Social kinds and conceptual analysis: defending the semantic strategy

Some philosophers have recently argued that traditional conceptual analysis is irrelevant, or at least seriously limited, when it comes to answering the main philosophical questions about the nature of gender and race. For instance, Sally Haslanger (2000, 2005, 2006) has argued, first, that the main question in this debate is not what our ordinary concept *is*, but rather what our ordinary concept *should* be, and second, that even when we are concerned with our current ordinary concept, this is not really constrained by ordinary speakers' intuitions. Similarly, Ron Mallon (2006) has argued that the most significant questions in the debate about race (and presumably, gender) are ethical and political questions regarding whether we should keep or eliminate racial (and gender) terms, not semantic questions of the form "what is the concept of 'race' (or 'gender')?", nor metaphysical questions of the form "what is the nature of race (or gender)?". In response to Mallon, Joshua Glasgow (2009) has argued that these semantic and metaphysical questions are indispensable, in order to answer the normative question of whether we should keep or eliminate racial (and presumably, gender) terms, but in any case, the most significant question is the *normative* question of what we should do with our racial (and gendered) discourse, question which cannot be answered just in terms of conceptual analysis. Like Haslanger, Glasgow argues that the main question is (not just what our ordinary concept is, but also, and more crucially) what our ordinary concept should be.

In response, I will argue that conceptual analysis has a very significant role to play in the context of philosophical debates about race and gender.
Following Haslanger, I will distinguish between the *conceptual project* (which uses a priori methods in order to reveal our ordinary, *manifest concept* of X), the *descriptive project* (which uses empirical methods in order to reveal the *operative concept*, that is, the objective type that our use of the term 'X' actually tracks), and the *ameliorative project*, which asks what the point of having a concept of X is, and aims to discover what concept would do that work best (that is, the *target concept*) (Haslanger 2005, 2006).

We can explain Haslanger's, Mallon's and Glasgow's different positions in terms of their different reactions to this tripartite distinction:
Haslanger claims that when we ask about the concept of race or gender, what we are asking about is, first, what the operative concept is (which in many cases is different from our manifest concept), and second, what the target concept is (which in many cases is different from our operative concept).
Similarly, Glasgow (2009) is concerned, first, with the question of what our ordinary concept is (although he does not clearly draw the distinction between the manifest and the operative concept), and second, with the question of whether we should replace the ordinary concept with some revised, more appropriate concept. With respect to the race debate, he argues, first, that given the intuitions of ordinary speakers, our ordinary concept of race is supposed to refer to a biological property, and secondly, that given that there is no real biological property that corresponds to

our ordinary concept of race, we should replace the ordinary concept with a new concept of race that can pick out a social kind instead.

Haslanger, on the contrary, would respond that ordinary speakers' intuitions would not be relevant here because we are trying to capture the operative concept, not the manifest concept.

In response, Glasgow would argue that even if we focus on the operative concept, it is highly implausible to claim that the objective types that our racial (and gender) terms actually track correspond to purely social kinds.

In reaction to this, Mallon (2006) would argue that these claims are misguided because they are assuming that the conceptual and semantic questions regarding our racial and gender terms are (i) apt to be resolved satisfactorily, and (ii) relevant with regards to the crucial normative issue of whether we should keep or eliminate racial and gender terms. It seems that both Glasgow and Haslanger would agree with claims (i) and (ii), even if they would endorse different solutions to the descriptive questions related to (i) (although, interestingly enough, they would endorse similar answers to the normative questions related to (ii), namely, a sort of revisionist or reconstructionist proposal).

On the contrary, Mallon would argue that both (i) and (ii) are false, and what we should do regarding the debate about the nature of gender and race is to put aside semantic, conceptual and metaphysical issues (regarding the concept/meaning of 'race' (and 'gender'), and the nature of their referents), and focus solely on the normative question of whether we should keep or eliminate racial and gender terms. Interestingly, Mallon defends a different answer to this normative question: he argues that the proposal according to which 'race' and 'gender' should refer to merely social kinds is not the most useful one, because this would not be able to explain the phenomenon of 'Passing' (that is, cases where members of one race "pass" socially as members of a different race) (Mallon 2004).

One of the reasons that Mallon gives in support of the view that we should skip semantic and metaphysical questions about racial and gender terms is that answers to these questions will unavoidably depend on the answers to some basic questions in philosophy of language, namely, foundational questions about the nature of concepts, meaning and reference, without which we cannot even get started on the questions about the meaning of 'race' and 'gender'. Mallon argues that these foundational issues are very complex, so that it is not very realistic to assume that a consensus will be reached in the near future. Because of this, we are not going to find any widely agreed-upon answers to those questions about the meaning of 'race' and 'gender' (and the nature of their referents) any time soon.

In response to this, I want to argue that, for similar reasons, the *normative* question of whether we should eliminate or conserve racial and gender terms is going to be very difficult to solve satisfactorily as well. In particular, there are two kinds of considerations that seem to pull in different directions: on the one hand, we have the constraint that we should, other things being equal, classify people in the way they self-identify themselves; on the other hand, we have the constraint that we should, other things being equal, reject terms and concepts that might give rise to faulty generalizations and discriminatory attitudes. Because of these apparently

irreconcilable constraints, it seems that the normative question is going to be very hard to answer.

On the face of these difficulties, I propose that we should favour the following simple answer to the normative question: we should keep a term X in our speech only if X actually refers to a real property.

However, this does not mean that ethical/political considerations play no role in the philosophical analysis of gender and race. Rather, I want to maintain that ethical and political considerations play a role in the project of discovering the *manifest* and *operative* concept themselves, not just the target concept.

This might sound surprising. After all, the conceptual and descriptive projects, as introduced by Haslanger, are purely descriptive projects, in the sense that they are concerned with what the relevant facts are, rather than with normative questions about what we should do. I wholeheartedly agree with this remark, but at the same time I want to suggest that anti-racist and anti-sexist claims play a role in formulating correct accounts of the manifest and descriptive concepts of gender and race.