Book Symposium

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Categories We Do Not Know We Live By

https://doi.org/10.1515/jso-2020-2006

Abstract: I argue that a central claim of Ásta's conferralist framework – that it can account for *all* social properties of individuals – is false, by drawing attention to (opaque) class. I then discuss an implication of this objection; conferralism does not meet its own conditions of adequacy, such as providing a theory that helps to understand oppression. My diagnosis is that this objection points to a methodological problem: Ásta and other social ontologists have been fed on a "one-sided diet" of types of examples, resulting in a limited view of the paradigmatic social phenomena, thus making conferralism too narrow to fulfill its intended role.

Keywords: Conferralism; Class; Opaque kinds of social facts; Ásta; Muhammad Ali Khalidi; Paradigmatic cases.

1 Introduction

Ásta's *Categories We Live By* (2018) significantly advances the field of social ontology by emphasizing the importance of communal properties and by providing a general theory of both institutional and communal social properties.[1] Consequently, it offers a systematic alternative to the various constitution accounts that have been dominating the field. Furthermore, it develops a new conception of social construction: "social construction as social significance." I take the conferralist framework to be the central innovation in *Categories We Live By*, but I must pose an objection to this framework: conferralism cannot account for *all* social properties of individuals, such as the opaque aspects of class. This shows that, contrary to conferralism's central claim, conferral by others is not a necessary condition for a social property of an individual to exist. I then discuss an implication of this objection, which is that it calls into question whether conferralism can

1 Thanks to Ásta, Anandi Hattiangadi, and Katharine Jenkins for helpful discussions.

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meet its *own* conditions of adequacy, such as providing a theory that can aid us in understanding injustice and oppression, since class is central to understanding these phenomena. My diagnosis is that this objection points to an underlying methodological problem: Ásta and other social ontologists have been fed on what Wittgenstein called a "one-sided diet" of *types* of examples of social phenomena. This methodological problem results in an overly limited view of the paradigmatic social phenomena, which in turn, makes conferralism too narrow to fulfil its intended role.

2 What Are The Paradigmatic Social Phenomena?

It is important to answer the question, "What are the paradigmatic social phenomena?", since what we take as examples of such paradigms profoundly influences our theorizing. For example, our view of the paradigmatic social phenomena determines what phenomena we ought to be able to explain and what examples to use as starting points in developing our theories. These exemplars have various sources, such as the philosophical tradition (cf. the many game analogies), our own experiences, and preconceptions of the social world. Furthermore, the examples of paradigmatic social phenomena are often *theory-driven* and drawn from *particular domains*, such as legal reality. For instance, Ásta states that *Categories We Live By* is a work in feminist theory, which makes gender and oppression central phenomena to explain, and her examples are chosen along these lines. She also emphasizes that she is especially interested in the categories that are protected in various jurisdictions, such as gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and religion (69, 93).[2] Consequently, many of her examples come from the legal domain. But these are still mere differences in the content (games, gender, law) of examples of paradigmatic social phenomena, and it is the kind, or type, of examples chosen that is even more important. Consider Wittgenstein's warning in *Philosophical Investigations* (§593): "A main cause of philosophical disease – a one-sided diet: one nourishes one's thinking with only one kind of example." Proceeding in a piecemeal fashion in choosing examples might thus result in a failure to acknowledge crucial social phenomena. Much work in social ontology, including Ásta's, has relied on a one-sided diet of kinds of examples. To avoid this pitfall, I think it would be useful to systematize our choice of examples

2 Ásta analyzes social properties of individuals, for example, being a woman or being queer, in order to give a theory of the nature of social categories, for example, women, queers (1).

in terms of type rather than content, using the fundamental dimension of mind-dependence to do so.

Muhammad Ali Khalidi's (2015) classification of social kinds is useful for this purpose. He starts from the familiar idea that social properties depend on our propositional attitudes in different ways and then asks us to consider two questions to clarify those differences (103):

(i) Does the existence of the *kind* depend upon our having certain propositional attitudes towards it?
(ii) Does the existence of *instances of the kind* depend on our having propositional attitudes towards them, namely that they are instances of that kind?

The answers to these questions result in a three-fold classification (104):

	(i)	(ii)	
First kind of social kind	NO	NO	Racism, recession
Second kind of social kind	YES	NO	War, money
Third kind of social kind	YES	YES	Permanent resident, prime minister

The shift from top to bottom in the classification is a shift from weaker to increasingly stronger mind-dependence. The first kind of social kind is mind-dependent in the sense that some mental states about other social phenomena need to exist for the kind to exist, but these mental states need not be about the kind itself. For example, money must exist (the second kind of social kind) for a recession to exist (the first kind of social kind). The second kind of social kind is mind-dependent in the sense that there must be mental states about the kind itself for it to exist, but there need not be mental states about each individual token for the token to exist. For example, for the kind money to exist, there must be mental states about money, but an individual token, say a coin, can exist even if there are no mental states about that particular coin. The third kind of social kind is mind-dependent in the sense that there must be mental states about both the type and the token for each to exist. Khalidi writes that the "third kind are social kinds whose very existence depends on specific attitudes towards the kind itself, and whose individual instances must also be deemed by at least some people to be members of the kind for them to be members of the kind" (104).

Ásta approvingly cites Khalidi's classification in clarifying a central difference between conferralism and John Searle's theories of social reality (1995, 2010). The former takes social properties to be of the third kind, while the latter admits of social properties of both the second and third kinds:

> Conferralism about social categories of people is committed to the claim that such social categories are of type 3 on the Khalidi scale, that is, both the existence of the corresponding category and membership in the category depend on subjects in the way that conferralism outlines. (Ásta 2018, 28)

But this central tenet of conferralism – that social categories of people are of the third kind – results in the theory being too narrow, even by its own standards.[3] Ásta states that *Categories We Live By* is a work in social theory that should be useful for certain purposes in the humanities and the social sciences (4): "Doing so also serves to support work done in the humanities and social sciences on the role of social construction in generating and upholding oppressive practices and institutions." However, much work in the social sciences, especially about oppression, is concerned with phenomena of Khalidi's first type. Consider, for example, economics, which studies recession, inflation, economic inequality, and the effects they have, or sociology, which studies social stratification and class. Starting one's theorizing from only phenomena of the third type involves a risk of not getting as far as these cases (they are to be dealt with later) and/or regarding them as less central than the other two types of social phenomena.

3 The First Kind of Social Kind: Opaque Class

One of the main contributions of *Categories We Live By* is to offer a general account of social categories guided by a normative commitment: providing a theory that can aid in fighting social injustices and oppression.

Throughout the book, Ásta applies the conferralist framework to categories like sex, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, and religion, all of which show (evidence of) a base property that either is or is taken to be transparent to

3 Elizabeth Barnes and Matthew Andler (2019) raise a different objection to Ásta's conferralist framework, which I take to be about the second kind of social kind. They argue that there are important differences between gender and disability, resulting in that one cannot give a unified conferralist account of these categories (without hiding these central differences). The reason is that "the social constraints and enablements of disability go beyond how others treat you or how you are perceived" (2019). Barnes and Andler continue by showing that conferralism cannot adequately distinguish between someone having an impairment (Juan) and someone faking an impairment (Jon), since both come out as having the social property being disabled on Ásta's view. It is interesting, I think, to note that this objection is due to Ásta denying the second kind of social kind. If she were to admit of the second kind of social kind, she could use the distinction between actually meeting the conditions for having a certain property (Juan) and being perceived to meet the conditions (Jon), to respond to this objection. The same goes for the example of passing.

the conferrers, whether on the body, in manners, or in speech. In each example, the conferrers attempt to track something they can observe. There are other social categories, like class, that also involve constraints and enablements but are discussed only in a few short passages in the book. Recall my earlier point that what are considered paradigmatic social phenomena highlight some aspects of social reality while hiding others. This is relevant in relation to Ásta's examples, nearly all of which involve (evidence of) some transparent base property. Furthermore, her choice of examples suggests that they are drawn from anti-discrimination law and thus involve a person's sex, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation, or religion. In fact, Ásta writes that "the categories that are legally protected in various jurisdictions are of special importance to my analysis" (4) and that she applies "the conferralist framework to some of the other 'usual suspects', that is, to some of the other categories that are protected classes in various jurisdictions, such as race, religion, and disability" (93). But class is not a category that is protected in law, so the anomaly that class is not given the same attention as the other social categories in Ásta's work – despite its significant and often governing contribution to injustice and oppression – might be due to the fact that the social properties in her examples of paradigmatic social phenomena come from anti-discrimination law.

It is thus both interesting and important to consider whether the conferralist framework can accommodate a person's class, especially the opaque dimensions of class.[4] The latter would be an example of the first kind of social kind. The conferralist analysis can easily be applied to certain aspects of class. Ásta offers the historical example of a group of people with standing referring to the use of certain words and not others as upper class and hence conferring this property on some people: "The Sloane Set decided what was U and non U (this is code for 'upperclass'). Using certain words was U, others non-U. Using cloth napkins was U; paper napkins non-U. And so on." (50). Call this the Sloane Set example.[5]

Here again, there is a transparent feature that is taken as (evidence of) the base property of being upper class. But there are other aspects of class that work in other ways, such as one's relation to the means of production. This category

4 I first raised this issue in my (2019) and I develop it further here.

5 It is instructive to quote the introduction by Alan S. C. Ross: "Today, in *1956*, the English class-system is essentially tripartite–there exist an upper, a middle, and a lower class. It is solely by its language that the upper class is clearly marked off from the others" (1956, 11). This is clearly a different sense of class than the Marxist sense. It also tracks a transparent base property (language). This is further emphasized in the subtitle of the book which refers to transparent, or identifiable, characteristics: *Noblesse Oblige: An Enquiry into the Identifiable Characteristics of the English Aristocracy.*

differs from the other social categories considered so far: its constraints and enablements are not due to the perceptions of the conferrers but rather to one's place in the capitalist system.

We can call the Sloane Set example "social class" and the latter Marxian notion "economic class." The first can be captured within the conferralist framework, but the second cannot. Still, economic class is a social property that impacts, often profoundly, what one can and cannot do by setting behavioral constraints and enablements, but it is not a conferred property. In fact, economic class *cannot* be a conferred property, since it conflicts with the central tenets of the conferralist account: that the conferrers are attempting to track a base property, that their perception is essential to the conferral, and that the constraints and enablements are tied to a person's perceived social status. It might even be that class is an opaque kind of social fact to the conferrers.[6] It would then be, due to its very opacity, in conflict with the central idea of conferralism, which is that the perception of other people is essential for a social property to exist. In short, conferrals by others is not a necessary condition for a social property of an individual to exist. Still, economic class is a social property that significantly impacts one's life chances and a key component of social injustice and oppression. Thus, it is central to Ásta's project. In summary, the conditions set out in the conferralist framework are not necessary for a social property of an individual to exist since some social properties such as one's economic class can exist without being conferred.

4 The Normative Commitment: Understanding Injustice and Oppression

One might think that our disagreement is merely verbal: should we or should we not call "class" in this Marxian sense a social category? I think, however, that the disagreement goes deeper and comes back to the question, "What are the phenomena we ought to be able to explain?" Given that a central motivation for *Categories We Live By* is to provide tools helpful for understanding injustice and

6 Amie Thomasson (2003) first introduced opaque kinds of social facts in a powerful objection to Searle's theory of social reality (1995). Thomasson distinguishes between epistemic and conceptual opacity: "Call a kind F of social entities 'epistemically opaque' if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one believes that anything of kind F exists, and 'conceptually opaque' if things of that kind are capable of existing even if no one has any F-regarding beliefs whatsoever" (275–276).

oppression and tools that are useful for the humanities and social sciences, class is of utmost importance. Ásta writes:

> My motivation for giving a metaphysics of social categories is fueled by the awareness that, while social categories can be a positive source of identity and belonging, they often are oppressive, and membership in them can put serious constraints on a person's life options. So in offering my theory of social categories, the aim is to reveal the cogs and belts and arrangements of parts in machines that often are oppressive. Doing so also serves to support work done in the humanities and social sciences on the role of social construction in generating and upholding oppressive practices and institutions. (Ásta 2018, p. 4)

Call this "the normative commitment." Recall also that this is a work in feminist theory. Ásta notes that another condition of adequacy for her theory is to make sense of intersectionality. Much influential work in feminist theory has been about the intersection of class and gender (e.g. Hill Collins 1990; Skeggs 1997). The implication of not being able to account for the opacity of class is that conferralism fails to meet its own conditions of adequacy: providing tools helpful for understanding oppression and injustice, accounting for the intersection of class and gender central to feminist theory, and providing tools for the humanities and the social sciences in understanding the role of social construction in upholding oppressive regimes. So, is Ásta really identifying the categories we live by? What matters most for these purposes? In short, class can sometimes be a category that we do not know we live by but that still matters a great deal for Ásta's purposes. The upshot is that conferralism is too narrow, according to its own standard.

5 Reply: Conferralism Is a Theory of All Socially Salient Categories

One possible reply to this objection would be to claim that conferralism is an account of *most* rather than *all* social properties of individuals. Ásta has undoubtedly already greatly expanded our theories of the social world by giving communal properties their proper place, and it might simply be greedy to ask for more. Ásta claims, however, that her theory is an account of *any* social category (4): "The conferralist framework can be used to make sense of any social category. I show it in action by offering accounts of some of the most dominant social categories, but it can be used to account for any others." Given this textual evidence, I take it that restricting the scope of the theory would not be Ásta's preferred choice of response.

Another, and related reply, is to say that conferralism is an account of all *socially salient* properties of individuals and that class, especially opaque class, is not a socially salient category. There is textual evidence to support this response: "the main aim of the account I am offering is to account for socially salient categories and properties, phenomena that *make a social difference*" (108, italics in original). The phrase "make a social difference" is used interchangeably with "social significance." In other words, the theory is meant to capture what it is for a feature of an individual to have social significance, understood as follows:

> [F]or a feature B to have *social significance* in a context is for another feature F to be conferred upon people taken to have B. F is then the socially constructed feature. Let us take the example of disability again. For disability to be socially constructed, on this conception, is for a feature, physical impairment, to have *social significance* in a context such that people taken to have the feature get conferred onto them extra social constraints and enablements that are over and above the constraints and enablements that mere physical impairment brings. (Ásta 2018, p. 44)

Ásta offers the examples of laws that bar people with physical impairments from driving even if they can physically drive safely (an example of an institutional constraint) and not taking someone with a speech impairment seriously (an example of a communal constraint). One's economic class, if socially significant in the above sense, would then be a conferred property and hence captured by conferralism. If one's economic class is not socially significant in this sense (and the opaque dimensions of class would not be since they are not conferred), it would not on this view be a social property of an individual. It might rather be a material property or a material relation that has social consequences.[7] Thus, it would not be a counterexample to the claim that conferralism can accommodate all socially salient properties of individuals.

But the same problem shows up again: this sense of social significance is simply too narrow given the motivation of *Categories We Live By* and its normative commitment, since it excludes properties that greatly impact one's life chances and contribute to social injustices and oppression. Distinguishing between two senses of "making a social difference" reveals the problem. The first is making a social difference in the sense of *affecting one's life chances* and contributing to injustices and oppression, even if one is unaware of it. The second is Ásta's sense of social significance, detailed above, which is conceptually related to conferrals by others. But social significance as affecting one's life chances is an important and intuitive sense given the motivation of this work and the normative commitment. Consequently, claiming that one

7 This was Ásta's response to this objection at the *Social Ontology 2019* conference in Tampere, Finland.

gives an account of social properties that are socially significant in this narrow sense remains in conflict with the normative commitment. In short, to understand injustice and oppression that are not due to conferrals by others we need another sense of social construction than "social construction as social significance."

Social significance plays an important role in the book since it is Ásta's preferred conception of social construction. This means that neither the conferralist framework nor social construction as social significance can accommodate opaque class. Consequently, neither of the two central conceptual resources of *Categories We Live By* can do this.[8] Note that this is not to say that Ásta's theory *cannot* handle opaque class in some way. Rather, my claim is that Ásta's account will remain *incomplete* until she has shown how to capture the first kind of social phenomena.

I believe this discussion points to a deeper methodological concern for social ontologists: in constructing our theories of the social world, we need to start from examples of all three of Khalidi's types of phenomena, not only the second and third types.

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8 My preferred option would be to analyze opaque class as a derivative phenomenon of the second and/or third types of phenomena that can be captured by another sense of social construction than social construction as social significance.