

Book Symposium

Bad Woman and Badass Woman: Comments on Charlotte Witt's *Social Goodness*

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Charlotte Witt has more than any philosopher called our attention to the pull of social norms, especially their gendering. In Witt's latest book, *Social Goodness*, she gives us a general theory of what the source and nature of social normativity is. In these comments I engage with that theory. To explore the contours of Witt's theory, I am particularly interested in social badness.

1. WOMAN, BAD WOMAN, BADASS WOMAN

As Witt stresses, we have to distinguish sharply among several issues:

1. What is it to be a woman?
2. What are the membership conditions for being a woman? How do you get to be one?
3. What is the content of the norms that come with that kind membership? What determines whether you are a bad woman or not?
4. What is the source of that normativity? In Witt's phrase, why are women "responsive to and evaluable under" gender norms?

I will want to pull this last issue apart even further. That will allow me to offer an alternative picture to Witt's that nevertheless shares certain methodological commitments.

10.25365/jso-2025-9647

Published online July 17, 2026

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2. THE METAPHYSICS OF GENDER

It will be helpful for our discussion to have some acquaintance with Witt's view of gender (Witt 2011) and the general methodology she employs. For Witt, gender is a social role. While that places her in the social position camp regarding gender, the details matter. In *The Metaphysics of Gender* (Witt 2011) she both offers a theory of what gender is and why it is the way it is.

Witt thinks that our gender practices meet the basic need that humans have for reproduction. Just as dining practices meet the basic human need for nourishment, so gender practices meet the basic human need for biological reproduction. There is room on her theory to explain some of the variation in gender practices across time and place by reference to differences in material circumstances, including climate, individual agency, and historical contingencies, just as one might explain some differences in dining practices with reference to some of these factors, although that is not a project she undertakes. However, most of us who give a theory of gender do not give anything like an origin story or an explanation of why we find ourselves in this predicament. One of the virtues of Witt's theory is that she does. I mention this here not because I agree with everything she says on the matter. In fact I have devoted considerable energy to disagreeing with her (Ásta 2012), but hers is a powerful theory, and an elegant one. Let us linger with other aspects of its elegance.

We have talked about gender practices and why we have them. What is it to have a gender? To have a gender is to have a social role, but it is a special sort of social role. Our gender is a mega social role, as it unifies all our other social roles. Just as the sheltering function unifies all the different parts of a house into the house that it is, so the engendering function unifies all the different parts of our social selves into the social individuals that we are. I might be a daughter and a mother and a partner and a professor but my gender unifies and organizes all these different roles into the social individual that I am.

3. METHODOLOGY

I want to situate Witt in the methodological landscape. The way I interpret her work, she observes certain phenomena such as gender practices, conflicts over social norms, especially gender norms, and the pull that social norms have on people who even are critical of those same norms. What she does is provide a theory of gender, the function of gender practices, and the nature and source of social normativity that makes sense of these observed phenomena. In that way, Witt's methodology is not unlike Sally Haslanger's (2012) or mine (2018). I note that hers is a descriptive project, an analysis of our current reality. It isn't an account of how gender or social normativity ought to

function. It is likewise not an account of the usage of terms or concepts, descriptive or otherwise. She, like all philosophers do, defines her terms and sharpens her concepts for the tasks at hand, but that is the extent of her linguistic or conceptual engineering. And although she is an essentialist, she is not an essentialist of the type that proposes essential features of being a member of the kind woman or offers a real definition of woman in a similarly essentialist sense. Her essentialism is a uniessentialism, which means that there is a function that unifies all the parts of an entity into the entity that it is. In that way, social individuals are like artifacts, with a unifying function. She thinks this unifying function is our gender.

Let us distinguish among several different projects in the area of gender (for a fuller picture see Ásta 2025). A descriptive theory of gender, for example, offers a conception of what gender is and how it functions. For example, you can, as I do, offer a theory of gender such that to have a gender is to have a social status or position in a context. This sort of theory is a metaphysics of gender and the aim is to illuminate an aspect of our world. Such illumination may reveal various sorts of injustices, for example unjust treatment of people because of their gender or even an injustice in the assignment of gender to a person. For example, in some contexts, people may not be assigned the gender status they identify with. But that is the correct result for a descriptive theory. If there is injustice in our gender practices, our descriptive theory should reveal it, not pretend it ain't there. The point of a descriptive theory is illumination.

A descriptive theory can then also be accompanied by a normative theory which argues for normative claims regarding gender or gender practices. This normative theory may, for example, articulate the nature of the injustice involved in our gender practices. But the descriptive theory may also stand solo, independent of any normative companion.

Instead of a descriptive theory of gender, one could offer a normative theory of gender, a theory of, for example how gender practices ought to function, or how moral agents should act gender-wise. It could be part of such a normative theory that it is unjust to be assigned a gender one does not identify with, that such a mismatch is unjust. Or one's normative theory could be more radical, where treating people differently because of gender would be unjust or immoral, or even the mere assignment of gender would be unjust. To give a normative theory of gender is not to give a metaphysics of gender, but rather to paint a picture of what a better world would look like.

I think Witt and Haslanger and I are all involved in similar projects in that there are certain phenomena that we observe and that our theories are to explain. Our theorizing is motivated by social justice concerns and our values guide our theorizing

in that it helps with the choice of what we think needs explaining and what is relevant to that explanation.

Suppose I am right and Witt and Haslanger and I are all doing roughly the same thing, that is, constructing theories that illuminate what our social reality is like and explain the phenomena that we observe, motivated by social justice concerns. How are we to evaluate the different proposals?

As I understand Witt's methodology in her latest project on social normativity, she proceeds the same way. There are certain phenomena regarding social normativity that need to be explained and she articulates a theory that is to explain them.

What are these phenomena? Here are the key ones: Why are we responsive to and evaluable under social norms that we may not endorse? How is it possible to criticize social norms and social roles? How can we make sense of self-creation, when we change the kinds of people we are? In what follows I will focus on how Witt's theory illuminates the first two phenomena, that is, how we can be responsive to and evaluable to norms that we may not endorse; and what the normative ground for criticism is.

4. AN ACCOUNT OF SOCIAL NORMATIVITY

Witt argues that the source of social normativity is external to us and that the artisanal model of normativity can explain the phenomena that need to be explained.

On the artisanal model you develop expertise in a social role just as you develop expertise in carpentry or piano playing; you develop know how and knowledge of why to proceed that way through practice and habituation under the tutelage of a master. You perform actions related to said role more or less skillfully depending on to what extent you choose and perform the relevant techniques for the task at hand. Similarly, for example, you act skillfully as a parent when you motivate your kid to eat their vegetables without shaming them, bribing them with candy, or beating them with a stick.

5. THE ARGUMENT THAT SOCIAL NORMATIVITY IS NOT REDUCIBLE

Some people think there are two kinds of philosophers, the lumpers and the splitters: The lumpers want to find commonalities, the splitters want to explore differences. I am usually accused of being a lumper, but in this case I side with the splitters when I ask whether there is a single distinct sort of social normativity. The question is twofold: Is social normativity irreducible or reducible to some other sort of normativity, such as moral or prudential? And is there only one kind of social normativity or are there

several? I am going to label Witt a monist about social normativity. I will end up advocating pluralism.

Witt argues that social normativity is neither reducible to moral normativity nor to prudential normativity. An important reason for why gender normativity is not reducible to moral normativity is the difficulty in explaining how one could criticize oppressive social norms that one nevertheless ought to follow. Similarly for the normativity governing the carpenter: although the carpenter ought to use a level in their construction, that is not a moral ought!

Social normativity is also not reducible to prudential normativity: What Witt ought to do as a professor may not be in her best interest. For example it may be in her interest to give everyone an A in a class, but nevertheless that is not what she ought to do.

Witt thinks social normativity is a distinct sort of normativity that comes with occupying a social position. The source of it is the social occupancy itself and the content of the norms in question are developed in accordance with the artisanal model of how one functions well in that role.

6. THE ARGUMENT FOR EXTERNALISM

Why would the source of social normativity be the mere occupancy of the role? Many people believe that you are not bound by the norms of a social role like being a woman, a student, or a father unless you have chosen those norms yourself. Witt thinks this cannot be right. You ought to take care of your kid because you are their father even though you have not chosen the norms that come with that social role yourself.

This case exemplifies the idea that the source of social normativity is external to the individual, not internal to them. You ought to take care of your kid, not because that would be to act in accordance with laws or norms you have yourself chosen to abide by. Nor should you do it because it is in accordance with your preferences. You should do it because you occupy the role of father and the standards of being a good father demand it.

In general, on Witt's view, the reason you ought to follow the norms of a particular social role you occupy is that you do occupy that role and "around here", to use her locution, social goodness in that role involves adhering to those norms.

7. BAD WOMAN

It is now time to put some pressure on Witt's account of social goodness by looking at social badness.

Let us go back to Witt's phrase that we are "responsive to and evaluable under" social gender norms. I want to pull these apart and suggest an alternative picture of the pull of social norms.

I agree with Witt that social role occupancy brings with it social norms and that others evaluate us in accordance with them, but I want to linger with the nature of the pull. Why do I feel bad when I don't shave my underarms and people stare at me at the swimming pool? Is it because I really ought to shave and I am failing at being a good woman? To be sure, I am failing, I am a bad woman according to the standard of femininity around here in the South where I live. I am a bad woman. But that is not why I feel bad. It is not the case that I accept that standard. I just feel bad because it is uncomfortable to have people stare at me and whisper and give me nasty looks. That is all. It is the badness of not fitting in and having people not like something about you or judge you inadequate, even if they are doing so according to a standard you do not endorse.

We might even complicate this a bit and think of a case where I am genuinely torn about gender norms, where I feel a strong pull, even experience myself as having those norms as relevant to me. Why not say that what explains my being responsive to gender norms regarding grooming and attire is that people with authority over me in my past (think parents and the like) police my appearance and through habituation I and others engage in such policing of ourselves and others to the point that we have internalized psychologically those norms, even if we do not endorse them. My habits were responsive to those norms yet I did not endorse them.

What explains that I am evaluated under these norms is my occupying a certain social position and others' judgment and policing. In this slightly more complicated case, I have internalized them like a bad habit or the "law of the father" to use a psychoanalytic phrase, but there is no normative oomph.

So: The community has a standard of gendered behavior and attire and I am evaluated in accordance with that standard and found lacking. However the only pull I feel is psychological, not normative. And this also explains why I am able to resist the gender norms. Through examination of my habits I am able to slowly unlearn them and evaluate them critically. I think they are stupid. Hairy armpits are hot!

This example suggests the following picture about gender norms: they apply to me because of my social position occupancy, but they do not have normative pull on me because I do not endorse them. If Witt agrees with me about this case, then either she has to give up her monism about social normativity or her argument for normative externalism needs to be reexamined. Let us go back to her central case of the father who ought to take care of his kid. Lest you think that this sort of obligation is best thought of as a moral obligation we note the social embedment of this obligation. In a society with different child rearing practices, a father might not be responsible for

taking care of his kids. I now imagine some of you saying: but that is not a case of a father, that is just a case of someone who donates sperm. To be a father is a thick role. Hence, Witt's phrase: the standards of excellence in a social role "around here".

In any case, you may think that we stand in certain social relationships and just standing in those relations generates moral duties. The moral duties do not make sense in the absence of the social practices we engage in, but nevertheless the normativity involved is moral. If that is your verdict regarding the case of the father, then that case does not establish normative externalism about social normativity.

Or, you might be having the suspicion, with me, that moral normativity is a kind of social normativity, such that instead of social normativity being reducible to moral normativity, it is the other way around: moral normativity is reducible to social normativity, perhaps a certain kind of social normativity that passes a generalization test or has some other specific feature that distinguishes it from conventions and mere means ends rationality.

Back to the father case and how I would make sense of it on the alternative picture that I sketched. Remember, the key was to distinguish between the psychological pull and the normative one.

Is it the case that the father ought to take care of his kid? We can assume, for the sake of argument, that it is a father role "around here" not with very different child rearing practices. The man had a one night stand with a woman, the woman got pregnant, and the man took off. She wrote him to tell him that he was a father. He does not believe in bourgeois morality. Should he take care of the kid? I am of course not asking the legal question, which will depend on the legal jurisdiction in question. The man did not want to be a father. He just wanted a fun night. And he does not think he should take care of the kid because he did not want it.

Here we might observe that the way we organize child rearing around here is such that children are dependent on their biological parents unless they make other arrangements. And we might say that it is this dependency that distinguishes the case from the one of gender norms regarding attire and grooming. The dependent will be harmed if you do not take care of them. No one is harmed by your hairy arm pits. They might feel disgusted when looking at you, but feeling disgusted does not equal being harmed.

If this is right, then the case of the father may indeed be the special sort of social normativity that is moral, in the way I suggested before such that what accounts for the external normative pull are the moral elements of harm and dependency.

So, here is a question: is it the case that whenever we agree that a person ought to do something even though they do not endorse the norms in question, what we are dealing with is the special case of moral norms? And if that is the case, is our judgment about the case based on norms that we endorse?

We might want to compare this case to a case where someone ought to avenge their father's death. We don't have to introduce complications of Antigonean proportions; just think of a case where someone killed your father and the norms for being a good daughter are such that you ought to avenge him by killing the offender. You are a pacifist but feel the pull, psychologically, to kill the offender. Yet, because of your pacifism, you do not endorse those norms and I am inclined to say there is no normative pull. Yet, this is a case where you do not excel in your role of daughter if you do not avenge your father. You are a bad daughter. Is this case not akin to the gender norms case?

8. THE THIEF AND THE ENSLAVER

Let me put more pressure on social goodness in a role. In particular I am interested in how narrowly it is defined. Consider two examples of social role goodness that may seem particularly counterintuitive, those of the thief and the enslaver. These are cases where the thief ought to steal something from someone and the enslaver ought to trap people.

Witt says about the thief that there are standards of excellence for a thief. You can be an excellent thief and a bad person. Notice, that being a thief requires the institution of private property. You cannot steal anything, well or badly, if no one owns anything, if ownership does not make sense. As I understand her, Witt thinks that the thief ought to slip in now and steal the jewel as that is the most skillful way of stealing the jewel. A less skillful way would be to break and butcher your way to the jewel, leaving carnage and broken glass in your wake. What would make it less skillful? Because it is messy? Causes damage? Is less efficient? Or because it risks getting caught so is less sustainable as a method as it risks not being repeatable? What exactly is in the quiver of techniques of being a thief?

The enslaver is another hard case. You can be a good enslaver and a bad one. A good enslaver presumably is very efficient at rounding people up and selling them to people who lock them up in containers and transport them to faraway lands where they are made to work the fields like in the United States in the past or made to perform sex work as is happening in many places right now. Perhaps we want to say that a good enslaver is efficient, has a low risk of getting caught, is skillful in negotiations, and so on. Notice that you cannot be an enslaver if there is no market in people, no others that lock and transport the people to the places where they are kept captive. You cannot be an enslaver in the absence of a system of slavery and the associated practices of trafficking in people. Compare with other kinds of trappers, for example people who trap foxes and exchange their fur for rifles or alcohol. Or those that trap domestic cats living outside. In the absence of a practice of giving

cats to people as pets through a network of adoption agencies, I cannot perform the function of a trapper. I am just a cat lady.

To return to the good enslaver: Does being an excellent enslaver involve contributing to the stability of the role of enslaver, which then means the stability of the system of slavery? What determines how narrow the role is? You might think that in many cases a trapper generates the market for their goods, such that a narrow conception of excellence is not warranted.

Witt relies heavily on the case of the carpenter to develop her artisanal model of social normativity. She says, for example, that the carpenter ought to use a level when constructing the post. Why is that? Because in order for the house to withstand weather and last longer, the beam has to be horizontal and the other pieces of wood attached vertically to form a 90 degree angle. This is how you achieve the highest tensile strength. The carpenter knows both how to construct it, and why they must do it in that way. But here I am inclined to think that what we have is means ends rationality: the goal is stability of the house. That requires maximum tensile strength and given the technology and materials we have around here, this is the best way to achieve that.

Another sort of case is the flautist. To engage in the activity of flute playing one needs to make certain kinds of sounds using the flute. The best way to achieve those sounds is to hold your lips and tongue like so (imagine the relevant mouth contortions) as you blow. The intermediate goal is a certain sound and there is a physical way to achieve that that even has a mathematical representation. The difficulty is the practice it takes to curve one's lips and tongue in the right way. So at least a part of the normativity involved for the flute player is means ends rationality.

9. PLURALISM ABOUT SOCIAL NORMATIVITY

If I am right about the cases I have discussed, then there is not one source of social normativity, but several, including social role dependent moral norms and social role dependent means ends rationality. I think it is defensible to say that these are social, because they are social role dependent. But I think we should be pluralist about them.

In the case of not conforming to gender norms, the psychological pull is explained by the power that social policing has over us in the simple case and the internalization of societal norms in the slightly more complicated, and perhaps more ordinary, case. But what explains our ability to resist social norms is that the psychological pull is not a normative pull and through examining our practices and the justification for our actions and attitudes we are able to resist practices that we do not endorse.

What is the source of critique of a social role on the artisanal model? The story is this: If failing to live up to the norms of the role of woman is being a bad woman and critiquing them is being a badass woman, on the artisanal model, what enables Witt to be badass is her knowing how to act excellently as a woman and why. Her knowing why is what enables her to critique the gender norms and become badass.

But think about an excellent woman who is the most fabulous homemaker and utterly uncritical of the gender norms she adheres to. We all know such, often wonderful, human beings. She has expertise in being a woman and both the know how and the knowing why she should stick to the gender norms of her community. She should not become a philosopher. Being an excellent woman involves making a nurturing home for her husband and children. She knows why: it helps their flourishing and the flourishing of her community and the society at large. How does her expertise explain how she can become critical; how does it explain the road to badass?

I do not think Witt's expertise in being a woman, although considerable, is what enabled her to become critical of gender norms, to become a badass woman. Knowing the function of the social role of woman in society helps, of course, but that cannot be the normative ground of her resistance. Instead, the alternative picture I propose is that it is her not endorsing those norms that explains it. She is subject to them, has internalized them to some degree, but the lack of endorsement upon reflection is the source of her ability to resist.¹

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¹ Acknowledgements: These comments originated in a symposium on Charlotte Witt's book at the University of New Hampshire in January 2025. I want to thank my fellow panelists, Louise Antony, Sally Haslanger, and Charlotte Witt, for stimulating discussions, as well as Laure Barillas for organizing a wonderful event.