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WAYS TO BE CONCERNED WITH GENDER IN PHILOSOPHY*

abstract

In this paper, some (non-exhaustive) ways in which philosophy can tackle gender are presented and examined. Starting from mainly negative critical stances and proceeding towards more positive approaches, the following ways to tackle gender are distinguished: the critique of gender through discourse analysis; the critique of gender essentialism; research on how gender concepts work; reflection upon how gender issues relate to issues of intersubjective recognition. The first three ways, although giving important contributions about how gender is conceived of, do not seem to give firm grounds to the rejection of gender discrimination, the refutation of essentialist beliefs about the genders, and the neutralization of the normative import of gender concepts. As a fourth way, I propose considering gendered subjectivity in the context of the dynamics of intersubjective relations, framing it in a view of intersubjective recognition as a basic process in human life. In this perspective, gender issues constitute a context in which people's capability and willingness to recognize others as subjects, and specifically human persons, is tested.

Introduction   In this paper, I illustrate some (non-exhaustive) ways in which philosophy can tackle gender. My aim is not to provide an overview of philosophical work on gender and gender-related issues in the past decades,[1] but to single out some kinds of approach to gender, whether actual or possible, and examine the difficulties or limitations of each. Starting from mainly negative critical stances and proceeding towards more positive approaches, I distinguish:

1. the critique of gender through discourse analysis;
2. the critique of gender essentialism;
3. research on how gender concepts work;
4. reflection upon how gender issues relate to issues of intersubjective recognition.

Each of the four main sections of the paper is devoted to outlining one of these kinds of approach. Since there are close connections between the first and the second, and between the second and the third, these three can be considered as following up or elaborating on the preceding one. The third way to tackle gender draws on recent research concerning the linguistic expression of categorizations, to which gender categories belong. This research, although not specifically about gender, offers a way in to understanding the normativity of gender models as well as gender-based discrimination. As to the fourth way, I propose considering gendered subjectivity in the context of the dynamics of intersubjective relations, framing it in a view of intersubjective recognition as a basic process in human life. Hopefully, this kind of approach might shed some new light on the debates on gender and gender-related issues.

1. Critique of gender through discourse analysis   Because of the complexity of gender-related issues in contemporary society, and the fact that assumptions and expectations about gender are usually tacit, it is not easy to spell out what gender is, or even simply what gender (and genders) are commonly held to be. One instrument at hand for obtaining some clarity about how we think about the matter is the examination of how gender is dealt with in discourse and other social practices. Although one may object

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1 So, I will not comment upon feminist philosophical work done in the various areas of philosophy (such as that presented and discussed in Fricker and Hornsby, 2000, and Saul, 2003). I believe, however, that distinguishing between kinds of approach to gender as I will be trying to do is indirectly relevant also to that kind of philosophical work.

that such a task does not pertain to philosophy, I maintain that it does (in part at least), for two reasons. Firstly, let us not forget that at a certain time in the 20th century philosophy was described as an activity of clarification (under the influence of Wittgenstein: see e.g. 1922: §4.112; 1953: §133) and even though this characterization is now taken to be outdated, I believe that it might still be worth consideration as non-exhaustive, alongside more ambitious ones (for which see e.g. Williamson 2006, 2007). The idea of philosophy as an activity of clarification is traditionally connected to an antimetaphysical attitude, so that what is expected to be clarified is philosophical discourse itself, insofar as it expresses unsolvable "philosophical perplexities". In my opinion, however, the idea can quite sensibly be extended to include all those issues we find difficult to tackle because of underlying conceptual confusion or lack of explicitness. In this sense, though seemingly a matter of applied linguistics, or somewhere between linguistics and sociology, discourse analysis (see Fairclough 1995, Wodak and Chilton eds 2005) can also be practised in a philosophical spirit, not only because it sometimes profits from the use of instruments coming from the philosophy of language such as speech acts, presupposition and implicature, but because it throws light upon the contents and organization of our ideas.[2] Secondly, once our tacit assumptions about some complex and controversial issue and their implications are made explicit, the question remains open as to whether such assumptions are acceptable or even correct. It seems to me that the critical assessment of commonly held assumptions about gender and genders is to a large extent a philosophical task, connected to the understanding that human beings have of the human condition and one to be pursued by argument. Even if it goes beyond mere clarification, this task is at least contiguous to clarification activities, because it is made possible by the explicitness that follows from them. We cannot reject an assumption about gender (or criticize it or argue against it) unless we are aware of it, and we might not even realize it needs to be criticized unless we are aware of the precise role it plays in our discursive and social practices.

2. Critique of gender essentialism

Many of the assumptions about gender revealed by analyzing discourse and observing social practices have the controversial feature of being "essentialist", that is, they present themselves as concerning "essential" properties of a certain gender-related class of human beings. Now on the one hand, were this true, alleged members of the class who do not possess such properties should not be counted as real members; on the other, accepting people who lack those properties as members of the class amounts to falsifying the claim that the properties are essential. But this is not what actually happens. Essentialist assumptions bear *de facto* normative implications, that is, the members of the class of human beings at issue, provided they want to be (or cannot avoid being) members of that class, are accepted as members, expected to have or develop or acquire the alleged essential properties, and negatively evaluated as not "normal"or not "good" members if they do not. Claims about the alleged "essence" of a gender thereby become models to which people who are assigned that gender have to conform. For example, it is often held to be part of the essence of a gender that people belonging to it have certain abilities and typical dispositions, which make them suited to certain roles in society, and this can create in them a normative orientation towards actually assuming those roles.

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2 Aspects of the use of language that are revealing of gender models are studied in the pioneering work of Robin Tolmach Lakoff *Language and Woman's Place* (1975). For a use of speech act theory and of presupposition applied to gender-related issues, see for example Hornsby (1994); Hornsby and Langton (1998); Langton and West (1999). I have used the instruments of pragmatics to make explicit various assumptions about or attitudes towards the feminine gender in my research on Italian women magazines (1976) and on books on pregnancy and birth addressed at women (1984).

A further essentialist assumption is that belonging to a gender is a fact determined by nature or even a fact of human nature (and thus part of the essence of human beings). These latter assumptions add to the normativity of gender models the compulsion to follow one of them: if belonging to a gender is an essential part of being human, then nobody can escape gender altogether, which means that every one of us will be subject to one or other of the gender models available.

Assumptions about gender and genders can be criticized as empirically false generalizations, and they can sometimes be proven to be such. But irrespective of their empirical truth or falsity (namely, whether the majority of the members of a gender actually display the properties supposed to be "essential" to it), they can (and should) be criticized as essentialist, which involves rejecting the idea that they describe the nature or essence of a gender, thereby limiting or suspending their normative import.

In their attempt to look at women's difference afresh, and therefore not merely as the lack of allegedly masculine virtues but as rich in positive contents, some feminist thinkers have raised claims about the feminine gender that appeared to have essentialist implications (Irigaray 1977; Gilligan 1982).[3] Many other feminist thinkers, on the other hand, as well as many researchers in linguistics and sociology, have chosen to criticize and reject gender essentialism. Indeed, gender models are quite obviously cultural constructions[4] and the rhetoric of naturalness is, therefore, both false and politically detrimental. But this anti-essentialist stance is not without problems.

To cope with the fact that most human beings have unambiguously sexed sets of chromosomes and bodies, anti-essentialists have used two strategies, one of which involves introducing the sex/gender distinction (see Lorber and Farrell eds 1991), while the other radicalizes anti-essentialism, considering sexes too as cultural constructions (see, most famously, Butler 1999). As we know, the sex/gender distinction assumes that in the opposition between male and female, what is natural can distinguished from what is cultural (and therefore, in principle, subject to choice). Unfortunately, though, it is empirically difficult, not to say impossible, to tell the difference between what people do because of their nature and what they do because of education, habit, tradition, and the like. Indeed, what appears to be cultural may be analyzed in a "naturalized" way, while what appears to be natural can almost always be modified by training or, when appropriate, by the use of technology. The sex/gender distinction, then, although at first sight clear and almost commonsense, actually turns out to be weak, and this weakness leads anti-essentialists to favour radical solutions, claiming that sex is as cultural as gender after all and that the sex/gender distinction does not hold.

That all difference between human males and females is a matter of performance, however, thus belonging to the realm of culture, is not thoroughly convincing. One may wonder, for example, whether a woman's failure to display certain properties belonging to the feminine gender (for example, a girl ignoring dolls and playing with cars and trains instead) and a woman undergoing surgery to change her sex are to be reasonably considered as graded manifestations of the same kind of process. The toughest point in the debate about essentialism is, however, reproduction. What about reproductive roles in human beings? Firstly, what about the physiological roles that male and female play in reproduction? From

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3 *Speculum* (Irigaray 1974) is not an essentialist book, but in later works (among which Irigaray 1977) this author seems to derive the properties of the feminine subject directly from features of female sex. However, see Braidotti's comments (1991: 248-263). Although Gilligan is often treated as the prototype of essentialist feminism (see for example Antony 2012), the interpretation of her work is controversial (see Saul 2003: 216-220).

4 This assumption works quite well as a framework for the investigation of gender identities and relations in social and communicative interaction. See for example Kotthoff and Wodak (eds) (1997), Baron and Kotthoff (eds) (2001).

the biological point of view, human reproduction resembles that of other mammals: male and female reproductive roles are not interchangeable nor symmetric, and (for the time being at least) the functions played in the reproductive processes by male and female individuals can only be partly replaced by technological aids. Secondly, does evolutionary adaptation to male and female reproductive roles determine other properties of male and female individuals? Perhaps not at all, or perhaps to some extent only.

Granted, technological progress can turn biological functions into cultural choices. This is apparent nowadays in human reproduction, particularly with respect to motherhood: thanks to technology, women now have the means to decide whether the sexual intercourse they might want to have will be potentially fertile or not, so that conception (and therefore motherhood) can no longer be considered as matters of biological fatality. Other more complex technological interventions make it possible to replace intercourse with artificial insemination, or let a woman host an embryo of which she is not the genetic mother; moreover, after a certain minimum gestation time, foetuses can now survive and develop outside the mother's womb. All these new techniques open the way to choices that were not "naturally" available, such as having a child from a dead husband, or getting pregnant after the end of one's childbearing age. In these cases, the obvious contrast between what is done by means of technology and what would happen according to "nature" suggests that on each occasion we face a choice between a technology-guided and a nature-guided line of conduct. But these two kinds of behavior are not "chosen" by people in the same way and to the same extent. In most cases, it is reasonable to assume that what happens without technological intervention has a default status: the issue of choice only arises when something (a precise goal, for example) makes the use of technology pertinent, and so the two situations are not symmetrical. So, while whatever technology does rather obviously pertains to culture, it does not follow that what happens without the use of technology should be counted as cultural as well. After all, it seems only fair to concede that the body enjoys a sort of givenness which philosophy should not sweep under the carpet but seriously thematize.[5]

It is quite understandable that people seeking to free themselves from gender models should attempt to shift the biology of reproduction from nature to culture: taking it all to be a cultural matter removes from gender models any possible biological legitimization. There might be other ways of rejecting gender essentialism, however, which do not need such a move. For example, it should be possible to see the nature/culture distinction as a continuous line between two poles, and recognize, in contrast to the way the distinction is construed when turned into a dichotomy, that culture has its determinism and nature its flexibility. As to our bodies, it should be possible to take them as starting points (be these resources or constraints), namely as things that do not speak for themselves but which we elaborate on and assign significance to. Of course, it is no easy task to construct a defense from essentialism along these lines, especially due to the widespread expectation that any theory that is not anti-essentialist must be essentialist, and *vice versa*.

3. How do gender concepts work?

Given the difficulties in dealing with essentialist assumptions about gender, one would expect that looking at language again would be useful, no longer to specify assumptions about gender making them available to criticism, but to investigate how it is that these assumptions are so pervasive of our experience and activity and tend to be perceived as normative, making one's

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5 More attention to this theme has been paid by phenomenology: a very interesting example is Heinämaa (2014). In my own work (Sbisà 1996), I have put forward a conception of feminine subjectivity as developing in the elaboration of female sex-related experiences.

gender appear as one's inescapable fate. Another way to concern ourselves with gender issues in philosophy might therefore be to discuss, not so much the content of gender concepts, as their nature or structure, and the way they work in cognition and communication.

Let us first examine which ways of conceptualizing gender are available in principle. To begin with, gender can be (and often is) conceptualized as dichotomically exhaustive: there are two genders and each individual has to belong to one of them, or even, every property that an individual may have must be part of one or other of the two gender concepts. In this case, individuals have to belong to a gender, and if the latter assumption is also taken to hold, this gender will determine all their properties. This is the most restrictive way of conceptualizing gender. Emblematic of this is the astonishing claim I happened to come across recently on a poster promoting protest against the alleged influence of so-called "gender theory" in Italian educational programmes: "boys are male and girls are female".[6]

To lessen the compulsoriness and pervasiveness of gender, one may conceive of gender concepts as comprising only gender-relevant properties. This makes it possible, at least in theory, that an individual lacking those properties might fail to belong to a gender. Moreover, properties not relevant to gender could be possessed by individuals of any gender and therefore, for example, shared by individuals belonging to different genders. It seems to me that our usual way of conceiving of gender matches this model at least in this respect. Compulsoriness of gender would be also mitigated if a society and its language were to allow for an open number of genders: this would be made possible if the contents of existing gender concepts were conceived of as non-exhaustive of the possible sets of gender relevant properties. However, this way of conceiving genders is not without risks, since it fosters the individual's identification with a gender, thereby indirectly confirming that gender belonging is compulsory after all.

As a further alternative, gender belonging may be conceived of as gradable. In this perspective, one individual can be deemed more masculine than another, or even more masculine than feminine (or the other way around), depending on the number of properties he/she possesses belonging either to the masculine gender concept or to the feminine gender concept. Those properties are still either feminine or masculine, and it is their proportion that determines gender belonging. Adopting this perspective enables us to talk of more (or less) feminine women and more (or less) masculine men, and although we may be accepting actual people as "hybrid", the fixed borders and received contents of gender concepts themselves are confirmed.

This brief exploration of possible ways of conceptualizing gender is perhaps enough to show, or at least to strongly suggest, that none of these ways is quite free from the pervasiveness and compulsoriness that make gender concepts such a source of trouble in real life. Clearly, the solution to these troubles cannot be found in the structure of gender concepts considered in isolation, and so it is worth considering whether problems with gender concepts may be rooted in general facts about language and cognition.

Gender labels are usually employed to make generic statements such as "Men love soccer" or "Women are emotional". Recent research on generics, by Sarah-Jane Leslie in particular (Leslie 2007, 2008, 2017),[7] maintains that such statements are not equivalent to quantified statements, but are held to be true when the property assigned to the category is prevalent in the category or else when, even if not prevalent, the property is characteristic of the category or striking for some other reason (e.g., members of the category that possess it are dangerous,

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6 I saw this poster in Rome in September 2017.
7 For an overview, see Leslie and Lerner, 2016.

as in "Mosquitoes carry the West Nile virus"). Elaborating upon various experimental findings (showing, for example, that children understand generics as generalizations about kinds or categories before they fully master quantified statements, and that people tend to recall universally quantified statements as generics),[8] Leslie claims that generics are the most basic way in which cognitive generalizations are expressed in language. So, generics support the fundamental cognitive activity of categorization both in the area of natural sciences (notably biology) and in social cognition, but at a price: the use of generics appears to regularly activate essentialist beliefs,[9] that is, the category is taken to be grounded in an essence, which means that members of the category are taken to share something that causally grounds their manifestation of certain properties (Leslie 2017). It should be noted that this use of generics does not suggest that the category they are about has fuzzy borders: rather, it makes the classic view of a category as having a perfectly delimited extension compatible with the possibility (and actual existence) of exceptions. Accepting a generic disposes the receiver to infer that any arbitrarily chosen member of that category is endowed with the property expressed by the predicate of the generic. It seems to me that the essentialist beliefs observed by Leslie in association with the use of bare plurals as subjects of generics could also be described as existential presuppositions (and accommodations thereof): the category is presupposed to "exist" *as* a category, and therefore, to have an essence, and the receiver is implicitly invited to share such a background assumption. It is insofar as a certain category is assumed to exist and be causally grounded (so that its members at least share the disposition to manifest certain properties), that it (or its members, *qua* its members) may become the target of derogatory assessment and discrimination.

All this may explain some of the troubles we incur as speakers or receivers of generic statements about genders. What is explained, though, it not avoided or overcome. If Leslie is right about the way in which generics function, and therefore about how gender concepts work, what should philosophers do with generalizations about social kinds, gender in particular? Should we avoid using gender generics (for example, assertions the subject of which is expressed by bare plurals like "men" and "women")? Leslie (2017) recommends the use of adjectives in place of nouns, since the former do not activate essentialist beliefs to the same extent as the latter: but this would hardly work with gender, and might even be a waste of energy, distracting us from tackling other sources of gender discrimination (as Saul 2017 warns). Should we, then, examine and reject the gender generics which fail to meet the conditions for a generic statement to be true (for example, the properties they predicate are not appropriate to generalization – not really "striking", not really functional to the primary social function of the category)? Or would it be enough to argue that the normative understanding of gender generics is ill-founded? Establishing this last point would cancel part of the harmful implications of the use of gender generics, but would still not be enough to stop them being used to discriminate a whole gender category.

At this point, there is a side issue that needs to be mentioned: I have assumed throughout that philosophy has a professional deontology. But does it actually have a deontology and should it have one? And if so, what kind? Some colleagues might say that philosophers should only seek truth and give reasons for those claims that they make in so doing. In the 20th century, numerous thinkers added to this, or else preferred to say that philosophers should refrain

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8 About children's understanding of generics, see Gelman (2010); Gelman, Goetz, Sarnecka and Flukes (2008); Gelman and Raman (2003); Hollander, Gelman and Star (2002); Leslie (2012). About recalling quantified statements as generics, see Gelman, Sánchez Tapia and Leslie (2016); Leslie and Gelman (2012).
9 Gelman, Ware and Kleinberg (2010); Rhodes, Leslie and Tworek (2012).

from making claims that are not suitable for being assessed as true or false, and should help non-philosophers distinguish claims that are so suitable from claims that are not. But apart from this direct or indirect relationship to truth, and the appeal to reasons, do philosophers have any further responsibilities as regards the society to which they belong? My reply to this question is simple: everybody is responsible for what her speech brings about (illocutions) and to some extent also for their consequences on psychological attitudes and behavior (perlocutions); but even more responsible is whoever knows more or sees farther than others, as should be true of philosophers, or is in a position that can *de facto* have influence on others, as sometimes happens to them. I therefore think that philosophers facing choices about how to deal with matters that have moral or political implications should care as much about what is right as about what is true. Incidentally, these aims may well not be in competition. On the negative side, a philosopher should avoid licensing implications that may be expected to be harmful. On the positive side, a number of morally or politically relevant goals, such as freedom of individual realization, self-determination (within reasonable limits), smoothness in interpersonal relations, and transparency and reversibility of relational asymmetries, are such that philosophy can and should help in the pursuit of.

Returning in the light of these reflections to Leslie's worries and recommendations about the harmful assumptions associated with social kind and gender generics, I think that they are basically legitimate and worth consideration. Obviously, changing people's linguistic habits by decree is obviously not a viable option, and after all, it is doubtful whether there is any simple way in which it would be worth changing them: but research on how certain harmful assumptions about genders are communicated and how their communication could be avoided or their content questioned can certainly be of some help on our way towards dealing with gender concepts in correct and appropriate ways.

4. Gender issues and intersubjective recognition

It seems that we have come to an impasse. We can make socially shared assumptions about gender explicit and criticize these assumptions. We can criticize not just their content, but also their essentialist implications. We are aware that certain quite common ways of speaking (the use of gender generics), along with their important cognitive function, may also carry harmful presuppositions about gender categories, play a normative function, and pave the way to discrimination. But all this does not seem to give firm grounds to the rejection of gender discrimination, the refutation of essentialist beliefs about the genders, and the neutralization of the normative import of gender concepts. To these aims, we might profit from another (albeit converging) line of reasoning: I would suggest that philosophy tackled gender issues by considering them as a test of people's capability and willingness to recognize others as subjects or, if you prefer, as human persons.[10]

By "intersubjective recognition", I am referring to the process by which two human individuals recognize each other as subjects. It is a basic process in human life, integral both to interpersonal relations and to broader social ones.[11] It is not a unilateral process. An attitude attributing subjectivity to an individual is not a private fact about the recognizer but, through

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10 In what follows I will speak of "subjects", in order to leave issues about the definition of "person" aside.
11 Many hints at this process and its indispensable role can be found in analytic philosophy. Recognition of mental functions, capacities and dispositions is taken into consideration and even given a central place in accounts provided by various philosophers of the process of understanding another subject's language and meaning. At the very least, I would like to mention Davidson's Charity Principle (1984), Grice's Cooperative Principle (1989: 22-40), and Dennett's "intentional stance" (1987). I have touched upon this theme on various occasions, most recently in my (2013). The idea of intersubjective recognition would also profit from a comparison with the theme of intersubjectivity in phenomenology, but the task is so huge that I am in no position to even begin hinting at it.

her behavior and speech, contributes to establishing the intersubjectively shared space of the encounter and to characterizing its participants as subjects endowed with certain attitudes, dispositions, and other action-related properties. It cannot in general be entertained for long if there is no response or feedback on the part of the recognition's target. The recognition of the other's subjectivity, therefore, necessarily involves a framework of intersubjectivity.

Being incapable of such recognition (which involves, for example, not realising that beliefs, intentions, desires and other attitudes vary across individuals and thus being unable to correctly attribute attitudes to others) is not merely being insensitive, but is actually a symptom of certain kinds of psychiatric disorders (see Baron Cohen 1997, Frith 2003). Local, but systematic, refusal to recognize certain others as subjects, possibly associated with the refusal of granting them human rights – as happens in reduction to slavery, or in genocide – is a unanimously condemned stance. Indeed, it should be pointed out that those who (for some reason of their own) do not want to condemn certain other people for taking such a stance make no attempt to defend them directly, but adopt a negationist strategy instead, attempting to deny that the events manifesting that stance have taken place or that they were an actual manifestation of that stance. There is no doubt that a responsible philosophy, in analysing subject-other relations, should foster practices of intersubjective recognition, rather than hinder them, and the first thing to do is to pay attention to how they work.

Recognizing someone as a subject involves assigning her various kinds of competence: attitudes, dispositions, but also rights, obligations and other deontic properties (amounting to what may be called, adapting a notion from narrative semiotics, the subject's "deontic competence")[12] that sometimes correspond to some kind of specific social status. It is tempting to think of this recognition as an all-in-one attribution, but while that may be so by default, in cases in which there are hurdles or problems either on the part of the recognizing subject or on the part of the subject to be recognized, in order to understand what is going on it is necessary to analyze various levels of attribution that may not all be active at the same time. Recognition of the other as a subject, then, consists at the very least of recognizing her as a center of perspective, while further steps consist of recognizing her as capable of (or actually exercising) agency, as a speaker mastering a language and expressing meaning by it, and finally, as a speaker-agent of illocutionary acts, endowed with the deontic competence necessary for her designed performance, and affecting, by her acts, the deontic competence of addressees or other target participants. Recognition of another human being as a subject is completely achieved when it involves all these levels of subjectivity and moreover, is granted unconditionally. Indeed, it can only be flawed when given under-a-condition: for example, if I take you to be an agent only insofar as you do certain things I want to be done, or to be a speaker insofar as that is indispensable to the exercise of a certain subordinate social role, or to be a center of perspective only when you perform your gender role in a way functional to my needs. When recognition is conditional in these ways, it can be suddenly withdrawn in ways which show that it was never actual and effective. It becomes apparent that I never really expected you to have your own perspective on your relationship to me, never really thought you were capable of autonomous decision-making, and never would grant that you be in a position to perform authority-presupposing illocutionary acts.

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12 In narrative semiotics (Greimas 1970, 1983; Greimas and Courtés 1979), the dispositions and the deontic properties that prompt the subject's action or enable her to act constitute her "modal competence" for acting. Focusing upon an agent's deontic properties, which in my perspective differ from attitudes or dispositions because they are granted and withdrawn on the basis of social or interpersonal agreement, I use the label "deontic competence". In my work on illocutionary acts since the 1980s, I have connected changes in the deontic competence of participants to illocutionary acts as their conventional effects (1984, 1989).

When the other is recognized as a subject because he or she is similar to us, we are faced with an ambiguous kind of recognition. A recognition based upon the assumption that the subject recognized is similar to the recognizer would indeed be a conditional one and would therefore be flawed. But what if the cognitive bases of recognition, consisting in an ability to attribute attitudes and agency to other people, should involve some kind of simulation of the others' stance and perspective (as in simulation theory, see Goldman 2006), on the basis of our own? Would this amount to making every recognition dependent on similarities between the subject to be recognized and the recognizing one? In many cases, perhaps, it will be enough if the interlocutors' capacities to entertain attitudes and to act are considered similar, or even just parallel. Moreover, if it is true, as research on the role of mirror neurons in social cognition suggests (see Rizzolatti and Craighero 2004, Rizzolatti and Sinigaglia 2007), that what we do is simply use the same action schemes both to project our own action and to understand what another agent is doing, this clearly does not require any previous assessment of similarities between recognizer and recognized. Rather, the feeling of a common belonging to humankind (or to the animal kindgom, or to life in the universe) will come later. But if there is a category of which both the recognizing and the recognized subject are held to be members, and this membership (involving participation in the category's "essence") works as a condition for the recognition, that recognition is flawed.

I would say that women have long suffered from being recognized as subjects both conditionally and partially (namely, not at all levels). This may happen to men too, in certain circumstances and for specific motivations; with racism, by the way, it happens to both genders at once; but for women, it is a chronic condition. The "silencing" of women, so much discussed in the philosophy of language and in political philosophy (Langton 1993 and Hornsby and Langton 1998 are key contributions to this debate),[13] can be seen as a manifestation of the failure to recognize the other's subjectivity and deontic competence unconditionally: a typical and often dramatic case of "silencing" occurs when a woman refuses a man's sexual advances, but the force of her utterance and the attitudes and the deontic competence it involves, both as regards the preconditions and the result of her speech act, are not recognized. It is no coincidence that the women's movement of the 1970s based feminine autonomy upon unconditional intersubjective recognition occurring among women: the words used for describing this process were less abstract and more emotional, but insofar as it worked, that was what was going on.

The issue of intersubjective recognition could be further investigated by considering it in the narrative dimension. I am not referring here to narrative theories of the subject in the philosophy of mind, but to the analytical techniques and terminology of narrative semiotics (Greimas 1970, 1983; Greimas and Courtés 1979). There, the Subject is first of all a narrative "actant", that is, a narrative element defined for its functions in the narrative syntax: receiving a task, carrying it out, and being rewarded. The Subject is then enriched by the attribution of dispositions and deontic properties, to be turned into a more specific "actantial role", and is manifested in discourse by an agent (an "actor") endowed with descriptive characteristics. Whatever the details of the analytic terminology employed, in narrative semiotics the role of Subject is not one that can be played in isolation: another function in the narrative syntax is required to be at work in order for the Subject to receive from it its task, as well as its reward. That function, called the "Destinant", is therefore indispensable to there being a Subject at all. It is the Destinant who assigns the Subject his or her task and

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13 Contributions to the debate include: Bird (2002); Caponetto (2017); Hornsby (2011); Jacobson (1995): Maitra (2009); McGowan (2009), (2017); McGowan et al. (2011); Mikkola (2011); Sbisà (2009).

after the performance, recognizes the Subject as the performer. In the terms used here, the Subject of a narrative exists as such insofar as its Destinant recognizes it. This confirms that our understanding of what it is to be a Subject (insofar as the structure of narratives reflects it) involves recognition of subjectivity as an indispensable part of the picture. A problem is raised, though, by the fact that the standard Destinant-Subject relationship appears to be mono-directional and hierarchical and therefore not suited to account for the intersubjective character of recognition of subjectivity. Not only are the functions of Destinant and Subject such that it is the Subject that depends on the Destinant, not the converse, but also, this functional asymmetry is typically reflected in the descriptive characteristics that Destinant and Subject are endowed with: the Destinant, which is also the source of the values of the narrative, does not belong to the same environment as the Subject and is therefore presented as "transcendent" with respect to the Subject and its world. But intersubjective recognition, as I have presented it here, is realized completely only if it is bi-directional. The kind of narrative underlying actual intersubjective recognition should therefore envisage a Destinant whose manipulation and assessment activities are carried out in the same environment as the Subject's performance, so that in principle agents expressing Destinant and Subject can switch their roles. Not by chance, it is especially in narratives in which the role of Subject is played by a female agent that this non-transcendence of the Destinant manifests itself: while on the one hand, this confirms that the feminine gender has no access to transcendent sources of values, on the other, it opens up the relationship of Subject and Destinant to reversibility (on this, see Sbisà 2017, 41-42) and to the bi-directionality of intersubjective recognition.

To sum up, my suggestion is that further reflection on the ways in which intersubjective recognition is achieved and made manifest (or on the ways in which it fails and is revealed as flawed) can throw light on the dynamics of human relations, both positive and negative, and among these, on gender relations.[14] This reflection could also elicit an increased awareness of why gender discrimination is ill-founded and should be stopped, why essentialist beliefs about the genders should be abandoned, and why gender concepts should not be granted normativity. In fact, discrimination is a process by which a subject is denied full recognition because of his or her belonging, or not belonging, to a certain group. Essentialist beliefs pave the way to discrimination or at any rate, make recognition conditional on the subject having a certain essence. Lastly, the normative function of gender concepts might turn out to arise from the pressure put on the subject seeking recognition by the conditions on which the alleged recognition would be granted.

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14 Notwithstanding the great differences in the terms in which the two proposals are expressed, there may be similarities or even some complementarity between tackling gender issues in terms of recognition of subjectivity or failure thereof, as I have been suggesting to do in this section, and Mikkola's humanist feminism as outlined in her work on dehumanization (Mikkola 2016).

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