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Social role normativity: from individualism to institutionalism

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ABSTRACT

In her book *Social Goodness*, Charlotte Witt gives an account of the normativity of social norms, crucially appealing to (and naming) social role normativity. Social role normativity is a distinctive kind of normativity that follows from social roles. For example, teachers ought to teach and students ought to do their homework. According to Witt's artisanal model of social role normativity, we should make sense of social role normativity by reference to artisanal roles, like being a carpenter. Just as carpenters have skills, techniques, and expertise associated with their craft, social roles have skills, techniques, and expertise associated with them. The artisanal model presents the individual craftsperson, taught by a uniquely qualified expert, as the paradigm. Because of this, I argue that the artisanal model struggles to capture the messiness of the actual world, where expertise is distributed, unstable, and contested. To accommodate the real world, we should move away from Witt's individualistic artisanal model. Instead of focusing on individual artisans, our account of social role normativity should focus on communities and institutions that promote artisanal practices.



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1. Introduction

In *Social Goodness*, Charlotte Witt gives an account of social role normativity. Social role normativity, here, is the kind of normativity that is distinctively associated with the social roles we inhabit. Parents ought to care for their children. Students ought to do their homework. Writers ought to, well, write. In each case, the 'ought' does not necessarily have a moral or prudential force. Rather, the idea is that the social role, in each case, designates some actions as required, permissible, forbidden, and so on.

In recent years, social ontologists have become more interested in social role normativity, using it to characterize gender roles (Haslanger

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2012), oppressive institutions (Brännmark 2022), and social power (Burman 2023).¹ Witt gives a foundational account of social role normativity. On her view, social role normativity is characterized by two overarching theses: normative externalism and the artisanal model.

Normative externalism is the view that the source of social role normativity resides, not an individual's attitudes or preferences, but in features of the world outside of the individual. Thus, we cannot reduce the normative force of the fact that parents ought to care for their children in terms of norms that parents themselves have accepted. Rather, parents are evaluable under norms that require them to care for their children, regardless of whether they themselves accept these norms.

The artisanal model of social role normativity is the view that social roles are best understood along the lines of artisanal roles, like being a carpenter. Carpenters possess expertise, the collective expression of which is a set of shared techniques. The techniques of carpentry involves the different ways of cutting and shaping building materials. These techniques are realized by the work of individual carpenters. This work, and carpenters as a whole, are normatively assessable *qua* acts of carpentry (and carpenters). Witt gives an account of how the artisanal model makes sense of the force of social normativity.

Witt's account of social role normativity helpfully brings out the way that social norms are intertwined with skills, techniques, and expertise. However, I will argue that Witt's treatment of techniques is idealized in a way that makes it difficult to understand how techniques are learned, created, and shared. The artisanal model presents the individual crafts-person, taught by a uniquely qualified expert, as the paradigm. This model struggles to capture the messiness of the actual world, where expertise is distributed (§2), unstable (§3), and contested (§4). To accommodate the real world, I argue that we should move away from Witt's individualistic artisanal model. Instead of focusing on individual artisans, our account of social role normativity should focus on communities and institutions that promote artisanal practices.

2. The expert and the novice

In Chapter 5 of *Social Goodness*, Witt gives an explanation of how we acquire the expertise characteristic of our social roles. On her model,

¹The contemporary discussion of social normativity is influenced by earlier discussions of social normativity in social ontology. See J. R. Searle (1995; J. Searle 2010; Gilbert 2013).

expertise is acquired via habituation, the inculcation of the relevant skills necessary for the activity.

Witt's Aristotelian notion of habituation requires a few different factors. Most obviously, habituation requires us to simply practice the relevant technique. Painters learn to paint by painting. Actors learn to act by acting. And so on. We learn to perform the complex activities associated with social roles in our local context. This kind of skill acquisition via imitation has been a common theme of philosophers of know-how since Aristotle. Gilbert Ryle writes, 'It is of the essence of merely habitual practices that one performance is a replica of its predecessors' (1949, 30). Witt specifically discusses the Heideggerian tradition, represented by Hubert Dreyfus, in which practical knowledge is mainly skillful, unreflective coping.²

Witt argues that habituation require more than imitation. We must also be sensitive to what we ought to do. Suppose a golfer chooses the correct club – say, a putter – to hit the ball in a given circumstance. If the expert is a golfer, they will not only choose correctly, but know why their choice is the correct one. If someone challenged their choice of a putter, they could give reasons why the putter is the best club for a particular scenario.

As described, habituation inculcates both know-how and know-why. One knows how to perform the activities characteristic of a social role, and one knows why that performance should be done. Both forms of knowledge, however, come from an apprenticeship with an expert. For Witt, such an apprenticeship is a necessary feature for developing expertise.

In Chapter 7, Witt says:

The novice-expert relationship is central to the transmission (and development) of artisanal technique. And the transmission of technique is hierarchical: it flows in one direction, from expert to apprentice. It is not a two-way street between equal partners, because in relation to the transmission of artisanal technique, experts and novices are not equal partners. The acquisition of technique is both a hierarchical process and a necessary feature of the artisanal model. (2023, 125)

On Witt's view, there is a necessary hierarchy between experts and novices, one that prevents artisanal techniques from being transmitted to novices. To be clear: Witt does not think that the inequality between expert and novice justifies any particular political arrangements; she is not making claims about the general division of labor in society. Still, this is a strong claim about expertise.

²Dreyfus (2014; 2017).

Is it true that the transmissions of techniques are truly one-way? This is unclear to me. I can imagine several cases in which the transmission of techniques is a two-way street.

Imagine a graduate student in philosophy who is being advised by a philosophy professor. The professor is teaching the student how to become a professional philosopher; they know more about philosophy than the student, they've published respected work, they know the norms of the profession, and so on. However, the graduate student knows much more about how to establish and maintain an online presence, a skill that is increasingly useful for professors to have. The professor, recognizing the student's skill, asks the student to help them redo their online image. The student helps the professor. And after taking the student's advice, the professor begins to acquire more professional opportunities. In this case, it seems that the professor has something to learn from the student that is relevant to being a professor. But if this is correct, then Witt's hierarchical account of technique transmission is false; techniques are sometimes transmitted from novices to experts.

Of course, this case is only plausible to the extent that one thinks that having an online presence is part of being a good philosophy professor. Alternatively, you may argue that the philosophy professor is only in a position of authority over the student with respect to being a philosopher, where being a philosopher is a much more narrow role than being a philosophy professor. Being a philosopher involves doing philosophical research; being a philosophy professor involves branding oneself professionally, being a good colleague, and so on.

We can still imagine that there are skills that the graduate student might have that are arguably characteristic of being a philosopher. For example, suppose the graduate student is skilled at mathematical logic and the professor is not. Or imagine that the student knows more about the history of philosophy than the professor. Maybe the student knows how to incorporate empirical insights into philosophy, while the professor does not. All of these are cases in which a student could plausibly transmit artisanal techniques to the professor.

Moreover, the cases I have described are still cases in which the student is plausibly a student. The transmission of technique is still largely from professor to student. Still, this raises a question about how Witt thinks of the hierarchy involved. We are initially presented with a simple picture in which the professor is an expert in Philosophy – the singular determinate subject – and the student is a novice in Philosophy. It is unclear how that simple picture is tenable, in light of the thought experiments I have described.

A different sort of counterexample to Witt's view concerns being self-taught. There are many self-taught artists. Some of those self-taught artists are certainly experts. Many self-taught artists rely on instructional videos and books, but they have no actual people that teach them. On Witt's view, it appears that it is not simply unlikely for an expert to teach themselves their craft; it is impossible.

In response to this, Witt might broaden the definition of what counts as an expert teacher; if instructional videos and manuals count as expert teachers, then perhaps it is true that no one can be self-taught. The problem with this broad definition is that it trivializes Witt's account of technique transmission; experts no longer have to be persons and they do not have to actively or intentionally engage with their apprentices.

If Witt's account of technique transmission is untenable, what will replace it? There are a few options. One is that the hierarchy only requires the transmission of techniques are *largely* one-way. This allows for the possibility that novices can teach experts, but rules out the possibility that novices know as much as, or more than, experts. Another possibility is that expertise is more fine-grained than we thought. The philosophy professor is actually an expert in a narrow set of skills rather than some general set of skills associated with the role of being a philosopher or philosophy professor. In either case, the account of expertise development will no longer usefully understood in terms of the colloquial notion of an expert artisan that has novices as apprentices.

My own suggestion is that we think of the transmission of techniques as mediated via institutions. Instead of starting with a particular relationship between two people, like the professor and the student, we should start with institutions that are designed to convey know-how and know-why to individuals that do not possess it. We need not locate particular individuals as possessors of expertise. Rather, the expertise is collectively shared and transmitted through a complex assemblage of institutional mechanisms.

3. New techniques

My question about the relationship between the expert and the novice, on the artisanal model, raises a related question about how Witt understands techniques. What is the difference between developing a new technique and implementing an existing technique? And how, on Witt's account, are new techniques possible at all?

Consider the technique of flopping. In sports like basketball and soccer, there are rules that penalize fouls, where a foul consists of unnecessary

physical aggression against one's opponent. If a player gets a foul, they or their team are penalized; the penalties, if they accumulate, can effectively tilt the balance of power on one team's side. For this reason, athletes have developed techniques that maximize the number of fouls called on their opponents. This technique is called flopping.

Here is an example. Suppose soccer player Mieka has the ball and Alex is running directly toward her. Alex might make light contact with Mieka, but upon making contact with Mieka, Mieka collapses to the ground and grabs her knee in pain. Mieka grimaces as if she is in extreme pain, when she is actually pain-free. The referee sees this display and calls a foul on Alex, one that may expel Alex from the game. As a result, Mieka's team has an advantage. Flopping is a potential tactic in several sports with personal fouls. In basketball, players fall to the ground when the opposing player touches them even slightly; or flopping players will intentionally wrap their arms into those of opposing players in effort to draw a foul.

Fans hate flopping. They often find it perverse and in violation of the spirit of the sport. Sports leagues are constantly trying to find ways to minimize or penalize flopping. At some point, however, athletes started flopping and found it to be a successful technique. It is unclear how Witt would describe this kind of technique and the corresponding expertise that comes with.

Suppose Mieka is the first person to regularly and successfully flop. It seems correct to say that Mieka created a new technique. When other players observed Mieka's success, they began flopping as well. Mieka is the catalyst for the current epidemic of flopping. But if Mieka created a new technique, it is unclear how this creation is compatible with the apprenticeship model of expertise. It is easy to imagine flopping being strongly disapproved by Mieka's trainers and mentors. They might tell them that flopping is definitely not the correct way to play soccer. How could such a discordant technique emerge, given the fact that techniques must be transmitted by the existing experts?

Alternatively, we could say that Mieka discovered an existing technique. To say that Mieka discovered an existing technique would be to endorse a kind of Platonism about techniques. The techniques associated with the social role exist prior to our discovery or implementation of them. It is unclear whether Witt would accept Platonism about techniques. On the one hand, she is an Aristotelian, which (perhaps naively) strikes me as in competition with all things Platonist. On the other hand, Witt's normative externalism does assume that social normativity

is inherent in the world, prior to our acceptance of it; the existences of techniques may be similarly agent-independent. In any case, Platonism seems counterintuitive. What counts as a technique seems to depend (at least in part) on agents.

The distinction between creating/discovering a technique matters because there will be many cases in which there is a major discrepancy between the accepted techniques for a social role and the techniques that, in some sense, work. The flopping case is an example of this. Flopping works but it may not be something that is widely accepted, at least initially. For a different example, consider gender. The accepted techniques for performing gender might surround gender presentation, but there may be techniques that are much better that people nonetheless resist. Perhaps displays of wealth can function as better markers of gender identity than clothing, in some cases. The development of such a technique will be contrary to what is accepted.

There is an instability in the distinction between created and discovered techniques, one that may prompt us to move away from the artisanal model. Witt's account seems to presume a stable distinction between created and discovered techniques, where techniques are ultimately created and discovered by individuals. My suggestion is that techniques are created and discovered collectively, by social groups and institutions. If we shift to an emphasis on collective construction, we would not have to immediately resolve individual conflicts about what techniques were created versus discovered.

4. Conflicting techniques

My last objection to Witt's account concerns cases in which it appears that we have conflicting techniques for a single social role.

Åsa Burman, in her book *Nonideal Social Ontology*, talks about the ways in which social ontology is idealized. Specifically, she criticizes what Francesco Guala calls the 'standard model of social ontology'. On the standard model, we focus on small-scale groups where each member (*a*) consents to being a member of the group and has the option to leave, (*b*) wants to cooperate with others in the group, (*c*) agrees with the judgments of others in the group, and (*d*) knows that everyone else in the group knows these things. The kind of social ontology is an example of what Burman calls *ideal social ontology*.³

³For additional discussion of ideal and nonideal social ontology, see Brännmark (2019; 2022).

The standard model is idealized in two ways. First: it idealizes away from oppression and injustice. This is the sense of ideal that Charles Mills criticizes in the context of ideal theory in political philosophy (2005). Second: the standard model idealizes away from the complications of the real world. In the real world, people do not agree; they do not consent; they do not have mutual knowledge; they are not cooperative; and so on.

I believe that Witt's account is idealistic in the second way. This kind of idealization is most apparent in discussion of the techniques associated with social roles. Here is an example.

Ideally a person who has taken the course at the Shelter Institute in Maine on post and beam construction has gained both know-how and know-why. When they build a house, they do so in a manner responsive to post and beam building norms, and they also can explain why these norms are correct. They are taught how to engage in the activities of house building in a manner responsive to local house building norms, and also they learn why the various activities and materials are the right ones for the job at hand given those local norms. . . . Expertise rests on the notion of technique, which is the idea that there are normatively assessable ways of engaging in human activities or realizing social roles around here. (2023, 78–79)

Witt gives a lucid explanation of how techniques are learned: by taking a course taught by experts. She also explains how techniques are implemented – via the building of a house. She also explains how expertise depends on techniques being normatively assessable.

While her account is a paradigm of analytical clarity, it also privileges the ideal case. In the example offered, there is no mention of dissensus or conflict. In the actual world, what is taught may be contested. The instructors at the Shelter Institute may disagree about what techniques are best and why, even if they share agreement in some cases. It is unclear if there is such a thing as (a) the unique techniques associated with a social role or (b) the uniquely correct reasons why those techniques should be deployed.

To be fair: Witt recognizes that the techniques for a social role will be context-dependent. Being a parent in New England is not the same as being a parent in North Africa. However, there is still the assumption that we will generally have consensus when we identify a local context, like New England or North Africa. There are all sorts of conflicting techniques associated with being a mother, even when we hold fixed a particular community. In a recent study of contemporary norms of motherhood, researchers found five types of norms governing

motherhood: ‘the norms of being attentive to the child (present mother), of securing the child’s successful development (future-oriented mother), of integrating employment into mothering (working mother), of being in control (public mother), and of being contented (happy mother)’ (Schmidt et al. 2023, 57). In actual local contexts, there is no determinate identification of a single consistent set of norms; consequently, there will not be a determinate identification of a single set of techniques associated with those norms.

A special problem occurs when the techniques conflict in a way that makes expertise impossible to acquire. It is common for people to argue that the social role of being a mother is actually impossible to truly satisfy, given the conflicting demands, even within a single society, associated with motherhood. Mothers are expected to spend a significant amount of time nurturing and caring for their children, but they are also expected to financially support their children by working. For many mothers, it is practically impossible to give their children ‘quality time’ when they must work incessantly. Being a good mother may be an impossible task.

Is it possible to account for the role of conflict, in a broadly skills-based framework? Yes. There are several resources in contemporary social ontology that can help make sense of the issues here. There are at least three structural notions that can help us do nonideal social ontology.

- *Indeterminacy*. Given a context, there may be no fact of the matter about whether a technique is best; or there may be no fact of the matter about how that technique is best applied in a given case.
- *Continuity*. Whether something is the right technique may be a matter of degree. This allows for the possibility that a bunch of techniques can be associated with a role while the exact degree to which they are associated with each role, or the degree to which they are appropriate, may vary.⁴
- *Contradiction*. We might simply accept the possibility of contradictory norms. In that case, conflicting techniques are no surprise.⁵

There are even more resources that could be employed. Appealing to such resources does not mean we must abandon Witt’s broad insights on skills, expertise, and techniques. However, I do suspect that the resulting

⁴See Richardson (2023) for the view that gender comes in degrees.

⁵See Brouwer (2022) for a contemporary account of social inconsistency.

view, whatever it is, is unlikely to resemble the artisanal model. This is because the proposed modifications decenter the role of the individual artisan. Artisans do not generally think of their crafts as indeterminate and contradictory. They *do* think of craft as continuous, but not in the way described above. To understand how techniques are associated with social roles, we have to go beyond individuals.

5. Conclusion

Witt's account of social role normativity is rich and promising. However, I have criticized it for being idealized in a way that obscures actual cases of social role normativity. The source of the problem concerns Witt's centering of the individual artisan and expert teacher; in this way, Witt's approach is individualistic. While the theory is clearest when applied to such cases, the individualistic model is overly restrictive insofar as it takes such a case as the paradigm.

Instead, I would suggest that we think more in terms of artisanal communities and institutions. I will call this the *institutionalist* view, for short. On this view, techniques are transmitted through the participation in social communities and institutions. In the simplest case, this looks like an expert who seeks to teach a novice. In most cases, however, we have a complex web of people, processes, and resources; individuals within this web come to acquire expertise characteristic of the relevant social roles.

If we take an institutionalist perspective, we must recast the debate about the origin of techniques. Instead of thinking of techniques as originating from a single person and then being spread by others, we can think of techniques as a product of institutional negotiation, from the very beginning. This kind of negotiation is likely to be messy and incomplete, leading to cases where the facts about techniques are scalar, indeterminate, and contradictory.

The institutionalist view is not so much a theory as a sketch of one. I suspect that Witt would endorse some of this sketch, as I believe it is largely amenable to her broad account. Still, thinking about social role normativity through the lens of institutions that produce artisans, rather than artisans themselves, represents a different starting point for the theory of social role normativity.

That said, I should not exaggerate the amount of disagreement between individualists and institutionalists. Both camps agree that social ontologists should be talking more about skills, expertise, and

social role normativity. Witt's *Social Goodness* constitutes genuine philosophical progress; it will spark fruitful debates about social role normativity, and it will be the central reference point for future discussions of social role normativity.

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