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DOSSIER ON *RESISTING REALITY*  
A DEBATE WITH SALLY HASLANGER ON HER BOOK  
*RESISTING REALITY: SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND SOCIAL  
CRITIQUE*

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## Introduction

What does it mean that gender and race are socially constructed? How should we understand the very real social relations of oppression with which structural forms of sexism and racism go hand in hand? And what can analytic philosophy contribute to the attempts of feminist and other types of critical theory to both analyze and criticize the status quo? These are some of the questions Sally Haslanger's important book *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* addresses by bringing together a number of highly influential essays, which explore the relation between social construction and social critique, drawing on insights from feminist and critical race theory. Offering reinterpretations of notions such as ideology, social structure, and oppression, Haslanger's analyses combine the methods of analytic philosophy and critical theory to provide a challenging view of the social world we live in, and of what's wrong with it.

Haslanger is one of the most prominent voices in contemporary analytic metaphysics and epistemology and from early on has used the conceptual and argumentative resources from this approach to contribute to the project of critical social theory in general and feminist theory in particular (in this her project can be seen as related to the work of philosophers such as Rae Langton, Elizabeth Anderson, Ann Cudd, and Charlotte Witt). Haslanger's interest in gender and race, however, is not merely theoretical but bound up with her activist engagement in the struggle to overcome structural obstacles to inclusivity and non-discrimination in the academic world in general, and philosophy in particular – obstacles which are still poorly understood (if not flatly denied) by many in the profession and which range from continuing outright discrimination and micro-aggressions, to unconscious biases and schemes, and the socially dysfunctional atmosphere of many departments (Haslanger 2008; Haslanger 2013a). In a similar vein her work explores the continuing impact of structural racism on the educational opportunities of students of color and the ways in which this impact is mediated by the micro-politics of the classroom (Haslanger 2014).

Against this background it is no surprise that the title of her book – *Resisting Reality* – is intended to be ambiguous: on the one hand, it refers to the all-too-common resistance to recognizing the reality of the social world, especially within philosophy; on the other hand, it refers to the urgency of resisting a world that is unjust in so many ways. As Haslanger (2012, 30) writes: '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.'

The papers in the first section of the book address the phenomenon of social construction and seek to clarify some of the confusions that this notion has given rise to, placing special emphasis on the preconditions and implications of a specific form of the constructionist project which Haslanger calls 'the debunking project'. This project can be seen as a variant of the critique of ideology in that it proceeds in the form of a critique of naturalization and dehistoricization – of the ways in which the social appears, or is made to appear, as natural: it 'typically attempts to show that a category or classification scheme that appears to track a group of individ-

uals defined by a set of physical or metaphysical conditions is better understood as capturing a group that occupies a certain (usually “thick”) social position’ (Haslanger 2012, 132). At the same time, Haslanger advances an understanding of social construction that she takes to be compatible with certain forms of realism, objectivism, and naturalism, thereby shifting established understandings of constructionism and of realism towards a form of critical realism, a critical realist social ontology (see also Mikkola 2013).

The papers in the second section focus on gender and race and show what a social constructionist account can teach us about them. In many cases, social differences are masked and taken to be natural – gender and race are prominent examples. Both race and gender are defined by, and thus do not only go along with, hierarchical social relations and structures; they consist in a complex set of social positions of subordination and privilege that individuals occupy by virtue of their bodies being interpreted and marked in a certain way. Haslanger therefore argues that we should understand race and gender not as natural but as – still very real! – social kinds and thereby arrive at a revised understanding of race and gender (that she contrasts with ‘the manifest concept’): what it means to be a woman, for example, is among other things to be structurally subordinated – being a woman thus has to do more with social relations than with supposedly intrinsic properties. Accordingly, both sexism and racism have to be understood in terms of structural forms of oppression and not in the individualizing terms of ‘bad attitudes’ and ‘failings of the heart’.

The papers in the third section investigate issues in epistemology and philosophy of language more generally in so far as they touch upon social construction and social critique as introduced in the first two sections. As we have seen, in everyday discourse we often use categories of gender and race as if they were referring to natural properties (‘the manifest concept’) while as a matter of fact they are referring to social positions and relations (‘the operative concept’). But how precisely should we understand the possible mismatch between the manifest and the operative concept and what would be the right course for conceptual reform?

Haslanger’s book is an ambitious and thought-provoking attempt to think through the challenges that the project of social critique raises with regard to ontology, epistemology and the philosophy of language – hence it comes as no surprise that it raises difficult questions about philosophical methodology, social ontology and critical theory in a way that has already sparked a lively debate (see, e.g., Jones 2013; Mills 2013; Haslanger 2013b; Mikkola 2013; Lepold 2013). With this dossier we hope to continue this debate and contribute to it from a variety of different perspectives.

In his contribution, Titus Stahl discusses the possibility of an immanent critique of our linguistic practices and the understanding of ideology critique underlying Haslanger’s project. Arianna Betti investigates the methodological role of models and schemas as irreducible interpretive tools and the importance of making them explicit. Mari Mikkola raises questions about the normative underpinnings of Haslanger’s theory of oppression and asks what makes oppression wrongful. In her extensive reply, Haslanger responds to the questions raised by these three contributions, further developing the arguments from her book and opening up new perspectives for future discussions.<sup>1</sup>

At the end of the introduction to her book, Haslanger expresses the hope that her work will be ‘at best useful for a while, and will then become obsolete as our social conditions and narrative resources evolve’ (Haslanger 2012, 30). As for the first part of her hope, it seems safe to say that it has already been vindicated – as for the second part, making critical theory obsolete is of course a long-term collective project to which philosophy, as Haslanger’s work exemplifies, can contribute its share.

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<sup>1</sup> The articles have initially been presented as papers (along with a fourth comment by Beate Rössler) at a workshop with Sally Haslanger on her book at the University of Amsterdam on November 18, 2013.