Book Reviews

Categories We Live by: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories, by Ásta. Oxford: OUP, 2018. Pp. 160.

Meeting at our favourite local coffee shop, Local Café, to discuss this critical notice of Ásta's remarkable contribution to social ontology and feminist philosophy, we place an order with an individual behind the counter. We begin the interaction by assessing the individual, before attributing to them various social properties, including the property of being a barista, the property of being queer, the property of being trans, and the property of being a man. Presumably, the barista engages in the same practice of assessment and attribution. In concert, we implicitly settle on the rules, norms, and expectations that will structure our interaction. For example, if the authors had attributed the property of being a mail carrier to the individual behind the counter, we would have waited for someone else before ordering coffee. Or, if everyone were attributed the property of being straight, the barista and one of the authors wouldn't have shared a familiar, knowing smile.

While the influence of social properties is evident, their metaphysical structure is perplexingly difficult to explicate. Put bluntly, what is a social property? That is, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for having a property such as being a customer, barista, woman, or man? Broadly, an individual has social property P in virtue of their membership in a corresponding social category C. For example, an individual has the social property of being a barista in virtue of being a member of the social category *barista*. Of course, this answer only pushes the question back: what is a social category?

It is this question that *Categories We Live By* sets out to answer, and its foray into the debate is a true *tour de force*. For Ásta, social categories are, exactly as she puts it, categories we live by. They enable and constrain us. With this in mind, Ásta stresses that a theory in social metaphysics ought to shed light on features 'that *matter* to our social life' (p. 29, emphasis in original). That is, an analysis of social properties ought to have the power to explain our social experiences. Along these lines, Ásta develops the *conferralist framework*, which is the primary focus of this critical notice.

That said, due to constraints of space there is much of Ásta's rich and wide-ranging text that we cannot explore in this brief review. In addition to providing original analyses of sex, gender, LGBTQ status, race, religion, and

　　　　　　　　© **Mind Association 2019**

disability (pp. 70–113), Ásta's *Categories We Live By* introduces an analytic audience to the nuances of Simone de Beauvoir's and Judith Butler's theories of sex and gender (pp. 54–69), as well as uses the conferralist framework to develop an illuminating theory of social identity (pp. 114–126).

To begin our exegesis of the conferralist framework, let's consider the social property of being a barista. In fact, for Ásta, here we have two properties: the *institutional property* of being a barista and the *communal property* of being a barista.

Ásta's framework for institutional properties is as follows (p. 21):

Conferred property: P
Who: a person or entity in authority
What: their explicit conferral by means of a speech act or other public act
When: under the appropriate circumstances (in the presence of a witness, at a particular place, and so on); we can think of this as a particular institutional context
Base property: the property or properties that authorities are attempting to track in the conferral.

Speculating about the governance of Local Café, we can fill out this framework and explicate the aforementioned institutional property's *profile*:

Conferred property: institutional property of being a barista
Who: head manager
What: their public approval of the individual's application for employment as a barista, as well as their continued public approval of the individual's fitness for employment
When: after the individual has interviewed for the position
Base property: fitness for employment at Local Café.

Let's flesh this out. The individual behind the espresso machine, Barry, has the *institutional property of being a barista* at Local Café in virtue of the manager, Manni, publicly approving Barry's employment. Notably, in order to confer the institutional property on Barry, Manni's *conferral action* (of public approval) must be performed in the relevant context. For example, let's suppose that Manni cannot confer the institutional property of barista on Barry before conducting an interview.

Importantly, Manni's conferral action isn't made arbitrarily. In conferring the institutional property of barista on Barry, Manni aims to *track* the relevant *base property*. In this case, Manni aims to track fitness for employment at Local Café. Of course, Manni's epistemic efforts might be unsuccessful. However, on the conferralist framework, Manni's error would be metaphysically irrelevant. Barry has the institutional property of barista in virtue of Manni engaging in the relevant conferral action—which Manni performs on account of their (accurately or inaccurately) judging Barry to possesses the relevant base property. On this point, Ásta stresses the importance of

distinguishing a social property's instantiation conditions from normative questions regarding whether an individual ought to possess the social property, or whether the property ought to have a different profile (p. 11).

As noted above, Ásta's conferralist framework is motivated by the idea that an analysis of a social property ought to play an explanatory role in our social experience. Let's flesh this out by considering our interactions with Barry the barista. On the conferralist framework, the fact that Barry instantiates the institutional property of barista explains why the authors ordered coffee from Barry. And the fact that the thirsty authors don't instantiate the institutional property of barista explains why we didn't skip the line and begin steaming Local Café's soy milk.

As a simple sociological observation, Barry's status as a barista at Local Café influences his social experience in the broader community of Local Town. In addition to serving fantastic coffee, Local Café is esteemed for its role in sustaining Local Town's healthy political dialogue and vibrant musical culture. In short, Local Café has a high standing in Local Town. For this reason, members of Local Town's community are implicitly expected to give privileged treatment to employees of Local Café. (To gain a bit of traction here, consider how members of many communities are implicitly expected to provide special treatment to law enforcement and military officials by, for example, discounting meals, engaging in displays of deference and respect, allowing extra space in crowded environments, and so on.) The fact that Barry is recognized in the community as a barista at Local Café explains why he's rarely charged for adding an extra side of tempeh bacon to his breakfast at Local Diner, as well as why the bouncers at Local Club often allow him to skip the line. That is, in addition to the aforementioned institutional property, Barry's social experience is shaped by his instantiating the *communal property of being a barista* at Local Café.

Here's Ásta's framework for communal properties (p. 22):

Conferred property: P
Who: a person, entity or group with standing
What: their conferral, explicit or implicit, by means of attitudes and behaviour
When: in a particular context
Base property: the property or properties the authorities are attempting to track in the conferral, consciously or unconsciously.

Speculating about the sociological features of Local Town, we can fill out this framework and explicate the profile of Barry's communal status:

Conferred property: communal property of being a barista at Local Café
Who: members of the community of Local Town
What: coordinated judgments of the members of the Local Town community that Barry is a barista at the Local Café
When: in Local Town

Base property: being a barista at Local Café.

Of course, Ásta's conferralist framework—including its distinction between institutional and communal properties—isn't limited in application to mundane social properties such as *barista* and *customer*. Ásta holds that every social property has a conferralist profile (p. 35). While analyses of properties such as *barista* can inform a general theory of social properties, they're more or less of derivative interest. In contrast—as social metaphysicians, feminist philosophers, and agents—we're especially interested in the nature of properties such as *woman*, *man*, and *genderqueer*. Accordingly, it will be instructive to conclude our exegesis by outlining Ásta's application of the conferralist framework to gender.

Take the social property *man*. For Ásta, here we have two properties: the institutional property of being a man and the communal property of being a man. Regarding institutional gender properties, Ásta considers transphobic state-level policies related to bathroom access (pp. 77–79). For example, in Local State, an individual has the *institutional property of being a man* in virtue of the relevant medical professional recording their judgment that the individual is male on an original or updated birth certificate. While conferring gender, the medical professional aims to track the base property of having a male biological sex. In Local State, Barry could be arrested for using a men's restroom because he doesn't instantiate the institutional property of being a man.

Happily, in contrast to Local State, members of the Local Town community reject biological essentialism about gender. In Local Town, an individual instantiates the *communal property of being a man* in virtue of the members of the Local Town community judging the individual to authentically self-identify as a man. In their conferral actions, members of the Local Town community aim to track the following base property: authentic self-identification as a man. The fact that Barry instantiates the communal property of being a man explains why nobody in Local Town bats an (on fleek) eyelash when he uses his preferred public facilities. (Here, notice that Barry must navigate opposing institutional constraints and communal enablements.) Additionally, the communal property of being a man plays an explanatory role in Barry's broader social experience. For example, Local Town has an elaborate collection of conventions, such that women greet other women with a fist bump, men greet other men with a hip tap, and individuals of different genders greet each other with a high five. In part, the fact that Barry instantiates the communal property of being a man explains why he greeted the authors with a high five and a hip tap, as opposed to a fist bump.

In contrast to Local Town, members of the community of Neighbouring Town aim to track the base property of biological sex while conferring gender, such that an individual instantiates the communal property of being a man in virtue of the members of the Neighbouring Town community

judging the individual to have a male reproductive biology. In the patriarchal milieu of Neighbouring Town, an individual's instantiating the communal property of being a man plays a role in explaining why they're likely to be systematically privileged along some dimension.

As we hope is clear by the above explication, Ásta's view of social properties is clear, precise, and elegant. She offers a unifying explanation for what social properties are, why they are of interest, and how they shape our daily lives. We are resoundingly impressed by this theory, and by the care with which Ásta has explained and defended it. However, in what follows, we will raise concern that Ásta's view is perhaps a little *too* elegant.

Our basic point of concern is this: we're sceptical of whether a single type of analysis is appropriate for the wide range of social categories we encounter. Ásta's conferralism offers a unifying account of the nature of social categories. Social categories are individuated by social properties, and social properties are a particular kind of thing—a property conferred on an individual in a context in response to the perception of specific base properties (determined by that context), the conferral of which bestows on the individual certain constraints and enablements. We worry, however, that applying this analysis across the board as an analysis of social categories in general elides important differences between various social categories. We're in agreement with Ásta that, for example, race, gender, and sexuality are all social categories, in some broad sense of 'social category'. But it's less clear to us that they function in the same way or are amenable to the same type of analysis, simply in virtue of being social categories.

Let's consider, for example, the issue of *passing*. As typically understood, a person passes as a member of social category S, in a particular context C, just in case they are taken to be a member of S in C, but they are not a member of S. Clearly, Ásta's view of social categories can't accommodate this notion of passing, since what it is to be a member of S in C, on her view, is to have that property conferred on you by others in C, and there's nothing more to having the property conferred on you than being viewed as a member of S in C. What Ásta says, instead, is that passing must be explained via reference to the base properties that are being tracked in a particular context (pp. 123–124).

In *Twelfth Night*, Viola disguises herself as a man in order to get a job as a page. Everyone in the context views Viola as a man and treats her as such. And so, on Ásta's view, Viola is a man in that context—she's taken to have the relevant base properties (in this case, some collection of features related to biological sex) which then give her the social categorization 'man', which then gives her specific constraints and enablements (such as getting to work as a page). What Ásta can't say is that Viola is viewed as a man in that context, but isn't really a man in that context. There's no distinction, in her view, between what others view you as in a context and what you are in that context.

What Ásta can say, though, is that in this context people are making a mistake about the relevant base properties. The base properties that people in this context are attempting to track are those related to biological sex. And while it's true that Viola is a man in this context, it's false that she has these base properties. So passing is explained as follows. You pass when you are taken to have base properties you don't in fact have. And if people in the context in question knew you lacked those base properties, they'd cease to confer the relevant social property on you. People in a context can't, collectively, be wrong about what social category you're a member of in that context; but they can be wrong about whether you ought to be included, by their own lights, as a member of that category.

Ásta argues that this makes good sense as an account of passing. Social categories are precisely that—*social*. They play the distinctive role that they do based on how they're interpreted in a particular social context (their social meaning) and what they allow individuals to do (the constraints and enablements they confer). All this is public, and a matter of collective activity and agency. The category 'man' has social meaning, in a particular context, because of its particular social salience, and because of what people can do (and cannot do) as a result of being classed as men. Viola is a man if people treat her as a man, and if she's allowed to hold jobs reserved for men, and so on. But she doesn't have the properties that people believe they are tracking when they treat her as a man, and if they knew that they'd cease to treat her as a man.

Let's assume, for the sake of argument, that this is a plausible story about how passing works in the case of gender. It still seems decidedly less plausible as an account of how passing works for other social categories. And this is precisely because other social categories seem, at least to us, to have important differences from gender. In what follows, we'll focus on the case of *disability*. This is partly because one of us has spent a lot of time thinking about disability as a social category, but also, more significantly, because we think disability is a good case of a social category that often functions quite differently from gender.

Discussing the communal status of disability (as opposed to the institutional status of disability, which, on Ásta's view, corresponds to legal recognition of a particular kind of limitation due to functional impairment or perceived functional impairment, as recognized by laws such as the ADA) Ásta says that:

> the communal status of being disabled is…conferred onto people taken to have one of the base properties for the conferral in each context, and it can vary with each context what properties serve as the basis for conferral. (p. 111)

Ásta then elaborates what 'the communal status of being disabled' means as follows:

> And what is the upshot of having this status conferred? Communal constraints on and enablements to your behaviour in the context. For example, you may be taken

to be physically impaired as you limp; such is the power of the stigma associated with a certain status. At the milonga no one wants to dance with you, even though there is nothing wrong with your tango. Moreover, no one will even talk with you, as though they are afraid to catch your limp. Or, alternatively, having certain impairments can be associated culturally with having certain powers or insights, and your limp may be an indication that you possess great wisdom, and people may treat you accordingly. (p. 111)

On this account, the social property *being disabled* is a matter of how others view you, and how they respond to you as a result. And so, just as for gender, passing is a matter of whether individuals are confused about whether you have the relevant base properties. But, we suggest, for social categories like disability this is not plausible.

Consider Juan and Jon. Juan limps because he has MS. Jon limps because he is faking an impairment in order to get workers' compensation benefits. They are both viewed as having an impairment, and they are both treated accordingly. The same social stigma attaches to both, they get the same awkward glances, and they get the same well-meaning reassurances that they are 'doing a great job in spite of everything'. But, we suggest, it's simply incorrect to say that Jon and Juan share the social property being disabled, or to say that Jon has the social property being disabled (even though he lacks the relevant base properties—those related to physical im-pairment —which people in his context take themselves to be tracking).

And the reasons why it's incorrect to say that Jon is disabled, or to say that Jon and Juan share the same social property, reveal an important aspect of the social experience of disability—one which we think Ásta's unifying account of social properties runs the risk of obscuring. Simply put, the social con-straints and enablements of disability go beyond how others treat you or how you are perceived. When Jon and Juan encounter a building with stairs but no ramp at the entrance, their constraints are different. Jon might have a complicated calculation to make about whether he ought to use the stairs, especially if anyone is watching. But he can use the stairs. Juan cannot. That's a social constraint on Juan. But it's a social constraint imposed by the built environment, and it's independent of how Juan is viewed in the context. The difference in constraints between Juan and Jon is not how they are viewed—and not what properties are conferred on them by others—but simply the basic fact of what their bodies are like, and how their bodies interact with their social environment.

To emphasize this further, consider Julia. Julia has rheumatoid arthritis which affects her knees, but—like many women with medically complex disabilities—she conceals this in professional contexts in order to avoid ap-pearing weak or vulnerable. Julia also has trouble with stairs. But she goes to great lengths to disguise this. This places significant constraints on her so-cially—she is always planning her routes in advance, always careful to leave five minutes early from meetings so she doesn't have to walk in groups,

always getting that text that says she needs to go and run an errand right when everyone else is walking off together to get a coffee at the break. She's both constrained by her physical environment (she has to avoid stairs) and constrained to be socially isolated (because the process of passing is a delicate art). But none of these constraints—although they are undoubtedly social— are a product of how others view her, or the properties conferred on her. She is taken to be able-bodied in her professional context. But that doesn't mean that she functions, socially, as an able-bodied person in that context.

Juan and Jon are viewed by others as being disabled. But, we argue, their social constraints and enablements are not the same precisely because Juan really has the relevant base properties, whereas Jon lacks them. Julia, in contrast, is viewed by others as being non-disabled, but she nevertheless has many of the social constraints of being disabled precisely because she really does have the relevant base property. Ásta says that her account, when applied to disability, is an account of 'having a disability as a social feature'. But we disagree, because we argue that there is more to the social reality of having a disability than how you are viewed by others.

In sum, we think that explicating the nature of *some* social categories requires moving beyond Ásta's highly parsimonious framework. Ásta offers an analysis that is parsimonious along two dimensions: (i) it suggests that a single type of thing (the attitudes and perceptions of others in a particular social context) is what determines social category membership in that context, and (ii) it suggests that a single type of analysis (her conferralist analysis) can be applied to various different social kinds and categories. And while we admire the precision, elegance, and clarity of this view, our concern is that such a high level of parsimony obscures some aspects of complexity in social categories, and some important areas of difference between social categories.

With regard to (i), it seems plausible to us that social categories might differ in what determines their membership: constructed environment and embodiment are especially important to the nature of disability, but not to other social categories; ancestry might be particularly important to race, but not to other social categories; access to material resources and wealth might be particularly important to class, but not to other social categories; and so on. Conferralism can, of course, accommodate differences in which kinds of things are included in the *base properties* that agents in a context are attempting to track. But membership in social kinds, for conferralism, is fundamentally a matter of the reactions and attitudes of others in a particular context, regardless of which social property we are considering. And what we are suggesting is that this might be *overly* unifying. Different social categories might require different—and perhaps more complex—membership conditions. A theory of social kinds that appeals to a wider variety of features in determining membership conditions pays a price in terms of parsimony. However, given that some social properties might simply be more embodied,

or have a stronger relation to historical, environmental, or material factors, the cost might be unavoidable.

Similarly with regard to (ii), we wonder whether a single, unified analysis of social categories *in general* is something we should aim for. Our social world is vast, complex, messy, and confusing. And there are so many different kinds of things—ethnicity, religion, race, sexuality, and so on—that rightly deserve the label 'social category' and which Ásta rightly describes as categories which shape and guide our lives. It seems plausible to us that some of these categories might have a stronger embodied or environmental component, some might be more about a personally felt sense of identity, and some might be exactly the sorts of conferred group statuses that Ásta describes. Allowing that social categories can function differently, and admit of different kinds of analysis, is again a cost to parsimony in thinking about the social world. But given the complexity of the social world and the wide variety of social kinds we encounter, we suggest this cost is justified.

This concern aside, however, we cannot say enough good things about this book. Ásta has written a landmark contribution to feminist metaphysics. It is compelling, engaging, and carefully argued. And it is a must-read for anyone interested in social ontology and the nature of social kinds.

University of Virginia   ELIZABETH BARNES AND MATTHEW ANDLER
e.j.barnes@virginia.edu
msa6cm@virginia.edu

The Quality of Life: Aristotle Revised, by Richard Kraut. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018. Pp. x + 249.

It is hard not to like a book that so outrageously and skilfully defies expectations. Richard Kraut is among the leading authorities on Aristotle's ethics, and his recent volume, *What Is Good and Why: The Ethics of Well-Being* (Kraut (2007)) gave us one of the best contemporary articulations of the Aristotelian approach to well-being. The title of this one, *The Quality of Life: Aristotle Revised*, suggests a mere refinement of this approach. Well, it does say 'revised'. But then, historians have taken such disparate views of Aristotle's ethics that just about any contemporary theory might fairly be deemed a revision of Aristotle's account. At the very least, the bits about women and slaves call for some departures from the original.

But there are revisions and there are revisions, and this one is a doozy: herein lies an extended defence of 'experientialism'—roughly, the view that well-being consists wholly, or almost wholly, in experiences. Not Benthamite hedonism, to be sure—crucially, Kraut maintains that pleasure is just one