

Book Symposium

Social Normativity and Social Justice

Sally Haslanger

1. INTRODUCTION

Witt's book is a wonderfully ambitious, original, and compelling piece of work on social norms. It opens so many lines of inquiry and shifts many debates to new ground. This makes it a generative work that will have a longstanding impact. I agree with many of the claims she argues for, and it is wonderful to have the book as a resource for such important arguments and ideas.

The core question for Witt is: What grounds the binding normativity of social norms—the “oomph” that imposes requirements on us (p. 2)? Assuming there are things we ought to do as social agents, what normatively grounds that ‘ought.’¹ The aporia Witt has in mind might be put this way:

- On one hand, we ought to conform our behavior to social norms, even if it is not in our self-interest.
- On the other hand, social norms are just “shared standards of conduct.” Why am I bound by such standards just because others think they matter, even when I don't?

She rejects the suggestion that I have somehow, implicitly or explicitly, bound myself, made a commitment, or otherwise volunteered myself to join the club that imposes these standards. Instead, she argues, the norms apply to me whether or not I joined the club. How can this be? This is the main challenge the book seeks to answer.

1 I will sometimes semantically ascend and frame the question about ‘oughts’ and reasons we have to act on those ‘oughts’. I'm assuming that the kinds of ‘ought’ are closely linked to different kinds of reasons.

In these comments, I will begin with a selective recap of Witt's view and will raise four issues. First, Witt rejects the suggestion that social norms are binding on us because we (implicitly) accept or endorse them; she refers to this view as 'internalism.' Instead she defends a form of externalism such that social norms bind us even if we don't accept them. I wonder whether sometimes her forms of internalism and externalism are talking past each other. Second, Witt argues that social norms are not grounded in practical normativity and don't (or don't always) have instrumental value. In response, I ask for clarification about the relationship between practical reason, instrumental value and instrumental valuing. Third, I consider Witt's notion of an *Afunction*. What exactly are *Afunctions* and how do they generate norms? And finally, Witt suggests that her account helps us understand the possibility of social critique, especially internal critique of a practice. I agree with her that expert practitioners of a practice can be powerful critics, but I am more skeptical of expertise as a primary source of critique.

2. SOCIAL 'OUGHTS'

To frame the project, it is important to note that there are, of course, many kinds of 'ought' statements, and seemingly different forms of normativity, for example (those marked with an '*' are ones that Witt explicitly discusses):

- *Practical 'oughts': Sally ought to floss her teeth daily.
- Epistemic 'oughts': Sally ought to proportion her credences to the evidence.
- Semantic 'oughts': Sally ought to use 'its' instead of 'it's' in that sentence.
- Legal 'oughts': Sally ought to pay her income taxes.
- Etiquette 'oughts': Sally ought to thank her sister-in-law for the gift she received.
- Game 'oughts': Sally ought to castle on her next move (in chess).
- Aesthetic 'oughts': Sally ought to change the rug in her living room to match the rest of the décor.
- *Moral 'oughts': Sally ought to keep her promises.
- *Social 'oughts': Sally ought to manage the bulk of the caregiving responsibilities in her family.

And of course, as Witt notes, there are many more, depending on the activity. The ones she focuses on are artisanal norms or 'oughts' concerned with excellence in the activity. Let's call them "*excellence oughts*."

- Philosophical 'oughts': Sally ought to make clearer that the argument is a reductio.
- Culinary 'oughts': Sally ought to add more salt to the soup.

- Ballet 'oughts': Sally ought to point her toes when she does an arabesque.
- Carpentry 'oughts': Sally ought to use a screw rather than a nail to attach that board.
- Flautist 'oughts': Sally ought to work on developing a more flexible embouchure.

Many questions arise about this variety. It isn't clear how the normative force of all these different 'oughts' (from prudential to artisanal) are related. Are some reducible to others? And it is not clear what kind of value is at stake: some of these 'oughts' are clearly concerned with instrumental valuing, others maybe not. Some both. What kind of value is at stake in the case of social 'oughts'?

Some of Witt's main claims are:

1. Social 'oughts' are sui generis and cannot be reduced to either practical or moral 'oughts' (Ch. 1).
2. Social 'oughts' are not purely instrumental (e.g., pp. 45–48).
3. Social 'oughts' are binding on us, not by virtue of any psychological state (anti-internalism) (Ch.2).
4. The normativity of social 'oughts' is best understood on a model of artisanal 'oughts' (Ch. 3).
1. Social 'oughts' are tied to social roles.
2. Social roles are relevantly like occupations, crafts, or work, and have similar forms of excellence attached to them.² The ought's of excellence come with the social role, so *they are binding* on those who occupy the social role.
3. The *content* of artisanal 'oughts'—the particular norms—is determined by objective facts about excellence in the particular craft or work.
4. The forms of excellence for a craft or work are flexible and vary depending on the material and cultural context (pp. 48–49, 61).
5. The ontology of social normativity is incompatible with methodological individualism (Ch. 4).
6. Excellence in occupying a social role provides one both know-how and know-why, and these provide the basis for improvisation, transformation, and also social critique. (Ch. 5–6).
7. Social norms are intertwined and interdependent and can (and often do) form oppressive structures that can be evaluated holistically. But they are also conditions of social agency. The artisanal model captures their dual nature (Ch. 7 & Epilogue).

2 I'm not going to discuss it here, but even if some social roles can be understood using the artisanal model, I am not convinced that all can be. I also disagree with an approach that treats social role and social position as the same thing.

3. INTERNALISM/EXTERNALISM³

As mentioned, Witt favors externalism: “The core insight of externalism 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” (pp. 9, 26). This is important for Witt because she recognizes that some social norms may be binding on me, even though I reject them. This often happens for feminists: we object to many gender norms, but that doesn’t free us from them. I agree with Witt that externalism better captures this phenomenon.

I think there are several questions packed into the puzzle of social normativity, including:

- (A) How do certain social norms bind *me*, Sally, individually.
- (B) How do the relevant social norms get their specific *content*—what makes *these norms* the ones that apply to me.
- (C) What *kinds of reasons* do I (or anyone) have to abide by them?

I’ll consider (A-B) in this section and (C) in the next. To answer (A), Witt argues that:

- (A*) Social norms bind me individually through my occupancy in a social role. I ought to grade my students’ papers fairly because I occupy the social role of professor.

Here is a concern on behalf of the internalist. Witt acknowledges that she “brackets the question of the basis for social position occupancy” (43). In other words, she isn’t going to answer the question: By virtue of what we occupy specific social roles? Thus it seems that her answer to the question how social norms bind *me* is incomplete. She has an answer to the question how norms are attached to social roles and may have an externalist answer to that question. But if I occupy a social role through making a commitment, or endorsing it, or undertaking it (whether or not as part of my identity), then there is a sense in which what binds *me* is my action of taking up the role. And I can take up a role, even if I’m not keen in doing so and it would be my preference to do otherwise, if another option were available.⁴ However, usually our options are limited.

³ See claim (3) above.

⁴ I think it might be helpful here to consider conditional preferences, commitments, or endorsements. Given the choice between A or B, I prefer B. Also, it is complicated to explicate the way in which our relationship to a role by virtue of which we are “committed” to it is psychological. In particular, we should not assume that there is a psychological “act” (conscious or not) at a moment in time that commits one to a role.

So I wonder: Are internalism and externalism talking past each other? Internalism is interested in how the norms get *me* in their grip. The externalism Witt defends is mainly interested in how norms attach to roles and so get *occupants of those roles* in their grip. Externalism also helps us answer why the social norms that bind me have the content they do (answering (B)). However, because an account of social normativity should plausibly answer (A) and (B), we either need an externalist answer to (A) as well, or we need both internalism and externalism to answer both questions.

4. INSTRUMENTAL/NONINSTRUMENTAL VALUE OR VALUING?⁵

Let's consider (C): C) What *kinds of reasons* do I (or anyone) have to abide by social norms? (NB: We can have a variety of reasons to abide by a particular norm, e.g., we may have prudential, legal, and moral reasons to not steal.)

As I read Witt, she addresses (C) by claiming that reasons to abide by social norms are not prudential (pp. 5–6), nor are they purely instrumental, either for individuals or societies (e.g., pp. 45–48, 53). Social norms reflect and shape forms of excellence in an activity, and so our reasons to abide by them is the pursuit of excellence, or even, by realizing ourselves as social agents as we become “responsive to and evaluable under” them (p. 19).

I found the discussion of instrumental and non-instrumental value confusing. There are so many ways to understand both the distinction itself and related ones! As Langton, Korsgaard, and others have argued, there is an important difference between the distinctions instrumental/non-instrumental, extrinsic/intrinsic, and conditional/unconditional, as they apply to values and valuing. Langton (2007) makes a first stab at it drawing on Korsgaard (1983):

Intrinsic value is *the value a thing has in itself*. Extrinsic value is the value a thing has from another source. The distinction between ends and means is about *the way we value things*. To value something as an end is to value it for its own sake; to value it instrumentally, as a means, is to value it for the sake of something else. (160, italics mine).

As I understand this, someone S values X instrumentally insofar as S believes X to be a means to an end E (that S values). Achieving E may be valued instrumentally also, if E is believed to be a means to a further end E*. A final end is an end that is not valued as instrumental to any further end. Note that we can be wrong about how

5 See claim (2).

we value something (instrumentally or as an end). Our way of valuing something doesn't make it so.

However, Langton goes on to argue that valuing instrumentally should be understood more specifically: "we value something as an instrument when we value it for the sake of (not just any old "something else," but) its effects" (163) and, moreover, something can be valuable as a result of its effects. So she complicates the picture (164):

(Value) Ways things have value

- intrinsic value = value a thing has in itself
- extrinsic value = value a thing has from another source
- instrumental value = value a thing has from its effects
- conditioned value = value a thing has conditional on certain further facts, e.g., value has been conferred on something by an agent. This looks extrinsic, but Langton allows that the conferrer and conferred upon may be the same agent, in which case it is intrinsic.⁶

(Valuing) Ways we value things

- intrinsically = for the thing's own sake
- extrinsically = for the sake of something else
- instrumentally = for the sake of its effects [as a means to those effects?]

So what is Witt's argument that social goodness is not purely instrumental? Consider:

...there are aspects of skill and expertise that are local, the way we do things around here, and cannot be cashed out in instrumental terms. Indeed, some local standards of excellence might lack instrumental value entirely. (46)

What counts as a good carpenter or flautist is indexed—in a profound way—to the society in which the activity occurs, and it is this deep contextuality that underwrites that some of the goods in question are noninstrumental. (47)

If we take 'instrumental' to concern a *way of valuing*, then it is clearly true that in a particular social setting, locals may not value the activities of a skilled artisan, or the products, instrumentally. They may value them for their own sake and take them to be good in themselves. But this doesn't show that the activities or the products are

⁶ Based on Langton's further arguments in the paper, I add conditioned value as further sort of value. It doesn't fit within extrinsic or intrinsic, however, because she wants to allow that conditioned value may be intrinsic if an agent confers value on herself. In such a case, however, the value of the agent is not unconditional for it depends on the self-conferring of value.

intrinsically or unconditionally good. We may wrongly value something as intrinsically good, for it may not be good at all, or it may be only instrumentally good.

Consider Witt's example of cooking:

Think about cooking norms, which seem to be primary candidates for an instrumental analysis—after all we need to eat. But now also consider the wide variety of cooking techniques that reflect the way we ought to do it—around here. In this context, there are normatively assessable practices and activities that constitute excellent cooking, and that excellence is not explicable in terms of instrumental values. (15)

To call someone “an excellent cook” refers to local standards pertaining to the activity and product of cooking—tastes good, nutritious, economical—*rather than to the instrumental value that the activity of cooking might have as it contributes to a larger societal good like the economy.*(55, italics mine)

I'm not sure I understand how the variety of context sensitive norms is relevant to the issue of instrumentality. Cooking excellence definitely has different norms in different contexts. But this is compatible with them being spelled out in instrumental terms: what is nutritious and economical varies from place to place due to the availability of foodstuffs. The cooking norms, say, in culture *C* are good because of the effects they have in producing nutritious, economical, and tasty food in *C*. (This allows that cultural traditions may have evolved distinctive ways of cooking that are not simply maximizing nutrition and cost, for if food is to be eaten, then its appeal may depend on background expectations and cultivated tastes.) Moreover, why should instrumentality require that the end is a broad societal or global goodness (see italics in second quote)? Flossing my teeth has instrumental value, but it doesn't make the world, overall, a better place.

Recall Langton's distinctions: things or activities that have instrumental value are good because of their effects. Consider Witt's example. How could cooking be excellent if it didn't create pleasant or interesting taste? How could it be excellent if it didn't nourish? How could cooking be excellent if it didn't express a cultural sensibility that emerged historically in relation to the climate and agriculture? How could the techniques be good if they didn't result in an edible meal? It may be that some culinary standards are non-instrumental. But unless we are talking about *final ends*, something can be both intrinsically and instrumentally valuable. As far as I can see, the arguments about variability of cooking techniques seem to be irrelevant to whether cooking is valuable instrumentally.

But perhaps we should turn to the distinction between *praxis* and *poiesis* (pp. 47–48), i.e., to distinguish cooking as a productive art and cooking as an activity. Is it possible to view cooking as an activity that is good in itself, regardless of the product? This would mean that it is something more like making music, or swimming. It is its own end. I can sort of see how this could be—I love to cook—but it seems to me essential to cooking that it is producing food. Even if no one eats it, the expertise is deeply responsive to taste, smell, texture, in a dish *for eating*. In Aristotelian terms, it has a telos *outside of itself*. I think we are left with the question: Is cooking valuable because of its effects, valuable extrinsically (not in terms of its effects?), or conditionally? And what about other social roles and activities?

5. AFUNCTIONS—WHAT ARE THEY AND HOW CAN THEY GENERATE BINDING NORMS?⁷

Afunctions are crucial to Witt's account because they bring with them forms of excellence and, she suggests, binding social norms. Witt insists, however, that Afunctions are a distinctive sort of function, different from etiological functions, system functions, ascribed goals or purposes, or any of the other usual suspects (49). She says,

I take being an artisan as a paradigmatic social role and explain social role normativity (in general) in terms of the expertise, techniques, and functions associated with being an artisan, a cluster of concepts that together I call “Afunctions.” (37)

The normativity arising from the notions of function, technique, and expertise is not simply a matter of social acceptance but rather is grounded in the requirements for excellence intrinsic to an activity... It is what you ought to do or ought to use given that you occupy a certain social position, when that is understood to imply a technique and an expertise. (60)

So let's work through a case of an artisan. I am a knitter, and I knit hats (among other things). I have the equipment (yarn, needles, scissors, pattern) and use these items with know-how in producing a hat. What is the Afunction here? It seems that Witt wants to say that the *artisan*, rather than the tools, or the activity of knitting, has the Afunction.

7 See claim (4).

Aristotle's central examples in the function argument (and elsewhere) are artisans not artifacts. Both the source and the realization of the function or work obtain just insofar as that individual is an artisan of a certain kind. Afunction and identity go hand in hand. (47)

Although the normativity in the case of production (poiesis) is more complex than in the case of action (praxis), in both instances the value is noninstrumental in the sense that they are realizations of *the craftsman's end or function, of what it is to be an artisan of this kind*. Insofar as the individual is an artisan they realize their functions, their excellence as an artisan, in their artistic or productive activities. This excellence or goodness, this expertise, is intrinsic to being an artisan, to what the artisan is, and not merely instrumental as in the function of a tool. (48, my italics)

The artisan, in this case, Sally, has an Afunction, qua knitter. My Afunction is to realize the excellence of knitting. So, it seems, I am bound by an excellence 'ought' to learn the techniques and expertise that enable me to become an excellent knitter. And I can fail, qua knitter, if I don't master the techniques and develop expertise.

I wonder, however, how the notion of Afunction is supposed to explain how the artisanal norms of knitting are *binding on me*, or binding on knitters, generally. (This returns us to questions (A) and (B) above.) I grant that there are excellent knitters, those who know more techniques and have greater expertise; I admire them. But how does the fact that I'm a knitter bind *me* to those norms? I'm happy to be a mediocre knitter. I don't want to spend the time or money to be an excellent knitter. Should I be criticized for being mediocre? Have I failed in any way as a social agent? Have I even failed as a knitter? I don't see the normative "oomph." I even identify as a knitter (I'm definitely *not* a cross-stitcher or an embroiderer, even though I know how to do both). In suggesting that the norms constitute "what it is to be an artisan of this kind" is confusing, for presumably I may reject the norms, or fail to fulfill them, and still be a knitter. It is not as if I am not a true knitter unless I am an excellent knitter, though there may be minimal conditions I must meet to be a knitter. Knitting norms of excellence don't touch me, even qua knitter.⁸

What I'm looking for here is connected to the original puzzle: Why am I bound by standards of excellence in knitting just because I'm a knitter? Recall that it can't be

⁸ To explicate the notion of function she has in mind for Afunctions, Witt relies on the "Oxford English Dictionary's definition of 'function' as 'the special kind of activity proper to anything. The mode of activity by which it fulfills its purpose'" (50). Is the idea that in my social role as knitter, the telos of knitting becomes *my telos*? What even is the telos of knitting? And how does an acquired social telos interact with my proper telos qua human, i.e., eudaimonia?

because I commit myself to being a good knitter, because that would be an internalist answer. On Witt's account, my simply being a knitter should bind me to the norms of excellence. But I would like to hear more about how this happens.

Given that artisanal 'oughts' are supposed to be the model for social oughts, more generally, we can extend this: Why am I bound by standards of excellence in [parenting, teaching, homeowning...] just because I am a [parent, teacher, homeowner...], especially if we assume that these standards are locally determined (and plausibly flawed)?⁹

6. SOCIAL JUSTICE (BRIEFLY!)¹⁰

Witt's account of social norms provides a rich array of resources for understanding social critique. On her view,

Properly understood, habituation develops practical expertise, which includes both know-how and know-why. So, the expert in doing something is also an expert in how to criticize what they are doing and how to improve what it is they are doing. (88)

She also allows for transformative self-creation:

In brief, the artisanal model offers a location for the goods and norms that are the objects of aspiration for the apprentice. The apprentice wants to become a certain kind of person with a set of norms and values, to which they will be responsive. The apprentice's activities and decisions are directed toward those individuals who model activities, attitudes, norms. (112)

I have no doubt that it is possible to develop a critique of social norms from within a practice, and it seems right that we have capacities for evolving as social agents even within oppressive circumstances. I do wonder, however, whether there is an empirical dimension to this question and how far we can achieve a satisfying answer purely *a priori*.

More importantly, however, it seems that on Witt's view, the best critic of a practice will be one with the greatest expertise:

⁹ There may be a hypothetical imperative: if you want to be a good (true?) knitter, then you ought to develop the techniques of knitting excellence. But occupying the role doesn't, by itself, fulfill the antecedent. The hypothetical imperative captures the oomph of the internalist account.

¹⁰ See claims (6–7).

The person with expertise can make accurate, detailed, and persuasive criticisms of the norms governing a practice to which they are responsive. Of course, the social role critic must have genuine expertise. (100)

This strikes me as implausible in two ways:

(1) It may be that an expert at a social role is in an excellent position to judge the techniques to be flawed, or to question whether all the actual norms are necessary to achieve the telos of the activity. But the expert may be locked into a perspective that assumes the aptness of the social role (and its telos) and have difficulty seeing alternatives.¹¹ In other words, assuming the acceptability of the social role, the expert may have ideas for modifying it. But why should we think that the expert sees beyond the social role, or sees how the social role might be eliminated? This is why social theorists have turned to double consciousness (Du Bois 1903/1997), the “outsider within” (Collins 2000), *mestizaje* (Anzaldúa 1987), “world traveling” (Lugones 1987), and other ways of getting outside of a social role in order to see it for what it is. (This is especially true for roles that are naturalized, such as gender, race, and disability.)

(2) Why should expertise be necessary for critique? It would seem that those who *don't* fit the role and cannot become experts, for whatever reason, will be in an excellent position to critique the norms associated with a role. They can see why the norms are, e.g., biased, overly demanding, at odds with human flourishing. For example, people from working class backgrounds are, to my mind, some of the best critics of academic roles and norms, exactly because it is so difficult for them to fit them (Kadi 1999). The same is true of the standpoint of the disabled.

7. CONCLUSION

I hope I have given a sense of the richness of Witt's account of social normativity. And there is *so much* more to discuss, explore, develop. I am *not at all* sure I have interpreted her correctly or whether I have raised the right questions for her distinctive project. But it is clear that engaging with her book is tremendously rewarding and reveals so much of the social world that is typically obscured in contemporary social philosophy.

¹¹ This is connected to the idea that subjects are interpellated into roles. When they become social subjects through this process and take up ideology of the role, it is actually very difficult to see beyond it. (See Althusser)

REFERENCES

- Althusser, Louis. (1971) "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses." In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*. Trans. Ben Brewster. London: New Left Books.
- Anzaldúa, Gloria. (1987) *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. Aunt Lute Books.
- Collins, Patricia Hill. (2000) *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. 2nd edition. New York and London: Routledge.
- Du Bois, W. E. B. (1903/1997) *The Souls of Black Folk*. Ed., Robert Gooding-Williams. Bedford/St. Martins.
- Kadi, Joanna. (1999) *Thinking Class: Sketches from a Cultural Worker*. Boston: South End Press.
- Korsgaard, Christine. (1983) "Two Distinctions in Goodness." *The Philosophical Review* 92: 169–195.
- Langton, Rae. (2007) "Objective and Unconditioned Value." *The Philosophical Review* 116(2): 157–185.
- Lugones, Maria. (1987) "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* 2(2): 3–19.