

*Social Goodness: The Ontology of Social Norms.* BY CHARLOTTE WITT (New York: Oxford University Press, 2023. Pp. xi + 145. Price £ 54.)

Charlotte Witt's finely crafted book offers an original and powerful account of social role normativity revolving around Aristotle's conception of function. A further but no less important aim of the book is to address the dispute between internalists and externalists about social role normativity and to defend externalism. This is a beautiful and enlightening book, a must-read for any social ontologist.

In a nutshell, Witt argues that the source of normativity of a social role is the social function associated with it, and analyses the functions performed by artisans and skilled experts as paradigmatic cases to illuminate the normativity of social roles more generally. Following Aristotle, she proposes that artisans and skilled experts—such as carpenters, chefs and flautists—perform functions—such as building chairs, baking cakes or playing a melody. Witt analyses these functions in terms of shared techniques that these individuals learn through a process of habituation and imitation, and must master to gain expertise in their fields. Accordingly, artisans and skilled experts are 'responsive to' and 'evaluable under' the standards of excellence for the use of these techniques, where standards are always historically, culturally and materially situated, and should not be understood as merely instrumental but as constitutive of the identities of these persons. Such standards of excellence are—for Witt—the social norms that inform the roles of artisans and skilled experts. Witt submits that this account of social role normativity can be generalised to many or most social roles, including gender and race. This is so because, in her view, these roles are also associated with social functions that can be described in terms of appropriate 'techniques of living' or 'ways of being human' accompanied by standards of excellence.

According to the helpful framework that Witt outlines in her book, internalists about social role normativity hold that the source of normativity of the role norms under which a subject S stands is S himself or herself—specifically, S’s preferences, acts of self-legislation or intersubjective agreements. This means that S is subject to norm N only if S prefers, self-legislates or intersubjectively agrees on N’s validity. Externalists conversely root social role normativity in the social world itself—for example, its positions or institutions. This means that S is subject to a norm N exclusively by virtue of his or her social position or membership in an institution, independently of S’s attitudes towards N. Witt characterises her account of social role normativity as externalist. For it assumes that the obligations and entitlements of a social role typically depend on the social function one has by virtue of the social position one occupies, regardless of one’s attitudes towards such obligations and enablements.

Witt’s relatively short book is divided into seven chapters along with a preface and an epilogue. The first chapter introduces the themes and problems investigated in the book and offers reasons in support of the thesis that there is a specifically social form of normativity distinct from, for example, moral and practical or prudential normativity. The second chapter analyses the internalism/externalism dispute about social role normativity by outlining a basic taxonomy of internalist and externalist positions, and delivers a battery of arguments against internalism and in support of externalism. Not all of these arguments appear persuasive—I return to this below. Since the dichotomy internalism/externalism has been lingering in social ontology for some time without explicit discussion, this part can be extremely useful to the scholars in the field, regardless of their inclination towards internalism or externalism. The third chapter is pivotal, as it articulates the artisanal model for social role normativity analysing Aristotle’s notion of function in terms of technique and expertise. It also distinguishes this model from other externalist models and argues for its superiority. The fourth chapter elaborates on the notions at the basis of this model and contends that they

require a more complex social ontology and richer explanatory resources than those provided by methodological individualism. Chapter five uses the artisanal model to explain both the resistance to change typical of social roles and our capacity to criticise and change social role norms. Witt intriguingly argues that the very normatively conservative process of habituation and imitation through which artisanal techniques are transmitted in form of knowledge-how and knowledge-why offers a basis for our capacity to criticise and change social role norms. Chapter six uses the artisanal model to explain our ability to create ourselves. Particularly, it contends that the artisanal model—but not other externalist or internalist models—gives a response to the paradox of self-creation, which asks how it is that we can normatively create ourselves with norms that are genuinely new to us. The seventh chapter broadens the focus to the bigger picture of how social roles are ontologically and normatively intertwined in the social fabric. It contends that the artisanal model can illuminate the hierarchical and oppressive structure of certain social roles, including those gendered and racialised. It also argues that oppressive and hierarchical relations are not necessary features of the artisanal model, which leaves open the possibility of non-hierarchical and non-oppressive relations among social roles.

Despite its numerous merits, Witt's thought-provoking book is also open to criticism. Let me outline two of the concerns that may cross the reader's mind (as they have crossed mine). One minor problem relates to the paucity of examples. Witt insists that the scope of her model is broad, covering mega-social roles such as gender and race. We can easily think about what kind of social functions and 'techniques' may be associated with gender roles. In patriarchal societies, for instance, one specific function of women is to raise children, which involves a set of 'techniques' that women must master (e.g., regarding how to feed and dress children in different contexts). Yet it is harder to think about functions and 'techniques'

associated with race roles. Examples of the application of Witt's model and more discussion would have helped in this case.

A more serious problem afflicts Witt's rejection of internalism. Witt's central argument holds that internalism, unlike externalism, cannot account for standard cases of role non-conformity behaviour. Suppose subject S, with role R, does not do what is required by norm N, associated with R, because S *rejects* N. Witt argues that for the internalist, S is no longer subject to N's normativity because S does not prefer, self-legislate, or intersubjectively agree on the validity of N. Hence, the internalist cannot meaningfully claim that S does not conform to R, which is counterintuitive. (Think of lecturer S who does not lecture because S rejects the related social role norm—we would conclude that S is a role non-conformer.) However, Witt does not consider the following reply that an internalist could provide: once S has acquired—and so accepted—role R, S has *committed* to respecting the norms associated with R. If S then does not do what required by N because S rejects N, S still remains committed to N. This is why the internalist can meaningfully claim that S does not conform to R.