a society" have a culture). Here I suggest that social meanings are "included in" the schemas/ideology. Because I don't yet have a firm grasp on the best account of social meanings, I cannot explicate further what I mean by "included in," though I want to allow that there are components of schemas/ideology that are not social meanings.

22. Lessig, "The Regulation of Social Meaning," 955; see also 1000.

23. Elizabeth S. Anderson, *The Imperative of Integration*, 48.

24. Claude Steele, *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*.

25. George Lakoff, "Cognitive Models and Prototype Theory," 395.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid., 396.

28. Ibid., 400.

29. See also Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, for an account of how the fundamental schemas for gender interact with other schemas.

30. Lakoff, "Cognitive Models and Prototype Theory," 401.

31. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 105.

32. I'm *not* saying that "the meaning" of the term, say, "mother" is the mother-schema or that social meaning just is linguistic meaning. The relationship between linguistic meaning and social meaning is more complex and deserves theoretical attention.

33. See also M. Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*.

34. One way of thinking about the relationship between language and the various schemas or cognitive models associated with them is in terms of mental files. See François Recanati, Mental Files; and Laura Schroeter and François Schroeter, "Normative Concepts: A Connectedness Model."

35. Alissa Randall, "Slutwalk Set to Strut Past Queen's Park to Police HQ on April 3," *The Toronto Observer*, March 30, 2011, http://torontoobserver.ca/2011/03/30/slutwalk-set-to-strut-past-queens-park-to-police-hq-on-april-3/.

36. Note that I am not suggesting that the schemas are part of the linguistic meaning of the terms in question. Rather, the schemas are (in a loose sense) conventionally linked to the terms [and other socially meaningful stuff]. How might we develop this? We can think of conversations as guided by conversational norms, some quite general, some specific to a social milieu, and others to a particular conversational context. The norms, among other things, determine the permissible next steps in the conversation (whose turn, what tone, speech act, content), permissible inferences, and default additions to the common ground. The permissible inferences include not only what is entailed by what has been said thus far, but also material inferences that cannot plausibly be captured on the model of explicit reasoning. See, e.g., Robert Stalnaker, *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought*; Robert B. Brandom, *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*; and Timothy Williamson, "Blind Reasoning." Thanks to Jack Marley-Payne for helping me see this possibility.

37. Hilary Putnam, "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," 249.

38. Ibid., 251.

39. As Monique Wittig ("One Is Not Born a Woman," 49) claims in a different, but related, context: "To refuse to be a woman, however, does not mean that one has to become a man." Also quoted in Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 63.

40. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 134.

41. Of course, there are many examples of such critique, not only in the contemporary context but throughout the history of philosophy. Recall that to critique a concept is not necessarily to reject it (Elizabeth S. Anderson, "Unstrapping the Straitjacket

of 'Preference': A Comment on Amartya Sen's Contributions to Philosophy and Economics," 21-22), as much feminist work demonstrates (e.g., Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy*).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Anderson, Elizabeth S. "Unstrapping the Straitjacket of 'Preference': A Comment on Amartya Sen's Contributions to Philosophy and Economics." *Economics and Philosophy* 17 (2001): 21–38.

———. *The Imperative of Integration*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010.

———. "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions." *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 163–73.

Bicchieri, Christina. *The Grammar of Society: The Nature and Dynamics of Social Norms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *Language and Symbolic Power*, edited by John B. Thompson, and translated by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982.

Brandom, Robert B. *Articulating Reasons: An Introduction to Inferentialism*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001.

Burge, Tyler. "On Knowledge and Convention." *Philosophical Review* 84, no. 2 (1975): 249–55.

Cohen, G. A. "Where the Action Is: On the Site of Distributive Justice." *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 26, no. 1 (1997): 3–30.

———. *If You Are an Egalitarian, How Come You're So Rich?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Fricker, M. *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Haslanger, Sally. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

———. "Studying While Black: Trust, Opportunity, and Disrespect." *DuBois Review* 11, no. 1 (2014): 109–36.

Hornsby, Jennifer. "Feminism in Philosophy of Language: Communicative Speech Acts." In *Cambridge Companion to Feminism in Philosophy*, edited by Miranda Fricker and Jennifer Hornsby, 87–106. Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Lakoff, George. "Cognitive Models and Prototype Theory." In *Concepts: Core Readings*, edited by Eric Margolis and Stephen Laurence, 391–423. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1999.

Langton, Rae. *Sexual Solipsism: Philosophical Essays on Pornography and Objectification*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.

Lessig, Lawrence. "The Regulation of Social Meaning." *University of Chicago Law Review* 62, no. 3 (1995): 943–1045.

Mackenzie, Catriona, and Natalie Stoljar, eds. *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Martin, John Levi. *Social Structures*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009.

McGowan, Mary Kate. "Conversational Exercitives: Something Else We Do with Our Words." [REVIEW] *Linguistics and Philosophy* 27, no. 1 (2004): 93–111.

———. "Oppressive Speech." *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 87, no. 3 (2009): 389–407.

Millikan, Ruth. "A Difference of Some Consequence between Conventions and Rules." *Topoi* 27 (2008): 87–99.

Putnam, Hilary. "The Meaning of 'Meaning'," *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science* 7 (1975): 131–93.

Recanati, François. *Mental Files*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Schroeter, Laura, and François Schroeter. "Normative Concepts: A Connectedness Model." *Philosophers' Imprint* 14, no. 25 (2014): 1–26.

Sewell, William. "A Theory of Structure: Duality, Agency, and Transformation." *American Journal of Sociology* 98, no. 1 (1992): 1–29.

Stalnaker, Robert. *Context and Content: Essays on Intentionality in Speech and Thought*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Steele, Claude. *Whistling Vivaldi: How Stereotypes Affect Us and What We Can Do*. New York: W. W. Norton, 2010.

Tilly, Charles. *Durable Inequality*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

———. *Stories, Identities, and Political Change*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002.

Williamson, Timothy. "Blind Reasoning." *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume* 77, no. 1 (2003): 249–93.

Witt, Charlotte. *The Metaphysics of Gender*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Wittig, Monique. "One Is Not Born a Woman." *Feminist Issues* 1 (1981): 47–54.

Young, Iris. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.