

Sally Haslanger

**Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique**

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This important and extensive book contains seventeen groundbreaking papers by Sally Haslanger on feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, social ontology, and critical theory. Haslanger is one of the most prolific contemporary analytic feminist philosophers, and the book offers a comprehensive collection of her work over the past twenty years. With the exception of one (chapter 6), all of the essays have previously been published and many have gone on to define debates in feminist and social philosophy. The included essays are divided into three themes: social construction; gender and race; and language and knowledge.

The book does not put forward and develop one overarching argumentative line. Instead, the collected essays on the three aforementioned themes fall under the (intentionally ambiguous) idea of resisting reality. On the one hand, this captures "common resistance to recognizing the reality of the social world" and the tendency to opt for antirealist approaches to social categories (30). Haslanger rejects such approaches, and argues in a number of the included essays for "the reality of social structures and the political importance of recognizing this reality" (30). On the other hand, resisting reality captures the idea that the all-too-real social world, which in part consists of unjust social structures, ought to be resisted. This requires (among other things) making explicit mechanisms by which such structures are formed and maintained--a task that certain social constructionist positions are well suited for. As Haslanger puts the book's central idea in her trademark eloquent prose: "We should not resist seeing the reality that we should, in fact, resist; in fact, disclosing that reality is a crucial precondition for successful resistance" (30).

Part I deals with the notion of social construction, and contains some already classic papers that have been extremely helpful in clarifying and refining the notion. Chapter 1 ("On Being Objective and Being Objectified") discusses the oft-made feminist claim that reason and reality are "male" or "masculine." In this rich and well-known essay, Haslanger considers how reality could plausibly be "male," which form of this claim would be helpful for critical feminist projects, and how (following Catharine MacKinnon's work) there may be an interesting and important connection between the epistemic stance of being objective and the harmful objectification of women. Chapter 2 provides a valuable clarification of different senses of *social construction* with which we can critique traditional assumptions about what is "natural." Haslanger outlines six ways in which something could be socially constructed (generic, causal, constitutive, discursive, and strongly/weakly pragmatically constructed). These different senses enable Haslanger to argue that even if some antirealist arguments put pressure on the idea of an epistemically objective reality, those arguments do not force us into idealism or skepticism about reality, nor do they undermine the idea of an agent-independent reality. It is thus possible for something to be real *and* constructed, an insight that will be helpful for feminist antiracist movements. Chapter 3 elaborates social construction further and outlines one particular kind of social constructionist project that (Haslanger claims) Ian Hacking fails to consider. Although Hacking's approach to social construction is apt for some projects, according to Haslanger, it fails to capture adequately what is at issue for those working on gender and race. For these latter theorists, Haslanger offers the tool of "debunking": a particular kind of social constructionist project, which "attempts to show that a category or classification scheme that appears to track a group of individuals defined by a set of physical or metaphysical conditions is better understood as capturing a group that occupies a certain (usually 'thick') social position" (132). Examples of debunking projects include Haslanger's own constructionist accounts of gender and race (to be outlined shortly).

Chapter 4 expands the argument against antirealism. It does so by discussing the apparently uneasy alliance of feminism and metaphysics. A number of feminist philosophers (such as Judith Butler) have taken such an alliance to be untenable, and have subsequently argued for various antirealist positions. These feminist suspicions take two forms: some have taken dominant metaphysical theories to be male-biased (androcentric), and have called for less biased gynocentric alternatives; others have rejected metaphysical projects altogether as being incompatible with feminist ones. Haslanger argues that both forms of critique are flawed and suggests a way in which we could begin to develop a distinctly feminist metaphysics. One way to do so is by engaging in a kind of debunking project about gendered kinds outlined above: this enables us to retain the *reality* of gendered social kinds, and avoid (say) idealism about women and men, at the same time demonstrating that gendered kinds are distinctly social and not natural. In chapter 5, Haslanger considers the construction of personal identity, and critiques David Velleman's view that this sort of construction requires having relationships with one's biological progenitors. Chapter 6 again takes issue with antirealism and elucidates a form of social construction that is not (*contra* common views) committed to antirealism, antiobjectivism about kinds, or to antinaturalism. Rather, Haslanger argues that there is a "central" form of social construction, which is "compatible with important forms of realism, an objectivism about kinds, and naturalism" (183). (I will say more about this shortly.)

In Part II of the book, Haslanger puts forward her well-known and much-discussed conceptions of gender and race. Briefly put, she takes them to be social classes constituted by patterns of social domination, subordination, and privilege. In chapter 7 ("Gender and Race"), Haslanger provides her by-now classic

accounts of gender and race understood as social kinds. In line with standard feminist practice, she takes 'woman' and 'man' to be gender terms, and 'female' and 'male' to be sex terms. For her, to be a woman is to occupy a subordinate social position in virtue of observed or imagined female reproductive features. Men (for Haslanger) occupy a privileged social position in a parallel manner. Color is to race as sex is to gender, where 'color' refers to "any socially meaningful features taken in a context as (alleged) indicators of ancestral links to a particular geographical region" (7, fn 4). According to Haslanger, then, for some groups to be races is for them to be "situated hierarchically" due to (social, cultural) interpretation of their color (9). These ideas are captured in the slogans "gender is the social meaning of sex" and "race is the social meaning of color." The said definitions of *gender* and *race* are put forward in an ameliorative spirit: they do not aim to elucidate our everyday race and gender talk, and instead aim to capture those concepts that we ought to endorse relative to our legitimate feminist and antiracist political goals--namely, relative to political projects aiming for social justice.

Chapter 8 continues this line of thought, and discusses the implications of Haslanger's hierarchical definitions of gender and race. For Haslanger, although the definitions offered in chapter 7 suggest that "a primary task in the quest for social justice is to eliminate those social structures that constitute races (or racialized groups) and eliminate women and men" (252), there are nevertheless important considerations that count against treating gender and race as parallels. In short, a just future leaves room for nonhierarchical and egalitarian genders, but not for races. This is because, although sex can be a meaningful distinction from a political point of view, color cannot and should not be. So, nonhierarchical social meanings of sex would constitute egalitarian genders; Haslanger does not envision parallel possibilities for social interpretations of color though. Rather, the task of social theory and ideology critique is precisely to undermine such social interpretations constitutive of race.

In chapter 9, Haslanger discusses how we should conceive of racial identities or self-understandings given her constructionist account of races as hierarchically positioned social kinds, and constituted by various patterns of social domination and privilege. She further considers the implications of her view on transracial adoption practices. In so doing, Haslanger draws in a highly interesting and novel manner on theoretical considerations and personal anecdotes as an adoptive mother of two African American children. Haslanger continues to elucidate her constructionist account of race in chapter 10. There she discusses how her view differs from racial eliminativists (who maintain that race is a fiction), and neo-naturalists about race (who reject racial essences, but take races to be biologically evolved populations). Chapter 11 concludes the second part of the book. In this chapter, Haslanger offers an account of structural oppression focusing on racial (or racialized) oppression. Roughly: some group *F* are oppressed as *F*s by an institution *I* in a context iff (by definition) a certain unjust relation *R* exists whereby being an *F* nonaccidentally correlates with being disadvantaged by standing in *R* to others, and *I* creates, perpetuates, or reinforces that relation (325). By way of example, Haslanger discusses a study of US child-welfare policies and racism.

The final, and philosophically extremely rich, part III considers more mainstream issues in epistemology, ontology, and philosophy of language drawing on insights gained from the previous discussions. In chapter 12, Haslanger takes issue with contemporary analytic epistemology's preoccupation with questions like: what are the truth conditions of claims of the form *S* knows that *p*? She aims to show that much of feminist work "often deemed irrelevant to the *philosophical* inquiry into knowledge is in fact highly relevant" (342). Haslanger suggests that a program of normative epistemology informed by feminist insights provides new and novel ways to think about knowledge. Rather than starting with *a priori* philosophical reflection about the content of the concept of *knowledge*, a distinguishing feature of a normative program is that it begins by asking pragmatic questions: What do we need the concept of knowledge for, and what work is it doing for us?

Chapter 13 discusses the semantics of social kind terms. In particular, Haslanger draws on her constructivist accounts of gender and race outlined and defended in part II with the view to "question what's at issue in doing philosophical analysis of a concept, and to disrupt the assumptions behind the common revisionary/nonrevisionary contrast" (366). As previously noted, Haslanger's constructivist accounts of gender and race were put forward in an ameliorative or revisionary sense: they are the ones we ought to endorse relative to our legitimate feminist, antiracist goals. Haslanger terms the more standard

nonrevisionary ways of analyzing concepts "conceptual" and "descriptive" analyses. The former aims to elucidate our everyday manifest concepts by elucidating the conditions under which native English speakers commonly think someone satisfies (say) the concept of *woman*. (For instance, such an analysis probably reveals that the content of our manifest *woman* concept is that women are human females.) A descriptive analysis of our everyday (gender or race) talk focuses on our terms' extensions, and investigates whether our language-use in fact tracks some empirical kinds. Haslanger terms concepts analyzed in this manner our everyday "operative" concepts. An ameliorative analysis aims to "elucidate 'our' legitimate purposes and what concept of *F*-ness (if any) would serve them best" (376). This method will reveal our target concept. Our target concepts of gender and race, according to Haslanger, are those that she outlines in part II of the book.

Now, generally speaking, our manifest, operative, and target concepts at times coincide: we are aware of what we are talking about, and what we are talking about is what we should be talking about. But they may come apart, and to do so due to oppressive ideologies that are "masking what we are doing or saying" (376). In such cases, social constructionist and "debunking" projects may helpfully reveal to us something about our language-use and practice. Taking these different methodologies of conceptual analysis seriously can also explain why philosophers asking the same questions seem to be talking past one another (377). Social constructionist analyses demonstrate that there are many ways for something to be "our" concept of *F*, and mainstream philosophers would do well to take this insight on board. Interestingly, Haslanger also suggests that perhaps her constructivist accounts of gender and race are not as revisionary as might first seem: even though these accounts may appear counterintuitive, given the power of oppressive ideological masking of what we take ourselves to be saying and doing, we may be employing gender and race terminology in a way that results in our operative and target concepts coinciding. So, although we do not take ourselves to be saying that genders and races are social kinds constituted by structural relations of dominance and privilege, we may *in fact* be tracking gender and race kinds (roughly put) with this "in mind" without being aware of doing so. In this case, "our" operative gender and race concepts are Haslanger's target concepts.

Chapter 14 continues methodological discussions in philosophy of language, and takes issue with the role and value of intuitions in philosophical inquiry. First, Haslanger holds that, following the discussions in the previous chapters, relying on intuitions when doing conceptual analysis may not be the most fruitful method. Ideologies may mislead us about our practices, and "mask what we are really doing with our concepts" (403)--something that (Haslanger repeatedly argues in the book) social constructionist analyses can helpfully reveal. Second, Haslanger repudiates the charge that if social constructionist accounts of (say) gender and race are counterintuitive, we *therefore* have a reason to view them with suspicion. After all, counterintuitiveness is a criterion often used in standard philosophical analyses to show that our theoretical endeavors have gone astray. However, Haslanger argues convincingly that this in itself does not show constructivist analyses to be untenable. Rather, our philosophical theory choices and the "betterness" of an approach should be made relative to contextually variable semantic, political, and pragmatic considerations (385).

Chapter 15 returns to epistemological issues, and considers how we can make sense of genuine disagreement in a social world saturated with ideological baggage. Given that we live in different milieus even within the same social spaces, Haslanger offers a model for thinking about the truth-values of evaluative claims that avoids simple relativism about such claims, and thereby makes genuine disagreement along with ideology critique possible. In chapter 16 Haslanger explores methods by which we should fix the meaning and reference of racial talk. In this essay, she further argues for the dynamic relationship between moral and political philosophy, and philosophy of language and mind: as Haslanger sees it, doing full justice to one's subject matter requires attending to both normative and nonnormative considerations (443).

The final chapter, 17, continues considering many of the previously discussed themes, and connects the earlier discussions more closely with ideology critique and social theory. In particular, Haslanger draws on Sarah-Jane Leslie's recent work on generics in order to discuss claims like "Blacks are violent," and to expose their ideological grounds. Generic claims (in general) are part of the "common ground" we rely on

to communicate. But this common ground is not free from ideological forces. Ideology (as Haslanger understands it) is "a set of background beliefs that purport to justify social structures" (467). But our social structures are also partly constituted by ideology in the form of schemas: "intersubjective patterns of perception, thought, and behavior" (462), and shared dispositions to have such patterns (20). The other part of social structures is resources, which provide "the materiality of social structures" (463). Many problematic generics (about women, Blacks) seem to have become hegemonic and solidified as part of the common ground. Part of the task of ideology critique, then, is to refuse and resist the common ground: to expose and undermine the ideological pull of schemas in the formation and maintenance of our social structures.

What is striking about Haslanger's work is the honesty and courage with which she writes. Rather than relying on abstracted and outlandish thought-experiments, Haslanger utilizes many personal anecdotes and examples to clarify her points, and to motivate the various discussions. The book is not only philosophically refreshing and inspiring; it is also politically empowering. I cannot do justice to the richness of Haslanger's *oeuvre* here: there is much to say about the essays in this book, and much has already been said about them. Nevertheless, I wish to make some brief critical comments about the previously unpublished chapter 6 ("Social Construction: Myth and Reality"). As already noted, Haslanger argues in this chapter that a central form of social construction relevant for feminist antiracist projects is *compatible* with "important" forms of realism, objectivism, and naturalism (183). Haslanger targets primarily gender and race constructionists who deny this compatibility, although in the background of this and other essays appears a desire to convince mainstream philosophers of the valuable insights such constructionist approaches have. Although I entirely agree with Haslanger that constructionist accounts of gender and race are compatible with realism and objectivism about the relevant social kinds, I am less convinced of her case relative to naturalism.

How does Haslanger understand realism, objectivism, and naturalism? For her, realism is about truth-aptness: a realist about some domain holds that claims purporting to describe this domain are truth-apt (they can be either true or false, and "at least some of them are true") (198). On this understanding, typical antirealists are either noncognitivists (*contra* appearances, our claims are not truth-apt), or error theorists (all of our claims about some domain are systematically false). Objectivism is cashed out in terms of genuine types, and the existence of types "depends on members of a set of things having some degree of unity" (202). That is, there is some principled manner of unifying and binding together different entities, and our criterion of unification is not utterly gerrymandered and random. For a type to be *objective* is for it to be "real" (203). This means (for Haslanger) that the type's boundaries correspond to "real differences . . . there is something about how things are in virtue of which the members of the type differ from non-members" (203). Haslanger maintains (and I think rightly so) that constructionist views are not antithetical to these ways of understanding realism and objectivism. First, realism is understood in quite a minimal manner as being about truth-aptness. This enables constructionists to be realists about statements like "Whites, on average, hold greater wealth in the United States than Blacks," and to avoid the unhappy anti-realist positions whereby this claim would be either not truth-apt, or systematically false because the terms 'White' and 'Black' fail to refer. Second, there are clear and unproblematic cases of objective *and* socially constructed types. Haslanger's example is landlords. The type is socially constituted (what it is to be a landlord just is to rent one's property to others), and it is objective: the type's boundaries correspond to real differences since there is a real difference "in the world" between landlords and non-landlords--namely, the latter do not rent their properties owned, or do not own properties to be rented.

So far I have few qualms with Haslanger's case. I am, however, less convinced about her attempts to bridge the gap between social constructionism and naturalism. There are many ways to understand both notions; a number of Haslanger's essays clarify the former. But what, for her, is naturalism? It is "a commitment to seeing ourselves as parts of a universe in which all things are interdependent. Naturalism does not entail that there are only physical things, but if there are non-physical things, they must be part of the causal order, that is, they must either have causes and effects, or must supervene on things that do" (210). By contrast, an antinaturalist position (as outlined by Haslanger in chapter 6) would hold that if some Fs are socially constructed, then "being an F is non-natural" [that is, Fs are the way they are by virtue of social factors], or being an F is "not caused by natural processes" (211). And Haslanger aims to show that

constructionist positions, which are more usually coupled with antinaturalism, are *in fact* compatible with naturalism.

However, I am not entirely convinced by Haslanger's attempt to do so. First, in her framing of the naturalism/antinaturalism dispute, I do not see even a *prima facie* tension between the two positions, and they do not strike me as being contraries. After all, *nonnatural* is not equivalent to *nonphysical*. Many physical things are nonnatural, that is, they are the way they are due to social factors. Then again, nonphysical things that exert causal influence on reality can be nonnatural and socially constructed. Just think of a system of laws. Laws are nonphysical, and yet are part of the causal order: they cause people to be imprisoned, and conceivably have effects like reinforcing certain cultural images of "criminal Blacks" in the US. Or, if we wish to give a micro-explanation of this, nonphysical laws supervene on some psychological antecedents of conscious social agents (namely, beliefs and intentions conceived in a materialist spirit). But there is nothing in this formulation of naturalism that even *prima facie* rules out social construction. A naturalist can accept that nonphysical laws are part of a causal order, and need not hold that: (1) laws are natural, or (2) something's being a law is caused by "natural processes" (211). This is because they need not accept *qua* naturalists in Haslanger's sense that only natural entities are part of the causal order. So, *if* we accept Haslanger's conception of naturalism, she is right that constructionism is compatible with naturalism. But now, the compatibility thesis starts to look rather trivially true, and it seems to be one that neither antirealist feminists nor mainstream staunch metaphysical naturalists (in her sense) appear to deny. And this is because Haslanger's definition of naturalism seems to be rather innocuous. So, no staunch antirealist feminist (to my knowledge) would deny naturalism in Haslanger's sense, and staunch naturalists need to deny Haslanger's antinaturalism. The latter can accept that nonphysical things exist *insofar as* such things are part of the causal order, or supervene on things that are. So, they can easily accept that there are nonnatural, socially constructed Fs (where what it is to be an F ontologically depends on nonnatural processes) in that Fs exert causal powers. Nevertheless, they might hold that ontologically speaking, such Fs just don't matter: what matters is the supervenience base due to which the nonphysical, nonnatural Fs have their causal powers. They can accept the *existence* of ontologically non-self-sufficient derivative entities, and still hold that *really* what metaphysically matters is the nonconstructed, fundamental layer of reality on which all else is grounded. Again, Haslanger's compatibility thesis holds, but this does not require the naturalist to accept anything particularly controversial or unfamiliar.

I suspect that the compatibility thesis would be much harder (if not impossible) to establish with more stringent versions of naturalism. I cannot outline and discuss such versions here; still, one cannot help but wonder whether the conceptions of naturalism/antinaturalism that Haslanger advances too easily support the compatibility thesis by simple terminological fiat. Haslanger briefly discusses this objection, but rejects it. According to her, she is offering "the strongest philosophical positions on [realism, objectivism, and naturalism], not simply revising the concepts" for her purposes (214). Haslanger does not, however, offer a justification for why her conception of naturalism should be considered the strongest one, and I see little reason to agree with Haslanger on this point. But let's put this worry to one side, and accept the truth of the thesis. Does this yield the gains that Haslanger takes it to yield? I am still unconvinced. According to Haslanger, the compatibility thesis is important for feminist antiracist social theory: in order to change the problematic social realm and find out what are the "levers for change," we must understand the ways in which the social and the nonsocial are interdependent. So, a need for particular explanations motivates the need to endorse the compatibility thesis. But the compatibility thesis may hold without yielding the right *kinds* of explanations (let alone the right explanations). One can endorse a form of reductivism: we can accept the reality of the social realm and of the constructed Fs; and, nevertheless, one can hold that *really* what matters is the fundamental nonsocial level that grounds the existence and nature of Fs. Or, one can endorse a form of antireductionism: we can accept that we always inhabit causally interdependent systems or matrices (that is, one accepts naturalism); and, nevertheless, we can disregard the nonsocial in our explanations. That the compatibility thesis holds alone does not guarantee the kinds of explanations Haslanger envisages. We also need some further independent reasons for the two sides to take the other's insights seriously. This suggests to me that the acceptance of the compatibility thesis is of lesser importance than Haslanger accords it.

Nothing I have said provides a conclusive reason to reject Haslanger's compatibility thesis; however, I hope to have motivated the need for further work in this area. With this in mind, I look forward to the next twenty years of Haslanger's work.

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