

From structure to rhizome: transdisciplinarity in French thought (1)

The concept of transdisciplinarity is not part of the explicit discourse or self-consciousness of 'French thought'. Rather, it is used here, imported from the outside as a kind of operator or problematizing device, to begin a process of rethinking one of that body of thought's most distinctive but infrequently remarked-upon characteristics – its tendency to move fluidly across disciplinary fields and modes of knowledge – and thereby also to rethink some of its main ideas.

Unexamined transdisciplinary dynamics motivate and energize many of the 'great books' of postwar European theory. In France one can point emblematically to Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), the first volume of Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Practical Ensembles* (1960), Lévi-Strauss's *The Savage Mind* (1962), Foucault's *Words and Things*, Derrida's *Writing and Difference* and Lacan's *Écrits* (each 1966) and Deleuze and Guattari's two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972, 1980). All are books that cross disciplines with a confidence and facility that belie the complexity of the exchanges between the disciplinary knowledges upon which they are built – in often widely differing and unstated ways. And all have productive but problematic relationships to the varieties of systematic orientation (including anti-systems) that characterize the post-Kantian European philosophical tradition, raising the question of the proto-philosophical character of transdisciplinarity itself.

One way to approach this situation would be to focus on the singularities of such canonical texts as literary works. Another, adopted here, is to approach them via the most general concepts that they construct, and to inquire into the genealogy and transdisciplinary functioning of these concepts: 'structure', of course, and its place within work that was later called 'post-structuralist'; but also existentialism (whose death was prematurely announced), within which the rethinking of the concept 'sex' associated with Western feminism has its philosophical beginnings; along with ideas associated with tendencies that

do not fit so neatly into such boxes – like 'network'; and those that are simply too general to be usefully pegged to particular texts or even bodies of theoretical writing, such as 'science'.

The 'entries' presented below stake out some ground for rethinking these concepts from a transdisciplinary standpoint. By way of introduction to such a project (of which this is just one part of a small national sample – a second part of the sample will follow later in 2011), it may be useful to set out something of the thinking about transdisciplinarity that stands behind it. In particular, it is necessary to make clear what is *not* intended by the term 'transdisciplinarity' in this context, although the unintended usage must nonetheless be engaged if the current institutional conditions of knowledge-production are to be acknowledged.

Trans-, inter-, multi-, hegemonic and anti-

In the context of the 'post-philosophical' theoretical heritage of twentieth-century European philosophy, the concept of transdisciplinarity has two main points of reference. The first is the German critical tradition (post-Hegelian and materialist in inspiration), within which it appears as one way of thinking the conceptual space opened up by the critique of the self-sufficiency of a disciplinary concept of philosophy: a universalizing conceptual movement that recognizes (following Marx) that the idea of philosophy can only be realized outside of philosophy itself. Transdisciplinarity is thus, here, the product of a certain philosophical reflection on the limits of philosophy; a result of the self-criticism of philosophy, in a manner that opens philosophical discourse up to the claims of other discourses – a 'philosophizing beyond philosophy' as Adorno described it, with reference to Walter Benjamin's writings. Here, among the disciplines that are crossed, transdisciplinarity thus appears to have a privileged relationship to the philosophical tradition, even if it is primarily one of negation (determinate in each instance, but not necessarily generalizably so).

Something similar may be discerned in the generalizing and often transcendental dynamics of a certain ‘French thought’ from 1945 through to the 1980s. This thought inhabits something of the same trans-disciplinary conceptual space as the German critical tradition, but in a variety of radically anti-Hegelian modes. It too exhibits a complicated set of constitutive relations to philosophy – sometimes by its denial (which is not necessarily the same as its negation), but more often through philosophy’s transformation: ‘regenerating itself out of its other’, as Balibar puts it, below, in relation to structuralism. Different ways of being anti-Hegelian in France, one might say, tend to articulate alternative modes of transdisciplinarity.

Currently, however, the term ‘transdisciplinarity’ is most frequently to be found as part of anglophone methodological debates in the physical and social sciences, and in Science and Technology Studies and Education Studies, in particular. It is there, quite reasonably I think, opposed to established concepts of *interdisciplinarity* and *multidisciplinarity* – those two multiple-choice boxes familiar to anyone who has filled in an AHRC grant application in the UK. (‘Interdisciplinarity’ is understood to refer to a multiplicity of disciplinary methods employed by a researcher; multidisciplinarity to a multiplicity of researchers with different disciplinary affiliations.) These are now bureaucratic categories. The notion of transdisciplinarity is certainly, in various ways, an advance in relation to these two established ways of thinking disciplinary relationships. However, it has been subjected to a bureaucratic straitjacket of its own.

The notion of transdisciplinarity is an advance, formally, in denoting a movement across existing fields (as opposed to simply a thinking *between* them or a *multiplication* of them); and it is an advance in terms of theoretical content, in so far as it locates the source of transdisciplinary dynamics pragmatically in a process of *problem-solving* related, ultimately, to problems of experience in everyday life. It has been placed in a straitjacket, however, to the extent to which this process of problem-solving is generally reduced to a relationship between a *policy-based* reformulation of the problems at issue, which are construed in such a way as to be amenable to *technological* or other instrumental solutions. (Think of the way, in the case of Education Studies, for example, that the concept of ‘lifelong’ learning rapidly morphed into ‘work-based’ learning.) This conception has been summed up by Helga

Nowotny and others as ‘Mode-2 knowledge production’. The social organization of knowledges appears here in large part as an administrative issue – as, indeed, does the current reorganization of academic knowledges in British universities along corporate–managerial lines. In this context, ‘transdisciplinarity’ can become one of the things that is ‘happening to us’ in the universities, and not in a nice way.

In the context of the German and French critical traditions, and their anglophone reception, on the other hand, it is not inter- and multi-disciplinarity to which transdisciplinarity is most fruitfully opposed, or the bureaucratic reorganization of knowledges which drives it, so much as the conceptual pair of *hegemonic* disciplinarity (think of ‘English’) and a resistant *anti-disciplinarity* (think of ‘text’), which is motivated by a certain politicization of knowledges. In this context, transdisciplinarity is not the conceptual product of addressing problems defined as policy challenges, which are amenable to technological solutions, but rather of addressing problems that are *culturally and politically defined* in such a way as to be amenable to theoretical reformulation, as a condition of more radical forms of political address. The axes policy/technology are replaced by the axes theory/politics.

The emergent sociological discourse of transdisciplinarity is *positive* and *organizational*; the one gestured towards here is, though not wholly negative, at least *problematizing* and political.

The organizational conceit of the conference from which the ‘entries’ that follow derived is that we might obtain some insight into the relationship between problematization and transdisciplinarity through reflection upon the generalizing dynamics of particular concepts in French thought since 1945: from ‘structure’ to ‘rhizome’...^{*} This narrative is not intended teleologically but rather, like the notion of transdisciplinarity itself, as a critical device: a positing of oppositional points, conceptually and historically defined, the relationship between which – and hence the meaning of each – is still very much disputed. Politically, these poles represent two very different decades: those of the late 1950s and early 1960s (‘structure’), and the late 1970s and early 1980s (‘rhizome’), respectively: the beginning and the end, one might say, of a certain period of intellectual and political radicalism, which was definitively closed by the apparent opening of ‘1989’. Today, new openings present themselves.

Peter Osborne

^{*} The conference, ‘From Structure to Rhizome: Transdisciplinarity in French Thought, 1945 to the Present – Histories, Concepts, Constructions’, was held at the French Institute in London, 16–17 April 2010. It was organized by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) – in what were to become its final months at Middlesex University, before its move to Kingston – in collaboration with the Cultural Services of the French Embassy.

Sex

A transdisciplinary concept

Stella Sandford

What is sex? Some feminists have harboured suspicions about this form of question, given its philosophical (or ‘metaphysical’¹) pedigree. But philosophy no longer has the disciplinary monopoly on it. Indeed, with regard to sex, the more interesting task today is to pose and to attempt to answer the question from within a transdisciplinary problematic. For the question requires a theoretical response capable of recognizing that it concerns a cultural and political (and therefore neither a specifically philosophical nor a merely empirical) problem. It requires an account of sex which is theoretically satisfying whilst being both adequate to and critical of everyday experience; a critical-theoretical account capable of embracing the everyday experience of sex, its lived contradictions. This article represents a first attempt to construct a transdisciplinary concept of sex to this end. It traces a line from Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* to some recent attempts to define ‘sex’ and various related but importantly different concepts, and ends by proposing an answer to the question ‘What is sex?’ that draws on the philosophy of Immanuel Kant. For our transdisciplinary efforts will of necessity spring from some specific discipline(s) while not remaining confined within them, and not allowing them to remain confined within themselves (which has been something of a problem for philosophy, historically).

With and without gender

Sex, *sexe*, *Geschlecht*, *sexo*, *sesso*, and so on. Do these words all refer to the same thing? Presumptions about the obviousness of the meaning of sex might suggest that they do, but the least analysis reveals that the case is otherwise. For example, does ‘sex’ translate the French ‘*sexe*’, or is it a false friend? We have reason to be cautious because of an English interloper: the concept of ‘gender’. When, in the contemporary anglophone context, we insist on the specificity of the concept of ‘sex’ we distinguish it from a range of

related but distinct concepts: ‘gender’, ‘sexuality’ and (I would add) ‘sexual difference’. Most importantly, the distinction between sex and gender, which emerged in the 1950s in the published work and clinical practice of the American psychologist Robert Stoller, was seized upon in the following decades by feminists who immediately saw the direct political advantage of a vocabulary that allowed them to distinguish between what they saw as a biological reality (the functional distinction between male and female in reproduction: sex) and a socio-cultural system or demand (normative masculinity and femininity: gender). ‘Gender’ achieved a theoretical ascendancy in anglophone feminist theory that it still holds today. In some other linguistic contexts seemingly straightforward translations of the sex/gender distinction were made; where this was not possible feminists also introduced the English ‘gender’ as a term of analysis into other languages.

In retrospect, it is possible to posit a conceptual distinction between sex and gender in the analyses of various thinkers before the distinction was marked in the technical vocabulary. So, for example, Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1790) and John Stuart Mill’s *On the Subjection of Women* (1869) both exposed the falsity of the presumption that the present state of women, deprived of education, was determined by nature; an achievement that can reasonably be seen as distinguishing between what is now called ‘sex’ and ‘gender’. Indeed they laid some of the theoretical groundwork that later allowed the distinction to be made. Similarly, anglophone feminists have tended to read the sex/gender distinction into Beauvoir’s *Le deuxième sexe*, despite the terminology being absent. The famous claim that ‘one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’² is for many the founding claim for the analytical priority of gender over sex in second-wave feminism. I will return to Beauvoir later, to dispute this tendency. For now, the point to be emphasized is that where the originally

English-language sex/gender distinction operates, 'sex' is conceptually determined in its opposition to 'gender'.

Of course, many feminists who happen to be French have found the sex/gender distinction agreeable, and certainly it can be rendered in French. Nevertheless, the sex/gender distinction is decidedly foreign and indeed disagreeable to some of the major French feminist theorists of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries. This has sometimes been an obstacle in the English-language reception of these feminist theories from France, and not only because 'gender' is an alien concept when it comes to the interpretation of, for example, the meaning of '*le féminin*' for Luce Irigaray or of '*la différence sexuelle*' in various other psychoanalytical feminisms. If the English 'sex' is conceptually determined in its opposition to 'gender', but no such equivalent conceptual opposition animates these French feminist theories, there is reason to doubt even the ostensibly more plausible conceptual equivalence between 'sex' and '*sexe*'.

This leaves us with a two-way problem in the translation between French and English, which is precisely the topic of the entry for '*Sexe*', written by Geneviève Fraisse, in the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*. '*Sexe*', Fraisse writes, is only apparently a 'transnational' concept: 'The word "sex" in the English language essentially refers to the biological and the physical; in French, however, this

word signifies "the sexual life" quite as much as "the sexed character of humanity".' For Fraisse, it seems, 'sex' and 'sexual difference' are synonymous; as are '*sexe*' and '*différence sexuelle*'. The English 'sex' and 'sexual difference' 'refer to the material reality of the human'; *la différence sexuelle* is the *presupposition* of a difference between the sexes defined in a certain way, whether biologically, as in the natural sciences, or philosophically, as in '*la pensée du féminin*', the thinking of 'the feminine'.³ Most importantly, for Fraisse, '*Différence sexuelle*' coexists in French with '*différence des sexes*', from which it is distinguished to the extent that the latter 'implies the empirical recognition of the sexes without that leading to any definition of content'.⁴ '*Différence des sexes*', Fraisse writes elsewhere, is a 'philosopheme'.⁵ To the extent that the French '*sexe*' includes '*différence des sexes*' within its meaning, as Fraisse effectively argues that it does,⁶ it is already in some sense a theoretical concept, referring to something to be *thought* rather than a biological reality to be taken for granted. Without the philosopheme '*différence des sexes*', '*la différence sexuelle*' ('sexual difference', 'sex difference' or the English 'sex') is reduced to an empirical fact. According to Fraisse, American feminists, having only their limited (English) concept of sex, lacked any adequate linguistic tool with which to think *la différence des sexes*; they therefore 'invented' the concept of gender



to make up for this lack.⁷ But ‘gender’ is not a translation of ‘*différence des sexes*’, which remains untranslatable into English. ‘Gender’, Fraisse writes, has become a transnational term,⁸ but ‘*la différence des sexes*’ is still, it seems, a French speciality.

Although Fraisse sees the invention of the concept of gender as a ‘contemporary philosophical event’ that acknowledges the necessity to think ‘*la différence des sexes*’, the quickly achieved theoretical hegemony of ‘gender’ – which, it is true, for some decades almost entirely displaced any analysis of ‘sex’ in anglophone feminist theory – is regrettable to the extent that it seems to efface ‘sexe as sexuality’ (*le sexe comme sexualité*),⁹ that is, what is included in the French concept of *sexe*, according to Fraisse. (‘Gender’, she puns, is a ‘cache-sexe’. That doesn’t translate well into English either.¹⁰) The anglophone inability to think ‘*la différence des sexes*’ with a concept of gender means that ‘sexe’ is not *thought*; ‘gender’, that is, produces a philosophical deficit, ironically bolstering the old-fashioned view that ‘*la différence des sexes*’ is not be counted among the starry array of philosophical objects, such that people will say, as Fraisse recalls in 1996, ‘How extraordinary! What an idea, to want to think the “*différence des sexes*”!’¹¹ The consequences of this philosophical deficit are not just theoretical.

In the entry on ‘Gender’ in the *Vocabulaire*, written by Monique David-Ménard and Penelope Deutscher, it is argued that the Anglo-American distinction between biological sex and socially constructed gender identity rules out the possibility of thinking the primarily psychoanalytical concept of ‘*sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’ that these authors see as holding sway in French feminist thought. ‘*Sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’, they claim, is neither physiological nor psychological, but fantasmatic, to do with the drives (*pulsionnelle*).¹² The social determinations of gender and the physiological givens of sex are just two of the materials by means of which fantasies and drives are forged.¹³ Clearly David-Ménard and Deutscher’s ‘*différence des sexes*’ is different to Fraisse’s ‘*différence des sexes*’, but the authors make the same point for us here: the French and the Anglo-Americans do not think sex in the same way; indeed, the anglophones do not *think* sex at all.

Pas de Beauvoir?

It is surprising, to say the least, that neither the entry on ‘*Sexe*’ nor that on ‘Gender’ in the *Vocabulaire* mentions Beauvoir and *The Second Sex*. (Beauvoir, in fact, does not appear in the *Vocabulaire* at all. I just mention that.) How is this to be explained? Partly, of course,

the absence is explained by the fact that Fraisse’s account of the philosopheme ‘*différence des sexes*’ is clearly the articulation of one particular position, not a general account of what is thought on the subject in French. David-Ménard and Deutscher’s psychoanalytical concept of ‘*sexualité*’ or ‘*la différence des sexes*’, which they are undoubtedly correct to contrast with a certain anglophone concept of sex, is similarly specific. Overall, the main concern of both entries is to criticize the limitations of the concept of gender with regard to a French concept of ‘*sexe*’ beyond the sex/gender distinction. Ironically, in the entry on ‘*sexe*’, this leaves us with precisely that philosophical deficit that its author ascribes to ‘gender’ – namely, a failure to *think* ‘*sexe*’, since such a thinking would have to include what anglophones call ‘sex’, too. Perhaps this is because the remit of the *Vocabulaire* extends only to *philosophical* concepts, and the English ‘sex’ does not count as such. But, first, the *Vocabulaire* is also allegedly about words; and, second, can philosophical concepts be cut off from the generalities of everyday usage? Especially when that concept is ‘sex’? It is here that the question of a transdisciplinary, rather than a *narrowly* philosophical, concept is raised.

The concept of sex is not explicitly theorized in *The Second Sex*; nor does Beauvoir construct a concept of sex as a central theoretical element of her œuvre. Nevertheless, *The Second Sex* opens the theoretical space that made this possible for her successors. Beauvoir tends to write of ‘the sexes’ (*les sexes*), ‘the two sexes’ (*les deux sexes*), and men and women’s relation to their ‘*sexe*’, not of sex itself, and not of ‘*la différence des sexes*’. ‘*Sexe*’ in *Le deuxième sexe* is not a theoretical construction but the site of a problem. When referring to the functional, biological concept of sex Beauvoir tends to write of the ‘the division of the sexes’ (*la division des sexes*),¹⁴ but she begins her main discussion of this (in the first chapter of the first volume, ‘The Givens of Biology’), with a warning: ‘it is necessary to say, from the beginning, that the very meaning of the *division* [*la section*] of species into two sexes is not clear.’¹⁵ The point of this chapter of *The Second Sex* is to demonstrate that biology cannot, on its own, supply an answer to the two main questions of the book: What is a woman? And why has woman been assigned or assumed the subordinate position of the Other in relation to man? If biology could answer the first of these, woman’s being would be reduced to her being-female. ‘The fact is’, Beauvoir writes, ‘that she [woman] is a female’,¹⁶ but her sex or her being-sexed is not identical with this. When she writes that ‘no woman can, without bad faith, claim to situate herself

beyond her sex' she is not referring to 'her function as a female' ('*sa fonction de femelle*').¹⁷ The two sexes in *The Second Sex* are not just male and female but, more importantly, man and woman. It is sex in the sense of the sex of men and women, not of male and female, which is the topic of *The Second Sex*, and 'men' and 'women', unlike 'male' and 'female', are not biologically, but existentially defined.

Beauvoir describes the obviousness of the division of humanity into two sexes in the following way:

It is enough to go for a walk with one's eyes open to be sure that humanity is divided into two categories of individuals, whose clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, gaits, interests and occupations are manifestly different. Perhaps these differences are superficial; perhaps they are destined to disappear. But what is certain is that, for now, they do most obviously exist.¹⁸

As this is clearly not a list of biologically determined characteristics, many anglophone readers have presumed that such passages show that Beauvoir is really talking about gender, not sex. But granted that she is not talking about 'sex' in the sense determined by the sex/gender distinction this does not mean that she is not talking about sex in another sense. Refusing the reduction of sex to biology is the beginning of the opening out of the concept of sex for thought. That there is a need to emphasize the illegitimacy of this reduction shows that, so far as Beauvoir was concerned, there was *also* a concept of sex in French thought very similar to the anglophone concept of sex determined in its opposition to gender. This takes us to the crux of the problem. In effectively refining and specifying the meaning of sex existentially, Beauvoir reminds us, precisely, that this effort of thought must pitch itself against the dominant popular concept of sex evident in the assumption, common in both lay discourse and in philosophy, that biological sex determines what it is to be a woman. ('What is a woman? "*Tota mulier in utero*: she is a womb", according to one.'¹⁹)

We may call the popular, dominant concept of sex the modern 'natural-biological' concept of sex, not to commit it to a particular disciplinary-scientific origin or ontological status but because of the presumptions that constitute it. These presumptions are that there simply *is* sex duality (the exclusive division between male and female) and that that duality is naturally determined. As such, its referent is presumed to be a natural and not a historical object, and the possibility that the concept is precisely *modern* is hidden. I contend that this concept has no purely descriptive function in relation to human being, but the presump-

tion in its use is, precisely, that it does. It has no purely descriptive function because the constitutive and exclusive duality of its terms – male and female – is empirically inadequate to the phenomena that it would allegedly encompass without remainder, meaning that its duality is in fact normative and prescriptive.²⁰ Further, the natural-biological concept of sex functions in relation to human being to refer to a natural foundation for existence, such that it offers itself as a naturalistic explanation for some aspects – sometimes even *all* aspects – of human psycho-social existence and behaviour. Thus the natural-biological concept of sex functions as something both naturally determined and naturally determining and it is effectively impossible to separate these two aspects. In allegedly describing a natural foundation for human existence, the natural-biological concept of sex prescribes a duality, the nature of which is taken to be more or less determining of aspects of that existence.



When the more sophisticated theoretical constructions of *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes* overwrite this popular conception, the palimpsest does not erase all trace of the natural-biological concept of sex; far from it. If this is not acknowledged, the concepts of sex as *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes* float free, with no critical or political purchase. This may be fine for psychoanalysis, but not for feminism. The recognition of this is the basis for another discourse on sex in French thought, the sociologically informed political determination of the concept of sex in Christine Delphy's work. Sex, for Delphy, is not a natural given but a social relation, enabling the identification and recognition of groups in a hierarchical relation of oppression and exploitation. Sex, in this sense, is a material and ideological condition for the reproduction of the means of existence in a particular social form. In common with Monique Wittig, Delphy's political concept of sex does not simply overwrite the 'English' popular natural-biological concept; rather it includes the latter as the – reified – form of appearance of

the former.²¹ There is a direct line from Beauvoir to Delphy and Wittig in this respect. Neither Delphy nor Wittig appears in the *Vocabulaire*, either.

The persistence of the popular natural-biological concept of sex is not merely a regrettable theoretical naivety that more sophisticated theorists can simply dismiss; *this persistence must itself be thought*. In her *Sexe, genre et sexualités* Elsa Dorlin insists on this. How can we explain, Dorlin asks, the contradiction between the medical sciences' acknowledgement that 'the complex process of sexualisation is irreducible to the two categories of sex' and the medical practices – notably the medical management of intersex infants – which continue to accept, and indeed support, an unambiguous 'bicategorization' as unquestioned fact?²² How to explain 'the persistence of a belief and a scientific practice which contradicts the rationality of the very theory of which it claims to be the application'?²³ For Dorlin this contradiction amounts to a quasi-permanent scientific crisis, a crisis which remains unresolved because sexual bicategorization is necessary to ensure the reproduction of the social relation of domination that we call 'gender' (even though, at the same time, science itself has revealed that sexual bicategorization as social and historical norm, such that the social relation of 'gender' is in fact the ultimate basis for 'sex'):

If the crisis in the natural foundation of sex (male/female) is what sustains gender relations, it is first of all the effect of a contradiction between scientific theory and practice – a contradiction which is simultaneously both the effect of the crisis and its solution. The crisis is perpetuated as such. It is a scientific situation of the status quo which resolves a political problem, reifying the (political, not natural) categories of sex – bracketing, suspending the research into the natural foundation of sex, and employing a doxico-practical criterion (that is, gender) 'in the absence of anything better', 'while we wait'.²⁴

Thus the persistence of the modern natural-biological concept of sex must be thought, and not simply dismissed, because, its theoretical desubstantialization notwithstanding, it still sustains the gender system and its compulsory heterosexuality.²⁵ Dorlin's analysis exhibits the contradiction between the two faces of sex – naturalized bicategorization and denaturalized social-historical effect – and explains *why* the contradiction is sustained in terms of an ideological function. But is it possible to construct a single concept of sex for which this contradiction would be constitutive? And one, moreover, which explained *how* the contradiction is maintained?

'An object in the idea'²⁶

Any construction or philosophical determination of a concept of sex must in some way acknowledge the social reality or the effective actuality of the popular natural-biological concept of sex if it is to have any critical or political purchase. The construction of a critically adequate concept of sex is therefore the construction of a conceptual anamorphosis. In invoking anamorphoses I have in mind not Holbein's famous memento mori, but trinkets: the postcards, playing cards, bookmarks and so on that reveal one picture when turned this way, another when turned that. A single, transdisciplinary concept of sex – or at least a concept with pretensions to being such – would have to be similarly vacillant: encapsulating both a theoretically determined account of the functioning of the popular natural-biological concept *and* its criticism. The psychoanalytical concept of a fantasmatic complex, championed by David-Ménard and Deutscher, and Fraisse's philosophical concept of *la différence des sexes* do not do this precisely because of their disciplinary delimitations. I submit that this would be the case with any disciplinary concept of sex.

If there is already a path cut in the direction of a single, transdisciplinary concept of sex in feminist theory it runs from Beauvoir through Delphy and Wittig, but not much further. Judith Butler took the baton across the Atlantic but her *Gender Trouble*, brilliant though it is in many respects, effectively dismissed sex – it explained it away, rather than specifying it conceptually. (This is because, in *Gender Trouble*, Butler remained mortgaged to a presumptive natural-realist ontology, according to which sex could not be said to exist, coupled to an epistemological problematic according to which the in-itself of sex could not be known.²⁷) But Butler, gender theorist par excellence, *did* see that the normative dimension of the popular natural-biological concept of sex was *politically* the force to be reckoned with; thus her criticism of 'sex'. In this respect, contra Fraisse, any *gender* theorist, precisely in their rejection of the popular natural-biological concept of sex and its normative dimension, thinks sex better than the psychoanalytical theorist or philosopher of *sexualité* and *la différence des sexes*, who remain aloof from it.

The task of constructing a critical concept of sex in its greatest generality requires, as we have said, a determination of the nature of the popular natural-biological concept of 'sex' which can account for its actual effects, its social existence. I suggest that we can find the means for this in Kant's philosophy.²⁸ In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant, having discussed

the *a priori* contribution to experience of the faculties of sensibility and understanding and the legitimate employment of the concepts of the understanding (limited to the realm of possible experience), famously introduced what he called the ‘ideas’ of pure reason, or ‘transcendental ideas’.

The faculty of reason, according to Kant, itself generates, *a priori*, certain concepts (that is, ideas) and principles which, according to the ‘demand of [speculative] reason ... to bring the understanding into thoroughgoing connection with itself’,²⁹ guide the use of the understanding, pointing it towards the absolute totality of the series of conditioned appearances, its unconditioned ground. The idea of ‘freedom’ is, according to Kant, an idea in this sense. The idea has no possible congruent object in experience; it does not determine any object for cognition (it has no ‘objective validity’, in Kant’s specific sense of being valid for the determination of objects in general); but it ‘serve[s] the understanding as a canon for its extended and self-consistent use’.³⁰ This is for Kant the legitimate or proper ‘regulative’ use of the ideas of pure reason.

But the ideas of reason are also misused, or misapplied, in illegitimate ‘constitutive’ uses; that is, by mistaking their subjective necessity for objective validity, giving a purported objective reality to the object of the idea. This gives rise to what Kant calls ‘dialectical’ or ‘transcendental’ illusion, which is distinguished from both error and empirical and logical illusion in being ‘natural’, unavoidable and incorrigible – ‘irremediably attached to human reason’. For even when the being-illusory of the transcendental illusion is revealed, it does not cease to deceive us.³¹ The unavoidable tendency to understand the necessity of the ‘constant logical subject of thinking’ (my being the ‘absolute subject of all my possible judgements’) as ‘a real subject of inherence’³² – that is, a substance in the ontological sense – is just such a dialectical illusion, according to Kant.

If the trick of all transcendental illusion rests in ‘the taking of a subjective condition of thinking for the cognition of an object’, its necessity lies perhaps in reason’s inability to think its idea ‘in any other way than by giving its idea an object’. And in fact, Kant writes, the dialectical illusion of the substantiality of the soul, for example, expresses a proposition (‘the soul is substance’) that is perfectly valid *so long as we keep in mind* that nothing further can be deduced or inferred from this, ‘that it signifies a substance only *in the idea* but not in reality’.³³ This ‘object in the idea’ – this is the crucial phrase – is really only a ‘schema for which no object is given’.³⁴

The regulative principles of pure reason are called ‘transcendental principles’ to the extent that they *must* be presupposed for a coherent use of the understanding. For example, ‘we simply have to presuppose the systematic unity of nature as objectively valid and necessary’, according to Kant, in order to determine within the ‘manifoldness of individual things’ in nature the identity of species, genera and families.³⁵ The mistake is to suppose that this unity, which is a mere idea, is to be encountered in nature itself.



Kant’s example here of the specifications of species, genera and families pertains to the domain of what he elsewhere calls the ‘systematic description of nature’,³⁶ distinguished from ‘natural history’. But, as Robert Bernasconi has shown, the idea of reason also has a role to play in natural history, specifically – and this is of immense historical significance – in determining the concept of race.³⁷ As Bernasconi points out, the concept of race is not derived, for Kant, from nature; rather it is explicitly posited as a conceptual necessity for natural history.³⁸ For Kant, as Bernasconi explains, ‘in the present state of our knowledge the idea of race imposes itself’, as regulative idea.³⁹

Clearly the idea of race provided an example, for Kant, of the legitimate, regulative employment of an idea of reason. Even if the legitimacy of this idea is now questioned politically, it remains true that the concept of race has no corresponding, scientifically identifiable object in experience, although the lived experience of being-raced is undeniable. Does this mean that ‘race’ imposes itself as transcendental illusion? If it does, Kant’s idea of transcendental illusion is now historicized.⁴⁰

But what of the modern, natural-biological concept of sex? What grounds are there for thinking that sex might be an idea of reason and – in a sense yet to be determined – a transcendental illusion?

To recall, the presumptions internal to the modern natural-biological concept of sex are that there simply is sex duality (the exclusive division into male and

female) and that this duality is naturally determined. Further, in so far as ‘sex’ refers to a natural ground for human existence it is presumed to be something naturally determining. As the exclusive duality of its terms is empirically inadequate to the variety that it would allegedly encompass without remainder, the duality of sex is not descriptive, but prescriptive – quite literally prescriptive in the case of the intersexed infant who will be made to conform, more or less successfully, to one or other of its terms. Taken together, the constitutive presumptions and the prescriptive function of the modern natural-biological concept of sex contradict each other. As previously stated, the concept has no purely descriptive function in relation to human existence, but the presumption in its use is precisely that it does.

These two contradictory elements in the concept of sex may perhaps be understood as the difference between its uses as an abstract and as a concrete noun: abstractly, the general term for the (presumed exclusive) duality of male and female; concretely, referring to particular instances of one or other of those two terms. The equivocation between these uses – a conceptual juddering so fast as to be invisible – accomplishes the same ‘transcendental subreption’⁴¹ that Kant identified in the representation of a formal regulative principle as constitutive, the result of which is hypostatization. Or, just as, in the first paralogism of pure reason, the formal, transcendental unity of apperception is taken for the ‘real subject of inherence’⁴² (substance understood ontologically), so too the formal principle of the exclusive division into male and female (the prescriptive or, in Kant’s terminology, regulative principle) is taken for the cognition of an objectively real object (for Kant, an object given in intuition).⁴³ The ‘transcendental doctrine of the soul’, or ‘rational psychology’, is the taking of the idea of the soul for a real object and the subsequent claims to be able to infer from this idea alone the essential attributes of the soul.⁴⁴ In the same way, we may say, the ‘transcendental doctrine of sex’, taking the idea of sex for a real object, claims to be able to derive from the idea of sex alone the essential attributes of men and women.

Is ‘sex’, then, a transcendental illusion? Sex is not a transcendental illusion on Kant’s own definition, since this includes a reference to its ahistorical inevitability, ‘irremediably attache[d] to human reason’. Sex is *our* illusion; it was not Plato’s, for example.⁴⁵ But to the extent that we are also required to account for the actual effects of the concept of sex – its real existence as a structuring component of human experience –

there is, to use Kant’s word, something ‘unavoidable’ about it.⁴⁶ The idea of sex, like all ideas of reason according to Kant, is ‘merely a creature of reason’; but the ideas ‘nonetheless have their reality and are by no means merely figments of the brain’; ‘we will by no means regard them as superfluous and nugatory’.⁴⁷ Thus, we might say, sex is an objective *historical* illusion: an illusion that cannot be contrasted with reality because it *is* real to the extent that its effects are real. However, *given as object only in the idea* ‘sex’ (like the transcendental idea of the soul, for Kant) ‘leads no further’,⁴⁸ or its leading further is precisely the form of its ideological function.

What is the relation between this philosophical interpretation of the popular, natural-biological concept of sex as a regulative idea and the possibility of a single transdisciplinary concept of sex? For the moment, we can say this: there is already a kind of homology between them. The transdisciplinary problematic arises in the relation between conceptual generality, on the one hand, and everyday linguistic usage, experiences and practices, on the other. The objective historical illusion of sex is, I have suggested, precisely the transcendental subreption of this relation, or, in another vocabulary, the effective reification of the concept, at the highest level of its generality, empirically instantiated in almost every aspect of our lives. Avoiding the transcendental subreption is not merely a matter of theoretical vigilance; it is a political struggle at the level of everyday experience. The question of the meaning of sex is not a dispute to be settled by intellectuals or scholars; it is the lived contradiction of our sexed existence today.

Notes

1. Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter, Cornell University Press, Ithaca NY, 1985, p. 122.
2. ‘On ne naît pas femme: on le devient’, *Le deuxième sexe*, Vol. II, Gallimard, Paris, 1976, p. 13.
3. Geneviève Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, *Vocabulaire européen de philosophies: dictionnaire des intraduisibles*, under the direction of Barbara Cassin, Éditions du Seuil/Dictionnaires Le Robert, Paris, 2004, p. 1155. See also Geneviève Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris, 1996, p. 45: “‘*Différence sexuelle*’ is a philosophical presupposition [un *parti pris*] peculiar to French thought, notably that of Hélène Cixous or Luce Irigaray; *différence sexuelle* is already a definition of *la différence des sexes*, the ontological or psychological affirmation of a difference which is the starting point for a philosophy of the feminine.”
4. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155. See also Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, p. 46: ‘The concept of “*différence des sexes*”, such as one finds in Hegel, for example (*Encyclopaedia*), has the advantage of leaving open the questions

- apparently resolved by the preceding concepts [of *différence sexuelle* and *gender*].
5. For example, Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, pp. 44–5.
 6. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1156: ‘The English language has at its disposal only *sexual difference* while French can use, for nuance, *différence sexuelle*, *différence des sexes* and, indeed, *différence de sexe*.’
 7. ‘It was decided that the necessity for thinking *la différence des sexes* would be symbolized by the concept of *gender* [Il est décidé de symboliser, par le concept de *genre*, la nécessité de penser la différence des sexes]. Thus the concentration of attention on this notion of *gender* is a contemporary philosophical event.’ Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155.
 8. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1156.
 9. Fraisse, ‘Sexe’, p. 1155. ‘*La sexualité*’, note, is also not the same as the English ‘sexuality’.
 10. Literally, in English, something that ‘hides sex’; but also what we call in English, rather less elegantly, a ‘G-string’.
 11. Fraisse, *La différence des sexes*, p. 6.
 12. Monique David-Ménard and Penelope Deutscher, ‘Gender’, p. 497. It is symptomatic that English has no adjective with which to translate ‘*pulsionelle*’.
 13. David-Ménard and Deutscher, ‘Gender’, p. 496.
 14. For example: ‘La division des sexes est en effet un donné biologique, non un moment de l’histoire humaine.’ Simone de Beauvoir, *Le deuxième sexe*, I, p. 19.
 15. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 16. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
 17. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
 18. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
 19. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
 20. On the empirical inadequacy of the duality of sex categories see Anne Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*, Basic Books, New York, 2000. See also Elsa Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, PUF, Paris, 2008, especially ‘L’Historicité du sexe’, pp. 33–54.
 21. See, for example, Christine Delphy, ‘Penser le genre: Quels problèmes?’, in Marie-Claude Hurtig et al., *Sexe et genre: de la hiérarchie entre les sexes*, Éditions du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris, 1991 (‘Rethinking Sex and Gender’, trans. Diana Leonard, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, vol. 16, no. 1, 1993, pp. 1–9); Monique Wittig, ‘The Category of Sex’, in *The Straight Mind and Other Essays*, Beacon Press, Boston MA, 1992. On this political concept of sex see also Stella Sandford, ‘Sexmat, Revisited’, *Radical Philosophy* 145, Sept/Oct 2007.
 22. Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, pp. 42, 43.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
 24. ‘Si la crise du fondement naturel du sexe (mâle/femelle) permet de maintenir le rapport de genre en état, elle est d’abord l’effet d’une distorsion entre théorie et pratique scientifiques, qui est à la fois l’effet de la crise et la solution de cette dernière. La crise est maintenue comme telle. Elle est une situation scientifique de statu quo qui résout un problème politique, à savoir la réification des catégories, non pas naturelles mais politiques, de sexes: maintenir la recherche du fondement naturel du sexe en suspens, utiliser “aute de mieux” ou “en attendant” un critère doxico-pratique – le genre.’ Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, p. 52. On the relative stability of this crisis and its function, see also Elsa Dorlin, ‘Sexe, genre et intersexualité: la crise comme régime théorique’, *Raisons politiques* 18, May 2005, pp. 117–37.
 25. See Dorlin, *Sexe, genre et sexualités*, p. 55.
 26. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allan W. Wood, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998, A670/B698.
 27. For this argument, see Stella Sandford, ‘Contingent Ontologies: Sex, Gender and “Woman” in Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler’, *Radical Philosophy* 97, September/October 1999, pp. 18–29. Nevertheless, the importance of *Gender Trouble* for the philosophy of sex is hard to overestimate.
 28. The following argument is elaborated at greater length in the Coda to my *Plato and Sex*, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2010.
 29. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A305/B362.
 30. *Ibid.*, A329/B285.
 31. *Ibid.*, A293–298/B249–355, A339/B397.
 32. *Ibid.*, A350. This is the first of the ‘paralogisms of pure reason’.
 33. *Ibid.*, A396, A681/B709, A351, emphasis added.
 34. *Ibid.*, A670/B698, A674/B702, emphasis added.
 35. *Ibid.*, A651–2/B679–680.
 36. Immanuel Kant, ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’, in Robert Bernasconi, ed., *Race*, Blackwell, Oxford and Malden MA, 2001, pp. 40, 39.
 37. Robert Bernasconi, ‘Who Invented the Concept of Race?’, in Bernasconi, ed., *Race*. Bernasconi’s essay on race has provided me with a model for part of the present discussion of sex.
 38. Kant, ‘On the Use of Teleological Principles in Philosophy’, p. 40. *Über den Gebrauch teleologischer Prinzipien in der Philosophie*, Akademie Ausgabe Vol. VIII, pp. 157–84.
 39. Bernasconi, ‘Who Invented the Concept of Race?’, p. 29.
 40. Compare Michel Foucault’s conception of the ‘historical *a priori*’: ‘This *a priori* is what, in a given period, delimits in the totality of experience a field of knowledge, defines the mode of being of the objects that appear in that field, provides man’s everyday perception with theoretical powers, and defines the conditions in which he can sustain a discourse about things that is recognized to be true.’ Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archeology of the Human Sciences*, Tavistock Publications, London, 1970, p. 158.
 41. A619/B647.
 42. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A619/B647, A350.
 43. Which is not to say that the ‘transcendental unity of apperception’, qua (self-)consciousness of the spontaneous action of the understanding, does not itself harbour a metaphysics. But that is another matter.
 44. Its substantiality, simplicity and ‘personality’, that is, its being a ‘person’, and the (problematic) ideality of external objects.
 45. See Stella Sandford, *Plato and Sex*.
 46. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A298/B354.
 47. *Ibid.*, A479/B507, A314/B371, A329/B385.
 48. *Ibid.*, A350–51: ‘one can quite well allow the proposition *The soul is substance* to be valid, if only one admits that this concept of ours leads no further, that it cannot teach us any of the usual conclusions of the rationalistic doctrine of the soul, such as, e.g., the everlasting duration of the soul through all alterations, even the human being’s death, thus that it signifies a substance only in the idea but not in reality.’