

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 defended 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 Torrenco), 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 Torrenco, 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.