

# Parallel Debates: A Methodological Proposal

*Debates paralelos: una propuesta metodológica*

Itsue Nakaya-Perez

## ABSTRACT

Social ontology focuses on questions about the reality of human categories. The typical examples are gender and race. Common questions about them are: Do they exist? What is their nature? Do they exist in the best possible way? Meanwhile, the philosophy of psychiatry has been discussing the reality of psychopathology, what is the best way to classify mental disorders, and whether it is possible to define them without normative vocabulary. I think there is something not only strange but inadequate about these discussions being held apart. Particularly, I hold that by being held separately these discussions are philosophically incomplete. In this paper, I argue that these debates are parallel in crucial aspects, but more importantly that they can benefit from each other if they start a dialogue. I suggest some paths we can take to start fruitful discussions and offer examples of the kind of outcomes we can expect. However, my main contribution is to sketch a common framework to map current discussions, make comparisons between them, and, more importantly, guide new research.

**Keywords:** Mental illness; race; gender; social categories; philosophy of psychiatry; philosophical methodology.

## RESUMEN

La ontología social se pregunta sobre la realidad de las categorías humanas. Los ejemplos típicos son el género y la raza. Las preguntas más comunes acerca de estas categorías son: ¿Existen? ¿Cuál es su naturaleza? ¿Pueden ser transformadas? Mientras tanto, la filosofía de la psiquiatría ha estado discutiendo la realidad de la psicopatología, cuál es la mejor manera de clasificar los trastornos mentales y si es posible definirlos sin un vocabulario normativo. Sostengo que hay algo no sólo extraño sino inadecuado en que estas discusiones se mantengan separadas. En este artículo, argumento que estos debates son paralelos en aspectos cruciales, pero más importante, que pueden beneficiarse mutuamente si inician un diálogo. Sugiero algunos caminos que podemos seguir para iniciar debates fructíferos y ofrezco ejemplos del tipo de resultados que podemos esperar. Sin embargo, mi principal contribución es esbozar un marco teórico en común para entender los debates actuales, hacer comparaciones entre ellos y, lo que es más importante, orientar nuevas investigaciones.

**Palabras clave:** Enfermedad mental; raza; género; categorías sociales; filosofía de la psiquiatría; metodología filosófica.



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## 1. Introduction

Social ontology focuses on questions about the reality of human categories. The typical examples are gender and race. Common questions about them are: Do they exist? What is their nature? Do they exist in the best possible way? Meanwhile, philosophy of psychiatry has been discussing the reality of psychopathology, what is the best way to classify mental disorders and whether it is possible to define them without normative vocabulary—just like some typical illnesses. I think there is something not only strange but inadequate about these discussions being held apart. Particularly, I hold that by being held separately these discussions are philosophically incomplete.

In this paper, I argue that these debates are parallel in crucial aspects, but more importantly that they can benefit from each other if they start a dialogue. I suggest some paths we can take to start fruitful discussions and offer examples of the kind of outcomes we can expect. However, my main contribution is to sketch a common framework to map current discussions, make comparisons between them and, more importantly, guide new research. Although it is not uncommon that mapping important literature in an area, pointing out similarities between debates and offering methodological tools are hardly seen as real philosophical contributions, I hope to show in this paper that they are more important than we think.

The paper is structured as follows. In section 2, I offer some highlights around the ontological and scientific status of mental illness, as well as the debates on race and gender in social ontology and argue that there are important parallelisms between them. Having done that, in section 3, I argue that having a common framework can benefit both debates and sketch my proposal. Then, I explain some ways in which the discussion can be enriched. I argue that social ontology can be benefited by incorporating scientific tools to study biological aspects of race and gender to open new possibilities to fight against injustices. Philosophy of psychiatry, on the other hand, can overcome the fear of antirealism by incorporating social constructionist analysis without compromising the idea that mental illness is a natural kind; besides, this framework can be useful as a tool to conduct research with intersectionality insight. Later, I suggest that the fact that these debates have similar structure reveals something about the categories themselves and advocate for expanding our human ontology. Finally, I consider some objections. I conclude with some final remarks in section 4. Before starting, it is important to say that my purpose here is only to point out some similarities between the debates; for that reason, it is not my goal to provide an entire panorama about them.

## 2. Two Debates

There is a long tradition asking about the history, meaning, and existence of *madness*. Here, however, I focus specifically on debates about the reality and scientific status of mental illness in contemporary philosophy. These debates take different but related forms. For example, during the second half of the last century, a common question was whether mental disorders exist at all, and if they do, in what way—as a social category, or as a biomedical entity. Later on, the terms of the debate shifted to the concept of natural kind and the relevant question started to be whether mental disorders are natural kinds. This issue also takes the form of asking if it is possible to have an objective classification

of mental disorders. The concern of whether the category of mental illness is factual or value-laden may be behind both discussions. And there are three main options for such a concern: mental illness is value-laden, it is factual, or it is both. Within these options, there are multiple theories with different variants. It would be impossible to address the rich variety of them in this paper. Rather, in what follows I briefly explain the core of the main ones.

The posture according to which mental illness is value-laden is called normativism. According to normativism, the relevant fact for determining what mental illness is are social facts, more specifically, social norms. In this view, if one transgresses social norms one can be judged either as immoral (e.g. violent) or as mentally ill (e.g. schizophrenic). The normativist may accept that we look at biological or psychological facts about people that we consider mentally ill, but only after we determine who counts as mentally ill by other means. In other words, they assert that we cannot talk about normal and abnormal without involving our values. For example, Rachel Cooper (2005), holds that for something to count as an illness it needs to satisfy three conditions: it is a condition that is bad to have, it is such that the affected person is unfortunate, and it is potentially medically treatable. Although the last condition alludes to biological facts, it is meant to emphasize that the potential interventions need to be acceptable in each society. Besides, something can be medically treatable without being a biological condition; for example, when political dissidents in the URSS were classified as schizophrenics, they received treatment for schizophrenia (Lavretsky, 1998).

The other side of the coin is the objectivist or naturalist posture. A well-known representative of this is Boorse's biostatistical account (1977). This view is based on the idea that the normal state of an organism in terms of health, can be understood as the normal functioning of its body systems. In contrast, disease is understood as an internal state in which there is a dysregulation of some system with respect to its normal efficiency. To know if an individual is sick, we need to first look at its reference class—the set of individuals of the same species, age, and sex; and second, at the normal function of the corresponding subsystem—the statistically typical contribution of any of its processes or parts for its survival and reproduction. Thus, disease is understood as something that can be objectively identified without the need for an external normative judgment. Whether dividing a population into subgroups using those criteria is value-laden remains an open question.

The last posture, sometimes referred to as a hybrid account (Garson, 2021) or two-stage account (Radden, 2019), maintains that mental illness involves both a normative and a factual component. Two important defenders of this view are Jeremy and Murphy. Broadly speaking, this theory holds that a mental illness must meet two jointly sufficient and individually necessary conditions; for example: being dysfunctional and causing harm Wakefield (1992a; 1992b); or involving mechanistic abnormalities and system of values (Murphy, 2006). While the first requirement is an objective, scientific fact, the second requirement is a normative judgment that refers to the negative consequences that the first requirement brings to the individual given a sociocultural standard. In this paradigm, the dysfunction or mechanistic abnormality must occur in internal mechanisms like physical structures and organs, or mental structures and dispositions such as motivation, cognition, or perceptual mechanisms. In this theory, all disease requires a biological dysfunction or mechanistic abnormality but only those that cause harm, discomfort, disability or are socially devalued, constitute disorders.

The postures mentioned so far assume that mental illnesses exist and try to explain their nature. However, some have denied the very existence of mental illnesses. Thomas Szasz, for example, claimed in *The Myth of Mental Illness* (1960), that there is no such thing as mental illness. He argued for the fitness of objectivist views for mental illness; that is, that mental illness should be understood as any other kind of illness, with the only difference that it takes place in the brain and is expressed in the form of mental symptoms. However, he notes that a disease in the nervous system should become manifest as some form of paralysis or other discomforts, not as an emotion or a behavior. So, we face a dilemma: mental illness is either a disease of the brain—as it was the case with neurosyphilis—or a myth. According to the standard idea, all mental illnesses are like the first disjunct. In his view, however, the emotions or behaviors in which the alleged diseases manifest themselves are not symptoms of a disease but problems of life; thus, mental illnesses do not exist.

Let me now turn to other human categories. Social ontology has been concerned with the reality and manner of existence of social categories. However, most of the attention has been directed towards two categories that, oddly, are not clearly social: gender and race. That they are not clearly social is not a secondary point, but the main one. Much ink has been spent trying to defend the idea that race and gender *are* social. There are two main positions on how to decide it: constructionism and naturalism (or objectivism, or biologicism). These postures are usually taken as exclusive; however, although uncommon, one can embrace both. I now proceed to briefly explain their main components.

Constructionism is a position that harbors a great variety of theories. It broadly holds that for a category to exist it is sufficient that some of its properties are constituted or caused by social facts. A first approximation to social construction can be understood as follows: X is socially constructed if and only if X's existence or persistence or character is caused or constituted by human mental states, decisions, culture, or social practices (Mallon, 2016). What such causation and/or constitution consists of, how it occurs, which of the two is more relevant, what exactly it is caused or constituted, etc., is something different constructionists differ on. For example, what causes and constitutes something can be physical or social facts, the mental states of a person or her community, relations with the environment or with others, or a mixture of all of these; some believe that intentionality, speech acts, language, or collective consciousness is what gives rise to social entities, while others place more emphasis on non-conscious, non-intentional processes or environmental influence; and some hold that it is sufficient for a social entity to be caused by social entities while others require that it is constituted by them (Epstein, 2018). Still, others question whether the distinction between causation or constitution is clear enough and propose a different analysis of how construction occurs (Khalidi, 2016).

As I mentioned, you can also be a naturalist. Naturalism can take different forms, essentialism being a paradigmatic one. It is important here to be clear that essentialism has very different connotations in social ontology, philosophy of science, and metaphysics. Essentialism, when applied to human categories, is generally understood as *biological* essentialism: the perspective that holds that a certain group has inherited, natural, and simple biological properties, such that each member of the category has them (Epstein, 2018); in addition, such property explains other typical characteristics of the category (Mallon, 2016; Appiah 1994). There are historical examples of this view being held by both the lay people and the scientific community. During World War II this was believed for to Jewish

people and the Aryan race. For example, supposedly physical traits (head shape or eye color) or abilities (such as greater intelligence or physical strength) were explained in terms of intrinsic properties (genes or blood). However, more broadly speaking, essentialism is simply the posture according to which X (a kind, in this case) has necessary properties—which do not have to be biological. Generally, attributing essence to something implies sufficiency and necessity: possession of the essence of a kind is sufficient and necessary for membership of a kind (Bird & Tobin, 2018). Whether all instances of a category, such as *woman*, share a given property and thus possess an essence (e.g. being oppressed in a certain way), remains an open question.

There are few attempts to overcome the dichotomy between naturalism and constructionism. One example is the framework offered by Mallon (2016). In it, he seeks to answer the question of how categories such as gender and race can be socially constructed while being able to make successful inductions with them. Boyd (1999) famously claimed that for a kind to be natural it is enough that it has properties that co-occur in a number of cases with an underlying mechanism that explains such co-occurrence and allow us to project hypotheses to other instances of the kind. So, broadly speaking, Mallon intends to offer an explanation of how some social categories allow successful inductions while at the same time are affected and constituted by human representations.

Lastly, some views question the mere reality of the categories. An important example of these anti-realist accounts is given by Anthony Appiah. According to Appiah (1994), naturalism—particularly essentialism—is the right way to approach whatever we mean to refer to when we talk about race. However, when we look at the world to find the properties we are talking about, we realize those properties do not exist.

### 3. A methodological proposal

#### 3.1 Parallelism

As I mentioned above, the discussion around the reality of race and gender and the discussion around mental illness have been held separately. This is not surprising since each of those categories has its particular history, and the answer we give about each of their ontologies can have different consequences. For example, race is a term mainly used in political domains and it has also been important in medicine and biology; gender is currently very important in those senses too and it is also crucial in one's self-understanding. Mental illness, on the other hand, has been mainly relevant in medicine and biology, and its political and personal meaning is thought to be secondary although increasingly challenged by diagnosed people. This has made each field develop its own tools and have its own particularities. I think one of the reasons it is important to have a dialogue between these discussions is because they can benefit from their differences, or so I will argue this in the next section. But now, let me suggest as a first methodological procedure to look for a parallelism. I will mention some important similarities and differences between them in order to support this suggestion.

There is an important parallelism between the postures we can find in these discussions. In the philosophy of psychiatry, there are three basic positions: objectivism (or naturalism), normativism, and hybrid accounts (or two-stage accounts). When we abstract their essential features, we find that objectivism holds that mental illness can be defined entirely in factual terms, normativism holds that a social component is needed, and hybrid accounts hold that both factual and social components are necessary. Meanwhile, in social ontology, there are three basic positions as well: naturalism, social constructionism, and naturalistic social constructionism. Again, when we abstract their most important features, we can say that according to naturalism gender and race can be defined in purely scientific terms, according to social constructionism race and gender require social components, and for naturalistic social constructionism both components are necessary.

This similarity can be framed in very different terms, such as what is discovered vs what is invented (Tsou, 2021), what is indifferent vs what is interactive (Hacking, 1999) what is factual vs what is value-laden (Garson, 2021), what is natural vs what is constructed (Mallon, 2016), and so forth. But in the end, the similarities between the two debates are clear. There is a correspondence between naturalism and objectivism, social constructionism and normativism, and naturalistic social constructionism and hybrid accounts.

A further question we can ask is whether there is also parallelism in the nature of the categories themselves. In these debates, kinds are classified as either social or natural which can suggest that there is also a parallelism. Besides, social constructionists and normativism usually claim that the categories they study are social kinds, while naturalists and biologists usually claim that they deal with natural kinds. At this point, however, it is important to note that there are two different questions going on here: which framework or view should we adopt to study a certain category, and what kind of categories we are dealing with. Of course, they are related, which is reflected in the relation between a given framework and a given type of kind. But sometimes there are unexpected connections. For example, Cooper (2006) is a normativist about mental illness but thinks that mental illness is a natural kind and Mallon's naturalized constructionist account claims to deal with both (2016). This discrepancy can be striking because what we are trying to account for in this debate is the reality and nature of the category. In order to explain this mismatch, let me offer a second methodological suggestion.

### 3.2 A Common Framework

Besides, looking for a parallelism between both debates, I propose to systematize them with the help of a framework in common. In order to do this, I propose to distinguish three different projects around human categories: semantic, ontological, and normative. Although I think it is impossible to fully isolate the different projects present in these debates, it is possible to conceptually separate them to understand their particularities.

The semantic project questions what we mean when talking about a certain category—what experts say, what common people mean, etc.—and to what entity in the world, if any, we are referring to. Part of this project is methodological, it tries to answer the related question of how we should figure it out—conducting conceptual analysis, using genealogical methods, etc.



Meanwhile, the ontological project deals with another concern: are these categories *real*? Do they *exist*? And if so, what is their *nature*? This project has a methodological component as well. The parallelism I noted in the previous sections, corresponds to this methodological project. The main positions here are naturalism (or objectivism, or biologicism) and constructionism (or normativism). Regarding the other one, I mentioned social kinds and natural kinds as possible ways the categories can be. However, they both are part of the realist position. A broader way to identify the positions is as realist, anti-realist and skeptical. While the realist claims that given categories exist, the anti-realist claims that they do not—for example, scientific research has proven us to be mistaken—and the skeptical suspend judgment about the existence of such categories—but can still get involved in the other projects. A tentative representation of this project looks like this.

Figure 1. The Ontological Project.

Ontological Project		
Does X exist?	What is X nature?	Which is the best framework to study X?
Realism	Social kinds	Naturalism/Objectivism
Antirealism	Natural kinds	Constructionism/Normativism
Skepticism	Hybrid Kinds	Hybrid accounts

Own source.

Finally, the normative project is not concerned with the question of what a certain category is but what it *should* be. That is, it evaluates the way the categories currently exist and tries to respond if they could be different. This project, then, deals with the question: *what* we should do with our current categories and its related terms? And *how* should we do it? This last question is a practical question, concerning the political, social, economic, and scientific means to achieve the transformation or conservation of the categories as currently exist and their related concepts. Regarding the first question, there are at least three postures one can take: to conserve the category and its terms, to eliminate them or to transform them. A tentative representation of this project looks like this. I would like to notice that although the first two columns look similar, they are different. The first one refers to what should be done about a category—such as depression—, while the second one refers to what should be done about the terms, we use to refer to them—such as the word ‘depression’.

Figure 2. The Normative Project.

The Normative Project		
What should we do about X?	What should we do about X related concepts?	How should we do it?
Conservationism	Conservationism	Abrupt
Transformationism	Transformationism	Gradual
Abolitionism	Eliminativism	No action

Own source.

Now we are in a position to understand the mismatch between the ontological postures and their explanation of the nature of categories, even if we still find it inappropriate. While the postures in social ontology and philosophy of psychiatry I mentioned addresses the question: ‘Which framework is appropriate to study x’s nature?’, the general ontological project tries to answer the question: ‘What kind of category is x?’ These two questions, even if related, can be separated, and thus there is no necessary connection between them. Furthermore, this makes clearer why it is coherent to ask if there are similarities between the categories themselves, and not only the frameworks we use to study them. I think this is a possibility that has been set aside and that is worth exploring. I will come back to this point in the next session. But before that, let me finish this section with a table representing the ontological project regarding mental illness and the different postures I presented.

Figure 3. Psychopathology State of Affairs.

Does psycho-pathology exist?	Which is the best framework to study psychopathology?			
		Naturalism/Objectivism	Construction/Normativism	Hybrid Accounts
	Realism	Broose	Cooper	Murphy Wakefield
	Anti-realism	Szasz		
	Skepticism			

Own source.

### 3.3 Advantages: Enriching Our Discussions

In this section, I will argue that both social ontology and philosophy of psychiatry could benefit from each other by taking into consideration the parallel debate that is taking place in the corresponding field. I will consider three paths that are worth exploring. First, I discuss what each area can gain by incorporating the other’s tools. Second, I reflect further on what these debates reveal about the categories they are dealing with. Finally, I argue that my framework helps to discover other similarities and differences important to look at; I focus on the normative project.

Let me start with social ontology. Social ontologists have been very cautious about considering biological and psychological tools, which by contrast, are cherished in philosophy of psychiatry. However, incorporating such tools could be beneficial to social ontology. To give just one example, a common assumption in constructionist frameworks is that racism—which arguably both casually and constitutively constructs race (Haslanger, 2012)—occurs due to social factors alone. However, some evidence suggests that there may be evolved mechanisms playing a role in racial classification and, in turn, this may explain *in part* some racist tendencies (Garson, 2021).

As I mentioned, committing to one framework does not imply committing to a specific metaphysical claim about a category; that is, claiming that we can incorporate such naturalistic approaches to our constructionist frameworks does not imply race is a natural kind, for being a natural kind is not just having some biological properties. After all, even presidents have biological properties and we take them as a paradigmatic social kind. Being a natural kind requires, for example, allowing projective



hypotheses based on an underlying mechanism that groups together different properties—on Boyd’s account—or having necessary and sufficient biological properties shared by all the members of the kind—on an essentialist account. If the claim about racial classification turns out to be true, it could have important implications about how to overcome racism. For example, if some kind of grouping or stereotyping is innate, early exposure to contra-stereotypes may be useful for avoiding stereotyping ideas on race. In fact, the idea that there are innate ways of essentializing human categories has been embraced by some people regarding mental illness classification, allowing them to discuss its social consequences (eg. Haslam & Ernst, 2002).

On the other hand, philosophy of psychiatry is stuck in discussions about natural kinds (e.g. Kincaid & Sullivan, 2014). In my view, one of the reasons is that there is good evidence showing that mental illness is affected by social factors but it is not clear how to account for this in a naturalistic framework. Although the bio-psycho-social model (Engel, 1997) is widely accepted both in the clinic and in research practice, incorporating analytic tools from social ontology could be very helpful for that discussion. Broadly speaking, the bio-psycho-social model holds that a holistic, non-reductionist understanding of mental illness is needed. Such understanding may include neural and genetic explanations as well as social factors and the patient’s self-understanding of their illness. However, it does not specify how these different factors interact.

Integrating the distinction between causal, constitutive, and other kinds of social construction can be very useful here. For example, to explain why the same person can be labeled as a political dissident in one context and a schizophrenic in another. If we embrace the idea that causal construction occurs when a social fact causes another social fact and constitutive construction occurs when a social fact is part of another fact. Arguably, the mismatch on the diagnostic is due to social values that constitute—not only cause—our understanding of what is normal. On the other hand, there is evidence showing that migration is an important cause of schizophrenia (Howes & Kapur, 2009), but we do not have reasons to think that it *is a part* of it—that it is constituted by migration. Thus, it is not enough to say that different factors are needed in order to explain a condition—which is already widely accepted—but to specify how and in which sense they are.

Although intersectionality as a methodology and as a thesis about the structure of social reality is recognized and integrated in studies on gender and race, philosophy of psychiatry has failed to do this in a systematic way. Having a common framework can help philosophy of psychiatry to recognize the similarities psychopathology has in common with other human categories and, hopefully, to integrate their study as a fundamental component of mental disorders and not only as a variant for studying them and treating them.

Second, as I already stated, I think it is important to reflect on whether the similarities in these debates suggest similarities in their categories themselves. It is possible that all our categories involve some values as well as some natural facts or that they are constructed in some senses and not in others, and we need to make justice to that complexity. But I do not think that the solution should rest on making more complex frameworks, such as naturalistic approaches to social ontology (Mallon, 2016) or hybrid accounts of philosophy of psychiatry (Wakefield 1992a, 1992b; Murphy 2006). Instead, I think that our social reality demands us to reconsider our human ontology. For instance, instead of dividing human kinds between natural and social ones, it has been proposed to include *hybrid kinds* as a third kind in our ontology (Nakaya Perez, 2021). According to this proposal, all kinds can be causally constructed by social facts but constitutive construction only occurs in social and hybrid kinds; the difference between them is that in social kinds constitutive construction is both necessary and sufficient while in hybrid kinds it is only necessary. Although this proposal can be wrong, it could still be true that the distinction between what is natural and what is social is too complex for our current dichotomic framework, and that we could do better with a plural or a gradualistic one.

Besides, there are pragmatic reasons for expanding our human ontology, which provides a further reason to reconsider it. We have evidence that we hold different attitudes toward different kinds that, in turn, can lead to different consequences or courses of action. For instance, different ideas of what mental illness is can influence different types of research. If we thought that mental illness is a natural kind we would be more motivated to engage in a project such as the RDoC instead of in cultural studies. Similarly, human classification can affect the members of a category. As Ian Hacking (1996) famously argued, an important difference between classifying things and classifying people is that people can be affected by the classification that refers to them. A clear example of this is a study where individuals diagnosed with obesity, who were told that their condition was a disease, showed a reduction in the importance they placed on taking care of their health (Hoyt et al., 2014).

Finally, in this work, I have analyzed similarities within what I called the ontological project about human categories. However, I mentioned two other related projects: a semantic and a normative one. I think it is worth looking for parallelisms and divergences in those projects as well, since we could find out new things about our frameworks, the categories we are studying, and ways to improve those frameworks and categories. For example, anti-realist views on mental illness and race have led to similar normative suggestions such as eliminating mental illness talk (Szasz, 1960) and race talk (Appiah, 1994), respectively. According to these views, called eliminativists, if the psychiatric and racial terms we use do not refer to anything in the world, we should get rid of them.

These views are worth analyzing further, especially in the case of mental disorders since such a project has been widely abandoned in academic research. Although eliminativism may sound promising, not everyone is willing to dispose of terms that have shaped so many people's lives, identities, oppressions, and fights. For example, some diagnosed people are claiming the label *mad*, such as *Mad Pride* groups. Having certain labels could also be helpful for individuals to reclaim certain treatment and medical help, as was claimed by folks in the autistic spectrum and their families when terms such as asperger were removed from the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders [DSM-5] (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Thus, it is worth theorizing and exploring different normative possibilities we could adopt.

On the other hand, there are important mismatches between both debates. A way in which my framework can be useful is by comparing the different postures taken in the different projects, such as the normative one. For example, in both race and gender debates there are abolitionist views. A well-known position is held by Sally Haslanger (2012). According to her, both gender and race are constructed by contingent social facts that hierarchically structure them, making some genders and some races to be in an oppressive position. Since the facts that give place to the categories are contingent, their current organization is contingent as well. If we aim to fight against injustice, we should abolish the structures that make it possible. For this reason, her argument goes, we should abolish gender and race—at least, how they currently exist.

A fact that strikes me is that there are no abolitionist positions regarding mental illness. I think this is an interesting disanalogy. In my opinion, it reveals our idea of mental illness as something more related to biological facts than to social reality. To see this, notice that we do not try to *abolish* biological entities such as viruses. We may try to *eliminate* them or *cure* them, when they cause an illness, but not *abolish* them since abolitionism seems to be a politically charged term. Thus, it seems that we do not think that political action can significantly change the reality of mental illness. This, of course, has been put into question and it is widely accepted now that mental illnesses are affected by the political context, they occur in. However, this idea had not been enough to embrace a view such as abolitionism.

### 3.4 Objections

Let me finish this proposal by considering two concerns of accepting a parallelism between the different categories and adopting a common framework for their study. The first one is an ethical concern. Social ontologists are very cautious when questioning whether gender or race can be addressed within a naturalistic framework, since thinking about gender and race in biological terms has had terrible consequences. I think something that feeds this fear is the current recognition of only two possible kinds of human categories—social or natural; thus, thinking about those categories in biological terms can be thought to imply further that those categories are not social but natural. The problem with this is that conceiving them as natural kinds, and thus homologizing them with other natural kinds such as COVID-19, could have detrimental consequences; for example, it would make it conceptually impossible to have some identities, such as being transgender—arguably social—without having gender dysphoria—arguably natural. However, I think that this concern is misleading. On the one hand, as I just argued, having a certain approach is not necessarily attached to a specific kind. On the other hand, our human ontology may be much more complex than a dichotomy between natural and social kinds.

The second concern is ontological and epistemic. According to it, there is a tendency of building *flat* ontologies that do not do justice to the complexity of our social world (Guerrero Mc Manus, 2020); by doing that, we can be making deficient theories in the name of simplicity. For example, according to Epstein (2019), these theories seem to presuppose that all human categories are the same; however, social sciences and diverse social practices work instead under the assumption that there

are significant differences between, for example, the nature of a president, a woman, and a depressed person. Thus, different models must be employed to account for the complexity of our social reality. This is a good point and there are cases proving that it can be detrimental to apply the same analysis for similar but different categories. A well-known example is a controversy around whether it is possible to be transracial, given the possibility of being transgender (Tuvel, 2017). Although a legitimate question, part of the criticism of the transracial argument was that it relied on an incorrect analogy.

I think this concern is important since such errors could have important consequences, like potentially harming already oppressed identities. However, although important, I think that this concern is misleading. Framing the different debates under the same framework can lead us to the opposite conclusion, as I already argued; sometimes, we need to compare the categories to realize how they differ. Thus, the moral should not be to stop looking for resemblances and drawing comparisons, but to have this concern in mind and not rush to simplistic conclusions when finding similarities between different kinds.

#### 4. Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that while the debates on the ontology of gender, race, and mental illness have been held separately, there are similarities between them. I argued that there are significant similarities between the debates in that they provide a framework to analyze different steps or projects around human categories. I focused on the ontological project and presented the three main realistic postures in both debates as well as an anti-realistic view. Furthermore, I claimed that there are reasons to bring them into a dialogue. On the one hand, different tools have been developed in each of the discussions that can be useful for the others; on the other hand, this similarity may be reflecting important facts about the kinds themselves. Finally, I suggested that we should look for similarities and differences in the other projects—semantic and normative—since there too we could learn more about our frameworks and the categories we live by.

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