



HAL
open science

Book Review: Sex and Ontology

Alison Assiter

► **To cite this version:**

Alison Assiter. Book Review: Sex and Ontology. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 2006, 13 (4), pp.373-375. <10.1177/1350506806068670>. <hal-00571285>

HAL Id: hal-00571285

<https://hal.science/hal-00571285v1>

Submitted on 1 Mar 2011

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



HAL Authorization

Book Reviews

SEX AND ONTOLOGY

DOI: 10.1177/1350506806068670

Carrie Hull

The Ontology of Sex: A Critical Inquiry into the Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Categories

London and New York: Routledge, 2006, 185 pp., ISBN 0-415-35791-1

This book offers a useful summary, in the first chapter, of epistemic foundationalism. Many students of the subject, I am sure, will find this valuable. The book's overall stance and orientation is one with which I am sympathetic.

Hull sets out in the book to counter positivism and postmodernism, and to defend a form of realism. This is very much what I also set out to do in my book *Enlightened Women* (Routledge 1996), which I was sorry to see was not referred to in the text.

Hull provides a robust defence of the naturalness of the two-sex distinction, with some very useful scientific evidence in support of her position, against those, like Judith Butler, who seek to question the naturalness of this distinction and who argue that sex is a performative construct and that there may be more than one sex. Hull questions some of the statistical evidence that purports to show that the number of individuals who deviate from the norm of male and female is significant. In fact, she argues, the number of such individuals is very small indeed. She offers some useful material on the categorization of people into two sexes that will give food for thought to those who question the two-sex dichotomy. She argues that it is poor scientific practice to suggest, on the basis of statistically insignificant numbers, that there may be more than one sex.

This is one point made in the book, and the sex distinction is referred to in a number of places throughout the book. But the book seeks to go much further than this. Where it sets out to go further, I would have appreciated some distinction being made between variants of postmodernism and positivism that would have made it easier to evaluate the positions defended.

For example, Hull claims that positivists and nominalists are setting out to counter epistemic foundationalism. She mentions, in this regard, two thinkers from the analytic philosophical perspective – Nelson Goodman and W.V.O. Quine. She also refers to two major thinkers from different traditions – namely Foucault and Judith Butler. She claims that there are similarities between the thought of these various people, similarities that are not usually drawn to the attention of potential readers. I think that this is a useful thing to have done. However, I was left wondering why these particular thinkers had been chosen and why many others who might have been considered had been left out. For example, there are

those in the analytic tradition who might be thought to be more obvious – or equally obvious – candidates for inclusion, who are not even mentioned – for example Kuhn, Sapir-Whorf or Feyerabend. There are also many more thinkers in the broadly continental tradition who might have been mentioned.

Then there is the further question: what particular form of postmodernism or nominalism is being questioned? One thesis that is frequently identified with Quine for example, is conceptual scheme relativism. But Quine's work is dismissed in four pages of Hull's book. Unfortunately, moreover, the language used about great thinkers is sometimes insulting. For example, Hull writes: 'Quine contends that even from within a single language, meaning can never be shared. Seemingly eager to gain an advantage in the race to meaninglessness, he dramatically concludes that there is no "meaning to be shared in the first place"' (p. 32). It is unfortunate that language like this is used about someone whose thought is highly original and very influential. There is also a huge literature on his work, very little of which is mentioned by Hull.

For Quine, the thesis of conceptual scheme relativism is thought to be a consequence of the claim that language determines the limits of our world. It is also important to point out – and Hull does not mention this – that conceptual scheme relativism has been used to serve a number of different ends, and these ends need to be carefully distinguished from one another. One is metaphysical anti-realism – the view that there is no one determinate way the world is or that there is no privileged language in terms of which we should describe it. But a different end is epistemological scepticism – the idea that, for all we know, the world might be radically different in general character from the way we ordinarily take it to be.

The points made by Hull throughout the book about ontological realism would cut no ice with a believer in epistemological scepticism. When Hull claims, for example: 'Realism characteristically posits the existence of a special class of entities, the sorts of things rejected by nominalism: causal mechanisms, structures, kinds and other "universals"' (p. 83), the epistemological sceptic could simply reply 'so what?' To be fair, Hull does claim that realists are not setting out to counter the foundationalist. She writes: 'If it countered that this solution misses the larger philosophical point of an absolute guarantee for our knowledge, realists are no longer troubled by this point' (p. 83). She makes the valid point that it is important to accept that no theory need be rejected simply because there is a small number of exceptions to the thesis. She also makes the important point, following Bhaskar, that experimentation would be impossible were it not for the structured nature of reality. However, it is difficult to see why Hull spends such a long time characterizing foundationalism if she is not interested in countering it in any way. She does not, for example, make many epistemic points – most of her characterization of realism is done in terms of ontology.

The position she outlines – largely a defence of Roy Bhaskar's transcendental realism – is indeed a different position from anti-realism. However, I think that a believer in anti-realism would need stronger arguments than the claims made here to be convinced. There is, furthermore, a whole literature offering some very detailed and sophisticated arguments against metaphysical and epistemic anti-realism that is not referred to in Hull's book. There is, for example, Donald Davidson's very influential article 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', which challenges the coherence of conceptual scheme relativism with some very nuanced arguments: he distinguishes, for example, total failure of translation and partial failure of translatability between two hypothetically incommensurable languages and offers some detailed arguments against each.

There is one final point I would like to make. Hull offers a defence, as I have

said, of Bhaskar's transcendental realism. Although much of the empirical material Hull is referring to – from Foucault and Butler – on sexuality, madness and punishment, for example, is social, Hull does not refer to the realist theoretical literature on the social realm. Durkheim, for example, was adamant that social facts are real entities existing in the real social world, external to the individual and exerting a causal effect on him or her. He argued that when we perform our duties as a brother, a husband, a citizen, for example, we carry out commitments we have entered into and which are defined by law and custom. These things are intrinsically social and are different from individual acts. They are general throughout society; external to the individual and constraining. He believes, indeed, that individual actions derive from society.

This could be argued to be a form of realism. Indeed, there are examples from Bhaskar himself that Hull could have referred to. But most of Hull's examples, in her sections of the book on realism, are taken from the natural sciences. This is especially unfortunate, given that some realists in the social sciences would like to challenge the assumption that there is a hierarchy of sciences, with physics at its root. Some would wish, and not in an anti-realist fashion, to assert the position of the social world as *sui generis*.

Overall, then there is much in this book that will be of interest to many different people. However, I doubt that it will convince those who are not already followers of critical realism.

Alison Assiter
University of the West of England

NURTURING WHITE IDENTITIES

DOI: 10.1177/1350506806068671

Bridget Byrne

White Lives: The Interplay of 'Race', Class and Gender in Everyday Life

London: Routledge, 2006, 200 pp., ISBN 0-4153-4711-4 (hbk), 0-4153-4712-2 (pbk)

Bridget Byrne's qualitative analysis of white London mothers' discourse represents a major step towards establishing whiteness as a serious paradigm in British sociology. Not only is this an empirical monograph problematizing the racialization of white identities, but one that does so by focusing on the experiences of mothers, thus beginning to fill another hole in the literature. Byrne's work addresses key themes raised in fieldwork in Britain, and highlights methodological issues pertinent to all researchers interviewing people about 'race'.

Byrne opens with an epistemological discussion outlining the background of studies of whiteness: 'the assumption often is that we (everyday white people in Britain who are not particularly racist) cannot be interesting as "race" has nothing to do with us' (p. 1). Indeed, her project involves analysing how the 'we' she refers to is constructed, a project requiring 'hearing and seeing "race" in contexts where it is not explicitly felt as present' (p. 2).

This elusive quality of whiteness generates particular methodological problems illuminated here. In an engrossing section on narrative methods, she demonstrates how telling life stories can enable some respondents, but prohibit others from making themselves subjects: building a story around turning points requires seeing one's life in a particularly coherent way in which the self is attributed a