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How Essential is Gender Essentialism? Comments on Charlotte Witt's *The Metaphysics of Gender*

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Introduction

In her recent book *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Charlotte Witt argues for a particular sort of gender essentialism – one that she terms ‘gender uniessentialism’. Her starting point is the following question: would you be the same individual if you were gendered differently? According to Witt, most ordinary social agents take the answer to this question to be an obvious ‘No!’ and they have no difficulty providing the answer. By contrast, most academics working on philosophical issues to do with gender and feminism find the answer neither obvious nor easy. What generates such divergent views and why are

ordinary agents so secure in their gender ascriptions? In her book, Witt aims to articulate and make good ordinary social agents’ gender essentialist intuitions. In short, she argues that gender is uniessential to them *qua* social individuals.

My aim in this paper is not to question Witt’s explanation of the everyday intuition that were I gendered differently I would be a different individual. I find her explanation that appeals to gender uniessentialism to be eloquent, interesting and largely persuasive. Instead, I want to take issue with Witt’s *motivation* for her project of providing an articulation for the everyday gender essentialist intuitions. Part of the motivation comes from the apparent divergence between ordinary agents’ and academic feminists’ intuitions about gender essentialism. Witt is motivated by “a desire for clarity and understanding of what essentialist claims about gender might mean, [and] a commitment to honor and understand our ordinary day-to-day intuitions about gender” (xii).¹ But she aims to do more: she hopes to “contribute to ways of thinking [that are] useful to feminism” (xii). This will be achieved by providing a coherent statement of the claim of gender essentialism – by providing a statement of the claim that could be true or false (66). And, Witt argues, her gender uniessentialism provides such a coherent statement. My present task is to question the *importance* of being able to provide such a coherent statement of the claim of gender essentialism. More specifically: how does such a statement (as Witt puts it) contribute to ways of thinking that are useful to feminism? Apart from providing an elucidation of our everyday gender essentialist intuitions, what does feminism gain from Witt’s gender uniessentialism? My contention is that uniessentialism is not particularly important for normative feminist ethics and politics. This is not because of Witt’s formulation of it. Rather, I disagree with Witt’s claim that “the centrality of the essentialism/ anti-essentialism

¹ All references are to Witt’s *The Metaphysics of Gender* (OUP, 2011), unless otherwise stated.

debate within feminist theory is indisputable, and its significance for a wide range of issues in feminist theory is beyond doubt" (68). Let me clarify: feminist theorists have certainly extensively debated the issue of gender essentialism and, in this *descriptive* sense, it is correct to say that it is a central feminist issue. But 'ought' does not follow from 'is'. And whether gender essentialism *ought to be* a central feminist issue is far from obvious to me. Witt does not clearly distinguish the descriptive and normative centrality of gender essentialism, although I think that she endorses both senses of 'centrality'. This is where our views come apart: as I see it, gender essentialism is not a central issue, normatively speaking, and (*contra* Witt) nothing politically hangs on our ability to provide a coherent account of it. My contention is that Witt does not sufficiently justify the normative centrality of gender uniessentialism. And this undermines the motivation for her project.

Witt's Gender Uniessentialism

Let me begin by briefly outlining Witt's main argument. She holds that gender is uniessential to social individuals, where uniessentialism is a sort of individual essentialism. We can distinguish two sorts of individual essentialisms. The standard Kripkean identity essentialism asks: what makes an individual *that* individual? Witt's Aristotelian-inspired version, however, asks a slightly different question: what explains the *unity* of individuals? What explains that an individual entity exists over and above the sum total of its constituent parts? On this latter view, certain functional essences have a unifying role: these essences are responsible for the fact that material parts constitute a *new* individual, rather than just a lump of stuff or a collection of particles. Witt's example is of a house: the essential house-functional property (what the entity is for, what its purpose is) unifies the different material parts of a house so that there is a house, and not just a collection of house-constituting particles (6). Gender (being a woman/ a man) functions in a similar

fashion: it provides "the principle of normative unity" that organizes, unifies and determines the roles of social individuals (73).

It is important to clarify further the notions of *gender* and *social individuality* that Witt employs. First, gender is a social position that "cluster[s] around the engendering function ... women conceive and bear ... men beget" (40). These are the "socially mediated reproductive functions of men and women" (29) and they differ from the biological function of reproduction, which roughly corresponds to sex on the standard sex/gender distinction. Witt writes: "to be a woman is to be recognized to have a particular function in engendering, to be a man is to be recognized to have a different function in engendering" (39). Second, Witt distinguishes:

- *Persons*: "individuals who have a first-person perspective (or self-consciousness) and are characterized by the related property of autonomy" (54).
- *Human beings*: biologically human organisms.
- *Social individuals*: individuals who occupy social positions synchronically and diachronically, and are ascribed certain social roles/ are subject to particular social normativity simply *by virtue of* their social position occupancy.

These ontological categories are not equivalent in that they have different persistence and identity conditions. Social individuals are bound by social normativity, human beings by biological normativity. These normativities differ in two respects: (i) social norms differ from one culture to the next whereas biological norms do not; (ii) unlike biological normativity, social normativity requires "the recognition by others that an agent is both responsive to and evaluable under a social norm" (19). Thus, being a social individual is not equivalent to being a human being. Further, Witt takes personhood to be defined in terms of *intrinsic* psychological

states of self-awareness and self-consciousness (i.e. the first-person perspective). However, social individuality is defined in terms of the *extrinsic* feature of occupying a social position. So, the two are not equivalent: personhood is essentially about intrinsic features and could exist without a social world, whereas social individuality is essentially about extrinsic features and ontologically depends on there being a social world.

Witt's gender essentialist argument crucially pertains to *social individuals*, not to persons or human beings: saying that persons or human beings are gendered would be a category mistake. Why is gender essential to social individuals? For Witt, social individuals are those who occupy positions in social reality. Further, "social positions have norms or social roles associated with them; a social role is what an individual who occupies a given social position is responsive to and evaluable under" (59). However, *qua* social individuals, we occupy multiple social positions at ones and over time: we can be women, mothers, immigrants, sisters, academics, wives, community organisers and team-sport coaches synchronically and diachronically. Now, the issue for Witt is what unifies these positions so that a social *individual* is constituted. After all, a bundle of social position occupancies does not make for an individual (just as a bundle of properties like *being white*, *cube-shaped* and *sweet* do not make for a sugar cube). For Witt, this unifying role is undertaken by gender (being a woman or a man): it is "a pervasive and fundamental social position that unifies and determines all other social positions both synchronically and diachronically. It unifies them not physically, but by providing a principle of normative unity" (19-20). By 'normative unity', Witt means the following: given our social roles and social position occupancies, we are responsive to various sets of social norms. These norms are "complex patterns of behaviour and practices that constitute what one ought to do in a situation given one's social position(s) and one's social context" (82). The sets of norms can conflict: the norms of motherhood can

(and do) conflict with the norms of being an academic philosopher. However, in order for this conflict to exist, the norms must be binding on a *single* social individual. Witt, then, asks: what explains the existence and unity of the social individual who is subject to conflicting social norms? The answer is gender.

Gender is not just a social role that unifies social individuals. Witt takes it to be *the* social role – as she puts it, it is *the mega social role* that unifies social agents. First, gender is *a* mega social role if it satisfies two conditions (and Witt claims that it does): if it provides the principle of synchronic and diachronic unity of social individuals, and if it inflects and defines a broad range of other social roles. Gender satisfies the first in usually being a life-long social position: a social individual persists just as long as their gendered social position persists. Further, Witt maintains, trans people are not counterexamples to this claim: transitioning entails that the old social individual has ceased to exist and a new one has come into being. And this is consistent with the same person persisting and undergoing social individual change via transitioning. Gender satisfies the second condition too. It inflects other social roles, like being a parent or a professional. The expectations attached to these social roles differ depending on the agent's gender, since gender imposes different social norms to govern the execution of the further social roles. Now, gender - as opposed to some other social category, like race - is not just a mega social role; it is *the* unifying mega social role. Cross-cultural and trans-historical considerations support this view. Witt claims that patriarchy is a social universal (98). By contrast, racial categorisation varies historically and cross-culturally, and racial oppression is not a universal feature of human cultures. Thus, gender has a better claim to being the social role that is uniessential to social individuals.

Normative Centrality of Gender Essentialism

As outlined, Witt endorses a tripartite structure of the self and is ontologically committed to the existence of persons, human organisms and essentially gendered social individuals. In arguing for the existence of social individuals, Witt considers a dualist ontology that is only committed to the existence of human organisms and persons. On this view, “humans that meet certain conditions ... are persons, and as persons they are deserving of moral treatment, and legal and political entitlements. The claims and criticism of feminism can be articulated as the unfair (discriminatory) treatment of some persons (i.e., women), or as the political and legal inequality of some persons (i.e., women)” (67). However, this dualist ontology should be rejected because the claim about gender essentialism cannot be formulated coherently in relation to persons or humans. So, Witt claims: “if an intelligible or coherent formulation of the claim of gender essentialism is important for feminist theory, then this is one reason to find the simpler ontology lacking” (67). The important questions for my purposes are: What justifies the antecedent? Why is a coherent formulation of gender essentialism normatively central to feminism? I want to suggest two possible answers. Both proposals are (more or less explicitly) present in Witt’s account: gender essentialism is central to feminism, first, because it is central to feminist accounts of agency; and second, because it is central to the very normative foundations of feminist politics. I will argue next that we have reason to find both proposals suspect. Let’s start with the former.

Witt seems to take the indisputable centrality of gender essentialism (at least in part) to boil down to its importance for questions about agency: individual essentialism, rather than kind essentialism, “intersects with questions of agency, and the issue of agency is central to feminist theory” (10). Now, Witt does not tell us how and why issues about agency are central to feminism. But at the very least, one would

expect her account to tell us something important about women’s agency, which will be useful for feminist politics understood as “advocacy and action in support of political and social change directed toward ending the oppression of women” (128). That is, we need to elucidate a feminist account of agency that facilitates the kind of social change that brings an end to gendered oppression. So: what is Witt’s feminist account of agency? How does it connect to gender unessentialism? And how does this account fulfill the political desideratum? I will claim that answering the final question is particularly tricky and it is far from clear what Witt’s picture of agency is meant to do for feminist politics that a dualist picture cannot. This being the case, considerations appealing to agency do not yet justify the normative centrality of gender unessentialism.

First, Witt’s account of agency: for her, agents are “individuals who are capable of intentional behaviour, are capable of entertaining goals (singly and in groups) and figuring out how to achieve them, and are capable of acting from a standpoint or perspective” (60). Further, most social individuals are agents in this sense (61). That is, individuals who occupy the social position of being a woman (are taken to have a particular engendering role) have agency, and subsequently they act *in* and *through* their social position: women (*qua* agents) have intentionality, they engage in means-ends reasoning and they can act from a standpoint or perspective. Witt is also committed to an ascriptivist account of social normativity: on this view, “normativity attaches to the social position occupancy itself and does not require that an individual identify with that social position or practical identity” (43). Such an account is put forward as an alternative to a voluntarist account, whereby the individual identifies with certain social position occupancies, accepts the norms associated with them and takes the “norms [to] provide her with reasons for acting in one way rather than another” (43). The upshot of this is that women need not identify or be aware of the practical identity their social

position occupancy generates in order to act in and through it. This account of agency is coupled with a particular view of the self in order to avoid an ontological problem regarding the locus of agency, which *prima facie* is the social individual. After all, agents act in and through their social positions and social individuals are essentially social position occupants. But (as Witt herself admits) persons also have a good claim to being the seat of agency: persons are essentially self-reflective beings, and self-reflection seems to be an essential feature of agency. In order to clarify matters, Witt argues that the acting self requires the entire trinity: the self is “a kind of person, one who is capable of self-reflection, and whose capacity for self-reflection is actually exercised in relation to her social roles” (126). So, although persons are essentially self-reflective beings, they require materials from the social world in order to avoid self-reflection just becoming an empty capacity. And social individuals, who ontologically depend on a social world, provide the necessary materials. (Think of Kant’s famous dictum: concepts without intuitions are empty and intuitions without concepts are blind.) What ensures that a person is related to a social individual in the right kind of way is that the same human organism *constitutes* them both (119). The self is a kind of embodied self-reflective person who occupies various social positions and roles.

How does this picture tie in with gender uniessentialism? Social individuals are essentially gendered. Even though persons are not essentially gendered, they are nevertheless *derivatively* so insofar as the same human organism constitutes both the person and the social individual. Furthermore, the self – the seemingly proper locus of agency – is not essentially but *inevitably* gendered: this is because the self requires both personhood and social individuality in that the former provides the capacity for self-reflection and the latter provides the materials upon which the self reflects.

How is this picture politically helpful? Why should we endorse this picture for feminist political ends? Witt suspects

that some might reject her picture on purely parsimonious grounds: friends of such ontologies will wish to cut social individuals and simply commit themselves to the existence of persons and human organisms. Now, parsimony is no friend of mine and I welcome Witt’s ontological additions. Nevertheless, it is far from obvious to me what her picture of agency and the self are specifically meant to bring feminist politics and what is it that a dualist picture fails to deliver. Perhaps the key is the following claim: “Gender uniessentialism directs our attention away from individual psychologies, their conscious and unconscious biases, and ‘deformed’ processes of choice, and towards the social world, its available social roles, and the ways in which its available social roles can and cannot be blended into a coherent practical identity” (128). Since gender uniessentialism shows that our practical identities are essentially gendered, Witt suggests, “political and social change for women will require changing existing social roles that ... disadvantage and oppress women” (128). Presumably the politically significant point is that we can see how certain social position occupancies themselves come packaged with politically and ethically insidious social norms; and this should motivate our rejection of those norms, rather than embarking on projects that aim to alter women’s individual psychologies. It is certainly true that the goal of critiquing and altering oppressive social norms is crucial for feminism. However, it is unclear to me why precisely uniessentialism and Witt’s picture of the self as inevitably gendered are needed to motivate this thought. The view that “feminist social and political change must include critique of existing, gendered social roles with an eye to changing those that disadvantage and oppress women” (129) strikes me as a fairly common view in feminist theory and practice, and I see no special need to invoke the notion of *gender uniessentialism* or Witt’s account of the self to persuade people of its importance. Furthermore, acknowledging the above to be an important feminist goal does not yet give us a reason to endorse gender

uniessentialism. For instance, consider the dualist ontology that is only committed to the existence of human organisms and persons. Recall that on this view “[t]he claims and criticism of feminism can be articulated as the unfair (discriminatory) treatment of some persons (i.e., women), or as the political and legal inequality of some persons (i.e., women)” (67). We could simply add that feminism should also include an investigation of existing social roles, a critique of those that disadvantage and oppress certain persons (i.e. women), and an attempt to alter the ones that are part and parcel of unfair discrimination of those persons (i.e. women). This move would not force us to posit the existence of social individuals, if we can tell an alternative story about the impact of oppressive social norms only by appealing to persons and human organisms.

Witt can obviously respond claiming that we cannot articulate the statement of the claim of gender essentialism coherently merely with the language of persons and human organisms. This is why we must include social individuals into our feminist ontology, which undercuts the above suggestion that we can achieve Witt’s political goals with an alternative (dualist) ontology. However, this response only has bite if we understand personhood in Witt’s terms. And we need not understand personhood as Witt does - if we reject her view of personhood, we have as of yet no reason to accept an ontology containing social individuals. For Witt, persons are individuals who are essentially self-reflective, have a first-person perspective and the capacity for autonomy, which is “a kind of inner self-legislation or self-conscious regulation of our desires, decisions and actions” (54). The features are intrinsic. It then follows that persons so characterised could exist without there being a social world (71). Witt does not argue for her conception of personhood, and my critical question is: why should we accept it? For one thing, it is much more prevalent in feminist philosophy to endorse some kind of a relational conception of the self. Such views centrally take the development of selves to require

relationships with other selves and reject “a view of the self as an isolated, atomistic individual” (122). It is unclear, however, why this conception is rejected over the conception of personhood Witt endorses, which is precisely such an isolated, atomistic conception. And if we were to understand personhood in relational terms, there would be no need to posit social individuals as bearers of gender. Witt could obviously retort that we must posit the existence of social individuals *because* we cannot coherently claim that persons are gendered (gender being about extrinsic features and personhood about intrinsic). But this move is no longer available if we have given up Witt’s account of personhood and instead favour an account that characterises personhood essentially in terms of both intrinsic and extrinsic features.

Now, I have been speaking of persons and selves interchangeably in the previous paragraph and this may be illegitimate. In fact, I am genuinely unsure about whether the relational account of the self is meant to be equivalent to a relational account of personhood. Witt’s comments on the matter are unclear and actually generate more confusion. She notes that (for instance) Sara Ruddick’s feminist maternal ethics rests on “an ontology of relational selves” (122). However, earlier in the book, Witt also claims that Ruddick’s maternal ethics is appropriate for *persons*, not social individuals or selves (63). Witt’s discussion of autonomy further murkies the waters. When discussing feminist relational accounts of the self, Witt suggests that her position in fact *contributes* to such accounts rather than is put forward as an alternative to them. She notes that these relational accounts have two aspects: (1) the already aforementioned aspect of taking self-development to require relationships with others, and (2) a relational view of autonomy. On this latter view, autonomy “is caused by (or sometimes constituted by) relations with others, which include both the interpersonal relations and social environment of the agent” (123). Witt’s own discussion of the normative situation of the self as a social agent is meant to be an elaboration of relational

autonomy, and so presumably her account is meant to contribute to the debates on relational selves (124). This normative situation includes three factors: “acting from a standpoint, being responsive to its [one’s social position’s] norms, and being evaluable under them” (124). This move is surprising given Witt’s previous formulation of autonomy (54), where she holds that only a first-person perspective is needed for the possibility of autonomy. On this formulation, her account of autonomy is precisely the empty and merely formalistic one that feminists arguing for relational autonomy reject. It certainly does not seem to contribute to relational accounts of autonomy. In fact, it seems to me that Witt endorses two accounts of autonomy that are in tension with one another and I cannot see how this helps feminism politically.²

Maybe another way to motivate the thought that uniessentialism and the proposed picture of the self are needed for the articulation of the kind of agency that is important for feminism comes from thinking about Witt’s ascriptivist account of social normativity. Recall that on this view “normativity attaches to the social position occupancy itself and does not require that an individual identify with that social position or practical identity” (43). Feminist politics allegedly benefits from this account of social normativity. According to Witt, ascriptivism “provides a compelling explanation of why women feel the pull of social norms that they reject or criticize on ethical and political

grounds, and why they are assessed under those norms whether they endorse them or not” (47) - it provides a better explanation of oppressive social norms “than those that mention women’s limited autonomy or deformed preferences” (47). Further, an ascriptivist explanation of gender “suggests that feminist politics should focus on how the social world is normatively structured and criticize those norms that, individually or in concert, are oppressive to women” (47). I have already noted that I see no reason specifically to favour gender uniessentialism or Witt’s conception of the self with respect to the second point. What about the first? I find the idea that women fail to reject the pull of certain oppressive social norms because these norms attach to the social position occupancies themselves compelling. Still, it is not clear to me how this provides a better explanation of oppressive social norms (and on what grounds is it *better*). Witt needs to show why an explanation that appeals to a mixture of the above mentioned aspects would not also be compelling. There are many different social norms and many different kinds of social norms. It does not strike me as implausible to think that these norms might function differently and that to provide an adequate explanation of some phenomenon, we might have to consider a mixture of ascriptivist and voluntarist social normativity. Consider the normative pull of dress codes. Many women reject the rightness of such codes and actively fight against them in their daily lives. But they also feel the pull of those norms. However, this may not be just because certain dress codes are ascribed to their social position occupancies. It may also be because of limited autonomy - just think of the different reactions frumpy and badly dressed women in politics or academia get in comparison to frumpy and badly dressed men in these areas. Here is an illustration: I am fully aware that my looks *as a matter of fact* in no way determine my philosophical abilities. I am also aware that my social position occupancies as a woman and a philosopher are subject to certain ascribed norms about looks. Further, no matter how

² Actually, Witt claims that the first-person perspective is *a* condition necessary for the possibility of autonomy. This of course leaves it open whether there are other - perhaps social - necessary conditions. And if some social conditions are also necessary for the possibility of autonomy, my point is undermined. However, this response does not succeed. After all, persons are ontologically *independent* of the social world. So, whatever other necessary conditions there may be for the possibility of autonomy, they cannot be extrinsic social conditions.

much I would want to attend my job interview (or the first day of classes) wearing loose fitting jeans, no make-up and with undone hair, I cannot. And this is not (or not just) because of the ascribed norms of my social positions, but because I would seriously undermine my chances of getting the job were I to bunk the norms. So, the explanation for why I succumb to the pull of oppressive social norms also has to do with ascriptivist social normativity *as well as* the regulation of my desires, decisions and actions – namely, with (the first sense of) autonomy on Witt’s account. The moral of the story is this: it is not yet clear to me how ascriptivism about social normativity would show that Witt’s gender uniessentialism or her picture of the self are particularly helpful for feminist politics. And due to this, we still have not made good the claim that questions about gender essentialism are rendered normatively central to feminism due to Witt’s account of agency.

The second proposal for why we might hold that questions about gender essentialism are central to feminism comes from normative considerations to do with feminism itself. What normatively grounds feminism? What does feminism need (in Louise Antony’s words) in order to “articulate and defend its critical claims about the damage done to women under patriarchy, and also to ground its positive vision of equitable and sustaining human relationships” (1998: 67)? Why is it that women *qua* women should be treated in some ways and not others? One suggestion might be that we need to know something ethically significant about women (*qua* social position occupants) in order to answer these questions. And resolving the essentialism/ anti-essentialism debate enables us to do this and so provides the very normative foundations for feminist theory and practice. Following Witt, we might say that her account of gender uniessentialism tells us the missing, and yet crucially important, information about women. This would be a very powerful justification for taking essentialist questions seriously and considering their importance to be indisputable. Although Witt does not

explicitly claim anything of this sort, this kind of thinking is common in feminist philosophy generally and in her account too. I will next take issue with precisely this common view. Admittedly, my discussion is light on arguments and heavy on polemics, simply because I do not have the required space to make my case in detail. Still, unless my polemical questions and queries are answered, Witt has not yet provided a justification for the normative centrality of (any form of) gender essentialism.

The common view that Witt along with most feminist philosophers are implicitly committed to is (what I call) the ‘normative dogma’ regarding gender: that we require a substantive conception of *gender* in order to normatively ground emancipatory feminist politics and ethics, where ‘gender’ is a social term. Let me clarify what I have in mind. Feminism is said to be the movement to end women’s oppression (hooks 2000: 26). It is commonly conceived to be a movement that aims to respond to the difficulties women face and to aid women overcome gender-based and unjust structural obstacles. Ordinarily, language users understand the term ‘woman’ in this claim to be a sex term: ‘woman’ picks out human females and being a human female depends on various biological and anatomical features (like genitalia). However, in response to biologically deterministic accounts that took anatomical features to determine all behavioural, psychological and socio-political features and arrangements, feminists in the 1960s and 70s began using ‘woman’ differently: not as a sex term, but as a gender term (for more, see my 2011b). Being a woman or a man was no longer considered to depend on the kind of anatomy one has but on particular social and cultural factors, roles or positions. Now, since genders depend on social factors (broadly conceived) and it is these social factors that feminism aims to alter, the gender concept *woman* became the defining concept of feminism both theoretically and politically. It became commonplace to treat *woman* as the concept around which feminist politics is and should be organised, and the term

'woman' as that, which picks out the category making up feminism's subject matter. Since emancipatory feminist ethics and politics should be grounded on *woman*, it is allegedly important to know something substantive about us as gendered beings.

During the past 40 years of feminist theorising, this normative dogma has generated two puzzles. First, the *semantic puzzle*: given that ordinary language users tend not to distinguish sex and gender (treating 'woman' largely as a sex term or, at least, a mixture of social and biological features), what precisely are we – feminists – talking about when we talk about 'women'? Are there (perhaps necessary and sufficient) conditions that the concept *woman* encodes, and if so, what are they? Second, the *ontological puzzle*: what kinds of entities are gender and sex? How should we understand gender classes and gendered identities? What are the processes by which genders come into being? Are there *really* women and men at all? Feminist theorists from various disciplines have provided numerous answers to these questions and, during the past 40 years, a rich literature to address them has emerged. Nevertheless, there is precious little agreement amongst feminist theorists or even amongst feminist philosophers about these semantic and ontological issues. As is well-known, feminist philosophers disagree amongst themselves about practically all aspects of gender. The contemporary philosophical discourse on gender, then, is a long-standing and apparently intractable *controversy*.

Witt's work responds to the ontological puzzle and so is part and parcel of this controversy. But why take part in it at all? Perhaps in trying to lay down the normative foundations for feminism, what feminists ought to do is no longer contribute to this controversy – perhaps they should give up the underlying normative dogma that generates it. According to Witt, feminism is about "advocacy and action in support of political and social change directed toward ending the oppression of women" (128). My polemical questions are:

why do we need a substantive account of gender *at all* for this end? Why should we continue upholding the normative dogma that underpins Witt's work, given the wealth of disagreement that exists over gender? My view is not that we should not appeal to or use gender terminology at all. For instance, for feminist political purposes it is important to be able to show that some individuals (namely, those we call 'women') systematically receive lower pay for comparable work than other individuals (namely, those we commonly call 'men'). Demonstrating this is necessary if we are to alter the status quo. My view is not that we can engage in such *descriptive* activities without using gender terms. But we need not appeal to a substantive conception of gender in order to identify that some individuals (i.e. those we commonly call 'women') are unduly disadvantaged by current social arrangements. If we need such a substantive conception, this must be for some *normative* purposes (e.g. in order to say why discrimination of women is wrong). Now, my contention is that feminism need not appeal to a substantive account of gender for normative ends – there are other more viable alternatives, although I cannot provide a detailed account of them here (for a first stab at my alternative account, see Mikkola 2011a). This being so, it is far from obvious to me that feminism requires a substantive conception of gender for political purposes. Quite simply: I urge feminist philosophers (including Witt) to take the justification for the normative dogma regarding gender seriously. If we wish to claim that a coherent statement of the claim of gender essentialism is normatively central to feminism and that we should retain the normative dogma, I want to know *why*. If we do not find good support for retaining the feminist dogma and find notions other than gender that can do the normative work required for feminist politics, I am left wondering how essential is *gender* essentialism to feminism.

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