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## Sally Haslanger, Resisting Reality: Social construction and social critique

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There has been a significant amount of research, from a variety of disciplines, targeting the nature and political status of human categories such as *woman*, *man*, *Black*, and *Latino*. The result is a tangle of concepts and distinctions that often obscure more than clarify the subject matter. This incentivizes the creation of fresh terms and distinctions that might disentangle the old, but too often these efforts just add to the snarl. The process iterates, miscommunication becomes standard, and insufficiently vetted concepts can gain central theoretical status. Over the last two decades, Sally Haslanger's work in this area – conveniently consolidated in the volume “Resisting Reality: Social construction and social critique” – has been a much needed corrective to this process; Haslanger's terms and distinctions really do disentangle. In this respect the volume is a nice example and reminder of the value of the methods of analytic philosophy – of how careful analysis can clarify concepts, improve dialogue, and chart new directions. But importantly, these essays are not methodically narrow-minded or beholden to a single style of analysis. Rather, and in order to carry out her epistemic and political projects, Haslanger enlists strategies and concepts from a broad range of sources and academic frameworks (in the space of a few pages one can find discussions of hegemonic ideology, Gricean implicature, natural kinds, teen fashion, and linguistic accounts of generics). Below I organize and explicate central themes from Haslanger's volume. I then offer some critical comments, arguing that some of Haslanger's distinctions and proposals are less successful than others.

Readers familiar with Haslanger's work will not find much new here – only the Introduction and the chapter “Social Construction: Myth and Reality” appear for the first time. It is worth noting that the Introduction is much more than a perfunctory gloss of the volume's contents. While the volume's chapters are not always consistent, they nonetheless have a systematic character, and Haslanger's Introduction provides an effective framework for grasping that character. It also provides a sense of Haslanger's most recent thinking on the volume's topics: one gets the impression that had *Resisting Reality* been a monograph rather than a collection of essays (Haslanger provides reasons in the Introduction for pursuing the latter course) it would have resembled a rich extension of the Introduction. Turning to the volume's chapter content, there are various ways that one might taxonomize broad themes. The volume's chapter divisions – “Social Construction,” “Gender and Race,” and “Language and Knowledge” – suggest one way, as does the slight variant of this offered in the Introduction. Working from the volume's “intentionally ambiguous” (29) title, I will elaborate on a different taxonomic choice.

We can view the essays in *Resisting Reality* as recommending and arguing for three distinct but interdependent orientations toward reality. First, we are given reasons to *confront* reality. Several essays make clear how researchers abuse the classification “socially constructed.” One such abuse is the conflation of *P is socially caused* with *P is less (or deficiently) real*. Another is the overgeneralization of “socially constructed” to reality, truth, and “everything.” Haslanger makes a strong case that these abuses stem from vague or equivocal concepts of social construction and that they obscure the respects in which social categories are as real as “bridges abutments and fists in the face” (84). She also makes a strong case (in opposition to the views of Butler) that our need to access the world via conceptual and linguistic

intermediaries does not lessen the quality of that access or the independence of the things accessed (154). But crucially, these and similar claims are grounded in Haslanger's careful and convincing discussion of the different types, underlying mechanisms, and products of social construction.

Consider Haslanger's contrast between distinctions that are "weakly pragmatically constructed" (WPC) and those that are "strongly pragmatically constructed" (SPC). Both types of distinction are driven by social interest, but while the former accurately represent objective facts, the latter are "illusions projected onto the world" (91). With this bit of analysis, Haslanger can now identify and criticize the common (and confusion-creating) tendency for theorists to conflate WPC and SPC. For example, it does not follow from the SPC status of certain gender distinctions (e.g., biological essentialist ones) that there are no objective differences between men and women. Rather, and in part *because* social roles and institutions have been built on such erroneous SPC distinctions (Hacking's "looping effect"), objective differences between men and women are all too real. Thus the distinction between men and women is WPC, and actual men and women are (in Haslanger's terminology) both "discursively" and "causally" constructed. Consistent with this ontological framework, several essays in *Resisting Reality* expound on a realist account of gender and race (discussed below) while also criticizing eliminativist accounts.

A second and related recommended orientation in *Resisting Reality* is that of *unmasking* reality. Many purportedly "natural" distinctions and categories are, as a matter of empirical and historical fact, developed out of social practices that could have been other than they are. For Haslanger, unmasking this underlying social structure, which will involve "debunking" illusions of naturalness and intrinsic essence, is often a crucial first step in the project of advancing political goals. Because illusions of naturalness and intrinsic essence have commonsense appeal,

unmasking can meet with resistance. For example, it can sure look and seem as if Joe Cool is cool by nature or cool intrinsically (especially when everyone says this about Joe and there are social rewards for agreeing), but *really* – and this is what needs to be unmasked – Joe is cool because he has the right sort of relationship to wider social practices that were themselves developed on the basis of (false) assumptions that coolness is an intrinsic or natural property. Unmasking “lays bare” this discursive process, and it debunks or discredits the very conceptual commitments responsible for that process in the first place.

I think it is important to point out that debunking and unmasking are not exercises restricted to the ivory tower; one can unmask and debunk during a casual conversation. For example, Haslanger claims that conversational statements like “Blacks are violent” often do more than assert a non-accidental correlation between their predicates and subjects. Through implicit-level mechanisms of implicature and presupposition they can also introduce propositions that ground predication in reference to kind-essence – in this case the proposition that Blacks are violent naturally or essentially (461, 468). Haslanger asks us to challenge such pragmatic moves by unmasking and canceling the implied propositions.

This brings us to the volume’s third recommended orientation to reality. Haslanger’s essays never lose sight of the need to *change* reality, and they offer several accounts of how we might do so. *Resisting Reality* makes clear that political and critical considerations ought to play a central role in theoretical debates not traditionally viewed as having an evaluative component. While some of Haslanger’s arguments here derive from previous feminist scholarship on the relationship between value and inquiry (especially Elizabeth Anderson, “Knowledge, Human Interests, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology,” *Philosophical Topics* 23 [1995]: 27-58),

Haslanger makes several novel contributions. Chief among these are her arguments that *prima facie* descriptive terms like “knowledge,” “gender,” and “race” have a stipulative component – it is “up to us” how to define them. Haslanger acknowledges other investigative projects, for example “conceptual” investigations into our manifest concepts and empirically-driven “descriptive” investigations into the objective properties of the type or kind picked out by our terms and concepts. But she makes clear that the stipulative, “ameliorative” investigations into “the phenomenon we need to be talking about” (224) are a methodological priority. Her theory of gender and race upholds this commitment, and it is a central cog of *Resisting Reality*. According to that theory (I will focus on gender), we ought to define the categories “women” and “men” hierarchically and in reference to relations of social subordination and privilege. We should do so, claims Haslanger, even if these definitions do not comport with the results of conceptual and descriptive investigations into these same categories (224).

Turing now in a more critical direction, *Resisting Reality* is less clear than one would hope in explaining how these three investigative projects interact, what happens should they conflict, how they can be brought into equilibrium (Haslanger claims this is the ideal, 387), and in which types of cases the ameliorative project is both possible and preferable. Regarding this latter issue, Haslanger’s interesting (and perhaps overlooked) ameliorative investigation into the concept *knowledge* (chapter 12) highlights a connection between the *normative* component of knowledge and the legitimacy of a value-laden stipulation for what counts as knowledge. Could this type of connection generalize as a rule or sufficient condition for the value (or applicability) of one type of ameliorative project? In other words, do all explananda with normative features warrant ameliorative investigations? It seems unlikely. The membership conditions for certain functional categories like hearts are determined by normative properties, but presumably *those*

norms are set by historical facts and are not up for stipulation. We might stipulate *future* heart-norms, but note that this is not a revisionist, ameliorative project. Rather, it is the use of normative theory to direct the outcome of empirically understood processes – in this case the selective processes that produce artifactual and/or biological hearts. Of course, for political or health reasons we may prefer to stipulate different cardiovascular categories – and this may be all that the ameliorative project requires of us in this scenario – but this now leaves us the task of integrating (epistemically and politically) the new stipulated categories with causally important bio-functional categories like *heart*.

A more pressing but not unrelated worry for *Resisting Reality* stems from Haslanger's hierarchical definitions of gender and race categories – definitions grounded in her ameliorative project. The worry is that the definitions and their defense lead Haslanger down a winding path of explanatory fixes, and the fixes – not always convincing – require too many fixes of their own. To illustrate, Haslanger advances her hierarchical definitions in order to meet certain social-political goals (discussed below). Haslanger then anticipates that these definitions will be reproached as unintuitive and as changing the subject. To defend against these charges, Haslanger packages the account with the theory of semantic externalism. The union is appealing because, under certain conditions, externalism permits a mismatch between a concept's salient descriptive content and its wide, referential content: it “allows us to claim that what we are talking about is, in fact, a social category, even if we think it isn't” (402), and “...we can proceed politically without recommending a semantic revolution as well (309).” But the application of externalism must be defended, and doing so requires further ontological commitments which must *themselves* be defended. Specifically, it must be shown that the target gender or race concept has, via some causal and/ or historical relation, an objective referent. It

would be tempting at this point to claim that natural kinds, individuals, or substances play this ontological role. But this appears not to be an option within Haslanger's framework: because such posits standardly incorporate exclusionary features (e.g., explanatory essences) that, for example, would preclude the diversity of *women* or establish harmful norms for *Black men*, they would obstruct Haslanger's ameliorative goals. In contrast, Haslanger's preferred hierarchical account – an account that does not build in such extra ontological commitments – “accommodates such variation by being very abstract (239).” But now notice the tight space we have traveled into: the account requires an ontological posit that is abstract enough to meet the ameliorative goals, and yet robust enough to serve both the semantic role of anchoring reference *and* the political goal discussed earlier of adequately theorizing, rather than disengaging with (the eliminativist's mistake), the objective reality of human categories.

Haslanger seeks to balance these commitments by appealing to what she calls “objective types.” *Resisting Reality* thus places more dialectical pressure on this device than is apparent, and it is not clear that the device is up to the task. Objective types are very weak ontological unities – they are sets whose members share an objective property. Examples include “things exactly one mile from my dog's nose” (202), “red things” (149), and “the things on my desk” (149). Even if some objective types exemplify greater unity than this, it is the allowance of this minimal unity that would permit Haslanger to count her hierarchical categories as objective types. On the other hand, a more demanding ontology – one that required additional axes of similarity – would enforce too much commonality within social categories, thereby undermining ameliorative goals. This ontological minimalism, however, appears in tension with the semantic and epistemological jobs assigned to objective types – jobs whose performance would seem to require greater not lesser objective unity. For example, a natural kind externalist can explain



reference by appealing to a kind's stable *combination* of properties exemplified by members for a *univocal* reason (e.g., microstructure, common descent). The kind's explanatory value – a result of its rich and non-accidental property clustering – explains that and how it accommodates reference and facilitates scientific success (e.g., Hilary Kornblith, *Inductive Inference and its Natural Ground* [Cambridge, MA.: MIT Press, 1993]). In contrast, it is unclear what non-ad hoc account Haslanger might give for why hierarchically defined objective types, and not one of the infinite other objective types, have historically accommodated the referential practices of both folk and scientists who use the terms *woman*, *man*, *Black*, and *White*.

At this point, *Resisting Reality* offers some general remarks about “social theorists” who set paradigms, study their commonality, and look for the most objective unity (135, 137, 305-306, 373). It is not entirely clear how this is supposed to work, or who counts as a social theorist (it is noteworthy that in chapter sixteen Haslanger shifts her attention to a “rational improvisational model” of meaning). While I am sympathetic to the idea that we need to examine the efforts of social scientists – indeed, social scientists keen on discovering patterns of social injustice – in order to uncover what things in the world accommodate their explanatory practices, I am unconvinced that such an undertaking would reveal hierarchically defined objective types. Rather, and as I discuss in more detail elsewhere (Theodore Bach, “Gender Is a Natural Kind with a Historical Essence,” *Ethics* 122 [2012]: 231–272), a more robust ontology of natural kinds with historical essences arguably best explains extant social scientific investigation into social categories.

But let's return to the reason for why we started down this path of dialectical maneuvering in the first place. After all, those truly committed to the ameliorative project, while requiring objectivity, may not care about the benefits of semantic externalism. What ameliorative

goals mandate the use of Haslanger's hierarchical definitions? She claims that "for the purposes of a critical feminist inquiry, oppression is a significant fact around which we should organize our theoretical categories" (240). The idea seems to be that, with subordination and privilege built into the definitions, extant investigations into gender categories will never lose focus on the injustice of women's oppression and the "one's that matter" (240). But there appears to be a hidden assumption at work here: that what is politically and normatively central to a group ought to be also constitutively/definitionally/ (and/or) ontologically central to that group.

Whether or not Haslanger is committed to the above principle, it is worthwhile to reflect on why this principle should give us pause. First, note that it is not true generally, and thus the application to gender would not follow automatically from the truth of the general principle. Consider a Civil War doctor who encounters only gangrened feet and who has the investigative goal of rehabilitating such feet. To advance that goal, it would be a mistake to define or understand *feet* as essentially gangrened. This follows from the empirical and ontological nature of human feet (e.g., that they might survive the eradication of gangrene). The moral we might draw from this example is that the aptness of any particular application (e.g., Haslanger's) of the general principle will depend on the empirical and ontological character of the thing investigated. While Haslanger allows that ameliorative projects should begin "with a rough understanding of the salient facts" (353), she appears to overlook the point that ameliorative stipulations can *seal off* certain empirical possibilities and facts – facts that, as it might turn out, are central or even necessary to meeting one's ameliorative goals.

One such (politically important) empirical possibility closed off by Haslanger's stipulative hierarchical definition is the *mutability* of categories like *women*. Such mutability would apply if the ontological natures of social categories like *women* are analogous to that of a

species or an artifact lineage (see Bach 2012), in which case these groups can survive the loss of a property such as *socially subordinated*. This descriptive possibility informs political possibilities. For example, on this ontological construal (and contrary to Haslanger's), advocating for social justice would not require advocating for the elimination of the groups *men* and *women*. The more general, methodological point is that sometimes the best way to advance one's ameliorative goals will be to prioritize empirical and ontological investigations into the category's nature. Only then can certain avenues for, and perspectives on, social and political change reveal themselves as recommended possibilities.

If any of the above critical remarks have any merit, it is only because *Resisting Reality* is so successful at organizing and restructuring concepts and distinctions so that interlocutors can engage meaningfully with, rather than talk past, one another. The preceding discussions hardly do justice to the richness of Haslanger's volume. I wish I had the space here to discuss Haslanger's illuminating essays on the dynamics and ethics of transracial adoption, or the nature of knowledge. I can only recommend that others spend time working through these and other essays in *Resisting Reality*. Haslanger's work is always rewarding, and *Resisting Reality* is required reading not just for philosophers but – more rare – any researcher who has a serious interest in the nature of social construction, human categories, and social justice.

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