

*Categories We Live by: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*  
By Ásta  
Oxford University Press, 2018. xiv + 140 pp.

In *Categories We Live By*, Ásta defends a general framework of the metaphysics of social categories like women, Asian, and refugee. The book builds on Ásta's earlier work developing a conferralist account of social categories while expanding it in significant ways. Her aim is to show "the conferralist framework can be used to make sense of any social category" (4). The book defends a view that is a major contribution to feminist metaphysics and social ontology. More generally, it also encourages us to reflect on the interplay between appearance, reality, and normativity.

Social categories or social kinds are classes "defined by a unifying property" (2, fn. 1). Ásta divides social categories into two sorts—those that are institutional (e.g., married person, registered voter) and those that are communal (e.g., man, lesbian). Both involve conferring social properties on individuals through speech acts, other actions, and explicit or implicit attitudes and behaviors. Social properties are conferred in ways that are meant to track what Ásta calls "base properties", which are other (perhaps non-social) properties that individuals are taken to have. For instance, someone might take being a citizen to be tracking properties having to do with being born within the borders of a particular country or completing steps for naturalization. Conferral of membership in a gender category might be taken to rely on having particular genitalia, chromosomes, self-identifying in a particular way, and so on. Importantly, Ásta argues that being a member of a social category does not require actually having the base property. Rather, it depends on being conferred a particular status, which brings with it various constraints and enablements. As Ásta puts it "it isn't whether people have the base property that matters, but whether they are taken to have it. What matters socially is what features you seem to have, not what you do have" (48). Being taken to be a woman (in a context) just is to be a woman (in that context).

Ásta offers profiles for institutional and communal social categories. Institutional categories—like being a citizen—fit the following profile (21).

**Conferred property: P**

**Who:** a person or entity or group 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 witnesses, at a particular place, etc). We can think of this as a particular institutional context

**Base property:** the property or properties the authorities are attempting to track in the conferral.

For example, the property of being married may be conferred on a person by a judge with the requisite authority through a pronouncement ("I now pronounce you ...") during a marriage ceremony with the aim of tracking properties including intentions to wed, not being currently married to someone else, and so on.

Other social categories are not based on legal regulations and are not conferred by people with explicit authority. Rather they are conferred by people with standing in a context and can be conferred in implicit ways. She offers the following schema for communal social categories—like gender categories (22).

**Conferred Property: P**

**Who:** a person or entity or group with standing

**What:** their conferral, explicit or implicit, by means of a attitudes and behavior

**When:** in a particular context

**Base property:** the property or properties the authorities are attempting to track in the conferral, consciously or unconsciously.

For example a gender might be conferred on a person, Sam, by people with standing in a context via seemingly perceiving Sam to have certain base properties (perhaps breasts, bodily presentation, or Sam's self-identification) and forming certain attitudes and behaving in certain ways.

The conferralist account is broad and wide-ranging and offers promising resources for feminist philosophers, social ontologists, and others working in areas that interface with social metaphysics. In the space I have here, I raise two potential worries for the view.

First, on Ásta's account, membership in a social category depends on conferral and is highly context-sensitive. Does this mean that in some (many?) contexts a trans woman is not a woman? Is a Latinx U.S. citizen who is routinely harassed by ICE agents in the social category of undocumented immigrants? Ásta's answer to both questions, at least when it comes to communal categories, is yes.<sup>1</sup> To be conferred membership in a kind K in a context is to be a member of the kind. But, one might contend, this cannot be right! A trans woman is a woman regardless of how certain people categorize her. A U.S. citizen is a citizen, regardless of what ICE agents might assume.

Ásta is sensitive to these concerns, but argues that they do not show what *is* the case in terms of social categorization, but rather reveal our judgments about what *ought* to be the case. She argues that "to give a metaphysics of social properties is to give an account of the properties that *do matter* socially, not the ones that *should matter*, but don't" (11). For instance, even though the Latinx person is a citizen, in contexts in which they are treated as undocumented, they are constrained and enabled in the ways that come with membership in the communal category of undocumented people. Regardless of whether one agrees with the conferralist framework, Ásta's view is an important and interesting way to understand how metaphysics and normativity fit together.

And, lest it seem that Ásta is not concerned with what categories *should* matter, she also draws out points at which her metaphysics interfaces with normative and political questions (e.g., debunking projects and social construction in Ch. 2). One particularly interesting way in which her metaphysical view can predict harms comes out in her discussion of social identities. Social identities are locations on social maps that involve intersecting conferred statuses (e.g., Korean working-class cis woman). These can objectively place people in various social categories, in ways that may neither fit with self-identification nor accurately track base properties. A subjective social identity is the location a person self-identifies with. But, Ásta states, "Sometimes there is no location in the current context that we identify with. And sometimes there are very few contexts with locations that we identify with. Our struggle then is to make it the case that there are more contexts in which there are locations that we can identify with" (123). Ásta's metaphysics of social identities can help to make sense of the wrongs that come from a lack of a location for one to "live in" on a social map.

The second worry I have concerns whether the conferralist can answer the questions it sets out to. Ásta aims to answer a swathe of questions in social ontology including "What is a social category? What is its nature? How is it created and sustained?" (127). She also wants to provide a framework for context-sensitive answers to questions like "What is a woman?". The conferralist's answers to the first few questions are clear—social categories are conferred categories that are

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<sup>1</sup> Authorities have granted the Latinx U.S. citizen the property that makes her a member of the institutional category of U.S. citizen and not in the institutional category of undocumented person. But in many cases Ásta takes there to be both institutional and communal categories (cf. the discussion of refugees 45-46).

created and sustained by conferral. Ásta also has a neat way of answering *who*-questions. The members of a social category K in a context C are those upon whom the status of being K has been conferred by those with authority or standing in C.

Notice that in the conferralist profiles conferred properties, e.g., “being a woman”, are not analyzed. Rather, they are listed as one ingredient in the profile. But, what is it to be a woman? Like Mason (forthcoming), I’d like to know more about the conferralist view of properties that unify social categories or kinds like *women* (or *women* in context C).

There are several ways that Ásta seems to be answering these sorts of *what*-questions. At one point she says that to have a social status “*just is* to have the constraints and enablements in question” (29 *emphasis original*). So perhaps that is the answer—what it is to be a woman in C is to be suitably constrained and enabled. Yet, at other times she says “constraints and enablements are the product of our membership in many intersecting social categories” (5), that they “come with a certain social status” (128), and that “gender roles ... have constraints and enablements attached to them” (75). Relations like *being a product*, *coming with*, and *being attached to* do not sound like the identity relation. So, perhaps constraints and enablements are related to being a woman but not via identity.

Then later Ásta says “Of course, we could answer the question *what is a woman?* empirically: in this and that context, the base property for the conferral of the status is sex assignment, or the presence of a vagina, or self-identification” (91). The conferralist certainly takes base properties to be relevant for conferral, but here they seem to also be (partially?) answering the question of what is it to be a woman. Finally, when considering how one might justify solidarity across contexts and ground claims about systematic oppression given the radical context-sensitivity of social categories, Ásta argues that we can point to either shared base properties or similarities in constraints and enablements (128). Yet, Ásta is clear that the base properties alone do not define social categories—that would go against the conferralist framework she argued for throughout the book. So, perhaps the conferralist’s answer to *what*-question relies on both base features and constraints and enablements.<sup>2</sup>

Overall, *Categories We Live By* sets out to do a lot. In addition to developing an account of social categories and social construction (Ch. 1 and 2) and illustrating the conferralist framework via case studies (Ch. 4 and 5), it offers analyses of Beauvoir’s and Butler’s theories of sex and gender (Ch. 3) and considers how the conferralist can account for social identity (Ch. 6). While the book leaves one with some open questions, the slim volume is fecund with insights and will make a strong and lasting impact on feminist metaphysics and social ontology.

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## References

Mason, Rebecca. (forthcoming). *Categories We Live by: The Construction of Sex, Gender, Race, and Other Social Categories*. *Hypatia Reviews Online*.

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<sup>2</sup> Another intriguing interpretation is that Ásta allows for the possibility that solidarity and claims about widespread mistreatment might rely on base properties alone and so not really on social categories at all.