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# Making Sense of Gender, Sex, Race and the Family

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# Between Science and Philosophy: New Perspectives on Gender, Sex, Race, and the Family

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Historically, the inquiry into the nature of gender has been mainly focused on the relation between gender and sex, but recently an increasing number of analytic feminists is coming to consider the status of gender also in its correlation with the categories of race and family. On this approach, it would be a mistake to isolate conditions such as gender, race, class, nationality, ethnicity, sexual orientation, economic position, family status: insofar as they are social constructions, all these notions differ from one society to another, and they are in some way deeply entangled. In other words, according to this approach, in order to make sense of one of the conditions above it is necessary to consider it in its connections with the others. Take gender, for instance. Women or men do not experience their membership in a gender all in the same way. The gender experience will depend both on the particular individual at issue (on her sensitivity, her history, her biological constitution, etc.) and on the type of society where she happens to live, and on how, in that society, the gender category is connected to sex, race, family, social class, and so on.

On the background of this general approach, several issues are in need of a philosophical enquiry. For instance, the categories mentioned above (sex, race, gender, etc.) are socially constructed or rather do they correspond to some natural joints, so to say, according to which the reality would be *per se* carved up? And, if they are mere social constructions, by means of which mechanisms are they established, and in what respects do those mechanisms differ? What is the relation, if any, holding between the physical substrata and the relative social categories or objects? How can race and sex affect the way we perceive and shape our gender experience and gender expression? Are there

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different types of human bodies and different ways of classifying sexually them? And what does make a woman (or man) a mother (or father)? Is parenthood a biological or natural relationship? What defines a family? Is family a "natural" aggregate or it is rather a merely social construct?

Many of these and related questions are addressed in this special issue of Humana.Mente, *Making Sense of Gender, Sex, Race, and the Family.* The issue collects seven papers, three commentaries, three book reviews, two conference reviews, and two interviews. The contributions in this volume are united by a common thread, namely the view that not only gender classifications, but sex classifications too are not just a matter of biology.

Traditionally, as it is known, many feminists have understood "sex" and "gender" as different categories. Whereas the first would depend on biological features, the second would rather depend on social and cultural factors like social or economic position. In so doing, many feminists have seen sex as an unproblematic category. The contributions presented in this volume share instead the claim that not only gender but sex too is not a mere matter of biology: both sex and gender are largely the product of the complex interaction of social processes and categories, and our concepts of them are shaped by social meanings.

The seven papers can be divided into two groups. The first one is centred on analysing what the outcomes of different scientific contemporary researches tell us about the matter at issue: neurosciences in Chizzola's paper; experimental pragmatics in Cocco and Ervas's paper; and biomedical research in Maglo and Martin's paper. The second one includes papers enquiring the matter from the point of view of a particular philosophical discipline: philosophy of science, in Doron's paper; metaphysics, in Borghini's paper; ethics in Papadaki's paper; philosophy of language in Diaz-Leon's paper.

Starting with the first group, the paper *Sex and/or Gender? Some Neuroscientific Approaches* by Valentina Chizzola focuses on some recent neuro-scientific theses concerning sexual differences. Chizzola explores the distinction between "sex" and "gender" and shows how some recent neuroscientific results concerning sex/gender distinctions support the idea that we should redefine and challenge the traditional meaning of the two terms. Traditionally, as it said, sex has been taken as a label referring to individuals on the basis of their biological features, while "gender" would rather refer to individuals on the basis of their social and psychological features. Arguing against such a simplistic view, Chizzola highlights the reciprocal

interdependence of sex and gender looking at neuroscientific results. To understand whether or not there are brain differences between men and women, recent researches on brain structure submit, we should focus more on individual differences: «each brain is unique and unrepeatable because of individual differences which penetrate even to the minutest neural networks.» The discovery of brain plasticity makes the issue of the brain differences much more complex than radically constructivist theories would have us believe and the thesis «everything is socially constructed» might be an oversimplification of the matter. The conclusion suggested by the neuroscientific studies under scrutiny is that much (but "not everything") depends on our education. By paying more attention to that "not everything," Chizzola argues, it might be possible «to achieve considerable theoretical and explanatory progress with regard the issue of sex/gender differences.»

The gender differences are analysed, in the paper by Roberta Cocco and Francesca Ervas (*Gender Stereotypes and Figurative Language Comprehension*), from the point of view of the figurative language understanding. The main idea is that figurative language (including simile, metaphor, metonymy, irony, and so on) «being so context-dependent, is the best "tribunal of experience" for testing the structures of social and cultural knowledge people own.» Making reference to some recent researches in experimental pragmatics, Cocco and Ervas argue that (i) social stereotypes such as race, gender, age, and occupation stereotypes play a fundamental role as contextual sources of information in interpreting others' speech and behavior; (ii) gender stereotypes are one of the most influential cues on figurative language comprehension, especially in the use and interpretation of irony and sarcasm, concluding that «the ways non-literal communication is influenced by gender stereotypes reveal this tacitly shared background of human communities, complete with their subtle differences.»

Koffi Maglo and Lisa J. Martin (*Researching vs. Reifying Race: The Case of Obesity Research*), providing biomedical data with a philosophical analysis, investigate the reification of concept of race in biomedical research. In particular, they take as a case study the research on obesity prevalence in various populations from US and some African countries, and analyse the way in which the reification fallacy (namely «a mistaken attribution of an objective biological basis to race») may occur. In doing so, they argue that, while race research may positively impact population health, more often this type of research leads to racial stereotyping that could negatively affect medical

practice itself. Accordingly, they argue that «biomedical race research does not require a theoretical grounding in a realist framework and that, to avoid the reification fallacy, researchers should use race, when need be, parsimoniously in an instrumentalist framework merely as a problem-solving conceptual device».

Coming now to the second group of papers, Claude-Olivier Doron (*Race and Genealogy: Buffon and the Formation of the Concept of "Race"*) analyses the formation of the concept of race in natural history in the middle of the eighteenth century, addressing some central questions on the theme: «To what extent the concept of "race" was integrated in natural history's discourses before the middle of the eighteenth century? And to which conditions could it enter natural history and develop in it?» Doron maintains that, in order to understand how the concept of "race" developed in natural history, we should first understand how the genealogical style of reasoning brought in natural history by changing «the very principles of classification that organized it». More precisely, Doron believes, the contribution of Buffon and some proponents of the "monogenist" tradition has been crucial for the development of the concept of "race" and the genealogical style of reasoning in natural history.

In *Food in the Metaphysical Orders: Gender, Race, and the Family*, Andrea Borghini has two related aims. First, to show that the analysis of developmental trajectories can help us reveal the link between constructionist and naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family, by exhibiting their biological underpinnings. Secondly, to argue that a point where the two theories converge is food, understood as «a complex system of knowledge, technologies, skills, ceremonials, meanings, ecological relationships, nutritional, biological, and chemical properties within which human populations find their sustenance.» Indeed, on the one hand, food has to do with practices that play a crucial role in establishing identities of gender, race, and family; on the other hand, these practices are deep-seated in skills and habits that are acquired through specific developmental patterns. Borghini explores these twofold theses through the discussion of two case studies: women hunters and the diet of the Obama's.

In *Abortion and Kant's Formula of Humanity*, Lina Papadaki explores the issue of abortion from a Kantian perspective. As it is known, Kant's Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative claims the prohibition against treating humanity merely as a means. Traditionally, many feminists have argued that

forcing a woman to continue a pregnancy against her will is treating her as a mere means, namely a mere "fetal incubator" for sustaining the fetus. On this view, forcing a woman to continue her pregnancy is an assault on her humanity, namely her capacity for rationally setting and pursuing her own ends. Nevertheless, one might say that also who aborts her fetus can be seen as treating it merely as a means for her own ends: her fetus is a being which has the potential for humanity. Papadaki shows how the Kantian discussion of abortion rises to a number of important questions, including: «Does respecting the pregnant woman's humanity, and hence enabling her to have an abortion if she chooses that way, go against appropriately respecting the fetus? What does it really mean to respect a fetus' potential for humanity?» By answering these questions, Papadaki aims to analyse the Kantian prohibition from an original perspective and argue that the debate on Kant's theory can provide the abortion debate with novel and potentially fruitful insights.

Finally, in *Social Kinds, Conceptual Analysis, and the Operative Concept: A Reply to Haslanger*, E. Diaz-Leon addresses the debate between social constructionists and error theorists about social categories such as race and gender. There is a genuinely metaphysical disagreement about whether and what our race and gender classifications capture in the world. According to social constructionists about race, for example, the term "race" refers to a social kind. Unlike, error theorists believe that the term "race" is an empty term, namely a term that does not denote anything. As Diaz-Leon points out, this dispute seems depend on the meaning of the corresponding expression and our intuitions as competent speakers. But, Diaz-Leon asks: «What should we say if competent users of the expressions "race" and "gender" understand the terms so that being a natural or biological property is a necessary condition in order to fall under the term?». If it is so, one might think, social constructionism would be flawed. Nevertheless, Haslanger has recently defenced social constructionism from this objection by embracing semantic externalism, the view according to which the meaning of a term is determined by factors external to the speaker. In her paper, Diaz-Leon aims to show that semantic externalism about natural kinds cannot really comply with Haslanger's claim that ordinary intuitions concerning social kinds are not relevant.

The other contributions to the volume aim to complete the overview of the subject and include three commentaries (by Sanja Milutinovic Bojanić; Greta Gober, Maria Rodó-de-Zárate & Marta Jorba), three book reviews (by Anna

Boncompagni; Ingeborg W. Owesen; Giuliano Torrengo), the reports of two international conferences (*Under-Represented Groups in Philosophy*, Cardiff University, 26th-27th November 2010, by Jules Holroyd and Alessandra Tanesini; and *Women in Philosophy: Why Race and Gender Still Matter*, Notre Dame of Maryland University, 28th April 2012, by Maeve O' Donovan, Namita Goswami, and Lisa Yount), and two interviews, respectively to Sally Haslanger, edited by Elena Casetta, and Marta Nussbaum, edited by Sara Protasi.

We would like to conclude this brief introduction by thanking the authors of the papers collected in this volume for their willingness to cooperate during the whole review process, and Silvano Zipoli Caiani and all the Editorial Committee of Humana.Mente for the support given to the publication of this volume. We also thank Andrea Borghini, Giuliano Torrengo, and Achille Varzi for their precious suggestions, and the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America for providing Elena with a stimulating environment during the final stages of this work. Last but not least, we profoundly appreciate the efforts of the referees in reviewing the papers. Without their help, this special issue would not exist.

# Food in the Metaphysical Orders: Gender, Race, and the Family[*]

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ABSTRACT

By looking at human practices around food, the paper brings novel evidence linking the social constructionist and the naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family, evidence that is based on the analysis of developmental trajectories. The argument rests on two main theoretical claims: (i) unlike evolutionary explanations, developmental trajectories can play a decisive role in exhibiting the biological underpinnings of kinds related to gender, race, and family; (ii) food constitutes a point of convergence between constructionist and naturalist perspectives because it embeds practices of particular significance for establishing identities of gender, race, and family that, at the same time, are rooted on skills and habits acquired through specific developmental patterns. The paper illustrates (i) and (ii) via two case studies involving women hunters and the diet of the Obamas. The latter also suggests that kinds associated to gender, race, and family are entangled.

## I. Linking Social Constructionism With Naturalism

To date, distinctions of gender, race, and family structure are regarded as a matter of social construction by a number of scholars. Introducing a collection of essays devoted to sexual meanings, Ortner & Whitehead write: «What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them – all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological "givens," but are largely products of social and cultural processes»

[*] I am most thankful to Larry Cahoone, Elena Casetta, and Vera Tripodi for their copious and precious comments on previous versions of this work.
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(Ortner & Whitehead, 1981, p. 1). A few years later Judith Butler, even more starkly, claims: «perhaps this construct called 'sex' is as culturally constructed as gender» (Butler, 1999, p. 10). Social constructionists about race defend an analogous position regarding racial distinctions and their biological bases.[1] Finally, that family structure can take multiple forms, even within the same population, is all the more evident and is regarded as an indication of its social, rather than biological, derivation.[2]

Opposed to the constructionist, stands what might be labeled the *naturalist* camp. Naturalists with respect to genders, races, and family structure view the respective kinds as capable of being defined (or, at least, characterized) in terms of biological facts of some sort and, from a methodological point of view, hold that studies in biology or natural sciences can foster the understanding of said kinds as well as their purpose in the public sphere.[3]

The dialogue between the two camps has been sparse and difficult. In part the impasse can be explained by pointing at the diverging research methods and scholarly traditions employed to work on the same issue; but an important responsibility seems to be shared also by the ill-suited argumentative strategies pursued by the naturalists. Attempts to rebut, complicate, or mediate social constructionist positions by means of biological arguments have so far hinged on the evolutionary history of *Homo sapiens* and some of its most direct ancestors. The typical schema of an argument explaining cultural facts on the basis of evolutionary processes goes roughly like this: if within population *P* we find the peculiar custom of grouping members of *P* according to some apparently cultural feature *C*, this is because the possession or lack of *C* is linked to some evolutionary advantage *A* bestowed only upon those ancestors of *P*s members that possessed a certain biological feature *B*; thus, what appears as a cultural construct is explained in terms of a biological story. The schema, however, has more often than not produced far-fetched and hardly provable hypotheses regarding human evolution (Machery & Faucher, 2005) is a good example), which have done little to challenge constructionist analyses of specific case studies and even less to question their key assumptions. After all, one should be mindful of Darwin's admonition in Chapter 4 of the *Origin*:

> We see nothing of these slow changes in progress, until the hand of time has

[1] Cfr. Omi & Winant, 1994; Cornell & Hartmann, 1998; Mallon, 2004.
[2] Cfr. Berger & Luckman, 1966; and Guba, 1990.
[3] The current research in this area is extensive; for some more or less recent philosophical imports, see Boyd & Richerson, 1985; Machery & Faucher, 2005; and Kitcher, 2007.

> marked the long lapses of ages, and then so imperfect is our view into long past geological ages, that we only see that the forms of life are now different from what they formerly were (Darwin, 2003, p. 146).

That evolutionary stories can hardly settle disputes between naturalists and constructionists is not, however, to say that there are no better mediation strategies. The goal of this paper will be, in part, to start presenting one of them, based on ontogenetic – rather than phylogenetic – factors. Since phylogenesis concerns the evolutionary development of a species, arguments based on phylogenetic factors need to ground on the too-often undefined history of *Homo sapiens*; ontogenetic factors, instead, which relate to the complex of biological processes marking the development of an organism throughout its life, can be more reliably studied by observing contemporary humans. It is indeed striking that ontogenesis has so far taken a back seat in the disputes between naturalists and constructionists: the "natural" underpinnings of distinctions of gender, race, and family structure can often find evidence within more visible short-term processes of individual development (such as the acquisition of particular skills and behaviors) rather than within the larger schema of human evolution. "Development" here stands for any genotypic or phenotypic change that an individual organism undergoes during stages of its life; this will include not only morphological or physiological traits, but also typical behaviors and skills.

The stance adopted in this work aligns with the quest for a more palatable methodology to study cultural processes from a naturalistic perspective. In part, such methodology is hinted at in this passage by Eva Jablonka and Marion Lamb, criticizing the shortcomings of the approaches to cultural evolution grounded in memetics or evolutionary psychology:

> *What is missing from both memetics and evolutionary psychology is development* ... Memetics and evolutionary psychology have little to say about how cultural constructions actually begin: they tell us almost nothing about ways in which social, political, and economic forces transform societies and culture through the plans and actions of people (Jablonka & Lamb, 2005, p. 218, my emphasis).[4]

A chief underlying premise of this work is thus that developmental processes constitute a key component of the evolution of culture; the goal of the present

[4] Among the most distinguished examples of studies of cultural evolution that are not centered on phylogenetic processes: Cavalli-Sforza & Feldman, 1981; and Boyd & Richerson, 1985.

endeavor is to start showing that, by looking at the development of practices surrounding food, we can come to understand how specific genders, races, and family structures come to be adopted. To illustrate the point by means of a parallel example, consider the processes typical of (natural) language acquisition.[5] Properties such as *Being a native speaker of Tagalog*, for instance, depend on social interactions whose details may be left to the will of individuals and groups, but at the same breath are subjugated to biological constraints on the developmental trajectories suitable for the aim at hand (e.g., a person can hardly become a native speaker of Tagalog if before age fifteen she has never been exposed to it). Once socially determined practices such as studying a foreign language are shown to influence certain ontogenetic possibilities, speculation regarding the broader evolutionary meaningfulness of ontogenetic possibilities can be undertaken on common grounds. In other words, the study of language has found a meeting point between social constructionist and naturalist theories by studying specific social characteristics and pairing them with specific ontogenetic trajectories.

The cases of gender, race, and family structure, I submit, follow that of language. The link between social constructionist and naturalist theories dealing with those issues can be proved by pairing distinct social processes with distinct developmental trajectories. The typical schema of an argument of this sort goes roughly like this: within population *P* we find the peculiar custom of grouping members of *P* according to some apparently cultural feature *C*; in order to acquire *C*, however, a member of *P* has to undergo some developmental trajectory *D*; thus, what appears as a cultural construct is inextricably linked to a biological story (rooted in *D*).

In the sequel, the schema shall be exemplified by focusing only on a class of social processes, namely, food practices. "Food" in this context stands for that complex system of knowledge, technologies, skills, ceremonials, meanings, ecological relationships, nutritional, biological, and chemical properties within which human populations find their sustenance. Although philosophers have scarcely paid attention to foods, these may provide excellent material for speculation. As the examples to follow shall testify, over the past three or four decades, both social and natural scientists have looked into food matters from a

[5] Ever since the publications of Lennenberg (1967) and Chomsky (1968), which defended an evolutionary savvy form of innatism regarding the capacity of acquiring natural language, natural language acquisition has been at the center of heated debates from an evolutionary perspective. See also Pinker, 2000; and Chomsky, 2000 for more recent takes on the topic.

wide spectrum of angles; there is plenty to dig for those coming to the topic with a special attention to the metaphysical status of social kinds. The contention is, hence, that the study of food practices can provide the right sort of evidence needed to prove the links between constructionist and naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family.

## II. Food in the Metaphysical Orders

Perhaps not surprisingly, also in the area of food studies – broadly construed – we find a strong divide between the constructionists (anthropologists and sociologists especially) and the naturalists (such as geneticists, evolutionary biologists, nutritionists). In a methodologically innovative work on the theme, Mary Douglas speculated that the lack of attention to culinary matters was due to a split analogous to the one portrayed in the section above: «The absence of serious research into the cultural and social uses of food is caused by a more fundamental separation between food sciences and social thought» (Douglas, 1984, p. 2).[6] While anthropologists and sociologists debate as to the social significance of habits and skills associated with, e.g., controlling fermentation processes, geneticists aim to detect which genes are linked to – say – the capacity to detect bitterness.[7] There are of course some exceptions,[8] but much more can be done to bring the contestants from the two camps to a fair terrain of dispute. The present work constitutes an attempt to move in such a direction. The underlying metaphysical perspective will serve both to prove a point with respect to kinds related to gender, race, and the family as well as to establish a certain approach to food studies.

Food will be here regarded as both a social construct *and* a natural product. This is because while the adoption of specific activities, manners, and recipes may be seen as a resultant of socially-driven choices, the habits and skills

[6] Unfortunately, the research presented in the rest of the volume edited by Douglas arguably conceives of its subject matter under a constructionist point of view; it provides, nonetheless, a good case for the methodology here adopted.

[7] Some remarks on cheese production and gender divisions can be found in Camporesi, 1985, pp. 63–65; and Naso, 2000, pp. 98–99; but see also the very first treatise on cheese production by Pantaleone of Confienza (Pantaleone, 2000, pp. 191–192); I thank Paolo Savoia for insights on this topic. On bitterness, see for instance Wooding, 2006.

[8] For an anthropological perspective taking into account the importance of the development of skills and abilities, see Ingold, 2000; Mennella et al., 2001 is one of the best examples of a biological study of the dependence of food habits upon development, centered on the preferences for carrot juice; for a study of the transmissibility of food habits in rabbits by means of behavior, see Bilkó et al., 1994.

associated with those choices exhibit clear biological underpinnings. Of course, a parallel division can be spotted on the part of the ingredients as well: Granny Smith apples or Florence fennels, for instance, are best accounted for by means of their biological traits paired with their social histories; the evolutionary histories of apple trees and Florence fennel plants are really histories of co-evolution with humans, which find a rationale in their phenotypic and developmental traits as well as in their gustative properties.

The main claim of the present paper is, then, that human practices around food can bring novel evidence to link the social constructionist and the naturalist theories of gender, race, and the family. This claim is based on two sub-claims: (i) unlike evolutionary explanations, developmental trajectories can play a decisive role in exhibiting the biological underpinnings of kinds related to gender, race, and the family; (ii) food constitutes a point of convergence between constructionist and naturalist perspectives because it embeds practices of particular significance for establishing identities of gender, race, and family structure that, at the same time, are rooted on skills and habits acquired through specific developmental patterns.

In the sequel, the main claim will be illustrated by means of two case studies involving women hunters and the Obama family. They will be considered in order. In each case, the relevance with respect to gender, race, or family identity will be first explained; then, links to underlying biological processes will be suggested. According to recent statistics (Griggs, 2011), there are over two millions of women hunters in the United States, a data that may seem surprising to most and that contrasts with stereotypes. Despite the appearances, it is argued that the fact is not a proof of a mere social construction of the stereotype of Man the Hunter: developmental trajectories can influence to great extent hunting skills, thus partaking in characterizing a woman as a hunter and, consequently, women's image at large.[9] The case of the Obamas, instead, is most interesting for understanding race and family

[9] Several alternative case studies would deserve to be examined. Just to list some other topics that may speak to the metaphysics of gender: the increasingly prestigious part played by women in defining standards of haute cuisine; the rise of women butchers; women's function in the production of alcoholic beverages; women's legacy in the history of cheese production. Each of those topics may be employed to test and illustrate the main claim of the present paper. The case involving women hunters was chosen because it apparently challenges said claim. It would seem that, if more and more women are turning to hunting, then women's relationship to such practice is of pure social derivation; consequently, it would seem that gender-identity is, at least in this respect, socially constructed. At a closer inspection, the initial impression will prove to be defective.

distinctions (although Michelle Obama's insistence on dietary advice suggests some gender considerations as well). Food has arguably played a key role in the construction of the racial profile of the Obamas, setting standards for distinct, at times unprecedented, culinary preferences of the presidential family as well as suggesting family roles and educational standards. The food choices of the Obamas suggest that eating habits depend on developmental trajectories – skills and habits connected to gathering food and cooking it, dining, or exercising, that one acquires through years of appropriate apprentice; such skills and habits are often associated (although they need not to) with specific racial and family profiles. The example of the Obamas uses food to make a parallel argument with respect to the biological underpinnings of kinds associated with race and family structure; moreover, the Obama family demonstrates the difficulty of disentangling identities associated with race, gender, and family structure.

## III. Woman the Hunter: a Rediscovery or a Reconstruction?[10]

The contemporary gender division among American hunters has left many baffled. It is the picture of a rapidly changing situation. According to data collected by the National Sporting Goods Association, in the United States alone, «between 2004 and 2009, the number of women hunting with firearms jumped 50%, from 2 million to 3 million ... Bowhunting women climbed from 500,000 to 800,000, and female target shooters increased from 4.3 million to 4.7 million».[11] Among other things this means that, during the period under consideration, women outnumbered men among newcomer hunters in the U.S.; no surprise, then, if some are wondering whether women can save the survival of hunting practices within our society.[12] Now, to these data we shall add that the vast majority of the hunters in question eats the prey: it is in fact illegal in North America to sell the meat of any wild animal, so that we can safely claim that hunting is by and large a food-driven sport, increasingly motivated by ethical considerations related to animal suffering and environmental preservation.[13] Thus, by delving into hunting, women are at

[10] I am much indebted with, and grateful to, Larry Cahoone for numerous conversations on hunting practices in the United States and the philosophy of hunting.
[11] See Griggs, 2011. It should be noted that the numbers include women of age 7 and above; when counting women of age 17 and above, the figures suggest that around 2.5 millions women hunt.
[12] McCombie, 2010.
[13] See Kowalsky, 2010 as well as Pollan, 2006 for a further exemplification of those points.

once modifying their relationship to meat. What should we make of the turn that seems to be taking place? Does it prove that Woman the Hunter is a possibility as much as Man the Hunter is, and that gender divides among hunters are a sole matter of socially constructed roles? Or, is predating rather an activity sitting within human "nature", one that feeds into an ancient ecological relationship that humans bore and still bear to their environment? In other words, does the turn prove that woman the hunter was reconstructed, rather than rediscovered?

Hunting sits deep into the evolutionary roots of *Homo*,[14] so much so that – in the words of Valerius Geist – «before discussing the morality of hunting, we need to consider hunting and meat eating in our evolution. It may be that questioning the morality of hunting questions our humanity» (Geist, 2010, p. 131). It is through the ability of hunting that hominids gained an unprecedented advantage over predators such as wolves and coyotes. Moreover, it is likely that the development of hunting practices played a relevant role in the selection of traits that were most advantageous to human evolution such as balancing on one foot, skills for fashioning protective niches and weapons, cooperation. Now, those traits are – at once – of chief social significance: even a simple trait like balancing on one foot assumes a cultural flavor when regarded as a key aspect of dancing; and the availability of weapons may have posed some of the most challenging ethical dilemmas to our ancestors. It seems plausible, then, to suggest not only that the development of a whole series of cognitive and skilled abilities throughout the life of a human is indeed connected to hunting; but, most importantly, those abilities will facilitate or hamper certain social behaviors.

Hunting practices carry some strong gender connotations within Western culture. The notion of Man the Hunter, first employed at a 1966 University of Chicago symposium on the ethnography of hunter-gatherers organized by Richard Lee and Irven DeVore,[15] has later been effectively borrowed to represent and reinforce the special relationship of men with meat. It is part of a somewhat mythical depiction of a refined society, where roles are properly separated: men go hunting (or procuring the primary sources for survival), women tend to household matters, including the preparation of the meals. Men have thus the duty and privilege of exercising their dominion over animals,

[14] For a clear-cut case in favour of the evolutionary importance of hunting, see Geist, 2010.
[15] See Lee & DeVore, 1968.

which gives them priority over meat consumption and establishes their more eminent societal position with respect to women. The rise of women hunters is clearly challenging this picture. Hence the question: is Man the Hunter a socially constructed narrative or is it rather the unavoidable resultant of some underlying natural distinctions between men and women? To address such questions, we shall look at three clusters of features with respect to which women and men differ in their relationship to hunting: (i) body traits; (ii) ecological relationships; (iii) emotional responses. An important premise to the discussion to follow is that hunting-related skills are acquired in conjunction with other conditions that may influence hunting practices. Some of those conditions will have a more naturalistic flavor, while others will largely be accounted for on the basis of social conventions; finally, a great deal of them will exhibit aspects from both sides.

(i) *Body traits*. Bodily differences between men and women may impinge, in some circumstances, on their respective hunting abilities. For instance, on average it may prove more difficult for a woman to drag a large buck out of a field by herself than it would be for a man; or, on average a woman will have less arm strength in shooting a bow than a man; differences in butchering abilities may be spotted as well, even though they may be harder to prove. Here, traits most likely developed independently from hunting-related abilities may interfere with the activity. The relevance of this sort of considerations is well exemplified by some historical and literary depictions of women hunters. Addressing human specimens in the mountains of Albania, Strabo chronicles of the unusual women inhabiting those lands – the Amazons; according to the Greek historian, it is said

> that the Amazons spend the rest of their time [i.e. ten months of the year] off to themselves, performing their several individual tasks, such as ploughing, planting, pasturing cattle, and particularly in training horses, *though the bravest engage mostly in hunting on horseback* and practise warlike exercises; that the right breasts of all are seared when they are infants, so that they can easily use their right arm for every needed purpose, and especially that of throwing the javelin; that they also use bow and sagaris (Strabo, *Geography*, Book XI, section 5, tr. by H.C. Hamilton, Esq. and W. Falconer, M.A., 1903; my emphasis).

Strabo's Amazons of Albania have their right breasts cut in order to be able to properly handle their weapons: women have to renounce to part of their most intimate and treasured anatomical features in order to become hunters. The

lesson for the readership seems to be that, if women wish to preserve their biological integrity, they better not hunt: this is a man's world. Still in fourteenth and fifteenth centuries A.D. literature we find portraits of the Amazons and imaginative discussions of their lifestyles. For instance, in the twentieth chant of his epic poem, the *Orlando Furioso,* whose first edition dates back to 1516, Ludovico Ariosto narrates of the female army lead by Orontea, «the youngest, the most beautiful, and the most clever».

At the same time, the mythologies of Artemis and Diana, two related and central figures of the Greek and Roman pantheons, accorded central place to women hunters: the two were often represented with bow and arrows, dwelling on high mountains and sacred woods. How these goddesses could be part and parcel of that social order to which Strabo would have subscribed needs to be carefully sorted out, a task laying outside of present purposes. Still, the contrast with the narratives of Strabo and Ariosto is stark and we can imagine that their most loyal readership would have been appalled by contemporary statistics.[16] We shall look into two more clusters of features before attempting to dissolve the issue.

(ii) A second cluster of features concerns the broader *ecological relationship* that men and women have with hunting sites. Consider even just the capacity of "making sense" of a forest: being able to read off a trace or a sound or an animal's behavior; devising possible paths and hiding spots; keeping a good sense of orientation; possessing the skills and tactics to wonder through the woods. Arguably, those are skills dependent upon a series of developmental traits that one can no longer so easily acquire and master once beyond adult age, in analogy with the ability to speak a given natural language. Are women less prone than men to develop appropriate ecological relationships to hunting sites? If so, is such a difference socially constructed or does it depend on some more basic natural distinctions?

(iii) Finally, consider *emotional responses* to death. For an older person who has never participated in the killing of a large animal, to adjust to the emotional challenge of a buck falling to the ground because of *her* deliberate shooting may prove extremely difficult, thus shying the person away from hunting practices. To show how far apart the sensibility of women hunters is from that of other women, Ariosto has Orontea's army adopt ferocious and

[16] One can even conjecture that during their respective times there were women hunters (at least in non-urban settings) and that their writings had been offered to encourage others to abstain from such a custom.

wildly implausible social rules, the sole conditions under which their hunting practices can be prosecuted. Are women less apt than men to emotionally respond to the killing of an animal? If so, is such a difference to be explained in terms of natural or, rather, socially constructed traits?

Those three clusters of features with respect to which men and women may differ in their relationship to hunting highlight their distinct respective relationships to meat. The thesis I wish to defend is that the difference is at once naturalistic and socially constructed: indeed, contemporary women hunters testify to the mixed character of their skills. Consider, first, emotional responses. The difficulty here seems to be true no less of men than women. Michael Pollan's report of his first boar hunt – which occurred at a mature age – does a great job, for instance, in highlighting manly fears.[17] Women that turn to hunting at an early life stage, indeed, demonstrate greater emotional strength than older women. Here is how a seventeen-year old reports shooting at her first turkey: «The bird was less than thirty yards away and I had never been that close before ... He was beautiful and he was going to be dead. I gently squeezed the trigger, never feeling the recoil» (Zeiss Stange, 1997, p. 5). We can imagine (although of course that's not a necessary assumption) the seventeen-year old girl having previously marched through more tormented emotional states while growing up using a weapon. This strikes us as fundamentally no different from the process of emotional development that Nathan Kowalskly (a male hunter, and now a professional philosopher as well) had gone through when, at age 14, he ventured for the first time on a hunt with a rifle and a license in hand. He couldn't shoot, on fear of not killing the animal well.

> So Dad took the shoot instead. BANG! ... I remember running like hell towards him [the buck]... as if there was only one thing that existed in the world, that buck, and my entire consciousness was nothing but a giant tube through which something else beyond me was able to look through the fabric of the universe and see that buck, right there, die. *Whoosh* (Kowalsky, 2010, p. 2).

In the end, women and men seem to be capable of developing similar emotional responses to hunting practices. But this is not to say that the emotional response is socially constructed: it is part and parcel of a developmental process that has roots in our evolutionary history of predators. As far as we can tell, in that history men have no exclusive or special role as hunters; rather, the

[17] Pollan, 2006.

plasticity of development, for both men and women, is what's emerges most starkly.

As for the second cluster of features, women and men hunters seem to feed into the very same ecological relationship – that ancestral drive to procure food by predating. Women seem no less capable than men in reading off traces and behaviors, recognizing paths, getting around places, hiding themselves. The possession of analogous hunting-related capacities, however, doesn't entail that women's and men's hunting practices will develop similarly. Women hunters seem to interpret that relationship in a distinct way, based on the different upbringing received, which gives women plenty of reasons to want to hunt with other women. An example relates to the development of musical taste. In a discussion of hunting soundtracks, hunter Kim Hiss reports how, on her first hunt, immediately after shooting a mule deer «the guide swung open the doors of the cab, hit the cd player, and blasted Queen's *Another One Bites the Dust*». Clearly the guide was a man.

> But my best song-hunt association to date – continues Kim – came in the spring of 2006, when I was back in New Mexico on a turkey hunt with the folks from *Women in the Outdoors* magazine. Editor Karen Lee is a music head too, and on the drive to the lodge we talked about favorite songs, with Seals and Crofts' *Summer Breeze* topping the list that particular afternoon.[18]

What goes for music preferences goes for a whole series of themes apparently unrelated to hunting, including jokes and conversational preferences, so that in the end – as Mary Zeiss Stange writes in the introduction of her *Woman the Hunter* – «these women do not seem to want to be, or to act like, men» (Zeiss-Stange, 1997, p. 6). The irreversible components of upbringing, hence, contribute some natural distinctions to the bonding of women hunters, reinforcing the grouping of women as a separate category.

Finally, as for body traits, while some average gender distinctions of anatomy and strength may apply, it need not be the case that they all feed into a higher capacity for men to hunt. American women, for instance, may on average be better able to balance on their feet or make sudden moves because of the lighter weight and greater acrobatic skills, and most may have some familiarity with the butchering of an animal. Moreover, of course, we shall be mindful that the average differences in body traits between genders are just that: averages, based on somewhat conventional distinctions. Several women

[18] Hiss, 2007. I'm indebted with Larry Cahoone and Chris Dustin for pointing out this passage to me.

will possess as much, or more, strength than most men; and in some cases the gender divide will not neatly apply. It seems thus hard to conclude, on the score of body traits, that there are significant gender distinctions justifying the notion of Man the Hunter.

In a recent article on women hunters, Brian McCombie lays down some exemplary remarks of what may be labeled "the social constructionist fallacy":

> Research by Southwick and Associates notes that hunting is essentially a social activity: a way for friends and family to bond. Not surprisingly, women want to share their hunting with other women; as a result, it is important that programs such as Women On Target continue to grow; for example, a recent report on hunting trends, done by the National Shooting Sports Foundation, found that over a five-year period only 15 percent of women bought a hunting license each year, while 37 percent of men did (McCombie, 2010).

Claims such as that of McCombie's are misleading because they undermine the kinship of nature and culture in devising that social kind we refer to as "women". Such a kind has – most likely within the confines of each society – certain behaviors that are characteristic, including body movements, emotional responses, manual skills. Those behaviors do have biological underpinnings: they realize certain ontogenetic possibilities of humans,[19] possibilities that beyond a certain age cannot as easily be acquired or cannot be acquired at all, just as one cannot become a native speaker of Tagalog if, at age twenty, one still hasn't been exposed to it. Thus, women come to be defined not simply on the basis of social traits, but also on the basis of the biological traits that are – as a matter of fact – the other side of the coin of the social traits towards which we point our fingers. Of course, the traits in question are just realizations of *some* of the ontogenetic possibilities of women: several other possibilities are open. But they cannot be actualized unless different developmental trajectories are pursued.

Hunting stands as a case in point for the broader relationship that women bear to meat. That women in most Western societies have a distinct relationship to meat seems to be a platitude. In his book on the topic, for instance, Nick Fiddes brings abundant evidence to indicate that

> the macho steak is perhaps the most visible manifestation of an idea that permeates the entire western food system ... a beef steak can send powerful

[19] Some of those possibilities may even be tied to specific sexual traits, but I shall leave this more contentious supposition on a side here.

> sexual signals. The larger and juicier the piece of meat, the more red-blooded and virile the consumer should be supposed to be (Fiddes, 1991, pp. 146–147).

Statements, images, and behaviors underlying Fiddes's claim abound in contemporary media as well and remind us of a much recited sentence of Lord Byron according to which a woman should never be seen eating or drinking, unless it be lobster salad and Champagne, the only true feminine and becoming viands.

Byron's opinion can and should be resisted. Yet this is not because women's relationship to meat is solely, or even mainly, socially constructed. To stay within the case in point, if women have found it difficult to change their relationship to hunting, this is because: (a) hunting practices are founded upon certain developmental constraints (body traits, cognitive and emotional abilities), that cannot be easily changed by adult women; (b) hunting practices are entrenched with a host of other practices, presumably tied to additional developmental constraints. Hunters and farmers bear a special tie to their prey and properties, hence (typically) they also have special access to the consumption of the animals' meat. And yet little evidence shows that the tie is better embodied by men rather than women. At the same time this is not to deny that the tie is both naturalistic and socially constructed. In so far as gender categories are defined through a distinct relationship to practices, such as hunting, genders are neither naturalistic nor socially constructed: they are both.

## IV. Eating Like a Healthy Black Family: the Diet of the Obamas

On November 4, 2008, the day Barack Obama won the presidential elections in the United States, many celebrated the coming of the very first non-white American president. Taking quarters at the White House in early 2009, however, was not Barack alone, but the whole presidential family. Together, this now stands as the symbol of "the other" America and a quick look at the family histories of Barack and Michelle can start explaining why that's the case.[20] Barack represented at best America's mixed racial identity. He is the first U.S. president to be born in Hawaii. His mother – Stanley Ann Dunham – was of European ancestry, mostly English and some German, Irish and Swiss;

[20] Obama's family history is the central subject of Obama, 2005.

she was born in Wichita, Kansas, and lived in different American states and countries during her life. Barack Obama, Sr., instead, was from Kenya and in his early years traveled extensively throughout the world.[21] When in 1959 he enrolled at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, he was the first African student to ever attend the institution. In Manoa, Barack Sr. and Ann met during a Russian class in the Fall of 1960: later that semester Ann dropped out of school upon becoming pregnant with Barack Jr. On February 2, 1961 Ann and Barack Sr. got married. It turned out, though, that Barack Sr. had already married once in Kenya in 1954, and the two divorced in 1964. Shortly after, Ann married Indonesian geographer Lolo Soetoro, with whom she moved to Jakarta in 1967, bringing Barack Jr. with her for four years. In 1971 Barack Jr. moved back to Hawaii, to live with his maternal grandparents and attend school. He finished high school in 1979, moved to Los Angeles for college, then to New York City, then Chicago, Cambridge (Mass.), then Chicago, then to the White House in early 2009. Michelle Robinson Obama, on the other hand, descended from a typical African American family, with roots in South Carolina on the paternal side and a biracial great-great grandfather on the maternal side (the son of a woman slave and a slave-owner). Michelle grew up in Chicago; attended school in Princeton and Harvard; moved back to Chicago.

The symbolic strength of the new presidential family, however, cannot be explained just by pointing at Barack's and Michelle's respective family histories. Consider two other notable figures in the recent history of American government, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. The first was born in Harlem to Jamaican parents with some Scottish ancestors, and grew up in the South Bronx; Condoleezza Rice's family, instead, has roots in the American South, much like Michelle Obama's. But, despite the affinity, the racial profiles of Powell and Rice did not nearly receive as much public attention as the ones of the Obamas. Granted, Powell and Rice were not part of a presidential family; but, more should be said to explain the difference in symbolic power. Now, it has been already noted how Barack's walking style differed, for instance, from his predecessor's: just a few steps along the White House's colonnade on November 10, 2008 were enough to embody a clear-cut racial divide. *Ditto* for Michelle's decision to appear in sleeveless dresses at several ceremonial events, including the official White House portrait and the first President's address

[21] A piece of information that is curious for our purposes: his father (Barack's grandfather) was employed as a cook for missionaries in Nairobi.

before Congress.[22] Both of those instances reveal certain somaesthetic traits (bodily traits that play a role in world-making practices) that are distinctive of a racial profile.[23] Still, more needs to be excavated to show how such a profile has been incarnated. Two examples related to food shall be examined here, both of which exhibit a mixture of socially constructed properties along with naturalistic ones. One deals with the selection of the White House Executive Chef; the other with the White House Kitchen Garden and the *Let's Move* campaign against childhood obesity, both heartily supported by the First Lady.

As one can expect from a family relocating from one place to another, when the Obamas moved to D.C. from Chicago they aimed at taking with them their culinary traditions and dietary manners. For this reason, several speculated that they would have brought at 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. some chef aligned with their own taste. Three names circulated for some weeks: Art Smith, specialized in Southern cuisine and for some time now Oprah Winfrey's personal chef; African American chef Daniel Young, once upon a time also Carmelo Anthony's personal chef, best known for his focus on healthy American cuisine; and Rick Bayless, of Topolobampo and Frontera Grill Mexican restaurants in Chicago.[24] If the first two are associated with African American celebrities, Bayless runs one of the favorite Chicago dining options for the Obamas.[25] In the end, however, a fourth option prevailed: Cristeta Comerford, the chef selected by the Bushes in 2005, who was indeed confirmed in her role. Born and educated in the Philippines, Cristeta was also the first woman to hold the prestigious position of supervising the preparation of all meals for the presidential family and its numerous guests. What can we gather from such a pool of options and from the diet that was then chosen by the Obamas?

First of all, it should be noted that each candidate would have represented an unconventional choice for a presidential family: a woman from Philippines, a chef specializing in refined Mexican cuisine, one versed in Southern cuisine, and an African American focusing on healthy American eating. Each of them symbolizes the other America that the Obamas brought to the White House.

[22] I owe this remark on Michelle's arms and the previous one on Barack's walking style to Paul Taylor, whose research on the somaesthetics properties of the Obamas inspires the whole section.
[23] For an introduction to the principles of somesthetic, see Shusterman, 2008.
[24] See Piazza, 2008.
[25] Bayless was indeed guest chef at the White House on May 19, 2010, for the state dinner hosting Mexican President Felipe Calderón and his wife Margarita Zavala.

Even if the Obamas would have not been the first presidential family to appoint an African American as head chef (George Washington and Lyndon Johnson, for instance, had opted for this choice), what seems to be most remarkable is the manner in which a chef's profile can be used to suggest a certain image of the presidential family. Indeed, what matters is not just *who* is doing the cooking, but *what that chef* is asked to bring to the table. Here we find the tie between nature and culture: a family and a racial profile are formed through the perseverance of a diet.[26] A family's diet is not something that can be changed overnight without considerable re-educational efforts and sacrifice for the palate. If G.W. Bush was famous for having claimed that he would not eat anything green or wet, the Obamas made themselves known for their opting for fresh, healthy foods, often with an international twist. In bringing their culinary tradition and dietary habits into the White House, the Obamas did not entirely socially construct their racial identity: they followed – at least partially – the developmental patterns of their bodies, used to be fed on foods others than the ones of the Bushes. A family was hence brought together by means of its relationship to food, one constituted – at least partially – of a distinct biological component: the choice of a head chef representing the other America was placed along with a distinctive dietary history, to which Barack's and Michelle's bodies bear witness.

In the quest to reconfigure her image as a care giver and an educational model geared towards black mothers, re-establishing a White House vegetable garden (where both the Carters and the Clintons had failed) was one of the most successful accomplishments of Michelle Obama.[27] Not only did the garden reinforce the idea of an unprecedented presidential family whose diet consisted in fresh and healthy foods as well as in a close body relationship with nature's gifts; it also helped to re-configure Michelle's ideal place within the family, shifting the focus on her mother-role and sensitivity to the daily challenges and needs of African American mothers and children. Under these lenses, the *Let's Move!* campaign was the most obvious initiative to place next to the gardening initiative.[28] Launched by the First Lady on February 9, 2010,

[26] The case studies discussed in Douglas (1984) constitute an excellent proof of the strong ties between land, foraging and cooking skills that require specific development, and the formation of family or group identities.

[27] See for instance Carman, 2012. On Michelle Obama's image as a White House house-wife, see also White, 2011, that however does not touch upon the role of food in the Obama's aims.

[28] There is a third food-related item on the agenda of the first lady that deserves to be mentioned: MyPlate, the current nutrition guide published by USDA and issued on June 2, 2011. MyPlate

the campaign targets that «slow, quiet, everyday threat that doesn't always appear to warrant the headline urgency of some of the other issues that we face».[29] While the urgency is certainly of concern to U.S. citizens at large, it is of special relevance for black communities:

> You just heard the statistics. They're all too familiar: how nearly 40 percent of African American kids are overweight or obese. Nearly one in two – that is half of our children – will develop diabetes in some point in their lives. But I also know how easy it is to rattle off those numbers, and to shake our heads, and move on, because in the black community especially, these persistent health problems can become so routine that we come to expect it, sometimes even tolerate it.

To show her active participation, Michelle has held dancing events at several schools across the nation, involving celebrities such as Beyoncé, and she even put her daughters on a diet starting right before the launch of the campaign. While figures such as Sarah Palin have regarded Michelle's dietary advices as attempts to micro-manage the lives of American families, they seem to have been effective in bringing about a new ferment around fresh and healthy foods across the U.S.

Once again, the dietary challenges that the *Let's Move* campaign and the gardening initiative are trying to combat do not reflect just the need for cultural changes. They are unavoidably linked to developmental patterns too: the abilities correlated with gardening or training one's own body to perform physical activities require proper upbringing and are best and most easily acquired during early stages of life. This is, at least in part, the reason why both enterprises have a special focus on schools. The dietary suggestions that Michelle is bringing forward, hence, shape up her identity as an African American mother. But they do so not simply in virtue of a socially constructed image: they bear witness to the way her body developed. The challenges of obesity that the Obamas's daughters, Malia and Sasha, face are not simply

emphasizes the importance of physical activity alongside with simple, direct dietary suggestions. Because of those aspects, it confirms the points established by the *Let's Move* campaign that are most of interest for present purposes.

[29] These remarks are from the speech Michelle Obama delivered in front of the Congressional Black Caucus on September 15, 2010, as provided by the White House. (They can be retrieved at: http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2010/09/15/remarks-first-lady-congressional-black-caucus-foundation-legislative-con).

social; they are obviously medical as well. In so far as the identity of a family, of a race, of an African American mother are shaped via their relationship to a diet and an acquaintance with gardening practices or physical activities, such identities exhibit – at once – a social and a naturalistic component.

From the present perspective, then, the relationship of the Obamas with food exemplifies one of the means of establishing family, race, and gender identities on the basis of ties that cannot simply be discounted as socially constructed. Even if the Obamas can be charged with having carefully chosen the sort of food image that most suited their political orientation, at least part of that image is rooted in the respective histories of Barack and Michelle's families as well as in the developmental histories of their respective bodies. You cannot simply choose to change your diet, or gain acquaintance with practices such as gardening, in the same way you choose to change the password of your email account. Once the naturalistic components of development have been individuated, a common ground between social constructionists and naturalists will be established, and finding links between naturalistic claims and evolutionary facts more likely will appear as methodologically compelling.

## V. Conclusions

What is the metaphysical nature of kinds associated with gender, race, and the family? This paper has argued that it is fundamentally wrong to view those kinds as *either* socially constructed *or* natural. Additional research, to prove this thesis in the specifics, needs to be done. For now, we shall content ourselves with a methodological point and some hints. The case studies we surveyed suggest that kinds of agents stand in special relationships with kinds of practices around food. In both cases, we are dealing with kinds that can be characterized by means of specific properties (e.g. dark-skinned; slim; red-blooded; thick) or abilities (emotionally solid; making sense of the environment; being able to garden; surviving a simple diet); but, whether said properties and kinds be natural or socially constructed matters only to the extent that we want to know how to go about controlling them for our purposes. Thus, to the extent within which food helps to establish or reinforce identities of gender, race, and family, the dichotomy between social constructionists and naturalists loses appeal. Moreover, the identities in question turn out to be closely entangled when we examine how they gain

recognition through the establishment of specific dietary relations. Foods, in the end, reveal the purpose-oriented side of kinds; as Ian Hacking once put it: «kinds are important to the agents and artisans who want to use things to do things...The animals, perhaps, inhabit a world of properties. We dwell in a universe of kinds».[30] Control over specific relations to foods, often in conjunction with other relevant relational structures, such as education to arts and crafts, or the development of musical preferences, ends up creating or reinforcing distinctions across genders, races, or families.

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[30] Hacking, 1991: 114.

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# Sex and/or Gender?
# Some Neuroscientific Approaches

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ABSTRACT

Traditionally, Gender Studies differentiates between the term "sex", indicating sex differences from the biological point of view, and the term "gender", indicating that sex differences are social and cultural constructions. In this paper I discuss some recent neuroscientific theses concerning sexual differences to sketch a path of inquiry that goes beyond the logic of the separation of biological and cultural studies.

## I. Introduction: The Seduction of Neuroscientific Explanations

It can hardly pass unnoticed that today's TV-shows, magazines and book shops often direct our attention towards information that correlates classical philosophical problems – e.g. concerning ethics, aesthetics, economics or differences between the sexes – to the physiology of our brains. In a recent article entitled *The Seductive Allure of Neuroscience Explanations*, Skolnick Weisberg et al. have investigated the question of whether the non-expert public tends to take proposed explanations of psychological phenomena which make explicit reference to neural processes to be more credible than explanations which do not include such reference.[1] In order to answer this question, the Skolnick Weisberg research group has presented a sample of non-expert subjects with explanations of some specific psychological phenomena and patterns of human behaviour. The results of this study lend support to the hypothesis that adding pieces of neuroscientific information to an alleged explanation of a given psychological phenomenon tends to make that explanation more acceptable or credible to non-expert subjects – even

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[1] See Skolnick Weisberg, et. al, 2008.

when the neuroscientific information that is added is logically irrelevant to the explanation. In other words, the study conducted by Skolnick Weisberg et al. suggests that persons who have no or little neuroscientific training – i.e. the majority of us – tend to give greater credence to explanations of psychological phenomena when they include neuroscientific vocabulary,[2] and that there exists a tendency to attribute greater veridicality to neuro-biological explanations of psychological and behavioural phenomena. A similar point is stressed by Cordelia Fine in her book *Delusions of Gender*. In her words:

> There's something special about neuroscientific information. It sounds so unassailable, so very ... well, *scientific*, that we privilege it over boring, old-fashioned behavioural evidence. It brings a satisfying feel to empty scientific explanations. And it seems to tell us who we really are (Fine, 2010, p. 168).

The contemporary popularity of the neurosciences does not, of course, depend solely on their efficient presentation in the media. If one follows the history of philosophical thought one can notice that already in the first half of the 19th century there began to form a tendency that took the mind – today: the brain – to be the foremost object of philosophical thought. Today, more than ever before, scientific research produces results which seem to force us to reconsider wide areas of our traditional knowledge. Mental states, emotions, our perception of the artistically beautiful – phenomena which in the past have commonly been taken to resist complete scientific explanation – have become objects of scientific experimentation and theorizing. Moreover, the presentation of neuroscientific results is often accompanied by visual representations of the brain regions that react to specific stimuli, suggesting a strongly mechanistic image in which the entirety of our experience is traced back to specific brain regions which then appear to become the complete cause of a given function or psychological effect. The scope of neuroscientific research has grown considerably since the second half of the 20th century. Today it ranges over practically all areas of knowledge and it includes one of the most obvious, but at the same time most problematic, aspects of our everyday lives, namely that of sexual differences.

In this paper I will discuss some recent neuroscientific results concerning sex/gender differences in order to show how – once freed from certain misconceptions and stereotypes – they can help us redefine the meaning of the

[2] See Legrenzi & Umiltà, 2009.

term "sex/gender difference" and reconsider the thesis that sex and gender are two distinct and separate categories. Gender studies have traditionally distinguished between sex and gender, taking "sex" to be a biological term and "gender" to be a culture related term. By contrast, Feminist studies have preferred the term "gender" to emphasize that culture has an influence on the way we shape femininity and masculinity. In biological contexts, the term "sex" is mainly used to underscore the material and physical aspect of sex differences. In general, "gender" is used to describe the socially constructed aspects of sex-differences; "sex" is used to refer to the differences in terms of the physical and biological. Since I think that considering the terms "sex" and "gender" in a totally separate way is not advantageous for the understanding of sexual differences, in this essay I will use "sex/gender difference" not to assimilate the two terms, but rather to highlight their reciprocal interdependence.

## II. Neuro-Gendering *versus* Neuro-Sexism

In what ways can the attention paid to neural processes and the attempt to provide scientific explanations of human behaviour influence or, perhaps, even add to the explication of sex and gender differences? The question that here comes into play is a venerable one. It regards the well worn but far from resolved dispute over the distinction between sex and gender or, more generally, between human nature and human culture.

The distinction between human nature and human culture has been the object of debates, which range back to the historical roots of western philosophy. The locus classicus is Aristotle's distinction, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, between *zoé* and *bios*, i.e. between the life (*zoé*) that is common to all living beings and the life (*bios*) that is peculiar to human beings and which is constituted by the choices and practices of an individual or group of persons. Culture, according to Aristotle, is that which permits human beings to transcend the state of nature and to create a politically organized community, a *polis*. The term "human nature" is traditionally understood to refer to features of our lives which are simply given as invariable and beyond the range of what we can control or change according to the choices we make. The term "culture", by contrast, is often taken to denote those aspects of our lives which

are matters of locally variable conventions and which, as such, are in principle open to critique and change.[3]

In our context the distinction between what's natural and what's cultural translates into the following question: are sex/gender differences mainly the products of socialization and education within a particular social context with its specific cultural practices (constructivism) or do they rather derive from our biological make-up and are thus in some sense simply part of the "natural order" of how things are (biologism)? I will here not try to offer a solution to this dispute which, for its complexity, is difficult to reassume even in its main outlines.[4] In what follows, I will rather offer a brief sketch of the state of the current neuroscientific debate in order to then argue for the thesis that accepting either the constructivist or the biologist line of explaining sex/gender differences as correct and complete can lead to problematic and, in some cases, even dangerous ideological consequences for our social lives.

Arguably, if we considered both sex/gender differences as reducible to biological differences, any attempt to change institutionalised gender hierarchies would run 'against nature' and would therefore ultimately be doomed to failure. In this vein, Fine argues that «there is evidence that a stronger weighting of genetic influence on behaviour is associated with greater moral tolerance of the social status quo» (Fine, 2011, p. 8). Nevertheless, if we considered sex/gender differences as purely cultural constructs we would have to deny, implausibly, that biological research has anything interesting and relevant to say about the issue. I think that, for different reasons, both positions are unacceptable.

Relying upon techniques of brain imaging (fMRI), contemporary neuroscientific research provides evidence for the claim that it is, to say the least, inexact to maintain that the physiological make-up of our brains is fixed and not susceptible to change.[5] The new technologies, in fact, «have revealed the role of the environment in continually re-shaping our brain along our lifetimes as it goes through new experiences and acquires new knowledge» (Vidal 2011, p. 1). Even though it seems now indisputable that there is

[3] See MacCormack & Strathern (Eds.), 1980; Descola, 2003; Origgi, 2007.

[4] See Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Connell, 2002; Bourdieu, 1988; Vanni Rovighi, 1995; Tripodi, 2011, in particular pp. 36–52.

[5] The most important examples of these new techniques are Positron Emission Tomography (PET) and Functional Magnetic Resonance Imaging (fMRI). Both techniques do not only provide images of the cerebral structure but also information regarding the functioning of our brains in that they allow us to identify, given different stimuli, which brain regions, show greater or lesser neural activity.

significant interplay between nature and culture and that the traditional dichotomy between the two cannot be upheld, one cannot help but agree with Lesley Rogers, when she observes that:

> In the recent past, people have tended to take up one or the other extreme position, some people believing that genes have a pre-eminent role, and others that social or environmental factors are overwhelmingly important (Rogers 2001, p. 2).

In the current debate, however, there are also authors who, as for example Catherine Vidal, argue for a theoretical reconciliation of the two positions. Beginning with *Cerveu, sexe et pouvoir* (2005), Vidal has pursued the aim of spreading knowledge of neuroscientific results concerning sex/gender differences and providing critical analyses of these results. Her goal is two-fold, as she wants to «provide evidence against archaic beliefs about the biological determinism of sex differences but also promote a positive image of scientific research» (Vidal, 2011, p. 9).

Since the discovery of brain plasticity lends considerable scientific support to the claim that the environment can have a modifying effect upon cerebral physiology and, therefore, that the brain's physiology is itself susceptible to change, one might ask whether it still makes sense to stick to the clear cut theoretical distinction between biological and cultural factors which lies at the basis of the dispute between constructivism and biologism. Rather, some of the results of neuroscientific research seem to call for a re-evaluation and revision of both approaches. This re-appraisal appears to be all the more urgent because – as Fine and Rogers have argued – theories that purport to show immutable sex differences within the make-up of the brain do not only tend to have an influence on how we perceive ourselves and others but also to consolidate prejudices and stereotypes concerning the sexes.[6]

A similar point applies to the theoretical interpretation of experimental results by science journalists, philosophers and, not least, by the scientists themselves. The interpretation of scientific experiments concerning biological differences between the sexes is a risky business because, under the guise of an alleged impartiality, there often linger prejudices and clichés whose contents are then "interpreted into" the experimental results and thus provided with a "scientific justification":

[6] See Rogers, 2001, p. 8; Fine, 2011, p. 3; Fine, 2010, p. 172.

> The idea that biology is a major determining factor for cognition and behavioural gender differentiation, is still very much alive. The media are far from being the only guilty party. Some scientific circles actively promote the idea of an innate origin of a gender difference in mental capacities. Experimental data from brain imaging, cognitive tests or genetics are often distorted to serve deterministic ideas. Such abuse of 'scientific discourses' have to be counteracted by effective communication of clear and unbiased information to the citizens (Vidal, 2011, p.1).

In order to avoid misunderstandings, I here want to stress that I neither intend to doubt the legitimacy of using neuroscientific methods in order to broaden our knowledge concerning the sexes nor to deny that there exist sex differences between the cerebral and functional structures of different individuals.[7]

Rather, my aim is to argue for a critical stance with regard to some neuroscientific explanations of sex differences which, in some respects, over-interpret, misinterpret or even manipulate the experimental results which they rely upon.[8] For this purpose, I here suggest a brief reconsideration of some relatively recent studies which investigate the neuro-biological bases of sex differences. In particular, I will consider three well known areas in which neuroscientific explanations have been proposed: 1) language skills; 2) spatial cognition and 3) the influence of hormones on the brain.

## III. Language, Spatial Cognition and Hormones: What Makes the Difference?

1. Although it may seem problematic and controversial, the view that there are sex-related differences in the faculty of linguistic communication is widely held by many neuroscientists. «There is some evidence, for instance, that language may be processed in different parts of the brain in women and men,» and it seems that women elaborate certain aspects of language use in both brain hemispheres, whereas in men there exists a «bias to the left hemisphere» (Rogers, 2001, p. 18). Since the late eighties several studies have suggested that women, in comparison with men, on average have more pronounced communicative skills, while men seem to possess greater skills in the resolution of complex mathematical problems and a stronger sense of direction. The idea that women are more communicative and empathic than

[7] See Jordan-Young & Rumiati, 2011; Cahill, 2006.
[8] Similar points are made in Fine, 2010 and 2011; Vidal, 2011; Rogers, 2001.

men, and that men are more "rational" and "mathematical" than women is so ancient and rooted in our western culture, that it can count as a paradigmatic stereotype concerning sex and gender differences. As Fine points out, sex/gender stereotypes can be problematic because they are apt to «influence social perception in ways that are apparently unintended and unnoticed» (Fine, 2011, p. 3).

Evolutionary explanations of sex differences, on the other hand, suppose «that males and females have evolved different behavioural strategies to optimize their chances of successful mating» (Cahill, 2006, p. 480). Since Charles Darwin, in fact, it has been assumed that women generally possess more pronounced empathic and communicative capacities than men. This assumption – which has been extensively discussed by gender theorists – has also been put to the test in neuroscientific experiments. Baron-Cohen, for example, relying upon results obtained by means of fMRI, hypothesizes that «the female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy» and the «male brain is predominantly hard-wired for understanding and building systems» (Baron-Cohen 2003, p.1). Baron-Cohen's point is, of course, a statistical one: while it is possible for men to have a "female" brain and possible for women to have a "male" brain, on average more men than women have a "male" brain and more women than men have a "female" brain. Still, by interpreting his fMRI results with the help of the metaphor of "hard-wiring", he purports to lend scientific support to a stereotypical claim about sex/gender differences.[9]

This stereotypical claim – criticized strongly by Fine (2011) – can also be found in Helen Fisher's book *Anatomy of Love*. Fisher holds that women's presumed greater empathic and communicative skills are due to the particular physiology of the female brain, in which, or so Fisher claims, the nerve fibres which connect the two brain hemispheres (*corpus callosum*) are thicker and more interconnected than in the male brain. According to Fisher, by invoking the physiological structure of the "female" brain one can explain not only women's presumed greater capacity to understand the points of view of others but, at the same time, women's presumed propensity to apprehend new languages more easily than men (Fisher, 1992). It is, however, important to clarify immediately that Fisher's explanatory claims are laden with problems. In an analysis and critical review of 49 pertinent studies conducted in the eighties, Bishop and Wahlstein show that those studies provide no evidence for

[9] See Chizzola & Veronesi, 2011.

the thesis that there obtain a positive correlations between the volume of the *corpus callosum* and the number of nerve fibres or the intensity of brain activity.[10]

Arguably, the new technologies which are at the disposal of today's brain scientists make recent investigations of sex related functional and anatomical differences of the brain more reliable than the volumetric analyses of the past. A recent experimental study which *does* actually speak in favour of the thesis that there are sex related physiological differences between the brains of women and men has been published by a group of researchers based at the University Milano-Bicocca in the 2008 volume of the journal BMC Neuroscience (Proverbio, Zani, Adorni, 2008). In their experiment the group observed, again by means of fMRI, the brain activity of 24 men and 24 women while they were looking at images depicting persons and landscapes. The research group comes to the conclusion that, with regard to the case at hand, there are significant differences in the activation of brain regions in women and men. More precisely, the results of the study suggest that women react more quickly to pictures displaying social situations and that, in comparison with men, women are physiologically predisposed to take greater interest in other persons.

It must be stressed, however, that the advanced techniques which have been used in this study do not by themselves guarantee the epistemic legitimacy of generalizing its results in any significant way. After all, these results have been obtained with regard to a rather small sample of roughly 50 individuals. As Vidal reminds us, it is often the case that «when a large sample of subjects is analyzed the sex differences disappear» (Vidal, 2011, p. 4).

At this point, furthermore, it merits emphasis that even though the claims which have been brought forward in favour of the thesis that women possess more pronounced linguistic, communicative and empathic capacities than men or in favour of the claim that men possess more pronounced mathematical, analytical and constructive capacities than women are based – in one way or another – on empirical evidence. Actually, most of these claims have by now been contested on the basis of equally strong empirical evidence and therefore are the objects of ongoing controversial debates. The proposed refutations, however, usually do not excite the same amount of (scientific) media attention as their respective target claims. Presumably, this is the case because curiosity

[10] See Bishop & Wahlstein, 1997.

tends to prefer claims to novel knowledge over admissions of ongoing ignorance.

However this may be, the more important consequence of these observations concerns, I think, the fact that instead of pondering statistical averages we should direct our attention towards individual differences and peculiarities. With respect to language processing capabilities, for example, it seems not just more plausible, but more interesting as well, to pursue the hypothesis that

> the location of language zones [in the brain] varies considerably from one individual to the next. The differences between individuals of one and the same gender are so great that they outweigh any differences between the sexes. It appears that each individual has his own way of performing a language task (Vidal, 2011, p. 10).

2. Another very active area of research concerning neuronal differences between the sexes is the investigation of presumed sex related divergence with regard to spatial cognition. A recent study, conducted by Tim Koscik et al., about the performances of men and women in the task of mentally rotating three dimensional objects suggests that men often perform better than women in this exercise.[11] The study seems to lend support to the hypothesis that the sexual dimorphism in the cerebral structure lies at the basis of the more pronounced capacity in men with respect to the specific spatial cognition task of mental rotation. At the same time, however, Koscik et al. highlight in their paper that there is no reason to generalize from the better performance of men in this *specific* spatial-cognition task to an attribution, to men, of greater spatial cognition capacities in general. Despite the fact that Koscik et al. are very clear on this point, the results of their study have been misrepresented und misused by the media in order to offer bogus justifications for certain well known stereotypes concerning women's alleged incapacity to park cars or to read maps.

What Koscik *et* al.'s study *does* show is that women's performance *in the mental rotation test* tends to be weaker than men's and that men, on average, have more pronounced capacities with respect to the cognitive tasks involved in that specific test. As Koscik et al. make clear, however, this finding does not exclude the possibility that in other areas of spatial cognition women have greater capacities than men. There is empirical evidence, for instance, that

[11] Cf. Koscik, 2009.

women, on average, excel in remembering the precise position of objects in space. Furthermore, Koscik et al. lay emphasis on the point that their study should not be taken to lend evidential support to the claim that observable cognitive specialization in women and men is entirely innate, since socialization, training and traditional role allocations can have a significant effect as well.

Considering the results of studies concerning mental rotation capabilities in men and women, Vidal maintains that «[s]tereotype threats have a strong impact on performance»:

> [I]f before carrying out the 3D rotation test in a classroom, pupils are told that this is a geometry exercise, the boys will generally get better results. But if the same group is told that this is a drawing test, the girls will perform as well as the boys. These findings clearly show that self-esteem and internalization of gender stereotypes, and not biology, play a decisive role in spatial performance (Vidal, 2011, p. 4).

Neural structures and cognitive performances are not static but susceptible to change in correlation to various environmental parameters. There are studies, for example, which lend support to the hypothesis that specific forms of training as well as variations in situational context can enhance women's performance in the mental rotation test up to the point of reaching the same level as that of men's performance.[12] Individual experiences, social context, internalized stereotypes and training can have modifying effects on our neural circuits, and in this way they can contribute to the emergence of differences between individuals with respect to their competences and capacities in varying practical and cognitive contexts.[13]

3. The last example of neuroscientific research that I here want to consider concerns the questions of how hormones influence the brain and how this influence, in turn, can result in various sex-typed attitudes and behaviours.[14] These questions are not just interesting in themselves but gain further relevance by the fact that many "pseudoscientific" stereotypes about human

[12] Moè & Pazzaglia, 2006.
[13] Cf. Massa, Mayer, Bohn, 2005.
[14] A detailed explanation of how sex hormones influence the anatomic differences between men and women can be found in Cellerino, 2002, pp. 70–98. On this topic see also Rogers, 2001, who in the chapter "Hormones, sex and gender" questions the theories about the influence of hormones on sex-type behaviour, pp. 75–101.

behaviour are based on the issue of hormones, and also because hormones develop their influence in an intermediate area, on the boundary between nature and culture. Indeed, as Rogers puts it:

> On the one hand the X and Y chromosomes determine how the gonads will develop (into either ovaries or testes) and influence which hormones they will secrete (testosterone, oestrogen or progesterone) both before and after puberty. On the other hand the secretion of these hormones is influenced by factors from the outside environment. Certain experiences can change hormone levels (Rogers, 2001, p. 75).

The gonads begin to function at a very early stage of the ontogenesis and produce female and male hormones that are released in the blood. In the same way the hormones enter the brain and influence the formation of neuronal circuits that later on will be involved in reproductive functions: the female brain, for example, is characterized by particular circuits that are activated in order to enable ovulation.

In the course of her studies since the 1980s, Doreen Kimura – a well-known scholar of the cognitive differences between men and women – has come to the conclusion that there are structural differences between the female and the male brain and that these differences can be explained by divergent concentrations and functions of sex hormones in women and men respectively.[15] Inspired by Kimura's investigations, numerous recent studies have found the main cause for the behavioural differences between men and women in the presence of a high percentage of testosterone in men.[16] Vidal holds, on the other hand, that the juxtaposition of the activity of testosterone with that of estrogen leads to a simplistic view which in no way corresponds to biological reality (Vidal, 2005, p. 49), because there is reliable evidence that both hormones are produced in human beings irrespectively of their sex and that sex-related differences pertain only to the level of the concentration in which these hormones are present in the organism.

The question is rather complex in its details. However, it is certainly safe to claim that the brain plays a decisive role in controlling and regulating the levels of sex hormones secreted and released in the blood. The brain is able to "modify" these levels. Sometimes these modifications can be quite radical, as for example in situations of stress or suffering which are regularly

[15] Kimura, 1992.

[16] Cf. e.g. Bos, Terburg, Honk, 2010; Baron-Cohen , Lutchmaya, Knickmeyer, 2004.

characterised by increased levels of sex-hormones in the organism. In situations of calmness, on the contrary, the presence of sex hormones is much more limited.[17] The brain perceives and recognizes events that happen in the outside environment and it responds in different ways. Sometimes it «allows the level of sex hormones in the blood to change fairly markedly, as in the case of stress» (Rogers, 2001, p. 79). Taking into account this reciprocal exchange between brain and environment is fundamental because, as Rogers plausibly maintains, it can prevent misrepresentations and misconceptions of causal chains. While many studies of sex differences and hormones indeed take for granted that hormones are biological entities capable of modifying behaviour, relatively few take into consideration that «the causal chain may work in reverse, from behaviour to hormones to genes» (*ibidem*).

It's worth mentioning here, however, that the scientific data regarding the influence of sex hormones on the differences in male and female behaviour are rather limited. Kimura's experiments on rats have shown considerable behavioural differences depending on the presence or not of a high percentage of testosterone, but the same type of experiment done on primates has yielded inconclusive results. By now it has been shown that, while hormones can "interfere" with certain behaviours, they cannot be their constitutive cause. It seems rather that, in the course of evolution, the brains of the more advanced species have developed the capacity to withdraw – to some extent at least – from the "rule of hormones" and to regulate and "guide" sex-typed behaviours on an individual level.

The studies on hormones and neuronal receptors (proteins that have the task to recognize and absorb the respective hormones) indicate that, while hormone concentrations sometimes do have an influence on behaviour, it can also be the case that, vice-versa, behaviour affects hormone levels. This point should certainly be taken as highlighting the theoretical difficulties in any attempt to establish and fix certain sex-typed behaviours based on different hormone levels.[18] Moreover, it seems legitimate to ask whether the line of research just sketched, while certainly conducive to expanding our knowledge about human embodiment, is also apt to lend support to the claim that there are

[17] Cf. Rogers, 2001, p. 109.

[18] The problem of how to conduct reliable experiments on hormones is clearly illustrated in: Jordan-Young, 2010; on recent experiments on sex-type behaviour and hormones see also Vidal, 2011, pp. 4–6.

behavioural differences between the sexes which can be causally reduced to physiological differences. As one can see from the three areas of neuroscientific research which I have here briefly considered (language and communication abilities, spatial cognition and hormones), it sometimes may appear tempting to move from the claim that there is an observable correlation between differences in neuronal processes and differences in human behaviours to the assertion that behavioural differences are generally "caused" or "generated" or "produced" by neuronal differences. The inferential passage from the identification of brain areas that are activated in a particular experience or behaviour to the claim that this experience or behaviour can be explained by the activation of specific brain regions should be viewed with some suspicion – at least at the current state of research.

Furthermore, one has to be aware of the fact that the images of the brain that we see so far are instantaneous representations of brain functions which, as such, make it tempting to think that our mental states, our emotions, behavioural patterns and values *etc.* occupy precise and fixed locations in our brains. However, knowing which areas of the brain are activated during the experience of, say, tasting chocolate does not yet amount to knowing what tasting chocolate is like. To use a well known and somewhat disturbing image introduced by Thomas Nagel, even if a scientist that has never eaten chocolate in her life were to try and observe the experience of tasting chocolate by licking the brain of a chocolate-eating person (at the "right spot" as it were), she would thereby not succeed in getting to know, let alone in explaining, the phenomenal experience of tasting chocolate (see Nagel 1987, p. 30). What goes for licking might go for functional magnetic resonance imaging as well. And still, the power of the fMRI-images is such that we find it tempting to identify brain circuits with thought or cognition itself, to view the brain as the only valid «metaphor of thinking about what it is to be human» (Vidal, 2011, p. 2), and to think about behavioural and intellectual attitudes as fixed, crystalline and localizable in specific brain areas.

It is, however, important to stress that these temptations primarily concern the *interpretation* of the data provided by neuroscientific research and that, as with interpretations in general, there is room for variation. Taking a closer look at these data, they themselves can be seen as casting doubt on the idea that behavioural and cognitive sex differences can be traced back to cerebral difference.

## IV. Gender and/or Sex? Plasticity Crossing the Dualism

When neuroscientists talk of the brain's plasticity, i.e. of the intrinsic propensity of the brain to modify itself in relation to external stimuli, they do not exclusively refer to cerebral structures in children but to those of adults as well. They use the term "plasticity" to denote a characteristic that live human brains possess independently of their respective age. While it is true that learning abilities are particularly pronounced during childhood years, there does not seem to be any biological obstacle to an adult person's having similar abilities. In this regard, a study conducted on London taxi drivers by means of fMRI has shown that the development of brain areas correlated to the sense of direction grows in proportion to the number of years that taxi drivers have been in service.[19] Furthermore, this study has shown that when regular training is interrupted the pertinent areas of the cerebral cortex slowly regress. Cerebral plasticity, therefore, is involved not only in the augmentation and increase of the neuronal networks which get activated by specific and regularly encountered stimuli but also in the regression of the respective neural connections when the activating stimuli are no longer present.

In the adult brain neuronal connections are subject to a continuous reorganization and modification, «the processes of formation and elimination of synapses are constantly at work,» and this continuous "autopoietic" activity of the brain would suffice by itself to lend strong support to the claim that «theories which postulate the existence of *innate* structural differences between the male and the female brain are unfounded.» (Vidal, 2005, p. 41, my translation) Learning a language, a musical instrument, or a particular profession etc. involve continuous changes in neural circuits. Bearing in mind that changes in the brain can result from experience and environmental inputs, it should not come as a surprise to find cerebral differences between male and female individuals – just as it is not surprising to find brain differences between persons of the same sex.

These last considerations might be taken to suggest that the discovery of brain plasticity is apt to lend strong support to constructivist theories which focus exclusively on culture and socialization while tending to neglect the biological basis of human life. The issue, however, is much more complex than radically constructivist theories would have us believe. Certainly one of the

[19] See Maguire, Gadian, et al., 2000.

positive aspects of the spread of neuroscience consists in its having increased the awareness of the possibility that the thesis «everything is socially constructed» might be too simple and thus might stand in need of criticism. Neuroscientific studies on the functioning of our brains suggest that much, but "not everything", depends on our education. By paying more attention to that "not everything", it might be possible to achieve considerable theoretical and explanatory progress with regard the issue of sex/gender differences.[20]

It is the very structures of our brains which show us that the two points of view, constructivism and biologism, need to be theoretically reconciled. While it is no longer acceptable to view the individual as a *tabula rasa* which, in the course of its life, gets engraved by experience, the idea that every peculiarity of our being is a consequence of innate physiological differences seems equally unfounded. The development of our brains is affected by both aspects. On the one hand, the environment is able to effect changes upon the brain, but on the other hand the brain does not undergo these changes in a completely passive manner, since its structures guide the "implementation" and "translation" of environmental stimuli. The relationship between the physiological structure of our brain and the environment in which we live is essential, and it seems plausible to assume with W.J. Freeman that the shape and dynamics of our brains have evolved and adapted through communication and social interaction.[21]

The results of current research on brain structure provided by neuroscience suggest that one key to understanding whether or not there are brain differences between men and women consists in paying more attention to individual differences. If one considers the complexity and the unique potential of each person doubt is cast on research projects which aim at tracing social, ethnic or sex related differences back to brain structure, i.e. to a structure which is different in each individual. I think, therefore, that when we encounter stereotypes or vague generalizations of neuroscientific results, we must not forget, just like an "alarm bell", the fact that each brain is unique and unrepeatable because of individual differences which penetrate even to the minutest neural networks.

[20] See Cahill, 2006.
[21] See Freeman, 2001.

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# Gender Stereotypes and Figurative Language Comprehension*

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ABSTRACT

The paper aims to show how and to what extent social and cultural cues influence figurative language understanding. In the first part of the paper, we argue that social-contextual knowledge is organized in "schemas" or stereotypes, which act as strong bias in speaker's meaning comprehension. Research in Experimental Pragmatics has shown that age, gender, race and occupation stereotypes are important contextual sources of information to interpret others' speech and provide an explanation of their behavior. In the second part of the paper, we focus on gender stereotypes and their influence on the comprehension of figurative language, to show how the social functions of figurative language are modulated by gender stereotypes. We provide then an explanation of gender stereotypical bias on figurative language in terms of possible outcomes in the social context.

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## I. Socio-cultural Influences on Figurative Language Understanding

Every time we play with words, we have a certain audience in mind. If we do not know very well our audience, or we run the risk to be misinterpreted, or we choose to stay anchored to the literal meaning of conventional expressions. Figurative language comprehension seems to require "something more" than the knowledge of conventional meaning of utterances. Non-literal language, such as simile, metaphor, metonymy, irony, etc., requires the understanding that what the speaker literally says is different from what she intends to convey, which concerns the pragmatic field. Traditionally, Pragmatics has been relegated to a secondary role by Chomskyan linguistics, interested in grammar as a context-free device of the Faculty of language. On this view, language is a cognitive mechanism totally autonomous and separate from other cognitive functions. By contrast, Modern Pragmatics has instead paid attention to contextual cues on the interpretation of the "speaker's meaning", i.e. the intention to mean something different from the conventional meaning of speaker's utterance. In this sense, Pragmatics has abandoned Chomskyan solipsistic view of the Faculty of language, and it has privileged the mentalistic aspect of intention comprehension over other belief structures which influence how we communicate to other people. More precisely, these beliefs structures concern social and cultural aspects of our everyday lives.

As Katz pointed out, «despite their seeming centrality, the history of linguistics and psycholinguistics has evolved to marginalize, and even ignore, social and cultural factors» (Katz, 2005, p. ix). However, recent trends in research in Pragmatics have been brought to scholars' attention a number of social and cultural cues to figurative language comprehension, such as gender, ethnicity, socio-geographic origin, personality traits, socio-economic status, occupation, social power, political background, relationships of familiarity or friendship, etc. (Colston & Katz, 2005). According to this view, social and cultural aspects strongly influence the way human beings communicate. Figurative language understanding is indeed a complex interactive system which «even at the earliest moments of production and comprehension, simultaneously evaluates and integrates knowledge of linguistic structure – that is, how language is used and the socio-cultural factors of relevance» (Katz, 2005, p. x). Therefore, figurative language, being so context-dependent, is the best "tribunal of experience" for testing the structures of social and cultural knowledge people own.

As Lippman wrote, we tend to use social stereotypes to categorize people in different social groups and compare them to better understand the social world (Lippman, 1922). Social stereotypes are identified according to what we consider the "same nature" people belonging to a social group share, i.e. the particular pattern of characteristics or traits perceived as similar in members of a certain group. This could be explained as a natural tendency to draw and stock information about others on the basis of their (perceived) similarities in order to predict their behavior and communicate with them. In this paper, we aim at showing how and to what extent, social stereotypes modulate linguistic behavior understanding.

In philosophy of language, stereotypes have been described as "negative" when a-critically applied to individual traits departing from the social stereotype and used then as a prejudice which leads to misunderstand others' behavior. For instance, the stereotype of race based on the color of the skin could become a prejudice when used to dichotomically divide people into categories of "good" (e.g. white skin) and "bad" (e.g. black skin) in order to judge their behavior. From this perspective, stereotypes could produce a "false consciousness" and become troublesome because the judgments entailed could lead to misleading caricatures of "out-groups". However, they could also be "positive" bias in case we use them as simple categories for understanding others' behavior. According to Gadamer (1960), for instance, the interpreter never begins the interpretation with a state of mind similar to a *tabula rasa*, but always with some expectations, some pre-judgement, from which a first interpretative project arises. A good interpreter must continually test her interpretation to make her hypotheses more adequate, changing them when they do not find confirmations. In a similar vein, in analytic philosophy, Davidson wrote that the interpreter begins the interpretation with some expectations expressed by a "prior theory" (Davidson, 1986). During the interpretative process, the prior theory is modified and adjusted to be adapted to the speaker's intentions. An interpreter should interpret the speaker's utterances according to holistic criteria: the meaning she gives to a single word depends on the meaning of the whole sentence where it is inserted, and the meaning of a single sentence can be understood only inside the language used by a linguistic community in a social context.

In social psychology, stereotypes are usually conceived as generalizations or descriptive simplified categories people use to classify social groups and their individual members. From a social-psychological perspective, stereotypes

could be considered cognitive shortcuts we use to reduce the complexity of our everyday social world: when activated, people are judged in terms of the group's standards (Dovidio, 1999). In other words, stereotypes would be energy-saving devices associated with an unintentional and unconscious process (Gilbert & Hixon, 1991; Macrae, Milne, & Bodenhausen, 1994). Indeed, they seem to be automatically activated, especially for some fundamental categories such as those of age, gender and race (Lepore & Brown, 1997).

The effect of activating stereotypes on interpretations of subsequent information in a stereotype-consistent direction is well documented. Stereotypes shape interpretations and influence how information is recalled: people do recall information better and more readily when it is consistent with a preexisting stereotype than when it is inconsistent with it (Bodenhausen, 1988). Stereotypes guide expectations, inferences and impressions when people are not motivated to inhibit them and require a greater effort to be overcome (Devine, 1989; Kunda, 1999). However, as far as they are cultural products, they can also be modified. Some studies have shown that the exposition to other cultures could change individual stereotypes (Pepitone, 1986), while other studies have demonstrated that individual stereotypes could get softer according to exposition times and conscious reflection on their content. Studies on immigrant populations have shown that the longer someone from another culture has lived in their adoptive home, the more she will come to hold the values of the new social context (Hewstone, 1996): for instance, Chung & Fisher (2001) study on Chinese immigrants in Canada shows that their consumption stereotypes vary according to the exposure to foreign consumption behaviors and values. Other studies on stereotype change and prejudice reduction have pointed out that a significant increase in knowledge corresponds to a significant decrease in negative stereotyping. However, Hill & Augoustinos (2001) showed that education programs aimed at reducing prejudices towards Aboriginal Australians, hardly changed the existents stereotypes, even thought they could entail a decrease in old-fashion racism, when applied in "real world" context. At any rate, cross-cultural research has proved to be fundamental to specify the shared contextual basis of social cognition which cannot be comprehended by the classic "automatic processes" theory.

## II. Social Stereotypes and Non-literal Language

It has been argued that social stereotypes could be considered as cognitive structures (or *schemas*) which contain large networks of abstract information about traits, attributes and expected behaviors of members of a particular social group (Blumentritt & Heredia, 2005). These "social schemas" are a particular class of semantic associations: stereotypes are indeed composed by a set of semantically related concepts, which are frequently associated. A concept is more easily recalled by another concept when they are stereotypically related. As a wide literature testifies (see for a review Devine, 1989 and Dovidio, 1999), semantic priming, i.e. the exposure to a semantic stimulus influencing the response to a later semantic stimulus, is indeed the most important method used in the experimental study of stereotypes activation. Stereotype priming effect is usually activated by an implicit association test (Greenwald & Banaji, 1995; Nosek, Greenwald, & Banaji, 2005): each participant is presented with a list of semantic categories and some common trait features, and is asked to associate the target traits with the categories presented. The activation of stereotypes has been shown through participants' faster responses to traits stereotypically consistent with the prime category (e.g. White-anglosaxon) than to traits stereotypically inconsistent with the prime category (e.g. White-musical) (Dovidio, Evans, & Tyler, 1986).

This series of experimental studies have shown that language itself is a vehicle of social stereotypes, at the extent that it is difficult to imagine a natural language as free from stereotypes (Maas & Arcuri, 1996). Blumentritt and Heredia (2005) analyze how and to what extent stereotypes influence on behaviour, memory, social judgment and attitudes. In particular, they focus on the relationship between stereotypes and language processing and they suggest that «stereotypes can be construed as a special case of figurative language.» (Blumentritt & Heredia, 2005, p. 262) Because of their implicit structure of semantically related concepts, they are indeed important contextual cues to non-literal language understanding.

According to some researchers on social stereotypical categorization and non-literal language comprehension, social stereotypes – like speaker's gender, ethnic group and occupation – are found to be powerful bias on non-literal language interpretation. For instance, gender stereotypes are found to be a social constraint which comes into play very early in the process of sarcasm comprehension (Garnham, Oakhill, & Reynolds, 2002). Similar results have been found for ethnic (Heredia & Blumentritt, 2002) and occupation stereotypes (Pexman & Olineck, 2002a). In particular, Katz and Pexman

inserted speakers' occupation in the context of ironic utterance, both because «occupation is an indicator of the speaker's social status» and «also a variable that conveys the speaker's social knowledge» (Pexman, Ferretti, & Katz, 2000, p. 203).

Indeed, speaker's occupation has been shown to influence not only the interpretation of figurative meaning in general, but also the interpretation of ironic intention in particular (Katz & Lee 1993). The above mentioned studies on speaker's occupation, as a cue to either ironic or metaphoric interpretation (Katz & Pexman, 1997; Pexman, Ferretti, & Katz, 2000), Pexman and Olineck (2002a), suggest that «people shared beliefs about the linguistic tendencies of different social groups and that those beliefs influence perceived communicative intent» (Pexman & Olineck, 2002a, p. 270). Katz, Blasko and Kazmerski have forcefully shown that the emergence of sarcasm is produced by a character in the context making a statement incongruent with events in the story (Katz, Blasko, & Kazmerski 2004). Multiple sources of information are conjointly exploited when a listener attempts to understand an ironic utterance and also social-stereotypical categorization contributes to comprehension process. As it is argued in Pexman and Olineck (2002a), these results could be correlated with the specific traits of speaker occupation activated in irony interpretation or their perceived tendencies to be more humorous, to mock or criticize, to be less sincere and to have a lower occupation level, but also to be more polite and positive in case of ironic insults, the most spread form of sarcasm (Pexman & Olineck, 2002b). As we will see in the next section, occupation stereotypes influence metaphor interpretation as well.

## III. The Role of Gender in Figurative Language Comprehension

Social factors such as occupation, race and gender stereotypes play an important role in understanding figures of speech, such as metaphor and irony. An example of the influence of occupation stereotypes is the following sentence: (1) "Be careful James, those *sharks* will tell you one thing today and tomorrow say something completely different", which represents a type of figurative language known as metaphoric reference (Gibbs, 1990; Onishi & Murphy, 1993; Stewart & Heredia, 2002). In this sentence, the term "sharks" is clearly not describing a marine animal: instead, it depicts the idea that *lawyers* are bad and cunning. It contrasts with predicate metaphor of the form "A is a B" (e.g., "Lawyers are sharks"), where metaphor consists of a topic

(e.g., "lawyers") and a vehicle (e.g. "sharks"). In sentences such as (1), the vehicle is usually explicit, and the listener must infer the topic from the previous context. Indeed, to understand the sentence (1), information relevant to the topic must come before the metaphoric reference, otherwise it would be difficult to make sense of the sentence. Studies by Gibbs (1990) and Onishi and Murphy (1993) have shown that reading times are longer for metaphor than literal understanding and that it is more difficult to understand metaphoric than literal referential descriptions, because multiple sources of information have to be integrated in the comprehension process. Therefore, comprehension of non-literal reference cannot be as effortless as understanding comparable literal reference (Onishi & Murphy, 1993).

Occupation stereotypes are anyway less powerful in biasing non-literal language when compared to gender stereotypes. In this sections, we focus on gender stereotypes which seem to be more "basic" and influential and to appear very early in child cognitive development (Bemdt & Heller, 1986). Gender stereotypes have been well documented in the literature on irony. For instance, according to Raymond Gibbs (2000), men are prone to make sarcastic remarks almost twice as often as women and are more likely to use sarcastic irony in conversation with friends. In particular, as Jorgensen (1996) points out, there are gender differences in emotional reactions to verbal irony: men were more likely than women to perceive humor in sarcastic irony; on the contrary, women were more likely than men to be offended by sarcastic utterances. Therefore, gender might be one of the more evident stereotypical differences related to verbal irony production and interpretation.

Unlike, gender differences have received very little research attention in the literature on teasing, with contrasting results. A contribution is given by Lampert's research (1996): taking irony as a form of teasing, he reports that men were more likely to tease than women. By contrast, Keltner et al. (2001) argue that there is no evidence of gender differences in the style or behavior of teasing. Katz, Piasecka, & Toplak (2001) have investigated whether gender, as a social category, could suggest a speaker's tendency to make ironic remarks. In the light of their data, men are perceived to be more sarcastic than women. Interestingly, speaker's gender and addressee's gender were processed exactly when participants (adults and children) read the last word in the sarcastic comment (Pexman et al., 2000), suggesting that participants needed to integrate speaker's gender to fully understand it.

Another salient trait might be captured by conversational indirectness. Holtgraves (2005) found gender differences in production and comprehension of indirect requests. An example of this form of implicit speech is the following sentence: "It's cold in here", said as a request for someone to close the door. He also ideated and validated the "Conversational Indirectness Scale" (CIS) «to measure the extent to which individuals differ in their tendencies to express themselves indirectly and understand indirect meanings» (Pexman, 2005, p. 221). The participants rated their own tendencies to speak sarcastically in general and in specific contexts. According to the results, there is a significant gender difference: male participants gave higher self-reports of sarcasm use than female participants.

Gender differences emerge also in the use of asyndeton. Asyndeton is a form of indirect speech in which the speaker uses a minimal scheme, where conjunctions are omitted, to change the rhythm of the utterance and to imply a great deal more than what is said. An example of this kind of utterance is the following: "I go, I work, I leave". According to the data collected from six experiments conducted by Colston and Lusch (2004), asyndeton is considered a more male-like than female-like form of communication. In particular, men use it as often as direct negative commentary, whereas women use it less often than direct negative remarks. Both men and women reported that asyndeton poses more of a risk for misinterpretation than literal remarks do. Perhaps, men use asyndeton more often than women because its pragmatic functions (to be unconventional and to be humorous) particularly suit men's discourse aims and because the risk of misunderstanding inherent in asyndeton appeals to men's greater riskiness.

## IV. Making Sense of Gender Stereotypes in Language Use

Gender stereotypes seem to be one of the most influential cues on figurative language comprehension. As previously reported, gender differences have been found especially in the use and interpretation of irony and sarcasm. Colston and Lee (2004) tried to evaluate whether and why gender differences would be found in people's use of verbal irony, and found that this rhetorical figure is considered a more male-like than female-like form of communication by both men and women. To explain this result, they hypothesized that verbal irony, being an indirect form of language, might entail a greater risk of misinterpretation compared with more direct forms of speech. According to

this hypothesis, male speakers would be more prone to take this risk than female speakers, because men are generally more risky than women in a variety of social activities: a "better-recognized" social status could give them a greater willingness to risk (Byrnes, Miller, & Schafer, 1999; Wiederman, 1997).

The social effect of figurative language could explain why people use this more "expensive" and risky way of communicating. Indeed, other studies showed that verbal irony enables the speakers to perform a variety of pragmatic functions (Roberts & Kreuz, 1995; Lee & Katz, 1998), including to be humorous, to express surprise or mastery over some topic or issue, to diminish or to enhance criticism, to point out a deviance from expectations, to display negative emotions. It is also well documented that ironic comments is thought to be rude, to de-emphasize and to insult to a greater extent than literal comments (Colston & Lee, 2000, and 2004).

The social functions of verbal irony are more employed by female than male participants. On the contrary, the functions of irony used to enhance negativity and be humorous are equally employed by male and female participants. There are gender differences, for instance, in how people attribute blame for a failure. In general, men are more prone to blame the situation or their addressee for failures. Instead, women are more likely to make personal attributions for failures: this could be the reason why women are slightly less likely to use verbal irony. One hypothesis of this behaviour suggests that women usually tend to avoid ways of speaking which present higher risk of misunderstanding and to be slightly less likely to use verbal irony, because a quite common female behaviour is to blame themselves for a misunderstanding in a conversational exchange. As verbal irony may be considered a more aggressive form of talking than literal commentary; more critical and condemning than literally negative remarks, they would try to avoid as much as possible a social negative feedback.

According to Lampert (1996), male and female subjects also have different reasons for using self-direct humor. Men tend to use sarcasm when it would decrease vulnerability, while women use sarcasm to increase social vulnerability and promote intimacy. In sarcasm ratings for ironic compliments, women tend to perceive this kind of compliment as more sarcastic than men. To explain this result, a hypothesis might be that women rate ironic compliments as less polite than men do, because sarcasm would have a negative connotation in this sense (Dews & Winner, 1995; Pexman & Olineck, 2002a).

These findings tell us something about why and whether a social and cultural cue, such as gender, has an effect on non-literal language use. Figurative language, more than literal one, is human beings' way to express what is "unsaid" and implicit in communication. This "unsaid" depends on a background of tacitly shared social conventions and everyday practices, which allow people to understand the implicit part of their communicative exchanges. This tacitly shared background is shaped by more fundamental social and cultural phenomena related to social stereotyping and basic cues such as gender. The ways non-literal communication is influenced by gender stereotypes reveal this tacitly shared background of human communities, complete with their subtle differences.

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# Social Kinds, Conceptual Analysis, and the Operative Concept: A Reply to Haslanger

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ABSTRACT

Sally Haslanger (2006) is concerned with the debate between *social constructionists* and *error theorists* about a given category, such as race or gender. For example, social constructionists about *race* claim that the term "race" refers to a social kind, whereas error theorists claim that the term "race" is an empty term, that is, nothing belongs to this category. It seems that this debate depends in part on the meaning of the corresponding expression, and this, according to some theorists, depends in turn on our intuitions as competent speakers. But then, what should we say if competent users of the expressions "race" and "gender" understand the terms so that being a natural or biological property is a necessary condition in order to fall under the term? If that were the case, then it would seem that a social constructionist view would be out of the question. Haslanger (2005, 2006) has argued that a social constructionist view could still be defended in that situation. In order to argue for this, she draws on the classical arguments for *semantic externalism* (Putnam, 1975, Burge, 1979, Kripke, 1980), which show that the intuitions of competent speakers concerning the nature of a given category, and the objective type that actually unifies the instances of that category, may come apart. In this paper I will argue that the arguments for semantic externalism concerning natural kinds do not really offer support for Haslanger's claim that ordinary intuitions concerning social kinds are not relevant.

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## I. Introduction

Sally Haslanger (2006) is concerned with the debate between so-called *social constructionists* and *error theorists* about a given category, such as race or gender. For example, social constructionists about *race* claim that race is socially constructed, that is, the kind or property that unifies all instances of the category is a social feature (not a natural or physical feature, as *naturalists* about race would hold).[1] On the other hand, error theorists about race claim that the term "race" is an empty term, that is, nothing belongs to this category, since the conditions that something should satisfy in order to fall under "race" are not satisfied by anything.[2]

What kind of evidence could we use in order to support one or another of these theories? It seems that this debate is in part *semantic*: what makes the case that a category is an empty one, as opposed to it being socially constructed, has to do with the meaning of the corresponding expression. In particular, in the case of race, some people have argued that our concept of race is such that something will fall under it only if it is a *natural* property that can explain certain features. Arguably, there are no natural properties of human beings that can do the explanatory work that races are supposed to do, and therefore, error theorists have concluded that "race" is an empty term, that is, there are no races (Appiah, 1996).

These considerations suggest that if we want to find out whether a certain category is socially constructed, or whether an error theory about it is correct, we have to engage in *conceptual analysis*, that is, we should try to find out what are the conditions for something to fall under the corresponding concept.[3] If these conditions are not satisfied by anything in the actual world (and in order to find this out, we will have to engage in some empirical research), then we can conclude that the category is empty. If, on the other hand, the conditions

[1] Here, by "social feature" Haslanger aims to refer to properties that are socially constructed in the *constitutive* sense, that is, such that in order to define them, we must make reference to their role in certain social structures. This can be contrasted with properties that are socially constructed merely in the *causal* sense, that is, such that social factors play a causal role in bringing them about. See Haslanger (2003) for further discussion.

[2] Social constructionists about race include Haslanger (2000) and Sundstrom (2002); naturalists (or biological realists) about race include Andreasen (1998, 2000) and Kitcher (1999); and error theorists about race include Appiah (1996), Glasgow (2009) and Zack (2002).

[3] See Jackson (1998) for a general defence of this methodology.

are satisfied, but they turn out to be social features, then we can conclude that the category is socially constructed.

If we apply this framework to the cases of gender and race, the social constructionist could find herself in the following predicament. What if it turns out that most competent users of the expressions "race" and "gender" understand the terms so that being a natural property is a necessary condition in order to fall under the term? If that were the case, then it would seem that a social constructionist view would be out of the question: if races and genders have to be *natural* features (by definition), then there are only two open possibilities: either the conditions for membership are satisfied (by natural properties) and therefore naturalism is the correct view, or the conditions are not met (by natural properties) and therefore we should be error theorists concerning the category at issue. In either case, it seems clear that a social constructionist view with respect to that category would have been refuted. As Haslanger puts the problem:

> It is clear that the analysis of race I offer does not capture what people consciously *have in mind* when they use the term 'race'. The account is surprising, and for many, highly counterintuitive ... This counterintuitiveness will always be a feature of social constructionist analyses because ... social constructionists aim to reveal that the concepts we employ are not exactly what we think they are. But if the adequacy of a philosophical analysis is a matter of the degree to which it captures and organizes our intuitions, and if constructionist analyses are always counterintuitive, then it would seem that philosophers would never have reason to consider social constructionist projects acceptable (2006, pp. 93, 94).

## II. Semantic Externalism and Social Kinds

In response, Haslanger has argued that social constructionist views about gender and race can be defended from this charge. In particular, she argues that even if the intuitions of competent users of "gender" and "race" have it that the referents of these categories are *natural* rather than social features, this does not rule out that what actually unifies the instances of these kinds are *social* rather than natural features. In order to argue for this, she draws on some influential arguments in philosophy of language, namely, the standard arguments for *semantic externalism* (Putnam, 1975, Burge, 1979, Kripke, 1980). According to this view, the objective type that all instances of a certain

kind have in common does not need to be transparent to competent users of the term. For instance, competent speakers might associate the term "water" with the following description: "odorless, colorless stuff that fills rivers and lakes, falls from the sky, and so on" (the *watery stuff*, for short). However, the objective type that unifies all instances of water is being $H_2O$, not being watery stuff, even if competent speakers might fail to know that water is $H_2O$. That is, semantic competence does not provide knowledge concerning the objective type that unifies all instances of a given kind.

Haslanger (2005, 2006) argues that we can extend these ideas to the case of social kinds, so that the fact that competent speakers typically believe that certain categories are natural ones does not have to be an obstacle for claiming that the categories are in fact social. I agree that the arguments for semantic externalism show that the intuitions of competent speakers concerning the nature of a given category, and the objective type that actually unifies the instances of that category, may come apart. However, as I will argue in this paper, I do not think that this idea shows that speakers' intuitions are not relevant in the case of social kinds.

As we have seen, Haslanger's main aim is to argue, *contra* the error theorist, that the intuitions of competent users of a term are not as central as error theorists have it. In order to motivate this claim, Haslanger (2006) considers the example of a certain category that has been taken to be a natural (indeed biological) category, namely, *parent*, but she argues it is in fact socially founded. It might be argued that she is replacing our concept of parent (which speakers typically take to mean *immediate progenitor*, that is, a biological kind) with the concept *primary caregiver*, which is clearly a social category; in other words, it might be argued that her account of *parent* as a social concept is not a good account of *our* concept of parent, although it might be a good account of another concept. However, Haslanger argues that her analysis of our concept of parent as a social category is not ruled out by speakers' intuitions. She writes:

> I will argue, first, that the constructionist is not changing the subject, or changing our language; rather, the constructionist is revealing that our linguistic practices have changed in ways that we may not have noticed. Second, I will argue that although the constructionist suggests that we come to a new understanding of our concepts, this does not require replacing our old concept with a new one, but understanding our original concept better (2006, p. 106).

In what follows, I will review Haslanger's main arguments for these claims. As announced, these arguments draw on the lessons of semantic externalism. I will argue that the arguments for semantic externalism concerning natural kinds do not really offer support for Haslanger's claim that our intuitions are not relevant.

## III. Manifest vs. Operative Concepts

In order to argue that our intuitions concerning a concept such as *parent* do not necessarily have to put constraints on our accounts of that category, Haslanger makes a very useful distinction: she distinguishes the *manifest concept* (that is, the concept we take ourselves to be applying) from the *operative concept* (that is, the concept we in practice apply).[4] In order to illustrate this distinction, she presents the following example:

> Consider the term "parent". It is common, at least in the United States, to address primary school memos to "Parents", to hold a "Parent Night" or "Parent Breakfast" at certain points during the school year, to have "Parent–Teacher Conferences" to discuss student progress, and so on. However, in practice the term "parent" in these contexts is meant to include the primary caregivers of the student, whether they be biological parents, step-parents, legal guardians, grandparents, aunts, uncles, older siblings, informal substitute parents, etc. (2006, p. 99).

In this case, then, the operative concept seems to be the social concept *primary caregiver*, even if the manifest concept is the biological concept *immediate progenitor*.

Haslanger also distinguishes between two sorts of projects that someone interested in the analysis of a certain concept might be concerned with (2006, pp. 94–6). On the one hand, she might pursue a *conceptual* (or *internalist*) project, in which we use *a priori* or introspective methods in order to find out what conditions something has to satisfy in order to fall under the concept (we might examine our intuitions, test possible cases, and so on). On the other hand, she might pursue a *descriptive* project, in which we use empirical methods in order to find out what property (if any) actually unifies the

[4] She also distinguishes those two concepts from the *target concept*, that is, the concept we should be deploying, all things considered. I will mainly focus on the distinction between the manifest and the operative concept, for the purposes of this paper.

instances of the category: we might start by examining some paradigm cases of the kind in question, and find out what objective type we are tracking by using that concept.[5]

Haslanger claims that the outcome of the conceptual project will be the *manifest* concept, whereas the outcome of the descriptive project typically is the *operative* concept. This point is important because she will argue that if we are interested in an account of the operative concept (the concept we in fact apply), then we have to engage in the descriptive project, which, as she says, does not rely on a priori methods (e.g. testing our intuitions about possible cases, and so on), but rather on empirical methods. Therefore, this suggests that in order to reveal our operative concepts, speakers' intuitions are not that relevant, or, as she puts it: «In a descriptive project, intuitions about the conditions for applying a concept should be considered secondary to what the cases in fact have in common: as we learn more about the paradigms, we learn more about our concepts» (2006, p.108). Hence, she concludes, this shows that speakers' intuitions do not rule out the possibility of a social constructionist account of categories such as gender and race.

Unfortunately, I think this argument does not work, mainly because it is not clear that in order to reveal the *operative concept*, we need to engage in the *descriptive* project rather than the *conceptual* project. In what follows, I will elaborate this objection, by exploring two different ways in which we can draw the distinction between the manifest and the operative concepts, and arguing that neither of these characterizations could help Haslanger to show that the conceptual project is secondary with respect to what the operative concept really amounts to.

My plan is as follows. In section 4, I will focus on the distinction between manifest and operative concepts that is suggested by Kripke and Putnam's classical arguments for semantic externalism regarding natural kind terms such as "water", "gold" and so on; and in section 5, I will focus on a related distinction suggested by Burge's classical argument for social externalism. In each case, I will argue that there are no good reasons to hold that the

[5] Haslanger also distinguishes these two projects from the *ameliorative* project, in which we seek to find out what concept we should ideally be using, that is, the *target* concept (see previous footnote). As I mentioned above, for the purposes of this paper we can put aside considerations having to do with the ameliorative project, and focus on the distinction between the conceptual and the descriptive projects.

conceptual project is not relevant in order to discover the operative concept in the corresponding sense.

## IV. Conceptual vs. Descriptive Projects: An Externalist Account

How should we understand the distinction between the conceptual and the descriptive projects? A natural interpretation is in terms of familiar insights from semantic externalism, which, according to Haslanger, «should be applied to our thought and language about the social as well as the natural» (2006, p. 106). She provides a brief summary of this familiar externalist picture, as follows: «Externalists maintain that the content of what we think and mean is determined not simply by intrinsic facts about us but at least in part by facts about our environment. Remember: Sally and Twinsally both use the term "water", but Sally means $H_2O$ and Twinsally means XYZ» (p. 107). With this rough summary of the externalist picture in mind, we can ask: how should these externalist insights be applied to social terms and concepts? Haslanger says:

> Descriptive analyses ... seek to discover the *natural* (as contrasted with *social)* kind within which the selected paradigms fall. But it is possible to pursue a descriptive approach within a social domain as long as one allows that there are social kinds or types. ... Descriptive analyses of social terms such as 'democracy' and 'genocide' ... are methodologically parallel to more familiar naturalizing projects in epistemology and philosophy of mind (2006, pp. 107–8).

And closer to our concerns here, she adds:

> Social constructionists can rely on externalist accounts of meaning to argue that their disclosure of an operative ... concept is not *changing the subject*, but better reveals what we mean. By reflecting broadly on how we use the term "parent", we find that the cases ... project onto an objective social, not natural, type. So although we tend to assume we are expressing the concept of *immediate progenitor* by the term "parent", in fact we are expressing the concept of *primary caregiver*. ... This is not to propose a new meaning, but to reveal an existing one (2006, p. 110).

I agree with a general idea expressed in these remarks, namely, that the externalist picture about thought and language can also be fruitfully applied to the study of social concepts and kinds. However, I do not agree with

Haslanger's particular way of applying the familiar externalist insights that she is relying on to the case of social terms such as "parent" or "democracy". In order to motivate this claim, I will first explain what the externalist insights are supposed to amount to in more detail, and second, why they do not have the implications with respect to social terms that Haslanger maintains they have.

In my view, the basic externalist insight that is relevant here is roughly the following: When we reflect on the classical arguments for semantic externalism, what these arguments show is that many expressions, such as natural kind terms, exhibit a *dual* structure: they have an *internal* dimension, that is, the referent-fixing information that we associate with the term, which we can typically find out a priori (although it might take a considerable amount of reflection on our responses to actual and possible cases), and an *external* dimension, that is, the property that in fact satisfies that description in the actual world, which we can typically find out empirically.[6] In the case of "water", the internal dimension is something akin to the description "being watery stuff", and the external dimension is $H_2O$. We can understand the conceptual-descriptive distinction in these terms: On the one hand, the *conceptual* project aims to discover the *internal* dimension of our concepts, that is, the information that is associated with a concept just by virtue of possessing a concept or being a competent user of the term. This is the sort of information that we can make explicit by examining our intuitions, testing our responses with respect to possible cases, and so on.[7] The *descriptive* project,

[6] See Jackson (1998) for a defence of an interpretation of the classical arguments for semantic externalism along these lines.

[7] I think this is a very plausible interpretation of the externalist insights, but this is of course a controversial view of meaning/content. Some points of controversy are the following: (i) some people reject that what I call the internal dimension of meaning is indeed part of the *meaning* of the term (or the content of the corresponding concept); and (ii) some people reject that ordinary speakers have a priori or introspective access to that internal element (regardless of whether it is part of the meaning). (For instance, Haslanger (2010) seems to endorse these two objections.) I cannot explore these important questions here in any detail, but I will just make a couple of brief points in response: I think we can set (i) aside for the purposes of this debate, since as I see it nothing hangs on whether we consider this internal dimension part of the meaning or content: what is relevant for the role of intuitions and conceptual analysis in the study of social kinds is whether folk subjects have some significant form of epistemic access to certain central beliefs about the referent of the concept, not so much whether these central beliefs are strictly speaking part of the meaning. Indeed, we can also set aside a controversial aspect of (ii), namely, that folk subjects have *a priori* or introspective access to the relevant (reference-fixing) beliefs. All that is needed, in my view, is that there are certain central beliefs that are *non-negotiable* for competent users of the concept, regardless of whether these beliefs are

on the other hand, attempts to reveal the objective type that our concept aims to track. This is usually done by examining the nature of some paradigm cases of the category and finding out what property (if any) explains the features that we associate with the concept (i.e. the features that we came up with in the conceptual project). This second step typically requires empirical research.

However, when we go back to the "parent" example, we can see that in that case, the distinction between the manifest and operative concept does not match the conceptual-descriptive distinction. In that example, it does *not* seem natural to say that school authorities are using a concept of "parent" with a certain internal dimension, namely, "being a immediate progenitor", and an external one, namely "being a primary caregiver", in the same way in which it *does* seem natural to say that about a natural kind term such as "water": we associate this concept with an internal element or condition, namely, "being watery stuff", and the objective type that *actually satisfies* that condition turns out to be $H_2O$ (this is the external element). It seems more natural to say that in the case of "parent", what is going on is that the relevant subjects are just confused about which concept they are applying: if you asked them to define the term, they would say that "parent" means "immediate progenitor", but when we look at what groups of individuals they are in fact disposed to apply the term to (at least in the relevant contexts), we can see that they would also include adoptive parents, step-parents, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and so on. But crucially, in order to discover this we do not need to engage in the *descriptive* project: we do not have to focus on some paradigm cases of parents and carry out empirical investigation in order to find out what objective type they have in common. (If we did this, we would probably end up concluding that the common type is the biological property of being an immediate progenitor, since this is what the paradigm instances of "parent" will most likely have in common.) Rather, what we have to do in order to find out the operative concept that people actually apply here is to engage in a more systematic *conceptualist* project: we have to examine the classificatory practices of the relevant speakers, in order to find out what individuals they would classify as parents in both actual and possible scenarios (and this is clearly the business of the conceptualist project). In the example we are

part of the meaning (of whether they are accessible a priori or by introspection). Here I follow Glasgow (2009), who makes similar remarks, if I understand him correctly.

concerned with here, it seems plausible to say that the relevant speakers, when they are reflective enough, would apply the term "parent" to primary caregivers (otherwise, the case at issue would not correspond to our example, such as Haslanger described it).

If these considerations are on the right track, we can conclude the following claim. The phenomenon that Haslanger is concerned with (manifested in the examples of social terms she discusses, such as "parent" or "marriage") is different from the phenomenon manifested in the standard examples invoked in the classical arguments for semantic externalism (such as "water" or "tiger"). The former examples do not seem to exhibit the sort of internal vs. external dual structure that the latter do. Rather, those social terms are such that they can be (and in fact are) used more or less inclusively, by different communities of speakers (or even by the same speakers, at different contexts). We can use "parent" to refer only to individuals with some biological property in common (i.e. being immediate progenitors), or more inclusively, to all individuals with some relevant social property in common, namely, being primary caregivers.[8] We can use "marriage" to apply only to heterosexual couples, or more inclusively, to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. I agree with Haslanger that we have very good practical and political reasons for using these terms in the more inclusive way. We could express this point by saying that the best account of the concept of parent is one according to which it means "primary caregiver", or that the best account of the concept of marriage is one according to which it can be applied to both heterosexual and homosexual couples. But here we are no longer searching for the operative concept; rather, we are searching for the concept that we *should* use, given social and political considerations (i.e. what Haslanger calls the *target concept*, which is revealed by means of an *ameliorative* project). But this is different from the *operative* concept.

## V. Social Externalism to the Rescue?

In this section, I would like to examine briefly another class of familiar externalist insights that Haslanger mentions, namely, considerations having to do with the essential role played by the speaker's *linguistic community* in

[8] On the other hand, if we use the term in what I call the "more inclusive" way, we will also leave out some individuals that do fall under the term according to the "more narrow" understanding, since there are immediate progenitors who do not become primary caregivers.

determining the meaning of an expression (in addition to other external facts about the speakers' environment such as the chemical composition of watery stuff, and so on). For instance, recalling a familiar example discussed by Tyler Burge (1979), Haslanger says:

> Sally thinks she has arthritis in her thigh, and is wrong because "arthritis" in her community is an ailment of the joints; Twinsally thinks she has arthritis in her thigh and is right because "arthritis" in her community is an ailment that is not confined to the joints (2006, p. 107).

Along these lines, it might be argued that it is more useful to compare cases of social terms such as "parent" or "marriage" with the case of "arthritis", rather than comparing them with chemical terms such as "water" and "gold", as discussed above. Burge's discussion of "arthritis" is also part of an argument for semantic externalism concerning natural kind terms: the main idea here is that even if some speakers (of our linguistic community) think that arthritis can apply to a condition of the thighs, they are wrong, because given how the term is used by *experts* in our society (to whom we defer), it can apply only to a condition of the joints (but of course it is not necessary to know this fact in order to be a competent user of the term "arthritis", so this aspect of the meaning of the term is not transparent to competent speakers). Likewise, it can be argued, in the case of "parent" or "marriage", we could draw a distinction between the rough conceptions that ordinary speakers associate with the term (i.e. their *manifest* concept), which can contain false beliefs, and the more sophisticated conception that *experts* in our society actually use to determine the referent (i.e. the *operative* concept). This could explain why even if some people take "parent" to mean "immediate progenitor", it actually means "primary caregiver", because this is the real use that the concept has in our society, or at least the full conception that experts have.

The crucial idea here, then, is that we could characterize the distinction between the manifest and the operative concept as follows: the manifest concept corresponds to the different (and possibly mistaken) *conceptions* that speakers have, whereas the operative concept corresponds to the correct conception that *experts* in that community have (and on which ordinary speakers rely in order to be able to communicate with each other successfully). This seems to be a more promising characterization, but it is not clear how it could be applied in the case of "parent", let alone in the more controversial cases of "race" and "gender". Let's start with "parent": Haslanger is surely

right that ordinary speakers could have lots of mistaken beliefs about what "parent" refers to. In particular, when we think about the example of the school memos that she discusses, it is clear that some of the speakers involved (e.g. those teachers that write "parent" with the implicit purpose of referring to the children's primary caregivers) would have at least *prima facie* wrong beliefs about the extension of their uses of "parent" in that context, given that when they are asked what "parent" means, they would answer "immediate progenitor", but at the same time they would continue to address school memos to "parents", they would accept primary caregivers such as adoptive parents and legal guardians at Parent Nights, and so on. Our crucial question here is the following: Is this case sufficiently analogous to the case of the patient who wrongly believes that she has arthritis in her thigh? I do not think so. A crucial difference between the two cases is that the teacher who explicitly says that "parent" means *immediate progenitor*, but implicitly uses "parent" in some contexts to refer to all primary caregivers, has in principle relatively easy (and arguably, introspective or *quasi*-a priori) access to this fact about her linguistic usage, whereas the patient does not have relatively easy access to the relevant fact about her usage of "arthritis", namely, the fact that in her linguistic community "arthritis" is used to refer to a condition of the joints only. In my view, there is an important difference in the *epistemic situation* of the teacher who uses "parent" to refer to primary caregivers (but explicitly says that "parent" means "immediate progenitor"), and the patient who uses 'arthritis' deferentially (and therefore, refers to a condition of the joints) but explicitly says that she has arthritis in her thigh. I think this important epistemic difference is obscured by Haslanger's suggestion that we should treat both cases analogously. In my view, in the "arthritis" case it is clear that the patient does not have a priori nor introspective access to the actual extension of "arthritis" (or the relevant property). Therefore, in this case it is appropriate to distinguish between the patient's *internal*, manifest concept, to which she has a priori, introspective access, and her *external*, operative concept, which is fixed by her linguistic community, and to which she does not have introspective, a priori access.[9] However, the situation is very different in the case of "parent": here, the teacher has (for some reason) the explicit belief that "parent" means "immediate progenitor", but she also has access (in principle) to the internal fact about her linguistic usage that determines that

[9] See footnote 7 above, for some important qualifications.

her uses of the term "parent" in certain contexts (e.g. school memos, parent-teacher meetings and so on) actually refer to primary caregivers. Therefore, I do not see any reasons here to conclude, as Haslanger does, that speakers' intuitions revealed by the conceptual project are secondary to questions regarding the operative concepts that our social terms in fact express.

## VI. Natural Science vs. Social Science

In this final section, I would like to examine a possible response to the line of argument I have been rehearsing here. It could be argued that even if we agree with the interpretation of the familiar externalist insights that I suggested above (according to which natural kind terms present a dual structure, with an internal dimension, corresponding to the *manifest* concept, that is typically accessible a priori, and an external dimension, corresponding to the *operative* concept, typically accessible by means of empirical investigation), this does not rule out a possible application of semantic externalism to social terms such as "parent" or "marriage". In particular, the proposal here is that instead of using natural science to find out the underlying property that certain paradigm cases have in common, we should use social science to find out what interesting properties certain paradigm cases have in common.

This approach has also been defended by Haslanger. For instance, in her (2005), she considers the example of *tardy*, as used at a particular school, and she distinguishes how the concept is used institutionally (e.g. how it is defined by the school district: «any student arriving in his o her homeroom after the 8:25 AM bell is tardy» Haslanger, 2005, p. 13), from how the concept is used in practice, at least in some classrooms (e.g. some teachers do not turn in the attendance sheet until 9 AM). Following her proposal discussed above, this distinction could also be understood in terms of the manifest/operative distinction, that is, the manifest concept here would correspond to the school's institutional definition, whereas the operative concept would correspond to the way some teachers use the term in practice. Similarly, it could be argued that whereas we could use a conceptual approach to find out what the manifest concept is, the operative concept that people actually use can be revealed only by studying certain relevant practices empirically. Haslanger says: «Those pursuing a descriptive approach will usually select paradigms from commonly and publicly recognized cases; as suggested before, the task is to determine the more general type or kind to which they belong» (2005, p. 16). However, as I

suggested above, this method could be problematic in the case of social kinds, because if we focus on (commonly recognized) paradigmatic cases of, say, being a parent, then the more general type to which they all belong is probably *immediate progenitor*, rather than *primary caregiver*. Haslanger (2005) recognizes that there seems to be a problem regarding how to select the paradigm cases: «For example, the case in which Isaac arrives at school at 8:40 AM (when school starts at 8:25 AM) would count as a paradigm case of tardiness, regardless of what his teacher marks in the attendance sheet» (p. 16). If so, it is not clear that this paradigm-based method is going to reveal the operative concept that is used in practice, but rather the manifest concept according to the institutional definition (or common sense). But Haslanger adds:

> Of course, the aim of a descriptive approach in this case is not to provide a *naturalistic* account of tardiness – one that would seek to discover the *natural* (as contrasted with the *social*) kind within which the paradigms fall. ... But it is possible to pursue a descriptive approach within a social domain as long as one allows that there are social kinds or types. [...] However, the investigation of social kinds will need to draw on empirical social/historical inquiry, not just natural science (2005, pp. 16–7).

This passage seems to suggest a possible solution to the problem for the descriptive approach that I posed above. The main problem was that focusing on paradigm cases did not seem to reveal the operative concept that we were interested in (instead, we should focus on how speakers were disposed to use the concept in actual and possible situations, which is the business of the conceptual approach, or so I argued). But here Haslanger is suggesting that the descriptive approach, when applied to social kinds, should rely on social theory, rather than conceptual analysis (broadly conceived). She writes:

> The first task is to collect cases that emerge in different (and perhaps competing) practices; then, as before, one should consider if the cases constitute a genuine type, and if so, what unifies the type. This, of course, cannot be done in a mechanical way and may require sophisticated social theory both to select the paradigms and to analyze their commonality (2005, p. 17).

This is an important point: if we can use sophisticated social theory in order to select the paradigms, then maybe we can solve the main problem above. That is, if we can appeal to theoretical considerations in order to select the

paradigms, then maybe we can focus on a more diverse sample of paradigm cases (e.g. a set of paradigms of *parent* including adoptive parents, step-parents, etc.), so that the common type might turn out to be *primary caregivers*, as desired. However, other problems are lurking here. Haslanger claims: «Sets of paradigms typically fall within more than one type. To handle this, one may further specify the kind of type (type of liquid, type of artwork), or may (in the default) count the common type with the highest degree of objectivity» (2005, p. 18). In my view, there are two possible worries here for the claim that the operative concept associated with the relevant social terms can be revealed by means of empirical social theory, without the need for the conceptual approach. First, I think that the conceptual approach will be needed, in order to specify the kind of type that is relevant here. As Haslanger explains, a given set of paradigms falls within more than one type, and it is up to the theorist to decide which is the relevant kind. An important constraint, I contend, is posed by the conceptual/inferential role played by the corresponding concept, and this is revealed by the conceptual approach. Second, Haslanger suggests that when we do not have any good reasons for preferring a specific type over the others, we should just focus on the common type with "the highest degree of objectivity". Complicated issues arise here: for instance, according to some conceptions of objectivity, physical or chemical kinds have a higher degree of objectivity than biological or psychological kinds, although the latter are "more objective" than kinds from social sciences such as economics or sociology, and so forth. This is a controversial issue that I do not have time to explore here in any detail, but for our purposes my main contention is the following. Although Haslanger is presenting here a very promising approach to the study of social kinds, it seems likely that her method of selecting some paradigms and discovering what common type unifies them by means of social theory will need to appeal to some facts about speakers' intuitions (plus other facts about ordinary speakers' usage), in order to decide, first, which paradigm cases should be selected, and second, which one among several candidates turns out to be the shared, objetive type that ordinary speakers in a given context are actually tracking when they use a certain concept. Therefore, and to repeat my main point above, I cannot agree with Haslanger that «in any descriptive project, intuitions about the conditions for applying the concept should be considered secondary to what the cases in fact have in common» (2005, p. 17).

## VII. Conclusion

Recapitulating: As we have seen, Haslanger's aim is to extend the ideas of semantic externalism about natural kind terms to the case of social kinds. In order to do this, she compares some standard examples of natural kind terms, such as "water" or "arthritis", with some examples of terms that are socially founded, such as "parent" or "marriage". What these cases do have in common is that many or most ordinary speakers associate some descriptions with the term which do not correspond with the objective type that those terms actually refer to. However, this is not enough to show that in order to reveal the operative concept (the concept we in fact apply), the conceptualist project is irrelevant, or secondary. Actually, what careful analysis of the cases of natural kind terms above shows is that the conceptualist project is a first and crucial step in the search for the operative concept: in order to find out what the referent of, say, "water" or "arthritis" is, we first need to examine our responses to actual and possible scenarios (e.g. Twin-Earth scenarios where the corresponding terms are used in a different way by the experts, and so on), in order to find out what are the conditions that something has to satisfy in order to fall under the term (this is the outcome of the conceptualist project). And once these conditions have been clearly stated, we can then find out what stuff satisfies them in the actual world (this is the descriptive project). However, in the case of contested concepts such as "parent" or "marriage", there is no need in principle for a descriptive project of a similar nature: what seems to be in question in those cases is what the real *application conditions* of those concepts are, that is, the conditions that the relevant entities have to satisfy in order to fall under the concept. And in order to reveal this, the conceptualist project is still the best method we have.[10]

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# Race and Genealogy: Buffon and the Formation of the Concept of "Race"

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the conditions of formation of the concept of "race" in natural history in the middle of the eighteenth century. Relying on the method of *historical epistemology* to avoid some of the aporias raised by the traditional historiography of "racism", it focuses on the peculiarities of the concept of "race" in contrast to other similar concepts such as "variety", "species" and tries to answer the following questions: to what extent the concept of "race" was integrated in natural history's discourses before the middle of the eighteenth century? To which kind of concepts and problems was it linked and to which style of reasoning did it pertain? To which conditions could it enter natural history and develop in it? The article argues that "race" pertained to a *genealogical style of reasoning* which was largely extraneous to natural history before the middle of the eighteenth century. Natural history was rather dominated by a different style of reasoning, a logical and classificatory style, whose principles and concepts were strong obstacles to the development of a concept of "race". To understand how the concept of "race" developed in natural history, one should understand how the genealogical style of reasoning entered natural history and modified the very principles of classification that organized it. I try to establish that it is through Buffon and some of the main authors of the "monogenist" tradition that the most fundamental conditions for the integration of a genealogical style of reasoning and the development of a concept of "race" are met. To put it clearly, in contrast to many scholars' analysis – and following some intuitions of P.R Sloan – I argue that Buffon in particular, and monogenism in general, were decisive in

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the integration and development of the concept of "race" in natural history.

«Was Buffon a racist before the term was coined?» Léon Poliakov's question[1] illustrates a more general problem in the historiography of "race": it subordinates the history of "race" to the history of "racism", that is, of a polemical concept laden with ideological presuppositions which often remain unclear.[2] Moreover, the definition of "racism" one decides to employ predetermines the way in which one views the term's history. Scholars usually give the following response to Poliakov's question: Buffon was *not* a racist for the reason that he was a *monogenist*,[3] believed in the *unity of the human species*, in the *common origin* of the different "races" and in the *reversibility* of their characteristics.[4] Such a response is based on a variety of widely held presuppositions concerning the definition of "racism" itself. To be a racist, an author must believe in the *radical alterity* of human types, that is: 1) their *separate origins* (polygenism);[5] 2) their differences being *fixed* and *irreducible*;[6] 3) such radical alterity legitimating a *desire to exclude*: racism being primarily characterized by exclusion and domination based on the dehumanization of the other.[7]

Approaching the problem in this way unfortunately brings about many difficulties. If we focus on the field of natural history during the eighteenth

[1] Poliakov, 1971, pp. 165–166.

[2] By stating that "racism" is a polemical concept, and has been so since its origins in the 1920s, I am referring to the fact that it has always been used as a tool to denounce and criticize certain ideas and practices while exonerating others. As Pierre-André Taguieff (2001, p. 81.) says, "racism" has a twofold function: it is both polemical and descriptive. I argue that its polemical function occasionally goes against its descriptive function and prevents us to study serenely the history of "race".

[3] Historians of racism usually oppose monogenists and polygenists, with the former believing in the unity of the human species and its common root, and the latter believing in the plurality of human species and their different roots. This controversy between polygenists and monogenists developed in the end of the eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries in natural history, but historians often trace it back to the works of Isaac La Peyrère, Giordano Bruno and many others. For the vast majority of scholars, race and racism have their roots in polygenism. I hope to prove here that this is highly debatable, at least as far as we focus on the concept of "race" in natural history.

[4] See, among others, Roger, 1989, pp. 245–246 ; Blanckaert, 2003, pp. 134–149.

[5] See, among many others, Taguieff, 1997, p. 21.

[6] For instance, Isaac, 2004, p. 23; Fredrickson, 2002; Boulle, 2007.

[7] See Boulle, 2007; Fredrickson, 2002; Balibar & Wallerstein, 1998; Guillaumin, 2002; Taguieff, 1987.

century, limiting our observations to *discursive facts* – namely, if we consider statements in their positivity and study the way in which the notion of "race" was *actually* used – we may note that, among those authors who first defined the concept of "*race*" and who developed a science of human races, the vast majority, beginning with Buffon, De Pauw, Camper, Blumenbach or Kant, were *monogenist*. If we are ready to admit that "racism without race"[8] may be possible, it is more difficult to believe that the conditions of emergence of scientific "racism" and those of the concept of "race" are so radically different that to write the history of the former implies a systematic exclusion of those who made the history of the latter. At the very least, this fact demonstrates how important it is to separate the history of "race" from the history of *racism* because this history prevents us from serenely studying the *effective conditions of the formation of the concept of "race"*. The same remark may be applied to those historians who study the *idea* of race, conferring upon the signifier "race" the mysterious identity of an "idea": a mental reality that is supposedly expressed in various forms and contexts.[9]

To avoid this trap, I suggest we should develop a *historical epistemology of the concept(s) of "race"*, and attempt to answer the following question: what are the *epistemological conditions* of the emergence of the *concept* of '*race*' in the field of *natural history*? This entails that I will not, in this article, analyze "racism" but rather "*race*". Moreover, I will not analyze the idea but rather the *concept* of "race", that is, a notion defined through a network of interaction with other notions, forming a discursive system one can clearly identify and describe in its conditions of emergence and rules of functioning[10]. Such an analysis does not concern itself with the concept of "race" across all contexts – which would mean nothing – but rather in the context of *natural history*. In this narrower perspective, I hope to show the way in which Buffon and monogenism had a decisive impact on the formation of the concept of "race".

In order to prove this, in the first part of this essay, I will draw attention to the fields in which the concept of "race" was used before the mid eighteenth

[8] To quote Balibar's expression (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1998, p. 21).

[9] Ivan Hannaford (1996) exemplifies such a tradition. Again, such an analysis depends on the arbitrary content of what one considers to fall under the *idea* of race.

[10] I am not seeking to develop in this article the methodology of an epistemological history. See on this point Canguilhem, 1955; Davidson, 2001; Foucault, 1969.

century. In all these fields, "race" initially designated a *genealogical entity*, and pertained to what I call a "genealogical style of reasoning". I will argue, in the second part of the article, that there was no place within natural history, as it had been organized since the seventeenth century, for the concept of "race", the term being rather associated with the vocabulary of nobility and breeding. As we will see by way of an analysis of the view of Linnaeus, natural history was dominated by a *logical and classificatory style of reasoning* whose principles and concepts rather defined strong obstacles to the emergence of the concept of "race". I will especially insist on the fact that natural history did not really concern itself with the level between species and individuals, which it generally referred to as "*variae*" (that is, unstable variations and differences without any taxonomical relevance). Human differences were caught up within this both logical and taxonomical alternative between *species* and *varieties*. Within this alternative, there was no room and no need for any concept of "race". I will then argue, in the third part of this essay, that the emergence of this concept in natural history required the subordination of the logico-classificatory style of reasoning to a *genealogical perspective*. Through this reorientation, *variae* could gain relative stability as characteristics *transmitted over generations*, becoming *races*; the reproduction of characteristics became the dynamic principle determining the taxonomical status of differences and similarities. In this way, the entire grey area between individuals and the species could be differentiated and analyzed in terms of lineages and kinships; breeding and genealogy's vocabulary and problems could thus enter natural history. I will attempt to prove that it was through monogenism, and initially through Buffon, that this genealogical style of reasoning, along with all the problems and concepts it implied, was integrated into natural history and came to be considered valuable. The last part of my article will thus be devoted to a detailed analysis of the way in which Buffon integrated the concept of "race" into natural history, and how this concept was coherent with his more general reorientation of natural history via a genealogical perspective.

## I. The Three Fields of "Race" before the Eighteenth Century

It may be useful to begin by recalling, in a schematic way, the fields in which the different concepts of "race" were used before the eighteenth century. We must differentiate between these fields for the reason that they define different concepts of "race" which do not precisely correspond to one another, even

though they are interlinked. A rigorous historical epistemology of "race" should thus study each of these concepts separately: the way they worked in interaction with other notions, how they were correlated with a specific field of practices and problems, and at which points they were connected. Moreover, it should examine how these different concepts transformed themselves in order to constitute the modern concept(s) of "race".[11]

First of all, "race" designated *kinships* and *lineages*: it was used to define patrilineal lineages sharing a common ancestor. In this respect, "race" described a very important reality in *nobiliary discourses*, either for different royal dynasties (in France, it was common to speak of the First, Second and Third "races") or for the nobility. For an individual to be part of a particular race meant being inscribed in a genealogy of famous ancestors and glorious deeds which he had both to imitate and prolong. Race was a reality which transcended the individual and imposed upon him certain duties. At the same time, however, it also defined him in a positive sense: to be part of a noble race created a *presumption of virtue*, and thus gave such individuals many privileges. Within the nobility, a distinction was usually made between "nobility of the race" ("noblesse de race") and more recent nobility. "Nobility of the race" did not have the same juridical status and was not dependant on precisely the same rules. More specifically, it was impossible to render it null through civil laws; only the Sovereign could act upon it (though this power held by the Sovereign over race was a subject of debate). Race thus designated a necessary condition of the transmission of juridical status and privileges; it was both a familial duty one had to obey, and also a way to evaluate, *a priori*, an individual person, who was characterized as pertaining to such or such a race – that is, to a particular lineage.[12]

This nobiliary concept of race was consistently (if not systematically) connected to another way of conceiving of the notion, wherein "race" designated the *condition of transmission* of *sins* and *spiritual status*. We need only recall that the Council of Trent firmly restated the doctrine of the transmission of original sin through *natural generation*. This entailed that all of humanity participated in original sin because all men pertained to the same "*race*", that of Adam. But we must also remember that the history of the World's different nations was understood, by way of the old tradition of

[11] I develop some parts of this research in my PhD dissertation, *forthcoming*.

[12] For a detailed analysis of the concept of "race" in nobility, see Jouanna, 1976; Schalk, 1986; Smith, 1996, and my PhD dissertation, *forthcoming*.

universal chronicles, as a process of dispersion and colonization by different *patrilineal lineages* ("*races*"), each originating in common ancestors. Each lineage and each people thus had a specific "political" and spiritual status according to their genealogy, for the reason that they inherited specific faults from their ancestors. In this respect, it was commonplace to distinguish between the races of Sem, Japhet and Cham, the ancestral faults of the latter rendering it the most degenerate. Such degeneration legitimated either slavery or serfdom. In this instance, then, nobiliary and religious discourses tend to mutually influence one another.[13]

Last but not least, we may identify a third field in which the concept of "race" was omnipresent before the eighteenth century. It is this field which we should look to in order to study some of the main elements that constituted the concept of "race" in natural history. This field, however, was also deeply connected to nobiliary practices. I am referring to *breeding practices*, and especially to *horse breeding*. Breeders considered race to be a specific object of knowledge and power.[14] Through a variety of practices, they attempted to control the reproduction of the animals they had chosen in order to produce the best descendants, thus obtaining a good race. Issues such as the reproduction and conservation of a race's qualities were thus fundamental to breeders, and in this field, "race" was mainly reduced to mere *natural* characteristics (which was *not* the case in questions of nobility). A race's improvement and preservation consequently implied taking care of the entire range of animals' natural functions: reproduction, nutrition, and living conditions.

Some of the primary problems regarding knowledge of human races were first raised in the context of breeding practices.[15] These problems were, in particular: 1) the question of the conservation of a lineage's qualities in spite of the influence of transplantation and environment; 2) the variations or alterations which, depending on climate or the blending of breeds, may affect the primitive "type" inherited from ancestors. This implies the fundamental problem of *degeneration*, a question obsessively returned to since the

[13] See, among others, Gliozzi, 2000; Braude, 1997.

[14] It is of particular importance to remember that breeding practices underwent a radical transformation and development during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially in France through the development of a state administration devoted to the improvement of the races and, in France and Britain, through the development of national and international markets of breeding animals.

[15] See my PhD dissertation, *forthcoming*; and Doron, *forthcoming*.

eighteenth century; 3) the origins of the race, of the right ancestor one had to choose as the race's initial model. A very important field of knowledge developed throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries concerning the perfect type for horses, the *specific norm* from which all subsequent individuals would be evaluated; 4) the qualities and defects of the sires, the need to exclude all those from reproduction who may contaminate the race or alter the species; 5) the detailed mechanisms of reproduction and inheritance of qualities and changes in the lineage. All these questions will later appear as fundamental problems in the understanding of human races. Consequently, it is not by accident if, from Buffon to Prichard, all thinkers who elaborated the concept of "race" in natural history and anthropology took breeding and domestication as crucial points of reference. As we will see, analyzing the conditions of emergence of the concept of "race" in natural history largely means understanding how questions concerning breeding and the domestication of animals could enter the field of natural history, in which, before the mid eighteenth century, they did not have a self-evident place.

## II. Race and Classical Natural History

Now that we have in mind the various concepts of "race" which coexisted at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and the type of problems they referred to, we must pose two primary questions.[16] First, to what extent did the notion of "race" have a place in the very specific discursive genre that was natural history? [17] Second, under which conditions did "race" and the problems it referred to (genealogy, kinship, lineage, transmission of characteristics, primitive ancestors, degeneration, breeding and so forth) enter the field of natural history?

I will firstly argue that "race" did not have a self-evident place within the discursive genre of natural history before the mid eighteenth century; on the

[16] One may invoke two other uses. One is the all too famous paper from Bernier, presented by almost all authors as the first usage of the modern concept of "race". I have proved in my PhD dissertation that this is a highly debatable point. The other case concerns the use of "*raza*" in Spanish for the Conversos during the debate regarding "limpieza de sangre", but I believe this case falls within the articulation of the two first concepts.

[17] By "discursive genre" I am referring to a well identified set of discourses organized by common rules of functioning, principles and problems, as well as by common rules concerning veridiction (that is, the way we define the true and the false). In my opinion, it is important to analyze natural history as a specific "discursive genre".

contrary, the type of reasoning which ruled in this field defined *epistemological obstacles* to the development of the concept of "race". Secondly, I contend that it is through Buffon, and by way of his subordination of the logico-classificatory style of reasoning (which dominated natural history) to a genealogical style of reasoning (initially outside of natural history) that race and all the problems it referred to entered natural history's discourse. To make these claims clear, I will first need to describe the styles of reasoning which dominated natural history as a specific discursive genre up until the mid eighteenth century.[18]

The discursive genre of "natural history", as it emerged during the seventeenth century, had a twofold ambition: it was both *descriptive* and *taxonomic*. As Foucault rightly claimed,[19] natural history first implied a separation between what one can observe about a thing, and secondly, everything that had ever been said about it (the tradition). Natural history, in its classical sense, first consisted in detailed *observation* of natural beings, which was then supposed to lead to a *description* of the singular being so rigorous that it would almost correspond to the individual as though it were its *proper noun*. This ambition is exemplified in the *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire naturelle des animaux* collected by Claude Perrault between 1669 and 1676. Perrault claimed that he wanted to «show things exactly as we have seen them, like a mirror which adds nothing, but rather represents things exactly as they have been set before it» (Perrault, 1758).[20] He firmly distinguished between what had traditionally been said about things and the clear certainty one obtains through minute observation. This observation proceeded according to an analysis of the *anatomical structure of the individual being*. It led to a description of the being which was supposed to adhere to it in its *singularity*.

[18] I borrow the concept of "style of reasoning" from Davidson (2001) and Hacking (2002). From Hacking, I take on the idea that "style of reasoning" defines an historical way to perceive and construct the objects of knowledge; while I take on from Davidson, the idea that "style of reasoning" is mainly characterized by a set of concepts which are organized according to certain rules and work together (for a comparison between Hacking and Davidson's concepts, see for instance Singy, 2005). If, as I've suggested, natural history – and more specifically natural history of Man – can be defined as a well defined "genre of discourse", I believe one can study how it has been organized by different styles of reasoning coexisting together and sometimes in contradiction. Here I'm focusing on the relationships between logico-classificatory and genealogical styles of reasoning insofar as they were determinant for the formation of the concept of "race". One will find in my PhD dissertation further analyses on the coexisting "styles of reasoning" ruling the natural history of Man in the eighteenth-nineteenth centuries.

[19] See Foucault, 2002, pp. 136–144.

[20] My translation.

As Perrault (1758) stated, «we analyze things only as singular beings». It was a description not of the Lion, but of *a* lion, not of the Bear but of *a* bear. Here, knowledge precisely fitted the thing in its anatomical singularity.

Natural history, however, could not restrict itself to such a level of singularity. It had to combine this initial aim (namely, to carry out a rigorous *observation and description of the individual being's parts*) with an effort to go beyond knowledge of the singular in order to reach a *general classification of natural beings*. As Foucault (2002, p. 151) says, «for natural history to become a language, the description must become a '*common noun*'».[21] This means that description needs to be integrated into a *general system of language*, common to all the natural beings being represented, and shared by all virtual speakers, so that each description immediately manifests all the relationships between one natural being and the rest, whether they are similar or different. And these relationships were mainly *logical relationships*:[22] the natural historian looked for stable differences and similarities between beings, chose the most relevant and singular ones as specific, the most general and shared ones as generic, and so on. Natural history's common language was borrowed from taxonomy and scholastics. In this respect, it found its model in the science of *botany*, as, since the seventeenth century, botanists had developed methods to classify plants according to their visible characteristics, in such a way that it was possible to locate them immediately in a network of differences and similarities. This localization, being both a *cognitive* (producing understanding of a being) and a *taxonomic* operation (sorting such a being into a system), depended on a *practice of denomination*. Its ultimate purpose consisted in giving the particular thing a noun which would represent it adequately, precisely locating it among a system of coordinates, identifying its logical relationships with other things and establishing how it differed from them. It aimed at indicating its *necessary*, *exact* and *final* place inside a well-ordered system. A natural being was grasped according to its species, genus and class, so that it immediately occupied a well-defined space in a taxonomical system. Its "common noun", to use Foucault's term, was determined through

[21] My emphasis.

[22] Logical relationships must be understood here as referring, firstly, to the very old "division method" defined by Plato, and secondly, to the usual scholastic process of classification. Beings are sorted together according to their differences and similarities, and these differences and similarities are organized in a hierarchy according to whether they are more or less shared, and more or less stable.

*logic*. If this was a *family name*, such a family expressed only logical relationships. It did not express kinship or lineage.

This taxonomical system depended upon a hierarchy of logical relationships of identities and differences organized in the following order: class-order-genus-species-varieties. As Daudin said about Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae*, which we may take as the most accomplished illustration of this style of reasoning, «the number of the layered collective units had been *universally and necessarily* fixed to five: that is, from the higher to the lower, class, order, genus, species and variety».[23] The *species-genus* axis constituted the pivot of this system: classical taxonomy focused on genus and species as its fundamental units. "Varieties" (*variae*) did not count for a naturalist; they did not even define a true and stable collective unit, but rather a mere collection of heterogenic characteristics. Varieties concerned only *practical knowledge*, precisely because of their inconstancy and variability. As Linnaeus claimed, knowledge about varieties was good for chefs, doctors or farmers, but not for naturalists.[24] At a pinch, the naturalist could describe a few varieties, but he was not interested in the mechanism of their production or (even more importantly for us) *reproduction*.

The naturalist had good reasons to despise varieties. Taxonomy needed to rely on *constant*, clearly *defined* and *invariable* characteristics; alterations caused by climates, cultures or lifestyles were mere trivial variations which could not make up part of a well-ordered system. Questions of breeding, alterations of types or transmission of characteristics which varied across time and space thus had nothing to do with taxonomic knowledge. As Foucault rightly claimed, beyond the species, between the species and individuals, was an "*epistemological threshold*" which relegated everything beyond it to inconstancy and obscurity.[25] The naturalist's gaze, at least in its classificatory enterprise, did not go beyond the species. On the contrary, it took species and genus as its basis, as its starting-block in order to get to orders, classes, and so on. Varieties were only "*variae*", that is, mere variants, without any defined logical and taxonomical identity. They were disparate collections of natural

[23] Daudin,1926-1927, p. 38. My translation and emphasis.
[24] See Linnaeus, 1750, § 306 (p. 342 of the Eng. trans.): «The great usefulness of many varieties in domestic economy, diet and medicine has made the knowledge of them necessary in common life; otherwise varieties belong not to botanists as such, but so far as they should take care of that the species be not unnecessarily multiplied and confounded». See the whole chapter on varieties in this book. As Linnaeus repeats later (§315), «*varietates [sunt] superfluae in foro botanico*».
[25] Foucault, 1969b, pp. 899–901.

beings able to be multiplied indefinitely. I contend that it is only through a *genealogical prism* that all of this undifferentiated field of varieties came to be marked out, and that it is through the fundamental criterion of *reproduction* and *kinship* that varieties became "*races*", relatively stable entities relevant to natural history.

Of course, I am well aware that *Man* constituted a significant exception to this apparent lack of interest concerning varieties. From the first editions of his *Systema naturae*, Linnaeus focused more and more on *human varieties*. First of all, he distinguished between four varieties *(Homo variae)*: *Europaeus albus*, *Americanus rubescens*, *Asiaticus fuscus*, *Africanus niger*, dividing the genus/species *Homo* into *variae* strictly correlated according to geography, and defined by way of anatomical characters (colors). In his tenth edition (1758), he added two other varieties: *Homo monstrosus*, which collected disparate monstrosities, either the natural product of a country (*solo*) such as cretins or patagons, or the artificial product of culture (*arte*); and *Homo ferus*, which collected various cases of the "wild child" encountered in European forests. Moreover, Linnaeus split the genus *Homo* into two different species: *Homo diurnus sapiens* and *Homo nocturnus troglodytes*, the latter referring to the "blafard" or albinos. It is clear that, focusing on these *varieties* in the human genus/species, Linnaeus did not fundamentally depart from his more general principles, for this question was indeed of primordial importance in deciding upon the very status of the *species* of Man[26]. In any case, is this classification of the different *varieties* of men indeed, as many authors claim, an unquestionable precedent in the science of *races*? To many historians, the answer to this question is positive, because they believe that the *classification* and *division of human kinds according to anatomical characteristics* are the two fundamental elements in the science of human *races*.

It is here we reach the core of my argument, namely that we must pay attention to the fact that "race" and "varieties" pertain to different conceptual structures and styles of reasoning, and that the introduction of the concept of "race" inside a classificatory style of reasoning was far from evident. I do not question the fact that we find in Linnaeus a *classification* of the different *varieties* of the genus/species *Homo* according to their *anatomical characters*. I do contend, however, that the way in which Linnaeus defines the problem (at

[26] See *supra*, note 25. Linnaeus claimed that varieties were to be studied only as far as they could be assimilated with species, so as to avoid the unnecessary multiplication of species.

least in his *Systema naturae*), in strict continuity with the classificatory style of reasoning of natural history, excludes not only the very *possibility* of the formation of a concept of "race", but also the *necessity* of resorting to this concept. The dimension of "race" is made entirely superfluous and invisible, caught as it is inside the *logical* alternative: species/variety. Moreover, "race" simply does not pertain to the same conceptual system and does not refer to the same set of problems. An examination of Linnaeus' use of "varieties" and "species" proves this. Linnaeus states that *Homo sapiens* varies "according to culture and place", and he describes its main varieties of color, temperament, hair and so on. But it is very clear that Linnaeus is speaking here about mere "varieties" as *logical collections of disparate variations*, without any *genealogical* relationships or hereditary transmission, when he admits in his varieties the collection of all the individual cases of the "wild child" (who, obviously, don't share any kinship) under the category *Homo ferus,* and all the heterogeneous cases of monstrosities, from utterly different places and cultures, under the title *Homo monstrosus*. We have here a perfect illustration of the fact the notion of "variety" does not necessarily correspond to that of "race", and that a classification of the *varieties* of the human species is not necessarily a classification of human *races*. Such classification of varieties would become a classification of *races* only if these varieties were understood as a *genealogical* entity, and not simply as a logical collection of characteristics (that is, if these characteristics were analyzed as being transmitted from generation to generation, introducing, into the undifferentiated realm of "varieties", differentiations and stabilities grounded in their possibility for reproduction and transmission). This implies analyzing both the concepts of "varieties" and "species" from an entirely different, *genealogical* point of view. And, as we will see, it also implies a complete reversal of the axis on which natural history had previously turned, focusing namely on the space *between the individual and the species*. It is clearly not in a Linnaean system that such a reversal can be carried out. For Linnaeus, classification can only be organized according to varieties and species as *logical* concepts. The notion of "race" has no place here. We may prove this again by noting that, when Linnaeus seeks to identify a difference in the human genus which he believes to be more profound than a mere variety – when he wants to underline a collective unit whose characteristics are more constant – he makes use of the logical notion of *species*, which he applies to *homo troglodytes* without any other meaning than its logical one.

## III. Genealogical and Classificatory Styles of Reasoning in Natural History

I believe it is now clear that "race", a notion primarily used, until the eighteenth century, as part of a *genealogical* rather than taxonomical vocabulary, did not have a self-evident place within the classificatory style of reasoning which dominated natural history. We would be wrong to believe that race and classification are necessarily intertwined. We should rather believe the opposite of this, namely that classical principles of classification were important obstacles to the development of a concept of "race". Between species and variety, or between species and genus, there was no positive space for this concept. Difference was either constant and significant enough that it constituted a difference of *species*, or it was variable and trivial, and thus pertained to the undifferentiated realm of *varieties*. There was no logical space for a concept of "race", and no need for it.

The following question must thus be asked: under which conditions did *race* (rather than variety or species, temperament, climate and so on) become a fundamental reference in classification? How did this very peculiar concept of "race" come to be a pertinent tool for classification? In the logico-classificatory style of reasoning of natural history, inherited from scholastic logics and botany, this bizarre concept of "race", inherited from the fields of breeding practices and the nobility and stressing genealogical relationships between natural beings, had no place. How did a concept entirely foreign to methods of classification become a fundamental part of these methods themselves?

I believe this integration depended upon at least two conditions. 1. *The classificatory style of reasoning in natural history had to be subordinated to another way of reasoning*, in which the primary question was that of origins, lineages and descent: we may call this the *genealogical style of reasoning*. It is this style of reasoning which one finds in nobility, in universal chronicles and in breeding practices. 2. Moreover, it implied that it was thought *necessary* to define a *peculiar level of classification*, which did not exactly correspond to the level of species nor of varieties, but constituted an *intermediary category* of uncertain status. This intermediary category was more stable than mere varieties – whose inconstancy did not permit any real classification – but *less essential than specific differences*. And this second shift, I believe, was a *fundamental strategy of monogenist naturalists*, who could not be satisfied by acknowledging *logical* differences of *species* within the human genus. To put it clearly, I believe the concept of "race" was first strategically used by

monogenist naturalists as a way to circumvent the *logical* alternative between species and variety. This is why, from Buffon to Kant and Blumenbach, the main conceptualization of "races" in the natural history of man is carried out by monogenists.[27]

In this section, I will first focus on the second point, namely that monogenist naturalists used the genealogical concept of "race" in order to circumvent the logical alternative between "varieties" and "species". While polygenists were largely satisfied with the traditional vocabulary of natural history – the logical categories of "genus", "species", and "variety" – and had no difficulty to acknowledge *species* differences in human beings, monogenists used a *third concept* – that of "race" – to define a peculiar level, different from species but more constant than mere varieties. They argued that apparently specific differences between human types were actually differences of "*races*", that is mere varieties transmitted along generations through reproduction. Their strategy was to distinguish between the *logical* status of the differences and their *genealogical* status: a difference may appear to be *logically* a difference of *species*, while being, *in reality*, based on a *genealogical* common root. It was a very common argument among monogenists from Buffon to Blumenbach and Prichard to say that what appeared, nowadays, to be important differences between human types, were actually slight alterations that had became deeper and more important through the passing of time and the transmission of characteristics along generations. The "truth" about a natural being had to be sought in his *genealogy* and not in mere logical relationships. This discussion will lead us to see how the first condition we identified for the development of the concept of "race" in natural history (namely, the subordination of the classificatory style of reasoning to a genealogical perspective) has been realized also in monogenism. To this end, we will use Kant's distinction between *Naturbeschreibung* and *Naturgeschichte*. This distinction will allow us to understand how the genealogical style of reasoning could totally transform the principles of classification of natural beings and how the concept of "race" was strictly correlated to this transformation.

The existing tension between logical and genealogical perspectives on natural beings must be stressed for the reason that the historiography of racism, preoccupied as it has been by the opposition between monogenism and

[27] Voltaire seems to offer an exception to this claim, but I attempted to prove in my PhD dissertation, *forthcoming*, that this exception does not stand up to close scrutiny.

polygenism, has not paid enough attention to the fact that many "polygenists" seem, more than anything else, to be suspicious regarding the very inclusion of a *genealogical perspective into classification*. Moreover, if these same polygenists identify different *species* inside the human genus, it is primarily due to the fact that they reason according to a logico-classificatory style of reasoning. This is especially true concerning Bory de Saint-Vincent or Forster, who frequently expressed their suspicions regarding the fact that genealogical investigations brought religious biases to bear on the field of natural history. Moreover, for many polygenists, the specificity of the concept of "race" is difficult to understand: it is reduced either to a difference of *species* or to a difference of *varieties*. This is clear in the following extract from Lord Kames:

> M. Buffon ... endeavours to save his credit by *a distinction without a difference*. «[*Camel and dromedary*] are, says he, one species but their races are different and have been so past all memory». *Is not this the same with saying that the camel and the dromedary are different species of the same genus*? (Home, 1778, p. 13, my emphasis).

In Buffon's system, it is absolutely *not* the same thing to claim, on the one hand, that the camel and the dromedary are from the same species but constitute two different races, and on the other hand, to claim that they are two different species within the same genus. The reason is that, in the first case, one expresses a *genealogical relationship*, while in the second case, the relationship is merely of the *logical* kind.[28]

Many polygenists, at least until the beginning of the nineteenth century, first relied on the fact that the anatomical differences they observed had a *logical status of specific differences* and not of varieties (because they were highly characteristic and stable). It was only *secondarily*, and frequently when responding to monogenist claims, that they deduced from these logical differences a *genealogical* consequence: namely, that these logical differences of species must imply different lineages.[29] I wonder then if we should not even claim that far from being unique to "polygenism", the concept of "race" did not really have any relevance within polygenism, for the reason that it was largely superfluous. A polygenist could easily be satisfied by the two logical

[28] At least as long as Buffon did not accept the hypothesis of "natural genera". Later, things become more complex.

[29] Voltaire's analysis is a good illustration of this phenomenon. On this point, see my PhD dissertation, *forthcoming*.

categories of species and varieties, doubling them, if necessary, with a genealogical value. After all, he did not have any problem claiming that there were different *species* (even in a *genealogical* perspective) in the genus Homo: why should he have introduced any other concept? This is what Bory seems to think:

> For, up until now, we have studied the history of Man with only some precautions determined by considerations which are external to science ... the authors the most convinced of the truths I will try to expose never positively admitted that there may be various species in what was considered as *the* species par excellence, coming out of a single root. *Most of them thought they could escape the difficulty by referring to "races", most likely forgetting that the word "race", synonymous with lineage, is usually used to talk about domestic animals* (Bory de Saint-Vincent, 1825, p. 277. My translation and emphasis).

In my opinion, Bory's claim is largely true: the concept of "race" has been strategically used by monogenist natural historians to resolve the existing tension between monogenism and the observation of relatively stable differences inside human species. "Race" gave them the possibility to grasp, beyond such differences which *logically* would have made different species, a kind of *genealogical continuity*. They could escape in this way the logical alternative between species and varieties by insisting on *the historical and biological materiality of genealogy*. And Bory is right to underline the fact that "race" first originates in the context of breeding and domestication. Indeed, it is through the reference to breeding, its mechanisms of alteration and production of "races", that this historical and biological materiality of genealogy has been investigated. To the logico-classificatory style of reasoning, which in natural history was deeply intertwined with the epistemological preeminence of botany, one may oppose a genealogical style of reasoning which founded its model on breeding practices and the domestication of animals. And if Linnaeus adequately represents the first, I believe Buffon may be associated with the second.

Kant was in all likelihood the first author to make clear this tension between what he himself called two different "method[s] of thinking" preceding the determination of the object of knowledge[30] (what I call "styles of reasoning").

[30] Kant, 1788, p. 38 of the Eng. trans. Such a quotation expresses perfectly what is a style of reasoning.

Kant largely relied on Buffon, but gave Buffon's claims a decisive epistemological status. I would like to insist on this point in order to make clear the opposition between two styles of reasoning in natural history, as well as to show the way in which race pertains to a *genealogical* style of reasoning[31]. In his response to some criticisms Georg Forster had leveled at his article on the "Determination of the concept of a human race" (1785), Kant made explicit several distinctions which he had earlier proposed concerning the way natural history should be carried out. Forster accused him of establishing, prior to any investigation, «a principle on the basis of which the natural scientist might even be led in the investigation and observation of nature» (Kant, 1785, p. 38), namely, of having determined *a priori* the directions of the observation through principles. Kant's answer is epistemologically decisive: *no observation can exist*, according to him, *without a tacit principle*, without a *method* orienting the investigation. As Kant pointed out:

> Indeed, Forster himself follows the lead of the Linnaean principle of the perseverance of the characteristics of the pollinating parts in plants, without which the systematic natural description of the plant kingdom would not be so gloriously ordered and widely extended as it is (Kant, 1785, p. 38).

Forster himself follows, prior to any observation, a specific style of reasoning, which is precisely the *Naturbeschreibung*, the mere *description* of Nature, which Kant opposes to the *Naturgeschichte,* the *history* of Nature. Of course, even such "description" implies actually a method that is a set of articulated schema under which natural phenomena and their relationships are to be grasped.

Kant first described these two methods in his essay "Of the different races of human beings" (1775-1777), where he criticized (in accordance with Buffon) a method of thought separating natural beings into "scholastic species". «Scholastic division proceeds by *classes* [*klassen*] [and] divide[s] the animals according to *resemblances* [*ähnlichkeiten*] [... It] provides a scholastic system to memory [... and] only aims at classifying creatures according to labels».[32] Kant clearly referred to (and even caricatured) what I called the *logico-classificatory style of reasoning* in natural history. According to this

[31] See on this point the analyses of Sloan, especially in Sloan, 1979.
[32] Kant, 1775-1777, p. 84 of the Eng. trans. I modified some parts of the translation to be closer to the German concepts.

perspective, natural beings share logical relationships of differences and resemblances; they coexist in collective units that are merely catalogues.

Kant systematically contrasts this style of thought with another, through which, according to him, one may obtain a "*natural* division" of beings, "grounded on the common law of *propagation*".[33] We must underline this point: natural reproduction constitutes the basis of this new system, and not in its Linnaean meaning (i.e. that the anatomical parts necessary to reproduction must be fixed and static); reproduction is here understood as a *dynamic function* (with historical depth), *as a process which creates lineages, establishes the constancy of characters and sorts differences as more or less constant*. As Kant puts it, this natural division considers natural beings according to their «strains [*Stämme*] [and] divide[s] animals according to their kinships [*verwandtschaften*], with reference to their power of reproduction [*Erzeugung*]»[34]. This is supposed to lead to «the natural science of origins»[35], wherein natural beings would be studied from the point of view of their lineages, original roots and derivations. To put it succinctly, such an approach defines a *genealogical perspective over natural beings* and grounds a natural classification over this genealogy.

It is *only* in this perspective that the concept of "race" finds an appropriate place. Kant understands this point very well:

> What is a race? The word certainly does not belong in a *systematic description of nature*, so we presume that the thing itself doesn't exist in nature. However, the *concept* this expression designates is nevertheless well established in the reason of every observer of nature who, in *order to account for a self-transmitted peculiarity that appears in different interbreeding animals but which does not lie in the concept of their species*, supposes a conjunction of causes placed originally in the *line of descent* of the species itself. The fact that the *word* "race" does not occur in the *description* of nature (but instead, in its place, the word "*variety*"), cannot keep an observer from finding it necessary from the view point of the *history* of nature.[36]

Kant's analysis is of the utmost importance. As he says, in the *systematic description* of natural history (*Naturbeschreibung*), the notion of "race" does

[33] *Ibid.*
[34] *Ibid.*
[35] Kant, 1788, p. 40 of the Eng. trans.
[36] *Ibid.* I have somewhat modified the translation to be closer to the German concepts. Emphasis is mine, except for "concept" (Kant's emphasis).

not have any place. The only relevant notions are that of "variety" and "species". But the same is not true if one adopts another point of view which, beyond logical description, seeks to grasp the *historical and biological materiality* of Nature (*Naturgeschichte)*, and analyses natural beings from the standpoint of their origins and the mechanisms of transmission of their peculiarities. In this latter case, the concept of "race" appears as necessary and the level of race is clearly distinct from that of *species*. But here, the species itself does not designate a logical but rather a *genealogical* entity (Kant distinguishes between the *species naturalis*, defined by a common origin and a power of reproduction, and the *species artificialis* that is a scholastic meaning, wherein beings share common characteristics and are classified together).[37] "Race" defines a *relatively stable difference* (established through the fact that it is *transmitted over generations*) but not on the same level as that of the natural species: it remains *inside of it*. This is why it is such a strategically interesting level for monogenism: it defines a relative constancy of characteristics, transmitted over generations, *but inside a same species*. In any case, its own relative constancy makes classification possible (which is not the case with other kinds of "varieties").[38] According to Kant, this peculiar level of "race" creates a legitimate concept which is a regulative idea in Reason's attempt to make a *history* of Nature. And where do we find arguments to establish this idea? Kant is very clear on this point: we find such arguments in the "different interbreeding animals", and indeed, all problems related to *breeding* can now be integrated into the *history* of Nature.

## IV. The Concept of "Race" in "Variétés dans l'Espèce Humaine"

As I have already stated, Kant explicitly derived his considerations from Buffon and especially from his *Premier discours: de la manière d'étudier et de traiter l'histoire naturelle*.[39] It is now time for us to turn to Buffon in order to

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 50.

[38] I will not insist here on Kant's particular system of "races", which have been very well studied by Sloan or Bernasconi. Kant perfectly exemplifies how the whole undifferentiated field of "*variae*" could have been marked off and differentiated according to the criterion of reproduction and genealogical perspective. See his conceptual distinctions of "*Rassen*", "*Spielarten*", "*Varietäten*" and "*Schlag*" according to this criterion in Kant (1775-1777).

[39] Buffon, 1749a, pp. 3–65.

demonstrate – how P.R. Sloan rightly argued[40] – that Buffon was at the source of the concept of "race". I hope it is clear that, in stating this, I do not mean to determine whether Buffon was (or was not) *racist*. I seek to argue, in accordance with Sloan and in opposition to other scholars,[41] that he carried out many transformations within natural history's principles that established the concept of "race" in its *epistemological possibility* and its *logical necessity*. Such a demonstration would require many pages. I can only sketch here the most important points. I will focus first on the controversial existence of a concept of "race" in the article *Variétés dans l'espèce humaine* (1749), and will then show how this concept must be understood in the context of a more general approach which one can trace through the whole *Histoire naturelle*, and which is a decisive element in the formation of the concept of "race".

According to many scholars, Buffon indiscriminately makes use of the notions of "race", "species", "varieties" and "nations"[42] in his article *Variétés dans l'espèce humaine*. I do not share this view. Even if I am ready to admit that Buffon sometimes uses "species" as a mere "collection of individuals" without any taxonomic meaning, and that he sometimes uses "race" in the same way, I believe that, in a vast majority of cases, "race" characterized a *well-defined level of reality* which does not correspond to "species", "varieties" or "nations". If this question is of particular importance, it is because Buffon's article is clearly the first article within the field of natural history in which the notion of "race" is used with such "statistical" regularity (almost 50 occurrences). Is this regularity merely a question of quantity, or is it also *a regularity of definition,* i.e. a *concept*? I would like to prove that it is the latter by highlighting four main points.

Firstly, in many occurrences, "race" is clearly distinguished from "varieties" or "nations". It defines a *certain level of similarity and constancy in characteristics despite local variations or national traits*. For instance, the different Lapps (i.e. Borandians, Zembians, Samoyeds and so on) "seem to be

[40] See Sloan, 1979, p. 118. Many points I develop in this article are close to Sloan's interpretations of Buffon, even if Sloan prefers to underline the philosophical sources of Buffon while I am stressing his importance in the introduction of the vocabulary of genealogy, breeding and nobility in natural history, a thing Sloan strangely neglects, although he describes perfectly how Buffon created the conditions of possibility of this insertion.

[41] See for instance Blanckaert, 2003. The blindness to Buffon's importance in the formation of the concept of "race" is particularly strong in France.

[42] See for instance the introduction, by M. Duchet, to Buffon, 1971, p. 32; or Blanckaert, 2003, p. 135.

*of the same race*" despite their differences, because they share the same general physical characters (eyes, hair, faces) and the same customs. This does not mean that there are no "varieties" among them, but rather that «if these peoples differ, it is only a question of more and less» (Buffon, 1749c, pp. 371–373).[43] The same remark may apply to all peoples from the "Tartar race", who may differ in various aspects but «*share so many similarities that we have to consider them as being part of the same race* ... the essential characters of their *race* always remain» (pp. 379–384). "Race" thus defines a *principle of resemblance and continuity which persists beyond differences* and allows one to classify different nations together. To Buffon, for instance, the Japanese, Chinese and Tartars, in spite of their notable differences, are «*similar enough that we can consider them as part of the same and unique race*» (p. 389). It is clear that "race" is an entity broader than nations or mere varieties, which is grounded on a community of characteristics.

Secondly, if race defines a principle of continuity beyond varieties, *it differentiates on the other hand some broad entities from others*. It traces *discontinuities* between peoples, even between peoples who live *in the same climates*. The Lapps for example constitute a «*race* ... very different from the others,» «examining all the peoples that live in the neighborhood of this long strip of earth inhabited by the Lapp race, we'll see that *none has any relationship to this race*» (pp. 372, 378). The same applies to the Tartars who radically differ from the Russians who live close to them, even if both peoples mixed their blood: «Tartar blood mixed ... with Oriental Russians [*but*] *this blending did not entirely erase the characteristics of this race* because one finds many Tartar faces among Muscovites» (p. 384). As we can see, what actually defines the difference of race is a *difference of blood and lineages*. Put differently, "race" may thus distinguish broad human entities according to their lineages and origins. This fact appears very clearly when Buffon analyzes the peoples of Southeast Asia. In the same climate and sometimes even on the same island, "race" becomes a principle of description and sorting of differences according to genealogies and origins. For instance, people from Sumatra and Malacca are «from the same race» while they «seem to be from a race different» to those from Java. This is because the people of Malacca and Sumatra «originate from India, those from Java from the Chinese, except for those white and blond men called Chacrelas, who must come from Europeans»

[43] Emphasis and all translations from Buffon are mine.

(pp. 396–397, 419). Moreover, concerning the American Indians, Buffon states that they all form «the same and unique race of men» because «they come from the same stem and preserve until today the characteristics of their race without great variation» (p. 510).

That "race" designates relatively constant characteristics transmitted through generations, so that it can differentiate major lineages among human species, now appears to be clear in the way Buffon contrasts Ethiopians to Nubians. According to Buffon, Ethiopians' «natural color ... is brown or olive-greenish, as South Arabians *from which they probably descend*,» while Nubians are «*real* blacks,» «*original* blacks [noirs *d'origine*]». Or, as he says, «Nubians ... are black and *originally black* ... and they will remain perpetually black as long as they inhabit the same climate and do not mix with Whites; Ethiopians on the other hand ... *come from Whites*» (pp. 449–452 & 482). As Ethiopians and Nubians are living in the same climate, it is clear that only their *origin* here constitutes their racial difference. How does Buffon reconcile such a statement with his theory of the production of races through the influence of climates and life conditions? This question is not very difficult to answer, but it is important concerning the very concept of "race". Climate and life conditions act *over time*. They are *transmitted through generations and inscribed in the body through genealogy*. For instance, «the germ of blackness is transmitted to children by their fathers and mothers so that in any country where a Negro may be born, he will be as black as if he were born in his own country.» (p. 523) Over time, relatively "constant races" are created this way. It means that, according to Buffon, history, kinships and transmission of characters over generations creates *relatively constant varieties transmitted over time*. As he says, such alterations became:

> Varieties in the species because *they became more general, more sensible and more constant* through the continued action of the same causes; because *they have been transmitted and are still transmitted through generations and generations as deformities and mothers and fathers' illnesses which are passed to their children*; and because, giving the fact they must have been produced originally by the concourse of external and accidental causes, *they must have been reinforced and have gained constancy through the action of time* and the continual influence of the same causes (p. 530).

Here, the concept of "race" understood as a relatively constant succession of varieties transmitted along generations inside the human species is clearly

enunciated. The relative constancy of these "varieties" is grounded in genealogy.

A final point must be added, which I believe to be of great importance. If it is indeed true that "race" defines a particular level of varieties, whose constancy is based on reproduction through generations, then Buffon can define *a criterion to distinguish between "race" and mere "accidental variation"*, according to the *capacity for reproduction*. This is precisely how Buffon differentiates between monstrosities or pathologies, and racial characteristics. In contrast with Voltaire and Linnaeus, for instance, Buffon does not believe that Albinos are a species. They do not even, as he puts it, «form ... a particular and distinct race»: they are representative merely of «a kind of disease» which concerns only isolated individuals «who have degenerated from their race because of an accidental cause» (pp. 500–501). The same holds true for «dwarfs and giants [...*who*] must be considered *as mere individual and accidental varieties, and not as permanent differences able to be produced by stable races*» (p. 509). While in Linnaeus, monstrosities and wild child were put at the same level with other human differences (the level of "*variae*"), Buffon clearly introduces differences of level between "*races*", that is relatively constant *variae* transmitted over generations, and monstrosities or other heterogeneous characters, considered as *mere accidental varieties*. This differentiation is of the utmost importance. As I stated previously, varieties, in order to be considered worth studying in natural history, had to be turned into races, that is, had to obtain a relative constancy throughout a genealogical process of transmission and fixation. This operation is clearly realized in Buffon's analysis.[44] He makes a very important distinction between those characteristics able to be transmitted over generations and those which will not produce a race, thus remaining merely accidental (or pathological) varieties or monstrosities.[45]

## V. Race and Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*

Having, I hope, convincingly proven that we find the concept of "race" clearly (if not unproblematically) defined in the "Variétés dans l'espèce humaine", I

[44] The fact these characters are said to be reversible over other generations (at least 8 generations for the Blacks for instance) doesn't modify anything on this respect.

[45] A detailed history should mention the works of Maupertuis to whom Buffon is indebted in these analyses.

would like to demonstrate how this concept finds its place in the broader project of the *Histoire Naturelle*. Indeed, it is not enough to establish that Buffon had already elaborated a consistent concept of "race" in 1749. We must still seek to understand how this concept could enter natural history and acquire a *taxonomical status*, in such a way that it became a basis for classification. As I previously argued, the integration of "race" in natural history required at least four conditions to be met. 1. The *subordination of the classificatory style of reasoning to the genealogical style of reasoning*, that is, the conversion of logical and taxonomical entities into genealogical ones, grounded on kinships and lineages. Common nouns in natural history must not be mere logical family names but *real, genealogical family names*. 2. The reorientation of natural history according to the *process of reproduction* and transmission of characteristics over generations, which presupposed a *theory of reproduction* to be the basis of the natural order.[46] 3. The *reversal of the epistemological threshold barring access to the undifferentiated realm between species and individuals*. This reversal concretely means that varieties may be considered as one of the main fields of investigation in natural history, and that what counts in the knowledge of nature is what goes on at the level between the individual and the species or the genus. 4. The necessity, when dealing with these questions, of referring to all *practical knowledge concerning breeding and the domestication of animals* as the touchstone of knowledge on natural beings.

It is not difficult to show that it is in Buffon's project that, for the first time in natural history, these conditions all met. Let begin with the two first ones. We may first recall that Buffon vehemently criticized Linnaeus for the *artificiality* and *arbitrariness* of his system, which Buffon compared to mere catalogues or «dictionaries where one finds nouns sorted in an order relative to an idea and, consequently, as arbitrary as the alphabetic order» (Buffon, 1749a, pp. 9 & 24). To Buffon, classical taxonomy proceeds on nothing but «truths of definition», which are relative to our understanding and define «ideal identity having no reality» (pp. 53–54). Conversely, he claims to carry out two processes in his *Histoire Naturelle*: firstly, «an exact *description* and true

[46] I will not insist here on Buffon's theory of reproduction, which is very well known, but it is clear that a coherent concept of "race" supposes the notion of the transmission of characters over generations. It is not by accident that those who, in my view, played a decisive part in the maturation of "race" as a concept in natural history (Maupertuis, Buffon and Blumenbach) are the main critics of the theory of the preexistence of germs. The case of Kant is rather more complex.

history of *any singular thing*» (p. 29). For him, *individuals are the ontological base of Nature* and «the more we multiply the divisions in natural productions, the closer we'll be to truth, because nothing exists really in nature but individuals, and genus, orders and classes exist only in our imagination» (p. 38).

I would like to underline the fact that, in this text, neither *species* nor *race* are said to be *imaginary divisions*.[47] Buffon has good reason to omit them. He too, like every natural historian, seeks to go beyond mere singular descriptions of individuals and to transform, as Foucault put it, proper nouns into *common nouns*:

> we need to elevate ourselves to something bigger and worthier [...*and*] it is here, precisely, that we need *a method* [*but...not*] *a method which merely sorts words arbitrarily: we need the kind of method that has its basis in the very order of things* (Buffon, 1749a, p. 51).

Herein lies the main difference between Buffon and other taxonomists: in order to sort natural beings into a system, Buffon does not rely on mere *logical relationships*. He seeks rather to base his system on *real* and *natural* relationships, which he calls "*physical truths*". For Buffon, these physical truths refer to a *probabilistic conception of certainty*: their units are *individual facts* and they designate the almost *infinite probability of repetition* of a fact that has always occurred up until now. That is, they are «a *sequence of similar facts* ... a *frequent repetition* and *uninterrupted succession* of the same events». So: (i) Their ontological basis is in *individuals*; (ii) Their form is the *succession over time of the similarities* in these individuals; (iii) They define a *constancy* which is *inscribed in history* and which is only a *relative* constancy, always *susceptible to deviations* or accident. As Buffon (1777, p. 48) says, «by always, I mean over a very long period of time and not an absolute eternity». To put it clearly, while classical natural history, when it sought to go beyond knowledge of individuals, had to refer to the categories of logic in order to create a general classification of natural beings, Buffon wants to stick to natural relationships between individuals, identifying these natural relationships in the

[47] Contrary to the claims of Blanckaert who said that, to Buffon, "race", "species" and even "nation" (sic) are "mere logical categories, useful boxes where one can sort the different natural objects" (2003, p. 135). Neither species, nor race nor *a fortiori* nations are considered by Buffon as mere logical categories.

relative constancy of repetition of the same facts over time. Here is the point of entry for the whole *genealogical style of reasoning* inside natural history.

Because, where are we to find such a physical truth in Nature? The answer is self-evident: in the *species*. But the species is understood here as the *relatively constant succession of characteristics along generations*, i.e. as a *genealogical and historical entity grounded in the process of reproduction*. As Buffon (1749b, p. 3) says:

> it is not the individual who is the most marvelous thing in nature but rather the succession, the repetition and the duration of species ... this faculty to produce a similar being ... this kind of unit always remaining and which seems eternal.

It is very important to stress that species, here, does not refer to a mere *logical collection* of similarities but rather to their *succession* over time. Moreover, this succession does not refer simply to a statistical repetition: it is based on the *genealogical transmission of a type*, i.e. of some characteristics, which are inherited over time from the species' ancestor. This means that Buffon's natural taxonomy will be subordinated to a *genealogical style of reasoning*, and will depend on a theory of the transmission of characteristics over time.

Reasoning this way, Buffon claims to replace the imaginary (logical) "mold" he denounced in the taxonomists' minds with a *real mold* which is transmitted from the first ancestor of the species. «The first animal, the first horse for instance, is the external model and the interior mold on which every horse, which existed and will exist, were and will be formed» (Buffon, 1753a, p. 216). This means that the natural historian has to be a genealogist and must try to find, beyond all the accidental deviations accumulated by Nature over time, «the characteristic of the primitive race, the *original race*, the mother race of all races». Speaking of dogs, Buffon (1755a, p. 193) claims that he seeks to identity the race which is «the true dog of Nature», the one «which must be considered as the root and model of the whole species». And Buffon does exactly the same thing with horses and men. For instance, to him, there is no doubt about the fact that it is in Europe that one must take the «true natural color of man»,

> *the model and unit to which all the other nuances of color and beauty are to be evaluated*, the two extremes being equally far from truth and beauty. Here live the most standardized peoples ... who are also the most beautiful and well-shaped in the world (Buffon 1749c, p. 528).

I do not want to place too great an emphasis on this question, but we must remember that, for Buffon, each species has a natural mold, which is inherited from its first ancestor, and that the various races are nothing but the *degenerations* or *alterations* from this mold that have been accumulated and transmitted over generations.

Natural history's system will consequently be organized by *kinships*. When Buffon speaks of "*succession*", we must understand this term almost in its juridical sense, that of the *succession of inheritance*. Individuals from the same species are not to be seen as sharing a mere logical collection of similarities: even the criterion of similarities and differences is subordinated to a *principle of transmission* which may establish real similarities but also *unmask* apparent ones. For instance, it is true that dogs are so visibly different that they may appear to be of different *species*, as Voltaire believed; but because they can propagate themselves together, they are actually from the same species. And even if the wolf, the fox and the dog look alike, they are not usually able to propagate together, and are thus from different species. The same goes for horses and donkeys. In Buffon's words:

> If the similarities, both external and internal, were even more important in animals than they are between donkeys and horses, it should not ... lead us to put them in the same family or to think they share a common origin; because if they came from the same root, if they were from the same family, we would be able to relate and unite them again through breeding (Buffon, 1753b, p. 383).

For Buffon, families should thus not to be understood as taxonomists usually understand them, that is as mere logical families: «these families are our own work ... we have made them in accordance with our own mind» (Buffon, 1753b, p. 384). No, a *true* family is a *lineage*; it implies degrees of kinships and a community of stock. Through Buffon's analysis, it is the whole vocabulary of kinship, the entirety of genealogical knowledge from nobiliary, juridical or breeding practices which enters natural history. For Buffon, one may even establish:

> An order of kinships between species as we allow one in families. Horse and mare will be brother and sister in species and parents of the first degree. The same for ass and jenny; but if one gives an ass to a mare, it would be only be as cousins in species and this kinship would thus be of the second degree; and the mule that they may produce, sharing both the species of the father and the mother, would be at the third degree in species (Buffon 1776, pp. 31–32).

This text is from the late Buffon. But where does he claim to take his reference for this system of kinship in species? The origin of this reference is in a «kinship which is better known: that of the different races within the same species» (Buffon 1776, p. 33). It is indeed through his analysis of "races" within the same species that all of this vocabulary of genealogy develops in Buffon's system. And its best illustration may be found in the way dogs are described. Buffon proposes a «table of the order of dogs» that he defines as «a table or, if one prefer, a kind of *genealogical tree* where one may grasp at a glance all the varieties» of dogs. To Buffon, the Sheepdog is the «stem of this tree» as it is the «true dog of nature».[48] Given the fact that these "varieties" are explicitly "*races*" (as we will see), we have here a very dense network of meanings referring to genealogy and kinships. With Buffon, the whole vocabulary of nobility and breeding becomes part of natural history. This extract on the Donkey exemplifies, for instance, this importation of the vocabulary of nobility:

> the ass is an ass and not a degenerate horse ... it is neither a stranger, nor an intruder nor a bastard; it has, like every other animal, its own family, species and rank; its blood is pure and even if its nobility is less glorious, it is as good and as old as that of the horse (Buffon 1753b, p. 391).

Now, if it is true that a species is nothing but the succession of characteristics transmitted over time from individuals to individuals throughout generations, then individuals, families, "races" (understood as lineages) and species are situated *on the same line*. As Foucault remarked concerning Darwin – but in a statement which is actually true since Buffon – individuals, races, species and (this will be Buffon's great hesitation) even natural genus are situated on the same thread or at the same level of reality, which is defined through *genealogy*. This implies that the epistemological threshold separating species from individuals is blurred, and that the thread between individuals and the species, constituted by the succession of similarities over generations, defines a fundamental field of investigations in natural history.

And it in this field that "race" came to define a *peculiar taxonomic level* distinct from both *variae* and species. This is very clear in the way "race" is used by Buffon and Daubenton in the *Histoire Naturelle*. One has to remember that what constitutes a species is a *relative* constancy of characteristics over generations. This means that Buffon can also distinguish *other levels of*

[48] Buffon 1755a, p. 225 . See the genealogical tree of dogs in annexes.

*constancy* between the quasi-anomic accidental variety and the quasi-absolute constancy of species. Therein lies the taxonomic level of "race". As Daubenton says about dogs: «the[ir] races are, so to speak, *acknowledged by Nature itself*, because *they remain constant along generations* and the characteristics which constitute them are the most natural to the species» (Daubenton 1755a, p. 232).[49] This means that species are not, despite what Buffon once said, «the only beings of Nature» beyond individuals: *races are too*. They define a *relative constancy* of characteristics which last for many generations, so that they form different lineages and permit *general distinctions within species*. They define a peculiar entity, a peculiar object of knowledge and a peculiar level of classification. This is why Daubenton can use them so frequently to organize his own descriptions, based on differences which are not mere individual variations but rather relatively constant types *within species*. The Pig, the Horse, the Goat and so on, show «different races [*within their*] species» (Daubenton, 1755b & 1755c, p. 75 & 125). And these differences of race are *more constant than mere varieties*: for instance, «differences and varieties of color [*in sheep*] are even more accidental than differences and varieties of *races*» (Buffon 1755b, p. 22). These characters of race are more constant because they are transmitted along generations. Sometimes, as in dogs, there is even «in the very nature of the species *a tendency to return to the characters that form the principal races*,» a «tendency to preserve and restore the characteristics of the principal races» (Daubenton, 1755a, p. 231, 233, emphasis is mine).

It seems to me very clear, in the light of such quotations, that "race" defines a peculiar level of natural reality in Buffon's *Histoire Naturelle*. I thus believe that it is quite difficult to argue, as Claude Blanckaert did, that Buffon has nothing to do with the emergence of a concept of *race* in natural history because he used only a concept of "variety", and that this concept of "variety" was antinomic with the concept of "race" as it later developed in natural history.[50] Conversely, it is precisely in Buffon's work that some "varieties"

[49] Emphasis is mine.

[50] See Blanckaert, 2003, p. 134. In truth, Blanckaert confuses, as is often the case, "race" and "*racism*". What he means to say is that Buffon's conception of "varieties" is antinomic with the definition of "racism" Blanckaert chooses to adopt – because of the reversibility of characters, monogenism and so on. But this is not the question: it seems to me unquestionable that, for human as for animals, it is in Buffon that one sees some "varieties" becoming "races" through the adoption of a genealogical point of view.

have become "*races*", that is, that they have acquired *the genealogical depth* which made "race" such a peculiar entity in natural history.

## VI. Annexes: the Two Styles of Reasoning in Natural History


Figure 1: Linnaeus, *Systema naturae*, 2[d] ed., Kiesewetter, 1740. Illustration of classificatory style.

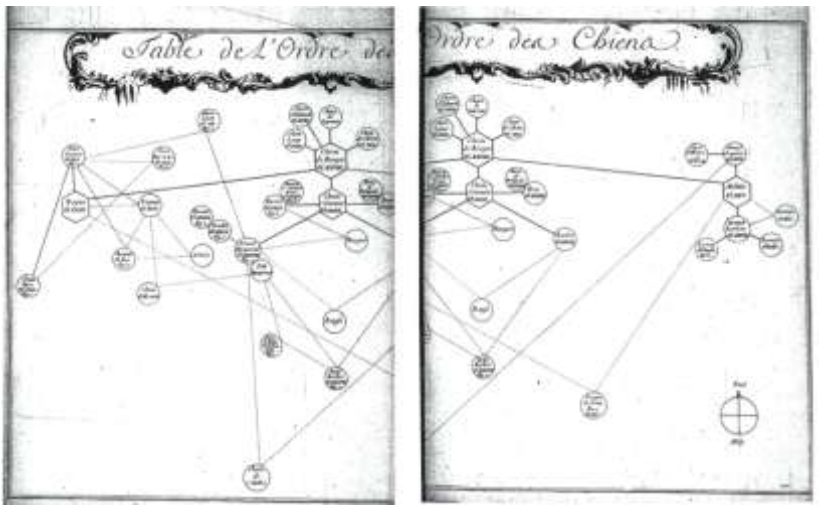


Figure 2: "Tableau de l'ordre des chiens" in *Histoire naturelle*, op. cit., *T. V*, "Le Chien". Illustration of the genealogical style. Note that to the genealogical tree is added a principle of geographical dispersion.

Figure 3: *Généalogie d'Abraham*, miniature, Saint-Sever, XIe siècle, from the *Commentaire de l'Apocalypse* of Beatus de Liebana, Paris, BNF, lat. 8878, f° 8. Compare with Buffon's genealogical tree.

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# Researching vs. Reifying Race: The Case of Obesity Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the reification of the concept of race in biomedical research. It combines philosophical analysis and a quantitative approach to investigate the ways in which the reification fallacy may occur in race research, thereby providing theoretical legitimacy to the misuse of scientific research. It examines the prevalence of obesity in the US and some African countries as an empirical case to guide a conceptual analysis. The paper suggests that, to avoid the reification of race, researchers need to be more aware of the fact that continental genetic clusters do not necessarily correspond to the genotypic partitions of interest in therapeutic reaction or disease etiology, and need to take seriously the phenotypic variability of breeding populations within continents.

## I. Introduction

Biomedical race research continues to spark controversies because of its problematic epistemic foundations and potential negative externalities. But because researchers often use racial categories as placeholders for human

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population substructures,[1] race research may, under certain conditions, positively impact population health. Yet even the most optimistic race researcher might still concede that this type of research may lead, at the very least, to racial stereotyping. However, in the case of racial stereotyping for example, it is clear that race researchers do not have control over third-parties' uses of their findings. Nevertheless, they have an obligation to avoid providing inadvertently theoretical legitimacy to the misuse of their research. A race researcher may unwittingly provide theoretical ground for misuses of his/her research results if the study commits, for instance, what is called the reification fallacy. Generally speaking, the fallacy of reification consists of erroneously attributing an objective independent basis to a notion that is merely an abstraction (Whitehead, 1925a; 1925b; 1929). As we shall see later in detail, the fallacy of reification of race is defined as a mistaken attribution of an objective biological basis to race (Gould, 1996; Duster, 2005).

Actually, the reification of race in scientific research has the potential to affect negatively medical practice itself. It may for example prevent a health professional from tailoring treatment to the individual needs of a patient because of racial assumptions. Thus racial assumptions about sickle cell anemia (see section II below) lead to misdiagnoses and various negative therapeutic consequences including «ineffective pain treatment» (Royal et al., 2011, p. 391). There is thus a need to subject race research to stringent methodological and ethical constraints (Maglo, 2010, 2012). To be sure, the reification of race takes many different forms in biomedical research even if all these forms may appear to be underwritten by an implicit belief that race is a natural biological fact in light of human evolutionary history. In fact, the possibility of determining continental ancestry in genomics has recently given a new momentum to biological race realism, or the contention that race is a natural category and therefore is rooted in biological reality. In this view, racial categories pick out distinct evolutionary kinds of humans. Biological race realism has sometimes served as a means to justify theoretically the use of race in biomedical research (Burchard et al., 2003; Risch et al., 2002). We argue that biomedical race research does not require a theoretical grounding in a realist framework and that, to avoid the reification fallacy, researchers should

[1] The term population substructure refers to the underlying genetic variation between subsets or subgroups within a population. The variation may be due to factors such as mating and migration patterns, mutation, etc.

use race, when need be, parsimoniously in an instrumentalist framework merely as a problem-solving conceptual device.

Accordingly, we have chosen to examine in what follows the ways in which the reification fallacy may occur in race research by studying obesity prevalence in various populations. Obesity is a complex trait influenced by multiple interactions between genetic and environmental factors (Martin, Woo, & Morrison, 2010). Yet social attitudes towards body image vary across time and space. But body mass index (BMI) has health implications, and health considerations are paramount in obesity research. Thus, the "obese" person may not only be subjected to negative social attitudes towards body size but s/he also may suffer from adverse clinical effects of the "obese" body. Nonetheless, rather than the esthetical standards associated with body image, it is the scientific measure in terms of BMI and its clinical correlates that concerns us here. Obesity research is particularly suitable for probing the reification fallacy because although it is a common condition, its incidence rates vary significantly among human populations. The question then is how we should go about researching this variation without reifying race.

For example, we may report some of the results of our study about obesity with the following statement: «we found that black women have higher incidence rates of obesity than white women». Statements such as this are typical of scientific race research reports. Yet not only would our statement be misleading but it may, even more so, be fraught with the reification fallacy if the study were conducted only on the US population as is often the case in race research.[2] Indeed, even though obesity prevalence tends to be higher among African American women compared to European American women in our study (see Fig. 1), we also found that obesity rates in many African populations (see Table 1) are far lower than those of European American women and, hence, of European American men. Combining then empirical methods and philosophical analysis,[3] we identified four major potential forms of reification in biomedical race research. These are: reification by mean-thinking, reification by cluster stability rule violation, reification by molecular

[2] Some researchers attempt to alleviate these concerns by specifying in their reports for example "US blacks", "US whites", etc. So we are not arguing for a complete ban on the use of racial categories. We only recommend that researchers be more alert to the potential of the reification fallacy and to the conditions of an appropriate use of these terminologies (for more details, see section IV).

[3] The method adopted in this paper – which consists of combining empirical investigation, normative ethical inquiry and conceptual analysis – has been dubbed elsewhere "axiological empiricism" (Maglo, 2010; 2012).

reductionism and reification by analysis of variance (ANOVA) epistemic naturalization. We explain each of these forms of reification in detail in section IV. Suffice it here to say that by ANOVA epistemic naturalization, we refer to the claim that contemporary statistical and computational methods vindicate race as a biological category having a regular predictive value in biomedicine.

The paper is an interdisciplinary paper articulated in three main parts. We first analyze the historical and theoretical issues surrounding the putative biological reality of the concept of race and its reification in scientific research. We show that even genuine scientific discoveries, when cashed out in questionable theoretical and ethical frameworks, may lead to the reification of race and cause harms. Then, we present empirical evidence about the prevalence of obesity in the US and in some African countries. The results of this empirical investigation, particularly the findings about the variability in obesity incidence rates within and between populations across continental regions, set the stage for the identification of potential forms of reification of the concept of race in biomedical research. Finally, we discuss the issue of reification in connection with the role of continental genetic ancestry in race research. Here, we demonstrate the importance for biomedical researchers to take seriously the philosophical implications of phenotypic plasticity, a phenomenon linked with the discovery that gene expression may depend on environmental conditions.

## II. Researching Race: The Lingering Ethical And Theoretical Framework Conflict

Concerns about the reification of race in research are not abating in the post genomic era. Critics worry that improvements in human biotechnologies simply increased the risk of fallacious attributions of a biological reality to a problematic concept that has ambiguous meanings. Already in the pre-genomic era, some researchers complained about the ways in which statistical methods such as factor analysis[4] were being used to reify, for example, IQ in race research. The issue was not that factor analysis was impotent in proving the validity of the IQ construct in race research. The point of contention was

[4] Factor analysis refers to a statistical method which takes a number of correlated variables and seeks to discover if the observed variables can be explained in terms of a smaller number of unobserved variables (see Gould, 1996, for an in-depth discussion in connection with the issue of the reification of race).

rather that the mathematical validity of the like constructs were cashed out in an unwarranted realist framework (Gould, 1996). In the post genomic era, criticisms of reification in race research unite disciplines ranging from the biological sciences and the health sciences to the social sciences and the humanities (Gannett, 2004; Duster, 2005; Smedley & Smedley, 2005; Shields et al., 2005; Cooper, 2005; Bibbins-Domingo & Fernandez, 2007; Bolnick, 2008; Oubré, 2011). Post genomic era critics of the reification of race take aim at what the sociologist Troy Duster called the «molecular reinscription of race» (Duster, 2006) which in the main leads to attributing a «misplaced genetic concreteness» (Duster, 2005, p. 1051) to the concept of race.[5]

Yet like their pre-genomic predecessors, post-genomic era critics of the reification of the concept of race do not deny that biotechnological, statistical and computational methods increasingly yield crucial and actionable biomedical information about human population differences. Rather, they challenge potentially harmful policy recommendations of race research and the realist ontological status accorded to race in the biological and biomedical

[5] Duster's notion of "misplaced genetic concreteness" is an appropriation of Whitehead's definition of the fallacy of reification as a "fallacy of misplaced concreteness", with concreteness inferred from abstract logical considerations (Whitehead, 1925b, p. 51). Below, we re-appropriate this Whitehead-Duster's notion of "concreteness vs. abstraction" to redefine the fallacy of the reification of race in general terms. In fact, Whitehead's definition of this fallacy occurred in part in the context of the philosophical revival of criticisms of the conceptual legacy of 17th Century science. Key to the dispute was a charge pressed by the French philosopher Henri Bergson against the philosophy of nature stemming particularly from Newtonian mechanics. Bergson claimed in various essays that the great success of physics was accompanied by an inevitable distorted representation of nature. The distortion consisted of the intellectual "objectivation" or localization of things in space as mere inert material beings. His target was particularly the mechanistic explanation of life, free will and consciousness made possible, according to him, by the triumph of the theoretical framework of classical mechanics. He mounted pointed attacks against the "spatialisation" of time conceived as reversible and a material object (receptacle) divisible into parts (Bergson, 1960, 1998, 2004). The resurgence of this debate over the modern scientific conception of nature led by Bergson and his followers like Édouard Le Roy prompted reactions by scholars such as the French mathematician and physicist Henri Poincaré (Poincaré, 2001, pp. 315–53). It is in this context that Whitehead, for one, wrote: «[...] I agree with Bergson in his protest: but I do not agree that such distortion is a vice necessary to the intellectual apprehension of nature. I shall in subsequent lectures endeavour to show that this spatialisation is the expression of more concrete facts under the guise of very abstract logical constructions. There is an error; but it is merely the accidental error of mistaking the abstract for the concrete. It is an example of what I will call the "Fallacy of Misplaced Concreteness". This fallacy is the occasion of great confusion in philosophy. It is not necessary for the intellect to fall into the trap, though in this example there has been a very general tendency to do so». (Whitehead, 1925b, pp. 50–1; see also Whitehead, 1925a; Whitehead, 1929)

sciences (Stevens, 2003; Duster, 2005; Ossorio & Duster, 2005). Consider for the moment the pre-genomic example of sickle cell anemia. The understanding of the causal mechanism of sickle cell trait, the HbS mutation due to selective pressures created by malaria infected environments, had a major impact on biomedical research and on fundamental implications for evolutionary biology in the mid-twentieth century. Indeed, the publication of "Sickle Cell Anemia, a Molecular Disease" in 1949 by Linus Pauling and his colleagues at Caltech set the stage for molecular medicine (Pauling, Itano,et al.,1949). As Pauling himself later noted, «sickle cell anemia is the first disease to have been called molecular disease» (Pauling, 1968, p. 268). The discovery of the molecular basis of this epidemiological condition raised hopes for the emergence of the era of molecular treatments. The concept of a molecular medicine arose partly in this optimistic climate. «Molecular medicine may, in one sense, be said», Pauling wrote, «to have originated in 1949» (Pauling, 1968, p. 268; see also Braun, 2002; Fullwiley, 2008; Swensen et al., 2010).

Yet Pauling, the chemistry Nobel Prize Award Winner, who clearly knew the difference between sickle cell carrier status and disease status and who also knew that, because sickle cell anemia is an autosome recessive disease, a child of two heterozygote parents has only 25% chance of being homozygote and therefore of developing the disease, wrote:

> I have suggested that there should be tattooed [sic] on the forehead of every young person a symbol showing a possession of sickle cell gene or whatever other similar gene, such as the gene for phenylketonuria, that he has been found to possess in single dose. If this were done, two people carrying the same seriously defective gene in single dose would recognize the situation at first sight, and would refrain from falling in love with one another. It is my opinion that legislation along this line, compulsory testing for defective genes before marriage, and some form of public or semi-public display of this possession, should be adopted (Pauling, 1968, p. 269).

Pauling explained his stance on the issue by appropriating the following words of his colleague Emile Zuckerkandl: «The probability of twenty five percent of giving birth to a grossly defective child is too great to allow a combination of ignorance and free enterprise in love to take care of the matter» (Pauling, 1968, pp. 269–70). The controversy that ensued from Pauling's public policy recommendation contributed very little to ameliorating public perceptions of this disease (Markel, 1997). However, controversial public health policies

need not derive only from genetic models of disease.[6] For instance, it has recently been suggested that children of obese parents be placed under child protective services with the possibility of removal from the home by the government because obesogenic environments such as low physical activity and high calorie diets contribute to obesity. The researchers, at Harvard University and Children's Hospital Boston, justified their recommendation on the ground that severe pediatric obesity may be a form of child abuse and that governmental intervention may be in the child's best interest (Murtagh & Ludwig, 2011).

Beside the continuing ethical and policy considerations, sickle cell anemia has all along generated in race debate great interest for at least three reasons. First, although Mendelian genetics was superseded by molecular genetics, sickle cell anemia is often viewed as having supplied a paradigmatic explanation of disease *tout court*. It provided the so-called genetic model for disease in which environmental factors are negligible in the actual disease causation because disease is reduced to a molecular structure. Second, sickle cell anemia continues to be perceived by many as a racial disease. It seemed to have offered a racial disease model or, for critics, a model for the racialization of diseases. Third, not only are human races believed to have group-specific diseases but they are also considered biologically real. As such, they are divergent evolutionary groups. Thus human races are not construed as evolutionary divergent groups simply because the emergence of diseases such as sickle cell anemia is explicable by evolutionary mechanisms. They are considered evolutionary divergent groups because they are thought to reach a degree of genetic differentiation that appears to represent distinct evolutionary branches on the tree of life. Otherwise put, they are said to be approaching, to borrow Dobzhansky's words (Dobzhansky, 2008, p. 285), a «degree of existential concreteness» such that, in light of evolutionary biology, they behave like «independent actors in the drama of life». In philosophical terms, race is understood as a biological category because it refers to different evolutionary or natural kinds of humans.[7]

[6] Nonetheless, the lingering impact of the reification of race, stemming from the successful scientific elucidation of the molecular mechanisms of sickle cell anemia, still requires scrutiny (Royal, et al., 2011).

[7] For the applicability of the term "natural kind" to biological kinds particularly in the debate over race, see Hacking, 2005; Kitcher, 2007; Root, 2010; Maglo, 2010; Maglo, 2011.

To repeat, in the debate over the existence of biological human races, a human population is not said to be a biological race simply because a genetic mutation or a trait (advantageous or not) distinguishes it from other such human populations. After all, different haplotypes[8] explain sickle cell anemia in different countries such as Benin, Cameroun and Senegal. Moreover, the HbF level associated with the respective genetic mechanisms causing sickle cell anemia varies among these populations (Green et al., 1993). So we can, thanks to molecular genetic laboratory techniques, tell patients in one country from those in another country. Furthermore, while sickle cell anemia is not prevalent in some sub-Saharan African populations, one finds sickle cell anemia in European countries like Greece (see Maglo, 2010). But the reification of race masks these facts in various ways. Accordingly, we here define the fallacy of reification of race in general, by appropriating Whitehead-Duster's and Dobzhansky's[9] conceptions of the objective reality of a notion, as a «misplaced existential concreteness of a biological kind in the evolutionary history of life».

Avoiding race reification in biomedical research requires a determination of the methodological, theoretical and ethical conditions for an appropriate use of the concept of "race". Without such a careful and systematic rethinking of the ontological status of this concept and the adherence to stringent ethical guidelines, race-based biomedical research may not avoid causing harms. Thus some philosophers have recently advanced a non-realist conceptual framework for the putative biomedical functionality of this double-edge-sword concept (Hacking, 2005; Kitcher, 2007; Root, 2010; Maglo, 2011; Maglo, 2010). Roughly speaking, the emerging philosophical trend distinguishes natural or evolutionary kinds from instrumental kinds (also sometimes called interactive or pragmatic kinds). While evolutionary kinds are biological natural taxa that map evolutionary relationships, instrumental kinds are mere pragmatic groupings that reflect human practical interests and serve as tools for solving problems. As practical problem-solving tools, their use depends only on their explanatory value in a study. That is, they do not have *a priori* any epistemic privilege in research compared to other variables like socioeconomic status (SES), occupation, diet, etc. (See section III below for empirical evidence.)

[8] The term haplotype refers to a group of genetic variants (a set or bloc of single-nucleotide polymorphisms) which are typically inherited as a single unit.
[9] For more details about Dobzhansky's views, see Maglo, 2011.

The instrumentalist conceptual framework appears to capture the ways in which race has been used in epidemiological research since, at the very least, Darwin's 1871 essay in the *Descent of Man* (Darwin, 2004) was published. In fact, one explanation of the putative utility of race in biomedical research is that risk factors influencing disease causation are often unmeshed with population history (social and biological). Because race is a handy taxonomical label for population substructure below the species level, racial partitions may sometimes help probe environmental and biological factors that influence subpopulation health.[10] The question that remains to be answered concerns how racial groups are to be determined. In the biological sciences, some experts simply refer to breeding populations as races, the so-called geographic races. But in recent years the focus seems to have shifted to continental genetic clusters or ancestry. In biomedical research studies, the dominant practice is to use categories of self-identified race,[11] although methods such as molecular genetic correlates of race determination are also currently used. In medical settings, others' assessments of a subject's race, his/her mother's race are important as well (Root, 2010). The practice of collecting data along racial lines is encouraged by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) which requires racial categorization for all studies which receive NIH monies (National Institutes of Health, 2001). The contentious issue is that some have argued that self-identified race corresponds to genetic clusters, and thus that race defined at a social level picks out a biological reality (Risch et al., 2002; Burchard et al., 2003). But as suggested above, the possibility of determining continental genetic ancestry does not mean that genetic ancestral groups are divergent evolutionary kinds. Moreover, the determination of continental

[10] This is not scientifically unusual. That population history affects population health is something humans share in common with nonhuman animals. The heated theoretical dispute has however always been about the fact that the degree of genetic variation between subpopulations within the human species is smaller than the degree of subpopulation differentiation in many nonhuman animal species. While this, by no means, negates the use of animal models, it at first glance seems to negate the philosophical wisdom of applying the same concept, namely race, to different degrees of differentiation across species. But the problem of asymmetric application of a notion to deferring degrees of differentiation is not specific to the concept of race. For instance, the concept of species is not squarely applied to the same degree of differentiation across genera. Moreover, there is more than one species concept. This suggests that our philosophy of biological kinds needs to be grounded in a case-based epistemology (Maglo, 2012).

[11] The term self-identified race refers to how an individual perceives and reports his/her own ancestry or membership in a given racial group. In the US for example, one may identify herself or himself as "White", "Black", "Asian", "Native American", "Hispanic", etc.

genetic clusters is hotly disputed both from theoretical and empirical perspectives (Maglo, 2011).

This epistemic issue is compounded by ethical ones. As we move forward to the age of personalized medicine, individual members of subpopulations that are well researched are more likely to find therapies for their health conditions than are individuals in poorly studied subpopulations. Otherwise put, in the age of individualized medicine, health equality will require even more so research equality across subpopulations.[12] Continental ancestry is certainly a useful tool in biomedical research. Paradoxically however, a focus on continental group or race may mask the subtle ways in which gene expression and risk factors affect local populations or actual breeding units (see Table 1, Section III). To alleviate this problem, some researchers have recently advanced the idea of divisionary levels and of ethno-genetic layering to emphasize the necessity to go beyond "continental race" in research study design while at the same time taking into account ancestry (Maglo, 2010; Jackson, 2004). According to this approach, it is legitimate to study and compare populations according to their substructure level.[13] Yet we cannot generalize the result of such a study to a higher level of substructure by mere use of racial terminologies without running the risk of reification and of causing harms (Maglo, 2010). We will return to this issue in more details in Section IV of this paper. It is sufficient to have shown here the extent to which epistemic and ethical considerations are unmeshed in this debate and to have motivated our cross-continental comparative empirical study. Indeed, as we shall now see, this empirical investigation sheds light on problematic realistic assumptions about race in biomedical research particularly when one studies common and complex traits such as obesity.

[12] Yet more than 90% of all genome wide association studies, for example, are currently conducted on populations of European descent. It is already well known that population substructure can be a confounding factor in research.

[13] A continental population, as explained above, is made up with many genetically distinguishable subpopulations. For example, Sicilians may be considered genetically a subset of the Italian population. Thus the LCT gene controlling for lactose metabolism differentiates the Italian population into various regional subsets of populations. Yet the Italian population as a whole is genetically a subset of the Southern European population, and the LCT gene, among many other genetic variants, allows distinguishing for example Southern from Northern Europeans. But European populations, taken all together, constitute just a subset of the continental population called "Eurasian" in genetic studies (for more detail, see Maglo, 2010; 2011).

## III. Race, Obesity Research And Continental Populations

Obesity is an interesting example of how "race" may be useful to consider clinically but at the same time is fraught with reification potential. In the United States, it has long been recognized that individuals of African descent have on average greater body mass index (wt (kg)/ht $(m)^2$) than individuals of European descent (Williamson, 1993). In fact, the most recent NHANES survey found that the age adjusted prevalence of obesity in adults was 44.1 and 32.4 in African Americans and European Americans respectively (Flegal et al., 2010). These differences are greatest in females as 49.6% and 33.0% of African American and European American women respectively are obese while 37.3 and 31.9% of African American and European American men respectively are obese. These differences have also been magnified with the rapid escalation of the obesity epidemic. As shown in the figure based on data from the US health trend, differences between African Americans and European Americans were less in the 1970s, but by the 2000s have increased significantly. Furthermore, there is a similar difference between demographic groups and sex in pediatric cohorts (aged 12–19) where the prevalence of obesity (BMI ≥ 95th percentile of the CDC age sex adjusted standard) is 15.4 and 25.4 for European American and African American girls, respectively, and 19.1 and 18.5 for European American and African American boys, respectively (Ogden et al., 2006). As in adult populations that vary along demographic characteristics, the disparity in obesity rates among youths of varying demographic groups and across gender seems to be increasing through time (Molaison et al., 2010; Freedman et al., 2006).

Figure 1: Trends in Obesity (BMI ≥ 30) Prevalence among US Adults by Ancestry (EA – European American, AA, African American) and Sex

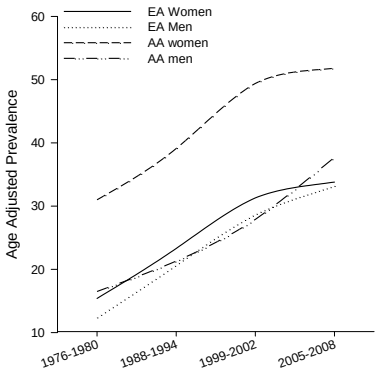
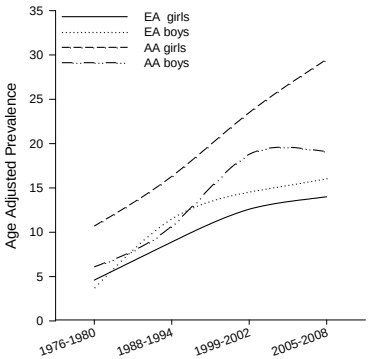


Figure 2: Trends in Obesity (CDC BMI % ≥ 95) among US Children by Ancestry (EA – European American, AA, African American) and Sex




These differences in prevalence are important clinically because obesity is known to be a risk factor for many cardiovascular disease risk factors including hypertension, type 2 diabetes, and dyslipidemia (Cossrow & Falkner, 2004). There are physiologic reasons for this relationship. For example, blood pressure is controlled in large part by the sympathetic nervous system, which when activated raises blood pressure. However, obesity is associated with increased sympathetic nervous system activity (Mancia et al., 2007; Grassi, 2006). For type 2 diabetes and dyslipidemia, it is thought that obesity creates a pro-inflammatory state that reduces insulin sensitivity and free fatty acid metabolism which can ultimately lead to type 2 diabetes and dyslipidemia (Heilbronn & Campbell, 2008; Steinberg, 2007).

However, there is also population level variation in the risk of these obesity related co-morbidities. As all three co-morbidities are associated with obesity, one might expect that African Americans would have a higher prevalence of these three particular co-morbidities given the increased prevalence of obesity. But, this is not true. While African Americans have higher rates of both hypertension (Dwivedi & Beevers, 2009) and type 2 diabetes (Carter, Pugh, &Monterrosa, 1996) than European Americans, they actually have lower rates of dyslipidemia (Sumner, 2009). There have been some treatment recommendations for hypertension based on race, but these recommendations are controversial (Izzo & Zion, 2011). Indeed, some of the differences in outcomes may be due more to cultural differences than genetic differences (Izzo & Zion, 2011; Scisney-Matlock et al., 2009). On the other hand,

knowledge of population variation may be very important in the treatment of dyslipidemia because dietary interventions to reduce a specific type of lipoprotein are less effective in African Americans than in European Americans (Furtado et al., 2010). Further, the impact of obesity on type 2 diabetes varies according to population. For the same BMI, African Americans actually have a lower risk of type 2 diabetes than do European Americans. This difference has been attributed to differences in fat distribution (Taylor et al., 2010), with European Americans having more central adiposity compared with African Americans (Camhi et al., 2011).

Many factors influence obesity and its related co-morbidities. The rates in obesity have increased over the past three decades due to changes in lifestyle (increased intake of high calorie foods plus decreased physical activity, otherwise known as the obesegenic environment). In the United States, low socioeconomic status is a major predictor of obesity and since African Americans have lower socioeconomic status on average (Kahng, 2010), much of the group differences may be due to cultural/environmental factors. There also may be cultural differences in the perception and recognition of obesity. For example in the United States, African Americans are significantly more likely to self-report obesity than are European Americans (Sivalingam et al., 2011). Yet, African Americans are not a homogeneous group but a subpopulation whose members sometimes show diverse ancestral paths. Indeed, one African American may trace his/her roots to West Africa and to Northern Europe, while another may trace his/her ancestry to West Africa and the Americas, and another to Southern Africa and Asia, etc.

Thus, to understand population level variation in the risk of obesity, it is important to study obesity rates across different continental regions. We have chosen here to focus on the African Continent. To look at the prevalence of obesity in Africa, we performed a PubMed[14] search on the terms "obesity", "prevalence", and "Africa" with publication dates from January 2006 – October 2011 limiting the results to humans. Four hundred and twenty four articles were identified. Table 1 provides an overview of the articles in which obesity prevalence was reported. The table is divided into obesity prevalence rates for adults and children. But in each age group there was a high degree of variability in prevalence estimates. A few studies examined the impact of urban

[14]PubMed (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed) is a free database on life and biomedical sciences. It includes the MEDLINE database and is maintained by the United States Library of Medicine.

versus rural living on the obesity prevalence and these studies found much greater rates of obesity in the urban compared to the rural settings. There was a single study (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010) that examined the prevalence regionally (East, West, North, South, and Middle Africa[15]). This study focused on pre-school children and found variability by region, with South Africa exhibiting the highest rates of obesity.

Table 1: Prevalence of Obesity in Some African Populations

| Region | Location | Prevalence | | | Study |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Adults | Children (0–5) | Children (6–18) | |
| Western Africa | Nigeria | 8.8–12.5 | 5.2 | 0.3–5.7 | (Olatunbosun, Kaufman, &Bella, 2011; Senbanjo & Oshikoya, 2010; Omuemu & Omuemu, 2010; Adegoke et al., 2009; Adedoyin et al., 2009; Senbanjo & Adejuyigbe, 2007; Ben-Bassey, Oduwole, &Ogundipe, 2007) |
| | Cameroon | 11.1 | | | (Kengne et al., 2007) |
| | Senegal | 8.3 –29.0 | | 9.3 | (Faye et al., 2011; Fontbonne et al., 2011; Macia, Duboz, &Gueye, 2010; Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Ghana | 16.0–35.0 | | | (Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Burkina | 4.0–28.0 | | | (Ouedraogo et al., 2008; Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Niger-Urban | 7.0–35.0 | | | (Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Benin | 18.0 | | | (Sodjinou et al., 2008) |
| | Regional | | 6.4 | | (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010) |

[15]"Middle Africa" is not a term commonly used in studies on Africa, and "Uganda" (see Table 1) is usually considered an East African country. However, our interest here is in the variability of obesity incidence rates.

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Eastern | Kenya | 5.1–38.0 | 3.8 | | (Mathenge, Foster, &Kuper, 2010; Gewa, 2010; Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009; Christensen et al., 2008) |
| | Tanzania | 12.0–32.0 | | 5.9 | (Mosha & Fungo, 2010; Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Malawi | 12.0–23.0 | | | (Ziraba, Fotso, &Ochako, 2009) |
| | Regional | | 6.7 | | (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010) |
| Northern | Sudan | | | 9.7–10.5 | (Nagwa et al., 2011; Salman, Kirk, &Deboer, 2010) |
| | Tunisia | 12.2 | | 4.3–5.7 | (Boukthir et al., 2011; Aounallah-Skhiri et al., 2011; Kamoun et al., 2008; Blouza-Chabchoub et al., 2006) |
| | Morocco | 29.9 | | | (El Rhazi et al., 2011) |
| | Regional | | 17.0 | | (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010) |
| Southern | Botswana | 9.5 | | | (Letamo, 2011) |
| | Mozambique | 6.8 | | | (Gomes et al., 2010) |
| | Regional | | 7.6 | 3.3–4.0 | (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010; Armstrong, Lambert, &Lambert, 2011; Reddy et al., 2009; Armstrong et al., 2006) |
| Middle | Uganda | 10.4 | | | (Baalwa et al., 2010) |
| | Regional | | 8.7 | | (de Onis, Blossner, &Borghi, 2010) |

These empirical results have various theoretical implications for race research. They shed light on the limitations of the continental race concept in biomedicine and on the necessity to provide conceptual, methodological and ethical guidelines for race research. Though one cannot rule out genetic factors in the understanding of common and complex phenotypic traits such as obesity, the apparent dependency of the latter on environmental conditions and the population variation that ensues deserve serious theoretical scrutiny.

## IV. Obesity, Ancestry And The Philosophical Implications Of Phenotypic Plasticity

Our empirical findings reveal a great variability in obesity incidence rates when one considers for example age and sex categories (see Fig. 1 & 2). But they also show the same variability between subpopulations regardless of continent of origin. Briefly, in spite of the difference between groups, there is 1) a significant variation around the population mean; and 2) risk factors associated with obesity vary even among populations sharing the same continental ancestry. These results indeed have many theoretical implications ranging from the stability of continental clusters to the ephemeral nature of developmental kinds. The variability observed here highlights the necessity to reengineer constantly population-thinking in biomedicine in order to avoid erroneous attribution of reality to mean differences in race research. We call here this potential form of erroneous attribution of reality to race "reification by mean-thinking".

### a) Individual Variation and Reification by Mean-Thinking

As mentioned above, our empirical study shows for example that although obesity is more prevalent among African Americans than European Americans, many African populations have lower incidence rates than European Americans (see Table 1). Moreover, among African populations themselves, obesity incidence varies according to regions and occupations, with higher rates observed in urban areas as compared to rural areas. The latter information suggests that higher economic status may be a predictor of obesity in some African countries while lower economic status may best predict obesity in the US. But leaving aside for now the issue of explanatory variables, other studies of obesity co-morbidities such as hypertension have reached results similar to ours. For instance, while African Americans have higher hypertension rates than European Americans, comparative studies between populations of African descent and of European descent showed that the lowest incidence rates of hypertension are found in Africa and the highest in Europe (Cooper et al., 2005). Other studies suggested that hypertension incidence varies among African immigrants with length of stay in the US (Borrell et al., 2008). Thus environmental factors and population history play an important role in disease onsets and health outcomes.

Nevertheless, taking into account population history in biomedical research does not imply that all individual members of a population equally share risk factors. Group differences are usually differences in the mean. As Ernest Mayr recently put it, «In a Darwinian population, there is a great variation around the mean. This variation has reality, while the mean value is simply an abstraction» (Mayr, 2002, p. 91). Mayr's observation is relevant not only to systematic zoology but to biomedical research as well. To be sure, the "mean" is a crucial statistic that informs and helps us collect valuable information about populations under study. However, the mean as such lacks concrete reality. Reification occurs when we lose sight of this phenomenon and attribute an objective independent reality to race. What we call here reification by mean-thinking consists of mistakenly attributing, in race research, a concrete natural basis to mean differences while disregarding individual variation. Otherwise put, this form of reification refers to a process whereby one substitutes mean-thinking to population-thinking in biological and biomedical research. Reification by mean-thinking, as an implicit negation of individual variation, has the potential to adversely affect medical practice and to undermine our endeavor to achieve personalized medicine. That said, our study also sheds light on an interconnected form of reification that pertains to the stability of continental clusters.

### b) Reification by Cluster Stability Rule Violation

In section III, we showed that continental subpopulations do not necessarily share the same clinical priorities with respect to obesity and its co-morbidities (see Table 1). This raises questions about the explanatory value of the continental race concept in biomedical research since a subpopulation from one continent may cluster at the phenotypic level with subpopulations on other continents. That is, membership in continental racial groups is not necessarily stable with respect to epidemiological conditions (Cooper et al., 2005). Otherwise put, the continental race concept cannot be considered a regular predictive tool. Yet researchers frequently label biomedical differences among Americans as "racial" differences even if they have not compared the American populations to populations in continents associated with their primary geographic regions of origin. To account for findings similar to the differences in obesity rates we observed here between African Americans and European Americans, some researchers may simply state that there are "racial"

differences between "blacks" and "whites". But if the terms "blacks" and "whites" refer to the populations categorized in the US census as "blacks" and "whites" or to continental populations defined in genetic studies, then that interpretation of the results will be, if not simply false, at the very least misleading. In effect, unless there are obviously objective scientific reasons to extrapolate from a subpopulation study to a continental population, researchers violate, by their use of racial terminologies what has been called the cluster stability rule. This rule states the following:

> It is legitimate in rational scientific practice to target a subset of a given continental population in research and clinical trials, but researchers who aim to generalize their findings (or those of other studies) to all the members of the continental cluster are obliged, by the membership stability burden of proof, to provide in their study designs tests for the stability of the cluster (Maglo, 2010, p. 366–7).

Cluster instability derives in part from the fact that a continental genetic grouping may not necessarily be the genotypic kind of interest in drug response or disease etiology of a given subpopulation and from the fact that phenotypic kinds do not necessarily correspond to genotypic kinds. Actually, with recent advances in biotechnology, we can now meaningfully subdivide our species into various genetic groups. Yet risk factors are not necessarily shared equally by members of even relatively "homogeneous" groups, if there is any such group. The point is even more obvious with so-called continental groups or races which encompass numerous breeding populations. Because gene expression may differ among subpopulations even when a causal variant, that is a variant that directly impacts a phenotype of interest, is common among them, the utility of genetic ancestry, rather than licensing sweeping inference about continental race, requires that particular attention be paid to smaller breeding units (see Table 1). Indeed, we may liken the condition of human breeding populations to that of many nonhuman animals. Take for example the field of mouse genetics. There are currently over 13,700 strains of mice (www.informatics.jax.org). Mice could be viewed as having many breeding populations. However, when genes have been knocked out of mice to determine the effect of a gene on a phenotype, the result can vary dramatically from no effect to lethal, depending on the background strain. These strains are housed in similar environmental conditions, suggesting that the difference in phenotype is likely due to underlying genetic differences between the strains.

Yet phenotypic variation may also occur despite genotypic similarity. Bluntly put, genotypic and phenotypic partitions do not always correspond for the same population.

The point we are trying to drive home is that the membership stability burden of proof requires that observations of a breeding population within one continent not be generalized to the whole continental group unless the researcher provides appropriate scientific supporting evidence for the generalizability of the observations. In fact, reification by cluster stability rule violation is the process whereby observed characteristics of an insufficient number of breeding populations within one continent are implicitly generalized without scientific warrant to the whole continental population by mere use of racial labels. Be that as it may, the phenomenon of cluster instability points itself to another potential form of reification which concerns the epistemic status of environmental and molecular factors in biomedical explanatory models.

### c) Reification by Molecular Reductionism

We emphasized above the fact that differences in genetic endowment may phenotypically differentiate breeding populations living under the same environmental conditions. Yet, we have also suggested in section III that a phenotypic kind, say the kind "obese" or the kind "hypertensive," may be ephemeral and that gene expression may be conditioned by environmental factors. Phenotypic plasticity, or the fact that the effect of a gene may vary with changes in the environment, may result in developmental kinds that do not necessarily match continental genetic kinds. Thus genotypic kinds and phenotypic kinds may cross classify the same population or individual. On the one hand, genetic ancestry may be a useful tool with which to probe environmental factors. On the other hand, differences in environmental conditions may create epidemiological and clinical disparities even among genetically similar populations.[16] There is in fact a scientific hypothesis known as the "thrifty phenotype hypothesis" which posits that early maternal nutrition of fetuses influences the occurrence of chronic diseases in later life (Hales &

[16] It is worth noting that since Darwin human developmental kinds are not considered good candidates for biological human races either because the traits used for the taxonomy are deemed trivial (Darwin, 2004) or because the groups are not discrete (Keita & Kittles, 1997) or because the differences are ephemeral (Kitcher, 2007; Gannett, 2010).

Barker, 1992; Barker, 1997; Wells, 2007). Otherwise put, many chronic diseases are not reducible to molecular structures. Whatever may become of the fate of the thrifty phenotype hypothesis, it is clear that not all diseases are explainable in the same manner that sickle cell disease can be explained (see section II above).

In fact, aside from some Mendelian disorders caused by highly penetrant single genes,[17] causal genetic models taken alone appear incomplete just as indeterminist environmentalist accounts seem insufficient.[18] The challenge then is how to avoid molecular reductionism by incorporating non-genetic factors in biomedical explanatory models. There is no agreement among philosophers about what the term reductionism means in general.[19] So we here simply define molecular reductionism, at least in so far as race research is concerned, as the view that behavioral patterns, disease states and therapeutic responses are amenable to molecular structures in such a way that molecular genetic factors ultimately provide the only relevant explanation of the variation in trait or treatment outcome associated with groups. Reification by molecular reductionism then consists of reductively positing molecular genetics, in Richard Cooper's words, as the *Deus ex Machina* in race research (Cooper, 2005; see also Oubré, 2011). Put differently, reification by molecular reductionism in race research is the process whereby a researcher supplies a causal genetic explanation of group phenotypic differences that does not integrate environmental effects affecting the process of differentiation.

Nevertheless, we are not suggesting that continental genetic ancestry is useless in biomedical research. The membership instability evidenced by the findings of our obesity study does not exclude molecular mechanisms as

[17]An example of such a disorder caused by a single gene with high penetrance is Huntington disease. It is an autosome dominant disease. The offspring has a 50% chance of inheriting the gene if one of the parents posses the gene. The individual has a 100% chance of developing the disease in adulthood.

[18]For more information about gene-centered and pluralistic explanations in philosophy of biology, see (Giere, 2006; Longino, 2006; Waters, 2006).

[19] Philosophers continue to debate various forms of reduction including inter-theoretical reduction (Nagel, 1961), functional reduction (Kim, 2005) and mechanistic reduction (Bickle, 2003; Bechtel, 2009). It is not our goal here to review and discuss the philosophical literature about reductionism. For our purpose, it is enough to note that the claim that biological and biomedical research aims at discovering the molecular basis of traits and the molecular mechanism of treatment response is unproblematic. In fact, it is a mere restatement of a standard and major scientific goal. What we are objecting to here is the exclusivism of the reductionist thesis, or what has become the dogmatization of molecular explanation in race research.

relevant explanatory factors. Hence, it does not preclude differential effects of genetic ancestry. But that constitutes the membership stability burden of proof, that is, the scientific proof that continental genetic ancestry explains obesity prevalence among heterogeneous developmental kinds within a continental group whose members are exposed to differing environmental pressures. In a word, the requirement to incorporate non-genetic factors into the explanation of complex traits does not diminish appreciation of the importance of molecular factors in biomedical and biological explanation in race research. Furthermore, genomic and epidemiological studies have shown that molecular mechanisms affecting group differences – creating thus population substructures within our species – either are rare and limited to some populations, or are common and usually cut across continental clusters and social groups called human races (Maglo, 2010). That is, 1) continental or racial groups are not discrete, and 2) statistically significant group differences in the occurrence or effects of molecular mechanisms may not necessarily justify the attribution of reality to race in biomedicine.

### d) Reification by Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Epistemic Naturalization

The dispute in race research is not only over the within-continent variability of phenotypes and the ephemeral nature of human developmental kinds. As mentioned in Section II, post-genomic criticisms of the reification of race are not limited to the health sciences, the social sciences and the humanities only. Concerns about race reification are also raised about phylogenomic classifications which seek to map evolutionary relationships between groups based on the study of their genomes. Partly because genetic profiles within our species show smooth gradients across continental regions, critics of the continental race concept argue that continental genetic partitions, though potentially useful in research, reflect sampling and statistical artifacts rather than evolutionary breaks between human populations. According to this line of argumentation, race reification consists of interpreting continental ancestry (a merely useful phylogenomic artifact) as evidence for natural evolutionary groupings having regular predictive values in biomedicine. Concerns about the reification of continental genetic ancestry continue to spark thorny disputes over the interpretations of the results of computational and statistical methods such as "Structure" and "analysis of variance" (Long & Kittles, 2003; Bolnick,

2008; Maglo, 2011). The implication of the non-existence of biologically real human races from a phylogenomic perspective for our discussion is that statistical and computational differences associated with continental genetic ancestry in biomedical research do not license the attribution of a biological basis to race. The biomedical utility of continental genetic ancestry cannot be construed as a proof for the biological reality of race simply because utility or statistical significance by itself alone does not entail reality (Maglo, 2010). Thus we dubbed here the erroneous inference from utility to reality based merely on the notion of statistical significance "reification by analysis of variance (ANOVA) epistemic naturalization."

The identification of this form of race reification fallacy suggests that some of the arguments in this debate implicitly originate in the philosophy of statistics. Yet from the philosophy of statistics perspective, the theoretical quarrel over the interpretation of the results of statistical methods is anything but new. Roughly, the dispute in the philosophy of statistics is whether conclusions obtained by statistical methods which require the specification of a significance level[20] yield, philosophically speaking, "truth" or simply useful and actionable instrumental information about populations under study. In this respect, Neyman and Pearson, the founders of the statistical method of hypothesis testing, wrote:

> We are inclined to think that as far as a particular hypothesis is concerned, no test based upon the theory of probability can by itself provide any valuable evidence of truth or falsehood of a hypothesis [...] But we may look at the purpose of tests from another viewpoint. Without hoping to know whether each separate hypothesis is true or false, we may search for rules to govern our behavior with regard to them, in following which we insure that, in the long run of experience, we shall not often be wrong (Neyman & Perarson, 1933, pp. 290–291).

Thus an instrumentalist conception of scientific research findings does not seem to be foreign to the philosophy of mathematical statistics. In the instrumentalist view, the epistemic aim of statistical methods is less to discover the "truth" of the natural world than to provide actionable information and rules that can govern our decision making.[21] That is, we may well be justified in

[20] The challenge with statistics is that it is based on probability, such that the conclusions are based on whether the data could have resulted from chance ($\alpha$).

[21] According to Steven Goodman (Goodman, 1999, p. 998), what Neyman and Pearson were suggesting was that «We must abandon our ability to measure evidence, or judge truth, in an

holding that a) statically accurate observations about human populations reflect not necessarily "truths" about the observed populations and that b) statically accurate substructure partitions do not necessarily correspond to naturally independent realities in the actual world. Put in the context of our discussion, we may thus accept that continental genetic ancestry has the potential to yield actionable scientific information about human populations without having to accept that human races are biologically natural realities. Reification of race thus occurs when we naturalize population substructures within our species on the ground that our results are statistically valid and clinically useful. It is this naturalistic interpretation of statistical outcomes in the study of human population substructure that we call "epistemic naturalization" by means of analysis of variance, or simply "ANOVA epistemic naturalization". The fallacy of reification stems from the unfounded belief that validity (or utility) necessarily entails reality. We use the term ANOVA as a catching term for formal approaches to human population substructure. So reification by ANOVA epistemic naturalization refers to a process whereby statistically actionable information about continental genetic ancestry is predicated on natural processes of differentiation between groups construed as divergent evolutionary kinds of humans.

## V. Conclusion

We identified and discussed above four potential forms of reification of the concept of race in research including mean-thinking, cluster stability rule violation, molecular reductionism, and ANOVA epistemic naturalization. We illustrated the processes by which these types of reification can occur with an empirical study of obesity prevalence in various continental subpopulations. We did not find in our study evidence of continent-based clinical priorities shared exclusively by subpopulations in one continent with respect to obesity incidence. Our results are similar to findings about obesity co-morbidities such as hypertension. Moreover, we showed that neither the evolutionary mechanism involved in the molecular account of sickle cell trait nor the

individual experiment. In practice, this meant reporting only whether or not the results were statistically significant and acting in accordance with that verdict ... Hypothesis tests are equivalent to a system of justice that is not concerned with which individual defendant is guilty or innocent ... but tries to control the overall number of incorrect verdicts».

phenotypic variability of complex diseases such as obesity and its co-morbidities licenses the attribution of a biological reality to race in biomedicine. Consequently, we suggested that, in order to avoid the fallacy of the reification of race, researchers need to pay particular attention, in their study designs and scientific publications or reports, to the methodological and philosophical implications of phenotypic plasticity, a phenomenon which in turn reflects variability in gene expression in response to differing environmental conditions. But we stressed equally the imperative of being methodologically alert to the fact that, for therapeutic response and disease causation, the genotypic partition of interest may not necessarily be continental "phylogenomic" clusters.

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# Abortion and Kant's Formula of Humanity

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the issue of abortion from a Kantian perspective. More specifically, it focuses on Kant's Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative and the prohibition against treating humanity merely as a means. It has been argued by feminists that forcing a woman to continue a pregnancy against her will is treating her as a mere means for sustaining the fetus, a mere "fetal incubator" (Bordo, 1993). Accordingly, feminists believe, this constitutes an assault on her humanity, the capacity for rationally setting and pursuing her own ends. On the other hand, the woman who aborts her fetus can be seen as treating a being which has the potential for humanity merely as a means for her own ends. The Kantian discussion of abortion gives rise to a number of important questions: Does respecting the pregnant woman's humanity, and hence enabling her to have an abortion if she chooses that way, go against appropriately respecting the fetus? What does it really mean to respect a fetus' potential for humanity? Attempting to answer these questions helps us to see the Kantian prohibition against treating humanity merely as a means from a different, less familiar perspective, and puts out some new challenges to Kant's theory. At the same time, it gives us new and useful insights on the much-discussed issue of the fetus' status in the abortion debate.

This paper examines the issue of abortion from a Kantian perspective. More specifically, it focuses on Kant's Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative and the prohibition against treating humanity *merely as a means* (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 429).[1] It has been argued by feminists that the woman who

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[1] Indeed, most of the philosophical work done on the issue of abortion, within Kantian ethics, has focused on the Universal Law formula of the Categorical Imperative. See, for instance Hare, 1989;

is made to continue a pregnancy against her will (in cases, for example, where abortion is illegal, and thus inaccessible to women) is being treated as a mere means for sustaining the fetus, a mere "fetal incubator" (Bordo, 1993). Accordingly, feminists believe, this constitutes an assault on her humanity, the capacity for rationally setting and pursuing her own ends. On the other hand, the woman who aborts her fetus can be seen as treating it merely as a means for her own ends. She wants to terminate her pregnancy, in order to achieve some further end(s) that she has, which are not consistent with being pregnant and/or caring for a child. According to such a view, in the case of an unwanted pregnancy, it appears that one of the two parties (woman/fetus) is being treated merely as a means, and so in a morally problematic way.

Which of these two evils is graver? One might argue that the fetus is not a being with humanity, a rational agent. For this reason, the woman's right to control her body should be given priority. Actually, she is a fully-fledged human being, an autonomous agent. In order to be in a position to recognize her own agency, a woman must be able to exercise some control over her sexual and reproductive life. As Feldman puts it, «to develop agency, a person must be able to assent to or refuse sex and pregnancy» (Feldman, 1998, pp. 275–6). Being forced to continue a pregnancy against her will constitutes an insult on her rational nature and a violation of her autonomy. Things, however, are not that straightforward. The fetus is not a being with humanity *at present*, but it has the *potential* to become a person with humanity. Because of this potential, some believe, the fetus deserves to be respected and protected. In this view, aborting the fetus is destructing its potential for humanity, which can be taken to be a serious moral wrong.

The Kantian discussion of abortion, therefore, is controversial. It gives rise to a number of important questions about what humanity is and how it should be treated. Does respecting the pregnant woman's humanity, and hence enabling her to have an abortion if she chooses that way, go against appropriately respecting the fetus? What does it really mean to respect a

Gensler, 1986; Wilson, 1988; Denis, 2007. The Formula of Universal Law in itself, however, is insufficient in giving us answers regarding the morality of abortion. Denis herself talks about «the failure of this much-favored formulation of the categorical imperative to provide guidance regarding the morality of abortion» (Denis, 2007, p. 548). It appears that before we are able to put into use maxims of abortion, it is crucial that we know what the status of the fetus is within Kantian ethics. That is, whether (and, if so, how) the fetus' potential for humanity is to count in our moral deliberations and be weight against the pregnant woman's humanity. This is exactly my focus in this article.

being's potential for humanity (in our case, the fetus' potential for humanity)? And how must this potential for humanity count against actual humanity in the person of the pregnant woman? My purpose in this paper is to examine how a Kantian can deal with these issues. There is no "Kantian answer" to these difficult questions, clearly. An analysis of how Kant's theory can be applied to these issues concerning the morality of abortion, however, is illuminating. It helps us to see the Kantian prohibition against treating humanity merely as a means from a different, less familiar perspective, and puts out some new challenges to Kant's theory. At the same time, it gives us new and useful insights on the much-discussed issue of the fetus' status in the abortion debate.

This article is divided in four sections. Section I explains what it means to treat a person merely as a means. It focuses on Kant's Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative, and it provides an analysis of two influential interpretations of what is involved in treating a person merely as a means: Allen Wood's and Onora O' Neill's interpretations. In section II, I explain how these two interpretations can be applied in the case of a woman who is forced to continue her pregnancy against her will. This section presents some feminist analyses of what it means to treat the pregnant woman merely as a means. Section III explains how we can make sense of the claim that the fetus is being treated merely as a means in case the woman decides to abort it. Finally, in section IV, I argue that the issue of abortion presents the following dilemma for a Kantian: forcing a woman to continue an unwanted pregnancy amounts to treating her merely as a means for sustaining fetal life; yet, if she aborts the fetus, she treats it merely as a means for her ends. This section examines two ways out of this dilemma. According to the first, it is the pregnant woman, as a fully-fledged rational agent, who should be given moral priority over any rights the fetus may have. And according to the second, it is the fetus' right to life (and its *potential* for humanity) that should be given moral priority over the rights of the pregnant woman (except the woman's right to life). I argue that neither of these two approaches is satisfactory. The problem, in my view, seems to arise from Kant's own dichotomy between rational beings with absolute and intrinsic value and mere objects with only contingent value. If we place the fetus in the first category, we are in danger of taking it to have equal rights with these of the pregnant woman. If we place it in the second, the fetus is regarded as a mere thing subject to the pregnant woman's whims. In lack of a category in between these two, the Kantian theory is left with an irresolvable moral conflict in the case of abortion.

## I. What Does It Mean to Treat Someone *Merely as a Means?*

Before attempting to explain how the pregnant woman and the fetus can be treated merely as means, let us focus first on what, in general, is involved in treating someone merely as a means.

The Formula of Humanity of the Categorical Imperative, as stated by Kant, tells us: «So act that you use humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, always at the same time as an end, never merely as a means» (Kant1997a, 4: p. 429).

Humanity is an objective end, an end that holds for all rational beings and gives them grounds for securing it. The characteristic feature of humanity is the capacity for rationally setting and pursuing one's own ends. More precisely, a being with humanity is capable of deciding what is valuable, and of finding ways to realise and promote this value. According to Christine Korsgaard:

> [...] the distinctive feature of humanity, as such, is simply the capacity to take a rational interest in something: to decide, under the influence of reason, that something is desirable, that it is worthy of pursuit or realisation, that it is to be deemed important or valuable, not because it contributes to survival or instinctual satisfaction, but as an end – for its own sake (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 114).

This dictum states that humanity is what is special about human beings. It distinguishes them from animals other than humans and from inanimate objects. Because human beings are special in this sense, they have, unlike other animals and objects, a *dignity* (an "inner worth", as opposed to a "relative worth") (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 435). The value of what has dignity cannot be exchanged or replaced with something else.[2] Kant writes:

> Every human being has a legitimate claim to respect from his fellow human beings and is in turn bound to respect every other. Humanity itself is a dignity; for a man cannot be used merely as a means by any man (either by others or even by himself) but must always be used at the same time as an end. It is just in this that his dignity (personality) consists, by which he raises himself above all other beings in the world that are not men and yet can be used, and so over all things (Kant 1996, 6, p. 462).

[2] «What has a price can be replaced by something else as its *equivalent*; what on the other hand is raised above all price and therefore admits of no equivalent has a dignity» (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 434).

One way of showing disrespect for the worth of humanity, Kant notes, is treating it *merely as a means* for the attainment of some further end. But, here a question arises: what does it mean to treat humanity merely as a means?

According to a prominent interpretation, defended by Onora O'Neill, an individual A treats another, B, merely as a means, thus disrespecting B's humanity, if, in her treatment of B, A does something to which B *cannot consent*.[3] B can consent to being treated in some way by A, if it is possible for her to dissent from it. In O'Neill's own words, if B «can avert or modify the action by withholding consent and collaboration» (O'Neill, 1990, p. 110). In Kant's lying promise example (Kant, 1997b, 4, pp. 429-30), where A borrows money from B falsely promising him that he will pay it back, B clearly does not have the opportunity to dissent from A's action (to avert or modify it). This is the case because B is ignorant of A's action of lying to him about repaying his debt. O'Neill argues that in cases of deception, as well as in cases of coercion, a person's dissent, and thus her consent, is in principle ruled out (O'Neill, 1990, p. 111).[4]

An alternative account of what is involved, according to Kant, in treating a person merely as a means is offered by Allen Wood. For Wood, «a false promise, because its end cannot be shared by the person to whom the promise is made, frustrates or circumvents that person's rational agency, and thereby shows disrespect for it» (Wood, 1999, p. 153). An individual can share another's end if she has chosen to realise it. In the lying promise example, the promisee cannot share the promisor's end, in the sense that she is not in a position to choose to realise it. The promisor's end in that case is the *permanent* possession of the promisee's money. The promisee, however, taking the promisor's end to be, rather, the *temporary* possession of her money is unable to share the latter's end. That is, the promisee cannot choose to realise the end in question, since she is ignorant of the fact that this is her end. With her lie, the promisor, according to Wood, circumvents the promisee's rationality (her humanity), showing disrespect for it.

[3] To be more precise, according to O'Neill A treats B merely as a means if in her treatment of B, A acts on a maxim to which B cannot consent.

[4] A similar interpretation of what it means to treat an agent merely as a means is also espoused by Korgaard. According to her, «The question whether the other can assent to your way of acting can serve as a criterion for judging whether you are treating her as a mere means» (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 139).

## II. Treating the Pregnant Woman Merely as a Means

How can the above interpretations be applied to the issue of abortion? Let us consider first the case of a pregnant woman who wants to have an abortion, but because abortion is deemed illegal and is thus inaccessible to her she is being forced to continue her pregnancy. Following O'Neill's interpretation, we can say that, in this case, the pregnant woman *cannot consent to continuing her pregnancy*: she cannot avert or modify the situation of being pregnant. In other words, she is unable to dissent from it. Taking Wood's interpretation, the woman in question *cannot share the end of continuing her pregnancy*: she has not chosen to realise it, but rather it is an end that has been forced on her. As a result, according to both these interpretations, the pregnant woman's rational agency is frustrated and disrespected, and she is being treated merely as a means.

As is well known, many feminist discussions have been devoted to explaining the wrongness involved in forcing a woman to continue her pregnancy, pointing to her treatment merely as a means for sustaining fetal life. In her influential article on abortion, Judith Jarvis Thomson points out how the pregnant woman is sometimes seen as having 'the status of house' for the fetus. Quite often, the fact that the woman is a person, an autonomous agent, is forgotten. As Thomson puts it: «... if the woman houses the child, it should be remembered that she is a person who houses it» (Thomson, 1971, pp. 52–3).

Likewise, Susan Bordo argues that in our societies women are treated as "fetal incubators" or "fetal containers", whereas the fetus has the status of a "super-subject" (Bordo, 1993, pp. 77, 72). Bordo explains this point so:

> The essence of the pregnant woman ... is her biological, purely mechanical role in preserving the life of another. In her case, this is the given value, against which her claims to subjectivity must be rigorously evaluated, and they will usually be found wanting insofar as they conflict with her life-support function. In the face of such a conflict, her valuations, choices, consciousness are expendable.
>
> The nature of pregnancy is such, however, that to deprive the woman of control over her reproductive life ... is necessarily also to mount an assault on her personal integrity and autonomy (the essence of personhood in our culture) and to treat her merely as pregnant res extensa, material incubator of fetal subjectivity (Bordo, 1993, pp. 79, 94).

Similarly, Susal Feldman argues that the prohibition of abortion leads to an objectifying treatment of women. The woman is regarded as "a passive object of the state of pregnancy", "the vessel for the fetus" or the "flowerpot" in which it grows. However, as Feldman explains, moral agents have choice over which activities to perform and which to decline. In order to avoid treating women as mere fetal vessels, therefore, women's agency, and hence their ability to choose whether or not to continue a pregnancy, must be respected (Feldman, 1998, p. 270). We should not think of women primarily in their reproductive role and, Feldman maintains, women should not think of themselves in that way. In fact, Feldam alerts us, such a way of thinking about women leads to undesirable consequences: the danger of falling for women into servility and failing to confer the morally appropriate self-esteem to themselves. Feldman claims:

> It seems likely that one way in which a person comes to think of herself as a lesser being or a mere thing is through treatment by others as such. The prohibition of abortion involves such a treatment. One effect of such a prohibition is to diminish the empirical moral life of the moral agent. In Kantian language, it will lessen the likelihood that a person will recognize her own status as autonomous rational being, and her own worth as such ... I can think of no better illustration of 'treating a person as a mere means' than this. (Feldman, 1998, pp. 274- 5, 279).

From the above we can conclude that, in cases where the pregnant woman cannot consent to continuing her pregnancy, or share the end of remaining pregnant, she is being treated merely as a means: she has become a mere instrument (an incubator, a container, a house, a vessel, a flowerpot, to use the above-mentioned feminist metaphors) for sustaining the life of the fetus. As a result, this is inconsistent with treating her humanity as an end in itself, and thus violates the Formula of Humanity of Kant's Categorical Imperative.

## III. Treating the Fetus Merely as a Means

In the previous section, it has been explained how we can make sense of the claim that the woman, who is made to continue a pregnancy, is being used merely as a means for keeping the fetus alive. This section will shed light on the more controversial question of whether the fetus can be seen as treated merely as a means.

Let us go back to the two interpretations of what it means to treat someone merely as a means discussed in section A. According to O'Neill, as we have seen, A treats B merely as a means, if, in her treatment of B, A does something to which B cannot consent (O'Neill, 1990, p. 111). And, according to Wood, individual A treats B merely as a means, in the case where B cannot share A's end (Wood, 1999, p. 153). It is difficult to see how these interpretations can be applied to the case of the fetus. It would be absurd to say that the fetus is in a position to give its consent to being treated in some way or another. Similarly, the fetus cannot be regarded as able to share any ends whatsoever. At a first glance, then, we seem to be faced with a dilemma: either we admit that these two interpretations do not capture the fetus' treatment as a mere instrument in cases of abortion, or we draw the conclusion that, because of its inability to give its consent or dissent and/or share ends, the prohibition against treatment merely as a means does not hold for the fetus. Both these alternatives are unsatisfying. In what follows, I will argue that we have to accept neither.

To say that there is nothing morally problematic with treating the fetus merely as a means, *because* it is not in a position to share ends and give its consent to how others treat it, is too quick a conclusion. Actually, severely mentally incapacitated individuals, people in a coma, infants and very young children are unable to end-sharing, as well as consenting or dissenting to the ways others treat them (to a lesser or greater degree, depending on their condition). We would be far from eager, however, to conclude that, for this reason, people are allowed to treat them merely as means for their chosen ends. In any case, to draw such a conclusion would be to misinterpret Kant's own theory. The question of who to consider a rational agent, a being with humanity and dignity, is not an *empirical* matter (a matter of a how capable an individual is in exercising her rational capacities). Rather, this issue is to be decided on *practical* grounds. Korsgaard explains that moral freedom is an ideal concept, which no human being fully exemplifies. We do not ascribe this concept to ourselves and others only if we/they come close to this ideal, that is only if we/they are fully capable of exercising our/their rational capacities (Korsgaard, 1996, pp. 352, 355-7).

Here, it might be useful to consider Kant's own discussion about children and their parents' obligations toward them. Parents have, according to Kant, a duty to preserve and care for their children. This means that «children, as persons, have by their procreation an original innate (not acquired) right to the care of their parents until they are able to look after themselves» (Kant, 1996,

6, p. 280). Kant explains that the act of procreation is to be understood as our decision to bring a person into the world without her consent. This creates an obligation in the parents to make sure that their child has a good life. Kant writes:

> They [the parents] cannot destroy their child as if he were something they had made (since a being endowed with freedom cannot be a product of this kind) or as if he were their property, nor can they even just abandon him to chance, since they have brought not merely a worldly being but a citizen of the world into a condition which cannot now be indifferent to them even just according to concepts of right. [...] From this duty there must necessarily also arise the right of parents to manage and develop the child, as long as he has not yet mastered the use of his members or of his understanding: the right not only to feed and care for him but to educate him, to develop him both pragmatically, so that in the future he can look after himself and make his way in life, and morally, since otherwise the fault for having neglected him would fall on the parents (Kant, 1996, 6, p. 281).

Children, then, as Kant sees them, are *persons*. From the fact that their rational capacities are not yet (fully) developed it certainly does not follow that parents may treat them merely as means. Quite the contrary, Kant clearly states that parents have an obligation to make sure that their children grow into independent adults, and, importantly, into moral agents.

It is unclear whether Kant would consider the fetus as deserving of a similar treatment as that of a child. Does the pregnant woman have an obligation not to destroy the fetus «as if [it] were something [she] had made or as if [it] were [her] property»? (Kant, 1996, 6, p. 281). Does she have a duty to give birth to it, and make sure that it develops into an adult human being, a moral agent? The difference between the fetus and the child, one might think, is that the former, unlike the latter, has not, at the time, been brought into the world by the woman. Still, it is not clear whether this fact frees the woman from the obligation to provide the fetus (which has the potential to become a rational agent should the woman bring her pregnancy to term and give birth to it) with what it needs to eventually become a being with humanity.[5]

As we saw above, O' Neill's and Wood's arguments pose a dilemma and both argumentations do not capture what it means to treat the fetus merely as a

[5] The issue of the fetus' potential to become a rational agent and how a Kantian is to count this potential is discussed in section C.

means. Nevertheless, as I will explain, these interpretations can be applied to the case of the fetus as well. It is widely believed (and I think correctly so) that the fetus is unable to share ends and give its consent to the ways people treat it. Yet, one might argue that, if it were in a position to do so, the fetus would not give its consent to being aborted by the pregnant woman or share her end to have an abortion.

We may avoid the awkwardness of the issue whether the *fetus* would consent to x or y, or share this or that end by considering the case of an adult, who was once a fetus, and now is a rational agent. This is the strategy, for example, that allows Harry Gensler to argue that abortion is morally wrong. Gensler asks us to think of ourselves along these line: «If you are consistent and think that it would be *all right to do A to X*, then you will consent to the idea of someone *doing A to you* in similar circumstances». (Gensler, 1984, pp. 89- 90) His argument concerning abortion goes as follows:

> P1: If you are consistent and think that abortion is normally morally permissible, then you will consent to the idea of your having been aborted in normal circumstances.
>
> P2: You do not consent to the idea of your having been aborted in normal circumstances.
>
> Conclusion: If you are consistent, then you will not think that abortion is normally permissible (Gensler, 1984, pp. 93–4).

R. M. Hare has a similar argument against abortion. He asks us to imagine a «time switch into the past» in which we can speak with our mother, when she is considering aborting the pregnancy that would result in our birth. Let us assume, he says, that I consider my existence as valuable to me and that I am a normally happy person. Furthermore, let us assume that my mother will not die if she continues her pregnancy and gives birth to me. In this case, Hare argues, I would tell her that she should not have an abortion because my preference to live and enjoy life outweighs my mother's preference to have an abortion. If abortion were deemed impermissible in this case, it would be impermissible for everyone in similar circumstances. Abortion is deemed permissible in cases where the completion of pregnancy would result in the woman's death, or in cases where the fetus would not develop into a person who is happy to be alive (Hare, 1989, pp. 6–8).

Thus, under normal circumstances, and when I am generally satisfied with my life, I do not consent now to my having been aborted as a fetus, and similarly I do not now share my mother's end to have an abortion. So, if a woman, who considers aborting her fetus now, is happy to be alive and would not want her mother to have aborted her, she ought not perform an abortion.

Hare's and Gensler's arguments, however, leave open the possibility that some people would consent to having been aborted as fetuses. If my life is miserable and I am unhappy with it, then I could consent to my mother having had aborted me, and I could share her end to have had an abortion. These arguments, therefore, are not particularly useful in helping us judge the morality of abortion. If all depends on what I *want*, *desire* or *prefer* my mother to have done to me as a fetus, or on whether I consider my life worth living, then I could possibly share her end to abort me and consent to her doing so. If, for example, my life is miserable as a result of having been neglected and mistreated by my mother as a child, it is not implausible to say that I could consent to her having aborted me instead of giving birth to me. Likewise, it is not implausible to say that I could share her end to abort me, since she was not in a position to properly care for me, and give me what I need in order to have a good life. In this case, then, where I judge my mother's decision to abort me as preferable to her giving birth to me and neglecting my needs, my mother would not treat me (as a fetus) merely as a means. On the contrary, one could argue that my mother would act irresponsibly by not having an abortion in this case to spare me from a miserable life.

Lara Denis points out the problem with Hare's and Gensler's arguments as follows:

> Kant is concerned with willing – not wishing, wanting, or preferring. And the question is not what an agent can will based on some inclinations or feelings she has, but what reason commits her to, or precludes her from, willing. ... what is key is whether consent is in principle possible, or what rational people with proper respect for themselves and others would consent to, what free and reasonable people would agree to, etc., not whether some particular agent happens to consent (Denis, 2007, p. 551).

We could, however, avoid the above worry. Denis argues that Kant is not concerned with what particular people happen to desire or prefer, but what rational people would consent to. Denis is making here, I think, a serious and correct point. Furthermore, I am suggesting here that a true Kantian is committed to the view that even in the case where I, at present, truly desire not

to have been born, I *cannot* nevertheless consent to my mother having had aborted me as a fetus, or share her end to so doing. Consenting to this would be consenting to my having been treated merely as a means, an attitude that shows contempt towards my humanity.

It is not superfluous here to bring in mind Kant's discussion of suicide. In the *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals,* Kant explains what is morally problematic with the decision of an individual to take his own life in order to avoid a miserable existence so:

> If he destroys himself in order to escape from a trying condition he makes use of a person merely as a means to maintain a tolerable condition up to the end of life. A human being, however, is not a thing and hence not something that can be used merely as a means, but must in all his actions always be regarded as an end in itself (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 429).

In the *Lectures on Ethics* Kant writes: «Can I take my life because I cannot live happily? No, there is no necessity that, so long as I live, I should live happily; but there is a necessity that, so long as I live, I should live honorably» (Kant, 1997b, 27, p. 373). According to Kant, the individual in question ought to refrain from taking her life and so destructing her humanity. Respecting her humanity requires protecting and promoting it, even under bad conditions. It is also important to consider here Kant's justification for being inconsistent in willing not to help others in need, when in a position to do so. The individual who does not will to help others in need, according to Kant, in fact wills that others not help *him* when in need of their help, and so «would rob himself of all hope of the assistance he wishes for himself» (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 423). We can, of course, imagine a person who would rather die than accept help from others. This person's desire not to be helped, however, is irrelevant from a moral standpoint. The person in question cannot, as a rational agent, will that others not help him when in need of their help. Doing so would involve an improper attitude towards his own humanity, which must always be respected.

To return to our issue, now, even if my life is miserable at present, I cannot as a rational agent will my mother to have had aborted me as a fetus. Willing such a thing would be to will a disrespectful attitude towards my humanity, which I must in all cases value and respect. It is not possible, therefore, to consent to or share my mother's end of aborting me as a fetus. As a rational agent, I can only will that my humanity is protected and promoted. Thus, willing to have been destructed as a fetus amounts to willing not ever becoming a being with humanity. Since it is not possible to consent to my having been

aborted as a fetus or share my mother's end in question, it follows that if she had aborted me she would have treated me merely as a means, and so in a morally disrespectful manner. One might object, here, that there is a difference between Kant's examples of the person who considers suicide to end a miserable life and the case of the person who wills not to be helped by others when in need *and* the case of my willing to having been aborted as a fetus. In the former cases, we have an already born individual who considers ending her life or who is in danger of, say, losing her life deprived of others' help. In the latter case, I do not will to end my life now, but rather I will not to have been born. That is, I will to have been aborted as a fetus, *before I was a rational agent*, a being with humanity. The act of my having been aborted by my mother would not constitute the destruction of my humanity because I had no humanity as a fetus. All we can say is that I, at that time, had the *potential* to become a being with humanity, and that my mother's act of aborting me would have destructed this potential.

How this potential for humanity is to count in our moral deliberations is a complicated issue. In the following section, I will discuss this issue in more detail and draw a conclusion following Wood's interpretation of the Kantian prohibition against treatment merely as a means. As we will see, Wood gives us reasons for respecting and promoting the potential for humanity. These reasons could allow us to argue that I cannot consent to my having been aborted as a fetus, and I cannot share my mother's end of having an abortion (since that would amount to willing my potential for humanity to have been destructed). As a consequence, if my mother had chosen to abort me as a fetus, she would have treated me merely as a means for her chosen ends.

## IV. Treating the Pregnant Woman Merely as a Means Vs. Treating the Fetus Merely as a Means

As we saw above, in the case of a woman who considers abortion, we are faced with a conflict: forcing her to continue the pregnancy against her will amounts to treating her merely as a means for sustaining the life of the fetus; yet, if she aborts the fetus, exercising her right to control her body, she uses it merely as a means for her end(s). The issue of abortion, then, presents a challenge for the Kantian as, in order to respect humanity in someone, it is necessary to not treat another merely as a means. In what follows, I shall discuss two solutions to this dilemma and I shall concentrate on the two most common positions on the

morality of abortion. First, I will examine the view according to which the pregnant woman as a fully-fledged rational agent and her right to choose take moral priority over any rights the fetus may have. Second, I will explore the view that the fetus and its right to life take moral priority over any rights the pregnant woman may have (except the woman's right to life), and abortion is utterly the destruction of its potential for humanity.

In the heart of the feminist discussion lies the prohibition against treating a woman, a fully-fledged moral agent and a being with humanity, merely as a means. Treating her as a mere "fetal container" means disrespecting her humanity. Such a way of treating a person is inconsistent with treating her as an end in herself. As we saw, Feldman argues that a woman's choice to have an abortion should be respected and her argument is based on Kant's claim that we have an imperfect duty to ourselves to develop our talents. Even though the fulfillment of an imperfect duty is morally meritorious, adopting as a principle not to fulfill it is morally wrong (Kant, 1997a, 4, p. 423, 4, p. 430; Kant, 1996, 390, pp. 444–46). We are morally required to include projects of self-development in our lives. Pregnancy can, in some cases, disrupt these projects. More precisely, Feldman presents her argument so:

> While some people find that their ongoing projects are perfectly compatible with pregnancy, other people with different projects determine that they are not. ... the quality of its [pregnancy's] outcome is strongly affected by the effort that the pregnant woman puts into it. Knowing this, it is less plausible that anyone or nearly everyone can sustain a healthy pregnancy in combination with every sort of demanding project. Sometimes it is possible. Sometimes it is not. You can't always do two things at once (Feldman, 1998, p. 273).

If this is so, in those cases where the continuation of pregnancy interferes with a woman's fulfillment of the duty to self-perfection, it is morally permissible to have an abortion.

Interestingly, Denis argues that abortion is morally problematic by using the same Kantian idea of an individual's duty to oneself. Imperfect duties to oneself, she precises, «require sometimes acting on maxims of promoting ends whose adoption constitutes a commitment to realize one's rational nature» (Denis, 2008, p. 119). Duties to oneself as an animal and moral being prohibit individuals from acting on maxims of using their bodies in ways that are inconsistent with their dignity, or that threaten to undermine their bodies' ability to play their reason-supporting role. A virtuous Kantian agent, Denis holds, understands that the way she treats her body reflects the way she views

her rational nature. Her body, life, and health are essential for the expression of her rational nature. This means that she must not allow herself to be directed by her animal drives, but must govern herself through reason. Insofar, however, that some impulses or feelings in her animal nature are conductive to morality, a virtuous Kantian agent must not stifle them for merely inclination-based ends (Denis, 2008, pp. 120-3).

According to Kant, individuals have duties to themselves and to others that require them to protect and promote feelings of kindness, love, and sympathy for other people. Sympathy, more specifically, makes a person more perceptive of the needs of others (Kant, 1996, 6, pp. 456–7). Denis explains that pregnancy involves certain feelings, like attachment and protectiveness towards the fetus carried by the woman. As she writes:

> If we accept Kant's view that feelings of love and sympathy that aid us in fulfilling duties of love to rational human beings may be fostered by kind treatment of animals and stunted by callous treatment of them, we may assume also that such feelings can be encouraged by attentiveness toward one's fetus and weakened by destructiveness toward it. ... Killing her developing fetus goes against a woman's morally significant tendencies toward love and sympathy generally, and toward attachment to her fetus in particular ... Thus, abortion is problematic for a virtuous Kantian agent (Denis, 2008, pp. 128–131).

The view that abortion weakens or destructs a woman's morally significant feelings of love and sympathy is, of course, open to question. Denis herself acknowledges that a single abortion does not *irrevocably* impair a woman's capacity for these morally important emotions.[6] Furthermore, she admits that there are cases where abortion may be compatible with the morally significant feelings of love and sympathy. Namely, if the fetus has been prenatally diagnosed with a devastating and untreatable illness. In this case, it could be thought kinder to abort the fetus than to bring it into a life of pain and suffering (Denis, 2008, p. 132). Perhaps, we may argue beyond Denis, it could also be thought kinder for a woman to abort the fetus if she knows that she is unable to properly care for a child and attend to her needs. In any case, even if we accept the view that abortion can interfere with a woman's morally significant feelings of love and sympathy, the worry that pregnancy is often incompatible with the duty to develop one's talents and perfect oneself remains. Denis acknowledges

[6] For a more detailed examination of this objection and Denis' response to it, see Denis, 2008, pp. 133–4.

this worry when she writes that abortion is often morally permissible, for example in order to avoid having to drop out of school (and even morally required, in cases when it is necessary to preserve the woman's life) (Denis, 2008, p. 132).

Besides interfering with a woman's duty of self-perfection, the prohibition of abortion also interferes with a woman's autonomy. As Feldman puts it, such a prohibition «will lessen the likelihood that a person will recognize her own status as autonomous rational being and her own worth as such» (Feldman, 1998, p. 275). An autonomous agent is free to decide in which ways and for which reasons she will act. If a woman's life is spent thinking that her body is subject to use by others without her consent, she is unlikely to think of herself as possessing agency. And, if a person does not think of herself as having agency, she will most likely not conceive of herself under the idea of freedom. Rather, she will think of herself merely as someone to whom things happen. Feldman highlights that:

> To develop agency, a person must be able to assent to, or refuse, sex and pregnancy, before and after the fact. ... Denial of this will reinforce a belief in her own inferiority, her lack of right to exercise her rights, so to speak. It will make her see herself as the object of the choices of others, and not the subject with reasoned choices of her own. ... That this activity [pregnancy] is chosen, or voluntary implies that women must choose whether to engage in this activity. ... If women are denied the ability to make this choice, they are condemned to the life of a less mature, less respected, and less self-respecting moral patient – a morally lesser being (Feldman, 1998, pp. 275-277).

So far, I have presented and analyzed the view that a Kantian has reasons to think that the pregnant woman should be given priority over the fetus because she is a fully-fledged moral agent, a being with humanity and dignity. If her choice to terminate the pregnancy is not respected, this can interfere with her duty of self-perfection and constitute a violation of her autonomy. Let us focus now on the Kantian reasons, according to which the fetus must be given priority over the pregnant woman. As we mentioned above, even if it does not have humanity and rationality, the fetus has, however, the *potential* to become a being with humanity. But the fetus develops this potential only if the pregnant woman gives birth to it. In having an abortion, the woman irrevocably destroys this potential.

To make sense of this claim, we should first understand the reasons a Kantian has to respect and promote a being's potential for humanity. Allen

Wood gives us these sort of reasons in rejecting the so- called "personification principle", which claims that humanity or rational nature must be respected only *in the person of* a being who actually possesses it (Wood, 1998, p. 193). In order to respect humanity as an end in itself, we ought, in some cases, according to Wood, respect a being's potential for rational nature and humanity, or a being's having had humanity in the past, or having parts of it or necessary conditions of it (Wood, 1998, p. 197).

Wood does not deny that we ought to respect rational nature *in* persons, but argues that «we should *also* respect rational nature *in the abstract*, which entails respecting fragments of it or necessary conditions of it, even where these are not found in fully rational beings or persons» (Wood, 1998, p. 198). Wood asks us to think of small children and people with severe mental impairments or diseases, which deprive them temporarily or permanently of the capacity to set and pursue ends. Being indifferent to the potential for humanity in children, for example, would show contempt for rational nature. Likewise, it would show contempt not to respect rational nature in those individuals who have temporarily lost it, and not help them recover their rational capacities (Wood, 1998, p. 198). Regarding fetuses, Wood explains that, if we give up the personification principle, what is permissible to do to them might be limited, as fetuses, like small children, have rational nature potentially (Wood, 1998, p. 209).

The crucial question that arises at this point is how respecting rational nature in the abstract or a being's (a fetus') potential for humanity is to be weight against respecting fully-realized humanity in an individual (the pregnant woman). One reason against destructing a being's potential for humanity, even at the expense of disrespecting humanity in an adult agent could be that, as also mentioned in section B, Kantian agency is not an empirical concept, but a practical one. This could imply that agency must be seen and respected even at the very beginning of human life (i.e. at the fetal stage). The fact that agency or rationality is, according to the Kantian theory, a practical, rather than an empirical, concept "saves" this theory from excluding young children and adults with cognitive and developmental disorders from the category of agents. It would be awkward for a Kantian to have to conclude that infants and young

children, for example, who are not able to exercise their rational capacities at present, are to be valued less than adult human beings.[7]

Nevertheless, as Denis recognizes, we have reasons not to regard fetuses as deserving the same moral treatment as young children or adults who have developmental, cognitive, or psychological conditions, which prevent them from exercising their rational capacities. Dennis explains this point as follows:

> with fetuses it is not a matter of underdeveloped, fluctuating, fledging, degenerating, or impaired agency that makes us hesitate in calling them agents, but an absence of any traces of agency. The practical attributions and attitudes constitutive of our ascribing freedom to others are not naturally elicited by fetuses. Further, they make no sense when directed toward fetuses. We cannot see ourselves as literally cooperating with fetuses, nor can we properly hold them morally responsible for anything or ascribe maxims to them. And in the case of the fetus, unlike an unconscious but otherwise normal adult human, we have no reason to think of the fetus as someone who has maxims on which she is simply unable to act because of her physical state (Denis, 2007, p. 566).

Another argument against destroying the fetus' potential for humanity is that our bodies constitute the material condition for our human agency and rationality. Each of us inevitably passes through the stages of fetus, infant, child, etc. before becoming an adult capable of fully exercising her rational capacities. Destroying the body of an adult human being (by killing her), one might argue, deprives this individual of the material condition necessary for her agency. This is why it is judged as morally impermissible. But destroying the body of a fetus also deprives it of a necessary material condition for agency. So it too can be judged as morally wrong.

Denis rightly argues, however, that the devaluation of rational nature in an adult human being is *significantly different* from the devaluation of potential agency in a fetus. The fetus has only the potential for humanity. In other words, it has the potential to become a rational agent. Thus, it would be a mistake to think of a fetus as a rational agent now. Killing an adult human being is depriving a being, who is a rational agent *now*, of its humanity. Thus, it constitutes the devaluation of a rational agent. Aborting a fetus, by contrast, deprives a being of possibly acquiring humanity *someday*. It constitutes a devaluation of potential agency (Denis, 2007, pp. 570–1). Feldman, similarly,

[7] Kant's own discussion of children and their parents obligations toward them makes it clear that he did not consider this inability to exercise rational capacities as constitutive of an individual's value, as we have seen in section B.

notes: «The fetus, if valuable at all, is valuable as a potential rational being. That is, it has the potential to become valuable. But a potential value must in every case be less than that value fully realized» (Feldman, 1998, p. 278).

If devaluation of potential agency is taken to be as equally problematic with devaluation of actual agency (in the face of an adult human being), then we would have no moral hesitations to judge as morally wrong a doctor's decision to let a pregnant woman die in order to save the fetus, or – to push the example even further – with the doctor's decision to actively kill the woman in order to save the fetus. If the potential for humanity is equally important with humanity in the person of a fully-developed moral agent, then it does not really matter whether the doctor kills the woman or the fetus.

Wood's idea that we must respect rational nature in the abstract is appealing. Nonetheless, its drawbacks are evident when we try to put it into practice. Actually, traces of humanity, or the potential for humanity, can be found nearly everywhere. Not only in fetuses, infants, and some animal species, but also in biological entities like the zygote (the fusion of egg and sperm prior to implantation in the uterine wall). This could imply that taking the contraceptive pill is morally impermissible, as it destructs the zygote's potential for humanity. And, disturbingly, it could further be taken to imply that destructing the zygote is *as morally problematic as* killing an adult human being (if the potential for humanity is put on the same level as actual humanity). Traces of humanity can also be taken to exist, one might think, in sperm or in a woman's egg. If rational nature in the abstract is to be valued in the same way as rational nature in a person, these traces of humanity deserve to be respected.

It is worth to precise clearly here that Wood does not claim that we have the same moral obligations to fetuses and other biological entities that have traces of humanity as we have to persons. However, he does not give us any clues as to how rational nature in the abstract is to count when in conflict with rational nature in a person, like it is the case when abortion is at stake. Without a theoretical framework that explains and highlights our obligations toward rational nature in the abstract, we are left with a theory that threatens to put women, sperm, zygotes, fetuses, etc. in the same boat, with all the above-mentioned awkward consequences. If traces of humanity are to count equally as humanity fully-realised, we are in danger of losing the idea which lies in the heart of Kant's theory: that *a person's humanity* ought to be respected and treated as an end in itself in all instances.

## V. Conclusion

It would appear that the Kantian theory is faced with an irresolvable conflict in the case of abortion. If the pregnant woman aborts the fetus, she treats it (and its potential for humanity) merely as a means for her ends. On the one hand, if the woman is forced to continue a pregnancy against her will, she is being treated merely as a means, which constitutes an insult on her autonomy and rational nature. There are, as we have seen, reasons to respect and protect the fetus' potential for humanity. Counting this potential as equally valuable with humanity in the person of the pregnant woman, however, can lead us to the uneasy conclusion that the woman's autonomy may be sacrificed to preserve the fetus' potential for humanity. On the other hand, granting a person (in our case the pregnant woman) this special status and dignity, which makes treating her humanity merely as a means morally impermissible, may lead to regarding the fetus as a being which can be treated in any way a person wishes.

Even if we do not take the value of the fetus and its potential for humanity to be equally important with humanity in a moral agent, the idea of regarding it as a mere thing, with only derivative value, is unappealing. The problem seems to arise from Kant's own dichotomy between rational beings with absolute and intrinsic value and mere objects with only contingent value. If there existed a category in between persons and mere things, perhaps we would not be unhappy to place the fetus into it. This could avoid the awkwardness of considering the fetus as having equal rights with these of the pregnant woman, on the one hand, and having to think of the fetus as a mere thing subject to any person's whims, on the other. What this category would be like, which sort of beings would deserve to be placed in it, and what our moral obligations would be toward them are all complicated questions to which the present paper can do no justice, but has only faintly raised.

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Commentary

# The Female Brain

Cynthia Darlington

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# Gender and the Science of Difference

Jill A. Fisher (Ed.)

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Mental woman, born of man
Born of woman, mental man
Change me, I'm changing day to day
Lady, I'm a lady from today
Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti, *Menopause man*

The clever chiasmus in the opening lines of the song *Menopause Man* illustrates the complexity of the topic faced by the authors of *The Female Brain* and the collected work *Gender and the Science of Difference*.

The two volumes are about the understanding of *Sexing the Body* – about 'dueling dualisms', to borrow a term used over ten years ago by Anne Fausto-Sterling. In other words, they are about «the relation between *social expression* of masculinity and femininity and their *physical underpinnings* [that] has been hotly debated in scientific and social arenas»[1] for several decades. Before focusing the attention on the contents of these books, it could be worth to underline that, when we look at the topics of sexual difference and/or gender difference, the development of concepts that could enable us to integrate and uphold a coherent whole out of the mountain of empirical research in the cognitive sciences has been lagging behind. This lack of notions has been the cause of some serious political and ideological ambiguities and misunderstandings in the interpretation of the mentioned researches. Still, the

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[1] Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 3.

ambition of building a scientific paradigm on the basis of any empirical knowledge always presupposes a vocabulary that includes strong explanatory potential. Likewise, it is necessary to understand that neuroscience just like any other discipline, represents *knowledge in the making* (where the gerund points at the incompleteness and openness of accumulating knowledge).

*The Female Brain* was written by Cynthia Darlington, professor of Neuroscience, trained in psychology and neurophysiology. *Gender and the Science of Difference* was edited by Jill A. Fisher, who holds a PhD in science and technology studies and who currently is an Assistant Professor at the Center for Biomedical Ethics. The latter book contains contributions by both researchers in science and the humanities.

In what follows, I will firstly present certain key aspects of *The Female Brain*, and then *Gender and the Science of Difference* as well. In the main core of my comment, the intention will be to connect the two books through an analysis of their epistemological premises and point out the need for surgically accurate linguistic tools that follow behind. Such tools are necessary instruments in order to interpret the 'world' of (sexual and/or gender) difference in more persuasive and complete manner.

According to its author, *The Female Brain* originated as a response to the need of collecting in one book a series of issues that concern the brain structure and functions – only supposed to be neutral in terms of sex – about the biological origin of certain phenomena (such as the hypothesis that the women are more monogamous or less competitive than man or the relation between the universal codes of beauty and female forms, etc.) that she had to explain to her students. Consequently, beside the description of different factors such as genes, hormones or neurotransmitters that initiate sexually differentiated processes and their functionality, the author had to find a didactically efficient way of transmitting this knowledge to her students as well as the best form of communicating it in one emerging scientific discipline like neuroscience.

She thus studied the physiological factors that can influence neuron activity and asked herself along with her students: to what extent – if any at all – does the sex of the animal under observation condition the result of the experiment that is carried on? In the introduction to her book, Darlington writes that for practical reasons and in an attempt to obtain stable results the experimental animals were almost always males («females tend to be inconsistent in their responses as a result of the oestrous cycle», p. 2). She noticed that experiments

conducted in this way, guided by a long-term need of efficiency and stability in research, contributed to disregard and neglect certain changes that could be noticed if the different sex is taken into account. Motivated by the endeavor to articulate «the issue of basic biological differences between the sexes, in terms of brain function,» Darlington consequently stated that the biological sexual difference actually «has been clouded by issues of gender» (p. 2). Indeed, anticipating what in an increasing number of studies will become the heated concept of *plasticity of the brain*, she wrote that «differences may arise as a result of different brain structure or from virtually the same brain structure performing in different ways» (p. 2). More complicated still, but also more interesting, somewhat different structures can have marginally different ways of manifesting. It is not far from the truth that the intuitions that led Darlington to research the biological sexual differences were certainly correct. Still the problem here is exactly the fact that an established (but unsuited) vocabulary is too quickly imposed, and that this imposition biases, so to say, the results of the emerging study.

In the first two chapters she puts forward the basic physiological terminology, and then recounts the "history of the study of the female brains." Chapters from three to eight examine specific aspects of the structures of the brain, based on empirical evidence of the difference between so-called 'female' and 'male' brains. More precisely, the Third chapter highlights structural changes, while the Fourth documents the functional differences through descriptions of neurotransmitters and their receptors. Despite noticing the difficulty of separating structure from function, the author continues her exposition in the Fifth chapter examining the functional asymmetry of the brain through the dichotomy: male/female and left/right. Chapter Six explores differences in male and female perception, while chapter Seven thematizes neurological and psychiatric disorders that make visible neuronal particularities of different sexes. Chapter Eight introduces the role of hormones in treating certain neurophysiological disorders, which leads to the establishment of new variables that takes into account e.g. hormonal changes provoked by pregnancy, which are opposite to results arrived at during the studying of male animals. The old convention of universally applicable results of the experiments on male animals thus became non relevant. The book ends with a chapter of guidelines for future work in distinguishing the 'female' from the 'male' brain.

By the contrast, *Gender and the Science of Difference*, with its subtitle *Cultural Politics of Contemporary Science and Medicine*, was motivated, as mentioned, by the provocation to establish a 'science of difference.' The editor of the collection is careful to put at the same discursive level both 'gender' and 'science of difference' topics, by measuring their arguments in the larger historical and contemporary contexts. The reader is offered four parts that encompass various current critical analyses from humanities, science and medicine. The introductory section examines and evaluates the epistemological and methodological aspects of biological difference and gender. The paper by Lesley J. Rogers, "Sex Differences Are Not Hardwired," cleverly deconstructs opposing explanations of *causes* of sexual difference, moving away from the simple «nature versus nurture dichotomy» (p. 27) and pointing out the old trappings of determinism, whether in genetics or in evolutionary psychology. Unlike 'unitary explanations' (stating that genes are the main cause of sex differences: «men and women are made in fundamentally different ways»[2]) the author borrows examples from experimental sciences and zoology, and suggests 'interactive explanations' of the causes of sex differences that examine the interaction between genetic and epigenetic (experience) influences on the development of behavior. Assuming that "methodology is in the eye of the beholder," or in other words, that the examination of sexuality, sex and gender differences is first and foremost subject to 'judgmental stances,' Bonnie B. Spanier and Jessica D. Horowitz analyze the conceptual mistakes in the claims of biological determinism. They strongly contend with the famous McFadden research and the CEOAE study ("click-evoked otoacoustic emissions," 2008, pp. 48–60), which purports to «determine the subject's sexual orientation based on specific auditory functions».

The second part of the book deals with "Animal Obsessions", presenting—in the first paper—what is happening with experimental animals in laboratories and how feminists respond to this phenomenon. "Telling the Rat What to Do" by Lynda Birke tackles the cultural expectations of gender and sexual behavior where «the supposition of 'typical' sexually dimorphic behavior based in biology has been exacerbated by the use of limited testing conditions, which do not permit animals to show their full range of behavior» (p. 97). Arguing that the claims of biological difference are legion, she is challenging the possibility of acknowledging the seemingly rare idea that even lab rats have social lives

[2] See: Bainbridge, 2003, p. 33.

shaping their development (and therefore experimental outcomes). The next study in the section aiming to question sexual behavior in animals "Why do Voles fall in love?" by Angela Willey and Sara Giordano, describes sexual dimorphism in "Monogamy Gene Research". Smilla Ebeling and Bonnie B. Spanier, by asking why there would be gay penguins, adventure the analysis of penguins' – not without the zests of irony – 'socially constructed gender roles' and 'politics' in the animal world as well. Their

> examination of gay penguins in zoos illustrated the close intertwining and even co-construction of popular science and societal norms, raising questions about just how objective popular (and even perhaps formal) science can be on topics close to (human animal) home (thus comparing the issue of politics in relation to scientific objectivity) (p 140).

The third part of the book concerns the issue of the categorization of the body and, in particular, the problem of how to categorize those bodies that do not fit into the traditional framework of gender and/or sex binaries. The fourth and last part of the book faces the paradoxes of contemporary medical procedures that are not plastic surgeries in the usual sense, but rather so-called "facial feminization surgery," when there is a change in gender, but not a radical change in sex. This technique represents an invasive and expensive though uncertainly successful intervention that still remains highly sought by male-to-female transsexuals. By contrast, female-to-male transsexuals achieve masculinization of the face through hormone therapy avoiding surgery. This section of the book also focuses on obesity and on research about the extent to which obesity is a hereditary disorder. The last text in the book problematizes male sexuality and its manifestation making reference to the research conducted at the *Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social* hospital in Cuernavaca on 'Hybrid Medical knowledge' and urological problem know as the 'Erectile Dysfunction'. The author observes how the discourses on 'mature' masculinity (or machismo) provoke the contradiction when the need for the ED (Erectile Dysfunction) drug treatment appears on the surface.

*Gender and the Science of Difference* is undoubtedly an important piece of work, precisely because one of its main features is a discussion *of knowledge in the making*. This phrase marks a dynamic epistemological approach, which takes as its point of departure the stance that the production of knowledge, this time on 'difference,' demands an 'increased explanatory power' and the improvement of scientific justification when the human and non-human sexuality are discussed. In this sense, the vocabulary that grounds it should also

challenge linguistic stereotypes such as binary couples male/female, passive/active, strong/weak. And although the author of *The Female Brain* had a similar motivation, her intention was thwarted by the need to oversimplify (and reduce) a very large amount of scientific data, placing facts into concepts that rely primarily on largely circumstantial evidence results.

Contemporary bioengineering however – precisely insofar as it is conceived as *knowledge in the making* – ought to avoid oversimplification and carelessness when it chooses linguistic constructions that are intended to introduce shadings in the discussion on sex differences. Bioethics, biopolitics, bioeconomics, and other disciplines that combine the study of life – by using 'natural' and 'bio-metaphors' – offer the possibility of reexamining scientific nomenclature, radically rejecting binaries. In this way a dialogue can be established, in which gender as a social construct and indicators of sex in the biological framework can build a new scientific paradigm that would allow the mapping of the influence of hormones on behavior, or the study of sex differences emerging from the operations of the central nervous system. The study of sexual and gender differences is not the privilege of feminists – whether one declares as such or follows feminism rejecting the moniker – nor of anyone else who intends to promote ideological and political values through its research. Perhaps therein lays the value of a book about the 'scientific sexual difference': because in discussing (supposedly) unequivocal scientific knowledge, it points out to the reader the cultural and societal claims that underlie the design of almost all scientific experiments dealing with sexuality.

What are the presuppositions that lead to the formation of such scientific knowledge? *Gender and the Science of Difference* is a collection of scientific texts that communicate with the general public, offering some key interpretative tools. Making use of these, it is possible to identify the conceptual make up of specific terms that cause controversy, and consequently leave behind the constraints of *The Female Brain*. In other words, it will be possible to speak of estrogen, testosterone, behavioral stereotypes and paradigms, sexual differentiation, the hypothalamic-pituitary axis and the regions of the brain that mediate aspects of sex, even without referring to the used up and ontologically overexploited "linguistic" difference between the male and female. It will be possible to wonder about the interaction that would influence reproduction or any phenomenon that is part of human sexuality in comparison, or in opposition to, other living beings. For if the beginning of (scientific) discourse about difference lies primarily in language, it is then with

the help of tools that deconstructs the scientific vocabulary that we can put into question exclusively two sex attributes in the first place, as well the decades-long resistance that ties humans to stereotypes hindering science.

It has been over ten years since Fausto-Sterling pointed to the complicated interwoven nature of scientific standardization of hormone measuring – a necessary search for terms that would 'label' male or female hormones, with observations that constantly belied the monosemy of terms – and the emancipatory tendency that influenced the discourse of gender identities. The debate and terminological maneuvering that occurred at the beginning of the twentieth century over the naming of the enzyme and protein that determined the sexual orientation and behavior of humans lasted over thirty years. It can be said that the entire century has passed in convoluted struggles – lasting to this day – for scientists to realize that their inherent scientific knowledge rests on specific belief systems that require not only factual justification, but justification of the language they use to articulate the reality in which humans live and work.

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Commentary

# Sexing the Body
# Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality

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In *Sexing the Body. Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality* Fausto-Sterling attempts to answer two questions: How is knowledge about the body gendered? And, how gender and sexuality become somatic facts? In other words, she passionately and with impressive intellectual clarity demonstrates how in regards to human sexuality the social becomes material. She takes a broad, interdisciplinary perspective in examining this process of gender embodiment. Her goal is to demonstrate not only how the categories (men/women) humans use to describe other humans become embodied in those to whom they refer, but also how these categories are not reflected in reality. She argues that labeling someone a man or a woman is solely a social decision. «We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender – not science – can define our sex» (p. 3) and consistently throughout the book she shows how gender beliefs affect what kinds of knowledge are produced about sex, sexual behaviors, and ultimately gender.

This book has three aims. First, Fausto-Sterling challenges our dualistic thinking about the sex categories and how we use them. In particular she focuses on three pairs of concepts: sex/gender, nature/nurture and real/constructed. She cuts through these false dichotomies, claiming that sexuality is a somatic fact shaped by cultural effects. Throughout the book she explains how the categories used to define sexuality changed over time, thus supporting her argument that human sexuality is neither timeless nor universal. She recalls the feminist historian Joan Scott who argued that historians should not assume that the term "experience" contains a self-evident

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meaning and should always remember the historical context in which a particular "meaning" has emerged. Fausto-Sterling traces the development and construction of the concept of (homo)sexuality in the debates led by historians, anthropologists and philosophers. This helps us to understand how we've arrived at our present arrangements and understanding of human sexual development. But, what's more, she points out how all these debates are built on two-sex model of masculinity and femininity, with scientists looking for evidence of whether human sexuality is inborn or socially constructed. She agrees with those who fall along the social constructionist spectrum (Foucault, Haraway, Scott) that «our bodily experiences are brought into being by our development in particular cultures and historical periods» (p. 20), but she makes the argument more specific by saying that we literally, not just discursively, construct our bodies. To substantiate her claim, she argues that it is necessary to erode the distinction between the physical and the social body.

Second, she argues against current theories of sexual development and attempts to deliver a new theoretical approach to the study of human sexuality. Consequently, her approach cannot be classified as neither essentialist nor constructionist, as she rejects dichotomous categorizations. Her input into the ongoing debate (between essentialists and constructionists) is unique. She is a molecular biologist, a feminist and a historian and, as she puts it, she believes in the material world (humans are biological and thus in some sense natural beings) and in building specific knowledge by conducting experiments, but as a feminist and historian she believes that 'facts' are not universal truths but are socially constructed (humans are social and thus in some sense constructed entities). She asks whether we can «devise a way of seeing ourselves, as we develop from fertilization to old age, as simultaneously natural and unnatural» (p. 25), and recalls feminist theorists who already attempted to deliver a nondualistic accounts of the body (Butler 1993, Grosz 1994), but finds them unsatisfactory. Judith Butler, Fausto-Sterling argues, suggests we should look at the body as a system that simultaneously produces and is produced by meaning, thus she does not allow any biological processes a status that pre-exists their meaning. Unlike Butler, Elizabeth Grosz believes that biological instincts provide that kind of raw material on which sexuality develops. But the raw material is not enough and without human sociality human sexuality cannot develop. But taking the innate at face value, Fausto-Sterling further argues, «still leaves us with an unexplained residue of nature» (p. 25) and she argues for applying, what she calls, developmental system theory (DST) to the study of

human sexual development. DST theorists deny that there are fundamentally two kinds of processes: one guided by "nature" (hormones, genes, brain cell, etc.) and one guided by "nurture" (environment, experience, learning, etc.) allowing us to break away from the dualistic thinking about human development. One example of a theorist who represents systems theory approach is Elisabeth Wilson (1998) who argues for a theory of mind and body which she calls connectionism. In the old-fashioned approach the brain is thought of as anatomical (where the function is located in particular parts of the brain), whereas in the connectionist model the brains' function emerges from the complexity and strength of many neural connections acting at once. What implications this approach could have for studying sexuality? Fausto Sterling elaborates that connectionist networks are usually nonlinear and so even small changes can produce large effects. With regards to the study of sexuality,

> we could easily be looking in the wrong places and on the wrong scale for aspects of the environment that shape human development. Furthermore, a single behavior may have many underlying causes, events that happen at different times in development (p. 27).

Third, Fausto-Sterling stresses that her book is political. She is a social activist devoted to shifting the politics of the body, which she believes are harmful to those who do not fit in the modern rigid sex categories. In order to do that, she believes we must change the politics of science and argues this can be done by studying how scientists create empirical knowledge. Moreover, she argues that the dualistic framework we use in our daily debates (nature/nurture) holds enormous dangers. We had seen in past history how a believer in the "nature" side of things can lead to great tragedies and it definitely never worked to further equality for women. As she puts it: «I am deeply committed to the idea of the modern movements of gay and women's liberation, which argue that the way we traditionally conceptualize gender and sexual identity narrows life's possibilities while perpetuating gender inequality» (p. 8).

*Sexing the Body* takes us on a journey through the body where Fausto-Sterling confronts the false dichotomies of what is thought of as real (sex/nature) or as constructed (gender/culture). The book is organized into nine chapters, each dealing with different parts of the human body (apart from an opening and closing chapter). Starting from the genitals (chapters 2-4), the brain (chapter 5), sex glands and hormones (chapters 6-7) and finally sexual behavior in rats (to demonstrate how theories about human sexuality are often

derived from rodent experimentation) (chapter 8), Fausto-Sterling persuasively demonstrates how sex is literally constructed and how historically scientific knowledge about anatomy and physiology was gendered. She takes the reader through some complex issues and scholarships in a clear and well-organized manner, in a book that aims to speak to different audiences simultaneously. Fausto- Sterling explains how she in fact wrote two books in one. First part of the book is «a narrative accessible to general audience» (preface). Second part is intended for scholars (nearly as long as the first part) and includes endnotes and an extensive bibliographical section that aims to satisfy the curiosity and advance discussions within academic circles. This makes the book more accessible for the general reader, without doing any harm to its scientific dimension.

In chapter two, Fausto-Sterling traces back in history how the modern medical treatments of intersexuality developed, helping to maintain the two-sex system and leading to a complete erasure of intersexuality from the Western culture (her analysis is limited to Europe and North America). She argues that the fixation with maintaining "correct" membership of humans as either male or female coincided with the battle for social equality between the sexes: «the more social radicals blasted away the separations between masculine and feminine spheres, the more physicians insisted on the absolute division between male and female» (p. 40). In the premodern era in Europe (before 19$^{th}$ century), hermaphrodites were at least culturally acknowledged. Despite the fact the distinction between males and females was always at the core of the juridical and political systems, it was the individual who had the choice to decide with which sex they wanted to be identified with. Today the state and the legal system is still organized around the idea that there are only two sexes, but from the moment biology and medicine gained greater authority "ambiguous" bodies, now deemed as pathological, were literally erased from the public eye. What's more decisions, mostly irreversible, were from then on made arbitrarily by medical practitioners. Fausto-Sterling outlines the history of the classificatory schemas which were in force to help medical practitioners establish whether one was a female or a male. In the Age of Gonads (starting from the 1830s), the honor of definitive powers was offered to the gonads. This system was developed by a German physician Theodor Albrecht Klebs who contrasted "true" with "pseudo" hermaphrodites and declared that "true" ones had both ovarian and testicular tissues in the body (Fausto-Sterling after Dreger 1998). All other combinations (for example penis with ovaries, or

testes and a vagina) could be classified on basis of gonads as either male or female. Since the cases of "true" hermaphrodites were very rare significantly fewer people were counted as intersexual. «Medical science was working its magic: hermaphrodites were beginning to disappear» (p. 38). «The vanishing act», as Fausto-Sterling calls it, was even less flexible in the Age of Conversion (from 1930s). Medical practitioners developed the surgical and hormonal suppression of intersexuality and «found it imperative to catch mixed-sex people at birth and convert them, by any means necessary, to either male or female» (p. 40). Starting from the 1950s, further improvements in surgical technology allowed medical practitioners to "catch" most intersexuals at the moment of birth. Fausto-Sterling argues that, «if nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural conceits» (p. 31) and as an intersexual activist she calls for an end to all unnecessary infant surgery.

In next two chapters (three and four), Fausto-Sterling presents a historical overview of theories about the origins of sexual difference that provided the basis for the modern, rigid approach to the treatment of intersexual bodies. She persuasively shows how medical practitioners convince of and perpetuate the idea that children are actually born with gender. For example she debates that the definitions doctors use (to call a child a girl or a boy) are purely social and not medical and presents cases where doctors use only their personal impression to decide that a baby's clitoris is "too big" to belong to a girl. In such cases the clitoris is downsized, even if the child is not intersexual by definition, leading to unnecessary and sexually damaging genital surgeries (p. 60).

> Most intersexual males are infertile, so what counts especially is how the penis functions in social interactions – whether it 'looks right' to other boys, whether it can 'perform satisfactorily' in intercourse. It is not what the sex organ does for the body to which it is attached that defines the body as male. It is what it does vis-à-vis other bodies (p. 58).

The "immediate fixing" remedy of infants born with intersexed genitals ironically emerged from flexible theories of gender (initiated with the study of Albert Ellis in the 1940s).[1] These theories concluded that human sexuality is highly malleable and that nurture is more important than nature in the development of masculinity and femininity. John Money was particularly a

[1] See, Ellis, 1945.

strong proponent of such approach and insisted that early genital surgery is imperative, as the child develops his or her gender identity in connection to the body. Important component of successful treatment was therefore the parents : and later the child's belief that the, in many cases, arbitrarily chosen gender was in fact "what the nature indented". This resulted in medical manuals almost unanimously recommending that parents and children should not receive a full explanation of an infant's sexual status (p. 64). Money's theory was repeatedly challenged by, inter alia, Milton Diamond (1965), who explained that the brain (through hormones) is prenatally gendered, individuals are not psychosexually neutral at birth and healthy psychosexual development is not intimately related to the appearance of one's genitals. Through the 1960s and 1970s many researchers reported on cases of intersexual adults who, once they grew up, rejected the sex which was reassigned to them at birth, and even thought Money's main ideas were discredited, the social constructionist doctrine lingers in practice until today. Diamond called for new treatment paradigms of intersexuality where immediate and irreversible surgeries would be postponed.

In 1993, Fausto-Sterling published an article *The Five Sexes: Why Male and Female Are Not Enough* which she calls a "modest proposal" suggesting that we replace our two-sex system with a five-sex system. This, in fact, radical proposition sparked a huge debate and an outrage not only among medical practitioners, but it also provided an important stimulus for intersexual people to organize and demand change. Since 1993 Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), Hermaphrodite Education and Listening Post and many other support groups were established and continue building coalitions among groups of intersexuals, academics, physicians and psychologists, lobbying to change painful and irreversible treatment practices. She reveals many stories of people who are behind the statistics and provides vast evidence that the current approach instead of preventing psychological suffering actually causes it. And psychological pain is only one of the "side effects" of such surgical interventions. The myth that intersexuals without medical intervention are doomed to life of misery is refuted by more than 80 cases of people who, identified as intersexual, refused to give up their "double" identities and were leading a satisfying life. What Fausto-Sterling hopes to see in the future is the hierarchical division between patient and doctor dissolved, new medical treatment that permits ambiguity, medical interventions aimed only at life-threatening conditions and surgery seen as destructive, rather than imperative.

She argues, following Suzanne Kessler (1990), that to end gender tyranny we need to abandon the two-gender dichotomy and claims to a separate intersexual identity and asks: Can our physical genitals continue to form a basis for deciding the rights and privileges of citizenship? They are not even publicly visible. Fausto-Sterling understands her vision is utopian, but she believes it is nevertheless possible: «the elements needed to make our future more equitable and diverse already exist. We just need to make it happen» (p. 114). Fausto-Sterling continues documenting how culture and politics shape scientific knowledge also in chapter five. This time she turns to a study of the brain which aimed to revel gender differences within its anatomy. She discusses that

> relationship among gender, brain function, and anatomy are both hard to interpret and difficult to see, so scientists go to great lengths to convince each other and the general public that gender differences in the brain anatomy are both visible and meaningful (p. 115).

She gives a detailed account of various methodological and theoretical approaches which different research communities employ to investigate different parts and functions of the brain. The battle of sex difference continues undisrupted and Fausto-Sterling argues that it can last for hundreds of years, because scientists insist on using truths and beliefs taken from our social arena to structure, read and interpret the natural. Perhaps most interesting is the battle for corpus callosum, a very highly variable bit of our brain that has fascinated scientists since 1982. It began with an article in the prestigious journal *Science*, where two physical anthropologists (de Lacoste-Utamsing & Holloway 1986) reported that certain regions of the corpus callosum (CC) were larger in females than in males. «Although admittedly preliminary (the study used nine males and five females), the authors boldly related their results to possible gender differences in the degree of 'lateralization of visuospatial functions'» (p. 118). Both scientists and the popular media pushed the determinism to an extreme, expending the relationship between the CC to basically every aspect of human behavior. But Fausto-Sterling's close examination of many other research reports reveals an alarming number of methodological problems and surprisingly little consensus among different findings. She explains how scientists first turn a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional sample of tissue (which results in shape distortion and shrinkage). Next they further subdivide it and in the end proceed with their interpretations as if they measured the corpus callosum.

> Instead, interpretation ought to try to work by reversing the abstraction process; here, though, one runs into trouble. Far too little is known about the detailed anatomy of the intact, three-dimensional corpus callosum to accomplish such a task. One is left to assign meaning to a fictionalized abstraction, and the space opened up for mischief becomes enormous (p. 130).

In 1906 corpus callosum was studied with the hopes to understand racial differences and the differences found in brain measurements were completely consistent with "knowledge" about racial characteristics. Until they were disputed as inaccurate. Major objection: extensive individual variations swamped group difference (p. 123). Today the CC is studied with the hopes to understand gender differences. And once again scientists, to support their interpretations, turn to the context of an ongoing debate about the CC reflecting cultural assumptions about the meaning of the subject under study – the meaning of masculinity and femininity. «The social context may change, but the weapons of scientific battle can be transferred from one era to the next» (p. 124).

Fausto-Sterling throughout the book documents how scientists have, over the past century, worked relentlessly to prove that our gender is connected to our body. In chapter six and seven she turns to the chemistry of our body – the hormones. Since 1960 when testosterone and estrogen were acclaimed as the youth hormones they have become the most extensively used drugs in the history of medicine. But the concept of "sex hormones" gained popularity much earlier (around 1908), coincidently during the time when, in the USA and Europe, debates about the rights of homosexuals and women emerged. Fausto-Sterling points out that at the time the idea, that the public sphere was by definition masculine, was so deeply engrained in the social imaginary that many scientists were arguing that women who aspired to citizenship rights had to be masculine. «Physiological functions became political allegory – which, ironically, made them more rather than less credible, because they seemed so compatible with what people already 'knew' about the nature of sex difference» (p. 162). The next phase of hormone research was launched during the 1920s in what came to be called "endocrinological gold rush". She traces the fascinating history of hormone and genetic biology research showing how personal, institutional, financial and ultimately political interests of actors promoting and carrying out research in hormone biology overlapped in intricate ways (p. 177). Each step in the process of isolation, measurement and naming, based on the preexisting cultural ideas about gender, continued to

assign sex to hormones. Fausto-Sterling revels how scientists struggled to reconcile experimental data with what they felt certain to be true about sex differences. Even when they kept finding 'male' hormones in female bodies, they never gave up the idea that hormones are essentially linked to maleness and femaleness. This idea prevailed during the First (1932) and Second (1935) Conference on Standardization of Sex Hormones where definitions of androgen and estrogen were adopted. These not sex-specific steroid molecules (both men and women need both testosterone and estrogen), affecting most, if not all, of the body's organ systems (just to name the brain, lungs, bones, blood vessels and liver) were from then on deemed as 'sex hormones'. Fausto-Sterling argues that this decision has profoundly influenced our understanding of the biological nature of masculinity and femininity.

> Now that the label sex hormones seems attached to these steroid molecules, any rediscovery of their role in tissues such as bones or intestines has a strange result ... these organs, so clearly not involved in reproduction, come to be seen as sex organs. Chemicals infuse the body, from head to toe, with gender meanings (p. 147).

In this struggle to understand the role of hormones in constructing sex difference, Fausto-Sterling concludes: «the time has come to jettison both the organizing metaphor of the sex hormone and the specific terms androgen and estrogen» (p. 193) and insists on calling them "steroid hormones" as they are just that and nothing else. She points out that if we are to understand the physiological components of sexual development we must be looking at the steroids as one of a number of components that are important for the creation of male, female, masculinity and femininity. Only then «we will become able to conceptualize the ways in which environment, experience, anatomy, and physiology result in the behavior patters that we find interesting and important to study» (p. 194).

In chapter eight, Fausto-Sterling clarifies how research on human sexuality paralleled studies on animal sexuality and how the laboratory rodent became the premier model to explore hormones and sex-related behaviors in mammals. She recalls, amongst others, the French embryologist Alfred Jost who studied the development of anatomical differences between male and female fetuses. Fausto-Sterling points how Jost's theory adopted the metaphor of female lack and male presence which mirrored the ongoing debates about women's and men's separate roles in society. In her words:

> From the 1950s through the mid-1960s he referred to females as the neutral or anhormonal sex type. They became females, according to him, because they *lacked* testes, while the testes played the principal role in separating male from female development (p. 203).

Jost's model of sexual development was later imported into the study of behavior. Scientists researching male and female brain difference "discovered" that the "female" brain could only develop in the absence of testosterone. This leap from sexual anatomy (which is easy to observe and measure) to sexual behavior, Fausto-Sterling argues, opened a whole new chapter in research on masculinity, femininity, but also homosexuality, bisexuality and heterosexuality. For example, Frank Ambrose Beach (1947-48) developed a detailed theory of animal sexuality where he argued that neurologically all animals have a bisexual potential. He acknowledged individual variability within each sex, but argued that under some conditions, both sexes could display opposite sexes' mating patterns thus, he claimed, «human homosexuality reflects the essentially bisexual character of our mammalian inheritance» (p. 211). His findings were strengthened by Kinsey's famous survey which confirmed extensive bisexual behaviors in men and women.[2] All this, at the time when public discussions about homosexuality were at their peak (early 1950s). But just as the cold war ideology started to creep in (and as Guy Gabrielson, national chairman of the Republican party wrote «sexual perverts had infiltrated the government and were perhaps as dangerous as the actual Communists» (p. 198)) more conservative readings of animal sexuality started to dominate. «By 1959, a new rodent emerged that was distinctly heterosexual and far more bound by gender roles than were Beach's rats» (p. 211). When in 1959 cold war rhetoric about homosexuality, communism and the family was at its peak new chapter in the history of the manly rat began. William C. Young published an article in which he examined long-term hormonal effects on behavior and found that prenatal exposure to androgens or estrogens had «an organizing action that would be reflected by the character of adult sexual behavior» (Young, 1959, p. 213). This meant that a whole range of adult behaviors could be traced back to pre-birth hormonal chemistry, indirectly implying the finding of a biological basis of homosexuality. This paper, Fausto-Sterling maintains, «shaped the study of hormones and sexual behavior for decades to come» (p. 214). Young's new theory – the

[2] See, Kinsey, 1948.

organizational/activational (O/A) model of hormone activity argued that fetal hormones permanently fixed an individual's behavioral potential as either masculine or feminine and basically explained that femininity and masculinity were mutually exclusive. Whereas earlier researchers emphasized the role of individual variability, physiological complexity and environment in the development of sexual behavior, from then on all eyes were focused on the hormonal causes of gendered behavior, erasing learning and experience from the picture. Despite many other researchers' efforts to stave off single factor-models of development, this fatalistic theory stayed basically intact until the 1970s. In 1972 Money and Ehrhard published their groundbreaking work on biology and sexual development *Man and Woman, Boy and Girl* where, as was mentioned before, they concluded that human sexuality is highly malleable and that nurture is more important than nature in the development of masculinity and femininity. Other researchers followed with theories concluding that masculinity and femininity had an "orthogonal" relationship (varied independently from each other) rather than, as Young implied, being mutually exclusive (p. 222). These shifts paralleled with the growing importance of women's liberation movement and Sandra Bem's (1974) famous idea of androgyny was published the same year as the "orthogonal mode" of sexual behavior. An androgynous person is one that has both feminine and masculine psychological traits, which according to Bem is the best combination for one's healthy functioning in contemporary society.[3] Throughout the 1980s social scientists turned to biology to explain human sexual practices, while biologists found their own research paradigms influenced by new socially accepted definitions of human sexual diversity. And as new and more complicated accounts of human homosexuality began to take shape in public debate researchers working on animal behavior suddenly began to reevaluate their own experiments on rodent sexuality.

Fausto-Sterling argues that, as long as the dividing line between the so-called biologically and socially shaped behaviors remains rigid, it will be difficult to offer satisfying accounts of humans' sexual development. Her solution to these oversimplified (either nature or nurture) debates is to see nature and nurture as an indivisible, dynamic system where many factors play a role. «Some elements are anatomical, some physiological, some behavioral, and some social. They all form part of a unitary system» (p. 230). She points

[3] Foucault called the idea of androgyny "a hermaphrodism of the soul". See, Foucault 1980, p. 43.

out that the modern debates about genes roles too closely resemble what we had seen in the debates with hormones. The oversimplification is on the rise and genes are now thought to be responsible for everything, from homosexuality to shyness. Saying that genes make proteins is the common shorthandness found in many popular reports and thoughts about gens. Yet, Fausto-Sterling reminds, DNA itself does not make proteins, but like hormones, it needs to be in a complex system with other molecules to perform its action. And she concludes: «partitioning genes from environment, nature from nurture, is a scientific dead end, a bad way of thinking about human development» (p. 235). In the final chapter Fausto-Sterling argues that humans take the longest time to mature out of all primates and the longer the period of development the more opportunities for the environment to shape the developing organism. She insists on our understanding of human sexuality as a dynamic system that changes over time. And that the changes that happen in our lives are part of a biocultural system in which cells and culture mutually construct each other. Just like our anatomy is not constant – so are those aspects of human sexuality that derive from our body's structure, function and image. Only once researchers admit the limitations of working within a single discipline they can, she concludes, come up with a more complete theory about human sexuality.

Fausto-Sterling provided extended evidence in this book of how biology is politics, by other means. As we continue debating our politics through arguments about biology we should never «lose sight of the fact that our debates about body's biology are always simultaneously moral, ethical, and political debates about social and political equality and the possibility for change. Nothing less is at stake» (p. 255).

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Commentary

# The Complexity of Intersectionality

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Feminist analytic philosophers have been working in trying to define and explain the meaning of "gender", "race", "sexuality", etc., using the tools of analytic philosophy in very different ways and from a variety of approaches. Many feminist philosophers, for example, have focused on the question of whether the concepts of "gender", "race", "sexuality" and so on are natural kind terms or socially constructed.[1] Although we cannot claim that there is full agreement on either the methods or the theories forwarded, we can perhaps agree that the analysis of the relation between some of these categories is at times regarded as an even more difficult and contentious topic than the analysis of each category separately.

It is at this point that the notion of "intersectionality" comes into play as a proposal for a framework to deal with the complexity of multiple structures (such as gender, race, sexuality, class, age, disability, etc.), on the understanding that the categories with which they operate do not act independently but rather intersect and create specific oppressions. As Ann Garry notes in a recent article, «Feminist philosophers tend to give it [intersectionality] lip service, but often fail to construct theories that integrate the insights brought to bear by intersectional analyses» (Garry, 2011, p.

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[1] See, among many others, Appiah, 1996; Haslanger, 2000, 2010; Saul, 2006; Stein, 1998.

826).[2] Although some work has been undertaken with the concept of intersectionality in feminist analytic philosophy, most of the research has been conducted by feminists in the social sciences and other feminist theorists not necessarily from within the analytical philosophy tradition. This is the case of Leslie McCall, an American sociologist who addresses this topic in a way that can be fruitful for feminist analytic philosophers. The aim of this commentary is to outline and present a critique of her attempt to deal with the question of *intersectionality*.

In her article, *The Complexity of Intersectionality*, McCall defines "intersectionality" as «the relationships among multiple dimensions and modalities of social relations and subject formations» (p. 1171). In the first part of the article, she seeks to analyze the relationship between different social categories by outlining three approaches differentiated by their use and understanding of these categories. In the second part, she presents an empirical study as an example of the intersectional approach she favors.

Before focusing on McCall's own proposal, some background comments are perhaps required to account for the importance of the concept of intersectionality within feminist and women's studies and to explain how it emerged within these theories. The specific concept of intersectionality was first introduced in the late 1980s by the critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a way to describe the interconnections and interdependencies among race, gender and class in black women. Her contribution followed Black Feminist attempts at decentering white, western, heterosexual, middle-class woman who had become the central subject of feminist analyses and the measure of feminist politics. Other feminist critical race theorists such as bell hooks (1984) and Patricia Hill Collins (1990) showed the impossibility of separating out the categories and explaining inequalities through a single framework. They challenged the use of 'woman' as a unitary category reflecting an essentialized vision of all women. Their aim was to show how the experiences and struggles of women of color could not be explained by feminist or by anti-racist theories. As it is now well known, these two theories seemed to imply that "All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men"[3], so they considered it necessary to question the two concepts of

[2] Ann Garry (2011) discusses the concept of intersectionality and proposes a wittgensteinian family resemblance intersectional approach. This is one of the few works in feminist analytic philosophy in this topic.

[3] See Hull, Scott, & Smith,1982.

"woman" and "black" to illustrate the differences within these categories and, more importantly, the fact that interaction between these two categories forms specific oppressions such as those of black women. Intersectionality appears as a critical feminist proposal that can explore each intersection and which can shed light on previously hidden exclusions – black *lesbian* women, *muslim* gay men, etc. And at the same time it faces the problem of multiple feminine subjectivities. As Davis states,

> 'Intersectionality' addresses the most central theoretical and normative concern within feminist scholarship: namely, the acknowledgement of differences among women ... This is because it touches on the most pressing problem facing contemporary feminism – the long and painful legacy of its exclusions (Davis, 2008, p. 70).

McCall's understanding of intersectionality starts from the acknowledgment that social relations are complex, multiple and intersected and she seeks to manage this complexity by distinguishing three approaches that are defined in terms of their stance in relation to social categories: *anticategorical complexity*, *intracategorical complexity* and *intercategorical complexity*. These three approaches are not just conceptual possibilities but emerge from different historical positions adopted with respect to the categorization and the use of categories within feminist theory. Let's explore them in more detail.

First, *anticategorical* complexity is linked to feminist poststructuralists who, according to McCall, offer a deconstruction and rejection of social categories and interrogate the boundary-making of categories itself. She adds that from this perspective,

> social life is considered too irreducibly complex – overflowing with multiple and fluid determinations of both subjects and structures – to make fixed categories anything but simplifying social fictions that produce inequalities in the process of producing differences (p. 1173).

Some theorists have seen this approach as the most successful, given the great skepticism surrounding the use of categories in a simplistic way. The upshot of such an approach is a critical stance towards *categorization per se* and any research that is based on such categorization.

Second, *intracategorical* complexity is related to Black Feminism and focuses on «particular social groups at neglected points of intersection» (p.

1174).[4] It is critical of the general *use* of social categories. It is the approach that inaugurates the study of intersectionality by focusing on single groups placed at the intersection of multiple categories, but it restricts the scope of investigation to only one dimension (for instance, women and black), rather than «at the intersection of a full range of dimensions of a full range of categories» (p. 1781) – such as considering both women and men and black and white. The method normally used in this kind of approach is the *case study*, which investigates the features of a single group or culture and is typically associated with qualitative rather than with quantitative methods in the social sciences. As McCall states,

> 'the multiple' in these intersectional analyses refers not to dimensions within categories but to dimensions across categories. Thus, an Arab American, middle-class, heterosexual woman is placed at the intersection of multiple categories (race-ethnicity, class, gender and sexual) but only reflects a single dimension of each (p. 1781).

In this way, other categories of Western, man, black, homosexual, etc., do not enter into the analysis.

Third, *intercategorical* complexity is the approach McCall endorses. It requires adopting existing analytical categories strategically: it uses categories but maintains a critical stance towards them. In her words:

> The intercategorical approach [...] begins with the observation that there are relationships of inequality among already constituted social groups, as imperfect and ever changing as they are, and takes those relationships as the center of analysis. The main task of the categorical approach is to explicate those relationships, and doing so requires the provisional use of categories (pp. 1784–1785).

As an example of this approach, McCall presents her own *empirical research* in the second part of the paper. Adopting a statistical approach, she explores whether social inequalities among groups even exist, making these relationships the focus of analysis itself. The difference between this approach and the intracategorical approach is that it deals with complex relationships

[4] Although McCall literally says that poststructuralists *reject* categories (p. 1773), perhaps it would be more accurate to say that they operate with a *deconstruction* of such categories. For instance, Butler (1990) focuses on how these categories have been established through practices and repetitive performance.

among social groups rather than with single social groups or categories. The subject is thus multigroup, analyzing the intersection across all analytical categories and social groups, and her method is systematically comparative between them. Her specific intersectional research focuses on *wage inequality* in regional economies in the United States, using a large-scale quantitative analysis. She classifies individuals into traditional analytical categories and examines relationships of wage inequalities among such groups. She examines the dimensions of inequality first and then synthesizes this information into a configuration of inequality. The main finding is that patterns of racial, gender and class inequality are not the same across configurations, and she concludes that «no single dimension of overall inequality can adequately describe the full structure of multiple, intersecting and conflicting dimensions of inequality» (p. 1791).

Following this brief summary of 'The Complexity of Intersectionality', we shall now raise a number of critical points. Although McCall's aim in the paper is «simply to introduce alternative perspectives that many feminists have overlooked rather than to provide a comprehensive definition or defense of them» (p. 1792), she proposes her empirical investigation as a case of the intercategorical study she favors. The first problem we would like to underline is that she does not specify the relation between the intercategorical *approach* and the particular *methodology* that should be used. Is the statistical method really appropriate for the intercategorical approach? Our tentative answer would be that it is not, because the empirical results of her research merely restate the existence of complexity but do not explain it. In claiming as a result that «no single form of inequality can represent the rest but that some forms of inequality seem to arise from the same conditions» (p. 1791), all she shows is that complexity is at play, that different forms of inequality exist and that they are interrelated, but she does not specify *how* they do so.

As for McCall's treatment of categories, we contend that there are more possibilities, other than the one she takes, left open for examination. The study of complex, multiple and intersecting social relations from an intercategorical approach does not necessarily mean that categories must be used in the statistical and rigid way she uses them. Even if we grant that «if structural relationships are the focus of the analysis, rather than the underlying assumption or context of the analysis, categorization is inevitable» (p. 1786), could we not use categories in a way less rigid and more attentive to differences? For example, qualitative research could also be based on

traditional analytical categories without reinforcing binary and exclusive distinctions such as "woman" and "man", by continuing to use them in a less rigid and fixed way (taking into account intersexuals, transsexuals or other identities that do not fit into the normative categories such as female/male or woman/man). Such a move does not imply turning the analysis into an anticategorical one, but it does serve to point out how a wide array of methodologies (and maybe not only empirical methods) could fit into the intercategorical approach while using categories in a more flexible way.

Another critical point we would like to stress is that, after having defined the three approaches and illustrated her proposal with an empirical case study, McCall does not address the question of the relations and/or compatibility between the three approaches. On the one hand, it would appear clear that the anticategorical approach is incompatible with the other two (intra- and intercategorical), precisely because of the requirement of deconstruction of categories. On this point, McCall shares with analytic feminists the rejection of the poststructuralist project that seeks to undermine identity categories deeply. The complex interaction of categories, thus, requires a more complex, messy and fluid treatment (see Garry, 2011, p. 830), but this does not lead to the abolishment of social categories. On the other hand, the intra- and intercategorical approaches are not mutually incompatible, as one investigation could focus on a specific group placed at the intersection of categories and at the same time be intercategorical in the sense of examining these very intersections with not just one but with multiple dimensions.

Moreover, if the focus of the analysis when following the intercategorical approach is the relationship of wage inequality itself, perhaps she is reducing the possibilities of the approach instead of widening its scope. Taking categories as a starting point for the analysis of multiple oppressions of gender, race, sexuality, class, age, (dis)ability and so forth and studying the relationship of inequality could provide much more information than she seems to acknowledge. Besides using categories in a more complex way, the study of relationships of inequality can be studied not only as wage differences but as inequalities in civil rights, access to public services, criminalization, violence suffered, types of housing, sexual freedom, representativity, mobility, etc. which may require a qualitative methodology. It is not that McCall denies that the study of these inequalities are not suitable for the intercategorical approach, but she does not take them into account nor does she explore the possibilities of studying the complexity of inequality itself.

These criticisms, while worth making, do not undermine the relevance of this paper as a discussion of the relation between different structures. It is now a commonplace in feminist studies to believe that the experiences of women are not only shaped by gender but by a multiplicity of categories, and intersectionality has emerged as a new theory for dealing with difference. As McCall herself says, «intersectionality is the most important theoretical contribution that women's studies, in conjunction with related fields, has made so far» (p. 1771). Her contribution in this paper is precisely the examination of intersectionality as the very object of study, something that had not previously been theorized in this way. The classification she offers clarifies different ways of working with intersectionality taking into account the historical development of feminism itself.

Furthermore, as she briefly mentions in the paper, examining intersectionality has the value of bringing into focus *lived experience.* If, as Audre Lorde said, «there is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives» (Lorde, 1984, p. 183), feminism should deal with more frameworks than gender structure because our lived experiences are at the same time intersected by our age, class, sexuality, etc. Once experience becomes the focus of investigation in examining categories, the need for an intersectional approach arises. Because our experience is intersected, its study must take this into consideration. And the same is true in the other direction: once the relation between different categories of analysis, such as gender, race, sexuality, class, etc., becomes the focus of investigation, then experience becomes a relevant dimension to examine. An approach along these lines can be found in Valentine (2007) in the field of feminist geography, where the author illustrates intersectionality precisely as lived experience and considers the parameter of space as a key dimension of intersectionality.

The study of intersectionality is not only a way of granting experience relevant status in the investigation, but also it can be seen as providing the conditions for any analysis of particular categories. In other words, it has the resources to question a study on gender that does not consider sexuality variations, or a study on race that does not consider other relevant categories and assumes its results apply in general to all the particulars falling under that category. That intersectional studies call into question studies of isolated categories does not mean that they render them false, rather they just warn us about their general applicability: it might be true but only for some particular group of people or in a particular set of circumstances. In this line, and in

agreement with McCall, we might argue that intersectionality is not a methodology but rather a framework, within which different methods and methodologies can be developed (see also Garry, 2011, p. 830). The advantage of questioning restricted accounts would be its positive value as a "framework checker" or "method checker" that provides standards that a method or methodology should meet (*ibid.*).

McCall's contribution to feminism and social theory is now more than recognized, and as mentioned at the outset, intersectionality is rapidly gaining importance in feminist analytic philosophy. The study of intersectionality implies great complexity, as is implicit in the title, both as regards the examination of social relations from an intersectional point of view and in the study of the concept of intersectionality itself. Both senses of complexity could greatly inform work in feminist analytic philosophy. To our minds, it is worth that feminist analytic philosophers deal with the complexity of intersectionality for two main reasons: theoretically, to contribute to feminist debates on the concept itself and its implications, and politically because it can provide us with the building blocks of a theory that deals with difference, that has de potential to be sensitive to new exclusions and to take into account lived experience.

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Book Review

# Shifting Ground. Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness

Naomi Scheman
Oxford University Press, New York, 2011

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There are two main influences that can be identified in Naomi Scheman's work: Wittgenstein and feminism. Both of them are well recognizable in the collection of her articles and contributions that Oxford University Press has recently published, *Shifting Ground. Knowledge and Reality, Transgression and Trustworthiness* (2011, pp. 251). The book contains eleven essays that originally appeared between 1995 and 2008, organized around three themes: epistemological considerations (part I: Knowledge), ontological considerations (part II: Reality) and social and political issues (part III: Transgression and trustworthiness). These three parts, as we shall see, are kept together by the general aim of the book: to show the worth of «theorizing from explicitly transgressive social locations». (p. 4)

Wittgenstein's influence is particularly clear in Scheman's reflections on the «ground» and in what she calls the «terminal moraine» (p. 63). The failure of foundationalism, in her opinion, does not imply that the whole idea of ground is suspect and useless. Rather, it can be reformulated in terms of a terminal moraine, that is, in terms of the many pieces of rock that a glacier leaves when it recedes. The metaphor, chosen as an image of the post-war American born Jewish identity, is implicitly meant to contrast the vision of a conservative Wittgenstein which may arise from his insistence on the solid «bedrock» of our form of life: when no reasons for our actions can be given anymore, «the spade is turned» (*Philosophical Investigations*, § 217) and we must accept forms of life as they are. Nevertheless, a terminal moraine composed of different, non-homogeneous identities and narratives is no less a ground than a solid bedrock, and Wittgenstein himself, in Scheman's reading,

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points at the importance of acknowledging the different practices and standpoints which characterize our ways of living (see chapter 8; it is important to note, however, that Scheman is not interested in an exegetical work). In this way, any discomfort and not «feeling at home» in our practices can become a vital resource for social change. The point of view of those who are at the margins of a form of life provides a way out from a dualism that Stanley Cavell (1976, p. 47) had described as «the Manichean reading of Wittgenstein» (p. 151): the search for an independent view from nowhere (a view from no point of view) on the one side, and the acceptance of any human practice in which a person may find herself to be involved, on the other. The former option, Scheman argues, is illusory, the latter is fatalist, but a self-conscious marginal outlook offers a third way. Social critique and political action are thus made possible and, most relevantly, necessary.

It is by stressing the value of differences, and particularly of marginality, that we can see, besides Wittgenstein's influence, Scheman's second main source of interest, feminism and women′s studies. This should not be surprising, since she is also co-editor of *Feminist Interpretations of Ludwig Wittgenstein* (2002). Feminist epistemology, in particular, shows that «privilege in European modernity is distinctively marked by the tendency to take its own particularities as generic, to cast those who differ from its norms not just as inferior, but as deviant» (p. 42), and that this tendency has shaped both the conception of subjectivity and the ideal of objectivity in scientific research. It is only by paying attention to diversity and oppression that the artificiality of the disinterested, a-sexed, independent subject can be made clear, and its identification with the privileged male Western individual can emerge. At the same time, the ideal of objectivity (commonly associated with the idea of an independent reality and the abstractness of norms of scientific method) turns out to be nothing but a misleading conception, historically constructed and connected to that same notion of the individual developed in the course of modernity. Those who are in a privileged position, to become aware of their own status beyond its apparent neutrality, need that different standpoints are available, as well as the voices of the marginalized and of the subordinated, which need to be effectively heard in order for a deeper objectivity to be achieved. By focusing the attention on queer and eccentric positions, the problematic nature of central positions emerges. In this way their centrality can be questioned; in other words, it can be *queered*, as the well-chosen title of one of the essays ("Queering the Center by Centering the

Queer") suggests. The social construction at the basis of any apparent position of natural centrality is evident if we consider, following Scheman, a double aspect hidden in it. For instance, heterosexual identity, from the point of view of what she calls «heteronormativity», is both natural and virtuous (and homosexuality both an illness and a sin); the same can be said of the Christian identity from the standpoint of «Christianormativity» (to be Christian is to follow one's own true nature, on the one hand, and a duty, on the other hand). This mixture of natural and normative, which usually goes unseen, already shows that central identities are the fruit of a complex and deeply interiorized social construction.

The acknowledgment of the need for marginalized points of view leads to what is probably the most interesting proposal in Scheman's book: a new conception of objectivity, in which the partiality of any vision of the world is not regarded as a bias to be corrected, but as an incompleteness to be filled through other visions. Instead of aiming at an epistemology of parsimony, according to which what has to be achieved is an ideal knowledge purified from any perspectival distortion, she proposes an epistemology of *largesse*, where objectivity is to be obtained precisely in the other way around, by allowing different perspectives to work together. Objectivity so conceived makes realism compatible with a perspectival approach: only if you and I see the same thing *differently*, that thing can be said to exist (while if I see it and you do not, and, equally, if we both see it as identical in spite of our different positions, it means that it does not exist, or that it is an illusion). This way, Scheman suggests a solution to Wittgenstein's urging for «not empiricism and yet realism», that he defined as «the hardest thing» in philosophy (p. 156).

If realism is bounded to a perspectival approach, then ontology itself must be reshaped. What Scheman is primarily interested in, in the second part of the book (devoted to reality), is the ontology of emotions and identities. In this second part, she moves from the concepts of center and periphery (that occupied the foreground in the above-mentioned essay on the queer positions) to Wittgenstein's insights on mental states. By considering psychological descriptions and explanations as fundamentally social, her purpose is to oppose on the one hand the naturalistic accounts of physicalism, on the other hand the immutable definitions of essentialism. Again, she refers here to the feminist reflection, particularly relevant in this respect because it allows us:

> to see the importance and the possibility of holding on *both* to the idea that our mental lives are constituted in part by the ways we collectively talk and think

> about them, *and* to the idea that such talking and thinking are not arbitrary and that the realm of the mental is no less real for being in this sense 'made up' (p. 84).

Realism and objectivity are not given up, but are reinforced by the adoption of this stance. The image which Scheman uses to explain the difference between an essentialist and a perspectival approach to emotions is that of constellations and galaxies (p. 98). Emotions are not like galaxies but like constellations: their identity as complex entities is not given by any essence or nature, but it is relative to explanatory schemes that rely on social meaning and interpretation. Nevertheless, they exist, can be seen and have causal powers. This is not true of emotions only, but of objects overall (with a generalization which seems, actually, to be still in need of work), as their nature is not derived from the sum of their parts, but from the narratives in which they are included, and their integrity is essentially bound up with their relationships with other objects.

Since objectivity depends, as we have seen, on the existence and the effective possibility of allowing different voices to be heard, Scheman's remarks about social ontology are linked to her commitment to a fully-fledged *political* vision of philosophical work. The inclusion of the voices of the marginalized, indeed, requires precise and concrete steps to take on a social, political, academic and even personal levels, and these steps may not be easy to make. Queer identities, for instance, require that we cast doubt upon our own identities, and any reflection on our form of life calls into question what we refer to when we say «we» in the course of philosophical reasoning. The awareness of our dependence, in any epistemic task or activity, on others, has as its effect the search for a more and more shared ground, where solidarity plays a key role. Objectivity itself can be achieved only through trustworthiness, where trustworthiness is defined, in the context of research practices, as «what makes it rational for people to accept research findings – to build future research upon them, to utilize them to inform public policy, and to use them to guide individual choice and community action» (p. 172). It is no coincidence, then, that in Scheman's book personal and autobiographical considerations abound. To make research within this normative framework means to take a personal commitment to work for social institutions that are worth of trust, and for research methods that facilitate participation and social inclusion, as shown in the case of community-based research (topic discussed in the co-authored chapter 9). Political and epistemic aims are thus taken to be intertwined aspects of the same task, which imply – as the book aims at

showing – the inclusion of the marginalized positions in scientific research and theorizing. Personal passion along with a pleasant and clear writing and a useful and complete apparatus of footnotes and bibliography, contributes to make the book both enjoyable and challenging.

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Book Review

# Birth, Death and Femininity
# Philosophies of Embodiment

Robin May Schott (Ed.)
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*Birth, Death and Femininity – Philosophies of Embodiment* is an anthology written by four Nordic feminist philosophers: Sara Heinämaa (University of Helsinki),Vigdis Songe-Moller (University of Bergen), Sigridur Thorgeirsdottir (University of Iceland) and Robin May Schott (Aarhus University). The book, edited by May Schott, is the result of many years of collaboration and dialogue between the four.

Western philosophy has always been engaged with the topic of death. By contrast, it has rarely offered valuable contributions to understanding the issue of birth. This has something to do with gender, of course: it is women who give birth to children, and childbirth is thus a female experience. That is, *giving birth* is a female experience, while *being born* is something we have universally experienced, in the same sense that none of us, regardless of gender, can avoid death.

During the past decades feminist philosophers have criticized philosophy based on a false universalizing of men's experiences and a corresponding marginalization of women's experiences. But as philosophy aims to speak from a common human ground, women's experiences, such as pregnancy and childbirth, must be taken seriously and be included in philosophical reflection. As feminist philosophers Linda Alcoff and Eva Kittay asked in 2007:

> If women had originally been the world's philosophers rather than men, might we not expect a great deal of theorizing about pregnancy? (Alcof & Kittay, 2007, p. 7).

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There is not much theorizing on birth and pregnancy in philosophy, that is, the *concrete* (and painful) birth of children that women experience. On the other hand, birth is intermittently used as a concept, but then usually as a metaphor for something else, for example in Nietzsche's work *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), a book that might just as well be titled "the origin/beginning of tragedy", or in Plato's *Symposium,* where giving birth to ideas is given priority over physical birth. The intellect, and the male way of "giving birth", is hierarchically posited above the body and female childbirth.

May Schott writes in the introduction that, given the expansive philosophical literature on death and the limited philosophical interest in birth, one might expect that such a book would favour feminist philosophical analyses that re-thought philosophical concepts through death and birth, a kind of "philosophy of birth". But that is not the intention of this publication. Rather, as Mary Schott precises:

> our project shows how both the concept of natality and the concept of mortality contribute to reflections on fundamental questions in philosophy, including questions about identity, temporality, and community (p. 2).

Thus, Schott, Heinämaa, Thorgeirsdottir and Songe-Moller aim to analyse *both* birth *and* death from their respective disciplinary and feminist perspectives.

In the informative and clear introduction, Robin May Schott shows the prominent role the death plays in Western philosophy: the pre-Socratic view of death as part of the cycle between birth and death; death as the soul's liberation from the body in Plato; death as caused by human sin in Christianity, along with Christianity's belief in eternal life through Christ. Moreover, Descartes interpreted death as the breakdown of the body's machinery, and Simone de Beauvoir begins her *The Ethics of Ambiguity* by citing Montaigne, who claimed that we build our lives by preparing for death. Existentialist philosophy holds that death is always present in human life; we are born dying, so to speak, and death is the framework for human existence. The significant role played by death in the history of philosophy makes it possible almost to describe our Western culture as *necrophilic.* Western necrophilia is reflected, Schott highlights, in images invoked by concentration camps, genocide, the weapon industry, the medicalization of death and the general fascination with violence and death prevalent in film and literature. Schott refers to Grace Jantzen, who claims that this obsession with death is gendered; within this symbolical

system, women are associated with death, in the same manner that Christianity blames Eve for having brought sin and death into Paradise. According to de Beauvoir, the association between femininity and death is grounded in a masculine fear of otherness as well as finitude. The enormous fascination with death makes birth and natality practically invisible, but as Schott points out, we are all born and, in addition, born by a woman.

The ambition of the authors in this essay collection is therefore not to develop a philosophy based on birth and death. Rather, their aim is to analyse what these concepts might bring with them to philosophy. Concepts of birth and death do not only provide a new way of systematizing philosophy, they claim; new concepts also add a gender perspective. As we read in the Introduction:

> The book contributes to a reorientation of philosophical questions around themes of morality and natality; it widens the lens of analysis so that birth and death are not treated in isolation from each other or from the broad family of concepts to which they belong; and it explores the significance of ambiguity, ambivalence, and paradox for philosophical framing of these matters (p. 17).

The volume consists of nine thorough and in-depth chapters in which each of the authors offers analyses, concepts and methods from their respective fields. The book joins a new trend in feminist philosophy where one is no longer primarily concerned with criticizing the canon and canonical male thinkers, but rather attempts to see the history of philosophy as a reservoir or a source from which to derive concepts to be used for feminist purposes as well. It must also be said that it is a pleasure to read a philosophical book in which there are ample references to other female thinkers. The chapters are presented in a reverse chronological order reminiscent of Luce Irigaray's backwards route through history in *Speculum* (1974). But whereas Irigaray's intention was to deconstruct a phallic logic, the purpose here is of a more pedagogical nature. From a pedagogical perspective, it can be useful to begin with the familiar and temporally non-distant, and thereafter approach things from a more distanced perspective.

The first contribution is by Schott, who, in addition to her introduction, reflects in her two chapters upon sexualized violence. She analyses rape in mythological accounts and finds that in strikingly many historical myths of origin, such as the founding of Rome, tales of rape and offerings appear as backdrops for the creation of states. Against this backdrop Schott discusses the conscious use of rape as a weapon in modern warfare, as revealed in accounts

from the Balkans, Rwanda, Sudan, Congo and many other countries. Schott claims:

> Just as Hannah Arendt argued that twentieth-century totalitarianism and the Nazi death camps placed a demand to reflect on the fundamental problem of evil, so I argue that sexual violence in wartime puts a demand on us to reflect on the fundamental relation between the human body and the body politic (p. 49).

Still, from the Balkans came reports on how rape and resultant pregnancy was an intentional part of ethnic cleansing policy, or conversely, ethnic predominance. What makes rape a grotesque weapon of war is – Schott argues – not merely the suffering caused to victims and the obvious dimensions of gender, but that *birth*, in itself, is turned into a *lethal weapon* (p. 63). As Schott shows us, many of the raped women committed suicide, were expelled from their families or were harmed to such an extent that they were robbed of any conceivable "ordinary life".

In this volume, Heinämaa – who is an internationally acknowledged interpreter of de Beauvoir's work – contributes with three chapters revolving around de Beauvoir's thinking and more precisely de Beauvoir's thinking on death, femininity and the body. De Beauvoir claimed in *The Second Sex* (1949) that there is a close connection between death and femininity in Western culture. De Beauvoir's contribution to dissolve this connection is particularly relevant, according to Heinämaa, because she links a discussion on mortality together with a critical analysis of the asymmetrical relationship between the sexes (p. 119). Heinämaa makes use of the thought of Kierkegaard, Husserl, Heidegger and Lévinas in order to get closer to de Beauvoir's thinking. Heidegger's thought that one is able to live truly authentically only after one has stared death in the eye has inspired much existentialist thinking. Heidegger thus turns death into a life-giving principle *par excellence*. Heinämaa criticizes Heidegger for committing the same crucial mistake as the one committed by many male thinkers before him. More precisely, she stresses this point as follows: « ... Heidegger repeats the most profound gesture of Western philosophy – the gesture of substituting death for birth as the meaning-giving substrate of life» (p.100).

In her contribution, Thorgeirsdottir portrays Nietzsche as a philosopher of birth, despite the fact that his concept of birth is abstracted from physical and bodily childbirth. One finds in particular in Nietzsche's theses of the Eternal Return that birth is thematized; the Eternal Return is a cyclic interpretation of

life where everything is born again over and over again. Luce Irigaray has criticized Nietzsche for delivering a theory whereby one practically gives birth to oneself, and subsequently denies or annihilates any recognition of one's mother. According to Thorgeirsdottir, this is a simplistic interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy of birth. She chooses instead to interpret Nietzsche's concept of birth primarily as a metaphor for something that enables a creative and transformative experience (p. 164). Thorgeirsdottir argues also that Nietzsche's concept of birth constitutes the backdrop of Hannah Arendt's concept of natality. According to Arendt, Thorgeirsdottir maintains, natality is a basic concept for all political thinking. More precisely, Arendt states that: «natality exemplifies the very plurality and differences that makes life and political culture thrive» (p.186).

Everyone interested in Arendt's concept of natality is herewith advised to consult Thorgeirsdottir's rich and detailed discussion.

The fourth contributor is by Vigdis Songe-Moller and it concerns the relationship between the tragedy literature of antiquity and the philosophy of antiquity. Strangely enough, modern philosophers, with the exceptions of Hegel and Nietzsche, have not been interested in the relationship between the two disciplines. The tragedy functions as a reminder of death, Songe-Moller notes, but with a crucial difference regarding gender: men are usually killed by others, while women usually kill themselves, which is also the case in Sophocles' *Antigone*. Songe-Moller takes *Antigone* as the starting point for a conceptual analysis of tragedy with respect to Parmenides, Empedocles and Heraclitus. According to Songe-Moller, Antigone is someone who longs for unity and for keeping the family together. In the analysis of Sophocles' *Antigone*, Songe Moller emphasizes this aspect: «In *Antigone*, Sophocles holds up a mirror to Parmenides 'comic' dream of eternity, portraying it as a tragic illusion» (p. 226).

Antigone is a tragic heroine who no longer distinguishes between life and death. Instead of seeking to ensure the continuation of her clan and family, she seeks to be united with her dead parents and dead brother. Songe-Moller's contribution is a thorough and in-depth analysis, but is at the same time the one text in the anthology which is least feminist, in the sense that there are few references to feminist theory and literature.

Birth and death are two of the most significant experiences in human life. Some readers will perhaps question the absence of current discussions related to birth, such as surrogacy. But this book is not primarily about pregnancy and

childbirth, nor about ethical dilemmas such as abortion and surrogacy, but is rather an enquiry into birth, death, body and gender as recurrent – albeit not always visible and conspicuous – topics in philosophy. This book does, however, help make these topics at least *somewhat* more conspicuous.

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Book Review

# Minimizing Marriage. Marriage, Morality, and the Law

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In contemporary liberal societies, discrimination is seen as a potential source of violation of public justice. As such, the state and the law should avoid committing any unjustified discrimination. There may be justified cases of discrimination, as when we do not allow people with animals entering in hospitals for hygienic reasons, but any case of unjustified discrimination should in principle not to be institutionally sustained. To what extent the state should be involved against a discriminatory aspect of society depends on how unjust such an aspect is, and how pervasive its negative effects are. The central tenet of Elizabeth Brake's recent book is that marriage, as it is conceived in many Western countries at least, is profoundly discriminatory. Indeed, the state should intervene, through a reform of marital law, in order to contrast the unjustified privilege accorded to the model of opposite-sex dyadic romantic relationship – namely the "traditional" marriage (the quotes are due to the fact that «[m]any features of so-called traditional marriage are historically variable or recently constructed», p. 2). The idea of minimizing marriage is that of diminishing the restriction placed on the people entitled to obtain marital status, as to allow not only same-sex relationships and polyamory, but also networks of friendships in which the different rights and obligation connected to the marital status can be divided and distributed. In what follows, I will briefly sum up Brake's arguments against the privilege of "traditional" marriage, and her positive proposal of a reform of the law. I will then conclude with some considerations about the kind of metaphysics of social reality that I take to underlie Brake's rationale.

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In the first part of the book, Brake argues that marriage does not possess the moral privilege it is purported to embody. In particular, "traditional" marriage is neither the only nor the better model to carry about the kind of moral transformations that are indispensable for the well-being of society, such as establishing basic social relations and inspiring the attainment of the public good over the private one. Although institutions do have the power of shaping up behavioral patterns and psychological attitudes in the long run, no institution – let alone marriage – can have the "magic" effect of instilling moral values at the basis of society. In the first place, it is incorrect to think of marriage as based on a promise that the spouses exchange (p. 26). If marriage vows were actually promises to love and care about each other till death do them part, then unilateral divorce would be immoral, since breaches of promises are generally not morally acceptable. In general, obligations that rise from promises can be overridden only by stronger moral reasons, but this does not seem to be the normal case in unilateral divorce. Brake maintains that the solution of the puzzle lies in refusing to see marriage as based on an act of promising. The emotional component of marriage vows cannot be subject to promise, simply because it is impossible to promise to love or to remain in love. The intimate caring relationship which marriage aims at promoting and sustaining should be seen rather as the content of a commitment (p. 43). While *making* a commitment is an action that is not too dissimilar from that of making a promise (the latter being one way of bringing about the former), *having* a commitment is a dispositional state, which differs quite radically from promising as for its consequences. To wit, commitment to the marital roles, as other typical cases of commitments, is an enduring and dispositional psychological state, which entails complex obligations, and which is deliberate but not always completely voluntary.

Besides, a commitment to give behavioral priority to an intimate relationship with the spouse cannot be thought of as indissoluble. Whether we should maintain a commitment or drop it depends on the moral admissibility of what we are committed to, and that can vary over time. Neither are there reasons to think that commitments to relationships must be exclusive – the dyadic form of the marriage commitment is not intrinsically better, nor can better guarantee the existence of stable basic social bounds, than other forms of non-exclusive commitment, such as the ones that we find in friendship. However, marriage does impose costs on the exit options from a commitment to mutual caring relationships, and in that it has been seen by deterrence

theorists as a pre-commitment strategy (or a "Ulysses contract") that serves the purpose of constraining oneself to what is more rational for her or him in the long run[1]. If this view is on the right track, it is crucial to ask whether the marital commitment is indeed rational or not. Answering such a question boils down to apprising whether the goods obtained by marrying outweigh the costs. Brakes notes that if the marital commitment is rational, it is so for those who are happy with long-term exclusive intimate companionship, but certainly not for those who prefer a different life-style – such as "singles" who prefer living in a network of friendships, or the polyamorous. Even for the "marriage kind" of persons, though, the costs imposed on the exit options by marriage should not be too heavy, since that would create harm in cases in which one of the two parties is victim of abuse by the other – which unfortunately is not, statistically speaking, an uncommon situation. As a matter of fact, women are the ones that tend to benefit less from marriage, and so, in order to prevent gender discrimination, the legislation on marriage should see to it that both parties can protect allocation of rights and duties (including exit options). More generally, marriage legislation should avoid the suppression of "individualistic" rights such as privacy and respect, and even more importantly those connected to the risk of economic vulnerability and dependency, because that would be a violation of social justice (in Rawlsian terms) – especially on the face of the very high rates of violence and abuses within marriages.

Also the idea – which dates back to Aristotle and has been picked up by Hegel – that marriage is *in itself* good, regardless of individual preferences, precisely because it "teaches" the virtue of committedness, appears to be ungrounded (p. 43). Marriage is neither necessary nor sufficient for reaching this goal: friendships and polyamory have the same social function for many, and an intimate exclusive relationship may actually nurture behavior that privileges the private good over the common one. Unconditional commitment to a dyadic exclusive intimate relationship cannot always guarantee that social virtues are developed within the individual. Moreover, overestimating the moral power of "traditional" marriage may lead to blindness with respect to the

[1] Cf. «"Ulysses contracts" attempt to circumvent our own imperfect rationality. Aware that we are liable to weakness of will or preference change, we use self-binding or precommitment strategies to restrict our future actions to promote our long-term best interests. ... There are many different kinds of precommitment strategies, and marriage can be seen as employing several. It imposes a delay before spouses can exit the marriage (in some legal jurisdictions), it creates economic costs (the cost of divorce itself and, possibly, alimony) and costs of social disapproval on exit, and it creates incentives to remain (whatever benefits law and third parties provide as well as social approval)» (p. 56).

inertial behavior that sometimes it encourages to the detriment of personal and social realization, or even with respect to the harm it may protect and the vices it may create. The presence in society of a larger varieties of relationships, not necessarily involving romantic affection, can – and does, as a matter of fact in modern societies – better achieve the goal of shaping up social virtues and providing chances for social realization. Thus, the state should promote a legislation that protects all such models, and does not favor the romantic dyad over the other models. The discrimination against other kind of relationships in favor of "traditional" marriage is indeed a serious one. According to Brake, the current marital law inhibits the viability of different forms of relationships in which humans could flourish, thereby hampering, in an unjust way, the chances of self-flourishing of many individuals. Also with respect to the worry that sexual behavior requires a proper institutional environment not to be dangerous or destructive, it is dubious that limiting institutional recognition to dyadic monogamous marriage only is a very effective strategy. Sex education that allows people to make informed choices seems to serve better than marriage and abstinence education, which are «more likely to lead to unhealthy shame, fear, and reluctance to talk to doctors, counselors, or police» (p. 80). And analogous points can be made with respect to the idea that defending "traditional" marriage is a way to solve social problems related to poverty. Implementing a legislation directly devised to prevent poverty is a more rational strategy than investing public money on defending "traditional" marriage education (this aspect carries an analogy also with respect to the issue of the rearing of children, see below).

Brake's conclusion is that "traditional" marriage, just as any other care relationship, is a social good in so far as it complies with the general principles of justice[2]. There is no reason to think that unconditional commitment to an exclusive dyadic different-sex caring relationship will generally be valuable for the individuals involved and for society as a whole. Brake labels the kind of unjust privilege accorded to dyadic intimate relationships involving romantic love "amatonormativity" (pp. 88–89). Such expression is coined after the term, frequent in feminist and "queer" literature, "heteronormativity", which refers to the assumption of heterosexuality and gender differences as

[2] Indeed, the transformations that legal marriage has undergone since the beginning of the modern era have all been towards such direction – e.g. gradual abolition of many of its gender discriminatory aspects, the possibility of non-consensual divorce and pre-negotiation of many of its economic aspects.

prescriptive norms. Indeed, the extensions of the two concepts partially overlap, in that often the heterosexual ideal of a universally shared goal is the dyadic, exclusive, amorous relationship. However, the kind of discrimination that amatonormativity nurtures is not a matter of sexual preference. It is rather a matter of privileging one form of caring relationship over the other. The presence in the society of an amatonormative bias can hardly be denied. Even when not legally married, those who present themselves as "romantic partners" are given privileged social recognition over those who present themselves "merely" as friends or member of adult care networks[3]. Although Brake does not deny that an exclusive, dyadic and amorous relationship can be a well-functioning caring relationship, it is arbitrary and unjust to accord to such a model a social and legal privilege over other forms. If I read her correctly, the discriminatory factor here lies with the family status that is accorded only to marriage or marriage-like relationships, both by society and legislation. Ethical form of non-monogamy, for instance, are judged to be immoral simply because do not fall among the "default" expectations of amatonormativity. And non-amorous caring relationships are not accorded family status although they may serve all the functions of traditional families, such as material support, emotional security and frequent companionship. The kinds of harm to which those forms of relationships are subject is indeed pervasive. They range from social prejudices (the stereotype of the "single" as being an "eternal adolescent", unable to endorse his or her social responsibilities), to work-place discrimination, lesser government benefits, differential treatment in terms of healthcare, and child custody decisions.

Engaging in mutual care-taking and recognizing responsibility to do so are distinctive features of relationships that are on a par with "traditional" marriage with respect to social functions and emotional significance, and yet are subject to pervasive discrimination. The idea that the lack of amorous love in friendships and care networks, or the lack of exclusivity in polyamory or polygamy, makes such forms of care less valuable appears to be totally unjustified. The motivational and emotional work of care can be disjointed from sexual intimacy and life-long commitment, and it can be shared among individuals with different roles. Indeed, the mold of the life-long dyadic amorous relationship is often unfit to bring about stable and functioning social

[3] Namely, group of friends who endorse reciprocal commitments within a network of different roles; Brake sometimes calls them "urban tribes", after the book of Ethan Watters. See: Watters, 2003.

unities. This is not to say that forms of relationship other than "traditional" marriage are intrinsically better: the overgeneralization about the "insular" and "narcissistic" stance of the married is as unjustified as the overgeneralization about the "irresponsible" behavior of the unmarried. Brake's point is rather to argue against the discrimination that all forms of care relationship other than traditional marriage suffer, which is akin to that attached to other social markers such as race, gender and class. Indeed, amatonormativity often intersects with gay and women's oppression and it «is itself systematic in a way characteristic of oppression: Legal penalties and discrimination interlock with social pressure and discrimination, stereotyping in the media, workplace discrimination, consumer pricing, and children's education» (p. 98). The main point of Brake is that the institutional preference toward "traditional" marriage leads to the unjust preclusion of alternative social models. All other forms of caring relationship, although as functional and moral as the amorous dyad are downplayed, and made less salient because of the absence of active social scripts that establish their significance, which in many cases may be more appropriate for promoting social justice and self-respect.

In the second part of the book, Brake addresses more directly the issues of the reform of the marriage law, and puts forward her positive proposal of a "minimal marriage". A first issue is whether marriage should be maintained at all, given its intimate connection with a long history of injustice and discrimination, especially with respect to women's rights (pp.111–120). John Stuart Mill (in *The Subjection of Women*, 1869) compared the situation of the married woman to slavery, and until the seventies of the past century in the United States, Brake reports, the institution of marriage was detrimental to women's life opportunities, mainly because gendered spousal roles facilitated economic dependence and spousal violence. Today, although those differences have no longer legal status, they are still maintained through social pressures and expectations, and even taught in some public schools and educational programs (supported with public money). The earning gap between women and men is a tangible sign of that. However, according to Brake, abolishing marriage would not be the more effective way to address such problems. Conferring legal legitimacy to a wide variety of family models is the only way to ensure equal opportunities to a wide range of rights. Abandoning state regulation of marriage is likely to let the church or other private-sector groups lead decisions about who can enter the marital status. Hence, the state should

reform marriage in order to remove gender differentiations and amatonormative structure from it, thereby ensuring equal access to it. Besides, reforming the institution, rather than abolishing it, will send a clear message of rectification of past injustice (p. 123).

Now, both in the philosophical debate, and in the political and more broadly public debate, there is wide disagreement over the very definition of marriage: what are the core essential elements of it that distinguish it from other possibly similar relationships? (p. 132-4) Whether a radical change of the marital law would count as a reform of marriage or as an abolition of it and substitution with a new institution depends on how marriage is defined. Hence, deciding the borders of the concept of marriage does not involve only abstract philosophical reflection, but it carries a practical social import. The issue arises already with respect to the status of same-sex, but amatonormative, relationships. Brake addresses the arguments for same-sex marriage that have been proposed on the ground of the Rawlsian principle of neutrality. Intervention of the state has costs, which are paid by the whole of society through taxation. In order for public expense to be justified, citizens should expect the policies pursued by the state not to be based merely on contested moral or religious views – at least when such policies touch upon important issues of justice. General policies of the state (when they involve use of public money) should be justified by rationales based merely on public reason, namely arguments that anyone could be justified in expecting to be accepted also by people sharing different moral, philosophical or religious views. In other terms, important political decisions should be based on a theory of justice as a "narrow" political view, which remains neutral between the often mutually conflicting conceptions of the good to be found in "broad" moral or religious views. Since the family is part of the basic structure of society, and marriage gives rise to family status, the state intervention in family matters should be constrained by public reason alone. Thus, the argument goes, any *legal definition* of marriage cannot depend on elements from discussed moral or religious doctrines. The rationale for defining marriage is to be based on considerations of fairness, which should lead the state to acknowledge that denying to same-sex relationships eligibility for health insurance, pensions, and immigration rights, privacy rights, and visiting rights is unjust. Brake accepts such arguments for a legal re-definition of marriage as to include same-sex dyadic relationships in it. She discusses carefully many attempts to provide "heteronormative" rationales for restricting the marital status to same-sex

couples, which are not based on religious or ethic conceptions about sexual behavior (and hence falling outside the boundary of public justice). She concludes that not only all such attempts fail, but also that the same can be said for all restrictions that aim at establishing amatonormativity – for reasons that are strictly connected to her analysis of the status of "traditional" marriage held in the first part of the book (pp. 139–45).

The most serious argument against legal recognition of same-sex couples involves reproduction and parenting. The alleged ground for the state to protect exclusively heterosexual dyadic marriage is that the function of marriage is essentially procreative. However, it is odd to see procreation and parenting as the rationale behind current law for marriage, given that many marriages are childless, marriage do not end when the children leave home, and same-sex couple can have children from previous or parallel heterosexual relationships, but still they are not accorded the marital status (p. 146). However, defenders of heteronormativity can still insist that the institutional norm aims at protecting the optimal environment for child rearing, while the presence of non-optimal cases in society can to a certain extent be tolerated. Thus, given that optimal child welfare requires sexual differentiation in the parents, same-sex marriage should be excluded from institutional protection. The problem with this defense of "traditional" marriage is that the claim that same-sex parenting would harm child welfare has been found empirically ungrounded (p. 147). The kind of "complementariness" that is claimed to exist between all men on the one hand and all women on the other is a caricature: sex differences are statistical generalizations, which moreover vary cross-culturally (pp. 74–75). More to the point, sexual differentiation does not guarantee an optimal environment for rearing children. Statistics on the emotional, cognitive, and behavioral functioning of children show significant connection between worst performances by children and high level of conflict within the family nuclei. However, there is no statistically significant difference between children raised within same-sex relationships and children raised in heterosexual marriages (p. 148). If those statistics show that same-sex parenting is not harmful to the children, they also undermine any rationale for excluding same-sex marriage from the legislation. Furthermore, Brake argues that legislation about parenting and legislation about adult caring relationship should come apart (pp. 149-51). The legislation about child rearing should require a high threshold for nurturing and precluding abuse and neglect, but that can be better done directly rather than through the promotion of

"traditional" marriage. We know that conflictual environments have been found to be detrimental to children welfare, to the point that divorce may be the best option for children in high-conflict marriages (p. 147). Hence, the state should not bundle together regulation of parenting and regulation of adult care relationships. To the contrary, since continuity of care for children can be provided not only by heterosexual couples, but also by single parent, same-sex, and extended families (such as those advances by many "revolutionary" parents, or those of the successful model of the "othermothers" in African-American culture[4]), the state should permit and sustain the most inclusive class of frameworks for parenting.

Thus, arguments against heteronormativity lead to analogous considerations against amatonormativity. In general, it is difficult to single out "traditional" marriage as a privilege form of caring relationship over friendship, care networks, polygamy and polyamory. Once arguments based on the idea that traditional marriage provides an optimal environment for child care are proved unsound, any other functional criteria fail. The law should not endorse an ideal romantic relationship as a model for institutionalizing family, since amatonormativity is defensible only on the ground of a comprehensive moral doctrine, which falls outside of the scope of public reason. However, Brake does not want to defend the view, which certain modern contractualist theorists hold, that marriage should be abolished as an institution, and dissolved into the system of private contract (pp. 154–155). According to her, intimate caring relationships are valuable and fall within the boundary of public justice, hence the state should protect them, and give them institutional status, since institutional entitlements and status designation allow the spouses to act on their mutual care. What is unjust and arbitrary are the present restrictions on entering the marital status to couples engaging in romantic love only. The liberal state should not set any principled restriction on the sex or number of spouses, and the nature and purpose of their relationships. Neither should the state require that the exchange of marital rights cannot be divided and distributed asymmetrically. The result of reforming the institution of marriage along those lines is what Brake calls "minimal marriage". The central aim of

[4] See Collins, 1991, p. 119: «African and African American communities have ... recognized that vesting one person with full responsibility for mothering a child may not be possible or wise. As a result, othermothers – women who assist bloodmothers by sharing mothering responsibilities – traditionally have been central to the institution of Black motherhood» (quoted by Brake at p. 160 of her book).

Brake's book is to provide a philosophical justification for changing the restriction on entering the marital status, along the lines that I have illustrated so far. Yet those limitations are the most extensive compatible with political liberalism, and in that minimal marriage is minimal only comparing to the very strict contemporary legislation on marriage (p. 158). It is useful at this point to present one of the examples that Brake makes to illustrate her proposal:

> So far, the proposal might seem extravagantly removed from real life. But consider the case of Rose. Rose lives with Octavian, sharing household expenses. To facilitate this ménage, Rose and Octavian form a legal entity for certain purposes – jointly owned property, bank account access, homeowner and car insurance, and so on. The arrangement is long-term, but not permanent. Octavian's company will relocate him in five years, and Rose will not move – but they agree to cohabit until then. They even discuss how to divide property when the household dissolves, and agree that if either moves out sooner, the defaulter will pay the other compensation and costs. (This arrangement is not punitive, merely protective.)
>
> Rose's only living relative, Aunt Alice, lives nearby. Alice lives in genteel poverty, and Rose feels a filial responsibility toward her. Rose's employer provides excellent health care benefits, for which any spouse of Rose's is eligible (at a small cost), and other spousal perks such as reduced costs for its products. Octavian is a well-off professional and doesn't need these benefits – he has his own – but Alice needs access to good health care and, should Rose die, could use the federal pension that would go to Rose's surviving spouse if she had one. Assuming that such entitlements comport with justice, minimal marriage would allow Rose to transfer the eligibility for these entitlements to Alice.
>
> While Rose enjoys Octavian's company, and has affection for Alice, only Marcel truly understands her. Marcel is, like Rose, a bioethicist, and understands her complex views on end-of-life decision making. Rose wants to transfer powers of executorship and emergency decision-making to him. In addition, Marcel and Rose spend a lot of time together, discussing philosophy while enjoying recreational activities, and would like eligibility for "family rates" at tourist attractions, health clubs, and resorts. Their local city gym, for instance, has a special rate for married couples, but they don't qualify.
>
> There could be more people in Rose's life who occupy a role usually associated with spouses. Rose might share custody of a child with an ex. Or she might

> cohabit platonically with Octavian, living separately from the long-term love of her life, Stella. She could also cohabit in a small polyamorous family unit of three or four persons, or live separately from the other members of her adult care network.
>
> In all of these scenarios, there is no single person with whom Rose wants or needs to exchange the whole package of marital rights and entitlements. In fact, doing so would be inconvenient, requiring her to make additional contracts to override the default terms of marriage. Even worse, marrying any one person would expose her to undesired legal liabilities such as obligatory property division and could interfere with her eligibility for some loans and government programs. But Rose wants and needs to exchange some marital rights with several different people (pp. 166–167).

Although many of the arguments that Brake presents against "traditional" marriage are in the chords of the contractualist tradition, which is the main inspiration of the reforms that marriage has been subject to since the beginning of the modern era, it is important to stress the distinction between her position and the most radical contractualist proposal of abolishing marriage as an institution. One of the main reasons not to abolish marriage but to reform it is that many of the rights and duties involved in the marital status cannot be regulated by private agreements: for instance, immigration privileges, automatic decision-making powers and residency qualifications (p. 162). The only aspect that the proposal of minimizing marriage relegates to private contracting is the choice of how to distribute those rights and entitlements, as the example of Rose illustrates. Besides, caring relationships are among the "primary goods" in Rawls' sense of all-purpose goods that people want whatever their plans. In that, they are on a par with self-respect (p. 174). Caring relationships are essential to developing moral powers, since they are almost universally the context in which those powers are developed and maintained. Of course, moral powers can be developed and exercised also in isolation, but that is not a good reason for the state not to empower a legislation to protect caring relationships, at least insofar as such a legislation is not discriminatory, and allows easy exit options. A last objection concerns the use of the label "marriage" to designate such an institution concerning caring relationships. Brake admits that it is not central to her proposal that the name "marriage" should be kept, and minimal marriage in her sense could be called, for instance, "personal relationship law" (pp. 185–186). To be sure, extending

the name "marriage" to her proposal would amount to contravening past usage of the term. However, it would be also be a way to rectify past discrimination, and promote a new symbolism connected to ideas of equality and justice. In any case, Brake does not aim at a conceptual redefinition of marriage with far-reaching social consequences. She has the political aim of providing a *legal* redefinition of marriage in accordance with the principles of liberalism. Such a project is compatible with the fact that other concepts of marriage – connected to social or religious uses of the term "marriage", for instance – will be maintained too (p. 188). In the last chapter, Brake addresses the issues of implementing her broadly ideal characterization of minimal marriage in non-ideal conditions, such as those to be found in our modern societies (pp. 189–206).

Brake's book is undoubtedly an interesting and stimulating piece of good philosophical work. It has direct appeal for many debates both in ethics, and in political philosophy, but also for many questions concerning the metaphysics of social reality. Although Brake does not touch extensively upon the metaphysical aspects of the themes that she discusses, the tenets in ethics and philosophy of law that she defends have interesting bearings also for more broadly philosophical worries. The difference between *being married* and *being non-married* bears many analogies with other distinctions that possess social relevancy, in particular gender and race. Facts about possession of marital status seem to be even more social in nature than facts about race or gender – since being married is typically a status that requires the intervention of a group of people with distinct social roles within an (at least minimal) institutional frame. However, "naive" forms of realism with respect to gender and race have been proved unjustifiable (besides often being politically and ethically dangerous), and now it is widely accepted that social and cultural elements enter in the constitutions of gender and race too. What is at stake in the current debate is rather how deep such social elements are. Philosophers may have an anti-realist or eliminitivist stance toward those categories, and deny that there is any concept that deserves the label of "gender" and "race" which is not empty. But acknowledging the social character of gender and race is also compatible with realism, although in a more moderate form. Gender and race may connect to biological and morphological features in different ways. There may be more sophisticated definition of them in biological terms (for

instance, P. Kitcher's definition of race in terms of biological populations[5]), which acknowledge the role of social behavior for their constitution. Other philosophers defend an even lighter form of realism, according to which gender and race exist, but as social entities or constructions (for instance, S. Haslanger's definition of "woman" in terms of oppression[6]). Whether some form of realism or rather eliminativism is better suited to catch the socially relevant elements depends on the features of the concept involved. For instance, a theory in which god exists as a social construction would be hardly called a form of theism, and seen rather as a form of atheism in disguise. Although the "social theist" may insist that she does not deny that god exists, since social entities exist and have causal powers, the "standard" theist will argue that what the social theist means by "god" is different from what she means with the same word. As a matter of fact, the "social theist" is denying the existence of what the standard theist calls "god", namely of god *tout court*. But the metaphysical aspect often interacts with the ideological and semantic ones. To continue with the previous example: the reaction of the theist against the "social theist" is not justified if the latter is also advancing a proposal for reforming the ordinary concept of god and the usage or meaning of the word "god". In such a case, the theist and the social theist will be in practical disaccord on whether a social reform of the concept and name is a good to be pursued.

Trying to provide a full-fledged realist account of the distinction between being married and being non-married seems a more farfetched project, than the parallel one advanced for race or gender. Brake discusses certain attempts by defenders of "traditional marriage" in terms of the alleged biological instinct to form intimate stable dyadic relationships, but discards them as plausible grounds of amatonormativity (p. 99). Her arguments against them can be seen also as arguments against any hardline realism toward the married/non-married distinction: attributing biological meaning to the distinction, broadly independent from social factors, is not plausible. Yet it seems also clear that Brake does not embrace an eliminativist stance, such as some of the contract theorists that she discusses do, to the effect that the distinction should not be applied at all because it lacks justification. Indeed, she is at ease with having the distinction in her metaphysically "loaded"

[5] Kitcher, 1999.
[6] Haslanger, 2000.

vocabulary, although the ground of the distinction is exclusively social in nature. As I hinted at above, Brake defends her legal redefinition of marriage against the amatonormative alternatives, but she allows for the pluralistic co-existence of different conceptions of marriage circulating in the society. Such alternative conceptions may have a role in society, in so far as they do not influence the legislation, since that would be going against the principles of political liberalism. Brake's view about the possibility of pacific cohabitation of different "versions" of marriage may be a little overoptimistic. The distinction between being / non-being married, as she also stresses, is very central in our ordinary life. Thus, it seems likely that any reform of the legislation connected to marital status will have consequences on the ordinary uses of the distinction, at least on the long run. If this is true, it is not completely clear to me how a proposal of a radical reform of the legislation will not require also a form of "revolutionary" semantic project aiming at a conceptual redefinition with far reaching social consequences.

Be that as may, Brake's book is a real philosophical pleasure, which contains solidly argued defenses of critical tenets in moral and legal philosophy, and in which the practical bearings are an essential part of her argumentations. Besides, the book raises philosophically interesting points that reach far beyond that of those two disciplines – as I hope I have managed to give an idea of in the last two paragraphs of this commentary. [7]

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Interview

# Sally Haslanger

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SALLY HASLANGER is a Professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at MIT, and Director of the MIT Women's and Gender Studies Program. Her recent work is on the social construction of purportedly natural categories such as gender, race, and the family, and on topics in feminist epistemology. Her latest book, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press (2012). She has been named the 2011 Carus Lecturer, an honor presented bi-annually by the American Philosophical Association (APA), and she has been selected Distinguished Woman Philosopher of 2010 by the Society for Women in Philosophy.

1. Generally people tend to identify "traditional family", "natural family", and "biological family". Do you think such identification is justified, or the three notions come apart?

I hesitate to use the term "natural family" for several reasons. First, I am uncomfortable drawing distinctions between natural things and other non-natural things because I'm never quite sure what the relevant "non-natural" contrast is supposed to be. Human beings are, by nature, social creatures, so it does not make sense to contrast the natural with the social in human matters. But what other sense of non-natural might be at issue? Certainly not supernatural! Second, people tend to assume that what is natural is good, but of course that is a mistake. Cancer is natural, but it isn't good, or at least it isn't good for humans. There are natural causes for all sorts of problematic human behaviors, e.g., addiction. Third, what's natural is often assumed to be unchangeable. But that too is a mistake. It is often easier to change natural processes than social processes: the whole point of engineering and medicine is to change natural processes. I believe that perhaps the most influential factor

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in changing women's social roles has been the invention of reliable birth control that does not need to be utilized "in the moment", e.g., the birth control pill. Giving a woman control over her "natural" reproductive capacities made a huge social difference. So I think we should just drop the idea of the "natural family".

When we talk about the "traditional family" we should consider, of course, what tradition we are talking about. There are many different kinship systems based on different understandings of who is related to whom, to what degree, and with what responsibilities. The nuclear family is not the only way to organize sex, reproduction, and property.

But let's suppose we are talking about cultures with a relatively longstanding kinship system built around heterosexual marriage. It strikes me as odd to call families within these traditions "biological families" since the primary relationship forming the family is marriage, and marriage is certainly not a biological relation. Marriage is a paradigmatic social institution that is managed by the state, church, and broad social norms.

One might argue, however, that the point of marriage is to sanction and support the more fundamental sexual relationship between heterosexual partners that typically results in children. Sex and reproduction are biological, so, the argument goes, marriage may be a social institution, but it is based on biology. In response, one might question whether sex and reproduction are best understood as simply biological (recall, as mentioned above, that we have taken some control over reproduction through birth control, and human sex is highly scripted by social norms). However, leaving that aside, I'm not sure what is meant by marriage being "based on" biology. It certainly doesn't mean that heterosexual sex or reproduction is sufficient for marriage; nor is either necessary for marriage. Perhaps the idea is that marriage is intended to promote the biology of heterosexual sex and reproduction. But this is a bizarre idea: does biology need to be promoted? As John Stuart Mill says in *The Subjection of Women* (1869, Ch1, penultimate paragraph), «The anxiety of mankind to interfere in behalf of nature, for fear lest nature should not succeed in effecting its purpose, is an altogether unnecessary solicitude». More plausibly, the point of marriage is economic and political.[1]

[1] There are many historical and sociological texts that provide ample evidence of this, e.g., Coontz 2005 and 2000; Cott 2000.

In considering the "biological family", it might be worth asking who should be included in such a family. Presumably step-parents are not and those whose sperm and egg produce the child are, even if they are estranged or a danger to the child or other family members. With recent advances in assisted reproductive technology, things become even more complicated. Presumably a biological family does include gamete donors and gestational surrogates, even if they are anonymous or live half way around the world.[2] Although I support inclusive family arrangements, I don't think the defenders of the "traditional family" or the "natural family" would want the family to consist of all and only those who have biologically contributed to a process of reproduction.

So I think that the terms "natural family", "traditional family", and "biological family" are either confused, or refer to very different things.

2. Assuming that the traditional family is composed by a husband, a wife, and one or more children, there are several alternative models that can be met in contemporary societies (for instance, the parents can be non-legally married; or they can be a homosexual couple... ). Do you think that we are legitimized to speak of "family" also in these cases? And should all these models put on the same footing?

I definitely think that there are many forms of family other than the traditional nuclear family with a heterosexual couple and their genetically related children. In fact, the nuclear family we take to be the norm is a particular historical formation that hasn't always existed, and doesn't even today exist in all cultures. The concept of "family" is broad, contested, and variable, and has always been so.

This is compatible, however, with thinking that we *should* restrict the term "family" to a particular form of family, as you describe. What would the argument for this be? One thought might be that gay and lesbian families are not stable, but in Massachusetts, where same-sex marriage has been legal since 2004, divorce rates have been the lowest in the country, and in general, states with same-sex marriage have the lowest divorce rates overall. (It remains a question whether this is a causal connection).[3] Another thought might be that

[2] See article at: http://www.webmd.com/infertility-and-reproduction/features/womb-rent-surrogate-mothers-india.

[3] See article at: http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2011/07/06/divorce-rates-lower-in-states-with-same-sex-marriage.

children suffer in other sorts of families. But again, the data doesn't support this. In a joint brief submitted to the Supreme Court of the State of California in connection with recent legal controversies over same-sex marriage, the American Psychological Association, the American Psychiatric Association, and the National Association of Social Workers stated:

> Although it is sometimes asserted in policy debates that heterosexual couples are inherently better parents than same-sex couples, or that the children of lesbian or gay parents fare worse than children raised by heterosexual parents, those assertions find no support in the scientific research literature.[4]

These considerations are not the only relevant ones, but I believe they are the most common.

3. In catholic countries – as Italy – the institutions (and often the people) tend to stress the importance of the role of traditional family and depict alternative models as a menace to the stability of society. How do you see the *de facto* presence of alternative models in many contemporary societies?

I've addressed this to some degree in the previous question, however, it is also important to note that children benefit from living arrangements in which there are adults who love them and place a priority on their welfare. These advantages are reduced when society treats the relationships they have with these adults as problematic or culturally unacceptable. So it is good for children, and for their caregivers, to be supportive of their family formations, whether traditional or not.

4. Some forms of affirmative actions involve verbal changes, which are often considered to be shallow. For instance, recently US have endorsed the policy of using "first" and "second" parent instead of "mother" and "father" on passports. Do you think that this sort of linguistic changes can have a substantial import?

[4] Case No. S147999 in the Supreme Court of the State of California, In re Marriage Cases Judicial Council Coordination Proceeding No. 4365, Application for leave to file brief amici curiae in support of the parties challenging the marriage exclusion, and brief amici curiae of the American Psychological Association, California Psychological Association, American Psychiatric Association, National Association of Social Workers, and National Association of Social Workers, California Chapter in support of the parties challenging the marriage exclusion. See: http://www.courts.ca.gov/2964.htm.

I think such verbal changes are extremely important. They express a cultural acceptance of different ways of living and loving; they disrupt the assumption that there will be a male parent and a female parent, allowing people to envision themselves as co-parents with another of the same sex; they also reflect a reality that is already there: parents are not only those who are genetically related to their children, but those who love them, raise them, and have legal responsibility for them.

I'm not sure, however, that even moving to "first" and "second" parent is enough. My children have four parents: two birthparents and two adoptive parents each. In some cases, I think we should provide ways for them to list all four of us. I also am close to children who live with their grandparents. Why should we assume that the individuals with primary responsibility for a child are the parents (legal or genetic)? Should we introduce a new term into our vocabulary that embraces the various ways that adults take responsibility for children?

5. In the traditional model of family, the mother and the father have fairly precise and distinct roles in the education of the children and that is supposed to lead to a balanced development. How could (if at all) different models of family provide the same outcome?

In the United States, most children do not live in families with two parents who relate to them through traditional gender roles. And gender roles vary depending on time, place, and culture. Why should we think that there is only one way to provide "balanced" child-rearing? Consider also that sometimes women are very poor representatives of the feminine gender role and men are poor representatives of the masculine gender role. Should society dictate nevertheless that the woman should teach femininity and the man masculinity? That would be silly.

In my experience, children always need to rely on a broad range of adults and peers in their environment in order to develop in healthy ways. These include extended family, family friends, teachers, coaches, neighbors, religious leaders, and even characters in fiction. I believe that our children would be happier and healthier if we recognized the importance of multiple influences on children and cultivated their relationships with meaningful others. Hilary

Clinton was famous for publishing a book: *It Takes a Village* (1996) titled after an Igbo saying. I am sympathetic with this approach.

6. It is usually assumed that for an equilibrate development of children both a masculine role (father) and a feminine role (mother) are to be required. If this is roughly true, should we think of these roles as sex or gender roles? In other words, is *XY/XX sex* a sufficient and/or necessary condition to endorse such a masculine/feminine role?

As I suggested above, I don't think that a child's needs are best divided into "feminine" influences and "masculine" influences. In effect, there is no reason to divide the influences by sex *or* gender. The goal should not be to raise a girl or a boy, or to raise a person with the "right" amount of girlness and boyness, but to raise individuals who are happy and can use their talents and capacities to enrich themselves and those around them. Why assume that what we each contribute to the world should be packaged as masculine or feminine? And why assume that what you have to offer a child depends on your sex or gender? Forget the packaging.

For example, we ought to raise children who are morally responsible. But morality is not gender-specific. Both males and females should keep their promises, not tell lies, be generous to those in need, etc. There are no moral rules that differ depending on the sex of the individual agent. We ought to raise children who are capable of love, of being responsible towards others, of dedicating themselves to pursuing what's valuable. There isn't a "right way" to do this as a male or as a female, and both males and female are capable of teaching this. So I reject the idea that parents should teach children how to be boys or girls. And I reject the idea that to be a good, happy, healthy, person we should combine masculine and feminine in some way. The values that we should pursue and foster in our children are not gender-specific or gender-integrated. Our goal as parents, and as philosophers, should be to de-emphasize gender differentiation and to allow both males and females access to the full range of what's valuable.

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Interview

# Martha Nussbaum

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MARTHA NUSSBAUM is currently the Ernst Freund Distinguished Service Professor of Law and Ethics, appointed in the Philosophy Department, and Law School. She is an Associate in the Classics Department, the Divinity School, and the Political Science Department, a Member of the Committee on Southern Asian Studies, and a Board Member of the Human Rights Program. She is the founder and Coordinator of the Center for Comparative Constitutionalism. Prof. Nussbaum has chaired the Committee on International Cooperation, the Committee on the Status of Women of the American Philosophical Association, and the Committee for Public Philosophy. In 1999-2000 she was one the President of the Central Division. She has received awards and honorary degrees from more than forty colleges and universities in the U.S., Canada, Asia, and Europe.

Her latest published book is *The New Religious Intolerance*. Her current book in progress is *Political Emotions: The Public Psychology of a Decent Society.*

1. Two years ago you published a book called *From Disgust to Humanity* (Nussbaum, 2010). From its very title, it is apparent that it contains the development of some themes present in your 2004 book *Hiding from Humanity*, which contained a powerful critique of the role played by shame and disgust in the law. The subtitle of *From Disgust to Humanity* is *Sexual orientation and Constitutional Law*, and makes it clear that it is an application of those theses to the topic of discrimination based on sexual orientation. In the book you vehemently argue against what you call the *politics of disgust*, to which you oppose the *politics of humanity*. The politics of humanity is a politics of equal respect that is empowered, and in some cases made possible only, by the exercise of imagination. It is quite difficult to respect a human being that has been presented under the guise of a slimy and oozy

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thing, source of contamination and impurity, and it is precisely under this guise that LGBT people are often presented in the public sphere.[1] You suggest that the morally appropriate and politically efficacious response to the anti-gay propaganda based on eliciting disgust is to find ways of showing that LGBT people are «human beings of equal dignity and equal entitlement pursuing a wide range of human purposes» (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 51). An important analogy throughout the book is the one between discrimination against LGBT people and discrimination against African Americans, Jews, and other ethnical minorities. In general, you argue that «the case of sexual orientation seems analogous to gender and race because, in all three cases, people are classified by a trait, and then being denied fundamental opportunities in a wide range of areas because of that trait» (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 44). You mention also discrimination against disabled people. In particular, you frequently refer to anti-miscegenation laws as analogous in many ways to anti-sodomy laws. It is now unthinkable for most of us that not so long ago it was illegal for a white person to marry a black one. A little while ago, the satirical magazine *The Onion* published a "science fiction" article in which students look at the issue of gay marriage in a similar way to how we now think of anti-miscegenation laws (http://www.theonion.com/articles/future-us-history-students-its-pretty-embarrassing,19099/). Aside from the topic of marriage, do you see any significant difference between the two kinds of discrimination?

I think that each type of discrimination is subtly different, and indeed that is a project I have for the future, in collaboration with some colleagues in India: to investigate the varieties of discrimination – on grounds of caste, religion and ethnicity, race, gender, sexual orientation. My argument is that homophobia and American racism share an underlying anxiety about the body that leads people to project onto the minority the disgust properties – bad smell, sliminess, hypersexuality – that people fear in themselves. But there are subtle differences. African-Americans were standardly portrayed as mere animals, brutes, not even quite part of the same species. Gay men are portrayed as sex maniacs, but are thought to be crafty and intelligent (as indeed were Jews), planning a takeover of society and a destruction of its institutions. Then there is the whole issue of lesbians. As I argue in the book, they are subject to dis-

[1] LGBT is an acronym that collectively refers to "lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender" people.

crimination, as are gay men, but are less often the objects of disgust. Indeed, sex between women is a staple of straight male pornography and is standardly found arousing. In the case of lesbians, the focus of discrimination is on their rejection of the patriarchal family as the norm, and this is found threatening without being found disgusting in the same way that the sex acts of gay men are found disgusting. I think a major task for interdisciplinary inquiry (involving psychology, philosophy, law, anthropology, sociology, and history) is to investigate the subtle differences among types of discrimination in their concrete historical and political contexts.

2. It seems to me that one important difference in the case of LGBT people is that their differentiating trait is not recognizable in many ordinary interactions. In fact, you say that most people who are disgusted by homosexual behavior (or what they imagine as such) are unaware of being acquainted or even closely related to homosexuals and bisexuals. This may turn out to be in favor of the politics of humanity: it is thanks to seeing them as "normal human beings" with passions and virtues similar to theirs, that they can cease to be prey of the anti-gay propaganda. Do you agree with this suggestion?

Yes, the possibility of "passing" is one thing that works differently. Disability is rarely hidden. Race is sometimes hidden, but not so often. Sexual orientation can be very successfully hidden. This creates a difference in the way in which the deforming psychological pressures of discrimination operate: often a person may live an entire life in the closet, and thus be cut off from any community of other gay people, whereas it is less common for racial minorities to be totally cut off from community. But then too, as you say, the closet creates possibilities of closeness that sometimes, once the person eventually comes out, foster acceptance. When your own friend or child, whom you have known for years, comes out, it is very difficult to convince yourself that this person whom you have come to love is really a monster. We often see profound changes of view in parents and friends of gay people. With race, it is possible to go through life without close relationships with people of a different race, in part because you usually know who those people are.

3. You say that «sexual orientation ... seems to lie deep in the structure of people′s personalities, in ways that are crucial to their pursuit of happi-

ness» (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 121). Is this the origin of another difference with race and gender discrimination, or do you think that also gender and racial identity structure the way people pursue their happiness?

I think here again there are differences. Sexual orientation is about goals and projects: what sorts of people will I seek to bond with, what sexual relationships will I form? Race and gender don't in this way give one a set of specific life projects. To the extent that sexual relationship are important for a person—and for most people they are pretty important—sexual identity is also important. Race is different. I would say that race is significant only because history and prejudice have made it significant. Scientifically, it is an utterly bogus category, as Anthony Appiah eloquently shows in *Color Conscious* (Appiah & Gutmann, 1998). So with race it is in that sense optional whether a person wishes to make a racial identity central to his or her pursuit of a good life. The reasons for doing so range from solidarity with other oppressed people to pride in a group's history of struggle. But there are also reasons for not doing so: for example, one thinks other aspects of one's identity are more important. Gender is in between. Differences of sex are themselves less binary than people usually take them to be, but still there is a biological reality there. Differences of gender are social and are uneasily correlated with biological differences of sex, but it is still difficult to imagine a society in which no gender distinctions of any sort exist – while it's not so difficult to imagine a society that has transcended race. Gender identity will probably remain important to most people as a way of thinking about their life projects, but we can hope that by pursuing anti-discrimination policies in this area we can make people free of the rigid demand that they conform to a narrow social norm.

4. In your *Women and Human Development* (Nussbaum, 2000) you have articulated your version of an approach introduced in the context of social justice by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985): the capabilities approach. As you say in your article "Capabilities as Fundamental Entitlements: Sen and Social Justice (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 1): «Against the dominant emphasis on economic growth as an indicator of a nation's quality of life, Sen has insisted on the importance of capabilities, what people are actually able to do and to be».

   Sen's idea was that considerations of capabilities would have to implement considerations about people's fundamental rights, given that so-

cial groups such as women tend to exhibit *adaptive preferences*, that is, preferences that have been shaped by unjust background conditions.

You have not only endorsed that approach, but developed it further, arguing in favor of a specific list of capabilities: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; use of senses, imagination and thought; development and expression of emotion; practical reason; affiliation, being able to live with concern for other species and nature; being able to play; control over one's environment.

The list is meant to be open-ended and subject to ongoing revision and rethinking.

In your most recent book, *Creating Capabilities: The Human Development Approach* (Nussbaum, 2011), you argue again in favor of this approach. What are the new contributions of this book to the question of discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation?

Well, the book makes very clear that you can't have an adequate account of discrimination or of what society owes to people who are victims of discrimination, without having a concrete list of capabilities of the sort that Sen refuses to give. I said all this in a 2003 article in *Feminist Economics* (Nussbaum, 2003), so the book basically recapitulates that discussion, but it does make clear some differences between my approach and Sen's that are not stated in *Women and Human Development* (Nussbaum, 2000). Indeed, although you say that Sen introduced the capabilities approach in the context of discussing social justice, I'd say that this is not perfectly accurate: he introduced it as an alternative approach to the proper space of comparison in measuring social welfare or the quality of life, comparatively. What I now say is, if you really want to use the approach in thinking about social justice, you have to say much more about content, which capabilities are most central, and you should not suggest, as Sen sometimes does, that there is an all-purpose good of freedom that it is the business of politics to maximize. (You could compare my move to Hart's critique of Rawls's idea of the priority of liberty, where Hart says that a definite list is required – except that Rawls accepted Hart's critique, and Sen has not really commented on mine!)

5. I played a little game: every time I found the word *women* in your 2003 article (Nussbaum, 2003), I substituted it with *LGBT people*. It works well most of them time, but sometimes it doesn't. For instance, it seems to me

that LGBT people do not have the problem of not having their work recognized as work, which is typical of women and especially of women in developing countries. And there are some cases in which the substitution works only with some provisos: for instance, LGBT people may incur in educational deprivations indirectly, because being harassed in school may affect their capacity to fully take advantage of the educational resources, but they are rarely if ever excluded by education as such. What are the most interesting differences that you see between the two social groups with respect to the capabilities approach? Can these differences bring new insights to the capabilities approach?

You have identified some of the most important differences. I'd say that discrimination on grounds of sex has been, throughout human history, a much deeper and more organizing fact about how societies structure themselves than discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation. Laurence Thomas once wrote a controversial article called "Racism and Sexism" (Thomas, 1980), in which he argues that sexism is likely to be more difficult to eradicate than racism, because men's concept of their manhood is deeply bound up with domination over women, in a way that white people's self-conception is not inherently bound up with domination over black people. There is, he wrote, no concept of a "real white" that corresponds to the common notion of the "real man", meaning one who displays his power by controlling women. Well, I would say that he was right, and I think the same point applies to sexual orientation: there's no concept of "the real straight" that requires straight men to dominate gay people. And so we can expect that sexism will be much more enduring than discrimination against LGBT people. And we see this already. There have been massive and rapid generational changes in this area: people under 30 just don't have the same attitudes any longer. But people are not changing so rapidly with respect to sexism, because the whole structure of daily life is so deeply bound up with it. When I hear gay people speak these days, I hear a note of optimism and celebration that is utterly impossible to imagine in women talking about their own situation, no matter what country one is in. Let me put this another way. For a straight man who is homophobic to change and be non-homophobic, he probably does not need to change at a very deep level. He just needs an attitude of live and let live. This attitude would be more stable if he did change underlying attitudes about bodies and sexuality, but change is not absolutely required, since he does not need to deal with gay people in intimate

spheres of life. For a sexist man to change and to be non-sexist, he really does have to change in profound ways: his attitudes to the family, child-rearing, work, probably sexuality as well. So much of his daily and intimate life is bound up in sexist practices that change is difficult.

6. You have argued that the capabilities talk is superior to the rights talk because it rejects the traditional distinction between public domain, which the state regulates, and private sphere, where citizens have a right to privacy and to behave as they wish without state's interference. This distinction has been nefarious for the women's cause, for instance by legitimizing marital rape and domestic abuse in general.

   Sexual orientation is often seen as a private matter. I read about a headmistress of an Italian preschool who, when informed by a student's mother that the girl had two moms, replied aggressively: "Why do you come share with me your private business?" It seems to me that also in the defense on LGBT rights the private becomes public. But do you see any significant difference with the defense of women's rights?

First of all, let's be clear: I say that capabilities talk is not contrasted with rights talk, it is one species of rights talk, a species that avoids three pitfalls that are present in some common versions of rights talk: (1) the suggestion that rights are secured when the state does not act – whereas the capabilities approach points out that all capabilities require state action for their protection and implementation; (2) the strong distinction between "first-generation" (political/civil) and "second-generation" (economic and social) rights, given that the capabilities approach makes clear the fact that all capabilities have a socio-economic aspect, requiring taxation and expenditure for their implementation; and (3) the point you make about the public and private. In response to your question, I would insist (as I have in several places, including chapter 6 of *From Disgust to Humanity*), that the notion of the "private" is confused and confusing, conflating considerations that ought to be kept distinct: seclusion, informational secrecy, autonomy, intimacy. When we say that sexual matters are nobody's business, we are alluding above all to the fact that they are intimate areas of life that an individual has the right to conceal from the view of others; we may also be alluding to the autonomy interest people have in those activities. None of these uses of "private" entails that there is a special privi-

leged place ("the home") that law cannot regulate because of the kind of place it is. That is the notion that I reject.

7. You claimed that the capabilities approach is «very important for gender justice: the state needs to take action if traditionally marginalized groups are to achieve full equality» (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 7). I wonder whether someone who does not believe in the existence and/or utility of gender distinctions could find the very concept of *gender justice* preposterous. No doubt, someone could, but the question is whether that's a legitimate move. Do you think that theoretical attacks to the metaphysical notion of gender can affect the discussion of gender justice as it has been conceived of so far?

I think it's just like what I just said about race, for someone who utterly rejects the notion of gender: it still has historical and social reality, and has still been the source of great injustice. So it still makes sense to have affirmative action measures that use that category. If we were starting society afresh, we might not choose to use that notion at all, any more than India would use the notion of caste if it started from nowhere. But societies must take history into account when rectifying injustice.

8. It seems to me that in recent years you have devoted special attention to the issue of discrimination based on sexual orientation. What motivated you to tackle this issue?

Actually, I've written about this issue at least since the middle 1990's, and I've been interested in it for even longer. I think my first public lecture on the topic was at the first gay studies conference at Yale in 1986. There has always been an issue about the politics of the issue: namely, do LGBT people want scholars who do not share that orientation to participate, or not? At that Yale conference I will never forget that Blakey Vermeule, then an undergraduate and now an eminent scholar of comparative literature, opened the conference saying, "We are here as lesbian and gay scholars." Well, I felt that I was being told I did not belong; and of course many lesbian feminists have written that straight women are victims of false consciousness, and can't even really be feminists. So I later asked John Boswell, the great scholar who organized the conference, whether he wanted the contributions of people who unrepentantly prefer opposite-sex relationships, and they discussed this with the student group. The

students agreed that it was an issue of justice for all people. I think it is different from race and gender in that, because of the difficulty of seeing who's who that you mention, any scholar working on it is likely to be suspected of being gay; for a time many straight men did not want to get involved, and I admire the ones who did face that suspicion (Andrew Koppelman especially) for the sake of justice. But anyway, how did I first get interested in it? Two things. First, as a scholar of Plato, I could not avoid noticing that the erotic relationships that seemed to me most admirable as paradigms for my own life, involving shared aspiration and intellectual commitment, were relationships between men, so having these relationships as paradigms, I wondered how society could take the attitude that they were disgusting. Second, I was a professional actress for quite a while, and I got to know a number of openly gay men and a few lesbians, and I felt that the society that marginalized them was unjust. There was this world, I'll call it "the little world," using Ingmar Bergman's wonderful term for the theater world, in which everyone was accepted, and then there was the outside world, where they were treated as shameful and bad. I preferred "the little world".

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Report

# Under-Represented Groups in Philosophy

Cardiff University
26th-27th November 2010

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There has been a recent surge in attention to the phenomena of under-representation of various groups in academic philosophy. The conference on Under-represented Groups in Philosophy held at Cardiff University on November 26th and 27th 2010 was intended as a forum to enable a better understanding of the problems surrounding under-representation in philosophy, and to examine the philosophical under-pinnings of strategies for overcoming under-representation and its attendant problems. The conference attracted speakers and participants mostly from the Anglophone world including the UK, US, Canada and Australia. All the talks were recorded and podcasts are freely available at: http://www.cf.ac.uk/encap/newsandevents/events/ conferences/groups.ht

The conference venue was fully accessible to individuals with mobility impairments; all talks were translated in American and British sign language and interpreters were also present at the conference dinner. Finally, crèche facilities were available upon request to the organisers. One of the outcomes of the conference has been sustained attention to the question of how to organise conferences and workshops so that they are inclusive and accessible.[1]

The first talk *Women and Deviance in Philosophy* was delivered by Helen Beebee who at the time was the president of the British Philosophical Associa-

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[1]For example, see online discussions of accessible conferences here: http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2011/08/29/accessible-conferences-where-to-start/, and here: http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/2009/05/18/last-night-i-dreamt-of-an-inclusive-conference/.

tion (an association representing the interests of professional philosophers in the UK). Beebee presented the data gathered by the BPA on the numbers of women in philosophy.[2] These data revealed a steady drop in the representation of women in philosophy in the UK. The percentage of women drops from 47% of the undergraduate student body to just 15% at professorial level. Data has not yet been gathered on disabled philosophers or black and ethnic minority philosophers, but there is reason to believe the problems are no less stark.[3] Beebee also introduced the BPA report on the status of women in the profession which has been distributed to all the heads of philosophy departments in the UK and which includes a set of recommendations on how to address the issue of under-representation.[4] In addition to presenting these data, Beebee also offered some possible explanations for the under-representation of women. Among these she noticed a certain tendency for under-representation to self-perpetuate. When members of a group are perceived as statistically rare within a population, they also tend to be conceived as defective exemplars within the population. Thus, for instance, Beebee notes that an aggressive and confrontational style of argumentation is dominant in philosophy seminars. The kind of behaviour that is often accepted in this context would be unacceptable in most other social circumstances; and there is no good reason why it should be adopted in philosophy. Further, she suggested, this style may put women off. It does this, independently of whether as a matter of fact women dislike aggression and confrontation. Rather, because this kind of behaviour is culturally associated with masculinity, its adoption sends the message that philosophy is a masculine pursuit. Hence, the message that women are atypical philosophers is re-enforced.

Whether the way in which philosophy is perceived has a role in perpetuating under-representation was a question considered by Dr Pamela Hood and Dr Mahlet Zimeta. Their papers both addressed the value of studying philosophy. Hood addressed the perception, prevalent among the students at San Francisco State University (USA) where she teaches, that philosophy is a 'white thing' and thus both too hard and irrelevant for ethnic minority and underprivi-

[2]For an overview, see the BPA 2010 newsletter, available here: http://www.bpa.ac.uk/category/news/newsletters/. More information is also available here: http://www.bpa.ac.uk/policies/

[3] See, for example, Gines, 2011.

[4]Available at: http://www.swipuk.org/notices/2011-09-08/Women%20in%20Philosophy%20in%20the%20UK%20%28BPASWIPUK%20Report%29.pdf.

leged students. Hood described her numerous strategies to address this perception by teaching philosophy in a way that made its relevance to student's lives apparent. She discussed for instance the influence of ancient Greek philosophical thought on Martin Luther King's ideas. Hood showed how one can make philosophy relevant to everyday concerns in one's teaching, and argued for the importance of challenging the stereotype of philosophy as 'abstract and irrelevant' in addressing the pipeline problems of retaining BME students in philosophy. She also emphasised the way in which this engagement with philosophy in relation to real life could in turn be empowering for students.

Zimeta also identified a concern about the way in which philosophy may be perceived, and advocated a change in the way philosophy is conceived by its practitioners so that it can become more attractive to students from underprivileged backgrounds. As it stands, she argued, philosophy is not thought of as an aspirational degree choice by these potential students who aim to be socially mobile and gain more social power. At the root of this disinterest, she argued, is a conception of philosophy as lacking in social utility. This is a conception which is re-enforced by professional philosophers who emphasise philosophy's intrinsic value rather than also its instrumental value for social advancement. To remedy this problem Zimeta proposes a change of focus in favour of the role that studying philosophy can play as a way out of poverty, by providing access to skills and qualifications that equip individuals for a range of fulfilling employments.

These explanations for under-representation rely on hypotheses about students' views about philosophy, and places the onus on those working in educational environments to think carefully about the image of the discipline that is projected. Such stereotypes about what philosophy is, and indeed 'who does philosophy', play a central role in other attempts to articulate the root causes of under-representation. A number of papers drew upon the emerging research on implicit bias in some detail.

Professor Jenny Saul, in *Unconscious Biases and Women in Philosophy* set out data on implicit biases that we might expect to hinder the progress and inclusion of women and minorities in philosophy - for example, the propensity to rate less positively CV's when they bear women's names. There is also the data emerging from research on "stereotype threat"; the phenomena of underperformance due to raised stress levels at the prospect of confirming negative stereotypes. The data on these two phenomena, Saul argued, provide good reason to suppose that some procedures in philosophy do not meet the re-

quirements for equality of opportunity. For example, if in hiring procedures women and minorities are not evaluated equally, nor compete under the same conditions (due to stereotype threat) as candidates from groups that are not under-represented, then such procedures, Saul argues, do not adhere to principles of fair equality of opportunity. In her paper (available online[5]), some proposals for mitigating bias are considered.

As Saul acknowledges, none of the data gathered has been about philosophers, and although there is reason to suppose that philosophers are as liable to implicit bias as anyone else, the premises of her argument could be bolstered if data were to show that philosophers do harbour implicit biases, and that these are of the kind that could feature in (partial) explanations for the under-representation of women and minorities in philosophy. Moreover, greater understanding of the nature of implicit bias, and the kinds of cognitive architecture that support the elimination or mitigation of biases, should further help in equipping individuals and institutions with proposals for how to avoid biased responses. Much of this work will be empirical, but there is much conceptual and philosophical work also to be done (what is implicit bias? what epistemic responsibilities might individuals have in relation to bias?).

Implicit bias and stereotype threat might contribute to the (likely) complex factors that would figure in a full explanation of why some groups are under-represented in philosophy. Professor Louise Antony, in her paper *Different Voices or Perfect Storm? Explaining the dearth of women in philosophy*, takes up another explanation that has recently been offered by Stich and Buckwalter, on the basis of data garnered from experimental philosophy.[6] On this hypothesis (one of a range of "Different Voice" hypotheses advanced in recent decades), women may have systematically discordant intuitions, in response to thought experiments. Might this explain the attrition rate of women in philosophy?

Antony argued that serious methodological problems beset the claims from Stich and Buckwalter: for example, the effects (discordant intuitions) were found in only some of the experiments analysed, and in as many experiments *men* were found to have discordant intuitions. So the hypothesis does not ap-

[5]J. Saul, "Unconscious Influences and Women in Philosophy", http://feministphilosophers.wordpress.com/the-psychology-of-philosophy/

[6]Stich & Buckwalter, 2010, "Gender and Philosophical Intuition", http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1683066.

pear to fit the data. (It is also worth noting that no support has been garnered for this hypothesis in relation to disabled or BME philosophers.)

Moreover, Antony argues, there is significant damage in pursuing this hypothesis any further: claims about differences, she suggests, tend to be understood as categorical, and can fuel essentialising claims that have served to marginalise women. So pursuing this hypothesis could have dangerous effects. A rival hypothesis, to which research funding would be better directed, is the "Perfect storm" hypothesis, according to which various effects converge and intensify to marginalise and exclude women from philosophy (an example would be that of implicit bias and stereotype threat, mentioned above).

It is worth noting that the different voice hypothesis is not, strictly speaking, inconsistent with the perfect storm hypothesis: one part of the perfect storm could be that women have discordant intuitions. If true, then the dangerous effects would be ones that would require care to be managed (by explaining that it is fallacious to move from claims about statistical differences to categorical ones). But Antony's argument is in part pragmatic: given that research funding is limited, which should we bet on? The methodological concerns raised with Stich and Buckwalter's paper support the conclusion that we should jettison the different voice hypothesis as a main line of inquiry.

The explanations for under-representation, therefore, are likely to be complex and subtle, and will likely include reference to 'micro-inequities' of the sort highlighted by Professor Samantha Brennan in her paper, 'Re-thinking the Moral Significance of Micro-Inequities'. The cumulative effect of small deficits in recognition and support can be significant, Brennan argues, drawing, for example, on the work of Haslanger[7], Wylie, and the MIT Barnard Report on Women, Work and the Academy.

Brennan highlights the extent to which such micro-inequities have been overlooked in moral and political philosophy, which have often focused on "evils"[8], or "absolute rights"[9], or have focused on actions that are themselves wrong[10] rather than on unjust outcomes that may result from small acts which are not, individually, wrong. Highlighting those thinkers who have attended to

[7] Haslanger, 2008; Wylie, 2011; Barnard Centre for Research on Women report, Wylie, Jakobsen, Fosado, 2007.
[8] Card, 2002.
[9] Fried, 1974.
[10] Nozick, 1974.

small harms in their moral philosophy,[11] Brennan calls for more attention to such harms in moral theory, as well as further attention to the possible ways of addressing micro-inequities. Amongst the positive proposals Brennan considers, are those of engaging in "micro-affirmations" – small acts of support – and the importance of bystander training, which equips individuals to become "active bystanders" who can play a role in de-escalating hostile situations.

These instructive positive proposals again call for further analysis: if small harms are to be incorporated into moral theory, might individuals have duties to avoid them, or to mitigate them? Is it ever appropriate to hold individuals liable to blame for small harms (Brennan seems to suggest not)?

Not all explanations of under-representation need appeal only to micro-inequities, when larger obstacles are all too apparent. Whilst the three papers by Saul, Antony and Brennan offered theoretical accounts of the subtle causes of under-representation of women in the profession, and presented suggestions on how to overcome the problems, Teresa Blankmeyer-Burke's talk aimed to present some of the issues faced by the Deaf community in Academia. In particular, Blankmeyer-Burke recounted some of her experiences as a deaf philosopher. The ability to access only partially resources that others take for granted was one of the focuses of her talk. She noted, for instance, that very few presenters when using powerpoint take into account the fact that deaf people must look at their interpreter in sign language when the talk is delivered and consequently cannot look at the slides. But partiality of access is also the result of poor interpreting facilities provided at conferences. Blankmeyer-Burke explained that under budgetary pressures conference organisers often tend to provide a minimal interpreting service. For instance, they provide cheaper less experienced interpreters for the business part of meetings and offer no provision for the social part. As everybody knows, the latter is often among the most intellectually satisfying components of conferences. A consequence of the partiality of this access leaves deaf academics unable to participate fully in academic life, whilst their demands for better provisions are taken to be excessive. As it was remarked during the conference, it is important to remember that poor provision results in a two-way loss. The deaf academic is denied full access to others' views and presence but other participants lose the opportunity to benefit from the views and company of the deaf participants. This talk was the catalyst for action soliciting various scholarly funding bodies in the UK to ring-

[11] Parfit, 1984; Kernohan, 1998.

fence funding to help organisers make their conferences fully inclusive. This call has now been answered by some sponsoring bodies such as the Analysis Trust and the Mind Association.

The conference was extremely successful, and received attention in the press. "The Philosophers' Magazine" for instance published a long report on the conference. It is particularly pleasing to note that the conference has also served as a catalyst for positive action by the BPA, scholarly associations and the society of women in philosophy in the UK.

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Report

# Women in Philosophy: Why Race and Gender Still Matter

Notre Dame of Maryland University
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On Saturday, April 28, 2012, the Society for Women in Philosophy (Eastern Division) held its annual conference on women in philosophy at Notre Dame of Maryland University. The Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP) dedicates itself to honoring and enabling women philosophers in any field of philosophy, and this year the Eastern Division (ESWIP) conference focused especially on intersectionality.

"Intersectionality", the difficult yet productive attempt to theorize categories such as race, class, gender, disability, and sexuality together, has been a conceptual framework for more than a decade in the U.S. academy, yet it is almost entirely absent as a recognized philosophical theme or framework within the larger discipline of philosophy. Indeed, intersectional scholarship in both analytic and continental philosophy has yet to be recognized in a substantive manner. Intersectional approaches are inherently interdisciplinary and intradisciplinary, drawing on numerous areas of contemporary philosophical investigation: postcolonial philosophy, critical race theory, feminist and GLBTQ philosophy, and philosophy of disability. Nevertheless, such work has yet to receive widespread recognition and legitimacy in

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professional philosophy. For example, while feminist theory and feminist theorists have succeeded in making inroads within the discipline, the gains (anthologies, encyclopedias, tenure-track positions, etc.) have privileged white feminism and white feminists, often excluding women of color. A possible explanation for the reluctance of professional philosophers to embrace intersectionality is the fact that the various disciplines and approaches that constitute intersectional frameworks are internally complex and often have fraught relations with one another. For example, postcolonial and critical race studies have often ignored feminism, and almost all of these fields ignore disability studies. Give this complicated terrain, ESWIP hoped to organize a conference that celebrated the successes of intersectional, philosophical work while remaining cognizant of the challenges facing those who adopt such frameworks. As a result, ESWIP dedicated itself to recognizing and promoting intersectional scholarship in philosophy, as well as intersectional frameworks that drew on philosophy in other disciplines--such as political science, education, law, art and history. Building bridges between philosophical fields, as well as between philosophy and other disciplines, honors the contributions of intersectional scholarship. More significantly, such bridges provide critical tools from a variety of disciplines and theoretical frameworks to meet the challenges that remain.

In order to receive submissions from a wide range of scholars, we advertised our call for papers in multiple and varied venues. These included numerous listservs, blogs, websites, social media sites, as well as targeted emails to organizations and individuals with a demonstrated interest in at least one dimension of intersectional analysis. These venues were extremely successful in soliciting a wide selection of submissions. The twenty-eight papers chosen for the program covered a wide range of topics and themes—specifically we had sessions on epistemic injustice; identity; race and gender; freedom and equality; women in philosophy; motherhood and sexuality; moral innovation; and analytic and continental approaches to intersectionality. We were especially pleased to receive submissions from graduate students doing innovative work, and to have a small number of undergraduate students in attendance, since part of SWIP's core mission is to nurture and mentor younger scholars attempting to gain a foothold in an exclusionary and traditional discipline. We were disappointed not to receive submissions that focused specifically on disability theory, economics and transnational women's movements, indigenous communities, or climate change. We determined,

therefore, that for our next conference we would advertise our call for papers in venues that would garner such contributions.

Dr. Donna-Dale Marcano, Associate Professor of Philosophy at Trinity College, and an alumna of Notre Dame of Maryland University, accepted our invitation to deliver the keynote address: "Whiteness and Women of Color in Feminist Theory or Considerations of Race and Sex Analogies in Contemporary Feminism". Dr. Marcano centered her talk on a concrete example of the tensions facing those doing intersectional work. As a participant in the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival over the years, Marcano has come to appreciate the opportunities for networking that the festival offers—primarily via 'tents,' or covered spaces, designated for certain groups. In the last few years, controversy has arisen over one of these, the black womyn's tent. Given the excellent work being done in critical race theory, work that questions the nature and existence of blackness as a clearly identifiable, physical trait, some of the more academically-minded participants of the festival have challenged the need for such a tent. According to Marcano, a number of vocal objectors have argued that the tent reifies a socially constructed category that has proven to be damaging to those to whom it is applied. Yet, at the same time, many attendees of the festival, in particular those who identify as black, defend the ongoing presence of the tent as necessary, perhaps even more necessary than in the past, as a refuge and private space for black women to meet and share their experiences while at the festival. For Marcano, what is significant is that it is mainly non-black identified women calling to abolish the tent, and largely black-identified women demanding that it remain. In exploring the controversy through an intersectional lens, Marcano shed light on how and why race can indeed be socially constructed while at the same time being 'real' enough to mark off certain individuals as different, and in need of private, black-only, supportive environments. The festival's response has been to create a 'front porch' for the black womyn's tent, where those who wish to can meet and discuss ongoing concerns. Such controversy is not new to the festival--for many years the trans (-gender and –sexual) community and its supporters have been protesting the festival's policy of allowing only "womyn-born-womyn" to attend[1], with at least one objector describing the policy as a relic of second-wave feminism: «There

[1] For more information see: http://genderben.com/2012/05/31/michigan-womyns-music-festival-transphobia-in-feminism/; http://forcechange.com/13079/urge-the-michigan-womyns-music-festival-to-abolish-their-policy-against-transwomyn/. Retrieved June 14, 2012.

are some sincere lesbian and feminist folk with the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival (MWMF) who seem sincerely misguided, and stuck in the feminist identity politics of the 1970's when it comes trans women's identities being fully included in the community of female identities.»[2] As mentioned above, such tensions between (white) feminism and other dimensions of intersectionality are an ongoing challenge to those who wish to see intersectionality accepted, and employed, more widely in the discipline of philosophy.

To provide a snapshot of the diversity of additional offerings on the conference program, and to illustrate the ways in which employment of an intersectional framework generates novel analyses and new tools for dismantling oppression, we include summaries of seven representative presentations.

In "Nonsense as Discourse: The Continuing Importance of Critical Race and Feminist Analysis", presented by Dr. Jeanine Weekes Schroer and co-authored with Dr. Melissa Kozma, Schroer and Kozma interrogate the function of 'purposeful nonsense' in expressions of political ideology. When purposeful nonsense is passed off as simply bad or absurd discourse, it conceals the ways that it employs a variation on the phenomenon known as 'stereotype threat.' To illustrate their claims, they draw on the recent anti-abortion campaign targeting African-American women (including billboards that state "The most dangerous place for an African-American child is in the womb"). They argue that purposeful nonsense ordinarily subverts critical engagement, but critical race and feminist analyses contextualize it, potentially disrupting its harmful influence.

Dr. Iveta Jusova's presentation, "Intersectionality and Continental Feminist Philosophy: Rosi Braidotti's Recent Work", begins with an overview of Dutch politics, with particular attention to the deployment of "embedded feminism" and "homonationalism" by neo-liberals. Jusova argues that both strategies pit issues of sexuality against culture, rather than treating them as intertwined, seemingly disentangling ethnicity-based causes of (unacceptable) behavior from those generated in response to sexism or homophobia. The end result is continued, unquestioned advancement of anti-Muslim and anti-immigration agendas. Jusova recommends employing Braidotti's philosophy

[2] http://pamshouseblend.firedoglake.com/2010/03/04/michigan-womyns-music-festival-lesbian-and-feminist-musical-artists-supporting-segregation/. Retrieved June 14, 2012.

and practice to suture the social schisms generated by such polarizing Dutch politics.

Marie Draz, in her presentation "Transitional Subjects: Gender, Race, and the Timing of the Real", argues that contemporary accounts of gender, race, and state should not ignore how sex literally becomes the property of the state. Draz juxtaposes the history of such doled out realness for transgender "claims to the real" with the history of biopolitical administrative systems that create and maintain racial categories. When cisgendered queer feminists dismiss transgender understandings of embodiment, they reveal the whiteness of queer feminist accounts of embodiment. Draz argues that we cannot understand the relationship between gender and the state without an intersectional framework that attends to racialized-gendered subjection.

Historical analysis takes center stage in Professor Kristin Waters' paper, "Past as Prologue: Intersectional Analysis in Nineteenth Century Philosophies of Race and Gender". She contrasts the multivariable analysis standards of other disciplines (that require representative populations in their studies) over and against the way that the field of philosophy permits the absence of such oversight. She argues that the intersectional approach, which is a pre-requisite for black women social and political philosophers, ought to be required for all philosophers who theorize on human activities.

In "Intersectionality and [White] Feminist Philosophy: Problems, Projects and Prospects",[3] Dr. Alison Bailey explores personal and disciplinary reasons why white feminist philosophers have not enthusiastically engaged the radical work being done in intersectionality. In her presentation she identifies four projects that could contribute to creating a feminist critical race philosophy. These projects include self-reflexivity on the part of white women feminists and the willingness to: (1) interrogate the ways we may cling to theoretical abstractions and concepts at the expense of cultivating relations with other groups of women and their lived experiences; (2) step outside of the safe theoretical spaces where whiteness is centered (classrooms, conferences, workshops, roundtables, etc.) in favor of locations that can better challenge the irreconcilable material differences between the lives of white women and women of color; (3) consider the ways that we all exist as multiple selves, and that our character as white women feminists is legitimately viewed and received in ways be-

[3] This presentation was loosely based on Alison Bailey's earlier work (Bailey 2010. This chapter can be downloaded electronically at: http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1609862.)

yond our own construction of that character as good, well-meaning, and decent; and, finally, (4) confront some very real fears about white feminist philosophy's philosophical authority and the fragility of the feminist philosophical canon, when that canon has been built exclusively in a way that undermines plurality and intersectionality.

Heather Rakes' paper, "How Race and Gender Matter: The Case for Intersectionality in Feminist Philosophy", addresses the unequal terms of conditionality for happiness. According to Rakes, the happiness of long-tenured, white, straight, nondisabled, (secularized) Christian, cisgendered men comes first in philosophy departments. Their *philosophical* conditions for happiness determine what is deemed a philosophical pursuit, which excludes queer feminist of color work on histories of intersectional theory. Evidence of the exclusion Rakes describes is found in the relatively large numbers of women philosophers and philosophers of color (versus white, male philosophers) who leave academic philosophy for other, more welcoming disciplinary homes—women's studies and Africana or black studies most frequently—and the persistently low rate of tenure in philosophy for women and persons of color.[4]

Finally, the controversial decision to verify Caster Semenya's sex through chromosome testing after her victory at the 2009 World Track and Field Championships motivates Dr. Janine Jones' analysis in "Caster Semenya; Reasoning Up Front with Race". Jones utilizes this event to show how some intersectional theorists mistakenly 'bring in' race, when, instead, in cases similar to this one, race must be understood as intervening prior to the construction of sex/gender status, not subsequent to its invention. Jones argues that Semenya's case fails to live up to its oft touted contribution to intersectional work, that of providing an ideal case for challenging a realist view of sex, gender, and race. Instead, a more careful reading of the controversy supports claims such as Marcano's, that race is not equivalent to, but prior to, gender in impacting lived experience.

In conclusion, the response to the publicized conference program, by those unable to attend, and to the conference itself, by attendees, was overwhelmingly positive. For example, one participant wrote:

> It was – by far – one of the best conferences I have ever attended, and the

[4] See The APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy, Vol. 08, No. 2 (Spring 2009) and Gines (2011) for detailed discussions, with data, and analyses of the situation facing women and blacks in philosophy, respectively.

> setting – at such an historic women's college – was the icing on the proverbial cake. I especially appreciated the diversity of analytic, continental, and historical approaches amongst the papers. I couldn't believe the level of appreciation for each others [*sic*] work that was shown during the Q&A – in spite of this diversity.

Another expressed her gratitude for our giving intersectionality center-stage:

> I just wanted to thank you for organizing a wonderful conference on a topic that needed to be addressed. My sense is that this will give rise to a new, revitalized discussion of intersectionality and may even change the direction of the discourse.[5]

In addition, two presses have contacted the organizers, both wanting to publish the conference proceedings in book format. Much of the success is attributable to the intersectional theme, as well as to the history and reputation of SWIP as a welcoming and supportive place for women philosophers to explore and develop new ways of thinking.

Today's ESWIP aims to continue the legacy, through conferences, panels at major professional meetings, and awards celebrating distinguished women philosophers, of providing for women philosophers the kind of support and empowerment so aptly described by Claudia Card in her essay "Finding My Voice":

> A second stage of feminist awareness began when I connected with the Midwest Society of Women in Philosophy (SWIP), two years after the CR [consciousness-raising] group disintegrated ... I was able then to 'come out' in my work and at my workplace, thereby also becoming less vulnerable ... I began integrating my 'life' with my work ... The CR group, SWIP, and, later, women's studies helped me heal and heard me into speech, enabling me to find and develop my voice as a philosopher. (Card 2003, p. 45)

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[5] Both quotations are from private email correspondence between the conference organizers and participants.

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# *Making Sense of Gender, Sex, Race and the Family*

Edited by Elena Casetta and Vera Tripodi

*How can race and sex affect the way we perceive and shape our gender experience and gender expression? Are there different types of human bodies and different ways of sexually classifying them? What does make a woman (or man) a mother (or father)?; Is parenthood a biological or natural relationship? What defines a family?*

*One of the main topics in analytic feminist philosophy is the notion of gender and it is widely held that it is a social constructed concept or category. This issue of Humana.Mente will address these and related questions.*

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