

## Teaching Gender Issues Philosophically<sup>1</sup>

Many disciplines, of course, discuss issues to which gender differences are relevant. Sociologists study family structures, lawyers try to figure out whether laws that treat women and men differently are constitutional, reproductive issues are addressed by those studying medicine or health care administration, and so on. But courses that take gender as their central focus are most often taught in Women's Studies programs or in courses on recent developments in literary theory taught in English departments. Those teaching such courses are not philosophically trained, and have often been accused (with at least some justice) of being too rhetorical and political in their approach, and a number of philosophers have come to regard the field as intellectually unserious. (This is so despite the fact that "mainstream" philosophers from Plato to Judith Jarvis Thomson have addressed such issues.) When philosophers do discuss gender issues, it is usually under the heading of applied ethics. This state of affairs is unfortunate. It is not unfortunate because there is anything wrong with applied ethics, but because gender issues are also concerned with broader theoretical issues such as the relative roles of reason and emotion in moral judgment. They are likewise closely tied in with central questions in metaphysics, social philosophy, and even philosophy of religion. Seeing these connections greatly enriches our understanding of them.

Philosophers have something important to contribute to the study of gender issues, and reflection about them has something valuable to teach philosophers. Philosophers since Socrates have always been particularly interested in studying contested concepts, whose employment engages deep differences of evaluation and outlook, and concepts such as *male* and *female* are prime examples of such concepts ("justice" is another example). The use and understanding of

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Phil Devine for his help at every stage of the writing of this paper.

these concepts reflects background metaphysical and even theological considerations. In many people's thought, "male" and "female" function as categories in a broadly Kantian sense (leaving aside the question of their origin, this means that they are concepts that pervade our experience, and do not arise from bare observation). Important tendencies in contemporary thought regard them as mere projections or social constructions (usually but not invariably proposing to get rid of them). But both those who value them and those who reject them, however, see sex and gender categories as central to our self-understanding; and this situation provides a classic opportunity for philosophical reflection. (The distinction between sex and gender, and the relationship between the two phenomena, is one of the issues the course attempts to clarify. Roughly, "sex" refers to biological facts, and "gender" refers to what a given cultural tradition has made of these facts.)

The deepest philosophical issue about sex and gender concerns the moral importance of our existence as bodily creatures. Is our animal nature, including sex differences and our characteristic mode of reproduction, a prison from which we must be liberated? Or is it a source of norms to which we must conform our behavior in order to live virtuous and happy lives? (And, if so, what is the relationship between biologically grounded norms and those arising from our character as social and rational creatures?) Issues ranging from transsexual surgery through reproductive technology to the ordination of women raise these issues in a number of different ways.

In the first part of this essay, after some preliminary remarks on the value of critical thinking skills, I discuss the relationship between the study of sex and gender issues and problems traditionally addressed by philosophers, following roughly the same structure that I use to organize my course on Philosophy of Sex and Gender – i.e., beginning with methodological

issues, and then moving to male female differences, sexuality, reproduction, questions about the family, politics, and religion (in that order). In the second part I will address the pedagogical issues that arise in teaching a course on sex and gender issues. Such a course poses some unique problems, and I will say some things about structuring one, and suggest ways to create an atmosphere that is as open, as relaxed and as conducive to dialogue as possible. (I have taught a course on Philosophy of Sex and Gender at Stonehill for a number of years, and have just finished co-editing an anthology on gender issues with my husband Philip Devine, entitled *Sex and Gender: A Spectrum of Views*, published by Wadsworth, 2002), so what I say will draw on my experience in the classroom, as well as the struggles we went through to put together a balanced anthology that would fairly represent the views of the various factions and pitch our introductory material in an even-handed way so that people with widely different views could use the text and key issues could be brought out without offending anyone.

### Part I: Philosophy and Gender Issues

Gender issues, like racial issues, are issues about which people feel very strongly, so that thinking about them clearly can be difficult. Careful reasoning often seems to go out the window when the topic of sex is broached, with the result that much of what is written tends to be highly emotionalistic in tone, and often geared toward political goals. People quickly fall into simplistic ways of dividing up the world into the good guys (their side of course), and the bad guys, who are naturally painted in the most unfavorable light possible, and dismissed with a sneering label.

Of all the liberal arts disciplines, philosophy has the most deeply entrenched tradition of looking fairly at both sides of controversial issues before making judgments, bringing unexamined assumptions out into the open, and looking at and analyzing arguments rather than merely engaging in rhetoric. We ask what is meant by the key terms used by the disputants, and

try to make sure we have correctly understood what each side is claiming. We also try to understand *why* the parties to the dispute think in the way they do and make the attempt to see things from each side's point of view. These skills are very much needed in our current cultural conflicts over gender issues.

But thinking about gender issues can also be beneficial to philosophers, since examining philosophical issues as they arise in real-life contexts can shed valuable light upon them. The cognitive role of emotions, an important issue of methodology, arises particularly strongly in an area where the emotions are strong, messy, and sometimes in serious tension with what the person making moral judgments regards as the requirements of rationality. For example, a man might be rationally convinced that bisexuality is the ideal form of sexuality and thus wish to embrace it, but be quite unable to conjure up the appropriate emotional and physical responses to other men. Or a woman might be rationally convinced that her womanliness does not depend on having children and still feel incomplete without a child and succumb to what is sometimes called "baby fever."

There are cases where most of us would be inclined to trust reason over emotion, for example, discounting feelings of repugnance to inter-racial sex (if we have them) on the grounds that we can find no rational justification for them. But, there are also cases where we would be inclined to trust our emotions in spite of believing that they are in conflict with reason. For example, we might trust our spontaneous revulsion toward having sex with orangutans even if we had been convinced by Peter Singer's arguments that regarding it as wrong to have sex with a member of another species is a blatant case of irrational "speciesism." Both reason and emotion, then, seem to have legitimate claims. But what do we do in cases of conflict? Are the deep feelings people have about sex/gender issues only obstacles to clear thought, to be screened out so far as possible, or are they revelatory of reality? We should think about the fact that sex arouses

deep “gut” feelings and ask ourselves what these feelings tell us about ourselves and about sex.

Stereotypical judgments such as that men are rational and women emotional, while wrong as they stand, require critical examination in a less ideological context than the one in which they are usually posed. And this question leads into the most pervasive question in the sex-and-gender field – that of the status of male-female differences. In terms of metaphysical beliefs, some people find the difference between the sexes a matter of mere “plumbing,”<sup>2</sup> not linked in any deep way with who we are, like the color of our eyes or (more controversially) our skin color. Others attribute cosmic importance to the difference (as, for example, Mary Daly holds the male sex to be inherently evil).<sup>3</sup> Are the differences so large that only war is possible between the sexes? Or is the truth somewhere between these extremes?

Traditional metaphysical issues are clearly relevant to thinking about what it is to be male or female. For example, the phenomenon of transsexualism raises interesting questions about the relationship between mind and body. Some transsexuals say that they have always felt that they were in the wrong type of body, that despite the fact that their bodies were male (or female) their souls were female (or male). Can a person’s mind or soul be of the opposite gender from his or her body? What are we to make of this? The fact that philosophers have already given extensive thought to the “mind-body problem” puts us in a good position to think in a sustained way about the problem, rather than merely reacting to pressures put upon us. An example of the way that philosophical reflection can come into conflict with the sorts of emotional and political pressures operative in the public arena occurred during the copyediting phase of our book. The copy editor informed us that it was Wadsworth’s policy to refer to post-operative transsexuals using pronouns corresponding to their chosen gender, and not, more ambiguously as “he/she” (as we had done),

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2 This expression is used by Shilamuth Firestone in *The Dialectics of Sex*.

3 This emerges particularly clearly in her 1992 book *Outercourse* but pervades all of her recent work.

because they (the transsexuals) found the latter offensive. This was something of a problem, since the philosophical question we wanted students to ponder was whether the transsexual whose story we were reprinting *had* in fact become a woman after the hormonal and surgical treatments, so we did not want to beg the question either way. (At the cost of a few rather convoluted sentences, we finally managed to avoid *all* pronouns in our brief discussion of the post-operative transsexual.)

Thinking about the nature of sexuality, likewise, leads into some interesting philosophical issues. Ex-President Clinton's claim that what he did with Monica Lewinsky was not sex has become something of a joke, but the fact that he could make such a claim and expect to be taken seriously indicates that people can and do have different understandings of what sex *is*. Is sex merely a source of bodily pleasure, or does it have links to reproductive or other broader human functions that enable us to speak of abnormality or even perversion? (And, if so what are these functions, and why are they important?) Have the notions of "natural" and "unnatural" any legitimate place in our discussions of sex? Does it make sense to invoke natural teleology as a way of grounding moral norms governing sexual behavior? Are there phenomena that depart so far from culturally normative forms of sexual expression as to be, not incomplete or bad or perverted sex, but not sex at all? (Consider, for example, Freud's claim that excretion is in some sense sexual.)

Likewise, ethical questions about reproduction and the nature of the family quickly involve us in thinking about social philosophy. The opposing parties in the current disputes over gender issues frequently hold widely divergent social philosophies, so that bringing differing assumptions about social philosophy to the surface can help us understand why we disagree. The dispute between liberal individualism and communitarianism is, for a number of reasons,

particularly important for the way we think about sex and family.

Liberals, especially those in the Rawlsian tradition, have had difficulty thinking about the family on their principles,<sup>4</sup> and communitarians, in turn, have focused especially on the family in their critiques of liberalism. I have found that bringing out background assumptions about social philosophy often helps students understand why they react the way they do. For example, students' differing responses to Judith Jarvis Thomson's "A Defense of Abortion" often reflect differences in the background social philosophy they espouse, and when the underlying assumptions are brought to the surface, they can begin to discuss the particular issue more constructively. To give an idea of how this works, I will briefly characterize liberal individualism and communitarianism, and then show how looking at Thomson's argument against this background helps elucidate the issues (I choose Thomson's article as an example because it will be familiar to most readers).

Liberals characteristically think of human social life in terms of bargaining, on terms of at least rough equality, among persons whose identity is already given; the result is called the social contract. Liberals have a particular understanding of justice, one that assumes no prior social bonds among free and equal persons (regardless of the degree to which degree other facts about their nature and situation are admitted into the arguments supporting liberal understanding of justice). Our obligation to obey the laws, for example, then, is founded on implied or real consent to this social contract; we are bound only by obligations that we have ourselves assumed (or at least could reasonably be expected to accept). Most liberals place a high value on autonomy and attempt to secure tolerance for diversity and to place limits on the power of the state even when its policies have the support of the majority.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the dispute between John Rawls, Michael Sandel, and Susan Moller Okin over whether we can, or should, apply Rawls's theory of justice to intrafamilial relationships.

Questions having to do with reproduction and the rearing of children are difficult to handle within the liberal individualist framework, for children are not yet autonomous and cannot be parties to the social contract or make important choices for themselves. When discussing reproductive issues, we might try to imagine ourselves reasoning in ignorance about whether we have been born, but decisions now made about the uses of reproductive technologies will have an impact on the existence and genetic structure of future generations and on the character of the society they will find themselves in. Issues of family structure and education of the young are particularly difficult, for these are bound up with the question of what sort of people we want the next generation to become, and are thus particularly intractable to those in the Rawlsian tradition who want to screen out people's conceptions of the good life in the original position.

Communitarianism is a social philosophy that has arisen largely as a reaction against liberal individualism, and the areas communitarians are most interested in are precisely those areas where liberal theory seems most inadequate -- namely those involving families and the education of the young. Since the familial bonds created by reproductive sexuality (beginning with the nuclear family but extending outward to extended families, clans, and tribes, for example) have always been particularly important in holding societies together, communitarians place a high value on sustaining families, and support family friendly policies. We are not autonomous individuals who choose to enter into relationships with others. Human beings begin their reflection about who they are and what their obligations are from within a network of relationships; none of us would survive to maturity without the sustaining care of others.

Communitarians are troubled by the dissolution of the social bonds that hold families and neighborhoods together and by the fact that increasing numbers of children seem to be growing up to be materialistic, greedy and self-indulgent. In part these problems can be traced to the

corrosive effects of a highly competitive capitalistic economy. But communitarians also criticize liberal political theory on the grounds that its structure favors possessive individualism. Many important moral obligations, they point out, are not voluntarily assumed, with familial obligations being an especially important case in point (we do not choose our parents, for example, but have obligations to them). Virtues emphasized by liberals, such as a sense of justice and autonomy, must, they believe, be supplemented by such virtues as a sense of responsibility to help the less fortunate, and a willingness to subordinate one's own personal interests to the common good, and the family is the most important place where children learn these virtues. It is in the family that children receive their earliest and most important character formation, and it is there that they must be taught such virtues as self discipline and honesty without which our economic and political institutions cannot continue to function in a satisfactory way (consider, for example, the recent scandals about Enron and WorldCom).

When I teach this material, I bring in also Carol Gilligan's concepts of the "masculine voice" and the "feminine voice" in ethics, pointing out that liberal individualism is clearly a masculine voice social philosophy, while the feminine voice as defined by Gilligan has strong affinities with communitarianism. While those feminists who praise the "feminine voice" have often pointed out that liberal individualism is a "masculine voice" philosophy, they seldom acknowledge (for various complicated reasons) that the "feminine voice" would naturally look at social philosophy in communitarian terms. In any case, I encourage students to think about the connections between ethical theory and social philosophy along these lines.

Looking now at Thomson's essay, it is clear that her argument is situated squarely within the liberal individualist tradition, rather than the communitarian one. She thinks in terms of fairness and conceptualizes the problem in terms of a conflict of rights – the unborn person's right

to life versus the woman's property right in her own body and her right to decide what happens in and to that body. Insisting that the mother alone has the right to determine what happens to the unborn is to take a strongly individualistic position, and to neglect the fact that the unborn is already situated in a complicated network of relationships with the father, grandparents, siblings, possible adoptive parents, taxpayers, and all the others who will be affected by her decision. And she assumes that parents have obligations to care for and sustain their offspring only if they "do not try to prevent pregnancy, do not obtain an abortion, and then at the time of birth of the child do not put it out for adoption, but rather take it home with them." Communitarians, stressing as they do, that many of our obligations are not ones we have chosen, would not say this sort of thing.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, issues in philosophy of religion come into play when reflecting about gender issues. Whether we come these issues from a naturalistic or a theistic perspective makes a difference in a number of different ways. It is not just a matter of whether one takes certain behaviors to be enjoined or forbidden by God, or whether God should be understood through gendered concepts such as "Father" or "Mother" (important though these questions are). Human beings characteristically experience a tension between their animality and their humanity, and associate their humanity especially with their moral and spiritual aspirations. And sex is one area of our lives in which we can experience this sort of tension particularly acutely (consider, for example, St. Augustine's struggles with his sexuality). So broad assumptions about the spirit and its place in nature – assumptions that are played out in different ways in a number of the world's

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<sup>5</sup> Thomson's essay is also written in the "masculine voice," as is evident from her emphasis on rights and her statement that Henry Fonda would have no obligation to walk across the room and place his hand on her fevered brow even if doing so was the only thing that could save her life (The "feminine voice," after all, emphasizes taking responsibility to care for others.) For an extended discussion of abortion and the "feminine voice" see my article "Abortion and the 'Feminine Voice'" in our book (also reprinted in many places).

religions – come into play when sexual issues are discussed.

Since philosophers, then, have given thought to the deep assumptions underlying gender issues, and examined them in other contexts, they can bring this reflection to bear on the current debates over gender issues in order to clarify what is at stake and help the parties understand each other better. Hopefully if the issues can be clarified and distinguished, and some of the rhetorical noise toned down, people will be better able to charitably listen to each others' viewpoints and deliberate together about what should be done.

## **Part II**

At the start of the class I make it clear that I expect that they disagree with each other and with me on many things, and that I anticipate that this will still be the case at the end of the class. The purpose of the course is not to achieve uniformity (although we may draw closer together on some issues), but more importantly to understand our differences. Part of what it is to understand them is to connect them with our broader world views, and this means articulating and reflecting about our underlying philosophical commitments. If they come to understand why the opposing parties in our contemporary debates over gender issues think the way they do, they will be better able to communicate with those they disagree with and hopefully also to seek common ground with them.

### ***Structure of Course***

The course I teach is structured along the lines indicated above, and this tracks the structure of the book we put together.<sup>6</sup> I begin with the methodological issue of the proper roles of reason and emotion in thinking about gender issues. I then start with the smallest units – namely men and women – and work gradually out into the various complicated ways in which

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<sup>6</sup> Table of contents can be viewed at Wadsworth's website which is [www.wadsworth.com](http://www.wadsworth.com). Click on philosophy, then on upper division classes, subtopic sex and gender.

they interact (this structure has been described as Confucian). Thinking about sexual relations brings in the interaction of more than one person.<sup>7</sup> The possibility of reproduction opens the door to a whole new set of issues. Questions about family structure flow naturally out of these. I then look at the wider political realm, focusing on feminism and the gay and lesbian rights movement, and using concrete issues such as sexual harassment, affirmative action for women, and same sex marriage to illustrate the theoretical issues.

Finally, I look at the cosmic level and the way in which gender concepts have been applied to a reality transcending the merely human. Is God properly described as “Father?” Does the practice of calling God “Father” sanction patriarchy, and should we call God “Mother” instead? Thinking about ultimate reality through gendered concepts is not limited to theistic religions, although our students usually think about the problem within a monotheistic framework. Non-theistic religions like Taoism take gender to be deeply embedded in the nature of things, regarding the *yang* and the *yin* as central cosmic principles, and even people who do not think of themselves as religious commonly speak of “Mother Nature” or “Mother Earth.”

Ideally, I would include some cross-cultural material, although we were not able to put any in our book due to space limitations. American students tend to be alarmingly ignorant about other cultures, and need to realize that our way of doing things is one among many. People who are considered conservatives here (e.g. Phyllis Schlafly) would be regarded in many countries as dangerous radicals whose views threaten the very foundation of their societies. If one were to place all the countries of the world on a spectrum ranging from individualistic to communal in their social philosophy, we are clearly far closer to the individualistic end. Likewise on a spectrum ranging from those that believe strongly in the authority of husbands over their wives

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<sup>7</sup> I do not discuss masturbation in my class. Other instructors may, of course, wish to. There is a limit to how much I can cover in a semester, and I find the class flows better without it.

and children to those that are more egalitarian, we are much, much closer to the egalitarian end. These things are important for students to keep in mind, and I intend to use some cross-cultural supplementary material in my class this Fall. It is valuable for our students to realize that there are intelligent people who disagree deeply with American ways of doing things, and get some sense of how our culture appears to them.

One should, I think, select only one different culture and look at it in some depth. The different aspects of a culture are interrelated in complex ways, and one can't really understand one element in the tradition without seeing it in its relation to other elements. It is too easy to just select little snippets of this and that, cut to one's own ideological agenda (Stanley Fish has called this "boutique multiculturalism"). Perhaps Islam would be a particularly valuable culture for students to learn about at the present time. The readings, of course, should offer a balanced view of Islam that does not demonize Moslems (or sentimentalize them either).

When I first began to teach this course, my motive for developing it (it was a new course in our catalogue) was to facilitate open dialogue over gender issues. I felt students were being pressured to conform to various different people's agendas, but not encouraged to think rationally about what they believed and why. I used mostly xeroxed materials because the anthologies I looked at were all too ideologically monochrome. I wanted a book that included a wide range of different views under one cover, and they just didn't seem to exist.<sup>8</sup> It was this that motivated my husband and me to put together our anthology. Students always respond best when given both sides of an issue and are entitled to hear what the opposing parties have to say for their positions before being asked to make up their minds.

If you are putting together a set of readings, don't wall out your opponents, and be sure to

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<sup>8</sup> The situation may have changed a little since we started the project, but not very much. Blackwell's has an anthology out now that covers a wider range of topics, called *Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*.

include at least some intelligent authors who hold views that you have reason to suppose your students share. For example, many writers on gender simply begin by assuming that gender differences are not natural, but entirely socially constructed, and then proceed to ask how this construction occurs, and then to argue that such construction is entirely arbitrary and we could just as easily have three genders or five. The degree to which gender is socially constructed is an interesting question, but students need to be presented with both sides in order to even understand what is at issue in the debate. Students inclined to believe that male-female differences are real (as at least that *some* students are) are likely to tune out if their own view is walled out at the start, or perhaps simply treat the material presented as a game or source of titillation. Finally, it is easier for them to integrate the material with their own lives if you try to track the sorts of decisions most students will face in their lives. The issues are important, and their decisions, both personal and political, will have an impact on what our society will look like thirty years from now.

***Getting a sense of where your students are coming from.***

If you are planning to teach a class on sex and gender issues, you should begin by thinking about the sort of background that your students have had, and the pedagogical problems that these are likely to present for the teacher who wants to encourage them to be reflective rather than just emoting. I devote the first day of class largely to trying to find out where they are coming from – asking them, for example, about what their experience has been at Stonehill so far. Do they feel comfortable expressing their views to other students? In their classes? Are there perspectives that they feel they have not been exposed to? What topics are they most interested in? The last time I did this, I was surprised to find that, although I teach at a Catholic school, students said that they felt people with traditional Christian views felt inhibited about expressing them,<sup>9</sup> especially

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<sup>9</sup> Doubtless, different schools will have very different climates.

on the issue of homosexuality (we had at that time an active chapter of PRIDE on campus). But campus climate can change fairly quickly, and that seems to be less true for my present group of students. Generally, though, traditionalists tend to feel on the defensive when talking about gender issues. While putting our book together, we found that several of our more traditional authors needed to be reassured that their essays would be treated with respect and were not simply going to be pilloried. And in the same vein, we found those espousing traditional views on gender issues (with one exception) were so happy to be included that they either gave us their essays free or charged very nominal fees.

Many of those students who have previously taken courses on gender issues will have taken them through Women's Studies programs, and this often has the unfortunate effect of making them think that gender issues are somehow the territory of women and that men have no right to have opinions about them. Thus I found that more women than men signed up for the course the first time I taught it. However, the word got out that my classroom was hospitable to male students as well as female students, and the second time I taught it I discovered to my surprise that I had a large majority of male students! Since then, the numbers of male and female students have been more balanced. Issues like affirmative action, sexual harassment, and family policy obviously have an impact on men as well as women. Even issues about reproduction that have very different effects on women than on men (like contraception, surrogacy, reproductive technologies generally, and of course abortion) do nonetheless have important effects on men also, and in some cases on the children who may be conceived through surrogacy, artificial insemination, or other reproductive technologies. And, in the case of abortion, the fate of the unborn individual who has already been conceived is at stake also. Men often experience feelings of powerlessness, anger and guilt in the wake of an abortion, and I find that opening up the

question of whether fathers should have any say at all in the woman's choice to abort and why (suppose, for the sake of argument, that he is willing to take and raise the child), always triggers a lively and thoughtful discussion.

Sometimes connected with the idea that gender issues are the province of women only, is something worse – namely a subtle, or not so subtle, hostility to men. This engenders in male students various complex convoluted feelings of anger, guilt, and even self-hatred. Although I don't simply assume that male students have no biases against women, I stress the fact that every individual should be presumed innocent until proven guilty, and proceed on the assumption that all my students are basically well-intentioned but just need help learning to think out the issues.

For example, when we discuss sexual harassment, I have them do an exercise that requires all students to first put themselves in the position of a young man who wants to treat women respectfully, but who also would like to ask female fellow students or co-workers out on dates and find out whether they are interested in a sexual relationship. I then ask what this man should do or not do in order to avoid engaging in sexual harassment. I also ask them to put themselves in the position of a young woman and ask them to think about how she should communicate her preferences and how she would like the man to respond. You might try this first in same sex groups and then have them talk together afterwards. All sorts of cultural expectations may come to the surface in such a discussion, such as the fact that men are expected to be a little persistent and that women have been taught to feel that they should not say yes too quickly. But setting up the discussion in a way that recognizes that both men and women have legitimate concerns and interests helps defuse what could otherwise become too adversarial a discussion.

Many colleges and universities have freshman orientation sessions that involve sensitizing them to racial and gender issues, and often these are taught in a way that puts significant

emotional pressure on students, and presents certain views as being just obviously on the side of the angels. Since most students have a general (and laudable) desire to be good, decent people and to improve the world somehow, they often adopt whatever views are presented to them as the “virtuous” ones even when they run counter to their feelings. However they are unwilling to express their real feelings for fear of being thought to be bad people, and they haven’t been encouraged to try to integrate their feelings with their expressed views. If your college has a freshman orientation program that touches on gender issues, or a sexual harassment policy, you should familiarize yourself with them.

### ***A Few General Principles***

#### *Respect the Consciences of All Students*

It is particularly important to allow students the freedom of conscience to hold their own opinions. For example, students who, for religious or other reasons, genuinely believe that homosexual practices are immoral should be encouraged to be reflective about their reasons for thinking this, and, of course, discouraged from making derogatory comments about those who engage in them. But attempts should not be made to coerce their consciences. People must be treated with respect, but no one is entitled to the *approval* of others. Making clear that you respect the freedom of conscience of *all* your students goes a long way toward creating an open and relaxed classroom environment.

#### *Be Careful about Labels*

Using labels to describe the various positions that people may take on gender issues is almost always misleading. “Liberal” and “conservative” are virtually useless. In our book we finally settled on the terms “traditional” and “cultural radical” to describe the two ends of our spectrum. But all sorts of problems were raised about these labels by reviewers. The term

“radical” was, to our surprise, thought to have pejorative connotations, and the fact that our institutions are currently in considerable flux and vary widely along racial, ethnic and class lines made it difficult to delineate just what the “traditionalist” position committed people to. In any case, you should be careful not to argue by label and present your views as “progressive” and your opponents as “reactionary,” or, on the other side, to present your views as obviously sound moral good sense and your opponents as degenerates. Also do not smuggle strong evaluative elements into your labels, as cultural radicals often brand their opponents as “sexists,” or traditional types refer to feminists as “women’s libbers.” Try as much as possible to seek descriptions of the different positions that those holding them would accept.

*Encourage Students to Explore Moderate Positions*

In order to encourage nuanced thinking, it is necessary to wean students away from a simplistic “taking sides” mentality, for there are almost always more than two possible positions that an intelligent person might take on an issue. All too often, anthologies give only the extreme positions, and then try to force students to choose one or the other. There are more positions possible, for example, on the abortion issue than just “pro-life” and “pro-choice.” Any number of compromise positions are possible, and if one separates clearly questions about morality and questions about what the law should be, the issue gets even more complex. Many (perhaps most) students, upon reflection, adopt positions on the issue that fall between the extremes – i.e. positions that would restrict or discourage abortion in many cases, but allow it in others. And they should be allowed to hold such positions and not be pressured into one camp or the other. After all, as future citizens and voters, they will have to work together to hammer out policies, and encouraging polarization between the two groups will make this more difficult.

*Get Them to Think Concretely About the Implications of Views*

One technique for getting students to integrate what they are reading with their everyday lives, is to get them to imagine in concrete detail just what it would be like to live in a society where some writer's ideal society was realized, and how it would be different from their current lives.<sup>10</sup> Richard Wasserstrom argues that in an ideal non-sexist society, sexual differences should be treated both in personal life and in government policy as of no more importance than a person's eye color. And Susan Moller Okin, along with many other feminists, favors the "elimination of gender." It is one thing to say that the whole gender system is oppressive and should be destroyed, and quite another to contemplate what sort of society this would produce, and whether you would really like to live in it. What would be gained and what would be lost in a world that had no place for the concepts of masculinity and femininity? Often students skim over things and say "hey, that sounds good," without giving serious thought to whether the ideal proposed could be attained, how it could be achieved (e.g., how much coercion would be required to effect the proposed changes), and whether they would really like the results.

#### *Discourage Crude or Inflammatory Language*

Being careful to avoid and discourage the use of graphic, crude, or inflammatory language helps keep the emotional temperature of the classroom down. For example, if you are prolife, refrain from calling your opponents "baby butchers." Students are sometimes embarrassed about discussing sex and get uncomfortable with anything that goes into physical details in a concrete way. Camille Paglia, I think, goes too far in the direction of emphasizing the dark, irrational and atavistic side of sexuality (fantasies of vaginas with teeth, etc.). But omitting it altogether does not yield a balanced and complete picture. Some views that have a powerful sway on people's

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<sup>10</sup> Granted that it is hard for those whose imaginations were formed in the world as its to imagine a different world, but the exercise can still be valuable. It at least leads them to become more self-conscious about the ways that gender shapes their lives – their dress, their hobbies, their hopes and dreams, their conception of who they are.

imaginings are crude – such as the view that sexual penetration degrades the one penetrated, and one needs to confront them. Hence, we include in our book some authors who put matters quite bluntly (Andrea Dworkin, for example). But this does not mean that classroom discussion needs to also descend into the depths. Even if the author you are reading uses the term “fuck,” this does not make it acceptable for general use in the class.

But, on the other hand, keeping your discussion anchored in the bodily reality of what you are discussing is necessary sometimes. Veering away from the concrete and earthy dimension of sexuality and retreating into using only abstract and spiritualizing terms such as “autonomy” and “persons” builds a kind of bias into one’s theories; it slants the discussion in favor of legalistic approaches, and outlooks that dogmatically rule out the possibility that male-female differences be important. “Person” is an abstract, even metaphysical term, by contrast with “man” or “woman,” which have more fleshy connotations through their association with differing sexual organs and roles in reproduction. The term “Person” also emphasizes our role as buyers, sellers, voters, and employees rather than as family members, lovers, and friends. (The term also means “mask.”) Abstract language is especially inadequate to grappling with abortion; keeping the physical facts before one’s mind is essential to moral reflection about it (in particular the facts about fetal development and the concrete details about how abortions are performed).

### *Disentangle Sexual Issues from Racial Ones*

One of the most distinctive things about American feminism (by contrast with European feminism), is that, ordinarily and for the most part, Americans tend to think about sex as analogous to race, sexual discrimination as analogous to racial discrimination, and a society that is free of “sexism” as like one that is free of racism. European feminists do not generally think in this way, and I think the reason why Americans feminists do has a lot to do with the fact that

feminism here developed in the 1970's directly out of the Civil Rights movement.<sup>11</sup> Both race and sex arouse powerful emotions, but if one engages in the exercise of setting out clearly the similarities and differences between the situation of women and that of black people, and the nature of the discrimination faced by each group, there turn out to be some quite striking and morally important dissimilarities also. I ask students to list the differences and similarities, numbering them clearly. This exercise frees students to think about issues affecting both women and black people in a new and more creative way.

When you open up a questions like this for discussion, of course, you have to be open to what emerges. But a few things you might expect to find are: (1) sexual difference are deeper, in that there are important structural and hormonal differences between men and women; (2) male-female differences are connected with reproduction, and since this is something of enormous human importance, the likelihood that they will cease to play an important role in society is considerably less than is the case for racial differences; (3) the particular sort of racial prejudice that regards physical contact with members of the stigmatized race as somehow defiling, is almost unknown in the sexual case (such men do exist, but their number is minuscule).

### ***Techniques for Structuring Discussion***

In this class, as in all my classes, I use a combination of lecture and discussion. One technique I often use for getting them to open up in discussion is to divide them into groups of 4-6 to discuss a question or perhaps several questions, and then report back to the class on the answers they came up with (having each group designate a “spokesperson” at the start). I usually allow them to group with people sitting near them, but sometimes vary this by having them count

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<sup>11</sup> European feminists have devoted much more energy than American feminists to obtaining supports to help women combine career and family, and been less concerned with abortion and issues of sexual orientation. Sylvia Hewlett’s book *A Lesser Life* provides a lot of information about the differences between American and European feminists.

off and then have all the ones sit together, all the twos sit together, and so on. This latter way of dividing them is useful if you have one or two groups that tend to goof off too much. It also works especially well if you want to get in depth answers to particular study questions.<sup>12</sup> To accomplish this, I have them count off the class before the discussion is scheduled so as to get groups of the right size, and assign each group a particular study question to focus on in their reading. I find I get more thoughtful answers this way. Occasionally I will ask them to get in groups segregated by sex. I allow them 10-15 minutes for a start, but monitor whether they are still discussing the topic and cut the time if they are just chatting, or extend it if at the end of the period of time all or most of the groups say they need more time. I teach my upper division classes for two 75-minute sessions a week, so it is easy to have time for both small groups and an extended group discussion afterwards.

Some instructions I give small groups (in addition to the question(s) they are to answer) are that they should try to come to agreement if possible, but if they still don't agree, they can have majority and minority reports. The spokesperson sketches the answers arrived at, but I encourage those students who disagreed with them to speak in their own voices explaining why. Usually they are willing to do this because they have had the chance to articulate their view already in a smaller group. In this way, you can remember what some individual students think and be able to refer back to what they said at some later point. Another thing I tell the groups is that they should be careful not to come to an agreement too quickly. If they do, I tell them that someone should take the "devil's advocate" position and try to argue the other side from the rest

<sup>12</sup> I give out study questions in advance on all the readings. These are of two types: questions that direct them to the most important points made in the reading to be sure they are getting it, and "think questions." These can be of many kinds: asking them to connect the reading with their lives, to ask how one of the other authors would respond to what this author is saying, perhaps even to construct a little dialogue between two authors we have read, to take and defend a position, to connect the reading with other beliefs of theirs, to formulate a thoughtful question about it for discussion, and so on.

of the group. I do not have them do the reports in a rigid, wooden manner; I sometimes allow other students to react to what the reporting group is saying especially after a few groups have reported (I try to start with different groups each time). Later groups sometimes refer back to what earlier ones said, or compare their ideas with those already voiced. I try to be sure every group has a chance to speak, but if time is getting short I may ask later groups whether they have something to add that has not been covered..

If you want to cover an especially sensitive topic in a debate format, have them count off by twos and then assign the ones the pro side and the twos the con side. This helps them to distance themselves a bit from their own feelings, and because other students know that are arguing a brief they don't have to worry so much about personally hurting anyone's feelings. If your class is fairly small you can then just have them sit on opposite sides of the room and have a free form debate. One trick you might use if you want to find out what students honestly think on some especially sensitive topic is to have them put their heads down, close their eyes, and raise their hand in response to a few questions.

### ***Making Sense of Our Feelings***

The problem of integrating emotional responses and rational reflection is especially hard when sexual issues are under discussion. Abortion and gay and lesbian issues usually trigger strong emotional responses, but atavistic gut feelings can crop up suddenly during discussion of many gender issues. One of my favorite examples occurred the semester I had predominantly male students. In discussing the case of a male to female transsexual, one male student who was trying very hard to be tolerant and accepting of the person's choice, suddenly blurted out "Do whatever you want, man, but *don't cut it off!*"

When discussing homosexuality, however, one doesn't want to encourage those students

who have feelings of unreasoned repulsion toward such practices to express them in raw terms, since it is not at all unlikely that some of the students in the class are gay or lesbian. Nonetheless you do want them to become *aware* of their gut feelings and not just float above them on pious sounding rhetoric and this is often difficult. You want them to think about why they have the feelings they do – and I don't mean just finding sociological causes for why they think it, but rather taking a hard look at what it is about the acts in question that they find disturbing. One useful exercise when treating sensitive topics of this sort (it works well for abortion also) is to first ask them to explain, leaving their own opinions aside, what they think the strongest arguments are on both sides, writing them on the board as they talk. Next you ask them to try to enter into the way that the people on each side feel and try to understand why they feel so strongly.

Distinguishing clearly between legal and moral questions can also help them distance themselves from their emotions. What the law should be on abortion or same-sex marriage, for example, is a different question from the morality of abortion or homosexuality. They can discuss it more easily, I think, because they don't feel as though they are passing judgment on actions that people they know have done, or might do. And people who disagree on the morality of an action might still agree about what the law should be, so this *may* bring opposing parties closer together.

Perhaps the hardest thing for me when teaching this course is the fact that I myself have strong feelings about many of these issues, and if students sense this they are likely feel that I am not allowing them to have their own opinions or not “respecting” their opinions. But what some of them mean by “respecting” their opinions is that their opinions should never be challenged, and this, of course, is inimical to the nature of philosophy. Make it clear that it is the quality of their reflection and argumentation that you are concerned about, and that people can give bad

arguments for conclusions they agree with and good arguments for conclusions they disagree with. They are, of course, *free* to adhere stubbornly to their opinions in an irrational manner (i.e., refusing to respond to obvious objections or provide any evidence for their views), but they should not expect a high grade in a philosophy course for doing so. It may seem odd to have to say that they are “free,” since after all, one cannot forcibly change another person’s opinion. But they may *feel* that you are trying to take away their freedom, even so, and I have heard from one of my students of a case where a friend of hers was doing poorly in a course (in this case taught by a feminist professor, but this sort of problem arises all over the political spectrum), and finally decided to bite the bullet and feign conversion to the professor’s point of view, and received an A on the final paper as a result. The professor was not able to change her real opinions, but she did have the power to penalize her for expressing them.

I can’t say that I’ve found the perfect solution to the problem of what to do about the fact that I, the teacher, also have strong feelings about these issues. I think it is best to confront the issue directly, making clear that we all have strong feelings about these issues, and that it is all right to speak with conviction and feeling sometimes so long as you respect the other person’s freedom to disagree with you and are willing to back up your judgments with reasons rather than just trying to carry the argument by the force of your emotion. If you try to totally conceal your opinions or pretend to a kind of pure, disembodied sort of objectivity, this will make students nervous. They will feel you are hiding the ball and be trying to second guess you all the time. There is room here, however, for a variety of pedagogical styles, and some teachers are better able than others to conceal their own feelings and opinions and make this work in the classroom. In any case, a little emotion goes a long way, and you should try to maintain a certain amount of distance from the material in yourself so that students can do likewise. Given the inequality of

the power relationship, professors should be reserved about expressing their own convictions in an emotional manner.

Student reactions to the class have been generally positive. I teach at a small school, so professors and their courses quickly get a reputation among students. The first time I tried this course (using readings rather different and, I think, less balanced than the ones I now use), I encountered resistance to my approach among some students who had taken other classes in gender studies. They were inclined to see every issue in political terms and to resent being pushed to look carefully at both sides. For example, several of them were irritated when I said they needed to include a discussion of the theological issues involved if they wanted to write a paper on women's ordination. It is always hard, of course, to get students to give people they disagree with a fair hearing, but I think the problem is somewhat worse in the area of gender studies both because of the strong feelings students have about the issues and because of the emotional pressure they have been subjected to by other people who they don't want to offend. But students characteristically express gratitude for being given both sides of issues, for the open classroom atmosphere, and for being presented with issues in a morally serious way rather than in the glib and sometimes prurient way in which the media present them. For example, one student told me how pleased she was with the selection we read from the autobiography of a transsexual named Jan Morris, because Morris wrote so beautifully and obviously struggled with the moral and spiritual dimensions of gender. She found this refreshing and informative by contrast with the way the media present transsexuals.

Gender issues are extremely important; they affect individuals, they affect personal relationships, they affect families, they affect children, they affect politics, and they affect future generations. They therefore deserve careful and sustained reflection, and I think philosophers can

do a great deal to provide this and to facilitate dialogue among the warring factions in the current cultural battles over sex and gender issues.