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]

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[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

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[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?

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[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.

## REFERENCES

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