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Comments on Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*

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I. Introduction

Charlotte Witt's *The Metaphysics of Gender* is a beautiful little book, a model of clarity, eloquently written, theoretically sophisticated, and full of interesting thoughts and examples about the pervasiveness of gender in our lives. In this book Professor Witt seeks to show that there is a sense in which our genders are essential to our identities. That is a bold enough thesis, especially for a feminist, but her thesis turns out to be even bolder than that. She seeks to show that it is the *only* essential property for us, when we are understood as social individuals. This makes gender unique among the dimensions of oppression, such as race, sexuality, disability, or ethnicity, each of which is non-essential to our identity as

social individuals in her view. Furthermore, Professor Witt wants to argue that understanding gender as essential in this way will help us to fight women's oppression. Ultimately I do not fully accept her thesis of gender unessentialism, but she succeeds in giving us a very interesting and challenging way of viewing gender.

The book, I think, gets many things right. I am not a metaphysician, but Professor Witt's explanation of the different forms of essentialism is remarkably clear - clear enough so that I felt fairly confident that I was following the many distinctions about kind vs. individual essentialism, unification vs. identity unessentialism, ethical and metaphysical identity, and nominal vs. real essences. On my home turf of social philosophy, it seems to me that she provides a deep understanding of the pervasiveness of gender. The book also compellingly elucidates the tacitness of social norms, in a way that was reminiscent to me of Heidegger's concept of thrownness. Finally, it offers a theory that emphasizes the external, social origin of women's oppression. These philosophical nuggets make this a fascinating and rewarding read. However, my job is not only to praise the book, but to offer my critique, so let me now turn to that task.

In these comments I will only very briefly set out the thesis and its argument, in order to draw on the elements of the argument that I think need to be critically scrutinized. I then focus on four aspects to query: first, I offer reasons for skepticism about social individuals; second, I suggest that Professor Witt's account of persons as self-reflective implies a social self already, which makes social individuals ontologically redundant; third, I briefly investigate whether there are other candidates for the role of "mega social role"; and fourth, I question the engendering function as fundamental to our lives.

Here's my very brief overview of the argument of the book. First, Witt clarifies the notion of unification essentialism or uniessentialism as the principle of unity of an individual made up of parts. Next, she argues that gender is a (pair of) "social positions with bifurcated social norm(s) that cluster around the engendering function," (40) where the engendering function is the social realization of human reproduction. Engendering, she recognizes, is performed differently in different societies, and is not to be equated with any particular culture's way of reproducing; as Witt puts it, engendering is to reproduction as dining is to feeding. Gender is an ascriptive category, but no less universally applicable for being non-voluntary. And like dining, one's performance of her or his ascribed gender is evaluable under a set of social norms. The existence of individuals who do not fit neatly into one or the other gender (and who does?) does not deter her from positing the universality of these norms in the sense that we are all "evaluable under" them, such that even in flouting them, we prove their existence for us.

The next step of the argument is to distinguish among three levels of unity of human individuals. As biological organisms, human individuals are made up of human body parts that are unified causally as a member of the human species, a unity she calls the human organism. Persons are the next level of unity for (most) human individuals, and this unification is psychological for Witt: "Persons are individuals who have a first-person perspective (or self-consciousness) and are characterized by the related property of autonomy." (54) Not all human organisms are persons, and persons need not be human organisms; anything exhibiting a first-person perspective counts as a person regardless of how or whether it is embodied. At the third level we have social individuals, which are social position occupiers, meaning that they occupy and are recognized as occupying a social role in relation to a social world. Their social roles include voluntary and ascriptive roles, evaluable under social norms. These social norms entail relations to others external to the person. The

fact that most of our social roles (being a parent, a doctor, etc.) require embodiment means that social individuals are necessarily embodied. Being a person neither entails embodiment nor the existence of a social world of other beings with whom the person is in normatively governed social relations.

With these basic terms and premises, Witt offers her argument for the claim that we, as social individuals, are essentially unified by our genders, which she takes to mean that the engendering function is the social position that unites all others that we occupy, or in other words, that as we occupy any other social positions we do so as a woman or as a man. A social role that can so unify other social roles into a single social individual, or as Witt puts it, "weaves together and unifies a number of social roles into a single social individual," (77) she calls a "mega social role."

Now I need to pay close attention to the details of the climactic argument. Witt argues that gender is a mega social role, which means that gender provides synchronic and diachronic unity of a social individual. First, it is diachronic because it lasts through a lifetime (typically, except for transgendered individuals) unlike such social roles as "class clown". Second it is synchronic because it "inflect[s] or define[s] a broad range of other social roles." (87) Here Witt argues that gender systematically affects how social norms governing other social positions are applied to individuals. So, doctors do not exist in a gender neutral sense; they are doctors as women or doctors as men, professors are professors as either women or as men, and so forth. This is of course contextually, socially contingent, and in some societies the division of labor by gender has been so strict as to make the claim that gender is a mega social role uncontroversial. But Witt claims that this is nonetheless true today in that there are no social roles unaffected by gender, and, what is more, no social roles take priority over gender. Finally, Witt argues that gender is the unique mega social role, that no

other social role, such as race, is as pervasive. Although this is a contingent fact about our social world, it is universal, and this is “a consequence of [gendered social roles’] definitional relationship to a necessary social function,” (100) i.e., reproduction.

I now move to my four points of criticism.

II. Skepticism about social individuals

Witt’s thesis depends on the claim that there are social individuals, ontologically unified beings that are different from persons. She argues that we are occupants of social roles, and there must be a unifying relation for the social roles that any particular human organism or person occupies. Persons cannot occupy social roles, since they are defined as beings capable of self-reflection or self-consciousness; a property that Witt claims is entirely internal to the self. Thus, self-reflective beings only contingently occupy social positions. I want to suggest that we do not need a unifying relation for our social roles, and that persons can occupy the roles instead. An additional reason for needing social individuals according to Witt is that they are the only thing of which it can be asked whether gender is essential. She thinks that feminists need social individuals to make that question coherent.

First, why do we need a social relation to unify our social positions? Witt says it is because we experience normative conflict when we find ourselves evaluable under norms for the different social positions we occupy. One example she gives is that she asks herself “what should I wear?” on the first day of classes, responding to the norm for women of being concerned about appearance, though conflicting with the norm for philosophers of not being concerned about appearance. The fact that she feels and we recognize such a conflict means that there must be one thing that is evaluable under both norms. Furthermore, the fact that we feel that we need to prioritize or simultaneously respond to the norms of

the social positions we occupy shows that there must be one being that is evaluable under both norms. I agree.

However, I find it difficult to see how one of the social roles itself can be the unifying relation. Witt argues that the type of unity we need here is normative unity, and this means it must be a social role that organizes the prioritization of all of the social roles that one individual occupies. This seems to me to be contradicted by the example of the woman professor who is evaluable under both the norms of caring about and not caring about appearance. In Witt’s case it is the woman norm that rules. In my case it is the professor norm that rules: my question on the first day of class is always “what (the hell!) am I going to say?” It’s not that I am flouting the social norm that she is responding to; I am simply putting it on hold for the more urgent one, as I see it. I think we put social norms on hold all the time, whenever we are not in the right context to be evaluable under that norm. For example, as I speak I am putting on hold social norms about eating. It’s not that I am following the social norm of not eating while giving a formal talk; I am putting it on hold because it just does not apply since I am not hungry or faced with food or an invited guest at a meal, or in any other situation where it would seem to apply.¹¹ If I am right about the question of whether the social norm for worrying about appearance is put on hold when I am considering the more urgent question of what to say on

¹¹ After the session discussion, I realized that the locution “put on hold” was ill-chosen because it suggests a voluntariness that I did not mean to imply. The norms that apply to a situation are not chosen intentionally or consciously by the agent. But not all norms that might apply in any given instance do occur to or become active for the agent and thus structure her behavior. We cannot attend to everything relevant in any given situation, after all. I should have used a locution that suggested that some norms are crowded out by other ones in given instances, but this occurs at a subconscious level and is to some extent dictated by the situation and what (subconsciously) occurs to or arises for the agent as something to attend to.

the first day of class, then that means that gender is not unifying my other social norms. But if there is one norm that rules them all, then that norm cannot be put on hold, it must be either flouted or followed or blended with any other norm that is activated for one. Now one might respond that what social norms apply is not up to the individual – I could simply be obtuse in thinking that others are not evaluating me under gendered norms. But surely many of us do not attend to the gender norm of appearance in the way I suggest at least some of the time. And that seems to me to be enough to be skeptical of the overarching priority of a single social role. I think it more plausible to suggest that there is one thing that occupies the different social positions and that thing is the principle of normative unity that accounts for the possibility of normative conflict. This brings me to the second point I want to make, which is about her conception of the person.

III. Persons as self-reflective requires a social world

I will argue that Witt's conception of the person is inadequate, and this is why persons on her conception cannot provide the principle of normative unity. In order to be self-reflective one has to be able to reflect. Reflection, though, is a normative practice that is enabled by language and other social norms, such as epistemic and practical reasoning norms. Perhaps very primitive reflection is largely emotional, and involves a string of feelings. But in order to be a meaningful string, or to provide a ground for self-consciousness, it must involve seeing that there are feelings of a being. This is the normative argument for the claim, but there is also empirical evidence for the priority of the social to the person. Neuroscientific research on the development of mirror neurons suggests that humans begin to have self-consciousness only after and possibly because they are able to mirror the reactions of

others.² It seems likely that reflection requires the internalization of a social gaze in order to apply norms to guide reflection. Self-reflection, I would argue, is an essentially socially enabled practice, both normatively and empirically.

Persons are characterized, on Witt's view, by the property of autonomy. On some understandings of autonomy, this is an internal, individualistic property. But most feminists (as well as many other theorists of autonomy) characterize autonomy in a relational way which (I argue) implies that it is a social property. On some, procedural versions of autonomy, it might be thought that autonomy can be conceived as an essentially internal property because autonomy then depends only on a procedure of self-reflection. But other views of even procedural autonomy point to it being an essentially social characteristic of persons. For example, Andrea Westlund holds that an agent is autonomous just in case she could engage in a dialogue to give reasons for her desires and intentions.³ Such an account is social in that what counts as giving reasons is socially determined and guided by a normative practice. On the most plausible, compelling views of autonomy, I would argue, it is a relational property requiring for its very existence the existence of a social world inhabited by other social beings.

Witt argues that persons cannot serve to unify the set of normative social positions that the individual occupies because persons are not social beings, but rather entirely internally constituted through their ability to self-reflect. Contrary to Witt's view, I argue that persons cannot exist entirely without society. I mean this normatively, as I have just argued, not only empirically or causally. If persons are

² See Wolfgang Prinz, *Open Minds: The Social Making of Agency and Intentionality*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 2012.

³ Andrea Westlund, "Rethinking Relational Autonomy," *Hypatia*, vol. 24, no. 4 (Fall, 2009).

essentially social beings, then the person can serve to unify the being that inhabits social positions.

IV. Other candidates for mega social roles

Now I want to bracket my first worry about whether any mega social role exists, and suggest that there would be other equally good candidates to gender for the exalted position. Consider ability/disability status. First, what counts as being able-bodied or disabled depends on one's social context in much the way that other ascriptive status positions do: one is classified by others, the classification differs in different societies at different times, and one is held to social norms appropriate for the ascriptive status. Individuals are expected to engage in or refrain from certain activities or perform them differently according to one's ability/disability, and one is evaluable under norms that are specific to that status. Such norms are unavoidable, and even if an individual ignores them they are evaluable under them by others. Thus, ability/disability status defines a set of social roles. Is it a plausible candidate for a mega social role? As with gender, which Witt argues empirically affects how individuals are perceived in all their other social roles, being able-bodied positively affects one's role as parent, professional, citizen, etc. It determines where and how one can get around in the world, and whether one will be taken seriously, pitied, treated paternalistically, and so forth. I would venture that it affects everything we do and how we are seen and classified by others at all times. As an able-bodied person I am able to take for granted my position and only rarely am conscious of my privilege. But it is there nonetheless, as can be seen if one considers how it is to be disabled in any particular way for the whole range of social roles one inhabits.

Unlike gender (with the exception of transgender) and race, ability/disability status may change over the course of an individual's life. However, one has an ability/disability status through time and tells one's narrative in light of the status

over time. I think that this is the reason that transgender does not cause a problem for Witt's theory. The transgendered individual has two genders over a lifetime, but gender (one or the other) is pervasive at all times for the individual. I cannot see a good reason for holding that the fact that the inflection changes is problematic; that the status is a pervasive source of normative evaluation through time seems sufficient.

Race seems to me to be an equally good candidate to gender as a mega social role. Witt argues that it is not for two main reasons. First, racial categorization is not a cultural universal as gender is. But according to social dominance theory, categorization by ethnic or quasi racial groups is universal: there is always an us vs. them which cuts across gender and between perceived origin or territory.⁴ Race is simply the way in which this categorization works in our society (and many others). But even if something like race or ethnicity is not a cultural universal, it is certainly highly salient for many societies of the world for a significant period of history to claim that it is now a mega social role. Witt's second main objection to race as a mega social role is that "race is not connected to any central and necessary social function by definition in the way that gender is." (99) But I submit that gender does not have a definitional connection to such a function, just a close connection, and that race has an equally close connection to the function of work. After all, many women do not bear or raise children, and many men do not beget children. Therefore, these connections cannot be necessary and sufficient ones for norms based on them to be universal or prior. Race in our culture is connected to work in that Blacks are seen as appropriate for doing physical work, while Whites are for mental labor. There is an undeniable stereotypical connection, which implies a social norm is active. To prime our intuition about gender as essential to us,

⁴ Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto, *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Witt poses the question: if you were a different gender, would that still be you? To pose an alternative question that might prime us for the essential connection to race: if Hillary Clinton had been elected President instead of Barack Obama, would that have been as earth shaking a development for the US? As a White woman I am tempted to say yes, even more so, but I recall that at the time of the election, many men and women of both races (Whites and Blacks) said that the racial barrier was a kind of final frontier. Now, given my earlier concerns about whether there is any mega social role at all, I do not think that this really suggests that race is a mega social role. But I do think that it suggests that race is as pervasive as gender in our social world.

V. Engendering function – is it central to our lives?

The last point I want to consider is whether the engendering function is as central to our lives as Witt maintains. First, a personal anecdote to frame this discussion: when I was between the ages of about 15-32, I only very rarely interacted with any child for more than a moment, perhaps to say “excuse me” as I edged around one in a crowd. My friends were not parents and we rarely discussed any aspect of reproduction. Nor did I notice any pregnant women, until I had a close friend who was pregnant when I was in my early thirties. Parenting, mothering, childrearing were just almost always invisible to me. I had lots to do and none of it involved bearing or rearing young humans; other more salient social norms pushed the ones attached to the engendering function to the periphery. Then my partner and I decided that we would have a child, and ever since that time I have seen pregnant women everywhere and interacted with children daily. Now that my children are nearly grown and I am post-menopausal, childbearing and rearing is receding in importance again in my life.

I want to say that the norms that govern childrearing and bearing were not significant for me in my late teens and

twenties and are receding in normative significance for me. Witt would contend that I am confused about what it means to be evaluable under a social norm as a result of occupying the ascriptive social role of gender. She argues that the engendering function that assigns to women the roles of bearing and rearing children and to men the role of begetting children is ubiquitous because that is what it is to be a woman or man; it is definitional. Even though I may not have noticed that gendered norms for the engendering function were being applied to me, they were. Thus these norms were significant for me even if I did not notice them. I disagree. I agree that there were gender norms and stereotypes being applied to me, but they did not have to do with, except in rare circumstances such as visits to the gynecologist, childbearing, much less childrearing. Witt allows that there may be exceptional individuals for whom the engendering function is insignificant, but she says they do not affect her claim that the engendering function is normatively prior, just as the existence of a house that does not serve the function of giving shelter does not undermine the claim that house parts are unified by the sheltering function of houses. She writes, “it could be that our engendering function has normative priority in relation to the other social roles in a given society even if there are individuals in that society whose social roles are not organized by their engendering function. Hence there is no simple empirical argument in support of my claim (e.g. a poll or a survey) and no simple empirical refutation of it.” (91) But I worry that this means that the claim that the engendering function is central to our lives is not falsifiable. So here I would just like to register a question of whether it is falsifiable and if so, what would a world look like in which the engendering function is not so central as to define a mega social role?

VI. Conclusion

My disagreements with Witt’s view center around the claim that there are social individuals that are ontologically distinct

from non-social persons. I prefer to see persons as essentially social, making social individuals ontologically redundant entities. However, I also think that one's ontology should follow from the needs for explanation, which are in part pragmatic, but which must also answer to empirical evidence. If it were necessary to posit social individuals in order to see gender as pervasive and oppressive, then I would be more tempted by Witt's ontology. She claims in the last chapter that a person-centered ontology such as the one I favor focuses inward to find the cause of oppression. But I disagree that it cannot see the causes of oppression as external to the self. Elsewhere I have posited an alternative theory of oppression of persons by means of their social group status.⁵ My view of social groups is that groups are sets of constraints faced by agents through ascriptive and voluntary categorizations by self and others. Thus persons, who are at root essentially social, are evaluable by the norms that apply to them by virtue of their social group membership. Witt's theory of social individuals is a kind of inverse function of my theory of social groups, and both are externalist theories of human motivations to act.

On pragmatic, feminist grounds, Witt's ontology is equally good to mine for explaining how the cause of oppression lies in the social norms that we are evaluable by according to our social roles which we cannot make or control. But I think that her view is not as good at seeing how we as individuals can free ourselves of at least some oppressive normative expectations some of the time. Social individuals are always norm takers, it seems to me, never norm makers.

The Metaphysics of Gender focuses us on the fact that gender oppression is omnipresent, and longstanding. Gender, the normative evaluation of persons according to their ascribed engendering function, inflects all of our social roles. I

conclude then with two questions for Professor Witt: Is gender by definition oppressive? And would any possible mega social role be oppressive? For if the answer to the latter is yes, then on her view, oppression will always be with us.

⁵ Ann E. Cudd, *Analyzing Oppression*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.