

# Epistemic Trouble for Engineering ‘Woman’

## Abstract

This paper puts forth a functionalist difficulty for Sally Haslanger’s proposal for engineering our concept of ‘woman.’ It is argued that the project of bringing about better political function fulfillment cannot get off the ground in virtue of epistemic failure.

Keywords: conceptual engineering, epistemic failure, representational function, gender, race.

## 1. Introduction

Say that we wanted better ways of thinking about the world: could we replace our defective representational devices with better ones? Should we? Is this what philosophy is/should be all about? According to optimists about the conceptual engineering project,<sup>1</sup> the answer to all these questions is ‘yes’. We should manufacture better concepts for ourselves: semantically better, epistemically better, and importantly, morally, socially and politically better.

Sally Haslanger is a notable optimist. According to her, we should look into the function of our concepts, and engineer them accordingly, i.e. so that they

---

<sup>1</sup> See, e.g. Cappelen, H. *Fixing Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Sharp, K. *Replacing Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013);

serve the relevant function well/better. According to Haslanger, our concept of ‘woman’ is one such concept, in need of work; the concept in use carries politically problematic connotations: historically, it came to be associated with social and political subordination. Haslanger proposes to engineer ‘woman’ such as to bring these connotations into clear view. The final political goal of this move is the elimination of women: ‘[...] I believe it is part of the project of feminism to bring about a day when there are no more women.’<sup>2</sup>

This paper puts forth a functionalist worry for Haslanger’s project; more precisely, according to the view defended here, due to the epistemic normative specifics of the concept and its use, engineering ‘woman’ for political reasons, to the detriment of epistemic representational considerations, can’t get off the ground.

In order to do this, I will first give a brief overview of Haslanger’s proposal (#2). Second, I will look at the normative limitations of her functionalist conceptual engineering project (#3). Last but not least, I will voice the main worry of this paper and consider and dismiss a possible avenue for rescuing the Haslanger project.

## **2. Engineering ‘Woman’**

Haslanger’s engineering project is a function-first project: the thought is that, instead of trying to analyze our concepts, we, philosophers, should rather ask ourselves: ‘what functions do these concepts fulfill for us?’ and craft better

---

<sup>2</sup> Haslanger, S. “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 46.

concepts accordingly, i.e., remodel our representational devices so as to better fulfill said functions:

[...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?<sup>3</sup>

In the case of gender and race concepts, according to Haslanger, we should be focusing on two important functions of these concepts - one epistemic function, pertaining to fruitfulness in critical feminist/race inquiry, and, relatedly, the political function, concerning social dynamics they serve – and craft more useful concepts, accordingly. That is not to say that the representational function of these concepts is to be disregarded: rather, questions pertaining to their extension will only inform the project rather than act as an overriding consideration:

[C]onsider what work we want these concepts to do for us; why do we need them at all? The responsibility is ours to define them for our purposes. In doing so we will want to be responsive to some aspects of ordinary usage - and to aspects of both the connotation and extension of the terms. However, neither ordinary usage nor empirical investigation is overriding, [...] the world by itself can't tell us what gender is, or what race is; it is up to us to

---

<sup>3</sup> Haslanger, S. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 33.

decide what in the world, if anything, they are.<sup>4</sup>

Haslanger further proposes that we explicitly include the hierarchical social connotations in our gender concepts. Accordingly, on her view, we should revise our concept of woman as follows:

*S is a woman* iff<sub>df</sub> 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.<sup>5</sup>

Bringing the implicit hierarchical connotations carried by gender concepts at center stage is thought to result in both epistemic and political gain. Epistemically, Haslanger argues, feminist critical theory stands to gain from sharply identifying the target of its inquiry: women as subordinate social entities. Politically, the ambition is that, once negative connotations are made explicit, in time, we will 'get rid of women.' "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".<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Haslanger, S. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 33.

<sup>5</sup> Haslanger, S. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 39.

<sup>6</sup> Haslanger, S. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 39.

### 3. Functions, Norms and Goods

This section argue that the representational function of the concept of ‘woman’, in virtue of being its main function, will, contra Haslanger, override considerations pertaining to fruitfulness in feminist inquiry and political benefits. If that is the case, the project will have difficulties getting of the ground.

To see this, note that concepts, much like beliefs, are representational devices, their main function is an epistemic one: the main function of our concept of ‘chair’ is to pick out chairs. Our concepts are mainly there to help us come know the world around us. Compatibly with this, concepts may, and very plausibly often do, serve a variety of different functions, be they non-representational epistemic functions, or functions of more practical sort, such as moral, social or political functions.

Representational devices are hardly isolated among functional items in virtue of their multi-functionality: take the heart. Plausibly, its main function is pumping blood in the circulatory system. It’s a biological function. Compatibly with this, though, the heart also serves an epistemic function of informing us with regard to the general health of the cardio-vascular system. It serves this function in two ways: at a more rudimentary level, it does so by making a ticking sound. At a more scientific level, it does so by drawing EKG charts.

When all goes well, functional traits reliably enough fulfill their main function by functioning normally in normal conditions.<sup>7</sup> When all goes well, your

---

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. Graham, P. J. “Epistemic entitlement,” *Nous*, 46(3) (2012): 449-482; Millikan, R. *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

heart will reliably pump blood in your circulatory system by ticking, in normal conditions (e.g., when in the chest, when connected to the circulatory system etc; in what follows, I will take the ‘normal conditions’ proviso as read). A properly functioning heart will be a heart that’s ticking. Proper functioning for hearts is defined in terms of its main function of pumping blood. Conversely, a heart that fails to function properly will be malfunctioning.

Note, importantly, that your heart will count as malfunctioning even if, while not functioning normally when it comes to fulfilling its main biological function of pumping blood – not ticking - it does, nevertheless, reliably fulfill its secondary, epistemic function: a heart that fails to pump blood but keeps drawing charts on EKGs is still a malfunctioning heart. In fact, we come to know it is malfunctioning by means of the EKG reading.

This is due to the fact that secondary functions normatively ‘ride’ on main functions: functional items have secondary functions in virtue of their main function, as it were. The heart only has the epistemic function it has to begin with – the function of drawing EKG charts – in virtue of having its main biological function of pumping blood.

Consider, also, artifacts: take knives. The main function of knives is to cut. As such, a properly functioning knife is a sharp knife: a knife that, in normal conditions, reliably fulfills its function: it cuts. Compatibly with that, knives can fulfill aesthetic functions, for instance: they can be particularly pretty, displayed in museums etc. Note, though, that a blunt but pretty knife is still a malfunctioning knife, in virtue of failing to reliably enough fulfill its main function when in normal conditions. This is because its secondary, aesthetic function normatively ‘rides’ on its primary function - cutting.

Representational devices follow suit; take beliefs: when properly functioning, beliefs reliably represent the world in normal conditions. Beliefs, of course, can, and plausibly do, have a variety of secondary functions too. One important such function is practical, or biological: helping us survive. Now, these two functions usually work hand in hand: my beliefs about food and predators accurately represent the world, and thereby I stay alive. This need not be the case, though: there are cases where irrational optimism is best for staying alive. In such cases, false beliefs about, for instance, one's state of health, are good for survival: they serve beliefs' biological function well. Nevertheless, practical reasons are not good reasons for belief: wishful thinking is bad believing. In an important sense, if I believe that Berlin is the capital of France because you offered me a large sum of money to do so, my belief forming capacities are not properly functioning. The reason for this, again, is because the secondary, biological function of belief normatively 'rides' on its primary, epistemic function: belief is supposed to insure survival *by* proper representation. In fact, the only reason why wishful thinking 'works' to begin with is because it mimics epistemically proper believing: it 'pretends,' as it were, to tell the truth.

In line with other functional devices, then, in virtue of their main, representational epistemic function, concepts will be properly functioning when responsive to epistemic reasons pertaining to properly representing the world, and malfunctioning when merely responsive to other types – practical, moral, political - reasons. Concepts will function properly when they will reliably pick out what they are meant to pick out in the world. The concept of 'chair' will function well when it will reliably pick out chairs. Conversely, if it fails to do so, no matter what practical, moral, esthetic etc. benefits it brings, the concept 'chair' is malfunctioning.

Also, function talk is value charged: there is a sense in which a malfunctioning functional trait is a bad trait of its kind. To put the distinction that concerns us in value-theoretic terms, there is such a thing as attributive goodness,<sup>8</sup> and then there is such a thing as ‘goodness for.’ A heart is a good heart (attributively, that is, a good token of its type) when it functions properly, i.e. when it pumps blood in your circulatory system by ticking. Compatibly with that, a bad heart (i.e., a bad token of its type) can be good for a variety of things: in the example above, the bad heart is good for epistemic tasks: it draws charts on the EKG, thereby informing your doctor of the state of your health.

Similarly, a good knife is a sharp knife, and a good belief is a true (or knowledgeable) belief; all this, independently of what other secondary functions bad hearts, knives and beliefs might serve. Last but not least, concepts will be good concepts qua concepts when they are representationally, epistemically good. A concept that fails representationally will be a bad concept.

#### **4. The Worry**

To see why all the above constitutes a problem for Haslanger’s project, note that, plausibly enough, not all women fit the proposed definition of the concept ‘woman.’ Not all women, that is, are systematically subordinated along some dimension - economic, political, legal, social, etc. - and 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. Some women are lucky. Also, fortunately, as generations pass, subordination happens less and less at systemic

---

<sup>8</sup> Geach, P. “Good and evil,” *Analysis*, 17 (1956): 33–42.



level. Or, to say the least, claiming that all women fall under this definition would surely be a fairly bold empirical claim to make.

If that is the case, though, it seems to follow that the newly refurbished concept Haslanger proposes will likely fail to serve its representational epistemic function: it will fail to pick out a number of, well, intuitively, women. Lucky women will not be women if this engineering project goes through.

Haslanger is well aware of this worry, and happy to endorse the consequences:

I'm happy to admit that there could be females who aren't women in the sense I've defined, but these 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 - though they may be interesting for other reasons! [...] On the account I've offered, it is true that certain females don't count as 'real' women; choose what facts are significant on the basis of explicit and considered values. [But f]or the purposes of a critical feminist inquiry, oppression is a significant fact around which we should organize our theoretical categories.<sup>9</sup>

The thought, then, is that, even though we lose representationally, we gain in two other, more important ways: first, from an epistemic perspective, the Haslanger 'woman' is more useful for our feminist inquiry. Secondly, politically speaking, by raising awareness, it is more likely to help in bringing about a world

---

<sup>9</sup> Haslanger, S. "Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?" *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 46.

without ‘women’ in the Haslanger sense.

By now, one problem with this view should have become clear: whatever 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.

Furthermore, note that any other functions the concept of ‘woman’ might have normatively ride on its main function: 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. If that is the case, Haslanger is wrong to think that we are free to revise our concept as we please, for political gain: the concept’s political function rides on its epistemic, representational good functioning. Contra Haslanger, questions pertaining to the concept’s extension will not merely inform the engineering project, they need to act as an overriding consideration. If one engineers ‘woman’ for political gain, and thereby the concept loses its representational epistemic function, it also loses its political significance.

One way to protect the Haslanger project from this worry would be to go context-bound: it is not fair play, the defender of the Haslanger view could argue, to ask whether we should take on a new concept, and for what reasons, without

specifying what use-context we're asking about. Take 'chair' again: if the context of interest is related to home furniture, then it might be quite obvious that representational epistemic goals take primacy. If it's policy making, then it might be equally obvious that practical goals take primacy: if we can save a small country by calling tables chairs for the purpose of policy making, we should definitely do so. It need not be that if we change concepts in one context, then we have to change them in all others:

The problem with going contextualist, however, is that it is not clear that the worry does not reappear at the level of a particular context. Think back to the (arguably) parallel case of belief: it might be that, for the purposes of one context or another, it is better to believe what one is prudentially justified to believe. For instance, in the case of patients with very serious conditions, there is empirical research strongly suggesting that wishful thinking can prolong life expectancy. Still, there remains an intuitively important sense in which beliefs formed as a result of wishful thinking are defective beliefs. The functionalist picture serves to explain this. Similarly, it is not clear that using 'chair' to talk about tables will be a proper, non-defective way to refer, rather than a defective but useful way. To see the plausibility of the latter, think of failed attempts at semantic engineering in totalitarian regimes: the people of Turkmenistan might reliably call the forth month of the year by the dictator's mother's name, on pain of imprisonment, in all official contexts. This, however, fails to qualify as successful engineering for the concept of April.

## **5. Conclusion**

I have argued on functionalist grounds that the project of engineering ‘woman’ such as to include a subordinate status in its definition will have difficulties getting of the ground due to epistemic failure. The main function of the concept of ‘woman’ is to pick out women. If it fails to do so, it will also fail to better fulfill its secondary functions, whatever they may be.

## References

- Cappelen, H. *Fixing Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018)
- Geach, P. “Good and evil,” *Analysis*, 17 (1956): 33–42.
- Graham, P. J. “Epistemic entitlement,” *Nous*, 46(3) (2012): 449-482.
- Greenough, P. *Against Conceptual Engineering*, Manuscript (2018).
- Haslanger, S. “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” *Noûs* 34 (1) (2000): 31–55.
- Millikan, R. *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).
- Sharp, K. *Replacing Truth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).
- Simion, M. and Kelp, C. “Conceptual Engineering, Function-First,” Manuscript (2018)
- Simion, M. “The ‘Should’ in Conceptual Engineering,” *Inquiry*, Online First (2017).