

Philosophy, Sex and Feminism

Ronald B. de Sousa and
Kathryn Pauly Morgan
University of Toronto

ABSTRACT

The central aim of this paper is to argue that sex is an important area of study for philosophers, and that the present vitality of the philosophy of sex stems largely from the contributions of feminist thinkers. "Sex" refers to three distinct areas: gender sex, erotic sex, and sexual politics. In all these areas, prejudice and habit create difficulties in discussing sex; underlying those prejudices are some traditional models of the person in which sexuality threatens the real self. Feminist philosophy of sexuality involves critiques of those models, and of various forms of gender with them.

RESUME

Le but principal de cet exposé est de faire valoir l'importance pour les philosophes, des problèmes de la philosophie de la sexualité, et particulièrement de la pensée féministe en ce domaine. "Sexualité" désigne trois domaines distincts: la division des sexes, l'érotisme, et les aspects politiques. Dans les trois domaines, les préjugés rendent difficiles la pensée aussi bien que le discours. Derrière ces préjugés, il y a des conceptions traditionnelles de la personne qui opposent la sexualité et le moi authentique. La philosophie féministe de la sexualité fait la critique de tels modèles, ainsi que de plusieurs formes d'essentialisme qui s'y rattachent.

The view prevails in the English language philosophical community that sex is a marginal subject, a suspiciously bent twig off a branch of social philosophy. Our aim is to persuade you that sex is an important, exciting area of study for philosophers. We shall also argue more specifically that the present vitality of the philosophy of sex stems largely from the contributions of feminist thinkers.¹

Three Senses of Sex

It might seem that questions about sex are straightforwardly biological. As we shall see, it is not very clear what it is for a question to be "merely biological." Even on the biological level, the issues are controversial.²

The word "sex," in fact, encompasses three different areas. We call these gender sex, erotic sex, and sexual politics. All three terms require a gloss.

(i) Gender Sex

Gender sex refers to feminine and masculine, female and male. These are two different distinctions, and we shall introduce an appropriate refinement of the terminology. Both distinctions are merged when we speak of the sexes, the opposite sex, or the war of the sexes. Three questions arise about gender sex. What exactly differentiates the sexes? How many are there? How and to what extent does sex affect gender?

The biological aspect of sex refer to maleness and femaleness: gametes, chromosomes, the anatomy and functions of internal and external reproductive organs. It also refers, at least *prima facie*, to certain hormonal differences and to secondary sex characteristics. Gender, by contrast, refers to the normative psychological constructs of femininity and masculinity. It embraces sex roles played out in a social context and typically includes culturally variable features such as style, language, and dress. The term "sexual dimorphism" is used of both gender and sex. It should not be assumed as a matter of definition, however, that there are just two genders or sexes (see Morgan, 1979). Though usually ascribed at birth on the basis of biological sex, gender does not appear to be determined by sex. Were the case otherwise, our (normative) descriptions of "masculine women" and "feminine men" would be pointless. Feminist thinkers have stressed that the defining features of gender are ideological, and are coercively enforced by individual men and institutions in patriarchal (*i.e.*, practically all) societies.

(ii) Erotic Sex

The second area of sex, erotic sex, includes sexual experience, sexual behaviour, and sexual relation. What makes an experience, a mode of behaviour, or a relationship sexual? We shall make no attempt to define erotic sex here; but, by trying to formulate some universally valid criterion, the reader can easily see that the erotic is, indeed, as difficult to define as any other (Wittgensteinian) game.

Consider two scenarios. In one, a woman is manipulating the vagina of another woman reclining on a couch. In the other, a man is watching other men play football. Which scenario is sexual? Is the first not obviously so? Add that the woman in the first scenario is a gynecologist examining a patient, while the man in the second is enjoying detailed sexual fantasies about the players whom he is watching (see Smith, 1980). What if we add that the gynecologist is also the patient's lover; and the whole scene is on a movie set? What if it is part of a pornographic movie being filmed? Our answers will, in part, depend—to an extent that will vary from one culture to another—on questions of gender. As knowledge about context increases, our judgement of whether some behaviour is sexual may flip-flop (see Solomon, 1975).

If we do make bold to define erotic sex, we have a methodological choice. One option is to give a minimal or spare definition of erotic sex, and then examine separately questions about the relation of eros in that minimal sense to other emotional, psychological, social, and political issues. A rich definition, by contrast, will lay down answers to those related questions as part of the essence of real sex.

Alan Goldman (1977) argued for the first option, wherein plain, normal erotic sex is defined in terms of contact with the body of another to produce pleasure in oneself. Such a definition raises many questions. Is skin contact really necessary? Is physical arousal either necessary or sufficient? Does the definition countenance dead bodies (a theme dear to many a classic fairy tale featuring dead or comatose women) as the object of erotic interest?

A rich definition will tend to settle such questions, but not without begging a lot of questions about the concepts of perversion, sublimation, repression, liberation, and normality. The most elaborate rich definition of sex, and also the most influential, is the reproductive model articulated by Aquinas (1967). In Aquinas' view, the following claims are all integrally related: the emission of semen has the natural function of causing reproduction; all sexuality activity ought to be potentially reproductive; and, marriage must last forever and women must be subject to men.

(iii) *Sexual Politics*

The third area is the one that has received the greatest amount of attention from moral and political philosophers. Philosophical journals, as well as popular magazines, have lately presented a plethora of articles on such questions as sexual objectification, the ethics and politics of discrimination and affirmative action, reproductive

rights such as abortion and surrogate motherhood, and the right to sex education in light of AIDS. There are also political issues about erotic sex and, of course, the more familiar territory of sexual morality. Typically these are issues about freedom of sexual choice. These, too, sometimes depend on gender. In Canadian law, for instance, a male of 14 years or more may have sexual relations with a partner of 14 years, unless the partner is male, in which case they must wait until both are 21 (see the *Canadian Criminal Code*, sections 140, 146, and 158).

Questions about the morality and the politics of sex are usually considered in isolation from issues about gender and erotic sex. Yet, they often presuppose unexamined answers to the latter questions. One example concerns the difference between the private and the public. One might at first think that questions about gender sex belong to the public sphere, while erotic sex belongs to the private. Feminists have drawn attention to the extent to which public ideology permeates allegedly private experience. This occurs most obviously through established institutions such as marriage, including the permissibility of marital rape (which was made illegal in Canada only in 1983 and is still legal in many U.S. states), but partly also through the quasi-institutionalization of compulsory heterosexuality in the form of differential access to privilege. Civil, social, and economic security—inheriting, pension plans, “family” health plans, adoption, job security, lodging, immigration—all are affected by “private” sexual orientation.³ Even explicit human rights legislation can leave these privilege intact: the Province of Ontario, for example, recently passed legislation against discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation; yet, provincial health care family benefits continue to be restricted to heterosexuals.

Few questions about sexual justice, about the institutionalization of gender sex and of erotic sex, or about the private and public relations between the sexes can be adequately answered without reference to theories about the nature of sexual differences, sexual experience, and sexual relations. Sociopolitical proposals, conservative or radical, inevitably come with theoretical presuppositions about the essence of sex in both of its primary senses. It is, therefore, curious, if not a little scandalous that philosophers have devoted so little energy so far to those apparently more fundamental questions.

Talking About Sex

In both of its primary senses, but for different reasons, sex is hard to think about. Gender sex, though easy to describe, is difficult to focus on as the object of philo-

sophical inquiry because social practice often appears to have a certain obvious naturalness about it, particularly for those in a position of power. Erotic experience is difficult both to think and to talk about. This is, to begin with, because of the embarrassment that many people feel, particularly with their own experience. The elaborate and uninhibited vocabulary available to describe oral pleasures forms an instructive contrast here. In the gastronomical equivalents of orgies, the flavours, aroma, colour, texture, and arrangement of food are celebrated openly around the tables of public restaurants. Starving, feeling hungry, experiencing appetite, and a zest to eat can all be expressed without reserve. The pornography of cookbooks is neither censored nor prosecuted; cookware boutiques exist to enhance our pleasure, and people are not ashamed to be seen fondling the objects displayed in them as they relate their fantasies. The discrepancy demands analysis.

One obvious cause of the difficulties in thinking and talking about erotic sex is that we almost entirely lack a useful vocabulary in which to speak of erotic sex. Some words are rated “vulgar” or unprintable; others are strictly medical in connotation; and still others are euphemisms requiring hearers to assume what they do not say. All tend to come with implications that a philosopher should challenge.⁴

Three quick examples. The most common group of unprintable words referring to sexual activity—fuck, screw, bang, and many others—all carry, in their very syntax, the implication of activity on the part of the male and passivity on the part of the female (see Baker, 1984). The very language rules governing this descriptive vocabulary entail male dominance.

For a second example, consider the terms used most often by men to refer to women. Such terms may represent women as various kinds or parts of animals (*e.g.*, chick, bird, fox, pussy, tail, piece of ass, cow); as playthings (*e.g.*, babe, doll); as fetishised body parts (*e.g.*, cunt, pussy, piece); as frivolous edible products (*e.g.*, sugar, honey, cupcake, cookie, crumpet, dish, peach, cherry, and tart).⁵

Third, given all this, it is not surprising that our most common euphemism for erotic sexual activity is also “gender-corrupted.” “Intercourse” is a fine word on the road to swift degradation, not because of its use in a sexual context, but because of its systematic and now all but unavoidable misuse in that context. Properly used, any erotic mode of relating—whether heterosexual, gay or lesbian, and including not only the genital but also the ocular, the oscular, and even the merely jocular—ought to

count as “sexual intercourse.” The literal meaning of the phrase fits it to be used as one of the widest and vaguest terms available to describe erotic interaction. In current usage, sexual intercourse is very precisely Penile Intromission into the Vagina with Male Orgasm (or PIVMO, as a logically correct sexual discourse might have it). We need to struggle to become aware of the moral and political implications of our sexual vocabulary.

Models of the Person

We now turn to the very general questions of how erotic sex fits into our conception of the human person. Broadly speaking, there are three competing models.

(i) *The Pythagorean or Orthodox Polar Model*

Within this model, we are composed of a material and a spiritual part. All appetites belong to the material part, and erotic sex is an appetite. This is merely a structural description, but of course its power comes from its relative evaluation of the various parts. According to the orthodox version, the material part is lower, the spiritual is higher.

It is crucial to understand how such models affect the way we think and feel about human sexuality. The Polar Model clearly consigns sex to the category of an animal appetite. For example, Jean-Paul Sartre argues that we experience sexual desire as the invasion and clouding of consciousness by the body (see Sartre, 1956, especially III 2 and 3). Similarly, Alan Goldman (1977) claims that our experience of sexual desire reminds us that we are animals. Sexual desire is seen as inferior, but as having the power to subjugate intellectual and moral function. Carried to the extreme, it becomes the deadly sin of lust, or the female-specific personality disorder of nymphomania. Thus, along with other bodily experiences, sexuality becomes a victim of the general attitude of somatophobia (see Spelman, 1982, 1983). It is feared, derogated, and suppressed.

(ii) *The Laurentian or Inverted Puritanical Model*

The evaluative element can be logically separated from the structural one, so we might expect sometimes to encounter a simple inversion of the evaluation that preserves the essential structure. Just as the mainstream view leads to the derogation of sex, so the inverted view leads to its exaltation in sexual libertinism. De Sade, W. Reich, Walt Whitman and D.H. Lawrence are perhaps examples of writers who took the view that the person is indeed dual, but that of our two parts, the real, the higher self is that expressed ineros.

The mainstream view as well as its Lawrentian inversion might be dubbed puritanical views. Puritanism in this sense is not the claim that sex is bad. It is the more abstract view that the value of an actor or state of mind is to be gauged in terms not of their consequences, but of their origins. If an act of state of mind has its origin in the best or most real part of the self, it is “pure,” otherwise it is polluted. You might think that the rational part of the soul is the good or authentic one, or you might assign that place to the instinctual and sexual alone. To be morally pure is to follow the higher agency whichever that happens to be. Thus, there can be puritans of sex as well as (the more common) puritans of antisex.

(iii) *The Pansexual Model*

The third model is the descendant of a view expressed in Plato’s *Phaedrus* and *Symposium*. It roughly amounts to the thesis that erotic sex and philosophy are one and the same thing, because erotic sex is at the core of all motivation in the person as a whole. (Freud might also be classed as espousing this model.) In this third view, there is no necessary polarity between differently evaluated parts of the person. Different activities and impulses can, of course, be judged variously good, but the model of the person involved does not automatically assign an evaluation to every act on puritanical grounds in our technical sense.

How are erotic sex and gender sex related? In the mainstream view, they are assumed to be two aspects of the same thing.⁶ The rationale for this position is something like this. Once you understand that there are two sexes, then it stands to reason that sexual attraction is the result of the natural difference between them—whether defined as complementarity, polarity, or privation. Conversely, there would be no need for a systematic difference between the sexes if it were not for the biological or perhaps metaphysical requirements of sexual attraction. This heterosexual assumption seems to be widely taken for granted (see Marabel Morgan, 1973; Scruton, 1986).

In keeping with our preference for lean definitions over rich ones, we shall take it, with Plato, that the two aspects of sex are indeed conceptually independent. This would enable us to look critically at what relations are to be found between the two, without assuming that no such enquiry can succeed unless it is blessed with analyticity.

But What is Philosophic?

Since the above questions and speculations are intuitively philosophical, it is curious that they have all been

almost totally ignored by philosophers. Even now, proponents of courses in the philosophy of sex encounter considerable resistance within the philosophical community. The prevailing attitude is: this is not really philosophy. Is it plausible that a subject that plays such an overwhelmingly important role in our lives should turn out to be unworthy of philosophical interest? In its various guises, sex affects our laws, our political and economic life, the patterns of violence prevalent in a given culture, the degree of access of individuals to the public domain, and opportunities for sport and physical development. It permeates our consciousness of ourselves, our gestures, our fantasies, our notions of mental health and beauty, and, of course, our art. How much would be left of Shakespeare if we truly censored all those aspects of plots, passion or springs of character that can be referred directly to sexuality in any of the three senses we have distinguished? Without erotic sex, some plays—*Othello*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Taming of the Shrew*—would make no sense at all. To remove reference to gender sex, we should have to eliminate from the comedies all those plot devices that rely on the business of cross dressing. We would also probably have to question much of the motivation in those more military tragedies and histories, where manliness is all.

Perhaps the extraordinary denial of the philosophical relevance of sex is motivated by an unexamined philosophical prejudice in favour of the view that sex is just an appetite; or perhaps there is a different assumption that would justify it. Whatever that assumption could be, it must involve a thesis about the nature of sex and its place in human life. The rejection of sex as a philosophical topic is itself just an unsupported thesis in the philosophy of sex. This rejection, therefore, lacks credibility on two counts: it is self-refuting, and at its core there is merely the refusal of argument—but is this not the cardinal philosophical sin?

The claims we have just made presume some intuitive notion of what philosophy is. They call for justification, or at least explication. So let us backtrack a moment for a dogmatic compression on the theme: what is philosophy?

One defining feature of philosophy that it aims at insight through argument. As in science, the emphasis on argument is important for what it excludes: there are no sacred texts, no prophets, no privileged revelations, in short, no authorities. That is what makes philosophy essentially subversive and democratic. What is the relevant sense of argument involved here?

Three Ways to Insight Through Talk

In one sense it simply involves the acquisition of belief in a proposition that appears as the bottom line of an inductive or deductive argument. Usually a mere change in belief of this order lacks the visionary quality that is connoted by the word "insight." The second way is typical of communication about aesthetic matters (see Isenberg, 1949): it consists in directing someone's attention. That can be done by pointing, or by a combination of pointing and describing, but in the end insight must come from just seeing what is there to see. The sudden gestalting of something not seen before is part of what gives visual arts their special magic, and on a metaphorical plane it is also something to which philosophy at its best aspires.

Critical communication, however, is not strictly speaking argument. So, how can philosophy manage the analogous trick on the basis of real argument? One answer is that when enough beliefs change, and change radically enough, "vision" follows. That is true; but, there is also another answer, appealing to a method which is a hybrid of the other two. It draws attention to facts which have passed unnoticed, and then inferring to the best explanation of what seems at first sight inexplicable about those facts. By this method it is sometimes possible to see what was invisible though it was, in a sense, always in full view.

When properly applied, this method will hunt out those premises that lie deepest in a philosopher's conceptual edifice: the unexpressed assumptions, the unargued presuppositions. What must Berkeley have assumed, to find it so obvious that nothing is ever immediately present to the sense but ideas? Those sorts of questions are the hardest to answer, because the deepest assumptions are often shared between those who think they hold opposite views. They are also, for the same reason, the most revealing, the most likely to yield that liberating novelty of vision which we have suggested is a central ideal of philosophy (see Russell, 1959, pp. 153-161).

What is this, if not consciousness-raising? Speaking in the context of the Women's Movement, Joan Cassell (1977, quoted in Spender, 1980, p. 130) describes the process of consciousness-raising as a subjective state which can refer to "becoming conscious of something which one did not formerly perceive, of raising something from the unconscious to the conscious mind, to heightened consciousness of oneself or a state of affairs." This process of realization does not result in piecemeal shifts in perception, but involves a transformation wherein the individual "switches worlds." That is a pretty fair characterization of philosophy itself (Compare Wittgenstein, 1953, sec. 144: "I have changed his way of looking at things.").

Let us look at this method at work in a relatively modest context. If you claim to be or know a liberated feminist family man, try this innocent question: Do you help with the housework and babysit the children? Yes, of course. Is he not a liberated feminist man? That sounds plausible enough, for a moment. Then ask yourself whether you would have asked the same question of a married mother. Would you expect her to reply, "Yes, of course I help with the housework and babysit!"? The question and the answer now have a completely different ring, for the terms "helping" or "babysitting" imply an auxiliary role, by someone whose real responsibility is elsewhere. Often the deepest (patriarchal) attitudes are revealed in the presuppositions of an innocent phrase.

A similar example serves to reveal the depth as well as the invisibility of heterosexist attitudes. There are liberals who think themselves creditably tolerant of homosexuality, but at the same time insist that it should not be flaunted. Is not sex a private matter, and is it not, therefore, out of place to advertize your sexual preferences? Let us address the heterosexual reader: does this not sound entirely reasonable? Yes, until we draw your attention to the fact that heterosexuals are always out of the closet. Can you imagine locker rooms and faculty clubs, dinner parties and office gossip, where etiquette required that no one ever mention engagement rings, husbands, wives, "girl-" or "boyfriends," at least not in such a way as ever to reveal the preferred gender of their real or imagined sexual partner? The world in which the homosexual is asked to keep her sexual orientation to herself, is a world where the majority make of theirs a constant exhibition. They flirt, hold hands, kiss each other goodbye in public, embrace, and so on. More significantly, where access to privilege, economic benefit, civil rights, job security, and historical legitimacy are granted on the public display of heterosexual affiliation, there is much to be gained through such heterosexual flaunting. What does the inference to the best explanation suggest there? Clearly, that the so-called liberal still acts as if any but the heterosexual choice violated a norm of nature. A concept of erotic sex as purely private fails to account for the ways in which heterosexuality is inherently public.

Sandra Bartky (1979, pp. 252-258) has suggested that the term "feminist phenomenology" for examples such as the foregoing. Phenomenology is, here as elsewhere, only a beginning. Feminism can make at least two additional contributions to philosophy. First, it offers a point of view from which far-reaching criticism of other disciplines can be undertaken, both on the methodological plane and in the sphere of conceptual reconstruction; second, the use it makes of that interdisciplinary work casts new light on some of the deepest and most ancient questions about

human nature, including the significance of gender sex and the nature of erotic sex.

Feminism as Philosophy of Sex

Before we offer illustrations of this claim, we must attend to a link still missing in our argument. Why, it may be asked, have we been implicitly identifying feminism with the philosophy of sex? Why not speak simply of philosophy of sex and its importance, leaving to fall wherever they may arguments for one thesis or another?

It must be acknowledged that even a minimal definition of feminism, such as the following by Janet Radcliffe Richards (1982, pp. 13-14), refers explicitly to a thesis, not just a method or a topic, and is at least implicitly committed to a particular motivation:

[W]omen suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex. ...I shall be taking that proposition as constituting the essence of feminism, and counting anyone who accepts it as a feminist.

A feminist philosopher is not merely someone who has become interested in a conceptual analysis of sexism, sexual injustice and other forms of gender-based oppression, though excellent conceptual analyses do now exist (see, for example, Ayim and Houston, 1982; Frye, 1975). She or he is also committed to their eradication through philosophical critique. Is not this, the pure philosopher will ask, just too parochial and too contaminated by practical goals to count as a philosophy? Would one not be better off characterizing the subject matter we are interested in strictly in terms of method or topic?

Our first reply is that the distinction appealed to in this objection is illusory. Thesis and method are often convertible in philosophy. Many of the great schools of philosophy can be characterized alternatively either in terms of a central thesis or in terms of a method or topic. Try it for empiricism: the thesis is that all knowledge must be based on experience; and the method follows. In existentialism the thesis is one about human nature as defined by consciousness. That thesis generates an ethics and constrains philosophical method (the experimental method, for example, is more or less banned from psychology). It also limits the topics that will be of interest (there is not much existentialist philosophy of mathematics). Analogously, consider how this works for a radical feminist whose central thesis is that "the personal is political." Such a theorist would be committed to the philosophical methods best fitted to test that thesis: the conceptual analysis of concrete situations and alleged paradigm cases, and the

phenomenological investigation of apparently private domains of subjectivity such as sexuality and love. There is no reason why feminism cannot legitimately belong to the tradition of schools of philosophy that are defined partly by a thesis, partly by a characteristic set of methods, and partly by moral ends (see Jane English, 1980).

The second defense is that the existence of a normative motivation may actually provide a heuristic perspective that will prove critically fertile. We shall see how this applies to feminist critiques of nonphilosophical disciplines. Many feminist philosophers, moreover, question the other implicit premise on which the objection rests that there is a level of dispassionate philosophical interest, devoid of any motivation but curiosity, at which are to be found a thinker's best chances of objective discovery. We need to consider at least the possibility that the conceptual framework challenged by feminists runs so deep that it literally cannot be seen except through a conscientious effort to construe even apparently neutral phenomena as pervaded with distortions induced by an ideology of male supremacy and heterosexism. (The form of this experience will be familiar to anyone who has undergone Freudian analysis.)

Concrete illustrations of this point are not hard to find. Generally, throughout Western thought and practice women have been regarded as less rational than men either because their intelligence is seen simply as lesser in degree or inferior in kind (Lloyd, 1984; Morgan, 1987). In turn, this claim then justifies denying women full participation in forms of moral, social, political, religious, and theoretical life. Sex research in the empirical disciplines often seems directed toward this end. In historical perspective, the lengths to which science has gone to justify this sexist axiom is quite extraordinary. Nineteenth century brain researchers, for example, were anxious to prove that men were more intelligent than women. The method was to find something—it did not really matter what—that correlated with intelligence, and of which women had less on the average than men. For example, it was at one time maintained that the seat of intelligence was in the frontal lobes. As soon as it was found that frontal lobes did not tend to be smaller in women, the very propounder of the original thesis quickly declared that we knew that intelligence resides not in the frontal but in the parietal lobes (see Easley, 1981; Hubbard, 1982; also, Longino and Doell, 1983).

This illustrates one of the identifying characteristics of pseudo-science. Pseudo-science starts with a conclusion and looks for any available method of establishing it. The difference from true science is relatively subtle here,

because all science has to start with some hypothesis to be tested (and sometimes the scientist earnestly hopes that it will turn out to be true). All science must also make a great many auxiliary assumptions, which normally remain unquestioned unless the investigation runs into trouble. However, scientists do not view the discovery of favourable evidence as their principal task. For pseudo-science—for the aficionados of ESP or astrology—negative evidence simply does not count. For the direction of progress has been defined ahead of time, so that evidence can only count as advancing the “science” if it confirms the pseudo-science in that direction.

Two other identifying features of pseudo-science are the crucial roles of the rush to explanation on the basis of imaginary evidence, and the positive-biased statistical illusion. For example, much pointless intellectual energy is spent trying to explain the powers of dowisers, or the disappearances of the Bermuda Triangle. The “explanations” are invariably fanciful; but more important, the original “factual observations” which one strives to explain never occurred at all (see Giere, 1984, p. 378). In what passes for respected psychological research on sex differences, Paula Caplan has found many of the features of pseudo-science just listed (see Caplan, 1979, 1985; also Kinsbourne, 1980).

Philosophy itself is not immune to distortions of this sort. For an example, consider a well-known paper by Tom Nagel (1969), in which Nagel is reluctant to acknowledge that no hint of perversion could attach to homosexuality, though that conclusion is clearly entailed by his theory (see Moulton, 1969).

In the rest of this paper we explore a specific feminist critique of erotic sex. We then conclude with some remarks on the important implications of recent feminist work on our conception of human nature.

The Feminist Critique of Eros

Beginning with Simone de Beauvoir, contemporary feminists have produced powerful critiques of sex and love.⁷ We shall consider just one example of a radical analysis of erotic sex in the narrowest sense.

Karen Rotkin (1976) has argued as follows. When speaking of erotic sex, our use of language evinces a concept of sexual activity that is exclusively based on heterosexual male experience. We commonly ignore a straightforward factual difference between the male and female sexual and reproductive anatomies. The fact in question is that the main organ of sexual pleasure for the man is the

same as the organ of reproduction, the penis. In women, the sex-equivalent of the penis is the clitoris (of which the penis is the homologous organ).⁸ We are not now speaking of internal reproductive organs, such as testes, prostate and vas deferens, uterus, ovaries, and fallopian tube. None of these are relevant to reproductive behaviour. In terms of reproduction, and in terms of typical male pleasure, Rotkin argues, the vagina does seem to be the organ corresponding to the penis. In point of anatomical fact as well as in many women’s experience, the vagina is of relatively little importance for a woman’s sexual pleasure. (For further empirical support, see Hite, 1976.) The contrary assumption, apart from its anatomical inaccuracy, entails a view of the very nature of heterosexual activity that is entirely male-centered.

The resulting conception of erotic sex as consisting essentially of Penile Intromission Into The Vagina with Male Orgasm defines in colloquial, legal and medical usage the necessary and sufficient conditions for the performance of **the act**. In ordinary language “going all the way” means penis-vagina intercourse. Similarly, the quasi-legal definitions of female virginity, marital consummation, adultery, and heterosexual rape are all conceptually focussed on penis-vagina intercourse. These linguistic practices, and omissions, support a phallogocentric interpretation of human sexuality which maintains that at least one erect penis (or phallic substitute) is necessary for erotic sex to occur. In some historical periods, this phallogocentric conviction has led to the theoretical denial of the possibility of lesbians and lesbian eroticism (see Fry, 1983). The underlying prejudice infects the medical profession: the clitoral silence in gynecological textbooks and sex education materials deprives girls and women of the full realization of woman-centered eroticism (Weiss, 1977; Morgan, 1984).

Given the undeniable truth of Rotkin’s basic observation, we find persuasive her surmise that it might partly explain the most common sexual “dysfunctions”: those of impotent men and non-orgasmic women. It must be difficult to be stimulated to orgasm if you happen to be misinformed about the function of the relevant organs. For a man it is, indeed, an awesome responsibility to have to assist in an impossible task. (At least men had less trouble when they were brought up to believe that the question of sexual satisfaction is not one that could arise for a woman at all.)

The most intriguing implication of Rotkin’s observations, however, is that our entire culture has, in effect, been blind to biological facts absolutely central to the nature of what passes for the paradigm of the natural side of human

being, not the rituals of sex, not love, nor marriage, nor courting, but the natural conditions of sexual pleasure have been distorted by unexamined ideological assumptions. This is an instance of what we might call androcentric solipsism, the equation of male experience with human experience (reflected in the lingering practice and ardent defense of the use of the pseudo-generic pronoun "he"). Such solipsism easily leads men to appropriate women's bodies while women are taught a complementary sexual ethic of erotic altruism. (Think of all those sexual advice manuals which urge women to simulate orgasm.) (See Daly, 1974; Dworkin, 1978, especially chapters 6 and 7.)

Gender Essentialism

Are we dealing here simply with the prejudices of fallible individual men, philosophers, and scientists? In part, no doubt this is so; but, there is more, and of deeper philosophical interest. It is not simple malice, nor mere stupidity, that continues to distort so much thinking about sex into the shape of pseudo-science. Much of this distortion can be traced to the deeply ingrained philosophical myth that there is an essence of maleness and masculinity, and an essence of femaleness and femininity, there to be studied. This is gender essentialism.⁹

To see this, let us make a detour through the mysterious topic of gender identity. The provoking question here is, how do we know to what gender sex we properly belong? The possession of a certain genital configuration is neither necessary nor sufficient, as the case of transsexuals shows, for the acquisition of a gender identity that fits one's outward anatomical sex. Other biological marks of sex such as gonadal sex, internal reproductive organs, or even chromosome configuration sometimes fail to converge; yet others, such as hormonal balance, are not dichotomous but continuously variable. The one strictly dichotomous characteristic, the ability to bear children, could not be used as an actual defining criterion of femaleness without considerable gerrymandering. So what is sex-gender identity? One of the most influential theoretician in the field has suggested that we acquire a sex identity in the same way as we acquire a language. John Money (Money and Tucker, 1975) posits an innate capacity to acquire some gender identity or other, just as we have an innate linguistic capacity. That innate capacity, like the analogous linguistic, leaves it entirely open which specific gender identity or language is actually learned.

The parallel is intriguing. What exactly is it that we learn? Ayim and Houston (1985) have shown that acquiring gender identity cannot consist in inductive learning of

the "core" characteristics of sex: menstruation, gestation, lactation, ejaculation, and impregnation. For gender identity generally becomes immutable somewhere between eighteen months and four years of age; that is too soon for such a solid grasp of those particular facts of life. Nor can it be a matter of learning specific patterns of behaviour, for Money claims that, in spite of the immutability of gender identity, "A sufficiently strong stimulus—physical, hormonal, neural, or social—can push you over practically any behaviour line or barrier" (Money and Tucker, p. 73). The hypothesis seems mysterious, unless one assumes that it is known *a priori* that there is such a thing as the essence of each sex, and while essential characters are frequently tied to this or that more or less accidental ones, only the essence is immutable. The immutable essence continues to elude us.

Consider menstruation. This is often taken to be a paradigm of objective biological fact, partially definitional of womanhood. Is menstruation, at least, an unalterable fact of female biology? It is not. Kung women do not have what is considered in Western women part of a female's destiny: a monthly menstrual cycle. In fact, some women might menstruate scarcely a dozen times in their lives. The cycles are apparently regulated by a combination of lactation patterns, nutrition, and other socially conditioned factors, which result in an average of several years without menstruating between pregnancies (Short, 1984).

Closer to home, we know athletes who are able to cease menstruating at will for as many months as they please simply by stepping up their training to suitable thresholds which alter their body-fat ratios to the extent necessary. Where then is the inevitable destiny in the natural fact of menstruation?

Other studies have attempted to document invariant sex differences in strength, sweat production, size, performance, musculature, bone growth, height, hormone production, brain size, ration of brain surface to body surface, mathematical and visual-spatial ability, brain lateralization, and levels of testosterone. Seemingly purely natural, each of these areas has been shown to vary and be corruptible by shifting cultural conditions (see Lowe, 1983; Fee, 1983).

Nevertheless, the search continues. Why? Perhaps the systematic elusiveness of that immutable gender essence strongly suggests that in the last analysis it is like other essences, an entity that only patriarchal (or matriarchal) faith sustains.

Gender essentialism is a pervasive feature of theoretical as well as of ordinary discourse. Essentialism of any kind,

as applied to the biological level or higher, is a dubious dogma (de Sousa, 1984). It is particularly pernicious in the field of sex. The search for sex differences is, in important ways, a search for the natural man. We use the phrase advisedly, for it is part of the mythology of gender sex that women have been viewed as nature to men's culture. For this reason, we conclude by suggesting a normative definition of feminism:

Feminism is the rejection of the modern attack on essentialism, applied to both gender sex and erotic sex. The anti-essentialism of feminist philosophy challenges not only the specific ways that women and men are distinguished; it challenges the distinction itself.

NOTES

1. Since this paper was written, a large and strongly anti-feminist book (Scruton, 1986) has appeared. Our reaction to that book is forthcoming in *The Canadian Journal of Philosophy*.
2. The biology of sex poses three problems. (i) There is nothing biologically necessary about the existence of exactly two sexes for reproduction. Many species have no sexes at all, reproducing either by mitosis, or by some form of parthenogenesis (for example, see Cole, 1984). It is one of the great unresolved questions of evolutionary biology how the manifest disadvantages of meiosis—the effective halving of each gene's chances of transmission at every generation—can be outweighed by the advantages of sex (see Williams, 1972; Maranto and Brownlee, 1984). (ii) Even given the fact of reproduction by genetic recombination, how do the gametes come to be dimorphic—with a big one, identified by conventional definition as the female, and a little one, conventionally defined as the male? (iii) The dimorphism of phenotypes or grown up individuals is again a completely different question. All three questions are independent of problems posed by any further differences between the sexes.
3. Here feminism owes some debt to Marxism, and especially the Marxist concept of false consciousness, which makes it possible to view what are phenomenologically private and individual choices as constrained by material historical factors. Marxists have not generally included reproduction under the general heading of production. Nor have they had much to say about heterosexism, its meaning, and its consequences. On heterosexism, see Rich, 1980. On the politics of reproduction, see O'Brien, 1981; and Clark and Lange, 1979.
4. One striking exception, as Dale Spender (1980, p. 180, expanding on a point made by Muriel Schultz) has pointed out, is the word for rape: why is it, or some synonym for it, not obscene? It is a troubling paradox that a sexual word, "fuck," is used in slang to denote a hateful aggressive act, but the word for sexual aggression remains emotionally neutral.
5. Baker (1984) discusses these first three categories. Our student, Ms. Loretta Castellarin has explored a fourth category, noting that where males are referred to in edible terms (e.g., "hunk of beef"), they are seen as the main course, whereas women are in the dessert or snack category.
6. Remarkably, Plato—unlike Aristotle, Aquinas, or D.H. Lawrence—did not make this assumption. No doubt, Plato was helped in this bit of conceptual liberation by being homosexual.
7. See, for example, Barry, 1979; de Beauvoir, 1952, especially the chapter "The Woman in Love"; Firestone, 1970; Koedt, 1973; and Morgan, 1986.
8. This is the biological term for a pair of organs that develop out of the same original structures. The function of homologous organs may or may not be identical; but, organs that do not stem from identical origins and have similar function are said to be "analogous."
9. Gender essentialism is not confined to patriarchal thinking. For a recent example of feminist gender essentialism, see Dworkin, 1987, as well as the work of many French feminist theorists.

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The Transition Years

Surviving the years, walking through the days,
 Dry and brittle, thin-lipped and Machiavellian.
 Cracked dreams and oiled eyes,
 Victorian lace and Canadiana pine,
 Power driven and passion drowned.

At night she dreamed.

Keeper of microwave children,
 Electronic tones lulling her immortality to sleep.
 Piaget has caged her babies,
 Pioneer of high tech wilderness:
 Tribal drums revisited.

They said she was like fire and ice.
 Those were the kinder ones.
 Others called her barren, unnatural and ambitious.
 In fact she was ordinary, only different.

One night she expectedly died.

Lorna Banks
 Nova Scotia