

THINKING SEX

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Hours: TTh 12:30-1:30 & by appt.

THINKING SEX

Philosophy is, to a large extent, a discipline devoted to "drawing" conceptual "pictures" or constructing conceptual "lenses" that invite us to see and think about the everyday in a different way. Drawing conceptual pictures often involves introducing new terminology, or showing that two things are more alike or more dissimilar than we had thought, or showing what is wrong with widely accepted pictures. Thinking philosophically about sexuality will involve constructing and arguing for new conceptual pictures of sex (being male or female), gender, sexual orientation, and romantic love. In the past 15 years, there has been an explosion of scholarship devoted to reconceptualizing sex, sexual desire, sexual orientation, and gender. Virtually all of that work has been conducted by feminist theorists (including pro-feminist men) and scholars in gay and lesbian studies. This course is devoted to examining the conceptual pictures they have drawn. Many of those pictures are designed to get us to think more deeply about the politics, morality, and legal regulation of sex.

This course and English 178 comprise the two-course Integrated Studies cluster on Gender, Sex, and Love in the Social and Literary Imagination. The assignments in PL 178 are designed to complement those in EN 178. In this course, you will be (1) actively reading texts, (2) giving oral presentations of those texts and of your own work, and (3) engaging in the process of essay writing-creating a rough draft, critically reviewing others' essays, and revising your own essays in response to peer reviews.

One central theme of this course is the idea that cultures "make up"-or socially construct-the notions of biological sex, masculine and feminine genders, sexuality, and romantic love. Those of you taking English 178 should pay attention to the way that sex, gender, sexuality, and love are constructed in the literary imagination.

TEXTS:

PL 178 Coursepak (available at the Bookstore)
Feminism & Sexuality (FS), edited by Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott
Masculinity & Morality (MM), by Larry May
The Case for Same-Sex Marriage (SS), by William Eskridge, Jr.

GRADED ASSIGNMENTS:

Active reading through writing: You will be assigned to a group. On nine of your group's ten assigned days (roughly once a week), you are to choose one (or more) of the questions for the day listed on the syllabus and write a one and one-half to two page response. Try to pack in as much content as you can. Be precise, clear, and thoughtful. The point of these short exercises is to improve your skills at actively reading texts. (25%)

Presentations: You will sign up to give one or two 20 minute presentations whose purpose is to generate class reflection on and discussion of the readings for the day. See the guidelines for preparing your presentations. (10%)

Short Essays: Over the semester, you will write three short (4-5) page essays pursuing an original thesis related to our course readings. For each essay, you will bring two copies of the first draft to class and give to two peer reviewers. On the basis of the peer reviews you receive, you will then revise your essay and submit the final polished draft. See the guidelines for writing these essays. (35%)

Peer Reviews: Over the course of the semester, you will be writing six peer reviews of other students' essays using the Peer Review Form handed out in class. (15%)

Final exam: The course will conclude with a final, comprehensive, take-home essay exam. The essay questions will be handed out during the final week of classes. The best way to be prepared for this exam is to write out answers to the questions posed on the syllabus for each of our class sessions. (15%)

Attendance: College policy permits two unexcused absences. If you have more than three unexcused absences, your course grade will go down by half a letter. More than five unexcused absences will result in a failing course grade.

SYLLABUS

2-2 introduction

I. ESSENTIALISM VS. CONSTRUCTIONISM: IS SEX REAL OR INVENTED?

1. (2-7) Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex" (Coursepak)

#1 1. How does she distinguish "essentialism" from "constructivism" about sexuality? What evidence does Rubin give in the course of her article that sexuality is socially constructed?

2. As a way of illuminating what Rubin calls "sex negativity", describe what the social organization/practice of sex would look like if our culture treated sexual desire the same way it treated the desire for food.

3. What principle does Rubin recommend for distinguishing benign from nonbenign

sexual variation? What principle does she think our cultural currently uses? What would you recommend?

2. (2-9) Stevi Jackson, "The Social Construction of Female Sexuality" (FS)

Ann Oakley, "Sexuality" (FS)

William Eskridge, chapter 1, pp. 15-35 "A History of Same-Sex Marriage" (SS)

#2 1. What do Jackson and Oakley mean in saying that sexuality is socially constructed? What view of sexuality are they explicitly or implicitly rejecting?

2. Using Oakley's piece to remind yourself of how different the scripts for sexuality might be, try to unearth as many different components of our scripts for sexuality as you can (you may wish to describe male and female sexuality differently).

3. Although Eskridge ultimately wants to use cross-cultural evidence of same-sex unions as an argument for gay & lesbian marriages, do you think his examples of "same-sex unions" are best interpreted as examples of cultural scripts for homosexuality or cultural scripts for heterosexuality (that happen to involve some same-sex activity)?

3. (2-14) David Halperin, "Is There a History of Sexuality?" (Coursepak)

#1 1. How does Halperin define "sexuality" and distinguish it from "sex"? How is he using the term "sexuality" differently from, say, Rubin or Oakley? And what does he mean by "the autonomy of sexuality as a separate sphere of existence" and "the individuating function of sexuality"?

2. Why exactly does he deny that the ancient Greeks and Romans (as well as Jack Abbott) had a sexuality? Would you say that the Greeks who had sex with boys, or Jack Abbott (p. 424-425) were heterosexual, homosexual, or something else? (explain your position)

4. (2-16) Sheila Jeffreys, "Women's Friendships & Lesbianism" (FS)

video: The Invention of Heterosexuality

#2 1. What explanation does Jeffreys give for why sexual/romantic relations between women came to be treated as pathological in the late 19th century? Do you think she is implying that women were behaving more naturally when romantic friendships were permitted than afterwards when lesbianism was taboo?

5. (2-21) Ian Hacking, "Making Up People" (Coursepak)

#1 1. What is dynamic nominalism? Do you think Hacking is implying that people choose their sexual orientation? (What's the textual evidence for your interpretation?)

2. On p. 78 Hacking says, "It would be preposterous to suggest that the only thing horses have in common is that we call them horses." Why does Hacking not think that it would be equally preposterous to say that the only thing that people with multiple personalities have in common is that we call them multiple personalities?

6. (2-23) ESSAY due (2 copies).

Essay readings, class commentary, and peer reviewers work in teams.

7. (2-28) PEER REVIEWS due.

Ed Stein, "The Essentials of Constructionism & the Construction of Essentialism" (Coursepak)

#2 1. Why isn't the essentialism/constructionism distinction equivalent to the determinism/voluntarism or nature/nurture distinction? If a gay gene really were discovered, would it show that sexual orientation is an essential rather than socially constructed property of persons?

2. On pp. 341-343, Stein distinguishes 2 versions of social constructionism about sexual orientation. What are they, and which version does Jonathan Ned Katz (The Invention of Heterosexuality) fall into? (defend your choice)

3. Why do you think that people are more inclined to think that gender is socially constructed than that sexual orientation is socially constructed?

II. WHO REALLY HAS WHICH SEX, GENDER, SEXUAL ORIENTATION?

8. (3-1) John Stoltenberg, "How Men Have (A) Sex" (handout)

video: Juggling Gender

#1 1. What does Stoltenberg mean when he says that "sexuality does not have a gender; it creates a gender"? What are the multiple ways in which both men and women create their gender through their acts?

Friday 3-3. POLISHED ESSAYS due in my mailbox no later than 3pm.

9. (3-6) Suzanne Kessler, "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants" (Coursepak)

#2 1. Is Kessler claiming that sex itself is a social construction? Given the information in Kessler's piece, what conclusion would you come to about whether babies have a "true" sex?

2. What moral evaluation of sex change surgery on infants do you think she is making? (give textual evidence). What moral evaluation would you give? (argue for your view)

10. (3-8) Judith Shapiro, "Transsexualism: Reflections on the Persistence of Gender and the Mutability of Sex" (Coursepak)

video: Metamorphosis

#1 1. On p. 257, Shapiro says that transsexuals "make us realize that we are all passing." What does she mean? Is there, or is there not, a difference between the sense in which transsexuals pass as a particular gender and the sense in which nontranssexuals "pass"?

2. What do you think of Shapiro's suggestion that we think of transsexuals as "naturalized" men or woman (pp. 259-260) analogous to a foreign born person's being

naturalized as a US citizen?

III. THE POLITICS OF SEX & LOVE

11. (3-13) Martha Nussbaum, "Love & the Individual: Romantic Rightness and Platonic Aspiration" (Coursepak)

#2 1. If Nussbaum had to explain why we as a culture think romantic love is such an important emotion, what do you think she would say? What would you say?

2. What are the Platonic and Romantic conceptions of love? How does Nussbaum resolve the tension between the two, and has she gotten the right account what romantic love is?

12. (3-15) Cheshire Calhoun, "Making Up Emotional People: The Case of Romantic Love" (Coursepak)

#1 1. Drawing either on readings in EN 178 or on your own literary/film knowledge, give examples of how literary works portray the basic elements of the script for romantic love.

2. What sorts of people, other than lesbians and gays, are socially constructed as less psychologically competent to experience romantic love? What impact does this have on how they are thought of or treated by others?

SPRING RECESS

13. (3-27) Adrienne Rich, "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence" (Coursepak)

#2 1. What is "compulsory heterosexuality"? That is, what factors compel, what are women compelled to do, and why call this heterosexuality?

2. What does Rich appear to mean by the term "lesbian"? Do you have to be a lesbian to be a feminist?

14. (3-29) Marilyn Friedman, "Romantic Love & Personal Autonomy (Coursepak) and Monique Wittig, "One is Not Born a Woman" (handout)

#1 1. What analysis would Friedman most like give of romantic love in "A Streetcar Named Desire"?

2. For Wittig, what do the terms 'woman,' 'man,' and 'lesbian' mean, and does she think that you have to be a lesbian to be a feminist?

15. (4-3) ESSAY due (2 copies). Essay readings and class commentaries.

16. (4-5) PEER REVIEWS due. Liz Kelly, "'It's Everywhere': Sexual Violence as a Continuum" (FS)

video: Man Oh Man

#2 1. Is there an advantage to using the image of a continuum of sexual violence rather than sorting acceptable and unacceptable practices into discrete categories? Would you say that the continuum of sexual violence is constitutive of the practice of heterosexuality in our culture (as opposed, say, to an aberration)?

2. What, in your view, distinguishes "coerced" and "consensual" sex? How would you define "coercion" and "consent"? (give persuasive examples)

3. Drawing on both the article and your own knowledge, what cultural practices or ways of thinking about affection, sex, men, women, dates, children, etc. makes the existence of this continuum possible? In particular, what explains male sexual behavior and the absence of female resistance?

17. (4-10) POLISHED ESSAYS due. Deborah Cameron & Elizabeth Frazer, "On the Question of Pornography and Sexual Violence: Moving Beyond Cause and Effect" (FS)
video: Patently Offensive

#1 1. On p. 328, the authors say, "Even if [pornography] does not cause sexual violence it may be criticized for its role in shaping certain forms of desire (and not others)." What's the difference between causing violence and shaping desire? Do you think it is true that "looking at porn and committing a sex murder appear as two versions of the same enterprise"(p.330)?

2. The authors claim that pornography sends mixed messages about some sexual practices: that they are forbidden and that they are normative. How, besides pornography, do we receive the mixed message that some sexual practices are transgressive/wrong but also normative/understandable?

18. (4-12) Larry May, chapter 4, "Pornography and Pollution"(MM)

#2 1. What advantage does May see in using the metaphor of pollution? Who is responsible for causing the pollution?

2. What does he think the harm of pornography is? On his account, do you think that men and women are both harmed by pornography? Has he correctly and/or completely diagnosed the harm?

19. (4-17) Larry May, chapter 5, "Rape and Collective Responsibility" (MM)

#1 1. What is the difference between "distributional" and "nondistributional" collective responsibility (p. 90-91)? Who do you think is responsible for the prevalence of rape in our society?

2. How would you reconstruct the core of May's argument for the claim that men are collectively responsible for rape? If you disagree with May, what alternative view of responsibility for rape would you recommend?

20. (4-19) Larry May chapters 6 and 7, "Sexual Harassment and Solidarity" and "Socialization and Separatism" (MM)

#2 1. What is May's account of the harm of sexual harassment? Is his vision of conservative socialization and the "Consensus Seekers" a good way of eliminating sexual harassment?

2. May wants to use some features of traditional male roles as a basis for redefining masculinity in a way that enables men to feel good about themselves as men. Are this strategy and goal desirable?

IV. SEX & THE LAW: WHAT'S AT STAKE IN THE SAME-SEX MARRIAGE DEBATE

21. (4-24) ESSAY due (2 copies).

22. (4-26) PEER REVIEWS due. William Eskridge chapters 3 and 4, "The Debate Within the Lesbian and Gay Community" and, "Mainstream Objections to Same-Sex Marriage" (SS)

#1 1. What do you think the function of marriage is? Why do you think the law should (or should not) be in the business of licensing anyone's marriage and creating a special set of marital rights?

2. In deciding whether or not to change the traditional definition of marriage that requires that marriages be between a man and a woman, what considerations should be taken into account and why?

3. How convincing is Eskridge's claim that because issuing a marriage license does not entail approval of particular marriages, issuing marriage licenses to same-sex couples therefore doesn't entail state approval of homosexuality?

23. (5-1) POLISHED ESSAYS due. William Eskridge, chapter 5 "The Constitutional Case: The Right to Marry" (SS)

#2 1. What do you take the difference between a due process and an equal protection argument to be? Why think that a same sex marriage bar is not (or is) "narrowly drawn to serve a compelling social interest"?

2. Why does Eskridge think that legally permitting same-sex marriage would not entail also legally permitting polygamy and incestuous marriages? How logically convincing is his argument?

24. (5-3) William Eskridge, chapter 6, "The Constitutional Case: Discrimination" (SS)

1. What are the reasons Eskridge gives for thinking that the same-sex marriage bar is sex discrimination? Which do you think is the better argument--that same-sex marriage bars are sex discrimination or that they are sexual orientation discrimination?

2. What are Eskridge's reasons for thinking that sexual orientation is a "suspect classification"? Can you think of any way that someone could argue that same-sex marriage bars are not analogous to former antimiscegenation laws?

Final exam due on final exam date.

