

## **Guest Editors' Introduction to the Special Issue on Social Meaning and Reality**

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Human beings are social beings. Our development and socialization involve integration into groups. Through such processes, we become categorized in various ways, e.g., by our gender, race, abilities, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious belief, marital status, and nationalities.

For instance, Kamala Harris is an American, Democrat, Black, Asian, married, and a woman. But what makes her such? More precisely, what is the nature of these social categories, including their metaphysical bases, structures, and specific mechanisms, such that one belongs to one category but not the other? How much control do we have over our being in one of these categories rather than another? In what sense, and to what extent, are these categories up to us (Ásta, 2018; Epstein, 2015; Hacking, 1995; Mallon, 2016; Millikan, 1984; Searle, 1995)? Are we able to revise categories or invent new ones? If so, how do we go about doing so, and on what

grounds (e.g., Barnes, 2016; Haslanger, 2012)? How should we understand our personal relationship to groups to which we belong?

Besides being in various social categories, we talk about these categories. There are many things we can do with words (Austin 1962), and words that depict social categories, especially race, gender, and sexual orientation, can have enormous political import (Dembroff, 2016; Glasgow et al., 2019; Jenkins, 2016; Mühlebach, 2019). The way we understand and represent ourselves and others conditions our expectations, informs our preferences, and guides or alters our behavior. For one thing, individuals often reason in terms of their social identities and social roles, and consequently act as group agents towards the common good for their group. For another, research has shown that the language young children hear can shape their perception of social groups, which may lead to stereotyping and prejudice (Rhodes et al., 2017). Gender gaps in educational and career choices, for example, may be traced back to forms of stereotyping (Bian et al., 2017).

If language has such social import, we should ask: What is the meaning of social category terms and how is it determined? Do words such as “men” and “women” have a fixed and definite meaning, or does the meaning vary depending on the context and the user (Bettcher, 2013; Chen, forthcoming; Diaz-Leon, 2016; Saul, 2012)? What about the meaning of “nation” to the people who belong to a country not formally recognized internationally? To what extent are linguistic meanings up to us? Who has the power to change meanings, how do they do so, and on what sort of grounds is change justified (Burgess et al., 2020; Cappelen, 2018)?

The study of meaning and reality in social context has pivotal theoretical and practical significance. This special issue is a follow-up of the conference “Meaning and Reality in Social Context,” held on January 15-16, 2019 at the Institute of European and American Studies (IEAS), Academia Sinica. After the conference, we sent out a call for papers on the topics discussed, and selected the four papers included here. They address current debates on social ontology, the

semantics of social category terms, and normative issues concerning the relationship between individuals and the social groups to which they belong. While the approaches taken in the selected papers are predominantly philosophical, the study of social categories, institutions, and practices is not only philosophically important but has widespread significance. Careful examination of the metaphysics of the social domain provokes a re-thinking of our personal and collective identities and undertakings.

Research on these topics allows us to draw fine-grained distinctions and reflect on the relationship between the actual and the possible. Awareness that our actual social arrangements are not necessary or “given” but could be otherwise is important for challenging previously unscrutinized assumptions and identifying how we could do better. By developing adequate (conceptual) tools and models, we are in a better position to target the good. However, we must also acknowledge that academe itself is imbued with social influences: we are trained to respect disciplinary divides and proliferate sub-disciplines; the increasingly competitive job market and the “publish or perish” practice incentivizes work on “popular” topics; ubiquitous gender, racial, economic, and linguistic inequalities affect access to educational and professional resources. Calling attention to this background of our pursuit of knowledge reminds us of the limitations, potentials, and responsibilities of our activities.

*EurAmerica* aims to foster dialogues between scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds with common concerns about Western culture, thought, and social systems; so it is well-suited for serious discussions of these matters. We are appreciative of the vision this journal embodies and are thankful to the editor-in-chief, Prof. Norman Teng, and executive editor, Prof. Cheng-Hung Tsai, for their invitation to guest-edit this special issue. We thank all the contributors and the anonymous referees, whose commitment to outstanding research makes possible this collection. We hope the novel insights and arguments represented by each of these papers

and the opportunity to read them together demonstrates the value of this area of research and sparks further investigations.

Below we provide a short summary of each.

Just as there is a large variety of social categories that an individual can inhabit, there is a wide range of explanations of why one belongs to a particular social category. In “Open Questions in the Metaphysics of Habitable Categories,” Axel Barcelo divides the competing views into three general approaches, i.e. what he calls the common sense theories, socio-historical accounts, and performative theories. In addition to delineating their respective strengths and limitations, Barcelo argues that for someone not perfectly situated in a specific category, a scenario that in present days occurs more often than we originally think, the differences between these approaches have critical consequences. With this in mind, he suggests a pluralist account of category membership.

Some human kinds are products of our conceptual or social practices, even though they are widely believed to be natural, biological kinds. Ron Mallon’s “Structurally-Constituted Human Kinds” defends the covert social constructionist account of human kinds and articulates a semantic externalist (Kripke, 1972; Putnam, 1975) argument for it. Mallon zeros in on racial kinds and racial terms in the context of the U.S. and argues that (a) the key properties associated with racial terms are racial disparities; (b) racial kinds that are constituted by a heterogeneous collection of causal effects of past socio-conceptual activity; (c) semantic externalist accounts of reference (Boyd, 1992; Haslanger, 2003, 2005; Mallon, 2003) explain how racial terms in fact refer to social constructions, despite widespread misunderstanding on the part of those who use these terms.

A center of heated ongoing debates is the semantics of politically significant terms. Focusing specifically on the meaning of “man,” Dan Zeman’s “Invariantist, Contextualist, and Relativist Accounts of Gender Terms” offers a meticulously argued, up-to-date roadmap that helps readers navigate the array of positions

concerning the semantic amelioration of gender terms. Zeman argues that no existing versions of invariantism, contextualism, or relativism do justice to the rights of trans people. To fully respect trans people's choice, Zeman sketches a new invariantist view based on self-identification and notes potential challenges to it. Key issues addressed along the way include the desiderata of successful ameliorative semantic theories, connections to the metaphysics of gender, and the need for a fuller account of self-identification.

Robin Zheng's "#NotAllMen and #NotMyPresident: The Limits of Moral Disassociation" examines the nature of moral disassociation, a phenomenon that occurs when an individual distances themselves from the social group to which they belong due to an unjust collective practice the group maintains but the individual rejects. Zheng argues that focusing too much on moral disassociation can prevent us from zeroing in on structural or systemic injustice; she makes the further claim that everyone is responsible: we all share the responsibility for social change that aims at eradicating injustice.

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