

# Reading reflection 3

Critically analyzing and reviewing "THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION  
AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY" by Sally  
Haslanger

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## I. INTRODUCTION

This text is supposed to be a reading reflection of the text "THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY" by Sally Haslanger. First, there will be a quick placement into the field, or topic this text is about. After that, the central thesis of the text will be presented, as well as the arguments supporting this thesis will be summarized. Finally, the strength of Haslanger's line of argumentation will be reflected critically.

## II. WHERE WE ARE

With regard to the course Philosophy of social minds, the text "THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY" can be categorized into the field of social construction. Social construction is the idea that societal beliefs, norms, and values shape and construct our understanding and perception of reality, rather than reality being a fixed or objective truth. This concept holds that human experiences and concepts are shaped by social and cultural context. The challenge of social construction lies in its ability to shape and influence our perceptions and beliefs, often in unconscious and unrecognized ways, which can lead to a reinforcement of unequal power dynamics and oppressive social norms, limited perspectives and narrow-mindedness, a difficulty in accepting and acknowledging different experiences and realities, or a maintenance of stereotypes and biases. Thus, it is challenging to critically examine and understand the impact of social construction on our thoughts and actions, and strive towards a more inclusive and equitable society.

## III. CENTRAL THESIS

Changing or questioning the construction of our social ideas and concepts can help us creating a more equitable society.

## IV. SUMMARY OF ARGUMENTATION

First, Haslanger is introducing her argumentation by pointing at the issue that often it is unclear what it means that something is socially constructed. Therefore, she is starting by characterizing idea or concept construction. She states that the "ordinary view" denotes the idea that most concepts are products of a socio-historical process. Haslanger argues that when critically reflecting this socio-historical process it

becomes obvious that culture is largely responsible for our interpretive tools to understand the world. Going one step further, our experience of the world is an interpretation which is serving as a basis to reflect the adequacy of the underlying conceptual framework.

Therefore, Haslanger is establishing a more critical view of idea construction, whereas she points to the fact that it is important to question what assumptions are forming the basic structure for our interpretive frameworks. Further, Haslanger argues that frameworks come with certain limits and consequently are eclipsing something which we should question critically. She gives as an example the assumption that there are only two sexes (male and female) and accordingly explains how this is changing the perception of our world. As a matter of fact, she also adds to this thought that especially when considering genealogies of concepts, it reveals the history of the concept and situates it within social practices. Seeing how the notion of a concept changed over decades is proving the result of a complex social and intelligent history demonstrating our matter of choice. We are able to build advanced tools to change our cognitive ends. Next to cognitive ends, Haslanger displays that our cognitive tools are enacted and embodied in practices that engage the material world, whereas the products of our practices are in turn forming what we think. Haslanger concludes that our practices are shaped by assumptions, whereas the practices in turn are reinforcing the assumptions by materializing them. Furthermore, she infers that we have a choice about the assumptions and material changes we make. To sum up, critical idea construction denotes that a constructed idea is a product of a socio-historical process and only offers an eclipsed view, or partial interpretation of the world. In a broader sense, idea and concept construction denotes that our ideas or concepts are socially constructed, but the object that our ideas or concepts refer to are not.

Next to that, Haslanger is also introducing another meaning of social construction. Namely, she proposes the view of illusion construction which means that a social construct is a mere idea and is not mapping onto reality. Haslanger argues that the ideas are used in order to interpret and regulate social phenomena, however they are not describing something real. An eliminativist view of social construction can be displayed by the sentence, if X is a social construct, X does not exist.

Along with her argumentation Haslanger is depicting examples of race and mental disorders like hysteria in order to illustrate that point. By contrast, a non-eliminativist account of social construction would be rather in the sense that our ideas are socially constructed, but nevertheless it is possible to discover their real meaning or references in using certain methods. Since Haslanger has portrayed the social construction of ideas and concepts, she proceeds in proposing social construction of objects.

Whereas ideas and concepts would be something like the notion that there are two sexes, however an object according to Haslanger can be described in a broad sense as virtually anything that is not an idea like a man and a woman would be. Haslanger argues that our ideas and concepts are socially constructed and are not simply mapping a pre-given reality. Rather, they establish and maintain classifications of the world which are then finally shaping the classified elements. As a consequence, Haslanger concludes that the classified elements are to a certain extent socially constructed. Moreover, she argues that object construction is underlying a so-called looping effect. According to Linda Alcoff, Haslanger argues that a looping effect is a phenomenon in which the perceived identity of an individual is shaped by the ways in which they are socially categorized and labeled. This labeling then influences their experiences and behavior, which in turn reinforce and solidify the initial categorization and labeling. The looping effect perpetuates the formation and reinforcement of social identities. Moreover, Haslanger argues that gender is an idea and an object construction. It is an idea construction because the underlying classification of man and woman is a result of historical events and forces. Simultaneously, gender classifications are within a complex matrix of institutions and practices where effects in personal experience as well as material effects like social positions are induced. Further, Haslanger specifies another kind of object construction, the kind construction denoting the way in which entire groups or kinds of people are shaped through classifications and affected by looping effects. Haslanger explains that it is important to grasp the construction of kinds like gender or race, whereas it is important to distinguish between the social construction of ideas and objects because it is easy to confuse the idea of a kind from the kind itself. She argues that this distinction is important in order to recognize the interaction between the tool and reality. Haslanger argues that this looping interaction is crucial to the idea of social construction of all sorts. Furthermore, she illustrates that for the idea construction she revealed already in her argumentation that the framework we have for understanding the world is changeable with regard to the fact that we can actively change this framework. From this point she draws the attention to the kinds, can the construction of the objects, or kinds also be changed? Haslanger outlines a difference in the cause of commonality and the constitution of it in terms of kinds. She highlights that it is a pitfall to think that the commonality is caused by natural facts or forces, rather than by social arrangements. Concerning the constitution of commonality of kinds she points out that it

is important to distinguish social kinds from physical or non-social kinds. As a consequence, regarding the gender debate, that would mean that it is possible to detach gender from the notion that its commonality is constituted by biological or physical facts. She concludes that a sex or gender distinction is providing resources for including trans\* persons within the conceptual framework and offers a choice so to say. In other words, Haslanger has shown that object construction of kinds is not inevitable.

Finally, Haslanger is discussing what these insights mean in a transferred sense. She emphasizes that currently there are social categories like men, women, and different races, however it is up to us to change social conditions from the bottom up in order to make the categories visible in terms of social opposed to physical categories. She claims that a radical change in our thinking is needed. Moreover, she argues that humans are social beings that are highly influenced by their social context in order to make sense of the world and interpret it. She poses the wish for the society to overcome and critically reflect shaky assumptions in frameworks and instead construct new and different practices gendered differently which could possibly offer new sorts of beings. Generally speaking, Haslanger tried to reach the social constructionist's goal to overcome the challenge of inevitability of a given category, in this case gender.

## V. EVALUATION

What can be said about Haslanger's argumentation is that generally speaking she supported her arguments well by other theories and illustrative examples. Regarding the societal importance her approach has she has chosen for appropriate facets like racism or sexism for example and therefore successfully pointed at the relevance of social construction. Haslanger referred to a lot of other theories which supported her arguments, making her arguments more credible. Next to that, Haslanger proposed an overall logical structure of argumentation when introducing the object construction approach, as well as she introduced the construction of kinds in a reasonable fashion. Her arguments are building upon each other making it easier to follow her line of argumentation. Additionally, it was a bit hard to grasp her central thesis since there are a few underlying assumptions which need to be detected first in order to determine the thesis. Namely, Haslanger questioned the inevitability of the social category gender and emphasized that gender plays a specific role in the social framework one has, concerning different races, class, ethnicity and so on the notion of what does it mean to have a certain gender change. Haslanger argues that on a societal level that due to that, people may be advantaged or disadvantaged and therefore she indirectly claims that in order to create a more equitable society we need to release parts of our framework which may require a radical difference in thinking as Haslanger states. She also stated that the fact that our concepts and ideas are not inevitable is affecting the construction of kinds in a way that it can change the framework the kind is based on, whereas she gave the example

of gender and that the notion to release gender from sexual or biological facts and rather focus on societal identities which is leading to more inclusive framework. Ergo, we can change our underlying framework which is also influencing the construction of kinds which may help us to create a more equitable society. Or in other words, changing or questioning our ideas and concepts can help us to create a more equitable society. I would like to criticize here that the thesis was a bit hidden in her text and it would have been more intuitive if she had written down her assumption in order to help the reader more follow her train of thought. Moreover, I would like to point to the fact that Haslanger is introducing in her conclusion the term social entities denoting categories of people. I would raise the criticism that it would have been more helpful to define such a term in more detail as well as settling it more into a context. Generally speaking, Haslanger proposed a suitable approach for the specific challenge of the as it seems inevitable category of gender since she introduced a way to release gender from biological factors and rather said we should focus on social identities and have a sex distinction and a gender distinction leading to a more open framework for trans\* persons. All in all, she supported her arguments well with illustrative examples and other scientific theories and opened a new approach to change the given framework of gender in order to be more inclusive on a societal level. She reached an important level of societal basis and revealed that such notions of gender are underlying often other influences in our society like privileges for example. She successfully has proven that it is possible to change such a framework and the construction of social kinds if we make a radical change in our thinking and therefore revealed important knowledge necessary to come a step closer to a more just society. She might have defined the term social entity in more detail as well as her central thesis was a bit hidden. However, overall her argumentation was structured well and logically.

#### REFERENCES

- [1] Sally Haslanger (2017) THE SEX/GENDER DISTINCTION AND THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF REALITY. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4324/9781315758152-14>