

Philosophy 3334: Philosophy of Biology
Summer 2021, Homework assignment #4 – paper on sex and gender

Instructions: Write an argumentative paper on some topic relevant to our discussion of sex and gender in class. The paper should be between roughly 1000 and 1300 words. If you double space and have natural fonts and margins, this would be about 3-5 pages.

The paper must critically engage at least some assigned readings from the class. If you talk about a topic and one of our readings in class directly discusses that topic, you must discuss it. For example, if you argue that there are important psychological differences between men and women, you should address problems that Cordelia Fine has with the essentialist view of gender. If you say that women are just people with XX chromosomes, you should address reasons that Anne Fausto-Sterling thinks that gender categories (like ‘woman’) are not determined solely by chromosomes.

You may wish to read additional material that was not assigned, however, this is not necessary and not expected. But if you want to do that, I would be happy to help you find relevant readings. Several things that our authors reference or that I think would be helpful are already on the website as ‘extra readings’.

Due Date: You should upload this paper into Blackboard before 11:59pm on Monday, June 28th.

While I normally prefer to grade papers anonymously, I feel that this semester it is best if I am able to easily track who is turning in work when and grading anonymously slows this process down immensely. So please put your name on your paper.

Grading: This paper will be worth 14 points (14% of your final grade).

References: All sources used in the writing of your paper must be properly referenced. Now that you are writing a longer paper dealing with issues discussed in multiple places in our class, it is more important to be careful in this regard. “Properly referenced” does not mean that there is any particular format that I care about, but it does mean that if you say “according to Fine” or have a formal or informal quote referring to something one of our authors wrote, I should be able to very easily find exactly what they did say. So page numbers or timestamps for a video are essential for example. And if you use the words of an author or even their direct ideas, you should say it is from them. To not say so is to imply they are your words and so this would constitute plagiarism.

Topic:

You may choose to write about any topic relevant to biology and sex and gender. The most natural thing to do (and probably the easiest) is to take one of our authors who says something controversial, explain their view carefully, and then critically join in the debate by giving a further argument in favor of their view or against it. For example, here are some natural topics:

- 1) We know from multiple studies that there are some cognitive differences on average between males and females. But these traits vary widely within sex and overlap quite a bit between the sexes (see my slides on this for example). So is it valuable to talk about a “male brain” or a “female brain”? Are these “essential differences”? Or is it deeply problematic to use terms like this? [here watching the Rippon/Baron-Cohen debate is likely helpful].
- 2) Is thinking about evolution important for understanding human sexual behavior? How? When studying human behavior, when is it appropriate to study humans in the same way we would study animals and when would that be inappropriate?
- 3) Does the reason that more men get PhDs in physics than women have more to do with biology or with culture? [here watching the Pinker/Spelke debate would likely be helpful]
- 4) If men and women are actually different kinds of people, what makes them different? What about intersex individuals of various kinds?
- 5) How should we think about sex vs. gender? Are these really different? Does ‘female’ and ‘woman’ just refer to the same group of people (or maybe woman means adult female)? Or could these come apart in important ways such that someone could be a woman while also being male for example?
- 5) Is it ever important for society (or anyone) to distinguish between male and female? For example, in sports competitions? In various spaces such as bathrooms or prisons? If so, how should this distinction be made and why? (Maybe it is different for different purposes for example – you don’t have to talk about every purpose, just the one (or ones) you are interested in).

If you are not sure if your chosen topic is relevant, ask me.