NO EPISTEMIC TROUBLE FOR ENGINEERING 'WOMAN:' RESPONSE TO SIMION

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ABSTRACT: In a recent article in this journal, Mona Simion argues that Sally Haslanger's "engineering" approach to gender concepts such as 'woman' faces an epistemic objection. The primary function of all concepts—gender concepts included—is to represent the world, but Haslanger's engineering account of 'woman' fails to adequately represent the world because, by her own admission, it doesn't include all women in the extension of the concept 'woman.' I argue that this objection fails because the primary function of gender concepts—and social kind concepts in general—is not (merely) to represent the world, but rather to shape it. I finish by considering the consequences for "conceptual engineering" in philosophy more generally. While Haslanger's account may escape Simion's objection, other appeals to conceptual engineering might not fair so well.

KEYWORDS: Sally Haslanger, Mona Simion, gender, social construction, conceptual engineering

Sally Haslanger defends an "engineering" approach to philosophical analysis, with a special focus on race and gender concepts.[1] Her basic thought is that a philosophical analysis of race and gender concepts should focus on what functions these concepts serve: what do they do for us? Her answer, put broadly, is that they serve to *reinforce social hierarchies*. Haslanger offers this account of race and gender concepts in the service of the explicitly political project of dismantling these hierarchies. Her thought is that recognising the role played by race and gender concepts is an important part of this project.

In a recent article in this journal,[2] Mona Simion argues that Haslanger's engineering project faces a serious objection. The primary function of all concepts—gender concepts included—is to represent the world. Just as the

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[1] See several of the essays in Sally Haslanger, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

[2] Mona Simion, "Epistemic Trouble for Engineering 'Woman,'" *Logos & Episteme* 9, 1 (2018): 91–98.

primary function of the concept 'chair' is to pick out chairs, the primary function of the concept 'woman' is to pick out women. Because Haslanger's analysis of the concept 'woman' does not—by her own admission—pick out all and only women, it must be rejected. In this note I argue that Simion's objection fails because some concepts—what we can call *social kind concepts*—have the primary function of *shaping* the world. If—as Haslanger thinks—gender (and race) concepts are social kind concepts, then they serve to shape the world, not (merely) to represent it. I finish by commenting on the consequences for Haslanger's project, and the consequences for "conceptual engineering" in philosophy more generally.

Haslanger on Gender Concepts

I will start with an overview of Haslanger's account of gender concepts. This overview will combine two elements. The first is her social constructivist account of gender categories. The second is her engineering approach to analysing gender concepts. As we will see, understanding how these two elements interact is crucial to understanding where Simion's objection goes wrong.

Haslanger thinks that gender categories are socially constructed. But this claim is ambiguous in several ways. For our purposes, the crucial distinction is between what Haslanger calls *causal* and *constitutive* social construction:

> X is socially constructed causally as an F iff social factors (i.e., X's participation in a social matrix) play a significant role in causing X to have those features by virtue of which it counts as an F.

> X is socially constructed constitutively as an F iff X is of a kind or sort F such that in defining what it is to be F we must make reference to social factors (or, such that in order for X to be F, X must exist within a social matrix that constitutes Fs).[3]

Some writers on social construction[4] focus on the first claim, and hold that gender categories are socially constructed only in the sense that there are broadly social explanations why individuals come to have the traits associated with the gender category they fall under. Haslanger doesn't deny that there may be social explanations why individuals come to have gendered traits. For instance, it may be that there is a (broadly) social explanation why women are, on average, less strong

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[3] Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 131.

[4] For instance, Ian Hacking, *The Social Construction of What?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999).

than men. But she thinks that authors like Hacking are mistaken in holding that gender categories are socially constructed in merely the causal sense:

> I am a White woman. What does this mean? What makes this claim apt? … In effect, the [constitutive] constructionist proposes a different and (at least in some contexts) surprising set of truth conditions for the claim, truth conditions that crucially involve social factors. On this construal, the important social constructionist import in Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born but rather becomes a woman," is not *pace* Hacking … that one is caused to be feminine by social forces; rather, the important insight was that being a woman is not an anatomical matter but a social matter.[5]

Haslanger's claim is that gender categories—e.g. the category 'woman'—can only be defined by reference to networks of social relations. Thus, Haslanger thinks that in defining what it is to belong to a gender category—e.g. to be a woman—we must make reference to social factors.

While this settles the "ontological status" of gender categories—they are (constitutive) social constructs—it doesn't, by itself, supply a definition of them. It is here that Haslanger applies her engineering approach to philosophical analysis. Her task is not to find a definition of 'woman' that is extensionally adequate, but to "engineer" a definition that will best serve our purposes:

> [W]e 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?[6]

What are these purposes? Broadly speaking, Haslanger holds that gender concepts serve to reinforce existing social hierarchies, and our purposes are best served by shining a light on the fact that this is their function. This leads to her definition of 'woman:'

> S is a woman iff$_{df}$ 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.[7]

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[5] Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 132.
[6] Haslanger, 223–224.
[7] Haslanger, 230.

It is clear that not all women are going to fit this definition. But, given Haslanger's purposes, this is beside the point. As she puts it:

> The analysis is intended to capture a meaningful political category for critical feminist efforts, and non-oppressed females do not fall within that category (though they may be interesting for other reasons).[8]

So, in Haslanger's view, we want to pick out meaningful political categories, and to do so we need to sacrifice extensional adequacy.

No Epistemic Trouble

I will now turn to Simion's argument against Haslanger's analysis of 'woman.' Haslanger's analysis relies on claims about the function of 'woman,' and of gender concepts more generally. Simion's objection is based on some observations about functional items more generally. I will outline the objection, before turning to where I think it goes wrong.

We can start with Simion's observations about functional items.[9] First, when a functional item fails to serve its primary function (or serves its primary function, but in an abnormal way) we say that the item is *malfunctioning*. Take a knife. The primary function of a knife is to cut things, so when a knife fails to cut—e.g. when it is blunt—we say that it is malfunctioning. Note that this "malfunctioning talk" is *value-laden*. A malfunctioning knife is a bad knife *qua* knife (though it may be good in other respects e.g. as a tool for crushing garlic).

Second, functional items can serve multiple functions. Take, again, a knife. Knives serve other functions besides cutting. Some knives are aesthetically pleasing, so serve the function of being nice to look at. Note that, when a functional item fails to perform its primary function but still serves some of these additional functions, we still say it is malfunctioning. A blunt knife may still be nice to look at, but it is a malfunctioning knife all the same.

Applying this to concepts, Simion holds that concepts are "representational devices." That is, their primary function is to refer to whatever it is they are meant to refer to. So the primary function of the concept 'chair' is to pick out chairs, and the primary function of the concept 'woman' is to pick out women. Of course, it may be that some concepts serve other, non-representational functions. Some concepts may serve social and political functions. But when they fail to serve their

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[8] Haslanger, 239.

[9] Simion, "Epistemic Trouble," 93–96.

primary function of representing the world (or serve this function, but in an abnormal way), we would say that they are malfunctioning, even if they are still serving these other functions. Malfunctioning concepts are bad concepts *qua* concepts (though they may be good in other respects).

These observations lead to Simion's objection to Haslanger:

> [W]hatever other functions the concept of 'woman' might serve – epistemic, moral, social, political etc. –, its main function, like with any representational device is to represent the world. The main function of 'woman' is to pick out women.

In line with all functional items, a concept of 'woman' that fails to fulfill its main, epistemic representational function reliably is malfunctioning. Furthermore, in virtue of being malfunctioning, it is not a good concept qua concept – i.e., a good token of its type. If Haslanger's 'woman' fails to be a good concept qua concept, plausibly, it will not be a better concept than its predecessor. If so, Haslanger's project will fail to qualify as an ameliorative project: it will not have engineered better ways for us to think about the world.[10]

But, as we have seen, Haslanger's analysis of 'woman' is clearly not extensionally adequate. It does not pick out all and only women. So Haslanger's proposal that we should adopt her analysis as our concept of 'woman' must be rejected. Her proposed concept is not a good concept *qua* concept. Simion concludes that Haslanger's engineering project must fail. Indeed, as an explicitly revisionary project, it was doomed to fail. Any revisionary project is going to sacrifice representational accuracy, and so is going to deliver us a concept that is bad *qua* concept.[11]

So much for the objection. I will now turn to why I think it fails. Simion tells us that concepts have the primary function of representing the world because

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[10] Simion, 97.

[11] Simion also suggests that, if it is bad *qua* concept, it will not serve the desired political purposes. She says that "the only reason why the concept of 'woman' has any political significance, to begin with, is because it picks out women reliably. Were it to fail to do so, it would likely also fail to have much in the way of political impact" (Simion, 97). But it isn't obvious that a concept can have political significance only if it reliably picks out what it is meant to pick out. Some politically significant concepts might fail to pick out anything at all because they lack a stable meaning (e.g. 'fake news,' 'post-truth/factual politics'). More generally, I don't think the political significance of a concept need have much to do with what it refers to (consider concepts like 'socialism,' which—at least in the US—seem to have a significance entirely disconnected from what they refer to).

"our concepts are mainly there to help us come [to] know the world around us."[12] While this may be true for *some* concepts, I don't think it is true for *all* concepts. Consider *social kind* concepts like 'husband' and 'wife.'[13] These concepts refer to social roles that are in part created and maintained by our practices involving them. If we decided to apply these terms in different ways, then—perhaps over a long period of time—the social roles themselves might change. (This has, of course, happened with some social kind concepts). So we can say that social kind concepts serve to *shape* the social world. We have these concepts because they play a role in helping us organise the social world. Of course, this is entirely consistent with thinking that social kind concepts *also* serve to represent the world. The point is just that they don't serve to shape the world *in virtue of* serving to represent the world.

On Haslanger's view, gender concepts like 'woman' are social kind concepts.[14] As she puts it:

> [G]ender is not a classification scheme based simply on anatomical or biological differences, but should be understood as a system of social categories that can only be defined by reference to a network of social relations.[15]

The concept 'woman' refers to social structures that are in part (although only in part) created and maintained by our practices involving the concept. If we decided to apply the term 'woman' in different ways then—perhaps over a long period of time—these social structures themselves might change. If Haslanger's analysis of gender concepts plays the political role she wants it to, then it will be part of (though only a part of) a social change by which the systems of oppression relative to which 'woman' is defined will be dismantled. Note that this is not to say that this change *will* occur, or that it *could* occur in a short time-frame. The point is just that it might. Note also that, as with social kind concepts more generally, this is all entirely consistent with thinking that the concept 'woman' also serves to represent the world. The point, again, is just that it doesn't serve to shape the world in virtue of serving to represent the world.

If this is right, then Simion's objection fails. 'Woman'—like social kind concepts more generally—has the primary function of shaping the social world. Haslanger's proposed analysis of 'woman' would malfunction if there were a

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[12] Simion, 93.

[13] Cf. Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 131.

[14] You might deny this, but then the objection would be very different to Simion's.

[15] Haslanger, *Resisting Reality*, 130.

problem with the *way* in which it shaped (or had the potential to shape) the social world (see below). But it doesn't malfunction simply because it isn't extensionally adequate. I therefore conclude that there is no "epistemic" trouble for Haslanger's engineering account of 'woman.'

Broader Context

I want to finish by drawing out two consequences from my discussion. The first has to do with the debate over Haslanger's account of race and gender concepts. The second has to do with conceptual engineering projects in philosophy more generally.

First, I have argued that Simion's attempt to show that there is *epistemic* trouble for Haslanger's engineering of 'woman' fails. A social kind concept may fall short with respect to representational accuracy, yet still shape (or have the potential to shape) the world in ways that we regard as good or desirable. Any representational failing need not invalidate the (potential for) political success. However, this is not to say that Haslanger's definition of 'woman' would shape the world in ways that we regard as good. Indeed, there are excellent reasons for thinking that it won't. In a recent paper,[16] Katharine Jenkins argues that Haslanger's definition is problematic on the grounds that it marginalises trans women. But Jenkins' point is not that Haslanger's definition is extensionally inadequate. Her point is rather that the *way* in which it is extensionally inadequate perpetuates injustices. Haslanger's definition is therefore to be rejected on feminist grounds. This might suggest something very interesting: perhaps feminist political goals will be best served by analyses of gender concepts that are extensionally adequate. But the crucial point for our purposes is that the value of extensionally adequacy is secured via its consonance with feminist political goals.

Second, while I have argued that Simion fails to show that there is epistemic trouble for Haslanger's engineering of 'woman,' Simion's argument would certainly show that there is epistemic trouble for engineering approaches that don't target social kind concepts. While social kind concepts may have the primary function of shaping the world, it is not plausible that *all* concepts have the primary function of shaping the world. Some concepts merely serve to represent it. This point is important because in the recent literature on "conceptual engineering" some

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[16] Katharine Jenkins, "Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman," *Ethics* 126, 2 (2015): 394–421.

authors have defended engineering approaches to a range of concepts including (but not limited to) truth,[17] knowledge,[18] and normative concepts.[19] Absent reason to think these are social kind concepts, these authors face precisely the sort of trouble Simion thinks Haslanger faces. (For my part, I think knowledge *is* a social kind concept, but that just means I get into trouble elsewhere!). So Simion's objection may well work against several authors. It just won't work against Haslanger.

[17] Kevin Scharp, *Replacing Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[18] Davide Fassio and Robin McKenna, "Revisionary Epistemology," *Inquiry* 58, 7–8 (2015): 755–779.

[19] David Plunkett and Timothy Sundell, "Disagreement and the Semantics of Normative and Evaluative Terms," *Philosophers' Imprint* 13 (2013): 1–37.