

Ásta

Categories We Live By: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories
Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 (ISBN 9780190256807)

Reviewed by Rebecca Mason, 2020
University of San Francisco

Rebecca Mason is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at the University of San Francisco. Her research areas include feminist philosophy, metaphysics (especially social metaphysics), social and political philosophy, philosophy of language, and epistemology.

Quote:

"In *Categories We Live By*, Ásta presents an original way of understanding social properties in general, and social properties like sex and gender in particular. In so doing, Ásta has opened up a promising new direction for future research on social categories."

In *Categories We Live By*, Ásta offers, among other things, a general metaphysical account of how individuals instantiate social properties like being a woman, being Latinx, being a refugee, being queer, and being disabled.¹ Ásta's view is that social properties such as these are *conferred* properties. Her idea is best explained by way of an example.

Consider the property of being a woman. According to Ásta, someone has the property of being a woman in virtue of how they are perceived (75).² Specifically, the property of being a woman is conferred on a subject, S, if S is perceived to have some *other* property, which Ásta calls the *base property* (in her earlier work, these properties were called "grounding properties"). The base property is the property that conferrers are attempting to track. Which property conferrers are attempting to track is highly variable. With respect to gender, Ásta argues that "in some contexts people are trying to track sex assignment, in others role in social organization, a bodily presentation, a role in the preparation of food, a role in biological reproduction, a sexual partner, and so on" (74). As a result, her view entails that S can have the property of being a woman in one context but not another.

¹ Ásta claims that these properties define the corresponding social categories (for example, the category *woman* is defined by the property of being a woman). This may be a verbal dispute, but the social properties Ásta mentions do not *define* the corresponding social categories. For example, the property of being a woman does not define the category *woman*. Rather, property-talk and category-talk are different ways of talking about a single entity. Thus, the property of being a woman is just another way of talking about the category *woman*. By contrast, the properties that define a category are those that specify its nature or being. They are the properties that define *what it is* to be a woman. For example, on Sally Haslanger's account, what it is to be a woman is to be subordinated on the basis of one's presumed sex (Haslanger 2000). Below, I return to the question of how social properties are defined, on Ásta's view.

² Compare: an object, *o*, has the property of being spherical independently of how *o* is perceived.

Let's consider a context in which gender identity serves as the socially significant base property, for example, in trans-inclusive subcultures.³ In such contexts, whether the property of being a woman is conferred on someone depends on whether others perceive them as identifying as a woman. To understand how the property of being a woman is conferred in this context, Ásta provides the following schema:

Conferred property: being a woman

Who: those with standing in a trans-inclusive subculture, C

What: the perception that a subject, S, has the property of identifying as a woman

When: in a trans-inclusive subculture, C

Base property: the property of identifying as a woman

On Ásta's view, if those with standing (for example, social influence or power) in C perceive that S has the property of identifying as a woman, then the property of being a woman is conferred on S in C. However, in another context, C*, a different property may be socially significant so that the property of being a woman is conferred on those who are perceived to be biologically female in C* (that is, in C*, being biologically female serves as the base property). Thus, though S may have the property of being a woman in C, on Ásta's account, she may lack that property in C*.

Ásta argues that her conferralist framework explains how all social properties are instantiated. Moreover, she argues that her view also helps to explain what makes some properties social in the first place: they are properties that are instantiated in virtue of something about other people. Specifically, a property is social because it is conferred on someone by others (2). In contrast, nonsocial properties such as being bipedal or being five feet tall are not social properties because they are not conferred on someone by others.

Ásta begins in chapter 1 by spelling out the details of her conferralist account of social properties. In chapter 2, she gives a novel analysis of social construction that she calls "social construction as social significance." In chapter 3, she defends a new and compelling interpretation of Judith Butler's critique of the sex/gender distinction in feminist theory. In chapters 4 and 5, she applies her conferralist framework to particular social categories, including sex and gender. In chapter 6, she articulates a conception of social identity that complements her account of the metaphysics of social properties.

Categories We Live By is a slender volume. This is a virtue: Ásta's prose is clear and efficient. Be that as it may, I confess that at times I wished it were a little bit more verbose. For instance, Ásta does not say much about the nature of the conferral relation, or the nature of conferred properties themselves. Given this, I would like to raise two questions about her conferralist framework in what follows. I hope that these questions will stimulate further investigation into conferred properties and how they are instantiated.

First is the conferral relation *sui generis*, in other words, can it be analyzed in terms of more familiar relations like causation or grounding? Again, take the property of being a woman as an example. Suppose that in context C*, those who have standing in C* confer the property of being

³ According to Ásta, "a feature is socially significant in a context in which people taken to have the feature get conferred onto them a social status" (3).

a woman on Nancy by perceiving her to have the property of being biologically female. Does their perception *cause* Nancy to have the property of being a woman in C*? Or is Nancy's being a woman in C* *grounded* in their perception that Nancy is a woman in C*? Or is conferral an entirely different sort of relation, distinct from causation, grounding, constitution, realization, and so on? If so, then it would be helpful to have a description of this relation (for example, what kinds of *relata* does it join? what is its modal profile?) that distinguishes it from causation, grounding, and so on, in addition to an explanation of why those other relations are unable to account for the social properties of individuals.

Giving an analysis of the conferral relation is important because, as I mentioned above, Ásta's framework is supposed to be able to distinguish between paradigmatically social and nonsocial properties:

My proposal is that the conferralist framework is a good way to account for social properties of individuals. The conferralist schema, when filled out, is a way to articulate the idea that we have a social property because of something about other people by saying that a social property is conferred upon us by other people. I think that it aptly captures paradigm cases of social property, such as being elected president and being cool. It does not do justice to the property of having red hair, a paradigm case of a property that is not social. . . . (23)

Let's suppose that the conferral relation is causal in nature. Now consider this scenario: I believe that it is very important that all barns in Massachusetts have the property of being red. As such, I spend my summer weekends traveling through the Massachusetts countryside with my team of painters, painting all non-red barns red. Moreover, suppose that I am very well-respected among Massachusetts farmers (that is, I have standing), so no one would object to my doing so. By painting the barns red, I cause them to have the property of being red.

Is this an instance of conferral or not? If conferral is a causal relation, then it seems that we should conclude that being red is a conferred property. We can fill in Ásta's schema:

Conferred property: being red
Who: Rebecca's team of painters
What: painting barns with red paint
When: the summer of 2019 in Massachusetts
Base property: the property of being a non-red barn

But now the account is no longer able to distinguish between paradigmatically social and nonsocial properties: being red is not a social property.

One response might be to restrict the *relata* of the conferral relation: it can only obtain between people. Since barns aren't people, the above example doesn't involve the conferral relation. However, we can simply modify the case so that it involves me and my team of hair stylists, who go around dyeing people's hair red (suppose that the base property is the property of having

blonde hair). In that case, the property of being red is conferred on people by other people. Yet being red (or having red hair) is not a social property.⁴

Second, how should we understand the nature of conferred properties? At times, Ásta seems to suggest that conferred properties are defined in terms of constraints and enablements. For example, she claims that social properties are social statuses "consisting in constraints on and enablements to the individual's behavior" (2). Later on, she says that social properties or statuses "are then to be fleshed out in terms of constraints and enablements" (20) and that's social status (for example, being a woman) "consists in constraints on and enablements to their behavior" (44). These quotations suggest that the constraints on and enablements to the behavior of those who instantiate a conferred property define the nature of that property. However, defining social properties in terms of constraints and enablements leads to an implausible proliferation of social properties.

Consider the constraints and enablements associated with being a woman. The ways in which women's behavior is constrained and enabled vary—both over time and across social contexts. For example, prior to 1920, American women were not legally permitted to vote. However, in 2020, American women are legally permitted to vote. Likewise, in some contexts (for example, Ohio in 2020), women cannot legally receive an abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected. However, in other contexts (for example, California in 2020), women can legally receive an abortion after a fetal heartbeat is detected (they cannot do so once the fetus is viable unless the mother's life or health is at risk).

Intuitively, those who had the property of being a woman in the United States in 1919, and those who have the property of being a woman in the United States in 2020, instantiate the very same property. Similarly, individuals in Ohio who have the property of being a woman, and individuals in California who have the property of being a woman, instantiate the very same property. That is, individuals in very different contexts can nonetheless instantiate the same social property. However, defining social properties in terms of constraints and enablements does not deliver this result. When conferred properties are defined in terms of constraints and enablements, each of these is a numerically different property: being a woman in the United States in 1919, being a woman in the United States in 2020, being a woman in Ohio in 2020, being a woman in California in 2020, and so on. Individuating social properties in such a fine-grained way threatens our ability to make generalizations about women (for example, women are more likely than men to experience domestic violence)—something that ought to be avoided if possible. This is because the ability to make generalizations about women is central to feminist theory and practice.

If Ásta's view is that social properties are defined in terms of constraints and enablements, then this objection needs to be addressed. Why isn't the resultant proliferation of social properties as problematic as it appears to be? If Ásta does not hold the view that social properties are defined in terms of constraints and enablements, it would be helpful to hear how she thinks we might define them—even if she is not interested specifying those definitions in detail.

⁴ This is so even if, as Ásta mentions, "in some contexts having red hair serves as a base property for the conferral of a social status, *being a redhead*, consisting in constraints and enablements" (24).

Finally, I share Elizabeth Barnes and Matthew Andler's concerns about the scope of Ásta's conferralist framework (Barnes and Andler 2019). The account seems very well suited to explaining why individuals have some social properties, for example, being a permanent resident, being a refugee, being married. However, other social properties cannot obviously be explained by Ásta's conferralist framework.

Consider the property of being undocumented. Unlike the property of being a permanent resident of the United States, which is conferred on individuals by US Citizenship and Immigration Services, someone has the property of being undocumented precisely because other social properties (for example, being an H-1B Visa holder, being a permanent resident, being a citizen) have *not* been conferred on them. That is, being undocumented is not a property that individuals instantiate because it is conferred on them. Rather, it is a property that someone has in the absence of such a conferral.

Nonetheless, the property of being undocumented constrains the behavior of those who instantiate it. For example, in the contemporary United States, undocumented immigrants cannot vote, they cannot apply for certain jobs, and they cannot apply for a driver's license. Moreover, their behavior is constrained even if their social status goes undetected by everyone. That is, the behavior of someone with the property of being undocumented is constrained even if no one knows that they are undocumented. This is because undocumented immigrants, especially in the current political climate, are compelled to behave in ways that conceal their social status. Therefore, the constraints associated with being undocumented cannot be explained by appeal to the property of being *known to be* undocumented.

In *Categories We Live By*, Ásta presents an original way of understanding social properties in general, and social properties like sex and gender in particular. In so doing, Ásta has opened up a promising new direction for future research on social categories. Though her theoretical orientation is directed at metaphysical questions, she is motivated by feminist aims. Indeed, the book is full of claims that both metaphysicians and feminist philosophers will find interesting. As such, *Categories We Live By* is a valuable contribution to both social metaphysics and feminist theory.

References

- Barnes, Elizabeth, and Matthew Andler. 2019. *Categories we live by: The construction of sex, gender, race, and other social categories*, by Ásta. *Mind* fzz041, doi:[10.1093/mind/fzz041](https://doi.org/10.1093/mind/fzz041).
- Haslanger, Sally. 2000.