Social Goodness: On the Ontology of Social Norms, by Charlotte Witt

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I. Introduction

Charlotte Witt covers a remarkable amount of ground in this concise and elegantly written book. Coming in at under 150 pages, she artfully weaves together Aristotle's theory of functions with contemporary work on cultural transmission and apprenticeship, ideas about self-creation with theories of aspiration and transformative experience, and reflections on the relationships among social norms and games with thoughts about social roles and the nature of hierarchy. At the heart of it is an elaboration and defense of a thoroughly externalist account of social normativity. Witt takes skilled experts, especially artisans like chefs and carpenters, as paradigm cases for theorizing about social normativity. She uses them to argue that the ultimate source of many normative obligations is found not in the acquiescence, attitudes, or any other features internal to those on whom those obligations fall. Rather, the demands are rooted in the world itself, and flow from specific circumstances, especially from the constraints those circumstances impose on different actors in virtue of the tasks they need to perform. The result is a view that depicts social normativity not just as external to individuals but also unavoidably role specific; what is right for a chef is not necessarily right for a carpenter, and what makes for a good nurse might make for a poor drill sergeant. Witt's presentation of this package of ideas is both careful and austere, and it makes for a wonderfully thought provoking read. *Social Goodness: On the Ontology of Social Norms* will reward the careful attention of anyone interested in social ontology, especially the metaphysical foundations of normativity, the nature of social norms, and the relationship between social roles and the self.

II. Overview

The book is broken up into 7 chapters together with a short Preface and Epilogue. The first chapter introduces what Witt calls the "great puzzle" of social norms. Each of the next three chapters defends a key facet of her externalist position, showing how it has the resources to solve the puzzle, often by arguing that it performs better along various dimensions than the internalist alternatives she criticizes. With the more developed version of her own view in hand, Witt turns in the second half of the book to potential challenges. Chapters are devoted to the tension between imitating or blindly complying with social norms and the ability and insight needed to criticize them; to the putative paradox of a person being able to create a genuinely new self out of materials they do not in some sense already possess; and to the social *badness* evident in many social norms, especially those associated with social roles that are organized hierarchically.

Witt's point of departure is a question expressed by Elizabeth Anderson (2000, 191), who wonders about social norms "why people obey them, even when it is not in their self-interest to do so" and asks, "how do shared standards of conduct ever acquire their normativity to begin with?" Where do the "oughts" that prescribe how to be a good chef, a good carpenter, or a good mother come from, what gives the norms that attend to those social roles their normative oomph and authority? Exacerbating the puzzle is that this oomph and authority is often naturally thought of (by Western philosophers anyway) as coming from within. Individuals can decide to accept and comply with one social norm, while choosing to reject or violate another. But other times the demands of social norms seem to be imposed on us from some source external to ourselves.

Witt puts her cards on the table upfront: she defends a strictly externalist position according to which "our preferences, endorsements, or attitudes are not the source of normativity of the social norms we stand under" (Witt 2023, 2), and whose "core insight" is "that in some circumstances the structure of an enterprise or activity can bring with it normative demands quite independently of the attitudes of those who engage with it." (ibid 9). Externalism roots "social normativity in the social world itself, in its positions, institutions, and larger architecture" (9). Witt's externalism is broad and allows that the sources of normativity can be found not just in external features of person's concrete, physical circumstances, but also in features of their social world—the particular roles, positions and social circumstances in which they find themselves. This equips the view with resources to account for cases in which a person is bound by a norm—subject, in some sense, to its authority and normative oomph—without ever having chosen or endorsed it, and even despite actively preferring they weren't. It seems clear that these cases are rampant in the social world. It is true of many norms that apply to bakers and carpenters, as well as norms for women, Asian Americans, and intersectional categories like working class Black men.

The components of Witt's externalist view developed over the next several chapters center on her artisanal model. It is accompanied by a supporting cast of ideas, including an Aristotelian account of function along with notions of apprenticeship, mentorship, expertise, and technique. Lurking in the background is her notion of a social role and the ascriptivist view of social role occupancy defended in her previous book (Witt 2011).

On the artisanal model, social roles have associated activities or functions which are the source of their normativity. Performing those functions (baking a croissant, building a doorframe) typically requires techniques, the skilled ways of doing or producing that are associated with the role. A person's execution of those techniques in any instance is subject to assessment according to standards. Those standards are the social norms that a person becomes, in Witt's useful locution, *responsive to* and *evaluable under* once they come to occupy the role. Such norms cannot be totally arbitrary or completely subject to choices or attitudes. For example, whether a doorframe is a good one or a bad one, and so whether the person who made it was in that instance a good or bad carpenter, is not purely a matter of anyone's decision or endorsement. Rather, the goodness (or lack thereof) of the doorframe is largely a matter of something external to us, something about *doorframes*. If it does what it's supposed to do—something like support reliable entry and exit from a room— then the carpenter who built it was a good one. They will have executed the techniques and complied with the social norms that enable the successful performance of carpentry.

Occupants of a social role can also gain and convey expertise with respect to its associated techniques and norms. On Witt's account, "Expertise is an individual's ability or power to be

responsive to the norms that constitute a technique (or set of techniques) in their actions as they engage in the normatively evaluable practices pertaining to a social role" (2023, 72). Experts in artisanal roles, like expert bakers, have attained high levels of both the know-how and know-why concerning the functions they perform. The best will be able to not just execute the relevant techniques and fluently comply with the relevant norms, but will be able to teach them to others, often while innovating and improving on them.

This is a plausible picture for Witt's core cases. Ultimately, however, she aims for her account to generalize, capturing not just artisans like bakers and carpenters, but also the social normativity attached to gender, racial, and other social positions.

We next consider three questions Witt's account raised for us. They connect to its explanatory target, the scope of the model, and how the model theorizes norm change.

III. The Explanatory Target

Witt signals early in the first chapter, and notes throughout the book, that she is not interested in causal answers to the core questions about the source of the "oomph" or authority of social normativity and does not take herself to providing any. While a causal account of social norms might explain why people *do* what they in fact do, or predict what they are likely to do in different situations, they cannot speak to the question Witt is concerned with, which is why they *should*. Thus, whatever exactly is meant by the suggestive terms "normative oomph" (which Witt (2023, 2) takes from Brennan et al 2013, 24), it must be distinct from something like "motivational oomph". Witt is not interested in a psychological story that would answer the question of why people obey social norms by appealing to characteristics of their cognitive or affective systems (e.g. Kelly 2020; also see, Bicchieri et al 2023, Kelly and Setman 2020). Such a proximate psychological explanation would be straightforwardly causal. Her setting aside of causal explanations would seem to imply that she is also uninterested in ultimate explanations of social normativity that appeal to evolutionary histories, whether they be biological or cultural.

We found this distinction initially intuitive but more puzzling upon reflection. Perhaps in the background is a more general view concerning different forms of explanation, and the limits and proper domains of application of each. On the one hand there may be "horizontal" explanations that account for changes to phenomena by appealing to causal relations among a range of relevant factors over time. On the other hand, disjoint from those, may be "vertical" explanations that account for features of the world by discovering relations that hold between different properties understood to sit at different levels of reality. We would have liked more clarity on this issue, as the relationship between analytic metaphysics, including social ontology, and the social and behavioral sciences remains hotly debated (Epstein 2015, Ross 2023). It would have been particularly useful in light of Witt's embrace of Kim Sterelny's (2012) apprenticeship model, which is itself not just empirical, but straightforwardly evolutionary and steeped in causal claims about the nature of cultural transmission, the psychology of learning and pedagogy, the feedback loops of influence that hold between actors and their constructed niches, etc.

Perhaps related to this was some puzzlement we had about cases of, for lack of a better term, bad social norms (c.f. Thrasher 2018). Witt is clear that in general she thinks social norm "oughts" *really are* normative, that is, they have a distinctive and genuine normative oomph and we really should

follow them. It remained unclear to us if and how her view might admit of cases of illusory normativity, though. For example, it could be that many people in a particular role really and truly believe or feel as if they ought to follow some prevalent but bad social norm, say a pernicious one concerning genders and body types. They might also very well be criticized or otherwise diminished by others for not following it. In such a case, is there a real "ought" there, a genuine normative obligation? Or does it just seem like there is? A causal story can be told about the provenance and spread of such bad social norms, along with the psychology of those who accept and enforce them. But that is not the kind of explanation Witt is interested in. Perhaps if there are some genuine social norm "oughts", then in oppressive cases like these there is only the apparent pull of one. It would be interesting to see how an account of such cases would work.

IV. What Can the Model Capture?

The artisanal model is particularly useful for understanding social norms attached to roles like electrician, baker, and teacher. We have doubts about how well it might be extended to cover cases like race, gender, and class.

To begin, it will be useful to consider artisanal roles and their interrelations in larger social structures. As we noted above, on Witt's account, artisanal roles are associated with certain activities and functions. For instance, the baker bakes bread; the electrician installs and maintains electrical systems in homes and buildings. Many artisanal roles are situated in a larger system aimed at shared work and a shared end. As Witt puts it "[t]he artisanal model depicts social roles as holistic both ontologically and normatively" (2023, 122). For instance, electricians, plumbers, contractors, and others collaborate to build houses and other structures. In thinking through how to understand these holistic interrelations, we envisage a functional and normative connective tissue between social roles. Individuals come to occupy these roles as they collaborate on a particular project—like building a new house. Across town, another team, with different people playing the same types of roles, might be collaborating to build a different house. These are two teams of artisans carrying out work on two distinct projects (see Ritchie, 2020).

Consider now social structures that position people according to race, gender, sexuality, or class. Theorists often emphasize not only that such roles involve interrelations among one another, but that those relations are typically hierarchical and oppressive (Mills, 1998, Ch 3; Haslanger, 2000; Ásta, 2018). We also think that such roles involve several features that further distinguish them from the electrician and the plumber or the structure of a housebuilding team. First, while it is clear what activity or function a plumber carries out, it is far less clear what or whether there is an activity or function or set of techniques attached to the position of, say, woman or Asian person. While some theorists of race, gender, and class are quick to point out that many roles and relations between them function to support oppressors (e.g., Fields, 1982; Mills, 1998), this function is one we take to be best understood as had by the larger system, rather than by individual positions within a structure. Further, while on our understanding a team with a representative carpenter, plumber, electrician, etc. work together to build a house, that does not seem to be an apt way to understand the arrangement of positions in a racial or gender social structure. It is not as if there is a representative Asian person, Black person, white person, and so on who all work together to collaborate on some activity. Rather, racial, gender, class, and other structures position the larger populace into categories. The sorts of structures involved when thinking about particular artisans (like bakers training up apprentices) or teams of artisans (like the group collaborating to build a

house) are, it seems to us, crucially different than the sorts of broad structures that position us all into social identity groups (see Ritchie, 2020).

So, we wonder just how well an account that begins with artisanal roles and their associated activities and functions can generalize to the broader set of social roles that infuse our world with social normativity. We think Witt might appeal to her earlier work on gender uniessentialism (2011) to account for a function of roles like woman, and we'd welcome seeing the connection explored further. However, even if this account can address our concern in relation to gender, we wonder whether a similar account can handle other social categories like race, class, and the multitude of intersectional categories.

V. Changing Norms

Finally, we want to consider the externalist perspective on criticizing and changing social norms. One virtue Witt stresses about the artisanal model is that it can shed light on how individuals who are bound by social norms can criticize them. Indeed, she argues they are often in a better position to do so than others. For example, an expert baker is in a better position to criticize various norms about their work because they know how to carry out the activity, not just in theory but in actual practice. They will thus possess the understanding to innovate—to break, criticize and perhaps ultimately improve norms and the techniques they govern. As Witt puts it "the 'practical expertise' developed by habituation can enable critical reflection rather than only stifling it" (ibid., 88). She goes on to argue that those with expertise "are often the source of the most telling normative critique and the best normative innovation" (ibid). Once again, when focused on the artisans like bakers, we agree with Witt that expertise can express itself in productive criticism, but we are less confident about other cases.

Consider the role of expertise in criticizing social norms that attach to a different family of roles—like woman, Asian person, or intersectional positions like Black working class men—and the social norms of larger systems like gender or racial hierarchies. Does expertise in the techniques and norms associated with the woman social role position one to criticize particular norms, or the entire systems of norms, more clearly or pointedly? It seems to us that it does not (see also Lepold, ms, for a similar concern).

First, when thinking about larger structures of interacting positions within a social structure—like those in racial, gender, and intersectional structures—there are cases in which one does not need to be an expert or even to play a particular role to insightfully criticize some of the role's social norms. For instance, women who are feminists can and do criticize patriarchal norms related to being men. They are not themselves men, so they lack the expertise one could gain through playing the role of man. Nevertheless, it seems that women are often very well positioned to criticize e.g. norms of toxic masculinity. Perhaps here Witt would say that cases like these involve a different form of criticism, like moral criticism. If so, it would be fruitful to draw out how social norms are criticized in various ways and how expertise does or does not facilitate various forms of criticism.

Second, in some circumstances becoming an expert in a role can *disincentivize* criticism. Consider a newly hired tenure-track professor, still learning the various norms related their role. Over time, they will gain expertise in professorial activities, both the know-how and know-why concerning the techniques and attendant norms. Imagine that early on the young TT-professor recognizes injustices in the faculty system and its relations to graduate students and administrators, but decides it is better

to keep their head down and work towards gaining expertise in the role. They are awarded tenure and move up the ladder. They continue to see various ways norms ought to be changed, but thinking they need to gain expertise in each new role, they continue keeping their head down. They make Professor, then become Dean. At each step they refrained from criticizing, instead focusing on gaining expertise. Are they in a better position to criticize from their role in upper administration? It is certainly clear that the incentive structure of their role they occupy at the top of a hierarchy will not reward criticism of an entire structure. Perhaps they are well positioned to criticize, but unlikely to do so? Similarly, we take it, if one becomes an expert in the social norms of womanhood, motherhood, or a racialized role the incentives to "play along" might be such that one's expertise impedes rather than facilitates wholesale criticism of the role or larger social structure of roles and positions. Again, the extension of the artisanal model to these other types of social roles and norms left us with questions about its generalizability. Why think—to put it in a loaded way— indoctrination will enable criticism of oppressive norms?

VI. Conclusion

Witt bookends her discussion with a Preface and an Epilogue, and each contains an analogy used to illuminate broad features of social normativity. At the back end, she builds her closing remarks around the image of a birdcage. She reflects on the fact (beautifully described in a quotation from Marilyn Frye) that while cages are equivocally constraining—their very point is to restrict freedom— their power to contain can be misunderstood if viewed through the wrong lens. Too tight a focus can be puzzling because it misses the bigger picture. Any single wire of a cage, considered up close and in isolation, appears to be no obstacle at all; it will look like you can just go around it. But obviously cages confine not in virtue of any one of their wires but rather the intersecting network of them.

Likewise, it can be hard to appreciate the power of social norms unless one is able to see them—and see them not just one by one, but as complex networks of interwoven rules, virtually inescapable and regulating nearly every facet of our lives. Like the wires of a cage, social norms can limit individual freedom in ways that are easily missed, especially when the relationships between different social norms and the social roles they attach to are unfair and harmful, stabilizing unjust status hierarchies. Witt accepts this point, but objects that the cage analogy is misleading on other grounds. On her view, it focuses too much on confinement and restriction, obscuring the many important ways that social norms enable and empower.

This has been a main theme of the book, and to help reiterate it here, Witt calls back to where she began, with the familiar parable of one fish asking another how the water is, and the second fish replying, "What the hell is water?" This alternative analogy suits Witt's position better. It too highlights that social norms are so pervasive as to easily fall beneath notice, but with the subtle twist that nearly every aspect of our social lives is *predicated* on them. There would be no fish activities or fish lives without water; likewise, there would be no human activities or human lives without social norms. Moreover, water is not weighed down by the connotations of confinement that are central to how we think about cages and rules. This is consonant with the main virtues of Witt's artisanal model, which is not fixated on the restrictive aspect of social norms, but rather showcases their deep connection to technique and expertise, their role in coordinating social interactions, directing attention, guiding and refining skilled action. The view puts front and center how social norms are enabling and empowering, giving shape to our social worlds and making possible many of the more sophisticated things that we do.

But like all analogies, this one is imperfect, too. Another of the connotations associated with water is that it is uniform. The Lake Michigan water that one fish swims through near Milwaukee is essentially the same stuff as the water than another fish swims through near the Mackinaw City, and the fish in Milwaukee is affected and enabled by water in basically the same way the fish near Mackinaw City is. Another of the virtues of Witt's approach is that it cuts directly against this way of thinking about social norms. Much theorizing about social norms takes as paradigmatic rules that apply to everyone in a community, regardless of the specific social roles they occupy: drive on the left hand side of the road, use the small fork for the salad, cover your nose when you sneeze. When in doubt, conforming to behaviors common across a community will be the most promising way to avoid incurring sanction for a violation. Social norms that deviate from this kind of one-size-fits-all uniformity are then treated as special cases requiring additional explanation.

According to Witt's artisanal model, though, social normativity is "always local" (2023, 15), always rooted in the particulars of specific social roles in contexts and the distinct circumstances and demands that fall on individuals who occupy them. Social norms that are impartial, impersonal, and apply to everyone uniformly regardless of social role become the exceptions in need of further explanation, an implication that is plausible and also suggests interesting points of overlap with more empirical approaches to norms (Henrich 2020, also see Birch 2021). While we don't have any better analogies to offer that would unite all the distinctive virtues of Witt's approach in a single image, we are happy to report that her *Social Goodness* does a lovely job of making the case for all of them in a single book.

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