

Editorial note.  
*Disputatio* Symposium  
on Sally Haslanger's Work

**Teresa Marques**  
University of Barcelona

DOI: 10.2478/disp-2018-0011

BIBLID [0873-626X (2018) 50; pp.169–172]

**Abstract**

The articles collected in this symposium are result of the workshop *Doing Justice to the Social*, which was dedicated to the work of Sally Haslanger. The workshop took place at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona between the 6 and 8 June 2016. The workshop was also the 10th Meeting of the NOMOS Network for Practical Philosophy. The network meetings focus on philosophical issues connected with practical concerns, examined in an open-minded manner. This symposium collects articles by Rachel Sterken, Esa Díaz-León, and Jennifer Saul, and also Sally Haslanger's reply to authors.

**Keywords**

Sally Haslanger, social construction, structuralism, individualism, implicit biases.

The articles collected in this symposium are result of the workshop *Doing Justice to the Social*, which was dedicated to the work of Sally Haslanger. The workshop took place at the Universitat Pompeu Fabra in Barcelona between the 6 and 8 June 2016.

The workshop was also the 10th Meeting of the NOMOS Network for Practical Philosophy. The network meetings focus on philosophical issues connected with practical concerns, examined in an open-minded manner. The materials for the discussion are usually drawn not only from current scholarly debates on the matter, but also from other humanistic disciplines, social and political issues of the day and current scientific research.

Sally Haslanger is the Ford Professor of Philosophy in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy at the Massachusetts Institute of

Technology. Her work has been decisive in the rehabilitation of social metaphysics within the analytic philosophical tradition, and she is currently one of the most prominent analytic feminists.

For decades, notions like those of social construction and socially constructed categories were regarded by analytic philosophers as incoherent, imprecise, or irredeemably muddled. Through her work, Haslanger has sought to bring precision to the distinction between what is natural and what is social, and has tried to show that understanding the difference between socially constructed categories and natural categories can help us address issues of injustice in our societies. By arguing that some presumed natural categories are in fact social constructions, for instance those of gender or race, she makes the case that we can acknowledge that different more just social arrangements are possible. More importantly, she has argued, we can address the injustices that arise from organizing our social lives under the false assumption that certain social differences are natural. These mistaken assumptions can contribute to perpetuate social injustice and discrimination, and as such they are problematic for reasons that go beyond their falsity.

Haslanger's book, *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique* (Oxford University Press, 2012) collects her essays on gender and race. In 2014, the book received the Joseph B. Gittler Award from the American Philosophical Association, given for an outstanding scholarly contribution in the field of the philosophy of one or more of the social sciences.

In recent work, Haslanger has focused on understanding what social structures are, and has sought to explain how dimensions of injustice depend on them (see for instance Haslanger 2016). She has argued that structural social explanations, particularly those that focus on structuring causes, are preferable to individual explanations of people's behavior.

The workshop *Doing Justice to the Social* addressed different elements of Haslanger's philosophy. Rachel Sterken's paper included in this volume focuses precisely on Haslanger's approach to social structural explanations. Sterken offers a critical argument to Haslanger's view. She does not consider Haslanger's argument for structural explanations and against individualism *per se*. Rather, she argues that Haslanger has not shown that *broad and deep structural* explanations

are better *than local and flexible explanations*. Sterken argues that local flexible structural explanations are preferable at explaining structuring causes of individual behavior. Broad and deep features have a limited explanatory role.

Esa Díaz-León's paper is a reply to Elizabeth Barnes's interpretation of Haslanger's ontological commitments about gender and race. Barnes (2014, 2017) argues that the best way of understanding Sally Haslanger's views about the nature of gender and race is in terms of a version of ontological realism about these debates, and she further argues that metaphysical deflationism, on which these debates are about how we actually use or should use the terms 'gender' and 'race' (and other related terms), cannot capture what those debates are really about. Díaz-León's argues for a version of metaphysical deflationism that, she claims, can overcome some of these objections, and concludes that we can understand Haslanger's accounts of gender and race within the framework of metaphysical deflationism.

Jennifer Saul's article addresses the balance between explanations that pull towards individualistic views, and those that pull towards structuralist views. Her focus is on objections to implicit-bias stories, in particular, on objections that implicit-bias accounts are counterproductive for making progress in the promotion of social justice. Whereas Haslanger (2012) is concerned about (some) implicit bias stories, a concern that is rooted in the worry that they may hamper feminist and anti-racist projects, Saul admits that some projects may be flawed, but that nonetheless implicit bias stories can nonetheless be helpful. Saul concludes that an implicit bias story is helpful if it contributes to broader structural justice projects, if the story makes it possible and desirable to make progress, if it motivates individual or collective action, and if the story offers a road-map for action.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Thanks are due to all the participants, speakers and commentators at the 11th NOMOS Meeting, in particular to Sally Haslanger, Rachel Sterken, Esa Díaz-León, Jenny Saul, Josep Corbí, Manuel García-Carpintero, Mari Mikkola, and Jesús Vega. Thanks are also due to the Marie Curie-IEF Project, reference 622114, *CAND—Collective Attitudes and Normative Disagreement*, funded under the programme FP7-PEOPLE by the European Commission, to the *About Ourselves* Project, reference FFI2013-47948-P, *The Scope and Limits of Responsibility* project, reference FFI 2012-33470, the *Grup de Recerca Consolidat de Filosofia del Dret—AGAUR* (2014 SGR 626), the Law Department at Universitat Pompeu Fabra, the LOGOS

Teresa Marques  
Logos Group—BIAP (Barcelona Institute of Analytic Philosophy)  
Departament de Filosofia  
Universitat de Barcelona  
C. Montalegre, 6-8  
Barcelona 08001  
Spain  
teresamatosferreira@ub.edu

### *References*

- Barnes, E. 2014. Going beyond the fundamental: feminism in contemporary Metaphysics. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 104(3): 335–51.
- Barnes, E. 2017. Realism and social structure. *Philosophical Studies* 174(10): 2417–33. DOI: 10.1007/s11098-016-0743-y
- Haslanger, S. 2012. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Haslanger, S. 2016. What is a (social) structural explanation? *Philosophical Studies* 173: 113–30.