

Charlotte Witt

The Metaphysics of Gender.

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Charlotte Witt's treatise, *The Metaphysics of Gender*, argues that gender essentialism is true, given specific definitions of "gender" and "essentialism". The thesis is meant to bridge the gap between the diverse nature of gender, on the one hand, and the pervasive effects of one's gender on multiple arenas of life, on the other. The argument is backed by an ontological theory of the self, bringing Witt's theory from social philosophy into metaphysics. While her social analysis is insightful and sufficiently nuanced, her trinitarian theory of the self is problematic. Her rich ontology is perhaps too rich; she does not avoid the Cartesian dualism she wishes to avoid; and part of her argument is dangerously close to circular.

To overview Witt's use of terms: Gender is metaphysically "uniessential" to humans. X is uniessential for Y if X unifies the disparate parts of Y into one coherent whole. The functional property of shelter is uniessential to a house; without the unifying property, the house would be lumber. It is not kind essentialism (a property essential for an object to be classified as a particular kind); but individual essentialism (what makes an individual what it is). Gender, according to Witt, is separate but related to biological sex; gender is a social role, assigned due to others' perceptions of our biology. One is given the role of being a man or being a woman through the "socially mediated reproductive (or engendering) functions that an individual is recognized (by others) to perform" (18). One is assigned to one gender role or another by the normative belief that we ought to take either the begetting or the bearing role in childbirth. Once assigned these roles, we become "responsive to and evaluable under" the myriad of features which comprises our culture's view of gender.

Witt argues that the social role of gender unifies our entire relational existence to other human beings. It underpins and undergirds every social role in which we participate. Witt's argument for this conclusion is metaphysical in nature. The self has three components: the human organism, the person, and the social individual. Each is a separate (or at least separable) ontological category. The 'organism' is the human physiology. The 'person' is necessarily self-conscious and autonomous. A highly intelligent primate would count as a person, as would angels, should they exist; babies would not. The 'social individual' necessarily takes roles in relationships with other social individuals. Some roles are by choice and consciously held, but many are not. The organism constitutes the person and the social individual the way marble constitutes a statue – it is the organic stuff undergirding the more complex entity. The person and the social individual are related to each other because they are both constituted by the same organic entity. Thus, the person takes roles in social relationships, but not necessarily, only accidentally; the social individual is self-reflective, not necessarily, but only accidentally. These two share properties because they are tied together by the same meat. They interact and influence each other but they are metaphysically separate.

Uniessentialism applies only to the social individual. The social individual holds positions in multiple relationships, simultaneously and diachronically. These social roles would proliferate ontology beyond toleration unless they are unified into a coherent whole; Witt proposes that gender itself is what unifies the social individual. It is a “mega social role” that impacts and influences the way in which we hold every other role. Thus, gender is uniessential to the social individual, and thus uniessential to humans.

To elevate her conclusion from a social analysis of the importance of gender to a metaphysical claim about the essential nature of the self, Witt needs a trinitarian ontology; however, such ontology proliferates entities beyond necessity. One can, as many have before, view the self as one object with different aspects, such as the self-reflective aspect and the social aspect. To use her example of Michelangelo’s *Pietà*, the statue is in fact made out of marble, but “work of art” and “object of religious veneration” are not two separate ontological categories accidentally tied together by the same lump of rock; rather, they are two of many aspects of the one object, two functions of the same ontological entity. Leibniz’s principle works quite handily here: the work-of-art *Pietà* and the object-of-religious-veneration *Pietà* have all of the same properties, admired for its craft by some and religiously venerated by others, in addition to having the same weight, size, etc. Should they share all of the same properties, then “they” are the same object, not two distinct ones. Similarly with the self: Witt allows (Chapter 5) that when united in a human self, the person and the social individual share all of the same properties; only the modality of their properties changes. Thus, the social individual is necessarily social but only accidentally self-reflective, and vice versa for the person; yet, they share the same properties and thus Leibniz’s law applies.

The modal argument – that a social individual exists because it necessarily participates in social relationships – is one of two arguments given for Witt’s new ontology. The other leg of support is very close to being circular. Witt argues that we should accept her trinitarian ontology because the existence of the social individual is the only way to make the statement “gender is essential” a coherent one. Gender cannot attach to the human organism, as gender is only tangentially attached to biology. Gender essentialism cannot be coherently claimed of the self-reflective ‘person’, either, as gender goes beyond how one sees oneself; the social norms of gender often apply to us without our permission, consent, or awareness. Thus, feminists should allow the social individual into our ontology in order to make sense of the claim of gender essentialism, if only to deny its truth. While not precisely question-begging, this borders on the circular at least: in effect, the reader is asked to accept the premise of Witt’s argument because it is the only way to comprehend her desired conclusion. Further, the traditional denial of gender essentialism – that social, political, and functional capacities of a human are not determined by their reproductive physiology – can be coherently formulated without positing a separate entity called ‘the social individual’ to which we can attach gender. All that is required is that a human being is more than their physiology alone.

Finally, Witt claims that her ontology of the self is compatible with feminist aims in the metaphysics of the self, in that it avoids Cartesian mind-body dualism and includes an analysis of the intrinsic social nature of a human. However, her argument falls short on both counts. The body and the person are separable on her view, and the person is not inherently embodied; the person and the social individual are separable as well. Further, the essential nature of the self is

personhood: “Only persons – beings who are capable of self-consciousness – are selves, but the process of self-reflection is mediated by our practical identities or social roles” (110). A self is a person, and thus necessarily self-reflective and autonomous, and only accidentally embodied or social. This does not avoid Cartesian dualism, it repeats it. Further, her argument that social individuals are necessarily embodied (while persons are not) fails: she argues that many social roles require embodiment and that social individuals therefore must be embodied. However, “many” is far from “all”; if Witt allows for the possibility of disembodied angels being persons, then all we need is to allow that such angels could have a social structure of their own, and/or stand in social relations to humans, in order to prove that there could be disembodied social individuals.

On a final note, the essentialism that Witt argues for is strikingly ... nonessentialist. “[U]nification essentialism is not formulated using modal notions (possibility, necessity)” (21). Witt argues that gender ties together a social individual intrinsically, but not necessarily. Should human science evolve beyond the necessity of sexual reproduction, gender (which, recall, is based on society assuming that one should take a particular role in sexual reproduction) would disappear and something else would have to take its place as the unifying factor among our diverse social roles. Thus, gender is important, but not actually essential in the sense of being necessary. This claim seems at odds with Witt’s defense of gender as *the* “mega social role” that unifies a human being over other possible candidates such as race. Her argument that race is not the one unifying mega social role is that ideas of race vary from culture to culture, from context to context, and thus might, for an individual in a particular context, influence every other social role they occupy, but cannot count as the one true mega social role. However, admitting that gender itself is dependent on our particular context – no matter how entrenched and long-lasting that context may be – is to suggest that it, too, is only accidentally, and not essentially, unessential.

In sum, the *Metaphysics of Gender* presents a nuanced and interesting analysis of the way gender functions in a multiplicity of social contexts; however, the overarching argument is based on some unconvincing metaphysical arguments.

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