Gender Essentialisms

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Abstract

Charlotte Witt has argued that gender is essential to women and men, in a way that unifies them as social individuals but precludes each of them from being identified with the corresponding person or human organism. We respond to Witt's modal and normative arguments for this view, and we argue that they fail to support anything stronger than a moderate version of kind essentialism, which generally allows women and men to be identified with people. We finish by pointing out that several of Witt's central claims about gender roles and gender norms could be endorsed while rejecting her ontology of coincident individuals.

Keywords: gender, essentialism, identity, coincidence, social kinds, social roles, social norms, social ontology, Charlotte Witt

1. Introduction

In *The Metaphysics of Gender*, Charlotte Witt (2011) argues that gender is, in her terms, "unification essential" or "uniessential" to social individuals. While essentialism about gender is often seen as contrary to feminist goals, according to Witt, her *gender uniessentialism* is actually useful to feminism, as it draws our attention to oppressive gender norms, thus enabling us to effectively oppose them. Yet, as she explains, her view also implies that gendered social individuals such as women and men are not identical to people or human organisms.

In this paper we challenge the plausibility of Witt's gender uniessentialism. As it turns out, her arguments fail to support anything stronger than a moderate version of kind essentialism, which generally allows women and men to be identified with people. Excessive multiplications of coincident entities have been all too common in recent social metaphysics, but as will be illustrated here, they can usually be resisted by means of the familiar observation that a concrete entity or group can simultaneously belong to two or more different kinds. (For further critiques of this phenomenon, see Landman [1989], Searle [2003], López de Sa [2007], Hawley [2017], Ludwig [2017, chap. 11], Horden and López de Sa [2021], and Loets [2021].) Here we won't seek to decisively establish the default view that women and men are identical

to people, but we will argue that no compelling reason has been provided to give it up.

Accordingly, we begin our discussion by presenting Witt's gender uniessentialism, with its consequence that each gendered social individual is numerically distinct from the corresponding person as well as from the corresponding human organism (section 2). By way of contrast, we then present a minimal version of gender essentialism, that is, *gender kind essentialism*, which has no such ontologically inflationary consequence. This latter form of essentialism strikes us as harmless enough, and perhaps even unavoidable, once it is clearly dissociated from the stronger and more objectionable doctrines that have traditionally brought gender essentialism into disrepute (section 3).

In support of her uniessentialism, Witt contends that social individuals, persons, and human organisms exhibit modal differences in their persistence and identity conditions, and hence are distinct. Elaborating on a worry previously raised by Ásta Sveinsdóttir (Ásta 2012), we contend that such arguments generally conflate ideas about the essences of *individuals* with ideas about the essences of the *kinds* to which they belong (section 4). Witt (2012), however, has subsequently clarified that her overall argument for the distinctness of social individuals, persons, and human organisms was not meant to be purely modal but also *normative* in character, involving the essentially different norms to which she takes those three kinds of individuals to be subject. Accordingly, we consider such a normative rendering of her argument and argue that it also fails to support gender uniessentialism, with its implied proliferation of entities (section 5).

More positively, we emphasize that several of Witt's key claims about gender roles and gender norms are compatible with rejecting her gender uniessentialism. These claims may yield a specific and debatable account of gender kinds, but they do not require her trinitarian ontology of coincident individuals (section 6). We thus conclude that what is of value in Witt's account of gender may be endorsed without joining her in denying that gendered social individuals such as women and men are identical to people.

2. Uniessentialism
Witt's project concerns *individual essentialism*, the idea of a property being the essence of a particular individual, as opposed to a kind; where the essence of an individual is, as she puts it, "a property or characteristic that makes an individual the individual that it is" (Witt 2011, 5). (Where an *individual*, presumably, is just a particular thing of any kind whatsoever, which unlike a kind itself, has no instances or members.) However, as Witt subsequently clarifies, this initial characterization can be understood in at least two different ways. According to *identity essentialism*, an individual's essence is a property that is necessary and sufficient for being that very

individual at any time or in any possible world. But this familiar Kripkean idea is not the one that is involved in Witt's version of gender essentialism. The relevant alternative version of individual essentialism, according to her, originates with Aristotle:

> For Aristotle the question "what is it?" asked of an individual substance expands into a question about the unity and organization of material parts into a new individual. . . .
> . . . Aristotle explains why a new individual exists at all over and above the sum of its material constituents or parts. (Witt 2011, 6)

The idea is this. Some individuals are new things, numerically distinct from the mere sums of their material parts. To ask for the essence of such a thing is to request an explanation for how its material parts are unified and organized so as to yield a *new* and *distinct* thing. Hence the label *unification essentialism*, or *uniessentialism* for short.

Thus when a property is uniessential to an individual, *the very existence* of that individual is generated and explained by the instantiation of the property in question; hence that individual is numerically distinct from anything whose existence is independent of whether that property is instantiated. For instance, a particular tiger is not merely a sum of body parts; rather, some uniessential property explains how those parts are unified into the new thing that is the tiger. Thus, on this Aristotelian conception, many individual tigers may be thought to have the very same unifying essence (concerning their biological function), in contrast with identity essentialism, which would assign a different individual essence (concerning its origin, perhaps) to each individual tiger (see Witt 2011, 12, 16).

So far we have spoken passively of the *instantiation* of the uniessential property. But what does the instantiating, according to uniessentialism? At first, the answer might seem obvious: if a certain property is the essence of a particular individual, then it is a property of that same individual. However, while discussing her Aristotelian examples of organisms and artefacts, Witt instead suggests that, in these cases, it is the relevant material parts that (collectively) instantiate the uniessential property and *thereby* generate the new individual.

For instance, we are told that "a relational property that orders all of the individual parts into a functional unity . . . is the uniessence of the organism; it is by virtue of realizing a particular function that the parts of an organism are unified into an individual" (Witt 2011, 12). Similarly, "it is because these bricks and boards (or these windows and doors) realize the function of providing shelter to humans and animals that an individual house exists" (15); hence, "the uniessential properties of the house are functional properties that are realized in and by its material parts" (16).

Yet it can hardly be denied that the property that is alleged to be the uniessence of a house—that is, functioning to shelter humans and animals—is also a property of the house itself. So, although not fully explicit in Witt's presentation, the view that she actually attributes to Aristotle, and endorses herself, must be that the house's uniessence is instantiated *twice over*: primarily by its relevant parts, collectively, and derivatively by the house itself; and likewise for other artefacts and organisms. Thus Witt avoids the circularity of saying that each house or tiger is brought into existence by its own instantiation of its uniessential property. (This would be to illicitly presuppose what is to be explained—i.e., the existence of *that thing*—in the course of supposedly explaining it. See Witt [1989, 121–22], although her way of avoiding such circularity on behalf of Aristotle is different there.) Instead it can be said, without circularity, that the building materials or body parts collectively instantiate the relevant functional property and, by this means, produce the existence of *something else*, such as an individual house or tiger, which as a result has the same property (see Cohen 1992).

Still, in contrast to how organisms and artefacts are theorized here, the essence of being a student is not uniessential to any individual student. As Witt herself acknowledges (2011, chap. 4; 2012, 8), the essence of being a student is not a property whose instantiation makes it the case that a new individual comes into existence, beyond what was already there. Rather, when this property is instantiated, an independently existing individual goes through a certain phase, that of being a student, usually for a limited period of time; and likewise for the head of the department and other paradigmatic social roles.

Things are admittedly more controversial in the case of artefacts, and this will help to bring out the contrast between uniessentialism and the milder forms of essentialism to be considered shortly. Consider again Witt's introductory example of a house. If the property of *functioning to shelter humans and animals* is uniessential to a given house, then *the very existence of that house* is generated, and its unity is explained, by the instantiation of this property by the house's relevant material parts. On this view, the house is *numerically distinct* from both its material parts and their sum, which exist independently of the instantiation of this property. This contrasts with the view that contingently instantiating such a functional property is necessary and sufficient for an independently existing object—a sum of building materials, say—to be a house.

Similarly, consider a stone that is used as a paperweight. *Functioning to keep loose papers in place*, say, is uniessential to the paperweight only if that paperweight is numerically distinct from anything that exists independently of the instantiation of that property, including the stone. So uniessentialism would here prevent the paperweight from being identified with the stone that is used as, well, a paperweight. This contrasts with the view that contingently instantiating the property of

functioning to keep loose papers in place is necessary and sufficient for an independently existing stone to be a paperweight.

According to Witt's gender uniessentialism, *genders* are uniessential to social individuals, where genders are social positions defined in terms of the socially mediated reproductive functions of those individuals (2011, 29). So, assuming that "man" and "woman" are gender terms, *being a man* and *being a woman* are such social positions:

> Being a man and being a woman are social positions with bifurcated social norms that cluster around the engendering function. To be a woman is to be recognized as having a body that plays one role in the engendering function; women conceive and bear. To be a man is to be recognized as having a body that plays another role in the engendering function; men beget. (Witt 2011, 40)

Witt's version of gender essentialism is thus *social constructionist* in character, crucially involving social norms concerning biological reproduction.

Accordingly, gender properties such as *being a woman* and *being a man* are uniessential to social individuals only if *the very existence* of those individuals is generated and explained by the occupancy of such social positions. So, if gender is uniessential to social individuals, then those women and men are numerically distinct from any entities that exist independently of the occupancy of these social positions, such as, in particular, the corresponding people. So, according to Witt's gender uniessentialism, no gendered social individual is identical to a person. This contrasts with alternative social constructionist views of gender that are more ontologically parsimonious and somewhat less revisionary, according to which occupying a certain social position is necessary and sufficient for an independently existing person to be a gendered social individual such as a woman or a man.

3. Kind Essentialism

Witt also contrasts her gender uniessentialism with *kind essentialism* about gender. In her words,

> We can [also] think about essences in relation to kinds, and we can ask whether a collection of individuals constitutes a kind that is defined by a common and unique property (or properties). An essence in this sense is a property that determines kind membership. (2011, 5)

Given the crucial role that gender kind essentialism will play later in this paper, let us pause to make some further observations about it now.

To start, any adequate understanding of *kinds* and *properties* should allow us to say that every theoretically significant collection of individuals constitutes a kind (in the sense of being the extension of a kind) and that every such kind is defined by a common and unique property, which is the essence of that kind. Schematically, the *K*s are all the instances of the kind *K*, the essence of which is the property of being a *K*. (Indeed, some would further simplify this by dropping any distinction between kinds and properties; in which case, for a kind to have an essence just amounts to the self-identity of the corresponding property. See Lewis [1983, 344], Jubien [2001], Schnieder [2006], and Tobin [2013].) So, in particular, the collection of all women constitutes the kind *woman*, which is defined by the common and unique property of *being a woman*, and likewise for other genders. And by Witt's lights and ours, that is all that gender kind essentialism requires.

Notice that this *leaves open* whether to be a woman is to occupy a certain social role, or to have a certain biological or psychological feature, or whatever else (see Witt 1995; Mason 2016). Gender kind essentialism, as conceived here, doesn't tell us that being a woman is innate, or inevitable, or like this, or like that. It just tells us that there is a property of being a woman. Still, however we ultimately understand this property, it is reasonable to assume that it is relevant for many explanatory purposes. Even if it is not a properly biological property, it will at least be relevant for the purposes of psychology or the social sciences. So even someone who wishes to recognize only those kinds that feature in successful scientific explanations (despite the questionable vagueness of this restriction) should admit that there are kinds such as *woman* and *man*, defined by corresponding properties, thus vindicating gender kind essentialism as conceived here.

Granted, the label "gender essentialism" has traditionally been associated with stronger and more contentious views, to the effect that the essences in question have a certain biological nature. And such *biological essentialism* has often been used to justify the discriminatory social structures organized around gender. However, as Witt (1995; 2011, 7–9) and other feminists (e.g., Mikkola 2006, 2017; Haslanger 2012) have already argued, gender kind essentialism per se does not imply any such further view and is thus compatible with exposing either genders themselves or some relevant associated properties as socially constructed, thus debunking reactionary views to the contrary, with the expected emancipatory effects.

Yet two further issues that have arisen in feminist discussions may seem to undermine the very idea of a *universal property* common to all and only women, as gender kind essentialism would apparently require (see, e.g., Spelman 1988; Stoljar 1995, 2011; Witt 1995; Butler 1999; Mikkola 2006; Saul 2012; Jenkins 2016; Mason 2016; Dembroff 2018; Antony 2020; Barnes 2020; Richardson 2022). First, descriptively, it might be doubted that the relevant mental states and practices of language users, or any other relevant factors, decisively select *one specific kind* to be

the unique referent of "woman," given the availability of a plurality of similarly admissible kinds (with largely overlapping extensions). Second, normatively, it might seem inadvisable to try to select any one of those candidate kinds as the unique referent of "woman" (or, more realistically, narrow down the range of precise candidate kinds), because doing so would in all likelihood inappropriately exclude certain individuals from falling under that label, or inappropriately include others, in all possible contexts. Still, even if these descriptive and normative points are well taken, it should be agreed that *each* of the relevant kinds has an essence, of whatever character, compatibly with what we said before.

4. Against Modal Arguments for Distinctness

So what reasons are there for going beyond gender kind essentialism (with or without some more specific characterization of the relevant kinds) and endorsing gender uniessentialism in full, including its consequence that no gendered social individual is a person?

Parts of Witt's book suggest that her argument for gender uniessentialism is primarily *modal* in character. Consider for example the following passage, on why she takes social individuals to be numerically distinct from persons:

> Social individuals are essentially relational beings and their existence is dependent upon the existence of social reality. In contrast, to be a person is essentially to have a first-person perspective (self-consciousness), which refers to an individual's internal psychological condition or state. An individual person could exist independently of social reality because having a first-person perspective does not require the existence of the social world, but a social individual could not exist independently of a set of social positions and roles. Social individuals and persons have different persistence and identity conditions. Hence, social individuals and persons are ontologically distinct individuals. (2011, 55–56)

This looks like an instance of a familiar pattern of argument from modal opinions to nonidentity claims, as frequently employed to distinguish statues and the like from coincident pieces of matter (see, e.g., Paul 2010; and the references therein). Supposedly, the statue is not identical to the coincident piece of clay, given that the former could be destroyed (in an act of squashing, say) while the latter continues to exist. Similarly, Witt here implies that gendered social individuals such as women and men are not identical to people, given that social individuals cannot exist independently of social reality, whereas people can. Likewise she claims that individual people are not identical to human organisms, apparently on the grounds

that people cannot lack a first-person perspective, whereas human organisms can (following Baker 2000); and she argues that social individuals are not identical to human organisms either, since human organisms can also exist independently of social reality (see Witt 2011, 51–57).

Ann Cudd (2012, 4) has provided reasons to doubt the modal premise in the above argument concerning social individuals and persons. In particular, she questions whether an individual person could exist independently of social reality. For arguably, *being capable of reflection* is necessary for personhood, and having this capacity arguably requires participation in certain social practices and norms concerning language and thought. However, let us set aside this concern and grant Witt her modal premise for the sake of the argument. In any case, we take there to be a more general problem for *all* such modal arguments for distinctness.

To illustrate this problem, consider *making a fist*. We needn't think that by clenching one's hand, a new entity comes into existence, the fist, numerically distinct from the hand, which merely "constitutes" it (even if this is a possible view, as pointed out by Hirsch [2002, 67]). Instead we might prefer to say that one turns one's hand *into* a fist; one's hand *becomes* a fist, usually for a limited period of time. Yet the pattern of argument under consideration would have us believe that the individual fist is numerically distinct from the individual hand, appearances notwithstanding. For fists are essentially clenched, while hands are not.

Ásta (2012, 3) illustrates this general concern with paradigmatic social roles for people. As she points out, what is essential to *being a student* differs from what is essential to *being a social individual*, while also differing from what is essential to *being a person* and from what is essential to *being human*. So, given that Witt, for the stated modal reasons, already distinguishes each social individual from the corresponding person, and distinguishes each of these from the corresponding human organism, why shouldn't we likewise distinguish each *student* from the corresponding social individual as well as from the corresponding person and the corresponding human organism? It would seem that Witt's modal argument overgeneralizes.

One possible response here would be to follow this line of reasoning all the way and posit a multitude of distinct yet coincident role occupiers wherever and whenever multiple social roles are occupied: a numerically distinct individual for each role. However, as we will discuss in more detail later, Witt explicitly wishes to avoid this plenitudinous outcome. Accordingly, anticipating something like Ásta's overgeneralization objection, she considers limiting her ontological multiplication of coincident individuals to cases involving diverse kinds of pragmatic interest or diverse kinds with causal powers or explanatory significance (Witt 2011, 72). But students are of obvious pragmatic interest to us, as well as being causally powerful and explanatorily significant—as are fists, for that matter. In any case, once the fist is

identified with the clenched hand, and the student is identified with the woman or man who studies, why not likewise identify each woman or man with the person or human who occupies the relevant social position? More generally, once it is conceded that modal arguments for distinctness fail in some of these cases, why think they succeed at all?

As we see it, such arguments generally fail to establish the targeted nonidentities because they conflate ideas about the essences of *individuals* with ideas about the essences of the *kinds* to which they belong (cf. Jubien 1993, 2001). Hence they wildly overgeneralize beyond Witt's targeted nonidentities. Taken to its extreme, parallel reasoning would have us believe that nothing can belong to two or more different kinds. Yet, on the face of it, something can belong to two or more different kinds—for instance, the kind *person* and the kind *student*.

Simplifying slightly, we might say that *having a duty to study* is the essence of being a student. And we may suppose that no individual person has this duty essentially but at most has it contingently. Still, most of us would think that people can be students. On this view, a person *becomes* a student, for the time being at least, by assuming a duty to study. She herself is the student, and it would be a mistake to think that her acquiring this duty brings some *other* individual, "the student," into existence. Accordingly, even if having a duty to study is what is essential for someone to be a student, that property isn't uniessential to any individual student. Similarly it can be said that even if occupying a certain social position is what is essential for someone to be a woman, that property isn't uniessential to any individual woman. The woman isn't a new individual, brought into existence by someone's occupying a certain social position; she's just the person who contingently occupies that social position. In this way, a person can be a student, and a person can be a woman, even if genders are socially constructed in the envisaged way.

Now, it is especially clear that *being a student* is a contingent property of individuals, because this is typically a temporary property of individuals. Typically, an individual student wasn't always a student and won't always be a student; so, clearly, that individual isn't *essentially* a student. In contrast, some might think that all women are permanently women—assuming girls are classified as nonadult women—in which case the contingency of *being a woman* will be somehow less obvious. Of course, there are apparent counterexamples to the idea that all women are permanently women (although Witt [2011, 88] suggests that in such cases the social individual is *replaced* by a new, differently gendered one, which coincides with the same person and organism as before), but in any case, the permanence of gender would not imply that genders are essential to social individuals (lest anyone be tempted to argue that way). For, in general, an individual may have a given property *permanently yet contingently*, and this is especially clear when the property in question is a social position. For instance, someone can be permanently wealthy, or permanently

American, yet only contingently so. Such a person might say, "I would have been a different person if I'd grown up in poverty in Vietnam," but this is not to say that she would have been a numerically distinct individual in those circumstances (contrary to what is suggested by Witt [2011, xi, 51–52, 77–78]; cf. Olson [1997, 65–69]). Rather it is to imply that *she herself* could have belonged to those alternative social kinds, that *she herself* could have been profoundly different in the imagined ways, that *she herself* could have been poor and Vietnamese instead of being wealthy and American. She would have been a different *kind of* person, of course, but that is compatible with her being numerically the same individual.

Likewise, even if a particular material construction is permanently a house, we can still say that it might not have been a house. In suitably different circumstances, it might have served as a kindergarten or a jail or a monument, even without changing its actual material composition, shape, or location. Something like *functioning to shelter humans and animals* is plausibly essential to *being a house*, but that is compatible with identifying each individual house with an independently existing object: a sum of building materials, or temporal parts thereof, that is only *contingently* a house (regardless of whether this object is *erased from existence* when it is demolished, or merely *reduced to rubble*). Here it might be objected that the sum of those particular material things can't be identical to the house, because the sum and the house differ in other ways. In particular, the sum of those particular material things essentially has each of *those particular material things* as a part, whereas the house doesn't essentially have each of those particular material things as a part. It could have had a different front door, for instance. To this we reply that *being a house* and *being the sum of those particular material things* are both contingent properties of one and the same object. Having each of those particular material things as a part is essential to being their sum, but that is compatible with identifying their sum with an independently existing object: an object that is only *contingently* composed of them.

Similarly, one might argue as follows: (i) Charlotte's house couldn't survive being demolished, but (ii) the sum of those bricks and boards could survive being demolished; so (iii) Charlotte's house is not identical to the sum of those bricks and boards. In this way one might attempt to show that *some particular instances* of the kinds in question differ modally, despite their spatial or material coincidence. However, it should be remembered that descriptive terms such as "Charlotte's house" have both flexible and rigid readings. On a flexible reading, this term doesn't denote numerically the same object in all possible circumstances but instead denotes, if anything, whichever object serves as Charlotte's house in those circumstances. On a rigid reading, in contrast, it denotes numerically the same object in all possible circumstances, if anything—that is, the object that is Charlotte's house in the context of utterance—and likewise for "the sum of those bricks and boards." If these terms

are read flexibly, then the premises of the above argument, thus interpreted *de dicto*, are reasonable enough. Indeed, if something were to survive being demolished, then in those circumstances it presumably wouldn't be (would never have been, or would no longer be) anyone's house. But then the argument is invalid, for it fails to show how the actual current denotation of "Charlotte's house" differs from the actual current denotation of "the sum of those bricks and boards." Alternatively, if these terms are read rigidly, then the argument is valid, but its premises, thus interpreted *de re*, are question-begging, for together they distinguish the objects in question without justification. Indeed, why shouldn't we instead take the house and the sum to be identical and say that this object *could* survive being demolished, although upon demolition, it wouldn't be a house? Moreover, why shouldn't we say that it *needn't* have all those things as its parts, although if it didn't, then it wouldn't be their sum? Only by confusing the flexible and rigid readings of the relevant terms does one receive the impression of a valid argument with reasonable premises (see Smullyan 1948; Gibbard 1975; Kripke 1977; Jubien 1993, 2001; Sider 1999; Varzi 2000; Horden and López de Sa 2021).

So, in general, such modal arguments fail to establish the relevant nonidentities. A property can be essential for belonging to a kind without being essential to any individual that belongs to that kind. Accordingly, fists can be identified with contingently clenched hands, statues can be identified with contingently sculpted pieces of matter, and houses can be identified with material objects that contingently serve as human habitations. Similarly, even if *being a woman* is essentially to occupy the social position described by Witt, this is compatible with identifying each individual woman with a person or human who contingently occupies that social position. (And even if *being a person* is essentially to have a first-person perspective, this is compatible with identifying each individual person with a human organism—or nonhuman organism, for that matter—that contingently has a first-person perspective. Perhaps human infants are gendered even before they acquire a first-person perspective, in which case we might say that they are gendered human organisms that are not yet people.) Of course, none of this *disproves* Witt's view that gendered social individuals are additional entities, numerically distinct from the corresponding people and humans, but her modal argument does not oblige us to abandon the more parsimonious and less revisionary stance of generally identifying women and men (and girls and boys) with people and humans.

There is a further, related problem specific to Witt's gender uniessentialism. That is, the gendered social individuals that she distinguishes from people and humans appear to be *theoretically superfluous* on her view, since according to her view, people and humans also occupy the relevant social positions and hence are themselves gendered.

Recall that the property of *being a woman* is uniessential to a social individual only if *the very existence* of that individual is generated and explained by the instantiation of that property. Now, as previously discussed in relation to Witt's introductory examples of organisms and artefacts, we may again ask what instantiates the allegedly uniessential property here. Since Witt attributes genders to social individuals, we should of course say that the social individual herself instantiates the property of being a woman. But, as foreshadowed earlier, that can't be the whole story for gender uniessentialists. For if it were, we would have to conclude that, on Witt's view, each individual woman is brought into existence by the fact that she herself is a woman. Yet, again, it is hard to see how anything could be brought into existence by its own instantiation of a property. For in saying that something has a certain property, we presuppose that it exists; so any such explanation of that same thing's existence would appear to be viciously circular (see again Witt 1989, 121–22). Moreover, such existential bootstrapping doesn't accord with what Witt herself suggests concerning her introductory examples of organisms and artefacts. As discussed earlier, in those cases, Witt indicates that the relevant material parts collectively instantiate the uniessential property and *thereby* generate a new unified individual, which—as a result—also instantiates the same property. By analogy, this suggests that something *other than* the social individual instantiates the property of being a woman and *thereby* generates the social individual, which derivatively instantiates the same property. (Presumably, unlike the property of functioning to shelter humans and animals, the property of being a woman cannot be collectively instantiated by more than one thing. Besides, as discussed later on, Witt explicitly denies that each person coincides with a multitude of distinct role occupiers—e.g., the mother, the doctor, the immigrant, etc. So it's not as if she could say that some such multitude is collectively gendered.) This leaves us with two likely candidates for instantiating the uniessential property and thereby generating the social individual: the *person* and the *human organism*. Witt would presumably opt for the human organism here, since she takes it to constitute *both* the person and the social individual whenever these three individuals coincide (2011, 69–73). In addition, she explicitly allows a person to be *derivatively* gendered, in virtue of being constituted by something that also constitutes a gendered social individual (2011, 119–21, 125–26); and she generally allows both human organisms and persons to contingently occupy social positions (2011, 83; 2012, 6). So it seems that Witt would in fact allow *both* the human organism and the person to occupy the social position of being a woman, albeit contingently, even though she argues that gender is not "appropriately attributed" to human organisms or persons (2011, 36, 64–66). In any case, we end up with the result that either the human organism or the person, or each of them, *is a woman*, in which case positing an additional and coincident "social individual" to fulfil that same position looks entirely redundant.

5. Against Normative Arguments for Distinctness

Setting aside for the time being the last problem we just raised, is there any further reason to deny that each gendered social individual is identical to a person or a human organism? In response to Ásta's aforementioned overgeneralization objection, Witt has indicated that she takes there to be an additional reason for distinguishing each social individual from the corresponding person, as well as from the corresponding human organism, which supposedly would not lead us to likewise distinguish each *student* from the corresponding social individual:

> I think we need a category of social individuals to ground the normativity of our social agency, which is ascriptive and requires social recognition. ... 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 [Ásta]'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 [Ásta] envisions. (Witt 2012, 8)

Witt's further reason for distinguishing each social individual from the corresponding person, as well as from the corresponding human organism, it appears (see also Witt 2011, 59–64), is that the norms involved in being a social individual are social, while the norms involved in being a person are not social; thus the latter are *norms of an essentially different kind* from the former, as are the norms involved in being a human organism. In contrast, the norms involved in being a student and those involved in being a social individual are both social, so these are *norms of essentially the same kind*. So the thought would appear to be that nothing can belong to two different kinds—like *social individual* and *person*—that involve norms of essentially different kinds; while, in contrast, something can belong to two different kinds—like *social individual* and *student*—that involve norms of essentially the same kind.

One of the main contributions of Witt's book is her *ascriptivist* account of social normativity, as alluded to in the passage quoted above (see also Witt 2020). According to her, which social norms—expectations, obligations, permissions—apply

to an individual largely depends on which social positions that individual is socially recognized as occupying. Accordingly, many social norms are involuntary, inasmuch as they apply to just those agents who are "responsive to and evaluable under" them, as Witt often puts it, regardless of whether those agents (consciously or unconsciously) endorse those norms, and thus even if they flout and rebel against them. This rings true of many social norms. For instance, as Witt (2011, 43) points out, an individual mother might reject and criticize some or all of her culture's maternal norms; but even so, she would be still be responsive to and evaluable under those norms. Similarly, an individual student might flout her culture's educational norms— skipping classes, cheating in her exams, and so on—but even so, she would be still be responsive to and evaluable under those norms. As Witt says, "Rebellion is one way of being responsive to a norm; so is compliance" (43). That said, if the condition of being responsive to a social norm is so easily satisfied by an agent, then it might seem rather redundant. Indeed, if social norms in general apply not only to agents but also to artefacts such as houses and paperweights (as discussed below), then being subject to social norms cannot generally require any response at all from the entity that is subject to them.

Compatibly with Witt's ascriptivism, it might be thought that, in general, social kinds essentially involve social norms. For instance, even if being a student, in the socially loaded sense, doesn't essentially involve any culturally specific educational norms, it nonetheless appears to essentially involve some general educational norms, such as a duty to study. Likewise, even if being a mother, in the socially loaded sense, doesn't essentially involve any culturally specific maternal norms, it nonetheless appears to essentially involve some general maternal norms, such as a duty to care for one's children. Given a social constructionist view of gender such as Witt's, the same can be said of gender kinds and gender norms.

In her response to Ásta, Witt indicates that all social norms are *norms of essentially the same kind*, in that they are most naturally classified together, as social norms, when norms in general are partitioned into mutually exclusive kinds; although we can of course also speak of more specific kinds of social norms, such as gender norms, maternal norms, educational norms, and so on. Witt indicates that what all these social norms have in common—their shared dependence on social recognition—is greater than their differences, and she indicates that this feature importantly distinguishes them from nonsocial norms, such as ethical norms (which she associates with people) and biological (or "natural") norms (which she associates with the evolved biological functions of organisms and their functional parts) (2011, 19, 30–32, 37–38, 54, 63–65, 76, 83, 116). She concedes that not all social norms are fully ascriptive in her sense, since some social positions and their corresponding duties can be unilaterally renounced (2011, 43–44; 2020, 124); in which case, being socially recognized as occupying a given social position does not always suffice for

being subject to its associated social norms. However, Witt apparently takes such social recognition to be generally *necessary* for being subject to a social norm (2011, 9, 19, 44–45), in presumed contradistinction to ethical and biological norms.

In any case, we may as well grant Witt these assumptions about social norms for the sake of the argument, much as we granted her modal premise in the previous section. For even with these assumptions in place, it strikes us that her normative argument also fails to establish that each gendered social individual is numerically distinct from the corresponding person. For belonging to a kind can essentially involve being subject to certain social norms, even if no instance of that kind is essentially subject to those norms, and even if some instances of that kind are also subject to nonsocial norms, as can be illustrated with some familiar examples.

Let us assume that public artefact kinds, perhaps unlike plain tool kinds, are social kinds that are essentially governed by certain social norms (as argued by Thomasson [2014]). Then for a stone to form a paperweight as a public artefact, and not merely as a private tool, it is not enough that someone uses it as a paperweight. Rather it must be subject to certain social norms concerning how it is to be treated. Only when the stone is evaluable under those norms is there truly a paperweight where the stone is. Even so, we needn't think that the paperweight is a new object that comes into existence only when those normative conditions are satisfied. Instead we can say that those conditions are needed for the stone, which already existed, to *become* a paperweight. Accordingly, the paperweight can be identified with the stone, despite the essential normative difference between being a paperweight and being a stone. That said, *being a stone* as such doesn't seem to involve any norms at all; in which case, we don't yet have an example of something that belongs to two different kinds involving norms of essentially different kinds. Still, if we assume with Witt that organisms and their functional parts are subject to biological norms concerning their evolved biological functions, then, bearing our previous arguments in mind, we need only consider the possibility of authoritatively using a seashell or a tiger skull as a paperweight, or a feather as a pen, to see how something can simultaneously belong to two different kinds involving norms of essentially different kinds.

To reinforce the point, consider the social conditions needed for a hand to form a raised-fist symbol. As we saw, we needn't think that an individual fist is a new thing, numerically distinct from the hand that is clenched. Similarly, we needn't think that an individual raised-fist symbol is a new thing, numerically distinct from the hand that is clenched and raised, despite the raised-fist symbol's social significance. Instead we can say that, besides being clenched and raised, certain normative social conditions are needed for the hand to *become* a raised-fist symbol: to go through a *phase* of being a raised-fist symbol, or to *count as* a raised-fist symbol. Accordingly, the raised-fist symbol can be identified with the hand, even though the social norms

involved in being a raised-fist symbol are of an essentially different kind from the biological norms involved in being a hand. Similarly, each gendered social individual can be identified with a person or human who is simultaneously subject to norms of two or more essentially different kinds: social and biological norms; or social and ethical norms; or social, ethical, and biological norms—or any combination of norms you please. (Consider also aesthetic norms, epistemic norms, logical norms, etc.; the latter being discussed by Ásta [2012, 3]). Indeed, as we observed before, Witt herself concedes that people and humans occupy social positions such as—to give her example—*being a doctor* (2011, 83), which by her own lights implies that people and humans can be subject to social norms. Thus, even if Witt is right to claim that explaining the normativity of social agency requires a category of social individuals, we can still identify *each particular entity within that category* with a person or human organism. So, interesting as the normative view of social kinds may be in its own right, the normative argument just considered also fails to justify distinguishing gendered social individuals from the corresponding people and humans.

Admittedly, in order to preserve the analogy exposed here, Witt might instead choose to distinguish the individual raised-fist symbol from the hand that is clenched and raised, while likewise distinguishing the paperweight from the seashell that is repurposed for keeping loose papers in place, and the quill pen from the feather that is adapted for writing. But if one is generally willing to accept such uncomfortable distinctions, then why seek excuses for refusing to distinguish each student and each mother from the corresponding social individual? A modal or normative argument for distinctness could be given with respect to those latter cases as well, it would seem, and with no less persuasive force. (After all, students essentially have a duty to study, while social individuals do not.) The tension apparently lies in embracing a limited multiplication of coincident entities for essentialist reasons, while nonetheless striving to avoid an unrestrained—or barely restrained—abundance, whereby each human organism would find itself accompanied by indefinitely many concrete humanoid entities of diverse kinds (as defended, e.g., by Fairchild [2019]). In any case, such ontological multiplications can *generally* be avoided by carefully distinguishing the extravagant claims of individual essentialism from the far weaker demands of kind essentialism, as we have tried to show here.

6. Gender Kinds, Roles, and Norms

We have argued that Witt's modal and normative arguments fail to support her thesis of gender uniessentialism, according to which gendered social individuals such as women and men are numerically distinct from the corresponding people. Still, we wish to stress that much of what she says about gender is compatible with our rejection of her gender uniessentialism. In particular, her characterization of gender roles and gender norms, and how these interact with other social roles and social

norms, is compatible with identifying each woman and each man with the corresponding person. Such an account of the normative structure of society has no need for Witt's ontological multiplications of coincident individuals, as will now be discussed. Moreover, the benefits for feminism that she attributes to gender uniessentialism do not require the truth of that doctrine either. (Although, to be fair, she does not claim that hers is the only view of gender that could yield such benefits, but only that it does better than some of its rivals. See Witt [2012, 2].)

Recall that on Witt's view, genders are social positions, defined in terms of socially mediated reproductive functions. To be a woman is to be socially recognized as having a body that functions to conceive and bear. To be a man is to be socially recognized as having a body that functions to beget. These social positions are not voluntarily occupied but rather ascribed to individuals by others. As a result, such individuals come to be evaluable under a plethora of associated yet culturally variable social norms.

Now, without committing to this Wittian account of gender kinds, let us note that it is entirely compatible with saying that genders like *being a woman* and *being a man* are contingently instantiated by people or human organisms—or, indeed, by human organisms who are *also* people—and not instantiated by anything else. Characterizing genders in this way yields a specific social constructionist version of gender kind essentialism, but it does not entail gender uniessentialism or any other form of individual essentialism about gender. For, even taking into account that these gender kinds are instantiated, it does not entail that any individual is essentially a woman or essentially a man.

Witt further designates gender "the mega social role," by which she means that one's gender is a uniquely important social role, inasmuch as it takes priority over and systematically influences one's other social roles (2011, chap. 4). She notes that some social roles, like being a mother or being a husband, are explicitly gendered and hence transparently influenced by gender norms. Other social roles, like being a doctor or being an academic, are not explicitly gendered, but Witt points out that gender norms still strongly influence how these roles are variably enacted by women and men, as reflected in differences in working hours, earnings, specializations, and clothing.

Witt (2011, 76–77) contends that characterizing genders as mega social roles in this way explains how social individuals are synchronically and diachronically *unified*—why there is only one social individual with various social roles where each person is, rather than a multitude of distinct role occupiers: the mother, the doctor, the immigrant, and so on. This, she tells us, is why she takes genders to be the unifying essences of social individuals. Nonetheless, on Witt's account, the role occupiers in her example can't be unified into a woman in the same way that the bricks, boards, and so on are unified into a house. For clearly, the bricks, boards, and so on are *many*

things that are brought together to form a house; whereas Witt pointedly takes the mother, the doctor, the immigrant, and so on to be just *one social individual* with various social roles. Presumably, then, she seeks to explain how these various roles can be combined, and this is why she designates genders as the uniessences of social individuals. A social individual's various social roles are all organized according to that individual's gender, on her view, and in this sense, they are unified by that individual's gender. Given our preceding arguments against gender uniessentialism, however, it can be seen that this is a solution in need of a problem. A single person can occupy various social positions, both simultaneously and over time, in the same way that it is generally possible for a single entity to belong to various kinds or, equivalently, to instantiate various properties, both simultaneously and over time. So, for the social roles of mother, doctor, and immigrant to be combined, it suffices for them all to be occupied by a single person, as indeed often happens, regardless of whether those roles are unified in any stronger sense. Genders may still be *uniquely important* social roles, for roughly the reasons given by Witt, but again, this is compatible with straightforwardly identifying each woman and each man with the corresponding person or human organism.

In response to Witt, some critics have questioned whether any specific social roles have such special importance. It might instead be thought that agents typically have many different social roles that interact with each other in complex ways, with none of those roles generally taking priority over the others (see Ásta 2012, 4; Cudd 2012, 3–4). Indeed, this point may be seen as a dictum of intersectionality studies (see Stoljar 2018, 130), notwithstanding Witt's (2011, 101) assertion that "the intersectionality of multiple social roles with gender is compatible with gender being the mega social role." Moreover, it might be thought that even if there are mega social roles in Witt's sense, these needn't be gender roles. Instead, one's racial or ethnic identity, or one's status as disabled or able-bodied, might appear to take priority over one's other social roles, including one's gender (see Cudd 2012, 5–6). Be that as it may, Witt's characterization of genders as mega social roles essentially concerns how gender roles and gender norms significantly interact with other social roles and social norms, and all this is perfectly compatible with saying that it is *people* who occupy the relevant roles and are thus subject to the associated norms.

Gender kind essentialism, as we indicated earlier, is thoroughly opposed by many feminist philosophers who, as Witt (2011, xii) reports, see it as "theoretically misguided and politically dangerous," and as inimical to morally necessary social change. However, despite this prevailing hostility to gender essentialism, Witt argues that her gender uniessentialism is actually useful to feminism, and she further insists that, whatever the merits or demerits of gender kind essentialism, her gender uniessentialism does not entail it and hence does not require its defence (2011, 9–13, 15–16, 127–28). Yet, as we have seen, Witt's theory actually includes a specific

account of gender properties as social positions (as pointed out by Stoljar [2018]), and hence arguably entails a specific version of gender kind essentialism, given a minimal conception of *kinds*. Besides, as we have suggested, gender kind essentialism per se may appear fairly trivial and—as Witt herself indicates (1995; 2011, 7–9)—entirely harmless, once it is distinguished from stronger doctrines.

In any case, Witt claims that gender uniessentialism, in combination with her normative account of gender kinds and her ascriptivist account of gender norms, has the virtue of drawing our attention to oppressive gender norms in a way that enables us to effectively oppose them, in line with standard feminist goals. As she sees things (Witt 2011, 47, 128–29), in order to end or reduce women's oppression, it is better to concentrate primarily on how gendered social roles are systematically ascribed to individuals by others in society, and pay less attention to individual preferences and biases concerning these roles, including the preferences and biases of women themselves. She later clarifies (2012, 9), however, that she does not view the social position of being a woman as oppressive in itself, but instead takes the further social norms that are contingently associated with it to be frequently oppressive, and so apt for social change.

Here we see an instance of the "debunking" strategy of exposing a morally objectionable phenomenon as constitutively socially constructed, with the aim of showing that it is not inevitable but instead can be changed by social means (see Haslanger 2003; Witt 2011, 38). Notably, this strategy involves two ideas that are liable to be conflated: that of being *socially constructed* and that of being *socially changeable*, neither of which strictly implies the other (see Schaffer 2017, 2455; *pace* Díaz-León 2015, 1145; Griffith 2018, 395–96). For instance, the fact that so many people have high cholesterol is not socially constructed, but it is socially changeable. In contrast, the fact that public languages are widely used is socially constructed, but it is not socially changeable, at least not within any functioning society. Still, all this is compatible with acknowledging that the social roles and social norms with which Witt is concerned are both socially constructed and socially changeable, and that exposing their specific social character is useful for devising ways to alter or eliminate them, where some such outcome is deemed desirable.

However, once again, and as Mari Mikkola (2012, 2017) has already pointed out, such insights into the nature of gender norms do not require gender uniessentialism:

> The politically significant point is that social position occupancies come packaged with problematic social norms; and this should motivate our rejection of those norms, rather than embarking on projects that aim to alter women's individual psychologies.

I agree wholeheartedly that the goal of critiquing and altering oppressive social norms is crucial for feminism. But accepting this is independent of the truth of uniessentialism. (Mikkola 2017, 177–78)

As Mikkola rightly contends, we can agree with Witt that certain oppressive social norms depend on social recognition, while saying that it is simply *people* who are subject to those norms. Indeed, we can agree on that point without endorsing any form of social constructionism about womanhood itself, including the Wittian account of gender kinds presented here. For it can be agreed that women are *in fact* subject to oppressive gender norms, without taking any stance on whether womanhood itself essentially involves any social norms at all. Any specific account of gender kinds is bound to be contentious, but whatever being a woman amounts to, it should be uncontroversial that women are subject to oppressive gender norms, and that these norms are susceptible to social change.

7. Conclusion

As we have seen, Witt's modal and normative arguments fail to justify distinguishing social individuals from the corresponding people and humans, and so fail to support her gender uniessentialism, which entails such distinctness. Fortunately, many of her associated views about the social nature of gender and its significance for feminism prove to be independent from such ontological multiplications. So, insofar as these associated claims are insightful, they may be endorsed while still generally identifying women and men with people. This, we take it, is good news; if not for gender uniessentialism itself, then at least for feminist philosophy overall.

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