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**Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy**

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**Commentaries on**

Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*  
(Oxford University Press, 2011)

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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.<sup>11</sup> 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

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<sup>11</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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

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

<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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,

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<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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.

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



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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).<sup>1</sup> 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

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<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>2</sup> 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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### Comments on Charlotte Witt, *The Metaphysics of Gender*

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#### Overview

Charlotte Witt has published a bold new book on the metaphysics of our social world, in which she argues for gender essentialism. This may appear a surprising project, given that as a result of decades of feminist critiques “essentialism” has become a dirty word in feminist circles. However, as we read on we realize that she is not arguing for the vilified form of essentialism, kind essentialism, i.e. the view that to be a man (or woman) one need have some particular property that constitutes the essence of the kind and which is explain and justifies the behavior of its

members. Instead, she is offering a metaphysics of the social space we live in: what unifies and organizes the various social roles we occupy (parent, academic, politician, friend, student, etc.). Witt argues that gender is the function that unifies and organizes all our other social roles and is thus unessential to us social individuals.

Witt’s gender essentialism is thus a view about the structure of social normativity, where social normativity is distinguished from other forms of normativity (including moral) and consists in the expectations, obligations, and allowances that the various social roles we occupy bring us. Witt thinks we are responsive to, and evaluated with respect to, these norms irrespective of whether we endorse them consciously or unconsciously (unlike what many would say about moral norms) and they often pull in different directions: my role as daughter may demand I kill the slayer of my father; my role as sister that I protect my brother at all costs. What unifies my many roles, however, is my gender; it also conditions my practical agency in the sense that gender expectations and obligations trump other ones, often making it impossible to fulfill the obligations of the various social roles adequately. The gendering of our social roles is largely to blame.

Now you may ask: haven’t feminists been calling attention to and fighting such gendering at least since the seventies? Yes, but here we have a theoretical account of why the gendering is so pervasive, complete with an ontological picture of the relationship among human organisms, persons, and social individuals, and the mechanisms operating in the social world. A deeper understanding of the metaphysics of our social world and the mechanics of its gendering is a key component in our fight against sexist oppression.

#### The account

The central claim in the account of the pervasiveness of the gendering of our social norms is that as a matter of fact, in

western late-capitalist societies like the US, gender is unessential to social individuals. Let us flesh this out.

First, for a function to be unessential to an entity is for it to unify and organize all the parts of that individual into the whole that is the individual. For example, the time-telling function unifies and organizes all the tiny metal parts (hands, spring, gears, etc) into the whole which is the watch itself. Similarly, the sheltering function unifies and organizes all the planks of a wooden house into the entity that is the house itself.

Gender, understood in this way, is a function that organizes all the parts of a social individual into the social individual it is. The parts in question are all the other social roles the social individual occupies: parent, friend, professor, child, colleague, etc. Gender (man, woman) is a mega social role that unifies all the other social roles into the agent that is the social individual. Being a woman, a parent, etc, is to occupy a social position, with which come norms of behavior. The social individual is the entity that occupies all these social positions, the bearer of these social properties, if you will.

The social individual is distinct from the human organism and the person because the social individual stands in social relations essentially, but human organisms and persons do so only accidentally. Similarly, the person is distinct from the human organism and the social individual because the person has the capacity to take a first person perspective on itself essentially, but the human organism and the social individual only have that accidentally. Finally, the human organism has certain biological features essentially, but the person and the social individual does so only accidentally.

What determines whether you occupy a certain social position? On Witt's view, being a man and being a woman are social positions - social statuses, if you will, with which come social norms and people are responsive to and evaluated with respect to these norms irrespective of their

self-understanding or their endorsing these norms. Whether they occupy these positions or not depends on their being socially recognized as such. The social recognition includes recognition of other members of the group, institutional recognition as exemplified by a birth certificate, driver's licenses, marriage licenses, and other forms of group recognition such as initiation rituals.

The argument for the main claim is as follows:

1. The social individual is a separate entity from the person and the human organism
2. We need an account of the normative unity of social individuals
3. Normative unity of social individuals consists in a role or norm that trumps other norms and that unifies and organizes other roles
4. Why do we need social individuals be normatively unified? because they are agents. We need an account of what unifies their agency
5. The normative unity of the person cannot do the trick. Why? Because the normativity in question is wrong; it is moral norms.
6. The normative unity of the human cannot do the trick. Why? Because the normativity in question is wrong; it is biological norms.
7. The alternatives are: a) in some societies it is something else, like race; b) it is variable based on the self-understanding; c) it is the engendering function
8. It isn't something else, like race.
9. It isn't variable based on our self-understanding. Why: social individuals need normative unity even when lacking self-understanding?

10. Gender provides the principle of normative unity: it is because gender is a consequence of a relationship to a necessary social function, namely reproduction.

### Criticism

I think that what Witt offers is a very rich and original account of why the gendering of our social roles is so pervasive and consequently of what a good part of our fight against sexist oppression should be directed at. I'm very sympathetic with the aim of the project. But I worry that taking on the metaphysical picture she offers is too large a price to pay for giving a systematic account of the pervasiveness of the gendering.

My criticism focus on three broad issues. One is the grounding of gender in reproduction. Another is the nature of social normativity and its role in practical agency. And the third is the ontology underlying Witt's view. Let me start down below, with the ontological picture.

Witt's view is broadly Aristotelian, and she allows that there can be more than one entity in the same spatiotemporal location. Witt wants there to be social individuals, as well as human beings and persons. I'm not convinced that we need all three and I worry about the proliferation of entities.

Consider Anna, Witt's daughter. On Witt's view, in the spatiotemporal location where we look for Anna, we will find three entities. Apart from the human being and the person, we also have the social individual.

It isn't that I'm against there being many different objects of different kinds in the spatiotemporal region. I'm quite happy with having Anna as well as Anna's body cohabiting, just as I am happy to have Venus de Milo and the hunk of marble it is made of happily cohabiting in the Louvre. The worry just is that the entities Witt wants to cohabit seem to me not clearly of different kinds. In particular they all seem agents to me. Consider the following analogy:

Being a student has different essential features from that of being a human being. Anna is a human being, a person, and a social individual. Anna is also a student. Why not say that Anna the student will cease to be when she ceases to go to school but that now she is happily cohabiting with Anna the human, Anna the person, and Anna the social individual? Aren't being a person and being a social individual more like being a student, properties that human beings can acquire?

The argument for all these three being distinct is that they are not coextensive and that they differ in modal properties. And that is all well and good. But so is being a student and being a human being. Not all humans are students, and if you count dogs in the circus school in San Francisco, not all students are humans. The question just is, who is the agent in all this? Do we have three or do we have only one, the human organism, who is also a person, and a social individual?

Perhaps the argument on their being distinct rests not on failure of coextension and distinct modal properties but on their being subject to three distinct norms (biological, moral, and social). If so, then the introduction of the fact that Anna is a student will not generate any extra entities, since students are perhaps simply subject to social norms. But while that may work for being a student, some other roles seem to introduce other norms. What are we to do about Anna's doing her logic assignment? Doesn't that introduce some more norms, logical norms? And what is the entity that is subject to it? Do we have to add one more entity to the human, the person, and the social individual, namely the logical thinker?

The above is not an argument for these phenomena not being conceptually distinct. They are. But why not say that humans are sometimes persons (when they take a first person perspective on themselves) and that they are sometimes (even always) social individuals, that is, take up positions on a social map with which come constraints and enablements? On that kind of view, there is only one kind of agent in there.

There is just Anna. But for most of her life, she is a person, and for all of her life, she is a social individual.

The second point of criticism concerns the claim that gender unifies all our other social roles. The central argument was premised on the fact that social individuals need a principle of normative unity, they need something that unifies their parts into the whole that is the social individual. It shouldn't be just any old function, but a characteristic function. But how is the analogy supposed to work with the house and the planks that make it up?

House: the sheltering function unifies and organizes the planks into a house

Social individual: the engendering function unifies and organizes the various social roles into a social individual

What seems disanalogous to me is that the sheltering function defines what a house is, whereas it doesn't seem that the engendering function defines what a social individual is, however pervasive the gender inflection on our other social roles is. This is also a case where one social role is supposed to unify and organize all the others, as opposed to a function unifying and organizing material parts into the whole that is the house. However, Witt mentions another analogy that might work better. This is the analogy with the academic. Consider:

Academic: the characteristic function for university professors is to do their part in a system of higher learning. This characteristic function unifies and organizes all the other roles academics find themselves in: scholar, teacher, advisor, administrator, colleague, and so on.

Social individual: the characteristic function, ie the engendering function, unifies and organizes all the other social roles social individuals have in the social world.

But the disanalogy persists. It seems to me that a social individual's characteristic function is to play its part in a system of social relations, which involves being responded to, and evaluated with respect to, norms that accompany any specific location on the social map. Gender is just one social role among many that is in need of unification and organization by that (albeit quite abstract-sounding) characteristic function.

I take it that Witt thinks the engendering function is a characteristic function of social individuals is because of its relationship to reproduction. Let us look at the central analogy: engendering is to reproduction as dining is to feeding.

The main idea is, and it is in many ways an attractive one, that there are basic functions that humans need to perform but that that need and the underlying material conditions radically underdetermine the form that the performance of that function can take. I take it that the engendering function and the dining function are at the social level, and reproduction and feeding at the biological level.

The analogy goes like this: We have the need to eat. That need and the material conditions we find ourselves in radically underdetermine the way that need gets satisfied. Dining practices are social conventions set up to respond to the biological need we have to eat. Similarly, we have a need to reproduce but that need and the material conditions we find ourselves in radically underdetermine the way that need gets met. The system of gender relations are social conventions set up to respond to the biological need for reproduction we have.

There are some disanalogies here. The organism can be said to have a need to feed itself or be fed, but it doesn't seem that the organism has a similar need to reproduce. If it did, then the people who do not reproduce would not be meeting some basic need, and that seems implausible.

We might want to say that the population has a need to reproduce itself, where “population” is defined purely in biological terms, and where we then say that various social reproductive practices are ways of responding to that need. But if we say that, then it seems that the two genders Witt thinks are needed at the social level to respond to the biological need are just not many enough. For then it seems that there can be many other roles played by individuals that serve a reproductive function for the population, and on which the health of the population depends, including priests, caregivers of various sorts, teachers, and so on.

And even if we want to restrict gender roles to roles in the reproduction economy, such that individuals who do not partake in it by providing the biological material don't get assigned a gender, then we run into another problem, for on Witt's view gender unifies and organizes all our other social roles, and then the agency of priests and others who lack gender is lacking normative unity.

So while I agree with Witt that being of a gender is a social position, conferred onto us (as I would put it), I don't think that what is being tracked in the conferral is solely perceived role in the system of biological reproduction. I think that is sometimes what is being tracked, but oftentimes it is not. Often what is tracked in the conferral of the status of being a woman, man, or some other gender is mere presence of some body parts, presumed sexual orientation, self-presentation and the like. So I think Witt's account of gender is too narrow.

But the other point of disagreement is the role of gender in underwriting our practical social agency. I think there is something else that has to do it. But I don't think we need some principle of normative unity. I think all we need is intentionality and practical rationality; that is, we need to be able to form attitudes about things, be it food we want to eat or a film we want to see. And we need to have the capacity for practical rationality, namely to take the means towards our ends. Human organisms are capable of this, as are other

animals, such as dogs. And both humans and dogs are social beings.

### Final remarks

Any metaphysical account worth its salt is going to have something others will disagree with. I have focused on these three points of disagreement. But there is much that I do agree with in Witt's account and much I have learned from. Witt's work is a sustained argument for a precise thesis that weaves together issues in feminist theory, metaphysics, moral psychology, ethics, and political philosophy. There are not many works that accomplish such a feat. Witt's book is a very important contribution to our understanding of the metaphysics of social reality and of sexist oppression. Much attention has been given of late to the role of implicit biases, unconscious behavior, and gender schemas in perpetuating oppressive social structures and that is all for the good, but the problem of sexist oppression doesn't either take the form of explicit discriminatory laws or lie within our individual psyches. A large part of the problem lies in the gendered nature of the social norms that are neither chosen nor endorsed by us, but that we nevertheless live by.

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## Symposia on Gender, Race and Philosophy

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### *The Metaphysics of Gender: Reply to Critics*

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#### **Introduction**

I am very pleased to have an opportunity to respond to these generous and thoughtful criticisms of *The Metaphysics of Gender*. Considering that the book argues for a theory of gender essentialism and also sketches a view of the social world in which choice does not appear as a central political value for feminism, I had been worried about the book's reception especially by my colleagues in feminist philosophy. As it turns out my three critics have done a terrific job in conveying what my book is about, and as if by some pre-established harmony, have focused on different aspects. Mari

Mikkola's comments address the central and basic question of why an inquiry into gender is important for feminist theory. Ann Cudd's comments focus on my ascriptivist account of social normativity and my theory of social agency. And finally Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir's comments develop several possible ontological difficulties that my metaphysics of gender might face.

#### **Response to Mari Mikkola**

In her thoughtful and insightful comments Mari Mikkola challenges the idea that "it is important to know and understand something about us as gendered beings" in order to engage in the theoretical and political projects of feminism. Indeed, Mikkola wants to question what she calls "the normative dogma" that "we need a substantive concept of *gender* in order to normatively ground an emancipatory feminist politics and ethics." So, Mikkola claims not only that feminist theory and politics can get along quite well without my theory of gender uniessentialism, but also that feminist claims can be formulated and its projects engaged without **any** conception of gender or women or how we exist as gendered beings. I find this broad claim implausible. For example, it seems to me that feminists ought to resist biological conceptions of gender, which must raise the question of how it is we are gendered. Mikkola also believes that since we feminists can proceed without reflection on our existence as gendered beings that we ought to do so because the normative dogma generates longstanding and apparently intractable semantic and ontological puzzles. Again, I disagree. First, as I just mentioned, I doubt that we can do without thinking about how we are gendered. Second, even if we can, "ought" does not follow from "can". Third, I think that gender uniessentialism takes the intractability out of one ontological puzzle, namely how it is that we are gendered. And if, per impossible, gender uniessentialism does not



succeed, there are other candidates--like Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir's conferralism--that might do the trick.<sup>1</sup>

So let me narrow down and rephrase Mikkola's question: Why is gender uniessentialism, in particular, useful for feminist theory and politics? This is a reasonable and important question. Although I don't think it is necessary (or indeed possible) to argue that it's my way or the highway, I do think that gender uniessentialism has several features to recommend it. First, the framework of gender uniessentialism provides an account of gender, and of us as gendered beings, which is social and not biological. Second, gender uniessentialism differs from and is more illuminating than other approaches to women's social agency in ways that are important for feminist theory. Third, gender uniessentialism keeps theory responsive to the actual lived experiences of women, which is an important political and philosophical virtue.

One of the reasons that I began thinking that gender is different from social identities like race and sexual orientation is the universality of gender as a social category. Philosophers ask whether race was invented in the 17<sup>th</sup> century or whether homosexuality was invented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but there is no corresponding question that makes sense for gender. (Zack 1996; Halperin 1990; McWhorter 2009) For some the universality of gender categories points in a biological direction; one current manifestation is what Cordelia Fine calls "neurosexism" (Fine 2010). I think it is important for feminists to have an alternative account of how we are gendered, one that points towards social roles and the social world, but that can make sense of the important difference between gender and other social categories as well. Gender uniessentialism does this.

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<sup>1</sup> See her "Social Construction of Human Kinds", forthcoming in *Hypatia*.

Gender uniessentialism also contributes to our understanding of social agency. The idea that our gender is our principle of normative unity just is the claim that one of our social roles prioritizes, unifies and organizes our other social roles into a practical normative whole. And, according to uniessentialism, that we are gendered beings is not primarily a fact about our individual psychologies or our bodies; it is primarily a fact about the way in which our social world is organized and structured. Finally, according to ascriptivism it is just by virtue of occupying the social position of being a woman or being a man that an individual is responsive to and evaluable under a set of gendered norms. I might add that this is the case whether or not that individual accepts those norms or is even attending to them. Much of our social agency is habitually and tacitly normed; only occasionally do we consciously attend to the norms that we are responsive to and evaluated under by others.

For example, let's consider our philosophical culture's gender norms concerning appropriate attire for women, which both Mikkola and Cudd comment upon. In writing my book I had actually meant this example to be humorous, but maybe it is worth discussing. According to a recent discussion on the blog *The Philosophy Smoker*, the consensus is that a woman philosopher's professional attire should include make-up, discrete jewelry, and low heels, but no "hooker" boots, tight sweaters or plunging necklines.<sup>2</sup> I mention the recent discussion on *The Philosophy Smoker* because it contains a fascinating compendium of almost 100 comments many of which describe in some detail how a woman ought to present herself as an aspiring philosopher. Although a few participants were clothing anarchists most understood very

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<sup>2</sup> <http://philosophysmoker.blogspot.com/2011/10/request-for-advice-for-women-in.html>  
<http://philosophysmoker.blogspot.com/2011/10/situational-influences-during-job.html>

clearly that it really didn't matter what the individual woman thought about clothing or even whether she thought about clothing. In so far as she was a woman and a philosophy job candidate certain norms applied to her—as I would say—ascriptively simply by virtue of her social position occupancies. These two sets of norms lie in uneasy tension with one another. But, and this is the crucial point, the candidate's gendered norms of attire trump the different norms that attach to her social position as a philosopher. Why? Why isn't it entirely random, which set of norms she ought to follow? Why isn't it up to her to decide which norms to listen to as Mikkola suggests? Why can't she decide to attend to philosophical norms that day as Cudd suggests? My answer is that gender is the mega social role that is prior to, and prioritizes, a social individual's other social roles.

Mikkola has an alternative answer to these questions. She thinks that it is up to the woman to choose which set of norms to listen to, and she suggests that the reason she might attend to gendered clothing norms is because of a prudential calculation: "I would seriously undermine my chances of getting the job were I to bunk the norms." So, she decides to follow them. Mikkola's explanation acknowledges that there are ascriptive social norms in play, but her emphasis falls on the autonomy (or not) of the decision process. While I agree that this is a possible explanation for the sartorial decision, I think it is politically lacking in several respects. First, by couching the decision in terms of rational self-interest the explanation abstracts from the social and political context within which the decision is in one's self-interest. What is in the rational self-interest of the woman is determined by her need to respond in a self-interested way to the norms that govern her life as a woman. Even if she is successful in her instrumental response the fact that she needs to respond to just *those* asymmetrical norms is precisely the problem. And it is a political problem because the gendered appearance norms are in tension with the candidate's professional norms; there is no way to succeed given the current configuration of

social roles. Because while it might go better if you fulfill the dress norms (this is because gender trumps) this option transgresses the philosophical norm that appearance doesn't matter, which you are also evaluable under by virtue of being a job candidate. So, it is a normatively complicated situation with political overtones and not a simple calculation of rational self-interest. To lift the oppression one must alter the norms, either individually or the relations among them, and to alter the norms one must first understand what it is to stand under those norms and who stands under them. But if my decision to wear heels is understood to be in my rational self-interest, and arrived at without interference, then there is no need to undertake a political critique of the social context within which the decision is made. There is no need to notice the tension that arises when social roles clash, and no need to recognize that the problem has nothing to do with "the regulation of my desires, decisions, actions" by anyone in particular. Finally Mikkola's explanation does not identify the problematic aspect of the decision with the individual's gender, as a decision that she makes as a woman. That is, while Mikkola's description of the decision includes the fact that the individual is a woman, her explanation of the decision as being in the woman's rational self-interest does not make gender feature centrally in the explanation. Let me make this point a different way. Men are not in the same situation as women with regard to a tension between their gendered norms of appearance and the dress norms associated with their social positions as philosophers. This is, or should be, an interesting datum for feminist theory and for those concerned about the lack of women and the standing of women in our profession. But it is occluded in Mikkola's proposed explanation.

Gender uniessentialism directs our attention away from individual psychologies, their conscious and unconscious biases, and "deformed" processes of choice, and toward the social world, its available social roles, and the ways in which its available social roles can and cannot blend into a coherent

practical identity. In saying this I do not mean to dismiss or to criticize important feminist work on deformed preferences (Meyers 1989) or to minimize the role of gender schemas (Valarian 1999, 2005) or implicit bias (Banarji and Hardin 1996) in perpetuating discrimination against women.<sup>3</sup> But gender uniessentialism points in another direction, away from a focus on individual psychologies and toward the social world and its normative structure, which defines the conditions of agency for women. So to the frequently voiced question, “Isn’t the point of feminism to give women choices?” my answer is “no, not really.”

The third reason that I think gender uniessentialism is important is that it connects with the experiences of women. I consider the relationship between theory and women’s experiences to be a theoretical and political issue in feminism. I began my book by reporting some widely shared common sense views on gender identity that I encountered while thinking about gender uniessentialism and writing my book. Most people think that they would not be the same individual if they were a different gender. Most people think the question is simple and the answer is obvious. While it is important to note that this widespread belief is not a premise of my argument for gender uniessentialism, it *is* a common opinion in search of an explanation. Gender uniessentialism provides an explanation because the idea that gender is our principle of normative unity is just the claim that one of our social roles is prior to, prioritizes and unifies our other social

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<sup>3</sup> This research is of clear importance in helping to document the complex and persistent nature of discrimination against women. Certainly, situational interventions like friendly intergroup interactions and procedural remedies—like anonymous review of applications, journal submissions, and the like—are useful tools for combating implicit bias in some contexts. It is important to note, however, that these approaches focus on individual psychologies and “the moment-by-moment decisions that disadvantage women” (Valarian, 2005, p. 198).

roles into a practical normative whole. So, on the assumption that a theory about women ought to engage the views of women, gender uniessentialism matters because it engages those views rather than dismissing or minimizing them.

Finally, let me clarify my views on persons and selves, and the relationship between the two. My characterization of persons, as having a first person perspective, is taken from the Kantian and liberal tradition, and I wanted to talk about persons in this sense to make a point about gender essentialism, namely that you cannot express the claim of gender essentialism coherently about persons understood in this way. And I made this point as part of my explanation of why feminist theory needs the idea of a social individual. But, as Mikkola points out, feminists have criticized the Kantian and liberal view of persons by developing relational accounts of autonomy, and it might be the case that a revised, feminist notion of persons would obviate the need for social individuals. In my response to Ann Cudd (below) I explain why I think that the most plausible relational accounts of autonomy, and of persons, are not relational in the full sense required by feminist theory. So, even if we accept a relational account of persons and of autonomy, we would still need the category of social individuals. For more on this topic see my response to Ann Cudd.

Mikkola is unsure about how I view persons and selves. She wonders whether they the same or different. In chapter 5 of *The Metaphysics of Gender* I develop a view of the self in relation to the constitution ontology of human organisms, social individuals and persons laid out in an earlier chapter.<sup>4</sup> A self is a certain kind of person, namely a person who is constituted by a human organism that also constitutes a social

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<sup>4</sup> Imagine Michelangelo’s Pietà: a piece of marble constitutes both a statue (a work of art) and an object of religious veneration. Similarly, on my view, a human organism constitutes both a person and social individual.

individual. So, to be a person and to be a self are different; persons and selves are not interchangeable on my theory. In developing my view I wanted both to acknowledge that selves are capable of self-reflection, and to characterize them as beings that are inevitably (but not essentially) social position occupiers. We reflect about our practical identities. My view connects to, and extends, feminist accounts of relational selves by situating the self in relation to “the social environment of the agent.” (123) But notice that my view accomplishes this by making reference to social individuals, who are essentially social position occupiers.

Earlier feminist work on relational selves emphasizes a relation among and between selves rather than between the self and its social context. In this connection, Sara Ruddick’s project of maternal ethics uses the maternal relationship as a model for imagining ethical relationships in general, and in that way it presupposes a relational view of the self. However, Ruddick also thinks that maternal ethics requires that an individual choose to engage in maternal practice and that the normative requirements follow upon and are conditioned by that choice. So, for Ruddick, it is not by virtue of a woman being socially recognized to be a mother that she is evaluable under maternal norms, but it is a consequence of that woman’s (or that man’s) choice to undertake maternal practices and duties. This is a Kantian view of the basis of normative obligation, which I call “voluntarism” in my book. But, it seems to me that one of the salient features of the relationship between mother and child (or between a caregiver and a dependent more generally) is that the obligation is rooted in the relationship, which is not (always) undertaken voluntarily. Moreover, it seems to me that a mother is evaluable under maternal norms whether or not she chooses to accept that obligation. So, I find a tension in Ruddick’s view between her relational ontology of the self, and her voluntarist account of maternal obligation. My relational theory of the self (as inevitably engaged in the social world) is compatible with, and extends, one aspect of

Ruddick’s view (the relational self) but I do not accept another aspect of her view, namely the voluntarist account of maternal obligation.

### **Response to Ann Cudd**

Ann Cudd agrees with me that we need a principle of normative unity, and that a principle of normative unity is a condition for the possibility of conflicting norms. However, she strongly disagrees that the principle is itself a social role (gender) and she thinks further that normative conflicts like that between gendered dress norms and professional norms of attire supports her view and not mine. When Cudd is entering a professional situation she puts her gendered dress/appearance norms “on hold” and attends to her professional norms, which are not inflected by gender or by any other social role like race or ability/disability unless she chooses to attend to one of them as well. This happens all the time, in fact, and so gender could not be the mega social role as I claim it is. For Cudd the principle of normative unity is the person, and the person decides which social norms to attend to and which to ignore. I will have more to say about persons in a moment, but for now let’s stick with the two accounts of social normativity.

As Cudd sees it we have lots of sets of social norms that we alternately activate and deactivate to govern our behavior. In particular, with regard to the issue of appropriate dress in the context of philosophy, Cudd puts her gendered norms of appropriate attire on hold and activates her philosophical norms to ask “what the (hell) am I going to say?” Cudd adds: “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 put aside the gender norm of appearance in the way I suggest at least some of the time.” I certainly would not use the word “obtuse” in Cudd’s vicinity. And I have no doubt that some of us, some of the time, ignore

gender role expectations, which is, after all, just one way of being responsive to them. The picture Cudd sketches of us picking and choosing when we want to fulfill our gendered social norms or other social roles is very attractive. But if Cudd were right then it would just be a mystery why aspiring women philosophers even have to worry about what to wear for an APA interview besides the basics (wear clothing, no holes). If Cudd were right we should just advise women to put their gendered norms of appropriate attire “on hold” and to concentrate on what to say. The latter, by the way, I would argue also has gendered norms—that govern how to engage in philosophical conversation, whether or not to attend the smoker, whether or not to discuss personal matters like children, how to sit and so on. So, Cudd is right that, given her view of social roles, as a buffet of distinct and unrelated options from which we pick and choose, it would make no sense to claim that one social role is prior to and prioritizes our other social roles. But, if I am right, and whether and which social role applies to one is not up to us but is a matter of social position occupancy and social recognition, then one of our social roles could be our principle of normative unity. If I am right then social roles are less like discrete items on a buffet table and more like a soup or stew with intermingled and mutually inflecting ingredients. And we are not the cooks. Finally, I think there is an internal tension between the “buffet” view of social roles that Cudd endorses here, and her theory of oppression, which includes (as I think it should) an ascriptivist element in the norms associated with social groups. If there is an ascriptivist element then the consequences of group membership and the appropriate instrumental response to group membership are such that one often cannot place that group membership or the associated norm on hold.

Cudd thinks that persons unify their practical agency and she is not happy with my conception of a person, or my conception of autonomy. Let me begin with two points of clarification. I don’t describe persons primarily in terms of

autonomy; rather I describe persons as necessarily having a first person perspective or being capable of self-reflection. And I don’t hold that persons cannot occupy social positions; they can and they do. But persons are not essentially social position occupiers.

Cudd argues that my notion of social individual is redundant because persons are essentially social. Self-reflection requires the ability to reflect and reflection is inherently social: “Reflection, though, is a normative practice that is enabled by language and other social norms such as epistemic and practical reasoning norms.” We need to be clear about what it means to say that persons are essentially social. Cudd thinks that persons are essentially social in the sense that language and practical reasoning are not private or individual enterprises; they require other persons. I don’t think it follows from this that persons are essentially social in the sense that is important to me (and, I would argue, to feminism) namely that persons are essentially social position occupiers. If Cudd had an argument to the effect that to be self-reflective it is necessary that one be social in the full sense of being a social position occupier, then I might be willing to blend the categories of person and social individual but only because persons turn out to be essentially social individuals. But in the absence of such an argument the distinction between social individuals and persons is important because what is significant for feminism is that we are social individuals, that is, social role occupiers, and not that we are persons, that is not that we are self-reflective.

Cudd also argues that persons are necessarily social beings because of what autonomy really is. Autonomy requires a social world and social interactions to develop—a causal point—but it is also constitutively relational. Let me respond with three points. First, of course as an empirical or causal matter, autonomy requires other persons and a social world to develop. Second, as Cudd notes, what is at issue is **not** this empirical or causal claim about the conditions under which

autonomy arises, it is a question about what autonomy is. Third, it is not clear to me that the purely formal dialogic capacity or disposition described by Andrea Westlund as partially constitutive of autonomy (and cited by Cudd) is sufficient to make persons essentially social beings since it is devoid of any particular content.<sup>5</sup> In other words the formal dialogic capacity does not make any essential reference to a social role or identity although it does make reference to a rational capacity to engage with others. So I don't think that Cudd's view of autonomy gives us any additional reason to think that persons are essentially social in the sense of essentially social role occupiers.

Cudd shelves her skepticism about whether or not a mega social role unifies our social agency in order to focus in on my argument that gender, rather than say disability or race, does the job. She comments: "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." And further, in Cudd's case, the norms associated with engendering were not of interest to her at all during much of her life making gender a very poor candidate for being the mega social role.

It is simply not part of my view that women are always obsessing about children. Rather, the engendering function an individual is recognized to have establishes his or her gender, but the social roles of women and men contain many norms that are only tangentially related to the engendering function. For example, there are norms of dress and expression, of posture and behavior, of profession and vocation, of sexuality

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<sup>5</sup> "In my view, autonomy relies (in part) on the disposition to hold oneself answerable to external critical perspectives on one's action-guiding commitments. Autonomy thus requires an irreducibly dialogical form of reflectiveness. But this type of relationality is formal, not substantive, in nature and carries with it no specific value commitments." (Westlund, 2009, 27)

and interpersonal relations. And the fact that many women do not bear and raise children and many men do not beget is compatible with the functional specification of gender, which like all functional definitions is normative and not simply descriptive. The Republican war on women targets our reproductive rights and in doing so it attacks all women; those who have children and those who don't; those who can have children and those who can't; those who want children and those who do not.

However, Cudd is right that gender is not the only candidate for the mega social role. Plausible candidates for being the mega social role are those that inflect most or all of an individual's other social roles synchronically and diachronically. If we simply consider this criterion, as I note in my book, there are other candidates for being the mega social role, like race or sexual orientation. So, although I do argue that there is just one mega social role I think that the general account of social normativity—ascriptivism, and the inflection of one set of social norms by another apply more generally. In addition to this general account of social roles, however, the mega social role has certain distinctive features, namely it is prior to, and prioritizes an individual's other social roles. Let me make an analogy with Aristotle's notion of virtue and the role it plays in a flourishing human life. In some instances virtue will simply trump or be prior to other goods like wealth or honor; in other instances virtue will provide a way of prioritizing other goods and other pursuits. Pleasures are part of a virtuous life if they are moderate; money making must be compatible with generosity. So in the example discussed earlier of a job interview, in which professional philosophical norms are called for, we find that gender norms of attire trump or are prior to professional philosophical disdain for appearances.

In what follows I focus on disability as a candidate for the mega social role, noting that disability is a complex phenomenon and I am sure I can't do it justice here. In my

theory the mega social role is prior to, and prioritizes an individual's other social roles. Given this description of the mega social role, let me raise a few questions about disability in relation to the prioritizing function. First, disability (like race) is a "gappy" social category; some claim that disability as a social category has only existed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it is unclear how pervasive it is in cultures. Second, even in our culture today, the category refers to multiple conditions of very different types and of very different durations. Some disabilities might inflect an individual's other social roles only modestly, and some might be of relatively brief temporal duration. Other disabilities might be lifelong and minor or severe and temporary. For these reasons it is difficult to see how there could be a social role of disability with a set of norms that could perform the prioritizing function of the mega social role. It seems to make more sense to think that disability refers to many different social roles with many different norms. So, it seems to me that in a society like ours social roles like race or disability obviously do inflect an individual's other social roles—they matter socially—without being the mega social role.

### Response to Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir

Ásta Kristjana Sveinsdóttir thinks that the way I distinguish human organisms, social individuals and persons licenses an open-ended process of ontological multiplication. It might be hard to fit the trinity of human organism, social individual and person into an armchair, but what if we add the student, the blogger, the fashionista? As Sveinsdóttir notes, things are getting crowded. And, she wonders, aren't human organisms, social individuals and persons all agents? This seems redundant. But is it really? I think we need a category of social individuals to ground the normativity of our social agency, which is ascriptive and requires social recognition. Now my argument might not persuade Sveinsdóttir, who thinks that human organisms are agents of the right kind, or

Cudd, who thinks that persons are agents of the right kind, but a central argument for the existence of social individuals is that social agency and its normative structure is importantly different from both natural normativity (if there is such a thing) and ethical normativity, which pre-supposes a voluntarist account of obligation. This point is relevant to Sveinsdóttir's overpopulation worry that every time an individual occupies a social position, a new thing pops into existence. When a social individual occupies the social role of being a student or being a fashionista, she becomes responsive to and evaluable under new sets of norms, but they are social norms and not norms of an essentially different kind. So the argument that I make to differentiate human organisms, social individuals and persons is not applicable to these examples, and my trinitarian ontology does not license open-ended ontological multiplication of the kind Sveinsdóttir envisions.

Sveinsdóttir also wonders about the aptness of the Aristotelian model I use to introduce the notion of unessentialism—the idea that a functional essence organizes and arranges a heap of material parts into an individual, like an artifact or an organism. For example, the sheltering function organizes bricks and boards into a shelter, a house. Similarly I argue that a functional essence, the socially recognized engendering function (or the gender) unifies a heap of social role occupancies into an individual, a social individual. There are important differences of course; for example, the kind of unity in one case is physical and spatial, and in the other case it is normative and temporal. But Sveinsdóttir points out an additional difference, namely that the sheltering function defines what a house is but the engendering function does not define what a social individual is. This observation is partly right and partly wrong. It is partly right because on my view a social individual is an agent. An agent is capable of intentional behavior, capable of entertaining goals (singly and in groups) and figuring out how to achieve them, and capable of acting from a standpoint

or perspective. So there is more to what a social individual is than the engendering function. However, relative to the organization of actual societies, social individuals are essentially gendered. So, relative to the way societies are actually organized, the engendering function is part of the definition of a social individual. It might be worth noting that there is an ambiguity in the phrase 'defines what an x is'. It could refer to x's ontological type (x is an artifact; x is a social individual) or it could refer to x's specific kind (x is a house; x is a woman). So, here is the full analogy. Just as the house function is unessential to the house, which is an artifact, so her engendering function is unessential to the woman, who is a social individual.

Finally, like Cudd, Sveinsdóttir thinks that I make too much of the engendering function. First, Sveinsdóttir is concerned about all the people who are not "breeders"? Aren't they social individuals? Yes, they are and here is how. Functional definitions are normative and not descriptive so all the folks who are not breeders (who don't breed, or who can't breed) still count as social individuals. A celibate priest, for example, has a socially recognized engendering function even though he might never perform that function. Second, Sveinsdóttir asks: don't we use other markers for gender all the time--like dress or presence of body parts or perceived sexual orientation? I completely agree with Sveinsdóttir that when (or if) we are "tracking" someone's gender we might use "presence of body parts, presumed sexual orientation, self-presentation or the like" as signs or clues. But I don't see that as incompatible with the role I assign the socially recognized engendering function as establishing an individual's gender. It is important to distinguish the wide array of culturally variable markers for gender and what it is that makes an individual a man or a woman, namely that individual's socially recognized engendering function. As Kripke pointed out there is a difference in principle between the contingent features that we use to pick out an individual and what is essential to that individual. (e.g. the meter bar in

Paris and the length of a meter)

### Conclusion

I want to end my response by picking up on a question that Ann Cudd broached about the possibility for social change if the picture that I sketch of our gendered existence is right. She asks whether oppression is intrinsic to gender as I understand it, and how (or whether) I think it is possible to extricate ourselves from oppressive norms. Especially since, as Cudd puts it: "Social individuals are always norm takers, it seems to me, never norm makers." Well, I am optimistic and I think there is room in my theory for optimism. First, I don't think that engendering and the relations that flow from it are necessarily asymmetrical although I do think that they have been historically, and are currently, oppressive to women. Right now they are getting worse in the United States. But they need not deteriorate and could improve depending upon how we meet the current political challenge.

Second, progressive change is possible even though social individuals are not gender norm makers (though they can be and are norm resisters and critics). Change in social roles, and change in the possible configurations of social roles, in my view, is primarily material and institutional and only secondarily a change in individual psychologies. To end with a positive example, I think the political fight for gay marriage is changing the institution of marriage and the nature of family in ways that will have a positive ripple effect on the possible social roles and possible constellations of social roles that will be available to us in the future.

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