

## **PHIL2422, Philosophy of Race And Gender**

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**Handout at: [mipmckeever.weebly.com/teaching.html](http://mipmckeever.weebly.com/teaching.html)**

### **Plan**

- i) Haslanger 1: starting at the end
- ii) Conceptual engineering: what, why, who, (when)
- iii) Haslanger 2: on conceptually engineering race and gender.

Goals: introduce conceptual engineering; consider Haslanger's project; learn the Haslangerian terminology and definitions; think about whether we like conceptual engineering, Haslanger's analyses of race and gender; how the conceptual engineering approach differs from descriptive approaches; and whether Haslanger's project succeeds on her own terms.

Discussion interspersed, we'll go til 15.10 with no break (if you need to step out just do so).

### **Questions**

- i) Can you think of words or concepts that have recently been improved/introduced/removed?
- ii) Do you think conceptual engineering ('analytical project') is a good idea?
- iii) Do you think it's possible?
- iv) If you study something other than philosophy, do you think it is relevant to your discipline?
- v) Do you think concepts and words have aims or goals other than to accurately represent the word?
- vi) Do you think Haslanger's definitions are good given her aims? Can they be improved? Can you think of people it excludes?
- vii) My big question: is there really a difference between revision and description? Does Haslanger not tell us how the social world is—it's a place in which gendered properties are connected with socially subordinating or privileged

properties via sex properties. If Haslanger is right about that, then hasn't 'woman' always in fact meant what she says it means, the way 'gravity' always meant space-time curvature even before Einstein came along?

- viii) "The project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women"—agree or disagree?
- ix) Do you have questions? You should—though a classic, it's a tricky paper!

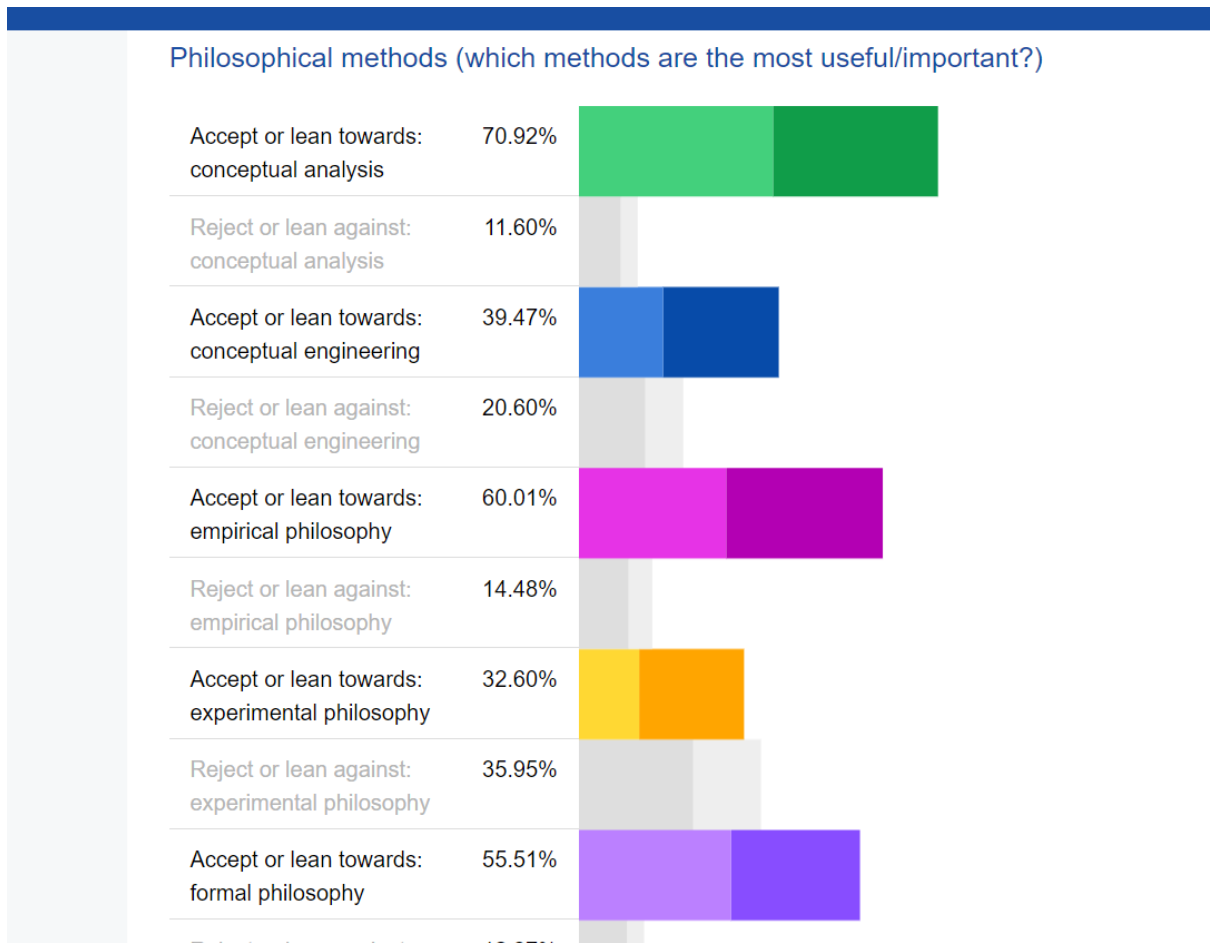
## A Nice Quote from Haslanger

Having proposed an analysis of gender and race concepts, Haslanger concludes

"I'm less committed to saying that this [the theory we'll discuss] is what gender is and what race is, than to saying that these are important categories that a **feminist antiracist theory** needs. As I've explained above, I think there are **rhetorical advantages** to using the terms 'gender', 'man' and 'woman,' and 'race' for the concepts I've defined, but if someone else is determined to have those terms, I'll use different ones. To return to the point made much earlier in characterizing analytic projects: it is our **responsibility to define gender and race for our theoretical purposes**. The world itself can't tell us what gender is. The same is true for race. It may be as Appiah claims that "there is nothing in the world that can do all we ask race to do for us" (Appiah 1992, 45), if our project inevitably inherits the concept's complex history; but we might instead ask "race" to do different things than have been asked before. Of course, in defining our terms, we must keep clearly in mind our political aims both in analyzing the past and present, and in envisioning alternative futures. But rather than worrying, "what is gender, really?" or "what is race, really?" I think we should begin by asking (**both in the theoretical and political sense**) what, if anything, we want them to be"

This is perhaps the seminal description of the conceptual engineering project (called by Haslanger 'analytic'; elsewhere 'ameliorative'). We'll be concerned with understanding it, explaining it, assessing it.

## Conceptual Engineering: The Very Idea



Two observations:

**Philosophy observation.** Philosophy has been concerned with saying how reality is. Plato asked the ti esti question: what is it? He asked what is justice, knowledge, love? Moral philosophers have always asked what is good; epistemologists and metaphysicians how reality is and how it relates to our thought.

**Life observation.** We understand the world by means of ways of thinking and speaking--concepts and words. We know the ways of thinking and speaking of our ancestors were wrong. They lacked, for example, 'germs', 'genes', 'depression', 'sexual harassment' ('trigger warnings'? 'gaslighting'?, 'emotional labour'?) We should assume we do too.

And one proposal

**Proposal.** Ways of thinking and speaking can be better or worse considered *separately from whether they are accurate or not.*

Conceptual engineering ties up the observations and the proposals. What if we tried to understand the world better by replacing our concepts? And what if we tried to replace our concepts with ones that were morally or politically better, as opposed to more accurate?

## Conceptual Engineering Is Not One Thing

Everything above is controversial! Some people think philosophy observation is only an approximation:

Cappelen against **philosophy observation**:

"I wish someone would write a history of philosophy as in large part a battle between descriptivists and revisionists. The distinction will not be simple or clear cut and the battle lines have been drawn in different ways in different time periods. But in each time period and in all parts of philosophy, we find these two fundamentally conflicting attitudes. For some, success is measured by a true description of, for example, what knowledge, belief, morality, representation, justice, or beauty is. For others, the aim is figuring out how we improve on what there is: how can we improve on knowledge, justice, belief, beauty, etc.?"

Illustrative example: formal language philosophy (Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, to Austin, Montague, the formal semanticists)

Against life observation...can we think of a response?

Against **proposal**. Can words be better or worse separate from their epistemic function? 'otorhinolaryngologists' is worse than 'head and neck surgeon'. 'Tax relief' is maybe worse than 'tax cut', 'extraordinary rendition' is worse than 'illegal abduction'. Maybe MRT voice 'dear safe elevator user' is better than 'dear elevator user'? Other examples?

Not all conceptual engineers care about proposal. Clark and Chalmers 1998 on extended mind; Scharp on truth.

Not all conceptual engineers think there are both words and concepts. Not everyone thinks they both have non-epistemic value. (Cappelen on function, maybe)

Nobody really agrees on what it all means. If we should carry out conceptual engineering, can we? ('The implementation problem')

Nobody agrees on how much we can change a concept while talking about the same thing ('Strawson's objection).

Very good questions to think about!

## Race and Gender and Haslanger

You saw last week various options for theories of race and gender. Realism, constructivism, anti-realism. They fit with **philosophy observation** (right?) Can we do conceptual engineering about race and gender?

Three different projects:

It is useful to begin by reflecting on the questions: "What is gender?", "What is race?" and related questions such as: "What is it to be a man or a woman?", "What is it to be White? Latino? or Asian?" There are several different ways to understand, and so respond to, questions of the form, "What is X?" or "What is it to be an X?" For example, the question "What is knowledge?" might be construed in several ways. One might be asking: What *is our concept* of knowledge? (looking to apriori methods for an answer). On a more naturalistic reading one might be asking: What (*natural*) *kind* (if any) does our epistemic vocabulary track? Or one might be undertaking a more revisionary project: What is the *point* of having a concept of knowledge? What concept (if any) would do that *work best*? These different sorts of projects cannot be kept entirely distinct, but draw upon different methodological strategies.

Some important terminology (analytical==conceptual engineering-y):

we can distinguish, then, three projects with importantly different priorities: **conceptual, descriptive, and analytical**....A conceptual inquiry into race or gender would seek an articulation of our concepts of race or gender (Riley 1988). To answer the conceptual question, one way to proceed would be to use the method of **reflective equilibrium**...a **descriptive project** is not concerned with exploring the nuances of our concepts (or anyone else's for that matter); it focuses instead on their extension..... Just as natural science can enrich our "folk" conceptualization of natural phenomena, social sciences (as well as the arts and humanities) can enrich our "folk" conceptualization of social phenomena. So, a descriptive inquiry into race and gender need not presuppose that race and gender are biological kinds; instead it might ask whether our uses of race and gender vocabularies are tracking social kinds, and if so which ones

The third sort of project takes an **analytical approach** to the question, "What is gender?" or "What is race?" (Scott 1986). On this approach the task *is not to*

*explicate our ordinary concepts*; nor is it to investigate the kind that we may or may not be tracking with our everyday conceptual apparatus; ***instead we begin by considering more fully the pragmatics of our talk employing the terms in question. What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better?*** In the limit case of an analytical approach the concept in question is introduced by stipulating the meaning of a new term, and its content is determined entirely by the role it plays in the theory. But if we allow that our everyday vocabularies serve both cognitive and practical purposes, purposes that might also be served by our theorizing, then a theory offering an improved understanding of our (legitimate) purposes and/or improved conceptual resources for the tasks at hand might reasonably represent itself as providing a (possibly revisionary) account of the everyday concepts

The big question: what are these points, purposes, cognitive or practical tasks that concepts carry out that can't be captured by the fact that they stand for a thing in the world?

neither ordinary usage nor empirical investigation is overriding, for there is a stipulative element to the project: *this* is the phenomenon we need to be thinking about. Let the term in question refer to it. On this approach, the world by itself can't tell us what gender is, or what race is; it is up to us to decide what in the world, if anything, they are.

Are these two paragraphs consistent? Is looking into the pragmatics or point of a concept in the same ballpark as deciding what phenomenon we need to be thinking about?

the goal of the project is to consider what work the concepts of gender and race might do for us in a critical--specifically feminist and antiracist--social theory, and to suggest concepts that can accomplish at least important elements of that work.

The broad project is guided by four concerns: (i) The need to identify and explain persistent inequalities between females and males, and between people of different "colors"; this includes the concern to identify how social forces, often under the guise of biological forces, work to perpetuate such inequalities. (ii) The need for a framework that will be sensitive to both the similarities and differences among males and females, and the similarities and differences among individuals in groups demarcated by "color"; this includes the concern to identify the effects of interlocking oppressions, e.g., the intersectionality of race, class, and gender. (Crenshaw 1993.)

## What Is Gender?

### Gender (and sex):

The guiding idea is sometimes expressed with the slogan: "gender is the social meaning of sex". But like any slogan, this one allows for different interpretations. Some theorists use the term 'gender' to refer to the subjective experience of sexed embodiment, or a broad psychological orientation to the world ("gender identity"<sup>8</sup>); others to a set of attributes or ideals that function as norms for males and females ("masculinity" and "femininity"); others to a system of sexual symbolism; and still others to the traditional social roles of men and women.

Among feminist theorists there are two problems that have generated pessimism about providing any unified account of women; I'll call them the commonality problem and the normativity problem. Very briefly, the commonality problem questions whether there is anything social that females have in common that could count as their "gender". If we consider all females-females of different times, places, and cultures-there are reasons to doubt that there is anything beyond body type (if even that) that they all share (Spelman 1988). The normativity problem raises the concern that any definition of "what woman is" is value-laden, and will marginalize certain females, privilege others, and reinforce current gender norm

### The basic idea:

Working at the most general level, then, the materialist strategy offers us three basic principles to guide us in understanding gender: (i) Gender categories **are** defined in terms of how one is **socially positioned**, where this is a function of, e.g., how one is viewed, how one is treated, and how one's life is structured socially, legally, and economically; gender is not defined in terms of an individual's intrinsic physical or psychological features. (This allows that there may be other categories-such as sex-that are defined in terms of intrinsic physical features. Note, however, that once we focus our attention on gender as social position, we must allow that one can be a woman without ever (in the ordinary sense) "acting like a woman", "feeling like a woman", or even having a female body.) (ii) Gender categories are defined **hierarchically** within a broader complex of oppressive relations; one group (viz., women) is socially positioned as subordinate to the other (viz., men), typically within the context of other forms of economic and social oppression. (iii) **Sexual difference functions as the physical marker** to distinguish the two groups, and is used in the justification of viewing and treating the members of each group differently.

## Finally, The Definitions

And so:

S is a woman iff S is systematically subordinated along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a female's biological role in reproduction. S is a man iff S is systematically privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and S is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of a male's biological role in reproduction

A group is racialized iff its members are socially positioned as subordinate or privileged along some dimension (economic, political, legal, social, etc.), and the group is "marked" as a target for this treatment by observed or imagined bodily features presumed to be evidence of ancestral links to a certain geographical region

## Normativity and Commonality

On my analysis women are those who occupy a particular kind of social position, viz., one of sexually-marked subordinate. So women have in common that their (assumed) sex has socially disadvantaged them... One might complain, however, that there must be some women (or rather, females) who aren't oppressed, and in particular, aren't oppressed as women. Perhaps there are; e.g., some may "pass" as men, others may be recognizably female but not be subordinated in any way linked to that recognition. I'm not convinced that there are many cases (if any) of the latter, but I'll certainly grant that there could be females who did not satisfy the definition that I've offered. In fact, ***I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women (though, of course, we should not aim to do away with females!)***. I'm happy to admit that there could be females who aren't women in the sense I've defined, but these individuals (or possible individuals) are not counterexamples to the analysis. The analysis is intended to capture a meaningful political category for critical feminist efforts, and non-oppressed females do not fall within that category.

More:

On the account I've offered, it is true that certain females don't count as "real" women; and it is true that I've privileged certain facts of women's lives as defin-



itive. But given the epistemological framework outlined above, it is both inevitable and important for us to choose what facts are significant on the basis of explicit and considered values. For the purposes of a critical feminist inquiry, oppression is a significant fact around which we should organize our theoretical categories; it may be that non-oppressed females are marginalized within my account, but that is because for the broader purposes at hand—relative to the feminist and antiracist values guiding our project—they are not the ones who matter. The important issue is not whether a particular account "marginalizes" some individuals, but whether its doing so is in conflict with the feminist values that motivate the inquiry. And as far as I can tell, not focusing our theoretical efforts on understanding the position of oppressed females would pose just such a conflict.

For example, isn't there something disingenuous about appropriating race and gender terminology because it is used to frame how we think of ourselves and each other, in order to use them for new concepts that are not part of our self-understandings? ... Thus there is an invitation not only to revise one's understanding of these categories (given their instability, this happens often enough), but to revise one's relationship to their prescriptive force. By offering these analyses of our ordinary terms, I call upon us to reject what seemed to be positive social identities. I'm suggesting that we should work to undermine those forces that make being a man, a woman, or a member of a racialized group possible; we should refuse to be gendered man or woman, refuse to be raced.... In one sense this appropriation is "just semantics": I'm asking us to use an old term in a new way. But it is also politics: I'm asking us to understand ourselves and those around us as deeply molded by injustice and to draw the appropriate prescriptive inference. This, I hope, will contribute to empowering critical social agents