

I gave this talk in China in August of 2018. I wouldn't have read it to you in the last class, but I would have drawn from it, particularly stressing the ways that the ideas about sex and gender we have been discussing align with the controversial (obscene?) work of James Joyce. I thought that some of you (especially those who took the Joyce classes) might be interested in these connections.

It was, as always, a pleasure and a privilege to be able to converse with you about meaningful, even urgent topics. Stay healthy and well, and I hope you continue your learning adventures for years to come. What a fabulous group you are.

With kind regards,
Vicki

Vicki Mahaffey, World Congress of Philosophy, Beijing, 2018

Sexual Justice

My talk today is partly inspired by Susan Moller Okin's wonderful book from the 1980s on *Justice, Gender, and the Family*, which addresses the question, "How just is gender?" (p. 8) Okin argues that "A central source of injustice for women these days is that the law, most noticeably in the event of divorce, treats more or less as equals those whom custom, workplace discrimination, and the still conventional division of labor within the family have made very unequal" (p. 4). Okin's claim that culture and tradition perpetuate inequality is still true in the United States today, a truth that is perhaps even more apparent than it was when the book was first published. In the United States, improvements in the laws designed to ensure equality for women have been less effective because inequality is so deeply woven into our traditions, our culture, and even our assumptions about the nature of sexuality. The recent MeToo movement is in part a backlash against the persistence of identifying a woman's social value with her youth and sexuality.

This way of thinking reduces young women to desirable commodities that can be traded, exploited, and even stolen (you may recall that in English, the word “rape” means “to steal”).

What I would like to focus on today, however, in this session on justice, is not the obvious injustice of (de)valuing women by limiting their potential social contributions to their sexual utility for heterosexual men. In other words, my approach will not be political but philosophical and intellectual. Political feminism, at least in its second wave, while important and valuable, relies on binaries such as male and female, heterosexual and homosexual, and aims to reverse the hierarchical dominance of one over the other. (Third wave feminism has added race and transgender issues to the mix, thereby calling binary thinking into question). Philosophical or intellectual feminism is less concerned with the social formations themselves and more engaged with the often-unquestioned assumptions that support those social and cultural structures and help them remain powerful, despite all that we have learned about the injustice they perpetuate.

The question I would like to reopen today concerns the assumption that there are two sexes that are diametrically opposed, so that one must be subordinated by the other (as we all know, as recently as one hundred years ago, women were legally property who had no voice in their own governance, no suffrage). Another binary opposition that is related to this primary one (that the categories of male and female were created by God, and that the female was derived from and subordinate to the man) is the opposition between heterosexuality and homosexuality. Again, many societies and religions insist on the superiority of

heterosexuality over homosexuality, assuming that the categories are distinct (there is no overlap between them) and opposed. These assumptions persist, despite the fact that psychoanalytic theory, feminist theory, and recent discoveries in biology all challenge them as pernicious oversimplifications. Many researchers and scholars have presented compelling evidence that the categories of male and female are socially constructed ones based on crude physiological differences; in short, they are caricatures of two opposite extremes of a sexual **spectrum**. This is in part what feminist theorists highlight when they talk about gender, which Okin defines as “*the deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference*” (p. 6). The concept of gender, then, challenges the idea that sexual difference is an inherently natural, biological, inevitable fact of life. The construction of gender masks the reality, which is that women are part male, and men are part female, to differing degrees. We have only to point to the fact that women’s testicles are internal (and are called ovaries) to illustrate the biological overlap between men and women. Similarly, the clitoris is a small but very sensitive counterpart to a male penis.

Two other categories that are less distinct and opposed that we tend to think are the categories of heterosexual and homosexual, which are still treated as opposite even after the transsexual movement. Heterosexuality is still privileged as “normal,” an attitude that disguises the reality that **sexuality itself is queer**. It is the lability of sexuality, its intimate connection to the vagaries of the unconscious and to the uncontrollability of emotions, that has prompted so many cultures to categorize and label it, but **our categorizations have the effect of making certain kinds of injustice socially acceptable**. In many cultures, even today, the exclusion, abuse, or

persecution of homosexuals or women is protected by being categorized as “normal” or even celebrated as “manly.”

I am a scholar of literature as well as someone who is deeply interested in feminist philosophy, so I will briefly illustrate the weirdness of sexuality and the artificiality of the usual sexual categories by directing you to the novel that is usually considered the greatest novel in English of the twentieth century, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*. The hero of that novel is a heterodox citizen of Dublin who is presented to readers as the modern Odysseus for his fortitude, creativity, empathy, and fairness when subjected to prejudice and even persecution. Moreover, Joyce presents Leopold Bloom as the “new womanly man”: he is heroic in that he sees and accepts the womanliness that has always been inherent in men. With an honesty and openness that caused the book to be banned throughout the English-speaking world for over a decade, Joyce exposes and even sympathetically endorses the oddness of this man’s sexuality in unprecedented ways. The Blooms lost an infant son 11 years before the novel begins when he was only 11 days old. The fact that the consequence of sex was in this case death has rendered Bloom unable to do anything that might produce another child. At the deepest psychic level, Bloom has experienced the intermingling of sex and death, eros and thanatos, with such intensity that he can no longer perform the act of sexual intercourse in “straight” ways. All his eroticism is deflected and mediated, incited by voyeurism, furtive letters to a stranger written with a pseudonym, or kisses bestowed on the “mellow yellow smellow melons” of his wife’s rump. He takes satisfaction in reflecting that this rump is universal, its fatty hemispheres uniting the eastern and western

hemispheres of the world. As Joyce puts it, the “adipose anterior and posterior female hemispheres, . . . redolent of milk and honey and of excretory sanguine and seminal warmth” are ubiquitous in “eastern and western terrestrial hemispheres” and in “all habitable lands” (17.2229-2236). Moreover, Bloom loves such hemispheres because they are “insusceptible” of “contrarities of expression” (17.2235); they do not lend themselves to binary opposition or contests of power. These thoughts produce “a proximate erection” (17.2246).

Joyce registered the femaleness of all men by highlighting it in Bloom: we all know that Bloom has a woman’s middle name, Paula. This in turn may prompt a realization that Joyce had a woman’s name, too: although “James” is male, “Joyce” is female. Joyce’s character, Bloom, turns into a woman in the “Circe” episode, where he experiences not just one aspect of womanhood but three: he is a virgin, a mother, and a whore by turns, as the whoremistress of the brothel, Bella Cohen, transforms into a brutal man who abuses him (her). The entire episode dramatizes the dehumanizing effects of a binary gender system that is fictional. In reality, as one of Joyce’s other characters puts it, “extremes meet. Jewgreek is greekjew.” He shows that to identify oneself as completely female or straight is to be unquestioning, ignorant, and obedient to a social system in which people are trained to be proud of being half-people. Moreover, this social system is self-regulating, because one half controls the other by sexually preying upon it and then putting it into domestic service. And now, due to social progress, this system allows women to be preyed upon in the workplace as well while still engaging in domestic service at home. The MeToo movement is a massive outcry against widespread injustice: women have

finally begun to speak out about the frequency with which they have been treated as prey even in the workplace.

What Joyce saw in 1922 was that the categories of male and female, gay and straight, are fictions designed to disguise the fact that in reality, these extremes are intertwined and immensely varied. This insight (that men and women are artificial oversimplifications and that all men are also women to some degree) helps to explain why feminism is a **man's** issue as well as a woman's. The oppression of women encourages in men a form of partial self-repression that has serious social repercussions: men are encouraged to repress the vulnerability but also the RECEPTIVITY thought to be primarily characteristic of women, especially young women. Women, in turn, are conditioned to deny the strength, self-sufficiency, and power to question that have been overdeveloped in men. These modes of social conditioning create a climate of predation in which men are the hunters and women are their smaller prey. Is this the kind of world we want for our daughters?

Another binary that plays into the problematic way in which gender has been constructed by society is age-related: the opposition between old and young introduces a different hierarchy of power that works differently for males and females: men gain social power as they grow older, and women lose it, because their sexual desirability lessens as they age. That makes it easier for older men to prey upon young women, because they have the double authority of being male and successful or experienced. Interestingly, once again Joyce (in *Ulysses*) draws attention to other differences between the young and the middle-aged. He shows that the sexual spectrum is less apparent in younger characters: his twenty-two year

olds are more polarized in their gender differences than characters who are in their mid to late thirties. This suggests that the admixture of maleness and femaleness seems to be something that people become more aware of over time. This in turn implies that young people are more blinded by their social conditioning than their more experienced, older counterparts. Moreover, the younger characters exhibit an almost willful blindness about the variousness and perverseness of sexuality that is independent of and unaffected by their intelligence. We might speculate that this may be due not only to naivete, but also to an instinctual drive to reproduce that lessens over time, but whatever the reason, young people seem to be less skeptical of the sharp social dichotomy between male and female.

Now, I would like to turn to another book of feminist theory that calls gender into question by using recent discoveries in biological research. In *Sexing the Body: Gender Politics and the Construction of Sexuality*," Anne Fausto-Sterling uses this research to show that "a body's sex is simply too complex" to be categorized in a binary way, arguing that "labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision" (3). She uses the history of Olympic competition by women to illustrate her claim; it has been fiendishly difficult for Olympic officials to determine whether female athletes are really female. Until 1968 female competitors had to walk naked before a board of examiners, until a multitude of complaints prompted officials to substitute a chromosome test, which had other problems (it is possible for an individual to have a Y chromosome that can't be detected by his or her cells due to androgen insensitivity, which means that she will develop into a female, pp. 1-2). Fausto-Sterling demonstrates that "ideas of both race and gender emerge from underlying

assumptions about the body's physical nature" that are not necessarily true (7); the science of the body changes as our social viewpoints shift (7). She argues in fascinating ways that "**the social becomes embodied**"; in other words, our social system prompts us to understand the body in accordance with its assumptions and values, and not vice versa. In other words, the "normal [takes] precedence over the natural" (7-8). Surprisingly, she shows that the division between the sexes has been medically maintained in part through the intervention of medical practitioners in their handling of intersexual babies. When a baby is born with attributes of both sexes, doctors intervene surgically to make the baby more clearly male or female.

Maleness and femaleness, then, exists along a continuum (in a much earlier period that continuum was said to range from hot to cold, note 62, 265, citing Laqueur). Fausto-Sterling shows that so-called sexual orientation or sexual preference exists along a similar continuum. The recognition that sexual preference needed more than two classifications began with Alfred C. Kinsey's work (first published in 1948), which surveyed men and women by asking them to measure their sexual preference along a scale with six different categories ranging from heterosexual to homosexual (there was a separate category for no erotic attractions) (9). Although multidimensional models of homosexuality have continued to exist, they are still the exception rather than the rule (one study found that they were used in only 10 percent of cases from 1974-1993, p. 10). "The emerging definitions of homo- and heterosexuality were built on a two-sex model of masculinity and femininity" (14). J. Katz in *The Invention of Heterosexuality* calls this the beginning of "erotic apartheid" in which heterosexuality became "normal" (cited

p. 15). In any event, “the sheer variety of past thought and behavior” defeats most “general laws about sexuality” (citing Nye, *Oxford Readers: Sexuality*).

The idea that there are only two sexes is what some scholars call an “incorrigible proposition” (an unquestioned axiom of life) that is not dislodged by the fact that many cultures have “third genders” (19). Moreover, the most common categories used to describe sex (homosexual, heterosexual, bisexual, transgender) are themselves inadequate, which is one of the reasons it is more illuminating to read Joyce on sexuality than to read many of discourses about it: he does not categorize, and he does not ever suggest that the sexual experience of one point in time will necessarily apply to another moment in time. Perhaps, as Fausto-Sterling suggests, we would be better served by the theories of “connectionism,” which insist that “the developmental process itself lies at the heart of knowledge acquisition” (quoting J.L. Elman, note 134, p. 27). Let me state my argument more boldly: if knowledge acquisition depends upon a developmental process, then the construction of stable categories of identity precludes the possibility and even the inevitability of growth and change. As Fausto-Sterling puts it, “organisms—human and otherwise—are active processes, moving targets, from fertilization until death” (235). One of the main ways society stultifies personal growth is by categorizing individuals, and the categories themselves, for the most part, do not change.

Let’s turn back to Joyce, and specifically to his younger protagonist’s exposition of his theories of art. In an earlier novel, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen promised that he would elaborate “some other day” on the “phenomena of artistic conception, artistic gestation, and artistic reproduction” (*P*

163) because they require “a new terminology and a new personal experience” that could not be derived from St. Thomas Aquinas. In *Ulysses*, we see him return to the question of how art resembles sexual reproduction, once again in the “Circe” episode. Stephen’s companion ridicules the ideas Stephen expounds as they walk through the red light district of Dublin, calling them “Pornosophical philotheology. [or] Metaphysics in Mecklenburgh street” (15.109). “Pornography” comes from the Latin word for “prostitute,” *porne* (originally something bought, purchased). Since *sophia* is “knowledge, wisdom,” pornosophy would be something like the wisdom of prostitutes, or possibly the prostitution of wisdom, whereas philotheology is clearly the love of discourse about the gods. According to this new part of Stephen’s theory, “gesture . . . would be a universal language, the gift of tongues rendering visible not the lay sense but the first entelechy, the structural rhythm” (15.104-6). Stephen then illustrates a loaf and a jug of bread or wine from Omar Khayyám (presumably the line “A Jug of wine, a loaf of bread, and Thou--/Beside me singing in the wilderness”) with a single movement (not two gestures). In essence, Stephen acts out with his body a view of Eucharistic communication that unites bread, wine, and the beloved, thereby making visible a vision of Paradise. Stephen suggests, then, however obliquely, that sexuality (including prostitution) and theology are closely akin. Dressed as a parson, Stephen seems to be announcing a new “love of religion” that unexpectedly depends not only upon lovingly eating the body of a dead man but also upon the knowledge of prostitutes. What do prostitutes know that many ordinary people do not? They know about a fuller range of sexual expressivity; they understand how diverse sexuality can actually be.

In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce's inscrutable last novel inflected by over forty languages, he depicts the Christian Fall and Resurrection not only as the diurnal rhythm of nightfall followed by sunrise, but also a sexual rhythm that can produce new life. Women fall as men rise (erect men create fallen women), but men also fall. The fall of man can be traced to sexual misconduct, to the omnivorous nature of man's sexual appetite. In *Finnegans Wake*, when men fall their reputations are recuperated by what women write in their defense. When the protagonist HCE is prosecuted for his attraction to young women and his aggression against young men (aggression being yet another expression of sexual interest), his wife defends him by explaining that he is not simply one man: he is multiple (HCE stands for "Here Comes Everybody"). Joyce is rewriting the divine comedy to show that the "structural rhythm" of rise and fall is also sexual comedy, and that all people are actually multiple. Moreover, each person becomes more numerous over time. The young girl is one but also two, seven, and twenty-seven. The twin boys are two, but also three. Their father is everybody, and his wife is his counterpart in every way. All men are partly female and women are partly male. HCE is comically rendered as "King of the Yeast"; he grows, like bread, over time, and in so doing becomes eastern as well as western. What is at stake in life, as in art, is how people can continue to grow, or self-reproduce, by incorporating in themselves both sides of any given opposition. What such a model eventually produces is an entire world, rich in diversity, almost incomprehensible in its multiple cultural and linguistic and historical differences.

I'd like to conclude by going back to a conception of sexuality as a whole--not riven by the reductive binary divisions between male and female, gay and straight. Surprisingly, Joyce shows that another dualism is also a pernicious fiction: embodied sexuality is the counterpart of what it would disown, spirituality, and vice versa. The worlds of body and spirit are similar places inhabited by opposite extremes: both are infernal and holy, potentially creative and just as possibly destructive and even lethal. Its apostle is Stephen Dedalus, the man playing the role of a parson in a brothel, on quest to visit a whore who is also a goddess. Here we can find the saved and the damned, the living and the dead, the beginning of time and its final livid flame—"Circe" is a book of Revelations that is also concerned with Genesis. This is the last opposition that Joyce undoes: the division between heaven and hell. It serves as a reminder that in monotheistic religions, there are not two principles (good and evil), but only one, which can grow in opposite directions.

One of the claims I have been using Joyce's writing to illustrate is that it is time—past time—to move beyond dualisms: male/female, old/young, spirit/flesh, divine/carnal. Division of people into unequal, opposed categories is good for stability, but it arrests personal growth. Moreover, if we want to expand our focus from the individual nations to which we belong to an entire world, bristling with differences that no individual can ever completely comprehend, it will be necessary to begin by undoing even the most intimate oppositions, such as that between male and female. The experience of the world begins with the experience of the body, but our conceptions of the sexualized body are still crudely primitive and intellectually indefensible if we insist that they conform to one of two categories. We often speak

of the importance of cultural diversity, but an embrace of cultural diversity is arguably impossible if we cannot first conceive of (and embrace) the reality of sexual diversity. In addition to restructuring sexuality as multiple rather than binary, those who wish to move to a truly global village will also need to re-think the value and significance of sexuality, which is currently still regarded as inferior to the realm of the mind and spirit. If sexuality were taken seriously as a mystery that is no less meaningful than divinity itself, it would be much more difficult to accept or excuse the widespread injustice of sexual predation. If we are to see women as something more than commodities to be traded and consumed by men, we must begin by paying homage to the complexity and the serious consequences of sexual behavior.

To sum up: sexual division and inequality is based on a myth. As Joyce puts in in *Finnegans Wake*, the book that tries to encompass the complexity of an entire globe, “male and female unmask we hem.” He is echoing the book of Genesis here, which proclaims that “male and female created he them.” He implies that it is time to undo this division, to unmask it as a fiction that licenses much injustice. Division into binary, unequal categories must also be undone. Echoing the title of Kierkegaard’s famous book, he writes, “Enten eller, Either/or”: “That’s how our oxygent [occident, the West] has gotten ahold of half their world” (281).