LSU PHIL 4941 / Spring 2016 / John Protevi

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Sally Haslanger, "What are we talking about? The semantics and politics of social kinds"
http://www.mit.edu/~shaslang/papers/HaslangerWWTA.pdf

ABSTRACT

Theorists "analyzing" the concepts of race and gender disagree over whether the terms refer to natural kinds, social kinds, or nothing at all. The question arises what we mean by the terms, and it is usually assumed that ordinary intuitions of native speakers are definitive. I argue that contemporary semantic externalism can usefully combine with insights from Foucauldian genealogy to challenge mainstream methods of analysis and lend credibility to social constructionist projects.

INTRODUCTION

NATURAL KINDS: a grouping of things that reflects real structures of nature rather than human interests (e.g., chemical elements and compounds: hydrogen, oxygen, and H2O).

BIOLOGICAL ESSENTIALISM w/r/t race and gender: there is a set of characteristics, defined in biological discourse, forming necessary and sufficient conditions for inclusion in race or gender categories. In other words, biological essentialism is the idea that the groupings of race and gender are natural kinds revealed to us by the science of biology.

SEMANTIC EXTERNALISM: this is the Putnam / Burge thesis we have talked about before. "Meanings ain't just in the heads." More technically, environment can determine reference w/o affecting sense: Oscar and Twin Oscar both have the sense "water" (they have identical brain states), but Oscar's term "water" refers to H2O and Twin Oscar's use of the same term refers to "XYZ."

FOUCAULDIAN GENEALOGY:

1) Functional approach, stressing historical change. Following Nietzsche, the idea that the origin of a practice need not determine its current meaning or function. For example, "enclosure in a cell" might have originated in monasteries for monks to meditate, migrated to jails for protection of prisoners prior to trial and punishment, and now be used in prisons as itself a form of punishment. Thus genealogy is anti-essentialist: the contemporary use of cellular enclosure as punishment does not go against the essence (the proper use) of cells, even though it differs from the original use / meaning / function. (Note that there is a reading of Nietzsche whereby he claims that some uses of a thing are closer to the most powerful effects of which it is capable: in those cases we are getting closer to a thing's "essence.")
2) Semantic "analysis" approach, stressing local differences. SH uses "genealogy" as a method to find the meaning of a concept by tracing the "broad matrix of practices, procedures, rules, rationales …" within which a concept is embedded. To use her example, to find out what "tardy" really means – or what "tardiness" really is – you look at the difference between the principal's office / institutional definition and how and who gets marked as late in the classroom.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM: SH puts it like this: "races and genders are real categories to be defined in

terms of social positions." Racial and gender categories have real life effects even though they are constructed differently in different societies (hence you need a genealogy to track the twists and turns).

POLITICAL PRAGMATISM: SH's constructionism is NOT offered as an analysis of the meaning of "white" or "woman" (or …) BUT because its results will give us practically / politically useful tools in a justice struggle.

ELIMINATIVISM: the idea that race and gender categories do not have real referents. An analogy is this: the European 17th century had a concept it thought was a natural kind (it was part of its ontology): "witches". But looking back on it now from the perspective of modern chemistry, we see it wasn't a natural kind at all, but a social fiction – it was a concept created by humans that served certain functions in a social practice we now call "primitive accumulation," but its referent does not exist for us now, though we maintain the name and the sense of the concept because it helps us make sense of the history of the time.

> I use the term "primitive accumulation" here to allude to Silvia Federici's account in her *Caliban and the Witch* in which witch-hunting, torture, and killing were part of the process of seizing control of social reproduction in the transition to capitalism by destroying access of women to contraception and abortion, which had been a sort of "commons," but now becomes a commodity, accessible, if at all, only via "official" means.

Similarly, at some point in the future "white" and "woman" (to use SH's examples) will be seen to have been social constructs serving a function in a social practice but whose referents no longer exist as they are no longer objects in the ontology of that future practice, even though the names and senses of those concepts will be retained in order to understand the past social practice in which they functioned under the guise of natural kinds.

EXPANDING PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS TO INCLUDE AN ACCOUNT OF IDEOLOGY: In this paper SH will be nuancing the account given above.

> "The broad goal of this paper is to question what's at issue in doing philosophical analysis of a concept…. When thinking about socially and politically meaningful concepts, we must also be attentive to the possibility that what's in our heads may not only be incomplete, but may be actively masking what's semantically going on. Part of the job of ideology may be (somewhat paradoxically) to mislead us about the content of our own thoughts."

> Ideology is systematically skewed thought serving to help reproduce, outside sheer coercion, unjust social practices whose effects are contrary to what might otherwise be seen as the interests of some or all of the participants of the practice.

<div align="center">GENEALOGY</div>

A. Tardiness
   a. Three traditional forms of "conceptual analysis" (answering 'What is X?' questions)
      i. Conceptual:
         1. A priori analysis of "our" meaning (community of native speakers);
         2. Uses introspection;
         3. Intuitions of cases and principles ending with reflective equilibrium
      ii. Descriptive
         1. What kinds do our terms track?
         2. Empirical investigation of the phenomena
         3. Naturalizing:
            a. Identifying paradigm cases as the referent

b.   Explicate the kind to which the paradigm case belongs
          iii.   Ameliorative
                 1.   What is the point of having this concept?
                 2.   Can we improve it so that it serves its purpose better?
    b.   Genealogy as another form of conceptual analysis
          i.   Explore history of a concept, not to find its true meaning in its origin, but to see its
               embedding in evolving social practices
          ii.   Two implications:
                 1.   Concepts and practices are intertwined
                      a.   Concepts don't just describe, but also "help structure" practices
                      b.   Practices affect concepts
                 2.   A gap to be explored
                      a.   Between the official or institutional understanding of a practice
                      b.   And the actual workings of the practice on the ground
          iii.   Example of "tardy" contrasting front office understanding and classroom activities
                 1.   Definition of the term
                      a.   You could say the front office has the *real* definition
                      b.   But what about the "more implicit meaning" at work in classrooms?
                 2.   Genealogy:
                      a.   Social / historical circumstances for both front office and classroom
                      b.   To highlight the different roles *tardy* place in each
                 3.   Various axes of comparison:
                      a.   Institutional vs local
                      b.   Public vs individual
                      c.   Explicit vs implicit
                      d.   Thought vs practice
                      e.   Appropriate vs inappropriate
          iv.   Target of analysis for race and gender concepts
                 1.   Not what we have in mind in using them
                 2.   But SOCIAL MATRIX where they do their work: that's what X really is
          v.   Normativity:
                 1.   SH questions whether genealogy has – or is usually done with (we can do a
                      genealogy of the practice of doing genealogies) a normative aspect: should we
                      have a concept / practice of "tardy" in schools? What functions does it provide,
                      and do we want to have them?
                 2.   Foucault tends to see genealogy as a neutral tool that might serve the normative
                      reforms a group of people might want to pursue: you can do a genealogy to find
                      the weak points in a practice / the turning points in its history, but what uses you
                      put that knowledge to is something he doesn't want to prescribe to others.
                 3.   For SH:
                      a.   Genealogy w/o normativity shirks its responsibilities
                      b.   Normative analysis w/o genealogy is out of touch with reality
B.   Forms of Genealogy
    a.   We can modify each of the traditional forms of conceptual analysis w/ genealogical twist
          i.   Conceptual: pay attention to the situations of the speakers you ask about the concept
          ii.   Ameliorative: you have to look to its multiple uses to find out why we have a concept
          iii.   Descriptive: what are the social kinds or types to which concepts refer?
                 1.   You may need sophisticated social theory here
                 2.   Because the kinds at work might not appear in untutored intuitions
C.   Semantic Externalism
    a.   Content of thoughts / meanings partially determined by environment
    b.   Initial forms:

   i. Natural kind externalism:
     1. Natural kind terms pick out a natural kind even if we can't state the essence
     2. Because meaning is determined here by
       a. Ostension of a paradigm (pointing to a prime case)
       b. Extension to other instances of the kind
   ii. Social externalism
     1. Meanings determined in part standard usage in a community
 c. Expanding externalism strategy to "relatively objective types"
   i. Defined by degree of unity of a set beyond a random or gerrymandered set
   ii. SH suggests degree of similarity as criterion for construction of an objective type
     1. Not just intrinsic similarity of set members to themselves
     2. But also relative to us
   iii. *Objective type externalism*:
     1. No need to state conditions of membership
     2. Meanings are determined by ostension and extension
 d. Connection of externalism and genealogy
   i. Conceptual genealogies
     1. Explicate *manifest* concepts
     2. As they vary over time and by social position
   ii. Descriptive genealogies
     1. Explicate implicit concepts via an externalist strategy for content
     2. That is, they determine the objective types into which paradigms fall
     3. Hence they disclose the structuring power of concepts as they are used
 e. Dissociation of manifest and operative concepts
   i. That is, when what we think we're talking about is not what our concepts actually do
   ii. These cases can be targets of genealogies
     1. For instance, you might think prison is for rehab when it's really for retribution
     2. That is, the content of your belief (the referent for "the purpose of prison") might be determined by external circumstance of which you are unaware

DESCRIPTIVE GENEALOGIES OF RACE AND GENDER

A. Recap of conceptual analysis methods and their genealogical twists
 a. Conceptual
   i. Analysis: elucidate *manifest* concepts: what speakers think about the terms they use
   ii. Genealogy: pay attention to the historical and social situation of speakers
 b. Descriptive
   i. Analysis: elucidate *operative* concepts by showing empirical kinds for paradigms
   ii. Genealogy: find the social matrix w/in which we use concepts to pick out things
 c. Ameliorative
   i. Analysis: elucidate *target* concepts: why do have them, how to improve them?
   ii. Genealogy: needs a normative aspect here
B. Social constructivists:
 a. Focus on cases where manifest, operative, and target concepts come apart
 b. Critique of false naturalization: content doesn't match introspection
   i. We think our concepts pick out natural kinds
   ii. But they really pick out social kinds
C. Diversity of approaches illustrated in race theory
 a. Conceptual analysis: how do we ordinarily understand race?
 b. Descriptive analysis: to what natural or social kinds do race terms refer (or not refer)?
 c. Ameliorative analysis: how should we (normatively) understand race?
 d. Genealogy: how did our race terms come to be what they are?

D. SH proposes we work towards a social situation in which there is a coincidence of manifest, operative, and target concepts of race
   a. We know that what we think we're talking about (manifest)
   b. Is what is really doing the work in structuring practices
   c. And is the result of normative work so that it's doing what we want it to do
E. However, right now we can see gaps between manifest and operative concepts
   a. Two approaches
      i. Strict standards (conceptual):
         1. Official (manifest) rule is reality because it's what is clearly stated and intended
         2. And local practices (operative) are mistakes
      ii. Priority of practice (descriptive / genealogical / constructivist):
         1. The local practices (operative) is where the action is (it's the paradigm)
         2. The official (manifest) is an illusion if thought to be really at work
         3. This is constructivist in the sense that the social kind of the actual local practices is what determines the referent of the term "I-grade"
      iii. Ameliorative: what should the practice be? This is normative / political.

CONCLUSION

A. Genealogy is externalist bcs it doesn't aim at what's in our heads but at the social matrix w/in which concepts are embedded and that thus determine the paradigm cases of socially constructed kinds which determine content of belief, that is the referent of our terms, "what we're really talking about" as opposed to the natural kinds that are the mistaken manifest concept, "what we think we're talking about."
B. Normativity comes in as we struggle against the unjust practices structured by falsely naturalized concepts of race and gender.
C. Hence philosophical analysis can unmask ideology's pernicious roles in practices rather than just explaining how it works.