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The Social Construction of Human Categories

Ásta: Categories we live by: The construction of sex, gender, race, and other social categories. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018. 140pp, US\$35.00 PB

Jonathan Y. Tsou, Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Iowa State University.

This book articulates a social constructionist theory of human categories. Ásta's analysis focuses on *social categories*: human categories defined by 'socially significant' properties that bring about 'constraints and enablements.' The distinctive feature of her 'conferralist account' is that social properties are entirely bestowed upon (i.e., conferred on) individuals by others (33).

Ásta presents the conferralist account in terms of an example of how a baseball pitch acquires the status of being a 'strike.' The conferral of this property involves five components:

- (1) The conferred property (e.g., being a strike)
- (2) Subjects who confer the property (e.g., the umpire)
- (3) The attitudes or actions of subjects that matter for conferral (e.g., the umpire's judgment)
- (4) The context of conferral (e.g., a baseball game)
- (5) The base properties that subjects are consciously or unconsciously attempting to track (e.g., whether a baseball passes through the strike zone)

For Ásta, the most important factor in determining whether a pitch is a strike is (3). Analogously, the most important factor in determining whether an individual possesses a social property is the judgment of conferring subjects, rather than base properties.

Ásta's conferralist account is presented primarily against John Searle's constitutional account of social reality. Searle argues that social properties are constituted by *rules*: '*X* meeting conditions *K* in context *C* constitutes social property *S*.' While Searle holds that subjects (e.g., umpires) can be mistaken in their judgments of base properties, Ásta argues that—in terms of *factors that matter for acquiring a status*—the judgments of conferring subjects 'cannot be wrong' (11). Searle's more recent account accommodates the role of collective intentions: 'We collectively accept that *X* meeting conditions *K* in context *C* constitutes social property *S*.' Ásta's countersuggestion is that: 'Subjects' judgment that *X* meets conditions *K* in context *C* confers social property *S* to *X*.' Whereas Searle maintains that constitutional rules determine whether an individual possesses a social status, Ásta maintains that conferring subjects' judgments (*guided* by explicit or implicit rules) are decisive.

Ásta distinguishes between ‘institutional’ and ‘communal’ properties, arguing that her account is superior to Searle’s for explaining communal properties. Whereas conferrals of institutional properties (e.g., being president or married) are grounded in *institutional authority*, conferrals of communal properties (e.g., being cool or a woman) are grounded in *social standing*. Compared to the formal rules that sanction conferrals of institutional properties, communal properties are conferred more informally by collectives of people. For example, conferrals of ‘being cool’ occur in different contexts on the basis of different tacit communal properties (e.g., having a tattoo or dyed hair). The conferralist account is superior to constitutional accounts for explaining communal properties because it is not satisfying natural or legal conditions that matter, but the judgment of others that one possesses a social property (28).

Ásta’s theory is a social constructionist account of *socially significant properties*. A property is socially significant when it is the basis for conferral of a social category (or status) with constraints and enablements (48). For communal properties, acquiring a social status (e.g., woman) requires *others’ recognition that one possesses a socially significant property* (e.g., self-identification as a woman). In contrast to causal accounts of social construction, Ásta does not require the presence of a specific description of a category (as argued by Ian Hacking) nor commonplace representations of a category (as argued by Ron Mallon). What matters is that others regard an individual as possessing some salient (but implicitly recognized) property.

Ásta argues that sex is an institutional property, while gender is a communal property. Ásta’s stance on sex opposes ‘materialist’ feminist accounts (e.g., Simone de Beauvoir, Sally Haslanger) that maintain sex categories (‘male,’ ‘female’) are biological, whereas gender categories (‘man,’ ‘woman’) are social constructs derived from sex categories. Ásta endorses Judith Butler’s argument that sex categories are not natural kinds, but ‘sex is itself a gendered category’ (57) insofar as sex categories are posited ideals (imposed on material bodies) created in accordance with prevailing gender norms. For Butler, different bodies (‘sexes’) only acquire meaning when perceived through the lens of preexisting social categories (‘genders’). In arguing that sex is an institutional (rather than biological) property, Ásta appeals to a methodological principle: a property is social *if it can explain social facts, but not natural facts* (71). She contends that sex categories cannot explain natural facts (e.g., what types of bodies give birth since some females cannot bear children); but they can explain social facts (e.g., unequal distribution of social resources and privileges). This argument is unconvincing. Assuming that human categories—at best—yield *ceteris paribus* predictions, sex categories provide more stable explanations of natural facts (e.g., males cannot bear children) than social facts (e.g., females earn less money than males). Moreover, intersectionality considerations counter Ásta’s assumption that sex categories *alone* can explain or predict social facts (e.g., many white females will enjoy more social privileges than black males).

Ásta’s stance that gender is a communal property implies that gender is highly variable because the socially significant properties used for gender conferral *change* in different contexts (e.g., a gay bar versus a family reunion). Ásta’s view departs from feminist accounts (e.g., Linda Martin Alcoff, Charlotte Witt) by severing *any* link between gender and biology. It is closer to Talia Bettcher’s pluralistic view that there are as many categories of ‘woman’ as there are

communities who care about the category. Whereas Bettcher addresses normative questions concerning what constitutes a ‘real’ woman, Ásta maintains that there is no such thing as a ‘real’ woman: individuals can only possess the *social status* of ‘woman’ (88). Ásta similarly treats LGBTQ categories as communal properties, wherein the base properties grounding conferrals vary with context. She outlines positions on race, religion, and disability: these social categories are conferred institutional or communal properties, which highlights the dynamic interaction between institutional and communal properties in practical contexts.

Ásta addresses two objections to the conferralist account. First, since all that matters for acquiring a social status is *to be regarded* as possessing some social property, it cannot account for the phenomenon of ‘passing’ as a social category. Second, intersectional analyses of oppression and discrimination speak against its reductive treatment of social categories. Specialists may find Ásta’s responses to these issues perfunctory.

Scientifically-oriented readers may find Ásta analysis of ‘natural properties’ inadequate. Ásta aims to distinguish human categories defined by social—*as opposed to* natural—properties (2). Her paradigm examples of social properties are being ‘president’ or ‘popular’; her paradigm example of a natural property is having ‘red hair’ (2). Ásta’s paradigm of a natural property is peculiar since the genetic properties (e.g., a recessive allele on chromosome 16 that alters the MC1R protein) that determine red hair are *as natural* as the genetic properties (e.g., the absence of the SRY gene on the Y chromosome) that determine being female (e.g., reproductive anatomy, producing relatively larger gametes). As suggested above, Ásta applies her methodological principle for assessing when a property is social (71) in a self-serving manner that downplays the biological properties tracked by sex categories.¹ Beauvoir’s and Haslanger’s accounts of sex accommodate empirical facts better. Moreover, Ásta offers no guidance on how to understand human categories that include *both* natural and social components. For example, some subcategories of disability (e.g., ‘Down syndrome’) are determined by biological properties (e.g., an extra copy of chromosome 21) and *also* bring about constraints and enablements. This indicates limitations of Ásta’s assumption that the properties used to define human categories can be classified *dichotomously* as ‘natural’ or ‘social.’

Naturalistic philosophers may be unpersuaded by Ásta’s methodological appeals to intuition and conceptual analysis. Ásta states that the conferralist account ultimately rests on its application to various cases (6); she frequently argues for its ‘correctness’ because it matches our intuitions. Philosophers who reject the reliability of conceptual analysis (e.g., Carnap, Quine) eschew attempts to give the ‘true’ or ‘correct’ definitions of concepts (e.g., ‘social properties’) and argue that philosophers should defend proposed definitions *relative to specific pragmatic aims*. Ásta argues that the conferralist account is *superior* to constitutional accounts because ‘to give a metaphysics of social properties is to give an account of properties that *do matter* socially, not ones that *should matter*’ (11). Given the incommensurable aims of Searle’s account

¹ Ásta classifies (natural) red hair as a ‘natural property’ because she assumes it cannot explain social facts; however, this property can confer a social status with constraints (e.g., being insulted as a ‘ginger’) or enablements (e.g., having Northwestern European ancestry) in certain contexts (e.g., a schoolyard, a white nationalist meeting).

(*prescribing* what membership in a social category entails) and Ásta's account (*describing* how a social status is acquired), attributions of 'correctness' appear inapt.

Overall, Ásta's book is informative, lucidly written, and innovative. It offers a valuable contribution to social ontology, social constructionism, and feminist metaphysics. Although I have criticized Ásta's arguments on naturalistic grounds, my criticisms target her positions on specific categories. The main argument of the book (*viz.*, that some human categories are conferred by communities and highly contextual) is illuminating and persuasively argued for.