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Master Class: The Ontology of Gender

For many years now—at least since the publication of Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* in 1949—feminists have been thinking about what “being a woman” amounts to. Beauvoir in that watershed book proposed that being a woman is not just a matter of biology. As she famously put the point, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.”

Of course, Beauvoir did not imagine that someone born with chromosomes other than XX and lacking a female anatomy could be a woman. But nowadays, progressive people are wont to believe that:

1. “Sex,” insofar as the term can be used to discuss people’s bodies, varies independently from gender.
2. Gender is not at all a matter of biology but rather of (a) personal choice/expression or (b) “social construction”/politics or (c) a combination of both.

In this course, and in light of rapidly shifting understandings in the culture of the nature of gender, we will explore the question “What is gender?” We will ask whether biology determines natural kinds and, if so, whether there are ramifications for our understanding and interpretation of sex-related bodily difference. Other questions addressed will include:

- Why should anyone care about the ontology of gender?
- Is there a difference between sex and gender?
- If so, what is the relationship, if any, between the two?
- What role does politics play in the very notions of “sex” and “gender”?
- Should we be aiming for a gender-free world?
- Is self-expression necessarily gendered?

The course—which will comprise four sessions—will assume no prior experience with the philosophical literature on the ontology of gender or with feminist philosophy generally speaking. Ideally, participants will be able to read one philosophical paper for sessions two through four. The reading suggestions may fruitfully be read after the course as well. All readings are available via this link:

https://drive.google.com/folderview?id=0B6_0s5Ucp_UBfmxwMGNid2tUbkpFcTBlc0Y1THh3Tm0tNExvRmNmRE5OZkVtdk1NU1B2YmM&usp=sharing.

Schedule of Classes and Readings

Please note that while you will get more out of class sessions if you do some of the reading, **all readings are optional**. Readings are listed in the order in which they will be discussed in class. During each session, I will make recommendations on how to approach the reading assignments for the next class.

Session 1: The History of "Gender" June 10, 2015, 3.15-4.45

An introductory (informal) lecture providing an overview of historical understandings of sex/gender and current views and theories. No reading assignments, though we will be discussing selections from **Simone de Beauvoir**, *The Second Sex*, which will be available on the Google Drive.

Session 2: Gender Essentialism and Social Construction: Origins June 11, 2015, 10.00-11:30

Reading Suggestions: **Marilyn Frye**, "Oppression"
Catharine MacKinnon, "Method and Politics," "Sexuality,"
"Consciousness-Raising"
Angela Harris, "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory"
Mária Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory for You!"
Sally Haslanger, "On Being Objective and Being Objectified"
Charlotte Witt, "What Is Gender Essentialism?"

Session 3: Gender Trouble June 15, 2015, 3.15-4.45

Reading Suggestions: **Judith Butler**, *Gender Trouble*, Chapter 1
Judith Butler, "Imitation and Gender Insubordination"
Toril Moi, *What Is a Woman?*, selection on Butler

Session 4: Gender Constructivism June 16, 2015, 10.00-11:30

Reading Suggestions: **Sally Haslanger**, "Race and Gender: What Are They? What Do We Want Them to Be?"
Ásta Sveinsdottir, "The Metaphysics of Sex and Gender"
Mari Mikkola, "Ontological Commitments, Sex, and Gender"
Nancy Bauer, "Beauvoir on the Allure of Self-Objectification"