

PHILOSOPHY: THE BIG QUESTIONS



RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY:

The Big Questions

EDITED BY NAOMI ZACK, LAURIE SHRAGE, CRISPIN SARTWELL



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RACE, CLASS, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY: THE BIG QUESTIONS

The Big Questions

EDITED BY MADNA JAKL, LINDA VERAGE, AND JESSICA SUTCLIFF

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Edited by Naomi Zack, Laurie Shrage, and Crispin Sartwell

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Crispin Sartwell: For my daughter Emma

Laurie Shrage: To Hannah and Nathan

Naomi Zack: To my sons, Alex and Bradford

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INTRODUCTION

Naomi Zack

Social Identities

This book is about the social identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Identity is the broadest subject in studies of human nature because it combines questions of how we seem to be to ourselves with how we operate as persons in society. Philosophers have found identity interesting in terms of several abstract and general questions: What kind of thing in the world is a human being? What defines or distinguishes a person so that if every other aspect changes, that defining quality will guarantee that the same person is still present? Is the core of human identity something that we can experience only directly, in the “first-person” from the “inside,” or is it something that others can observe about us from “outside” perspectives? Are we most truly our minds, our bodies, our behavior or some combination of these three things? Such abstract and general questions about human identity can be posed regardless of the time or place in which the subject lives. They are assumed to be universal questions about identity, about what we are.

In considering human identity as an aspect of human life in society, especially late twentieth-century American society, social categories and roles may be of more immediate everyday relevance than the universal or metaphysical categories addressed in the classic philosophical questions. In everyday life, most Americans are unconcerned about what it is that makes a person the same person or whether they are minds as opposed to bodies, or both, or something else. They are instead concerned with how the ways in which people are different affect their status and functioning in society. More specifically, most people accept what they take to be the facts of human difference and relate to others largely as members of the types and categories to which they seem to belong. This focus on the ways in which people differ in society, instead of on the ways in which they are the same, regardless of time and place, does not mean that sociology is more relevant than philosophy for understanding contemporary human identity. What it does mean, however, is that it may be useful to apply, or redirect, some of the philosophical questions about what endures through change and what it is that people most importantly are, to the categories of difference that are in wide use in society.

Redirection of philosophy from human sameness in a universal sense, to human difference in a social sense, raises a new set of philosophical questions about identity: Do the categories of human difference have natural or cultural origins? What are the defining characteristics of broad social categories, such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, to which people belong? Does membership in these categories completely define the person who belongs to them? Can the categories to which a person belongs change and is there room for overlap and interaction among categories?

So far, I have been using the term "category" to mean both race, class, gender, and sexuality, in their general senses, and specific types of race, class, gender, and sexuality, such as black, white, working class, female, or heterosexual. The universal questions about identity can be redirected again into questions of definition, sameness and change that apply to the specific types within the general categories.

However, there are limits to any system of human typing. All of us have ideas of ourselves and ways of interacting with others that seem to be typical of our race, class, gender, and sexuality. But we also vary as individuals and expect others to respect our uniqueness as members of a race or social class, as men or women, as heterosexuals or homosexuals. If strangers apply the categories to us and sort us into (what they think are) the appropriate types, we may feel diminished as human beings if our difference as individuals, as unique persons, is ignored.

Our identities of race, class, gender, and sexuality are partly made up by our own individual choices, partly influenced by the identities of others of the same group to which we belong, and partly influenced by members of groups different from our own. For example, if you are a man, you have your own ideas of what that means and much of your personal and social behavior, even your career and recreation choices, may express and define your masculinity. But your male peers, relatives and role models also influence what kind of a man you are, and so do your female peers, relatives and those who you accept as role models for women. Overall, if you are female, homosexual, white, Asian American, working class, upper class, disabled or whatever else may apply, your identity in the category that applies to you is made up in ways that combine self-image, same-group expectation and other-group image and expectation.

However, the range of personal choice may vary according to the types to which one belongs in the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. If one is a member of a type with a higher status – for example, male instead of female, white instead of black, heterosexual instead of homosexual, or middle class instead of working class, the range of personal choice will seem to be greater than if one belongs to the lower-status type. Also, where one lives, and when, and what subculture one belongs to, further affects social identity. Imagine, for example, the difference between being a black homosexual middle-class man in a southern city in 1940 and in 1998, or between belonging to the same types at the same times in New York City and San Francisco.

Of course, there are many other categories of difference to which people belong that make up their identities. Consider the categories of age (young, middle-aged or old), physical ability (able or disabled), health (mentally and physically well or ill). Thus in addition to race, class, gender, and sexuality, age, ability, and health are general components of identity that influence the formation of social roles in work and personal interactions. For example, your race and social class may influence the career you prepare for, and your age and physical ability may determine whether or not you can be a parent, while your race, class, and sexuality will partly determine whom you choose and are chosen by as a co-parent.

This Book

There are immediate reasons why the subject of this book is race, class, gender, and sexuality. In recent decades, partly owing to widespread social changes, there has been a new or revised interest in these categories and their specific types by scholars in the arts and sciences. Since the 1960s in the United States, there has been greater social *liberation* through increased economic and civic participation for disadvantaged types in the categories. More women have joined the work force and demanded full consideration as participating citizens in all aspects of American life. Nonwhites have been able to demand greater social justice and equality as the result of the civil rights legislation. Higher proportions of both women and nonwhites have attended college and entered the professions. Many members of the white working class have moved into the middle class through educational and economic advancement. During the same time, members of all category types have acquired more freedom to privately explore and express, and publicly identify, their sexuality.

At this point, it might help to define race, gender, class, and sexuality. Although there are no definitions that everyone would accept without qualification, the following will be useful for the sake of discussion, here.

Race: a physical and cultural typing that most Americans believe can be used to sort people into the four main groups of white, black, Asian, and Indian (Native American).

Class: a group that is distinctive from other groups owing to its members' wealth, occupations, incomes, level of formal education and lifestyle choices. The class and race a person belongs to is a rough but accurate predictor of his or her social status. Some scholars think race is a more important predictor of status or power, some think class. In the United States, most people think that social class identity is determined by money but they also acknowledge the importance of the educational level and occupation, not just of individuals but of their parents and grandparents, too.

Gender: masculine or feminine characteristics that include styles of appearance and habits, as well as social roles in romantic relationships, families, and other contexts of private and public life. Many feminist scholars believe that

gender is the most important predictor of the degree of power and well-being that individuals enjoy in society; other scholars of liberation think that race and class are more determining. In contrast to gender, the term “sex” refers to the biological traits that result in an individual being male or female. An individual’s sex is related to reproductive function as evidenced by the presence of ovaries or testicles or having XX (female) or XY (male) chromosomal markers. However, some feminist scholars believe that biological sex is a scientific idea that has resulted from cultural ideas about male and female gender.

Sexuality: orientation in sexual behavior, including the preferred sex of sexual partners, practices of monogamy or polygamy and styles of sexual behavior.

At this time, most people view race and sex as biologically determined. This is another way of saying that most people think that racial and sexual differences are “natural.” By contrast, gender, especially the social roles assigned to human males and females, and class, are viewed as the products of culture; ethnicity is also viewed as a cultural product, in contrast to race. However, some contemporary scholars insist that sexual differences are culturally defined or “constructed” and others argue that racial differences are not biologically real.

There is a problem with the definitions offered above which is addressed in different ways by the writers in this collection. This is the problem of *essentialism*. Before modern science, it was believed that if something existed, especially if it was a natural object as opposed to a man-made object, it had an essence. The term “essence” was first used by the Greek philosopher, Aristotle (384–322 BC) to refer to a quality in a type of thing, shared by each member of that type that made it a member of the type. Thus every member of the groups of cats, dogs, trees, and bodies of water each had the essence of its group or kind. The British philosopher John Locke (1632–1794) is famous for arguing that essences do not exist in natural things themselves but are invented by the human mind, somewhat arbitrarily. Scientists in many fields, especially biology, define words for natural objects such as plants and animals, with words that refer to characteristics that objects must have in order to belong to the kinds that they do. But no one has ever discovered an essence as distinct from the specific traits shared by all members of a kind. For example, there are no cat essences although there are traits that all animals we call cats have in common.

The first scientists who studied human behavior attempted to follow the methodology of the physical sciences, because they began their studies after the physical sciences were generally accepted as successful inquiries. But some of the nineteenth-century scientists of human behavior and biology carried scientifically unconfirmed Aristotelian notions of essences into their work. Such essentialist thinking is evident to us now in early studies of sexual and racial difference, and of differences in social class. (This is putting the case neutrally because many scholars today argue that the nineteenth-century scientists of race, sex, and class were simply racist and misogynistic, as well as elitist.) To some extent, in ordinary life, many people still think of their own and others’