

Open Questions in the Metaphysics of Habitable Categories*

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Abstract

My purpose in this text is to offer a general roadmap for navigating most current debates in the metaphysics of social categories regarding what sort of fact it is for a person to inhabit one social category or another—for example, what makes a person Mexican, or gay, or rich. With this goal in mind, I propose classifying the debating positions into three broad camps: common sense theories, socio-historical accounts, and performative theories. I characterise their main differences, identifying the main challenges and achievements of each. I show that for persons well integrated into their categories, the differences between these three broad camps are minuscule, yet become crucial when we try to account for

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people not so well integrated. Then, I sketch a pluralist proposal that reconciles the three camps I have identified, while doing justice to the challenges presented by interstitial phenomena such as *mestizaje*, transition, passing, migration, etc.

Key Words: social ontology, social categories, social construction, identity, migration

It is a truism that we often think of ourselves and others not as individuals but as members of broader human kinds: races, generations, nationalities, genders, etc. Despite continuous efforts to eradicate these from our ultimate picture of reality, facts such as my being Mexican, brown, and able-bodied ought still to be accounted for in our philosophical ontology. Yet, there is not a widespread consensus of what sort of facts these are. What sort of fact is my being Mexican? What makes me able-bodied instead of disabled? Is it just my colour of skin that makes me brown or is there more to it than that? And if so, what more? Did I have to do something to become all these things that I am? How much of a choice did I have? Such are the questions driving this essay. In particular, my goal is to bring into focus the main threads binding together the many debates on the metaphysics of human distinctions. My hope is that, presenting them at a more abstract level than usual might reveal interesting connections that might be easy to miss at ground level—in the very trenches of theoretical and political action, so to speak.

The paper is structured as follows. In the first section I motivate the critical and rigorous study of what I will call habitable categories, canvassing the important roles they play in our theoretical, normative and subjectivizing practices. I then focus on the question of what makes or what sort of fact it is for someone to belong to some category or another, presenting what I take to be the three major trends in the debate: common sense, socio-historical and performative, trying to fairly identify their achievements and challenges. In the final section, I present the reasons why I think I have shown (not argued for) the value of an abstract perspective as the one I adopt here. In particular, I argue that my abstract approach shows how interstitial cases like migration, passing, transition, etc. are specially problematic for unitary accounts of habitable categories and, therefore, that a pluralistic account is preferable. I also sketch my proposal of such a pluralistic view.

I. On Habitable Categories

Habitable categories, like those pertaining to our nationalities, gender, class, marital status, etc., play a key role in many of our most important theoretical, normative and subjectivizing practices. They figure centrally in the many ways we try to describe, explain and predict the human world in both everyday life and many of our scientific practices—in medicine, economics, anthropology, sociology, linguistics, etc. We usually say things like, “John skipped the flag salutation because he is a Jehovah’s Witness,” or, “The celebrations of the 25th of May were full because many Argentines live nearby.” In other words, we expect people to behave in certain ways and we make sense of what they do in part by identifying them as belonging to one category or another, just as we use other categories to generate expectations and explanations in other domains.

Besides these theoretical uses, habitable categories play a central role in all of our normative practices. How we evaluate someone’s actions is deeply interwoven with what kind of person we think they are (Rudder, 2014), just as how we evaluate our own actions is deeply interwoven with what kind of person we think we are. Inhabiting a kind usually entails duties as well as obligations, and there are duties and obligations that are conditional on whether we inhabit certain social kinds. Minors commonly have different rights than adults, aliens have different duties than citizens, etc. Even the most abstract theories of obligations recognise this (Demolombe & Louis, 2006).

Finally, habitable kinds are key to a series of practices through which we recognise and develop our own and others’ subjectivity. By inhabiting certain categories and not others, we identify with some people but not others; we make sense of our own existence and experience, and those of others. “I never spent anytime whatsoever contemplating the subject of femaleness—wrote Elizabeth Gilbert in her 2009 autobiographical essay—For that

reason . . . I never became very familiar with myself” (Gilbert, 2009: i). The question of identity is usually answered by a list of categories with which one identifies. Even on the negative side, we also assert our own subjectivity by resisting the pull of certain categories. Literary critic Stephanie Burt calls this aspect of subjectivization “the resistance to memoir, to narrative”—which echoes Paul De Man’s deconstructive resistance to theory—that is, the resistance “to identifying your true self with one story” even while referring to such stories in the search for this elusive true self (Burt, 2012). The categories we inhabit also shape our desires, thoughts, and actions. As Burt (2012) herself writes, the desire to look pretty has a different significance when one is a woman and when one is a man, or neither.

Nevertheless, talk about the theoretical, normative and subjective domains of application of these categories must not lead us to believe that some categories are just normative, others just theoretical, and some simply subjective. For most habitable categories, their theoretical, normative and subjective uses are deeply interwoven. One would be mistaken to think that the subjectivizing functions are quite independent from the theoretical ones, for example. As Felwine Sarr (2016) has argued, it is possible that in order to heal the effects of colonisation, Third World subjects must also develop the sort of intellectual sovereignty that requires a decolonisation of the theoretical scholarship of the categories we inhabit. This means that for categories to play the role we want in building our subjectivity, we must also change how we theorize about them, thus bringing together their subjectivizing and theoretical roles. Precisely one of the reasons why it is such a pressing issue to be clear on the metaphysics of habitable kinds is precisely because they are vehicles of cross-pollination between theoretical, normative and subjectivizing domains. Scientific theories, for example, have the sort of authority that makes them very attractive for ethical and political normative co-option (López Beltrán, 2004). A satisfactory metaphysical account of habitable

categories must recognise the heterogeneity of their theoretical and political uses, and the complexity of their interactions.

This work has been done in a variety of philosophical fields: of social science, feminism, race, critical philosophy, Marxism, liberal and communitarist political philosophy, etc. Nevertheless, common issues and arguments arise, and it is the purpose of this text to trace them. Yet, it is worth noticing that nothing I will say here requires that a single answer work for all habitable categories. Despite their all being habitable categories, it is often assumed that debates regarding the metaphysical nature of, say, race must be sharply distinguished from those of gender, class, disability, etc., and that metaphysical arguments relevant to one kind of habitable category might not apply to others (see, for example, Guerrero McManus, 2019 or Díaz-León's remarks on Weinberg, 2015). For example, there is relatively widespread agreement that material conditions are fundamental for determining who is or is not poor, but this might not generalize to other categories such as gender or race. Material conditions may also be fundamental to these other cases, or they may be not, yet this is a question that must be resolved on a case-by-case basis. In the end, it is very likely that the metaphysics of race will substantially differ from those of gender, for example. The historical and political differences between these categories are so profound that accounts that might serve to build better racial relations could nevertheless reinforce gender injustices if applied in that domain. This is because the struggles and oppression experienced by racial and gender minorities are substantially different, and any good metaphysical account of race and gender must account for these differences.

One might be skeptical about the value of talking about habitable categories in such abstract, detached and general terms as I plan to do here. Unfortunately, I have little to say to convince anyone already skeptical of dealing with social problems as pressing as these at such a general level except to ask her to read my paper and see for herself whether something important emerges from

changing the focus in these debates. I take it that even if it is true that different sorts of categories have different metaphysical profiles, it is precisely because they behave differently when considered under the same criteria. Thus, for example, if it is true that there is a stronger metaphysical link between gender and self-testimony than between, say, class and self-testimony, this must manifest itself as differences in the way we shall answer specific general questions about gender and class as habitable categories. Thus, it is fundamental to know the general issues and challenges that face any metaphysical account of a habitable category in order to even try to understand whether different sorts of categories are metaphysically different.

Finally, before getting fully into the question that drives this essay, I want to distinguish the question I am interested in, i.e., what sort of fact is it for someone to inhabit one category or another?—what I will call the *what-makes* question—from other important metaphysical questions regarding habitable categories: which questions, whether questions, systematization questions, and second order questions. *Which* questions are questions about which are the habitable categories and why. For example, is being blond a habitable category or not, and why? *Whether* questions concern whether or not these categories are empty. For example, are there really Hispanics, or is it just an empty moniker? Systematization questions look into the structure of the systems of categories to which categories belong, like what categories belong to the same system of classification? For example, is Jewishness a racial characteristic? Are races and ethnicities the same sort of categories? How many genders are there?, etc. Finally, second order questions concern the epistemological and methodological issues that should be taken in consideration when trying to answer the questions identified above. For example, what criteria should we apply when evaluating different metaphysical proposals, etc. how descriptive/prescriptive should our answers be? (Alcoff, 2005) Are we looking for absolutely general, or should the answers be valid only in

constrained historical circumstances?, etc.

As important as these questions are, I want to focus my attention here on the perhaps more fundamental question of what it is for someone to inhabit one category or another. What sort of fact makes it the case that I am a man, or that I am not disabled? In the next sections of the article I will present three broad ways of answering such questions, pondering both their strengths and challenges, before advancing my own pluralist proposal.

II. Common Sense Accounts

In broad strokes, we can classify the main positions in the what-makes debate into three major camps: common-sense accounts, socio-historical accounts and performative accounts. I call the first camp “common sense accounts” because they endorse common sense answers to the what-makes questions (or something as close to them as possible). So, for example, consider the follow common sense accounts of the distinctions underlying different cases of discrimination and oppression: that the main differences between men and women are biological, that poverty just is the scarcity of material resources (Cole, 2019; Kingston, 2000), that belonging to a given generation is just sharing the common experiences resulting from being of more or less the same age at the same time in the same place (Schuman & Scott, 1989; Williams & Page, 2011), that being Mestizo is just to have mixed Spanish and Indian ancestry (Chance, 1979), that being of a certain race is just to have some biological (cladistic) profile (Andreasen, 1998; Spencer, 2014), that being ignorant is lacking much important knowledge, etc. Some social categories, however, lack a straightforward common sense definition. A common sense account of the category of *naco*, a largely socio-economic label used in Mexico, for example, has proven to be quite elusive (Báez-Jorge, 2002; Bürki, 2014).

Despite the fact that “common sense has no absolute authority in philosophy” (Lewis, 1986: 134), respecting common sense is still

usually accepted as an epistemic virtue in ontology (Daly & Liggins, 2010). As Anil Gupta has quipped, “any theory that would wage war against common sense had better come loaded with some powerful ammunition” (Gupta, 2006: 178), as they face the challenge of having to explain why, while mistaken, common sense theories are widely accepted. Yet, common sense ontological theses still need to be developed into full theories, and this can be done in different ways. A biological account of parenthood, for example, can be as crude or as sophisticated as the biological theory in which it is embedded. Thus, it is important not to fall prey to strawman fallacies and think that common sense conceptions are nothing but naive pre-theoretical intuitions that need to be overcome by rigorous and politically-informed theorization and action.

Regarding the subjectivizing function of habitable categories, common sense accounts have the relative advantage of making recognition easier. It is easier to be recognized as, say, *gyuru* or a Muslim if what we mean by “*gyuru*” or “Muslim” is widely shared by those around us. However, this relative advantage has the cost of privileging a third-person perspective on most habitable categories, insofar as our common sense conceptions of them are usually shaped by people who do not actually inhabit them. After all, for almost any habitable category there will usually be fewer people inhabiting it than people who do not, and in the case of most discriminated against categories, those who do not will usually have more power to shape common sense than those who do. This is especially pernicious in cases where common sense accounts are “confining or demeaning or contemptible” to those who inhabit them (Taylor, 1994: 25).

For similar reasons, common sense theories are also favoured for their helpfulness in pushing eliminativist ontological agendas. Eliminativists, i.e., those who take discriminatory categories to be empty, usually (but not necessarily) endorse common sense accounts, and use them as arguments for their eliminativist arguments. For example, it has been argued that race is an empty

category because our common sense conceptions of what a race is—i.e., substantial phenotypic differences between social groups of common ancestors—do not correspond to anything in biological reality (Mallon, 2006). Similarly, some philosophers have argued recently that since it is constitutive of our common sense understanding of some social categories that people who belong to them are somehow inferior, and that this is patently false, nothing can fit inside them (I will not mention examples, because these categories are commonly expressed by the use of slurs and other derogatory terms, but see the work of philosophers of race like Appiah, 1996 or Zack, 2002).¹ In such cases, common sense classification involves a false presupposition that renders the category empty.

Yet, even though they have the obvious descriptive advantage of respecting common sense, few philosophers endorse common sense accounts nowadays, (even though this varies largely depending on the category), for a variety of reasons. For starters, they usually embrace essentialism. There is ample empirical evidence that, from a very young age, people adopt a default form of essentialism, that is, “the common belief that natural and social categories are underlain by hidden, causally powerful essences” (Cimpian & Salomon, 2014). That is why many common sense accounts of gender, race, sexual orientation, etc. identify these categories with essential or internal traits shared by all those that inhabit them. The resulting essentialist common sense accounts face the challenge of having to account for the historical development and heavily contingent nature of our common sense beliefs. Given the enormous variation in what it means to be, say, a child (Heywood, 2018), or a lesbian (Halperin, 2002), or disabled (Tremain, 2010), etc. in

¹ I find it interesting that this relation between eliminativism and common sense happens in other areas of metaphysics, for example, in the philosophy of mathematics, where nominalists (that is, eliminativists regarding mathematical entities) adopt a common sense view of the ontological nature of mathematical objects—i.e., that they are abstract entities—and then use this common sense account as a premise for the conclusion that there are no mathematical objects.

different historical and socio-cultural contexts, whoever wants to defend a current common sense conception as having finally captured the metaphysical underpinnings of such categories faces an enormous explanatory challenge. Given how much it has changed through history, how could we be justified in believing that we have finally got what it is to be a child, or to be disabled, for example?

From a political perspective, common sense accounts tend to be criticised for have limited ameliorative political value insofar as they do not address (or, even worse, contribute to perpetuating) the oppressive and discriminatory nature of the distinctions they are supposed to characterise. Common sense might tell us that racial differences are biological, for example, yet a biological characterisation of racial differences would fail to account for the power asymmetries between those that inhabit them (Ludwig, 2020; Mallon, 2006). Common sense might tell us that in order to be Hispanic, one has to be of Spaniard descent, yet identifying Hispanics that way might hide “the fact that [they] suffer because they are Indian descended, not because they might have a distant European ancestor” (Hayes-Bautista, 1980). Similarly, following common sense in characterising poverty as scarcity would suggest that the problem is economical, instead of political—one of resource distribution, instead of one of exclusion and discrimination, etc.

Furthermore, common sense accounts tend to present themselves as ideologically neutral when, in fact, they heavily reflect the prevailing ideology of those who hold them. In other words, what is, or is not, common sense depends heavily on the context and, in particular, to who holds power in such a context. Thus, giving ontological weight to so-called “common sense” ends up reifying the *Weltanschauung* of a privileged elite:

This is an important methodological issue. We philosophers (especially analytic ones) rely quite a lot on folk intuitions and on what we take to be common-sense. But once we get into a politically charged discussion, we must recognise that these folk intuitions vary across cultures.

Now what? Well, to settle on mainstream intuitions and common-sense is to make a political decision to further marginalize what Kristie Dotson called “diverse practitioners” in the field. (Bettcher, 2018)

III. Socio-Historical Accounts

Efforts towards addressing these shortcomings of common sense theories have given rise to more sophisticated theories of habitable categories that stress their social, historical and ethnic aspects. According to these socio-historical accounts, what enlists someone in a given category are social, historic and cultural traits, facts and/or relations she has in common with others like her, or which bind her to them. These traits, facts and relations are not just there, impassive and inert, but are instead imposed through disciplinary practices, and even through the application of coercive force. Thus, feminists who consider the sex/gender distinction central to understanding womanhood typically adopt a socio-historical stance towards gender in this sense (Lecuona, 2018; Oakley, 1972). Similar stances lay behind ontological theses like identifying Mexican nationality with certain cultural practices, habits, signifiers, values, etc. shared by many, but not all, and certainly not only the people born or living in Mexico (Hobsbawn, 1990). Social constructivist theories are another paradigmatic example of socio-historical accounts; for example, considering that what makes someone short, dirty or ignorant are standards of height, hygiene or knowledge that are not objective (like an average, for example) but depend on many social factors that deeply interweave them with other social categories, like class, race and gender (Knorr Cetina, 1993; Mallon, 2007); thus how clean need a white American woman ought to be in order to be considered clean is substantially different from how clean an African American man must be in order to fit the same category (Berthold, 2010). Philosophers who think that what makes a person an African American is a shared history or common experiences (Mallon, 2006:

535; Piper, 1992) are also embracing a socio-historical stance towards these categories.

The social facts, relations and structures that are relevant to a category usually include those resulting from the very way we use it (Ásta, 2018). For example, the fact that we use some categories to discriminate against and marginalize certain kinds of people is part of what makes those categories the sort of categories they are (I will not give examples to avoid the risk of legitimating such uses). The fact that we use certain external clues to apply our categories even if we know that such clues can mislead us is also a part of what makes those categories what they are (Knobe, Prasada, & Newman, 2013). This means that, for example, even if wearing some particular clothes or others does not make someone a lesbian, the social fact that young lesbians in Canada use certain brands of sportswear to signal their lesbianism is part of what it is for them to be lesbians (Anonymous, 2011; Clarke & Turner, 2007). The fact that we have institutionalised practices of conferral and classification, like census or civil registries, is part of the content of categories like race or marital status (Ásta, 2018). In general, more often than not, social practices of classification contribute as much as they respond to the content of those very classifications. This circularity is not vicious, because our practices of categorisation are neither stable nor infallible, and thus still need to cohere with the rest of the relevant social and material facts pertinent to the given category. The aforementioned practice of using certain brands of sportswear to signal one's lesbianism, for example, has ontological significance in part because of how well it coheres with other aspects of lesbian identity. An officer of the civil registry has the power to confer marital status only in so far as this power coheres with other institutional, social and material facts and practices linked to marriage.

It is worth remarking that not all socio-historical accounts postulate common traits shared by all those that inhabit a category and only them (but some do, like Haslanger, 2000). Some of them,

like Parsons (1973) for “human” or Stoljar (1995) for “woman,” conceive of them as family resemblance cluster concepts, where membership is grounded on “various resemblances between the members” of the category (Wittgenstein, 1953: 67), so that “there is no single feature in common to all of them, though there are many common features overlapping” (Wittgenstein, 1958: 20). Others conceive of inhabitable categories as social structures, i.e., complex systems of social relations, so that to inhabit a category is but to occupy a location or play a role in it (Wright, 2000). Categories so understood bind those that inhabit them, not from an inner common nature, but from the outside—so to speak—so that people of radically different kinds, with different traits, goals, etc. can still partake in the same structure by fulfilling different roles within it. As Iris Marion Young has argued, “the search for . . . common characteristics . . . leads to normalizations and exclusion” (Young, 1994: 713), and thus it is better to conceive of habitable categories as “material social facts that each individual must relate to and deal with” (Young, 1994: 730-731). In a similar fashion, Marilyn Frye (1996) proposes that we conceive of (at least some) habitable categories as joint onto-political ventures, where persons of different kinds, with different traits, goals, etc. can collaborate in a collective project. Consequently, she argues, we should stop looking for what all women have (or lack) that makes them women, for example, and instead work on building together a positive category for women of all sorts to inhabit.

As I had mentioned, since common sense theories tend to favor essentialist accounts of habitable categories, socio-historical accounts can better account for the heterogeneous, contingent and dynamic nature of social categories, how practically every category we have devised to classify our fellow human beings has historically evolved and been contested, adapted to different circumstances and how, even at the same historical moment, different communities have understood and applied the same category with different

criteria, criteria that many times is not even true about those it is applied to.

Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to think that socio-historical accounts completely abandon common sense. For example, many socio-historical accounts of class do not ignore the importance of economics in defining class differences, yet they do not think that that is all there is to them. Instead, they usually conceive of class as a social structure grounded in “both the material substance of social life (wealth, education, work) and the individual’s construal of his or her class rank” (Kraus et al., 2012: 546). In this way, they incorporate the insights of common sense into a more sophisticated analysis. In a similar fashion, socio-historical accounts of parenthood do not just disregard matters of biological reproduction, but instead are conscious that these biological matters are also social, historical, economical and culturally constructed (Kenny & Müller, 2018). In other words, they do not just take the common sense biological notion of parenthood, for example, and then throw some history, sociology, economics and anthropology on top. Instead, they aim to show how one cannot properly understand the biological dimension of parenthood independently from its social, historical, cultural and economical dimensions (and vice versa).

Unfortunately, many social, cultural, economic and historical processes and mechanisms tend to be too complex to play the theoretical and political roles that we want for our habitable categories (Kim, 2020). For instance, attempts to define what it is for someone to belong to a certain habitable category, like a nationality or a race, by appealing to historical facts fail because they just move the demarcation question up a higher level. This is so, because they still need to determine what makes certain historical facts relevant and not others. Trying to define the Mexican identity by appealing to a historical process of cultural syncretism or *mestizaje*, for example, gives rise to the problem of trying to define what historical facts, process and effects are part of this so-called

mestizaje and which are not; yet this problem is not actually simpler than the original one, and furthermore, it is not clear that we can solve it without appealing to some previous notion of Mexican identity. Thus, the proposed account fails to capture our national identity. Historical facts are just not sharp enough to serve as the kind of foundations that historicists accounts want for their social categories.

Other socio-historical accounts face similar shortcomings: whatever mechanisms they appeal to end up being much messier than expected (Antony, 2012). As a result, their attempts at providing an ontology well suited to the goals of redistributive justice face a series of problems that challenge their political and theoretical soundness (probably the best known of which is commonly known as the “nonidentity problem” [Roberts, 2019]). For example, as aforementioned, many historico-social accounts aim to make constitutive of a habitable category at least some social injustices the members of such category have endured in such a way as to make them worthy of the benefits of restorative redistribution of resources (Hayes-Bautista, 1980). For example, it has been argued that part of what makes someone Native-American is the historical fact that they have and still endure the negative effects of European colonialism in America, and that this is part of what makes some forms of affirmative action in their benefit just. However, filling the blanks of exactly how to link Native identity to colonization has not been easy, precisely because the current life and situations of American natives are so embedded in the overall effects of colonialism. We want to recognise that practically every aspect of current native American identity has been shaped by colonialism, and we want to say that the overall effect of colonialism on current native Americans has been harmful, yet we do not want to reach the seemingly unavoidable conclusions that being a native American or being born one is some kind of harm. Finding the right balance has proved to be quite difficult.

Some defenders of socio-historical accounts have embraced this complexity and, while recognising the possible theoretical advantages of univocal definitions of certain habitable categories, they reject the thesis that redistributive justice requires consistent and well-defined habitable categories. Instead, they have theorized that it is precisely because of their complex multiplicity that habitable categories contain the seed of their own emancipatory potential. For this sort of accounts, complexity, multiplicity, and even inconsistency are not liabilities, but assets of habitable categories (Solnit, 2020). María Lugones (2003), for example, has argued that “the logic of purity is conceptually linked to a desire for control” (Bailey, 2007: 83) and that well-defined categories belong within a logic of domination, so that in order to be truly liberating, we need to embrace equivocal categories. When resisting hegemonic systems of oppressions, the argument goes, it helps to inhabit slippery categories. Nazan Üstündağ (2019), for example, has shown how Kurdish mothers of the disappeared in Turkey have exploited the tensions in the category of motherhood in their socio-historical context to acquire political agency. According to Üstündağ, “the mother [is] a limit figure who, on the one hand, because she dwells in the private of the everyday, ‘knows’ truths unassimilable by law and, on the other, . . . when she transgresses her assigned space and expresses such truths to larger publics, creates an exception that cannot be easily ignored” (2019: 120). By identifying as mothers, they gained political access to the power of making demands of hegemonic power by assuming stereotypical ritualized domestic duties (associated with mourning) that entail contesting public political rights (associated to justice.) It is as if they were telling the hegemonic patriarchal state: “I cannot fulfil the role you have assigned me (as grieving mother) if you do not recognise the death of my children (and thus insert their death into the public discourse from which you have excluded them).” As there seem to be both political and theoretical advantages to both well defined and elusive accounts of habitable categories, the debate continues.

Since socio-historical accounts place social categories outside the classified subject, they are alienating to the subjects that inhabit them. This alienation might be considered a precondition for emancipation and genuine agency (Hyppolite, 1969); however, it has also been variously interpreted as not leaving enough room for genuine agency.² As Philippe Bourgois has written, “a focus on structures often obscures the fact that humans are active agents of their own history, rather than passive victims” (Bourgois, 1995: 17). According to these criticisms, by defining social kinds by the social conditions under which the persons who belong to them live, including those that oppress them, it makes such oppression constitutive of the kind, and as such, they leave not enough room for liberation (without abandoning the category itself) (Mikkola, 2011, 2016).

However, this criticism is grounded on a questionable division between individuals and society, as if individuals did not actively shape their social and material conditions. In actuality, most socio-historical accounts emphasize this constructive dimension of habitable categories. Charles Mills, for example, recognises that oppressive systems evolve over time, in part precisely because of marginalized groups’ political struggles against them (Mills, 1997: 101). María Lugones (2003) similarly stresses that oppressive systems are shaped by acts of resistance at least as much as by reinforcing ones. Thus, the criticism that socio-historical accounts are incompatible with emancipatory human agency is clearly unfounded.

Finally and unsurprisingly, socio-historical accounts have also been criticized for overemphasizing the social, historical and cultural aspects of habitable categories. From one direction, defenders of common sense theories argue that criticisms against them are

² See Thompson (1966) and Casey (1995) make this argument for class; Born & Hesmondhalgh (2000) and Jardina (2019) for ethnicity; Abrams (1995) and the works there discussed for gender; Guerrero McManus (2018) for humankind; Carbonell (2019) for a more general argument, etc.

question-begging in so far as they assume, instead of show, that the socio-political aspects in question lie within the ontological category itself, instead of belonging to the more complex material and social network in which it is situated. From a different direction, what I will call performance accounts have also argued that, even though socio-historical accounts are superior to essentialist accounts that postulate unchangeable and innate inner natures, they still stack the deck against individuals. Thus, even though it is true that many socio-historic accounts recognise the important role of individual action in constructing the material and social circumstances that ultimately bind individuals to the categories they inhabit, they still conceive of these social structures as ontologically fundamental and thus as mediating between individual action and category inhabitation. In socio-historical accounts, we do not inhabit our categories “from the inside”—to borrow a phrase from Kymlicka (1988: 184)—but from the outside, i.e., not primarily because of the features of our true inner selves, but from our external (even if internalized) circumstances, so that the only way we can change those categories is by changing our external circumstances—and only indirectly by changing ourselves. This is a complex issue indeed, and in order to properly assess it, it is necessary to understand what these performative accounts propose first, and only then evaluate whether they actually propose a better alternative.

IV. Performative Accounts

The aforementioned concern regarding social accounts has given rise to a new set of theories that I will call “performative accounts.” According to performative accounts, to inhabit a category is to perform a kind of constrained act or similar, like a public avowal or a personal project (Bettcher, 2009; Butler, 1990). In the words of Appiah (2018), habitable categories are “an activity, not a thing . . . not a fate, but a project.”

Performative accounts incorporate the insights from both socio-ethnic and common-sense accounts as constraints to the act, while also placing the agent at the center of her inhabiting one category or other (Baumeister & Muraven, 1996). Thus, they hold categories like class, gender, disability, nationality, etc., not so much as things that one is, but more fundamentally, as things one does. To be a Mexican, for example, is to act in a certain way in given occasions—like partying the night of September the 15th while listening to ranchera music from mid-20th Century and eating certain foods (like tacos and pozole) and not other (like hamburgers)—constrained by the social and material factors affecting her in her context—such as those that would make it hard for her to find good tacos in downtown Reykjavik, but would make it hard to avoid if she lived in downtown Coyoacán in Mexico City. In this sense, whatever actions constitute one’s inhabiting one category of another are always socially constrained. “Persons may not declare themselves teapots and thereby make it so,” as Bettcher rightly states (Bettcher, 2018: 98). The circumstances must be propitious, the action must adequately fit the circumstances and the agent must acknowledge proper ethical responsibility for her action (Bettcher, 2018: 101; Jenkins, 2018).

This performative aspect of inhabiting a category is very well illustrated by a key scene in Xaime Hernandez’s *Wig Wam Bam* (1994) episode of his long-lasting Chicano series of graphic novels. After a couple of hipsters make racist commentaries to her at a party on the East Coast of the USA, one of the series’ main characters, Margarita Luisa Chascarillo, relates the abuse she suffered to her friend and lover Esperanza Leticia Glass, telling her she is more than happy to leave town soon, which means going back to their Chicano neighborhood in southern California. Esperanza tries to make little of the event and to have Margarita drop the subject raising the point that “It’s the same shit all over . . .” Margarita is angered by the lack of solidarity shown by Esperanza, who has Colombian ancestors but, unlike her, can pass for white American. “Ok, then don’t go

back to California!—she screams at her friend—Shit, just 'cause you can turn off your 'ethnic' half whenever it's goddamn convenient!”

Now, I was born in Mexico, as were my parents. My skin is brown, my hair is thick and black and my mother tongue is Spanish. I have lived most of my life in Mexico City and currently live in the typical Mexican neighbourhood of Coyoacán, just a couple of blocks from historical monuments of early Colonial history. For me, it is very easy and natural to be—that is, to behave—Mexican, so much that it might seem more appropriate to say that I did not have to do much to be Mexican and that I was just born this way, i.e., that being born in the place where I was born, into the family and culture I was born made me Mexican. This is just what the socio-ethnic accounts hold. However, not everyone shares the same circumstances, as the aforementioned scene in Hernandez's novel illustrates very well. For Esperanza, her situation allows her to become white American or Colombian depending on what she does. She has reached a point where she has to make the decision as to whether to act in one way or another. This decision is both enabled and constrained by her circumstances—her skin color, her ancestry, her relation to California and to Margarita—but it is still hers to make. She has what Bettcher has called an “ethical first person authority” over her own ontological performance. Whatever way she acts will have not only an ontological effect, but also an ethical one. The way Xavier Hernandez sets the scene, it is clear that the ethical decision is to resist her whiteness and live up to her Colombianess.³ Only then can she take proper responsibility for her ontological performance. As a matter of fact, I would contend that one of the most attractive

³ This does not mean that all such choices have always such a clear ethical profile. Consider the case of Nicole Richie, who was adopted when she was three. Her African American parents, the successful singer and songwriter Lionel Richie and his then-wife Brenda Harvey, knew Nicole's biological parents, who were Mexican American. She went to live with and be cared for by the Richies in early childhood and was legally adopted at nine. Growing up in the spotlight, she was pressured into testifying to her ethnic identity and she could have chosen to identify as Mexican American or African American without much ethical fault.

aspects of performative accounts is how they bind the political, the ethical and the metaphysical.

For Performative accounts, if we look back at a case like mine, and compare it with an interstitial case like Esperanza's, we can see that action also plays a central, even if not salient, role in my being Mexican: that being born in Mexico, being brown, etc. are not what makes me Mexican, but only the material circumstances that enable and constrain my actions, and that it is ultimately these actions that ground my Mexican identity. Considering cases like these is very helpful in this respect, in so far as it allows us to disentangle the action from the circumstances that frame it (Jardina, 2019; Vargas, 2020). As a matter of fact, the experiences and reflections of immigrants and, in general, peoples who identify with categories that do not sit comfortable in their material circumstances have been fertile sources of performative theories of this sort.

Performative theories have been criticized for being either overtly individualistic or not genuine alternatives to socio-historical theories, and for drawing the boundaries between categories in the wrong place (where "wrong" here means both "inaccurate" and "unjust") by overestimating the importance of individual action and choice. Let's look at those criticisms in more detail.

First of all, performance accounts seem to fit better within a very individualistic view of politics, the kind of atomistic politics that is concerned mainly with "securing the conditions for individuals to exercise their powers of autonomous choice" (Bell, 2020), and thus is at tension with an alternative view of politics where "we also need to sustain and promote the social attachments crucial to our sense of well-being and respect, many of which have been involuntarily picked up during the course of our upbringing" (2020). As important as it is to have the chance to become who we choose to become, it is also important to recognise that, on the one hand, we cannot be expected to choose everything we are and, on the other, some of the things we might end up being not by choice might still be as fundamental to who we are as those that we choose.

In other words, because we are not (and we must not be) just what we choose to be, our inhabitable categories cannot be grounded on personal choice (or at least not all of them, and not for everyone who inhabits them).

A further consequence of the individualistic stance of performance theories is that they can easily slip into dangerous relativism. Giving subjects ultimate authority over their self-identity might allow those who would otherwise be identified as members of privileged groups to identify as members of historically disenfranchised groups, giving them unfair access to resources aimed to restore historical injustices. In this way, unscrupulous members of privileged groups might abuse restorative measures to access resources and spaces reserved for members of discriminated groups (Hayes-Bautista, 1980). American readers might be familiar with the controversial case of Rachel Dolezal (Krishnamurthy, 2015), yet the phenomenon in question is more widespread. In recent years, for example, groups of otherwise white, French descendant settlers in Quebec, through suspect genealogical practices, have demanded an “Indigenous” identity that has allowed them to dispossess genuine indigenous people from their hunting and fishing territories (Leroux, 2019).

However, as I had already mentioned, performance accounts like Bettcher (2009) and Jenkins (2018) contain an ethical clause, and insist on responsibility as a requisite condition for an avowal or action to have the desired ontological effect. In other words, according to Bettcher, it is not enough to just assert one’s willingness to inhabit a category, one must also “stake her claim” by taking full responsibility for the avowed desire (Bettcher, 2009: 101). This condition aims precisely to exclude this sort of abuse. Thus, the criticism misses its mark.

However, even after taking this ethical clause into consideration, it is still worth mentioning that making it too easy for anyone to inhabit a category or another, regardless of their material, cultural, social or historical circumstances, runs the risk of building

categories that bring together people which, from the perspective both from the common sense and socio-historical perspective, are too diverse to serve in efforts to diversify sites of power like governing bodies or boardrooms. People who perform in accordance to their social and material conditions and people who do not might end up having such different bodies, social histories, structural power, access to resources, etc. that one could not properly represent the experiences and concerns of the other. Thus, there is no political use in bringing them together into a single category.

Within performative accounts, there is ample debate on whether it is the act itself that constitutes our inhabiting the category or something deeper that manifests itself in such act, either something that we feel or perceive within ourselves (and thus, something for which we have privileged first person access) or the feeling itself. How the debate turns has important consequences to how performative accounts can avoid the sort of relativism just sketched (Ozturk, 2017). On the one hand, if it is not the act itself, but something else within each person that makes them inhabit the categories they do, then the relevant performances can be appropriate only if they correctly manifest what the person actually is. This means that people's first-person authority over the categories they inhabit is purely epistemic and, therefore, fallible (Bettcher, 2009; Lawlor, 2003). On the other hand, if it is the act itself that is constitutive, then relativism can be avoided by recognising that ontological performances, just like any performative act, are subject to external normative conditions (Austin, 1962). Either way, despite their ontological significance, our actions are not unbound but constrained and, as such, they are very unlikely to have the undesirable relativist consequences that their critics impute them.

As I have already mentioned, most socio-historical accounts give the subject relative power over what makes her inhabit one category or another. Yet, this power is not as direct as it is in performative accounts. Nevertheless, this difference must not be

overstated. After all, performative accounts (mostly in response to the accusations of radical relativism just sketched) recognise that one cannot just will oneself into any habitable category. One must perform the right kind of actions in the right sort of circumstances. However, they have a hard time trying to specify what makes the circumstances be of the right kind without reiterating the central tenants of socio-historical accounts. Going back to Xavier Hernandez's example above, it is clear what aspects of Esperanza's context gave her decision its ontological significance: her skin color, her ancestry, her relation to California and its history, her personal relation to Margarita, etc. What makes these be the relevant aspects and not, say, her height or the time of the season (which, in turn, may be ontologically relevant for other ontological performances and other categories)? It is unclear how performance accounts could answer, without recognizing the ontological importance of, in this case, one's body, one's social and personal relations to others, one's place and its history, etc., that is, without incorporating the central insights of socio-historical accounts. Thus, performance accounts seem to become more of a variety, instead of a true alternative to socio-historical accounts.

Summarising, the main problem with performance accounts is that the notion of a constrained act of self-identification at their heart is still an ill-defined notion, unstable between two equally undesirable positions. On the one hand, if such a constrained act were just the mere act of freely asserting one's will of belonging to a certain social group, that would cheapen the social categories to the point of being too arbitrary for being of any use in the fight for social justice. Such an action would not be a constrained action. On the other hand, if we require the act to be socially recognised within the group as being the kind of act that constitutes the kind, then it seems that it is not the agent but the group who confers the relevant category, making it socially constructed (Ásta, 2018). In other words, it would not be the act, but its enabling and constraining social, historical, cultural and material circumstances that would

serve as ontological grounds for the inhabiting of the category. Thus, performative theories would not be an actual alternative to socio-historical theories, and would not have achieved the desired des-externalization of our social ontology. For performative theories to be a genuine alternative, there must be some third alternative, but it is not clear that there really is such a third way, as much as performative theorists have certainly made substantial efforts in building one.

From the opposite direction, performative theories can also be faulted for making it too hard for those who could and should benefit the most from being recognized as inhabiting a given marginalized category. By insisting on an active engagement with the category, performative theories seem to require from those who are already in a practically diminished status to make an extra effort to be recognized as such. According to this criticism, by belittling victimhood, performative theories have also belittled victims (Convery, 2011). Consider again, the previous contrast I raised between me and the fictional Esperanza Glass. According to a performative theory of Latinx identity, it is much easier to me to identify as a Latinx than her, and the ethical stakes are also higher for her than for me. It can be argued that, for a proposal that tries to ameliorate the marginalization of groups like migrant Latinxs in the USA, it is strange that it makes higher ethical and ontological demands from migrants than from non-migrants. From this perspective, race (or class or gender, etc.) consciousness seems more of a burden that one would like to be liberated from than a mechanism of empowerment (Brody, 1992).

V. Final Remarks

In this essay I have tackled the complex metaphysical question of what makes a person inhabit one category or another, i.e., what makes someone Latinx, poor, disabled, etc.? Common sense might tell us that different sorts of categories will require different sorts of

answers. And even though this may be true about the details, I hope to have shown that much might be achieved by adopting a more abstract perspective. I hope to have shown that approaching the question at such a general level as I have done here allows us to detect general threads that weave through a vast range of philosophical theories of social categories and to compare and contrast them by identifying their central achievements and challenges. I hope to have shown the value of adopting an abstract point of view in condensing a wide variety of complex debates into a few simple questions and issues. This not something that can be argued for, but only shown, and that is just what I presume to have done here.

Thus, what is the picture of habitable categories that emerges from the abstract roadmap I have just laid out? I take that one major conclusion to draw is that who we are cannot be easily reduced nor detached from what we choose to do, what our circumstances are and how others perceive us; and that performative, socio-historical and common sense approaches tend to privilege each one of these dimensions. Performative accounts stress our personal choices and actions; socio-historical accounts stress our location in a material, social and historical world not entirely of our personal creation, while common sense accounts seem better suited to account for how we are seen from the third person perspective of everyday people. Yet, as I have tried to stress throughout the text, their overlap is at least as large as their discrepancies: Performance theories recognise, incorporate but also problematize the insight of socio-historical accounts as much as socio-historical accounts do the same with the insights of common sense theories. This should not be surprising in so far as the threads that each sort of accounts privilege are deeply interwoven within each category. And we understand this complexity precisely by seeing them as distinct threads and theoretical responses to different questions.

From a performative perspective, for example, I am a Mexican because of many actions and choices I have made throughout my

life—including not just my everyday choices of what to eat, what language to speak, what festivities to celebrate, etc. but also more institutional choices related to my legal status as a Mexican citizen—even if many of those choices I have made by default. From a socio-historical perspective, in contrast, I am Mexican because of the complex system of material facts and social-relations that have constrained and given ontological significance to those very choices and acts. In the end, when I say I am Mexican, what most people will think, and what will ultimately determine their first expectations of me, will be the commonsensical belief that I am from Mexico. And notice that this expectation would still be attached to my being a Mexican even if I were not actually from Mexico. These expectations, although commonsensical, are still socially and historically conditioned and, therefore, do not present an insurmountable challenge to socio-historical accounts just as the existence of social and historical constraints to human action does not preclude the ontological significance of human choice and action asserted by performative accounts.

As long as we think of non-problematic examples like mine—i.e., someone who acts Mexican, looks Mexican, lives and was born in Mexico, etc.—the differences between the three approaches seem negligible: each one just seems to bring to the fore a particular aspect of a complex phenomenon. It is when we think of the clearly more complex interstitial cases like Hernandez's white Latina Esperanza Glass, or the Kurdish mothers mourning their sons, that the discrepancies acquire major significance. It is only then, when different perspectives deliver different answers, not only to our original question of what makes someone, say, white, or indigenous, or middle class, but also whether someone is middle class, indigenous, or white. It is because Latinas like Esperanza Glass, that it makes sense to ponder the relative ontological importance of self expression over social circumstance or appearance in determining whiteness, for example. Cases like these show that when addressing the question *who we are?*, the answer may be different if we take it

to be asking about how we act and think of ourselves (as performative accounts do), than asking about our socio-historical position, or about what categories we fit in from the external perspective of common sense. Once we realize that the answers can be different, we ought to wonder why we ever thought they had to be similar.

Once we take a step back from the details of these debates and see the general pattern that emerges, we can advance the debate in a way that may be easily missed from a ground level perspective, so to speak. Having identified the different aspects of the phenomenon that each camp privileges immediately suggest the possibility of a pluralist account that reconciles the three perspectives in a straightforward way. It suffices to remember that the general structure of pluralist strategies in philosophy is to try to dissolve paradoxes and impasses by arguing that each of the positions in dispute deals with different, yet related questions. That way, they can all be right about their own topic, and they can all shed light on different aspects of the same complex phenomenon. Thus, where we thought we were dealing with a single question, we were actually confusing different ones (Barceló, 2019). In the case at hand, we thought there was a single what-makes question behind every habitable category. Now we can see that there were three: the question of how one thinks and acts as inhabitant of a category, the question of how our socio-historical position binds us to (and separates us from) others, and the question of what categories we fit in from the external perspective of common sense. These aspects of our habitable categories all interact in complex ways, and that is why we had been confused into thinking they all responded to the same phenomenon. Yet, now that we can disentangle these threads, we can see the way out of the confusion. We can see the value of each perspective to shed light on one of the aspects of categories of this sort as well as its limitations when trying to make sense of them as a whole.⁴ We can see, for example, the value of socio-historical

⁴ Furthermore, this pluralism can also do justice to the presumption that transition,

approaches to make sense of how our habitable categories are linked to our social and material circumstances as well as their limitations when trying to account for what it is to inhabit a category from the first person perspective, specially when those social and material circumstances situate us at the border of those categories. In a similar fashion, common sense accounts can be very valuable when trying to make sense of how people categorize us from their third person perspective, but not when trying to account for the relation between these categories and our true inner selves, specially when our actions are at odds with what is expected from us from that third person perspective, etc. Hence, a complete account of habitable categories that reconciles these perspectives while recognizing that what we do, what happens to us and what is expected from us does not always result in a coherent and unified picture of who we are is indeed possible.

migration, *mestizaje* or even the very notion of a “middle class” are all constitutively linked both to the category one transits, passes or migrates from as much as the category one transits, passes or migrates to. Unfortunately, this is an idea I cannot fully develop here.

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「可居之類」形上學的開放性問題

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摘要

本文試圖對當前最新的社會性類別形上學爭議，描繪出一個整體的路徑圖。「可居之類」的形上學爭議所處理的是，何種事實決定了一個人屬於某個社會類別？譬如：怎樣的事實使得一個人是墨西哥人、是同志、或是富裕的？本文將這些爭議中不同的立場分為三大理論陣營，即：常識理論、社會歷史解釋理論，以及展演理論。文中描述了三者間的主要差異，更指出其各自面臨的關鍵困難與優勢。作者認為，在說明那些與「可居之類」融合得很好的人時，這三大理論陣營的差異其實微乎其微；反之，在解釋那些和「可居之類」無法完美融合的人時，三者間的差異卻有關鍵的影響。本文因此試著提出一個多元式的進路來調和這三大理論陣營，此分析也能更適切地處理如：*mestizaje* (拉美涵化)、變遷、跨界、遷移等間歇性現象。

關鍵詞：社會存有論、社會性類別、社會建構、認同、遷移