

Gender: a question of personal identity or a mode of social relations?

Irène Théry

Inaugural Lecture, Centre M. Bloch (EHESS, Berlin), 20 octobre 2009

Published in French in a shorter version, in

<http://www.inrp.fr/publications/edition-electronique/revue-francaise-de-pedagogie/RF171-13.pdf>

Translated from the original lecture (manuscript given by Irène Théry)
by Dr. Stephanie Anderson-Morton, final checking in collaboration with Serge
Tcherkézoff.

Copyright : EHESS-Canberra Branch at ANU

Synopsis:

This article presents a theoretical reflection on the concept of *gender*, its definitions and its uses in the social sciences. In opposition to the prevailing approach which conceives of gender as a socially constructed identity or attribute of persons, a conception she considers essentialising, the author argues in favour of a relational approach to gender conceived as modes of social relations. She bases her argument on the researches of comparative and historical anthropology that oblige us to reconsider the dualism of the self and the body which constitutes the individualist ideology of the person, and criticises the hypostasis of the Self as homuncule constituted through an absolutisation of the first person. Analysing the gendered system of the three grammatical persons, she maintains that, not being referential, “the *I* of interlocution has neither sex , nor gender”. The intersecting contributions of anthropology and analytical philosophy lead her to reconsider the concept of person in order to think more profitably about the properly human ability to recognise oneself as being of a gender [*se reconnaître comme d’un sexe*] without ever being assigned to it.

(ST: this lecture includes a discussion of Marilyn Strathern’s *The Gender of the Gift*; also : the second part includes an historical analysis of the Western constitution of the notion of « person » since early Christian centuries).

Synopsis: French original by the author:

Cet article présente une réflexion théorique sur la notion de *genre*, de ses définitions et ses usages en Sciences sociales. S’opposant à l’approche dominante qui conçoit le genre comme identité ou attribut socialement construits des personnes, conception qu’elle considère comme essentialisante, l’auteur argumente en faveur d’une approche relationnelle du genre conçu comme modalités des relations sociales. Elle se fonde pour cela sur des travaux d’anthropologie comparative et historique qui contraignent à reconsidérer le dualisme du moi et du corps constitutif de l’idéologie individualiste de la

personne, et critique l'hypostase du Moi comme homoncule constitué à partir d'une absolutisation de la première personne. Analysant le système sexué des trois personnes grammaticales, elle soutient que, n'étant pas référentiel, « le *je* de l'interlocution n'a ni sexe, ni genre ».

Les apports croisés de l'anthropologie et de la philosophie analytique la conduisent à reconsidérer la notion de personne pour mieux penser la capacité proprement humaine de se reconnaître comme d'un sexe sans être jamais assigné à celui-ci.

Preliminary note about translation (ST): In French, the word *sexe* can be used to denote a gender category as well as a sexual act or relationship. When using the substantive in an adjectival form, that ambivalence disappears: French has two possibilities, *sexué* and *sexuel*, while English has one: "sexual". *Sexué* is often used in a sense that corresponds to the English "gendered" or "pertaining to sex categories": Irene Théry is no exception, so her expression "la dimension sexuée de la vie sociale", for example, is her usual way of expressing "the gendered dimension in social life". The French *sexuel* usually has the same meaning as the English "sexual", although some (but not Théry) might use it in a less precisely defined way that would encompass "gendered" and "sexual". Conversely, the French *sexe*, when not referring to sexual acts or sexually active relationships, can encompass the meaning of "gender" and of "social roles according to sex category" as well as "relations between sex categories" (those of women, men, transgender etc.) in expressions such as "*les rapports sociaux de sexe*" (which for these reasons we sometimes translate as "sex-gender social relations").

To understand the profound disturbance to thought, practices and the institution of social life as a whole, which has accompanied the very recent insertion of gender equality [*égalité de sexe*] into the core of democratic values does not only engage a critique of the prejudices affecting our representations of women (and men), of sexual minorities (and majorities) or of individual identities, "transgender", "*queer*" or "*straight*". It engages much more deeply a reform of understanding, in other words a reconsideration of the conceptual presuppositions by which we define what we call "a person" in general.

To introduce this problem, in what follows I shall develop a reflection on the new concept of "*genre*" (in French), from the English "gender", and its growing use in the social sciences disciplines as the work devoted to the masculine/feminine distinction has gained an increased audience and visibility in the academic world. As a parallel development, two important levels of usage of the term gender have gradually but, it

seems, imperceptibly, become established. It is important to distinguish clearly between them because in the two cases the word does not have the same meaning:

–On a *first level*, the term gender has a very general meaning which is more or less equivalent to different notions that have long been in use by Francophone sociologists, such as “social sex category” [*sexe social*], “sex-gender social relationships” [*rappports sociaux de sexe*] or again that of “gender difference” [*différence des sexes*] understood in the socio-anthropological sense of a difference not given naturally but constructed and transmitted by the morals, usages, customs and rules of societies. On this level, a single term – which is particularly effective – replaces phrases of several words (“sex and/or gender social relationships” [*rappports sociaux de sexe*], for example) and on its own points to a complex subject of investigation which for my part I call “the gendered dimension of social life” [*la dimension sexuée de la vie sociale*].

The success of this use of the word “gender” bears witness to the fact that the social sciences have changed, after having been completely unable to take seriously the major phenomenon which Mauss called “division by sexes” (a failing of our disciplines that, from 1931, he was the first to emphasise forcefully, cf. Théry, 2007). But that does not mean that on that account they are in the process of recognising that the question of the genders poses them a very real intellectual challenge, involving the re-examination of their most fundamental paradigms.

–On a *second level*, beyond the consensus that has been reached today about the importance of gender studies (or rather: the importance of taking gender into account in all of our studies in the social sciences), gender refers more precisely to “the masculine/feminine distinction” and we enter the domain of the definitions of gender that can be described as “conceptual”. We know that there are numerous theories of gender, often situated in that ill-charted zone between scientific research and civic engagement – differentialist, universalist, deconstructionist, Marxist, structuralist, symbolist, radical, *queer* etc. – which propose different arguments about the genesis and the transmission of inequalities and gendered and sexual hierarchies [*hierarchies sexuées et sexuelles*]. But much less attention is paid to the fact that initially every researcher is faced with a much more basic choice between two alternatives from the moment they embark on what at first appears to be so simple: the task of delimiting their subject of investigation, in other

words, making clear what the distinction between two adjectives – *masculine* and *feminine* – applies to, the distinction on which the concept of gender rests.

The alternatives are these:

–For some, gender must be understood as an attribute, a characteristic or again a “*personal identity*”. It is persons who are masculine, feminine, mixed, transgender etc. because they have attributes or psychological and mental characteristics that are themselves masculine, feminine, mixed, transgender etc. This conception, which opposes two identitarian elements of persons (their sex and their gender), predominates widely today among researchers whose mental horizon is that of sociopolitical debate as it is unfolding at the moment in the Western societies of Europe and America.

–For others, gender is not an identitarian attribute of persons but a “mode of social relations”, as I tend to express it. What has a gender, in other words, is not persons themselves, but the actions and the relationships that these persons initiate. This conception has been elaborated principally thanks to the development of gender studies among the anthropologists and ethnographers who are specialists of traditional societies very different from ours (in Melanesia, the Amazon region, the Indonesian islands of South East Asia etc.).

My conviction, which I have developed at length in *La distinction de sexe* (Théry 2007), is that this second, and “relational”, perspective is not restricted to the understanding of distant societies. It can readily be taken up in itself extrapolating from them, and reworked, in terms of research centred on our own culture and Western societies. The relational conception of gender is a major tool of comparative and historical anthropology, which it subjects to a deep process of renewal and it can in turn be extended and enriched, if the essential findings of the contemporary philosophy of action and of language, in particular currents that have arisen out of the change of thinking brought about by the later Wittgenstein in his *Philosophical Investigations*, are incorporated into the reflections of the social sciences. To orient oneself towards an *identitarian* conception or towards a *relational* conception of gender in reality engages the ideas that one comes to not only about the sexes, or the masculine/feminine distinction, but also about the person in general, of action in general and of the social bond in general.

I. Gender as a “dimension of social life”: the expression of a major change in representations and values

Let us first of all take the word *gender* in its most ordinary sense, that which in some way precedes the theoretical controversies and is a reminder that even so these controversies assume a certain common ground. It is in this sense that, in the United States under the label of “gender studies”, for a long time now studies have been brought together that are in fact quite different, indeed quite divergent in their methodology and their theoretical references. *Gender* is a very economical word, which manages to refer at the same time, using the one term, to “the masculine/feminine distinction in its social dimension” and to “sex/gender social relationships” [*les rapports sociaux de sexe*]. Gender thus understood is not opposed to sex, but subsumes it, to the point that it is not rare that comparative European surveys now refer not to the two sexes, but to the two “genders”, with the intention of clearly showing that men and women are not being reduced in them to their identity as human males or females. It can be seen here that English speakers have adopted the term *gender* with all the more haste as a result of a particular problem to be resolved stemming from the extensive usage in English of the terms “male” and “female” (which in the case of French are reserved for species in the context of the animal kingdom), and, too, of the adjective *sexual* in expressions such as “sexual antagonism” which does not mean “sexual competition” (*antagonisme sexuel*) but “antagonism between the sexes” (*antagonisme entre les sexes*). French has different resources, as demonstrated by the distinction our language makes between the adjectives “*sexué* [SA:‘sexed’]” and “*sexuel* [sexual]”, which has no equivalent in English. Be that as it may, the success of the word *gender* comes from it having been seen as the most appropriate expression of a transformation of collective representations and norms, inseparable from the promotion of the value of gender equality [*égalité de sexe*] as a cardinal value in these societies. Understood in this way, the term “gender” has two important functions in contemporary discourse:

– First of all, it is meant to indicate that the question of the sexes is not reducible to the question of women, and despite the fact that it is logical to have begun by identifying the situation and the rights of women as “the” problem. The direction of the passage from

women's studies to *gender studies* has from now on been to enquire into men and the masculine as well as into women and the feminine by looking on them as the two sides of one and the same problem. This is a major issue when we remember that in the eyes of the philosophers of the Enlightenment and the theorists of modern natural law only Woman is “different”, as if she were by nature more sexualised than men. Take Rousseau who says in his *Emile*: “The male is only male at certain times, the female is female throughout her life”. It is Louis Dumont who allows us to understand the stakes of such an asymmetrical representation of sex-gender difference at the level of *values*, thanks to the famous analysis in which he presents the subsuming of the future Eve by the first Adam at the beginning of Genesis as the prototype of the logical figure of “hierarchy” understood in the sense of the *subsuming of the opposite value* (Dumont 1979). The subsuming value being man, he is simultaneously the asexual representative of the human species in its entirety (Man, Mankind) and the gendered representative of the males of that species (Man, Men). The ambiguity of the term “*homme* [man]” in French bears witness to this sexual hierarchy which the concept of gender aims to deconstruct by interrogating the supposed masculine “neutrality”, and by placing squarely at the centre of the enquiry no longer just the situation of women alone but also that of men and the masculine/feminine distinction itself.

– Next, the word “gender” is meant to indicate that this masculine/feminine distinction is well and truly a social distinction, irreducible to a simple difference that could be observed between the respective features of each sex, rooted in the universality of human nature. On this point too, the debates over the reality and/or the origins of this or that major disposition or ability supposed to characterise each sex (classically: reason and aggression for men; caring and compassion for women) are inseparable from the issue of values. In presenting as innate this or that acquired characteristic, indeed in fabricating the idea that this or that psychological or mental quality, this or that moral competency, is in essence masculine or feminine, modern thought has “naturalised” the respective places of each sex-gender category in society. But that is not all, and today especially when these stereotypes are unanimously condemned, it is not the essential thing. The central point (incidentally much less noticed) is that the modern notion of human nature has created a quite excessive image not only of each sex category, but also of their *relations*.

It has looked on the universality of the gendered division of roles in societies quite simply as the effect of a “social vocation” appropriate to each sex, in a causalist logic avoiding any reference to the mediation of rules and of meaning, and reducing social *attributions* of roles and statuses to personal *attributes* treated as intrinsic properties of the self. In so doing modernity has transmitted a radically antisociological conception of the question of the sexes.

But isn't it a prime feature of individualist ideology in general to be spontaneously antisociological? That is why it is never enough in our societies to say that gender is “social”, we still need to specify what is understood by this term “social” given how often what is called social is assimilated to what is artificial and changing, what is not necessary, what is superfluous and, in the end, what by definition harasses us and oppresses us. And here begins the debate about the second sense of the word *gender*, gender as concept.

II. Gender as concept: what is understood by masculine/feminine?

It would be excessive to claim to provide here a synthesis of the debates about the concept of gender, or even a synoptic picture of all the definitions which have been proposed for it through a literature which now numbers thousands of references (among the easily accessible syntheses, readers could refer to Maruani 2005 and Théry & Bonnemère 2008). I shall therefore limit myself to concentrating on the great divide which, in the perspective of the comparative and historical anthropology that I am arguing for, provides the framework for all the others. It concerns the opposition between two major definitions of the concept: gender as an *identitarian attribute of persons* and gender as *mode of social relations*.

There is a consensus that the concept of gender means “the masculine/feminine distinction”, which is usually written with an oblique. But then, what is understood by masculine/feminine? This is the sense of the conceptual debate: it is a matter of proposing a rather precise definition of these notions and of this distinction, once there is agreement about their social, and not natural, nature. The oblique “/” seems to indicate the *relative* character of the terms (the terms cannot have meaning before the social enactment of

their relationship) and yet, in the majority of analyses, this relative character *disappears* in favour of the opposition between two categories each defined by its intrinsic properties to the point that certain authors, such as Françoise Héritier, have no hesitation in rendering them as substantives: “*the masculine*” on the one hand and “*the feminine*” on the other.

A–Gender as personal identity

We can understand this overlooking of the relative character of the terms if we go back to the origins of the contemporary usage of the term gender. If it is true that it owes its cultural success to the fact of being widespread first of all in the social sciences in the 1970s, there is a general lack of awareness that the social sciences had previously borrowed it from other sciences: from clinical knowledge (and practice). It was in the 1960s, in the United States, in the context of debates about transsexualism, which brought endocrinologists, sexologists, psychiatrists and psychoanalysts into opposition with each other around the *Gender Clinics*, that the notion of gender was opposed to that of sex, the word “gender” thus acquiring an entirely new meaning. This is the definition that the psychoanalyst Robert Stoller, one of the inventors of the new sense of the term gender, gives for the concept:

[Gender] has psychological and cultural connotations, more than biological ones. If the appropriate terms for sex are “male” and “female”, the corresponding terms for gender are “masculine” and “feminine”; the latter can be totally independent of (biological) sex. [...] Gender is the quantity of masculinity or femininity that is found in a person, and although there is a mixture of the two in numerous human beings, the normal male obviously has a preponderance of masculinity and the normal female a preponderance of femininity. (Stoller 1978: 28) [provisionally translated back to English from the French translation without checking the original]]

The novelty of the analysis is not in the notions of masculinity or femininity, which have been drawn from the most traditional thinking about the “characteristics” of the individual, but in the fact that these characteristics are redefined as the products of *cultural conditioning, of its “imprint” on the child*. Stoller specifies that these behavioural stereotypes are interiorised by the individual as *beliefs and feelings*. The child draws from these beliefs:

parental attitudes, in particular in childhood, these attitudes being more or less those adopted by the society, filtered through the idiosyncratic personalities of the parents. As a result these convictions are not eternal

truths; they are modified when societies change. An Amerindian warrior wore his hair long and felt masculine, a Prussian portrayed his affirmation of virility by very short hair. Masculinity is not measured by the length of the hair, but by a person's conviction that long hair, or short hair, is masculine. (*ibid.*: 31) [provisionally translated back to English from the French translation without checking the original]

We can see that the concept of gender is here built on two pillars: the first is the foundational opposition between biological sex and the psychological/social gender of an individual; the second is the definition of this sex and of this gender as the markers of the respective identities of two constituents of the person, their body on the one hand (endowed with a sex identity), their self [*son moi*] on the other (endowed with a gender identity).

The concept of *gender as personal identity* was forged here, and it would leave a huge legacy. Much weight being put on the concept at first, gradually it was to fuel numerous arguments. Is the body pre-social and does it not have a gender? Where does gender come from if it is imposed from the outside upon the inner self? Does it correspond to a psychological reality or is it a pure construction of language? Doesn't the self have an authentic gender that is deeper than its sociocultural gender? Why only two genders and not three? Why not transgender or *queer* identities rather than identities of masculine gender or feminine gender? The common frame for all of these debates is the notion of "gender identity", about which all put forward their own interpretations. It can therefore be seen, beyond the apparently radical nature of certain deconstructionist approaches, that a position is maintained on which all the approaches that have come out of the theoretical concept of gender elaborated during the psychological controversies of the sixties are agreed, namely that gender is an attribute of persons. Now it is precisely this position which today is being questioned by those who have thought it useful to make a detour via other societies and cultures rather than limit themselves to the here and now of their own societies. And it is in such societies and cultures that the other definition of the concept of gender appears, gender as a mode of social relations (cf. Théry and Bonnemère 2008).

B – Gender as a mode of social relations

We had to wait until the end of the 1980s for the link between the concept of gender and the conceptions of the person to begin to be properly discussed in the social sciences,

more precisely in anthropology, when ethnographic research undertaken in remote societies distanced itself from the identitarian approach to gender by showing that the latter relied on a typically Western and modern “dualist” conception of the person.

The sense of gender as a *mode of social relations* claims a well-thought out distance in relation to the modern Western sociocentrism of conceptions of gender, reconnecting especially with the Maussian tradition of an historical and comparative anthropology. As this approach is much less known, newer, and in my opinion much more convincing and promising for new discoveries to come than the previous one, I shall develop it at greater length, relying for convenience (but realising that this does not do justice to other remarkable books) on two works of anthropology, singled out here for their very significant contribution to the theory of gender as a relational mode.

Marilyn Strathern: The gender of the gift and the first inquiry into the person

Published in 1988, Marilyn Strathern’s work, *The Gender of the Gift*, has profoundly shaken the ethnography of the masculine/feminine distinction in the societies that are called “sociocosmic” to indicate that our idea of the divide between the realm of nature and that of culture has no meaning in them: society is part of a cosmic whole, at the same time natural and spiritual, which subsumes it, thereby calling for a quite different approach to distinction and to the relation between the human and the non-human. The anthropologist, a specialist in the culture of the Hagen people of the New Guinea Highlands, took issue in her book with the conception of gender as the “social sex” of the individual which had held sway in Anglo-American sociology and anthropology since the middle of the 1970s. As I have just said, in this approach to gender – and whatever the content one gives it and whatever the causes one thinks one has found for it – social sex is considered as an “intrinsic attribute of persons”, an identitarian constituent of the individual. But, Marilyn Strathern emphasised, such a definition was based on an implicit assumption, the Western conception of the person as a whole enclosed in him or her self. This conception is not translatable to Melanesian societies where the person is thought of as a being constituted by their relations. Masculine and/or feminine are not attributes of persons, still less the constituents of their substantive identity, but modes of *relations* themselves. Whence the title of her book, *The Gender of the Gift*. It points to

the fact that her aim is to show that it is the gift itself which has a gender (which is gendered¹) and thus to arrive at a renewed conception of it, extending the famous *Essai sur le don* by Marcel Mauss.

Strathern's work, unfortunately not translated into French, comes out of a feminist anthropology that has undergone a process of thorough renewal through the critique of Western sociocentrism. The "classic" feminist theories (including the most radical) do not, according to Strathern, allow us to account for the actions, representations and values of traditional societies, since they take as their global reference our own modern Western conceptions of man and woman. Now, these conceptions take it as given that a person is made up of a body endowed with a sex and a self endowed with a gender: the dichotomous splitting of masculine and feminine substantive identities, whether they are of sex or gender, thus leaves the sociological study of actions and of relations out of consideration. These are supposed to be a simple *effect* whose *causes* are the psychological identities acquired by a kind of conditioning to "gender stereotypes". But this generates two important questions. What then of the agency of the individual, of their ability to act for themselves and, in particular, are we obliged to think that an individual does not have this ability in traditional societies where the higher value is that of relationships? Is it not mistaken to seek, in the final analysis, an explanation in the differences established between substances (spiritual and physical), when in Melanesian representations these substances themselves are plurivocal, sometimes masculine and sometimes feminine, and in actual fact always symbolise relationships?

The Gender of the Gift has provoked great debate about the way in which masculine initiations in Melanesia were analysed following the early research of Gilbert Herdt,² with reference to the dichotomy men/women and to the hypothesis of "gender identity". I shall limit myself here to pointing out three of the major propositions that can be drawn from it for a general reflection on gender:

¹. Théry's note here for her French readers concerning her translation of the English term "gendered" by the French term "sexué" (translator's note): I translate "gendered" by "sexué" and not by the neologism "genre" which seems unnecessary. In French we have two adjectives, "sexué" et "sexuel", which English does not have; clearly our language gives us an advantage in this respect.

². Cf. Herdt 1981. Herdt has worked directly with Stoller on the elaboration of the notion of gender identity (cf. Stoller 1989: ch. 11).

1. The question of gender cannot be separated from conceptions of the person, which vary from one society to another with reference to their cosmology, their system of meanings. It is no doubt through ignorance of this *crucial* point that a certain sociocentrism of Western thought about gender as an “intrinsic attribute of persons” comes to be entrenched.

2. To describe the societies where it is thought that relations constitute persons, it is not possible to hold to dichotomous thinking about “relations between men and women” based in the final analysis on male/female sexual difference in relation to procreation, if only because *same sex relations*, relegated to the unthinkable by this construction, are not less important, or less social, or less gendered than the relations between opposite sexes. These two forms of relations make up a system and exist everywhere, covering all spheres of social life and not only sexuality or procreation.

3. Any gendered relationship cannot be understood if it is arbitrarily isolated from a chain of relationships enclosed one within the other. Take the exemplary case, of a gift relationship between the giver of a pig and his receiver in the context of Melanesian total prestations. This relationship is apparently *same sex* (masculine), but it only gains its meaning and its value because it hierarchically subsumes other relationships which have made it possible, as for example the *opposite sex* relationship between the wife – who has raised the pig – and the husband, a conjugal relationship that the husband represents as gift-giver and that he “makes seen” in the gift that he makes.³

Strathern’s analyses of the Melanesian person as “objectification” of the relations which constitute that person (the person is, on that account, both “relational” and “dividual”) have had a great influence and for twenty years have caused much ink to flow on the part of specialists. But not being able to spend any more time on it here, and in order to bring out points that are common to different approaches, I shall now turn to another work that is especially important for thinking about gender and the person: *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu?* published in France in 2000 and edited by Catherine Alès and Cécile Barraud.

³. For a summary of Strathern’s relational analysis refer to Gell 1999.

Relative sex or absolute sex? The four forms of the gendered relationship

This collective work came out of the researches of an international network of anthropologists, all engaged in ethnographic descriptions that have led them to reflect on the masculine/feminine distinction as a mode of social relations. Although not all the contributors claim to adhere to the same theoretical framework, they all see themselves as working within (and here they are also in agreement with Strathern) a *comprehensive* sociology. The editors of the book and a number of the contributors explicitly claim descent from the theoretical lineage of Mauss and Louis Dumont, in other words from the perspective of structural holism⁴: the individual cannot be separated from the concrete “whole” that is society in which they participate as a person, an agent of human acts. Social relations are partial totalities that only gain their meaning when situated in the global context of a system of ideas/facts/values itself differentiated into multiple levels enclosed one within the other.

The book deals with very diverse sociocosmic societies, studied from a single viewpoint thought to be of particular heuristic value: the link between *kinship* and *rituals* that allows the masculine/feminine distinction to be perceived as it is expressed in the language, the customs, the rules and rites, the cosmology and the mythological narrative of each society. The great originality of the approach of the authors is therefore to focus on exploring in detail just one thing, always known about in anthropology but never really taken seriously before this: the *diversity of the forms of expression of the masculine/feminine distinction* in kinship terminologies. We are not automatically sensitive to this question, since for us almost all our kinship terms are those of *absolute sex*: a substantive such as “father”, “cousin” [the author wrote “*cousine*”: translator’s note: in French ‘cousin’ is masculine, *cousin*, or feminine, *cousine*] or “grandmother” indicates both a kinship tie to Ego and a sex, masculine or feminine. Now, in a number of kinship terminologies there are also terms of *relative sex*. In these cases the substantive indicates both a kinship tie and a sex, but the latter can just as well be masculine as feminine, according to the sex of the speaker. Thus, for the ‘Aré ‘Aré of the Solomon Islands, *ahone* means “sibling of opposite sex” and therefore “my sister” if it is

⁴. On the difference between the structural holism proposed by Mauss and Dumont, and the structural causalism theorised by Lévi-Strauss, see Descombes 1995: ch. 3 and Descombes 1996.

a brother who is talking, “my brother” if it is a sister who is talking. The terms of relative sex are very interesting as they distinguish the sexes without however naming them and still less making them absolute: they put the emphasis directly on the *relationship*. It is that which is gendered in the sense that it is differentiated into two gendered poles joined by an internal relation. These terms are of two kinds, “relative opposite sex” terms and “relative same sex” terms. The authors show that a number of kinship terminologies present both absolute terms and relative terms, and that their distribution makes sense.

But the work’s major contribution to our thinking about the subject goes further. It is to show that the relations expressed in terms of absolute sex are not less “relational” than those which are expressed in terms of relative sex: they are just as much so, in the sense that their poles are also distinguished/bound by an internal relation. In other words: the terms cannot be put before the relationship. This means that the masculine/feminine distinction of kinship terms is not a simple process of *identification* of the sex or gender of individuals (conceived as intrinsic attributes of the latter), but a means of expressing the normative and signifying dimension of behaviour appropriate to humans living in established societies. The masculine/feminine distinction describes the *expected ways of behaving in the context of a relationship*. A relationship, for example, between siblings [*relation de germanité*], is differentiated into a way of acting it “in the masculine mode” (or “masculinely”) and a way of acting it “in the feminine mode” (or “femininely”). I translate that, for my part, by saying that the masculine/feminine distinction is *normative, adverbial, relative and relational, common to men and women who share in the same society*. It does not describe different individuals but sets out a common social rule of gendered division of rights and duties, defining the mutual expectations that constitute this or that relationship.

The study of terminological systems reveals that the masculine/feminine distinction is far from constructing the only opposite sex relationship, as the classical approach to “male/female relationships” seems to assume. With reference to this distinction, individuals are in fact simultaneously engaged in *four forms of gendered relationship*, some being expressed either in relative terms or in absolute terms: opposite sex relationships (brother/sister, husband/wife, mother/son etc.), same sex relationships (brother/brother, mother/daughter, father/son, warrior chief/warriors, woman who

initiates/woman who is initiated etc.), relationships of undifferentiated sex (grandparent/grandchild, for example) and relationships of combined sex (father's brother/sister's son, father's sister/brother's son, for example). It can be seen, by this method, that the authors have been able to go further than Strathern. More than ten years earlier, it is to her credit that she first and forcefully drew attention to the *system* formed by opposite sex relationships and same sex relationships in Melanesian societies. Following on from that, two other relational forms have been brought to light, undifferentiated and combined sex relationships. There is no more reason to limit these to kinship alone any more than there is for the first two, as gendered relationships cover all of the space of the social. Let us pause for a moment to consider one of them, the undifferentiated sex relationship.

It is decisive for our analysis, because it is the great forgotten dimension of Western thought in its focus on "absolute" sex and substantive identity. How could we have undifferentiated sex relationships since we are always gendered beings – girl or boy, man or woman – and are supposed, moreover, to be the possessors of an inner self of a certain "gender" laid down once and for all? The answer is right before our eyes but we cannot see it. It appears more clearly thanks to kinship systems where the same term refers to the grandfather/grandmother or the grandson/granddaughter. It is true that individuals are always of one sex, but *in this case that is not of importance* for the definition of their mutual relationship and the expected behaviour of each person. The one term shows that this society conceives of a "grandparent/grandchild" undifferentiated sex relationship, the normative expectations in this case being indifferent to distinguishing between ways of acting this relationship "femininely" or "masculinely".

A thoroughgoing sociological analysis could be elaborated here as the undifferentiated sex relationship can be referred to two very different values, neutrality and androgyny. The value which comes automatically to mind is that of the *neutrality* of the relationship. Indeed, in our own culture, a number of social relationships have gradually been redefined as those of "undifferentiated sex" as, for example, the relationship of fellow citizenship in which henceforth each of us is considered without regard to their sex which, in the event, is not of importance in terms of the definition of

rights and duties. But it is possible to refer the undifferentiated sex relationship to quite another value as Anne-Marie Peatrik, for example, has shown in her fine study of age categories and classes among the Meru of West Africa (2000). Here undifferentiated sex relationships are related not to neutrality but to *androgyny*. In the case of the Meru, the grandparent or the great-grandparent is also seen as a person belonging to a certain age group, having succeeded in reaching, at the end of a highly ritualised life cycle, the “status of androgyny”, thought of as the most perfect. Conversely, in a number of societies it is the grandchild who is seen as *still* androgynous, as it is constructed through the opposite sex relationship between its father and its mother, who represent more than themselves: the necessary alliance of their respective clans, who have become the paternal relatives and the maternal relatives of the child.⁵ The fact of valuing these androgynies, which are not substantive but relational via certain kinship bonds (grandparents/grandchildren and beyond), indicates that kinship is a part of the sociocosmic system, itself organised by distinctions of *sex, age and generation*. This is a first avenue that leads to connecting kinship, ritual action and the constitution of the person.

Two important lessons for thinking about gender

In studying the forms of cooperation between consanguines and affines in the different ritual actions of marriages, initiations, feasts, ceremonial exchanges and funerals, and in specifying how these relationships lie within the relationships between social castes (nobles and commoners), clans or households, the authors of *Sexe relatif, sexe absolu?* furnish us with very rich descriptions which I cannot refer to here. In conclusion I shall highlight only two general lessons:

– Firstly, an individual, man or woman, is never restricted to the dichotomy of the “male/female relationship” since the one person is situated simultaneously at the intersection of numerous opposite sex, same sex, undifferentiated sex and combined sex relationships, themselves defined in multiple ways according to context. The question is therefore to understand how the concrete complexity of the relational fabric, while

⁵ Here again we encounter Strathern’s fine analyses relating to the body, conception, birth and childhood in Melanesia that I do not have time to develop here (1988 and 1992: ch. 2).

challenging a binary approach to the sexes (namely their division into two “sex classes” in a Marxian perspective), in no way abolishes the global distinction between a personal status as a man and a personal status as a woman, but constructs it. One could even maintain that there are no societies more concerned to elaborate these statuses than sociocosmic societies, in which the tasks, the roles and the ways of behaving are extremely marked by the normative masculine/feminine distinction, right down to the detail of the minutest gestures of daily life. The great difference with our societies is that gendered belonging never appears as a “given” (arising from the determinism of nature, or that of culture), likely to separate society into two great classes of individuals. Indeed, these societies do not believe in “the biological”, or in “sexual difference”, or in “sexuality” as a kind of original and fundamental building block, ultimately a foundation. They do not make a separation between the mind and the body, nature and culture, as two substantive entities or two separate realms where the problem lies in finding the connection between them. That is why being “a man” or “a woman” is not a natural state in them but rather a civil status or a social status, more precisely a *personal status* gained in and by *social relations*, realised in the *actions* of which each person is the agent, the object or the beneficiary. One does not become what we call a person, the agent of human acts, except by reference to norms and values that testify to active participation in the sociocosmic whole. It will take the action of the person concerned and the ritual collaboration of many other beings, human and non human (plants, animals, spirits), so that, little by little, the supreme value that is the person – a value most often symbolised by their access to the ancestral domain – will come to be constituted.

The remarkable thing, for a non-specialist Western reader reflecting on the extraordinary complexity of the rituals described in this book, is the following: in taking the utmost care to distinguish between status as a man and status as a woman, these societies do not separate them but link them together. In so doing, they always set up, in one way or another, the conditions for *going beyond the duality of the sexes* typical of every living species that reproduces sexually. A status as a man or woman is not conceived of as an isolable or “intrinsic” identity but as a part of a sociocosmic whole itself made up of relationships, allowing the person to take possession of and as if *to*

internalise the masculine/feminine distinction itself. Besides, ritual action bears witness to the keen awareness that the members of these societies have of the deeply theatrical cast of human social life. It authorises numerous types of highly serious games with the institution of gendered ways of behaving, whether we think about the great rituals of sexual inversion, the integration in social life of “men-who live-like-women”,⁶ the sacred status of hermaphrodites, or the possibility in certain circumstances of granting a masculine status to a woman or a feminine status to a man, as in same sex marriage among the Nuer.

– Secondly, sociological description implies making a careful distinction between *authority* and *power*, since the specific nature of authority is that no one can confer it on themselves. It is with reference to common values and meanings that carry authority for the whole group that *status* hierarchies are distinguished. In the relational fabric that is set up, the same individual finds themselves sometimes in a superior position and sometimes in a subordinate position, as is demonstrated, for example, in the striking contrast between the very subordinate status of *wife* in her relationship with her husband and the very dominant status of *mother-in-law* in her relationship with her son-in-law that an adult woman holds simultaneously in the case of the Orokaiva of New Guinea (cf. Iteanu 2001). Even if it is true that in the vast majority of cases the masculine predominates over the feminine, it is not a universal truth; that is why an ethnographic study that is both precise and encompassing is needed to ascertain whether, in a certain society, it is the personal status as a man or as a woman which in the end is superior, or if the two are equivalent, because they are transcended, for example, by a “symbolic androgyny”.⁷

As the British anthropologist Annette Weiner has shown in one of the most famous pioneering studies of the new feminist anthropology (1976), one of the great problems bequeathed by the Western “masculine bias” in ethnographic observation has been seriously to misconceive not only the subjection of women in traditional societies – as that has been broadly recognised since – but also and in the same movement their worth, their authority and their power. This *double misconception forms a whole* and it is

⁶. This expression is the translation of the Samoan term “faafafine”. For an analysis of the status and the social integration of “men-who-live-like-women” in Samoa, see Tcherkezoff 2003: ch. 7.

⁷. I have borrowed this term from Glowczewski 2001.

a marker of sociocentrism and presentism.⁸ First of all, and this is typical of modern individualistic presentism, we have confused hierarchy – which implies two opposed values – with inequality – which implies a single reference value. Next, we have thought that the most encompassing thing in every society is necessarily, as this seems to be the case in our secularised state societies, the institution of political power, without asking ourselves what supra-political values this power is itself related to (for example, religious cosmology and, in our modern societies, human rights). Last, without submitting it to inquiry we have accepted the Western dichotomy between “the public” and “the private” or again “the political” and “the domestic”, and have universally assigned women to a so-called private and domestic domain, considered to be naturally subordinate in social life.⁹

The studies presented in *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu?* show in turn that attention to the authority of statuses in no way encourages us to underestimate the dimension of power in societies, but on condition that we make a distinction between the two senses of the word power. On the one hand the power appointed to be obeyed or to decide conflicts, whether it is political, religious or derived from kinship and, on the other, power as the exercise of brute force, coercion by violence and intimidation. Power in the first sense of the term is not reducible simply to tyranny. Indeed, it is generally subordinate to the authority of a value considered to be superior, and the person who is charged with representing it must himself respect rules and rites. Only the description of the social whole allows us to evaluate the way in which a particular society hierarchically orders gendered statuses, institutes power relations within it, and finally regulates (or not) the relationships of force, pure and simple, between individuals of both sexes. These few examples therefore open the way towards a critical reconsideration of the “grand theories” which, far from the patient historical and comparative anthropology built on primary attention to the ethnographic field and far from the comprehensive approach to the complex forms of individual *agency*, have proposed different versions of

⁸. I have borrowed the term *presentism* from Hartog 2003.

⁹. It is in this way that Weiner, having followed in the footsteps of Malinowski and studied feminine funeral rituals that he had overlooked, has shown that Malinowski had not noticed the superior authority of the women in the Trobriands and the encompassing value of the feminine on the level of *cosmological* relations whose stakes are not the political government of the society (conferred on the men/warriors) but the relationship between life and death, in other words, the inscription of social life in the cosmic whole which encompasses it.

one and the same hypothesis: that of universal “masculine domination” opposing two great classes of individuals, “men” versus “women”, a domination founded on mechanisms ruling the dominators as well as the dominated [dominated women: *les dominées*], although both classes are equally unaware of the determinisms which govern them and the alienation which is theirs.

Without being able to go into an argued critique of the great theories of masculine domination here, I would now like to begin to sketch, in a necessarily rapid way, as a simple “overture”, the convergence that I have tried to establish in the second part of my book (2007) between the relational anthropology of gender and the contemporary philosophy of action and of language around the concept of person.

IV. From the question of gender to that of the person

The relational approach to gender, much more than the identitarian approach, distances itself from the legacy of the modern Western philosophy of “human nature” which attributed our “social vocation” to a quintessential, masculine or feminine, inner identity. It places at the centre of its thinking an inquiry into the human being in general as a being affiliated to the “institutions of meaning” (Descombes 1996) and, finally, examines the core of the naturalist approach: its radical inability to think about the specificity of human signifying action, as to think about the specificity of the human social relation, mediated by the partners’ reference to common rules. It reveals that gender obliges us above all to interrogate our implicit conceptions of the person itself, and especially those dualist representations which hypostasise a “self” to make it the possessor of a “body”.

I shall concentrate on two important questions: firstly, the critique of the dualism of the self and the body, which allows us to see more clearly the implicit conception of the person in which the opposition between the sex and the gender of the individual is deeply rooted in identitarian approaches; next, to direct the critique towards constructive propositions, by highlighting the reconsideration of the classical notion of “self” as *absolute first person* by the philosophy of action and of language.

A. *The critique of the dualism of the self and the body*

What does the dimension of gender, understood in the relational sense, bring to our thinking, now long established in the social sciences, about the history of the concept of person? Quite simply it is that it not only draws attention to the “body” by showing that it is “social”, “constructed” etc., as is more or less general practice today, but to something else as well, which actually questions the border defining the object that is “the body” as something that is self-evident. Indeed, to put the spotlight on the concept of the person indicates that the thing on which attention is to be focused is neither the body as such, nor the mind (or the soul or the Self) as such but, rather, the crucial importance of the problem of the *dualism of the self and the body* which constitutes the individualist ideology of the person, the latter being defined as composed of two entities: “*a Self and a body*” (we know that this expression is omnipresent in the work of sociologists such as Anthony Giddens).¹⁰

In what follows, by focusing on the long history of the concept of person in the Western tradition, I would like to develop the idea that this concept is fundamentally plurivocal because it comes out of two very different strands of the Western tradition, out of two great definitions of the concept: the person as *interlocutor* arising out of Greek tragedy and Roman law, and the person as *hypostasis* arising out of the great Trinitarian controversy of the first centuries of Christianity. It was the philosopher Pierre Hadot who first pointed out the upheaval that, in the fourth century C.E., was caused by Christian theology inspired by Platonic thinking in the context of the great controversy about the Trinity. His remarkable contribution to the conference *Problems of the person* organised by Ignace Meyerson in 1960 (Hadot 1973) consists in drawing out this turning point and analysing it in detail.

Tertullian, in whose writing the term Trinity first appeared, expresses a purely *relational* and *differential* conception of the person. Indeed, it is above all the Bible, in Scripture, where they discern multiple occurrences of a *divine dialogue* in which the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are distinguished as three persons addressing each other that the Christian hermeneutist perceives the proof of the internal unfolding of God

¹⁰. Here we return to the critiques levelled at the “myth of interiority” following the work of Wittgenstein and of analytical philosophy (cf. Bouveresse 1976; Descombes 2004).

in a divine “economy”. There is one God in three persons. Thus, in Tertullian, the word “person”

has, inextricably, the sense of a *grammatical person* (he or she who speaks, to whom and about whom one speaks) and that of a *dramatic character* (he or she who has a role and consequently performs an action). The two senses, moreover, are closely connected as the ancient grammarians already pointed out. In this meaning, *persona* is a word without real conceptual content. It is a kind of pronoun. [...] in Latin there is no theological usage of *persona* as attribute: *persona* refers to the subject who has attributes, but is not an attribute” (Hadot 1973: 127-128)

A radical change took place from the third century C.E., under the influence of Origen, with the Neo-Platonists’ usage, especially by Plotinus, of the word *hypostasis*, “hypostasis” in the sense of the concrete realisation of a hidden essence: God has hypostases, that is to say that he reveals himself in definite forms. A polemic was then engaged between Greeks and Latins which was concluded by an accord at the synod of 362 C.E.: God has a single *ousia* and three hypostases, that is to say a single original essence revealing itself in three hypostases, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Pierre Hadot emphasises that this watershed in the fourth century C.E. prompted a major change in the theology of the person:

From the fourth century *persona* and *prosopôn* were identified with *hypostasis*. Their grammatical, rhetorical and dramatic origins were left behind in favour of an ontological, now one would say, rather, “ontic”, sense. As *hypostasis*, they would refer to the unity and the substantive totality of a subject who concretely manifests an essence. (*ibid.*)

I have attempted to show in turn that the famous chapter of *Essays on Human Understanding*, where for the first time Locke defined the person as a “Self” (internal and subjective), possessor of a “body” (external and objective), can be read as the moment when these two great traditions – the person as interlocutor and the person as hypostasis – were tied together in a radically new way, under the aegis of a conception of the *Self* as hypostasis clearly inherited from Christian theology. Indeed, whereas the *duality* of the soul and the body, or of the spirit and the flesh, never leads to *dualism* in Christian theology (this is the whole problem of heresies), the displacement effected by

Locke by this time hypostasizing an entity placed inside the individual and out of reach of others – this *Self* that he identifies as “the true person” – consists precisely in postulating a radical dualism.

Without being able to go into the criticisms levelled at the Lockian “disengaged self” by Taylor, Ricœur and Descombes, let us emphasise that “the Self” (significantly, a term translated into French by “le Moi” [or “the I”, literally “the Me”, “the Myself”; in psychoanalysis “the Ego”]) must be understood not only as a homuncule but more precisely as a homuncule constituted from *rendering the first person absolute*, the “I”. But the “I” was only one of the three modes of the *grammatical person*; and the grammatical person was inscribed, together with the *dramatic character* of Greek tragedy and the *juridical person* of Roman law, in the tradition of the person as “interlocutor” that goes back to Greco-Roman antiquity and has been deployed, parallel to (and sometimes in dialogue with) Christian *hypostasis*, throughout our Western cultural history.

Why is it that this question of the first person directly affects all thinking about gender? Quite simply because it allows us to understand why Locke’s philosophy – which also invented the notion of “personal identity” when he sought to describe the quintessential attributes of the *Self* – is no doubt the distant origin on which (without necessarily being aware of it) psychiatrists and psychoanalysts in the United States such as Stoller have drawn and, in 1960, created the notions not only of “gender” but of “gender identity” defining the latter on the basis of acquired properties of masculinity and femininity supposed to characterise the “Self” said to be “inner” in opposition to the “body” said to be “outer”. From the outset this approach has failed to confront the really big question left to us by our philosophical heritage: how is the hypothesis of an inner identity of the Self compatible with the human experience – yet one so banal, so ordinary – of non-adherence to self? It is true that each of us is only of one sex, but none of us is imprisoned in one half of humanity via a supposed “gender identity” that determines our behaviour in advance as if we were driven by an internal engine. To be a woman is not necessarily to think “like a woman”, to act “like a woman”, it can also be, quite simply,

to think and act like an individual, independently of any reference to a masculine/feminine distinction of ways of behaving that are expected of us.

In recent years, the identitarian approaches to gender have tried to advance on this human ability to escape from adherence to self through an ever-increasing complexity and changeability of gender identifications (multiple identities, *queer*, trans-, etc.). However, they inevitably fail to account for it because, following Locke, they continue to promote a substantivist conception of personal identity. It seems to me that the reason for this problem stems particularly from the fact that they do not perceive that in fact there are two “*who?*” questions, and therefore *two senses of the very notion of identity*:

- identity in the sense of *identification*, in which “to reply to the question ‘who?’” is to provide oneself with the means of not confusing one individual with another;
- identity in the sense of *narrative identity*, which Paul Ricœur (1990, especially pp. 137-198) has defined by this formulation of Hannah Arendt’s: “To answer the question ‘who?’ is to tell a story”.

It is towards narrative identity that we must turn if we want to understand why gender identity is in reality not a set of inner characteristics absorbed through cultural impregnation, as in the determinist visions of socialisation but, plainly, the agent’s *ability* to distinguish mine from yours and his or hers, in other words *to take possession of one’s own acts, one’s own words, one’s own story*. This ability is not innate in the baby but gradually acquired by the child as part of its apprenticeship in participating in the “language games” which are those of the human world. To understand why this ability allows us to recognise ourselves as belonging to a sex without thereby locking us into a sex or gender identity, we must now turn to the great work of rehabilitation undertaken by the philosophy that is heir to the “linguistic turn” set in train by Wittgenstein in the philosophy of mind: that of the person no longer as hypostasis but rather as *interlocutor*.

B. I, you, he-she: the system of the three grammatical persons

I shall take up again here three important ideas developed elsewhere (Théry 2007: ch. 10):

– The first is that the contemporary philosophy of action has completely overturned our approach to language by putting at the centre of analysis the theory of “*speech acts*” and more broadly the practice by human beings of an action, *interlocution*, with no equivalent in the other animal species. The important point that Wittgenstein enabled us to understand is that interlocution or the action of “talking to each other” is a *complex common action*, which presupposes the participation of two partners as a minimum, and that the fact of “thinking” (which is nothing other than “talking to oneself” or “talking silently”), is a *performance that is not primary but in fact secondary*, which presupposes the mastery of ordinary interlocution with others.

If we proceed from this ordinary experience of interlocution, then we are no longer tempted to isolate the *I* of the first person, and still less to make it absolute, as the three grammatical persons, the *I* of he or she who is speaking, the *you* of he or she to whom one is speaking, and the *he or she* of he or she about whom one is speaking, are inseparable and form a system, the very structure of interlocution as a complex common action. There is nothing condemning us to head off in the direction of aporias which will necessarily be encountered by sociologists who, with good reason, are today looking to get past determinist theories of the social and to think about the singular individual, but who do so by turning towards the first person (I, me [*moi*], indeed “the self” [*le moi*]) in isolation without taking into account the contributions made by contemporary linguistics and philosophy.

– The second idea is that if the “grammatical person”, which refers to the three possible positions in speaking, must never be confused with the “person” in the ordinary sense as the agent of human acts, we should nevertheless be cognisant of everything brought to it by the ability to participate in interlocution, in other words to alternate between the three positions of the one who is speaking (I), of he or she to whom one is speaking (you) and of he or she about whom one is speaking (he/she). At stake here is the whole question of gendered belonging because I maintain in my book that the three grammatical persons are radically different with respect to the masculine/feminine distinction. Indeed, what Wittgenstein teaches us here is to understand that the first two persons, *I* and *you*, which belong to the allocutional register, *are not referential* in the sense that they refer to nothing other than the respective positions of the two interlocutors with regard to their

interlocution, the one who is speaking (*I*) and she or he to whom one is speaking (*you*). *Not being referential, I and you have neither sex nor gender.* Put another way, *I* and *you* are not true pronouns because these words do not stand for names of concrete people in order to replace them.¹¹ Invariable in gender and number, *I* and *you* designate reversible functions which institute the locutional or allocutional register. *He* or *she*, the third person, does not have the same status as the first two at all. Drawing on Benvéniste, Ortigues (1972) says that “it is not a person”, because it does not refer to a third function in the act of speaking, but appears only in speech itself, in the delocutional register. Only in the third person does the personal pronoun stand for a name already mentioned, and varies in French in gender and number (*ils, eux* [they, masculine], *elles* [they, feminine]).

If, therefore, the first two grammatical persons, *I/you*, are invariable in gender and number, a central proposition flows from that: *the “I” of interlocution has neither sex, nor gender.* This proposition often generates incredulity and we need to understand why. One could firstly argue against it that there are a number of languages in which, as distinct from French or English, gender is marked from the second person, and languages in which it is marked from the first person. It is quite possible to reply to this linguistic objection. However we see that the root of the incredulity is of another kind: “Are you in the process of telling me that when a woman says *I*, it does not refer to a woman? When you say *I* this *I* is necessarily feminine as it is you, a woman, who utters it and as it is about you, a woman, that you are speaking.” The crux of the problem here lies in the close link and yet the indispensable distinction between the grammatical person and the person in the sense of the agent of human acts. To those who say to me that my *I* is feminine, my reply will be that I am certain of being a person, and of female sex, but that I strongly doubt that I am a grammatical person. What I began learning from my youngest days on the other hand, and which has come finally to constitute me as the human person that I am, is to use these three persons not only in my language and my

¹¹. Which leads Ortigues to write that “*I* and *you* do not take the place of a name. They are deflexives of the verb, that is values which were in the beginning assigned to the verb by inflection (as in Latin) have then been marked separately by a small word (...). It is not *I* and *you* that represent names, but on the contrary the names Peter or Paul that represent persons, that is beings capable of saying “I” or from whom one can expect an answer: “you...” (Ortigues 1972: 155).

relations with others, but in my very way of being in the world and of engaging in a process of reflexivity upon myself.

Starting from this interplay involving the three grammatical persons, a thoroughgoing sociological analysis of what happens to the newborn baby during its introduction to the human world can be embarked upon. To do that we need to observe that there is an order of three persons: the child is first of all *referred to in the third person* as he or she, by those who are speaking about it, and in so doing it is also designated as “one of us, a human”. Then there begins, from the very first day, from the very first look, its practical introduction to the very complex practice of interlocution by those who are responsible not only for caring for it but also for introducing it to the human world of meaning, in general its parents. We notice here that the child is “addressed” in the second person, by “you”, well before being capable of doing the same and, moreover, well before having acquired the ability to say *I*, and thereby the concept of first person. In a way this first person comes last, and not first, as the philosophies of the original inner self, with Locke, proposed.

It is precisely the interplay of the three grammatical persons that gives the properly human ability to recognise oneself as being of one sex (humans are members of a gendered species, who consider themselves to be made up of *hes and shes* and refer to themselves in that way in the third person) without ever being assigned to it, but by practising, on the contrary, the activity of appropriation that the use of the first person by every child, boy or girl, implies, and which opens up the double temporal space of the *memory of the past* and *engagement in the future*: it is I who said it, who did it...I shall say that, I shall do it.

We can see then that the proposition according to which the *I* of interlocution has neither sex nor gender is not the very abstract and negative idea it appears to be. Because, if *I* does not refer to someone, in return it shows on the part of the person who uses it in interlocution an *ability* which is no less than that of *self-awareness*. This ability is not a simple watchful awareness but an ability to take possession of one’s own acts, one’s own words. To “take possession of” means both to make them one’s own and to recognise them as one’s own, in other words to be able to answer for them. So it is in a positive way that we are able to extract ourselves from the identitarian trap. To recognise the neutrality

of the *I* is not in any way to deny that the one who uses it is a man or a woman. Rather, it is to declare the following: whether that person is of one sex or the other, he or she displays *one and the same ability*, the ability of self-awareness that characterises human behaviour.

The person: the possible interlocutor

The system of the three grammatical persons allows us to spell out the critique of the classical conception of the person. The *I* of the one who is speaking, which points to nothing other than a relative position in interlocution, demonstrates the ability of the individual to take possession of their own speech. In essentialising this ability in the form of an absolute first person, which more than that is considered to be original and distinct from the person who is speaking, we unnecessarily erect a solipsistic self within that person. Moreover, this self is endowed with a gender identity, which a priori imprisons them in one or the other half of humanity. This philosophy overlooks the fact that what we call *a person*, in the sense of the agent of human acts, could never be reduced to someone who says *I*. To be able to say it knowingly, and therefore to act in a meaningful way, it is also necessary to be able to say *you* and *he/she*, in other words to master the *system* of the three positions bound by an internal relation, and to practise the rotation of roles and positions:

An individual identifies himself as a person when he can recognise himself or locate himself in all the positions necessary to the existence of a system of communication within which he speaks, is spoken to or is spoken about. While personal identity is nothing but the physical identity of an individual, the form in which this identity is there to be recognised as personal is a linguistic or symbolic form of communication that causes the positions or the roles in which an individual presents himself to be rotated. (Ortigue 1985: 526)

Why is this rotation of the three positions in the system essential for an anthropology of gender distinction [*la distinction de sexe*] conceived in a “relational” perspective? Firstly, because it reminds us that this system could not emerge miraculously from the interaction between individuals: it assumes *speech*, and therefore that the *technique* allowing it to be constructed is already given in the institutions of social life, beginning with a natural language that is socially transmitted (not just an

invented code). Interlocution is a social relation irreducible to intersubjectivity, to a relationship between a “self” and another “self”, which would be nothing but a strange face-to-face between a first first person and a second first person. The original face-to-face between an *ego* and an *alter ego* or a “self” and a “non-self” – so prevalent in the modern mythology of the birth of the social from the encounter between individuals already fully constructed in a state of Nature – overlooks the mediation of speech without which the alternation *I/you* of the one who is talking and the one to whom one is talking is not possible. The system of interlocution with its rotation of the three positions expressed by the grammatical persons logically precedes the concept of the person as interlocutor, and more broadly as the agent of human acts.

Moreover, the institution of the system of interlocution allows us to see this obvious fact that is so often forgotten: *every child, boy or girl*, enters the world of speaking humans *in the same way*. Let us carefully consider this common humanisation of the young child, which preserves us from all the identitarian and sexualising essentialisms that imagine humanity to be made up of two halves, men on one side and women on the other, or the feminine on one side and the masculine on the other. This is the logic of the identical and the different, of the same and the other, in which we have been entangled since the emergence of modern thought about sexual difference: it reduces roles to identities, social attributions to attributes, ways of behaving to properties, because it does not think in terms of action and abilities.

So it is that the exteriority of the institution of language – about which the Durkheimians have so often been criticised by the adherents of the interiority of the Self for having considered it to be basic to the humanity of social man – reveals its liberating potential. When we cease to be fascinated by the hypothesis of the self assigned to its gender identity and supposed to reproduce a *sex role model* [in English in the original text] by imitation or identification, we shall be in a position to remember that all the individuals of one sex or the other belong elsewhere. We can then forget the aporias of the absolute first person and the pathetic splendours of its prison-kingdom. Whatever its sex, the newborn emerges from what Castoriadis (1987) called “the psychological monad” in gradually taking possession of the human world of meaning. The ability to distinguish between the three positions which only exist through each other in the system

of interlocution, and to play three roles – in the theatrical sense of the part one takes in an action – is constitutive of the emergence of self-awareness. It is inseparable from learning language, through which we are able to place our immediate experience at a distance by symbolizing it, and opening ourselves to the universal:

Self-awareness in the child develops at the same time as the ability to communicate with others. The personal singularity of an individual is there to be recognised in the question: how can I communicate with him? The person, then, is the possible interlocutor. (Ortigue 1985: 523)

The fact that there are infinite *degrees* in interlocution – so much so that one cannot determine a threshold at which interlocution with the child has become true interlocution – is very important. The search for the objective criterion determining those humans who would be described as a “person” and those who would not yet – or any more, or never – be so described has no meaning as the integration of the individual into the universe of persons is a purely moral, social and legal question. The individual may be profoundly disabled, they may be dying, they are still part of the “we” of the social community if we agree to enter into relations with them, to address them, in other words if we appoint them as *the possible interlocutor*. There is nothing, no prior theory, that can relieve us of our social and personal responsibilities when we face the border lands of life, when it is about deciding what is the best thing for a being living in relationship to others who are very close to them, who love, are suffering and seek a solution.

Bibliography

Alès Catherine et Barraud Cécile (dir.) (2001), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu ?*, Paris : Éditions de la MSH.

Bouveresse Jacques (1976), *Le mythe de l'intériorité*, Paris : Éditions de Minuit.

Castoriadis Cornelius (1987), *L'institution imaginaire de la société*, Paris : Seuil/Esprit.

Descombes Vincent (1987), « Note sur les cosmologies », in *Proust, philosophie du roman*, Paris : Éditions de Minuit.

Descombes Vincent (1995), *La denrée mentale*, Paris : Éditions de Minuit.

Descombes Vincent (1996), *Les institutions du sens*, Paris : Éditions de Minuit.

Descombes Vincent (2004), *Le complément de sujet*, Paris : Gallimard.

- Descombes Vincent (2007), « Louis Dumont ou les outils de la tolérance », in *Le raisonnement de l'ours*, Paris : Seuil.
- Dumont Louis (1979, *Homo hierarchicus*, Paris : Gallimard (première édition 1966).
- Dumont Louis (1983), *Essais sur l'individualisme*, Paris : Seuil.
- Gell Alfred (1999), « Strathernograms, or the Semiotics of Mixed Metaphors », in A. Gell, *The Art of Anthropology*, London : Athlone Press.
- Glowczewski Barbara (2001), « Loi des hommes, loi des femmes : identité sexuelle et identité aborigène en Australie », in C. Alès et B. Barraud (dir.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu ?*, Paris : Éditions de la MSH.
- Hadot Pierre (1973), « De Tertullien à Boèce, le développement de la notion de personne dans les controverses théologiques », in I. Meyerson (dir.), *Problèmes de la personne*, Paris : Mouton.
- Hartog François (2003), *Régimes d'historicité : présentisme et expérience du temps*, Paris : Seuil.
- Herdt Gilbert (1981), *Gardians of the Flutes : Idioms of Masculinity*, New-York : Mc Graw-Hill.
- Iteanu André (2001), « Hommes et femmes dans le temps », in C. Alès et B. Barraud (dir.), *Sexe relatif ou sexe absolu ?*, Paris : Éditions de la MSH.
- Maruani Margaret (dir.) (2005), *Femmes, genre et sociétés. L'état des savoirs*, Paris ; La Découverte.
- Ortigue Edmond (1972), *Le discours et le symbole*, Paris : Aubier.
- Ortigue Edmond (1985), « Le concept de personnalité », *Critique*, mai 1985, **
- Peatrik Anne-Marie (2000), *La vie à pas contés. Générations, âges et sociétés dans les hautes terres du Kenya, Méru Tigania-Igembe*, Paris : Société d'ethnologie.
- Ricœur Paul (1990), *Soi-même comme un autre*, Paris : Seuil.
- Stoller Robert (1978), *Recherches sur l'identité sexuelle*, traduction française de M. Novodorski, Paris : Gallimard.
- Stoller Robert (1989), *Masculin ou féminin ?*, Paris : PUF (coll. Le fil rouge).
- Strathern Marilyn (1988), *The Gender of Gift*, Berkeley : University of California Press.
- Strathern Marilyn (1992), *After Nature*, Cambridge : Cambridge University Press.
- Tcherkezoff Serge (2003), *Faa Samoa, une identité polynésienne*, Paris : L'Harmattan.

Théry Irène (2007), *La distinction de sexe, une nouvelle approche de l'égalité*, Paris : Odile Jacob.

Théry Irène et Bonnemère Pascale (dir.) (2008), *Ce que le genre fait aux personnes*, Paris : Éditions de l'EHESS.

Weiner Annette (1976), *Women of Value, Men of Renown*, Austin & London : University of Texas Press.