

Forthcoming in *The Philosophers' Magazine*, Second Quarter, 2012.

*The Metaphysics of Gender*, by Charlotte Witt (Oxford University Press), 168 pp, \$24.95/ £15.99 (pb)

At first glance Witt's project, which is to argue for *gender essentialism*, may appear surprising. After all, it is 2012 (not the 70s), and she is a feminist (not a reactionary or a crude sociobiologist), and gender essentialism has become a view self-respecting feminist theorists can't hold, whatever other theoretical commitments they have. But as we read on, we realise Witt is up to something very different from what we thought she was. In particular, she isn't defending *kind essentialism*, i.e., the view that to be a *man* (or *woman*) one need have some particular property that constitutes the essence of the kind and that explains and justifies one's behavior. Instead, she is offering a metaphysics of the social space we live in: the various social roles we occupy and their normative pull. Witt argues that gender unifies and organises all our other social roles (parent, academic, politician, friend, student, etc.) and is thus essential to us social individuals.

One of the problems people have with *kind essentialism* is that the prescriptive is masked as descriptive. While it is claimed that we are simply describing the way women are, we are in fact prescribing how women ought to be. To use JL Austin's terms, one speech act (a declaration or an exhortation), is masquerading as another (a mere assertion of fact). As it has been part of the feminist project to unmask the hidden normativity of this sort of gender essentialism, it should not come as a surprise that Witt's essentialism is not subject to such a critique, but rather draws on it. For her, gender essentialism is a view about the structure of social normativity, where social normativity is distinguished from other forms of normativity (including moral) and consists in the expectations, obligations, and allowances that the various social roles we occupy bring us. Witt thinks we are responsive to, and evaluated with respect to, these norms irrespective of whether we endorse them consciously or unconsciously (unlike what many would say about moral norms) and, as in Sophocles' drama *Antigone*, they often pull in different directions: my role as daughter may demand I kill the slayer of my father; my role as sister that I protect my brother at all costs. What unifies my many roles on Witt's view is my gender: I am not merely a child of my father, I am his daughter and the norms for daughters are different from the norms of sons; and I'm not merely the sibling of my brother, I'm his sister, subject to special sisterly norms.

Gender also conditions my practical agency in the sense that gender

expectations and obligations trump other ones, often making it impossible to fulfill the obligations of the various social roles adequately. This would be fine if it only happened once in a while. We would simply ponder the dilemma, perhaps even write a tragedy about it. Witt's point, though, is that ordinary women (and men?) find themselves regularly in a predicament like Antigone's. Perhaps fratricide isn't called for, but it is impossible for us to meet our obligations and the gendering of our social roles is largely to blame.

The account Witt gives is heavily Aristotelian: an entity has a characteristic function that unifies the parts that make it up. So, just as a time-telling function unifies the various parts that make up a watch, so does a gendering function unify the various parts that make up a social individual. Cohabitation of many objects in the same location is also part of the view: just as Venus de Milo and the piece of marble that makes it up are two distinct objects both living on the same pedestal, so a human organism, a person, and a social individual all cohabit the same space, all the while being three distinct entities.

There are things one can take issue with in Witt's account, to be sure. For instance, does the pervasiveness of gender really establish that it organises all other social norms? Do we have to crowd our spaces with social individuals, as well as humans and persons? Nonetheless, Witt's book is an important contribution to our understanding of sexist oppression. Much attention has been given of late to the role of implicit biases, unconscious behavior, and gender schemas in perpetuating oppressive social structures and that is all to the good, but the problem of sexist oppression doesn't *either* take the form of explicit discriminatory laws *or* lie within our individual psyches. Part of the problem lies in the gendered nature of the social norms that are neither chosen nor endorsed by us, but that we nevertheless live by. For this reason, as Witt's work shows so well, a crucial step in ending gender oppression must be to examine and fight the gendering of our social roles.