
Conferrals as Social Acts

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Résumé

In her *Categories We Live By* (2019), Ásta proposes a new explanatory framework for the ontology of social categories, or social kinds, e.g., gender, sex or race. The so-called "conferralist" view entails that social categories are not simply found in persons, but rather are *conferred* onto them by others, based on the perception of more basic properties. For example, gender is conferred onto individuals by persons in relevant social positions, based on perceived or imagined sexual organs. One core innovation of Ásta's framework is what she calls "acts of conferral", highlighting that social categories are acquired through concrete *acts* of conferrals. In this manner, she aims to account for the context-dependence of the social categories.

While acts of conferral play a central role in this promising explanatory framework, their nature remains largely unexplored in Ásta's work. Seemingly anything can be an act of conferral: a speech act (2019: 21), official documents (2019: 72; 99); judgements (2019: 8; 22; 72), attitudes and behaviours (2019: 22) and even perceptions themselves (2019: 75; 104). One is left perplexed by the variety of acts of conferral. How could there be a possibility of formulating a meaningful and useful concept that can account for all of these examples?

The aim of this paper is to analyse the notion "act of conferral". I argue that acts of conferral are a species of social acts, drawing on Adolf Reinach's legal phenomenology (Reinach 1913). So understood, the concept "act of conferral" can help us appreciate the role of individual action in explanations of social reality. Additionally, I argue that similar frameworks based on speech or document acts (e.g., Searle 1995; 2010, Smith 2014) are subsumed under a conferralist framework so analysed, while the latter can account for aspects of social reality that the former cannot.

Literature

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