

PHIL 398: Contemporary Issues: Bodies, Norms, Identities

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(This course has been offered, with various changes in readings, visitors, etc., four times between 2006 and 2013.)

Introduction

Many aspects of a society's health care system, and many other systems in our society, are deeply impacted by the society's accepted ways of classifying people in terms of their biology or their gender. Every entry into the health care system asks questions that require a person to accept a "location" with such a system of classification and so do the questionnaires that initiate most other formal relationships in our lives. But what if a society's accepted ways of classifying people do not match how significant numbers of people understand themselves? What if they are routinely required to "locate" themselves in a system of classification that has no "location" that matches how they identify themselves?

This is a course about: (a.) How accepted social norms about bodies and gender frame the society's understanding of people's identities; (b.) How identities that do not match accepted norms are challenged by and challenge a society's conceptions of embodiment and gender; and (c.) The kinds of complex moral/ethical issues – especially whether changes are needed in accepted social norms about these matters – that such framing and such challenging involve.

General Background: Social Ethical Analysis

Proposals for social change, that is, change in systems of socially accepted standards – rules, roles, institutional structures of all sorts, organizations and institutions themselves, as well as the conceptual systems that they employ and that in turn support them – are common. How are such proposals for social change properly evaluated from a moral/ethical point of view?

One answer to this question is a method for doing social philosophy that I call, "Social Ethical Analysis." The most general goal for students in this course is that they grow in their ability to morally/ethically evaluate proposals for social change by using this method in regard to several particular sets of questions. That is, they should leave this course able to identify the "steps" of this method (the skills that make it up, employed in their proper logical relationship to one another) and use them to carefully evaluate actual proposals for social change. By practicing it in proposals for change in several different social systems – all related to the course's topic theme of "Bodies, Norms, and Identities" – they should come to appreciate the importance of each of the method's component skills and the employ the method critically (in the constructive sense of this word) and creatively in evaluating other kinds of proposals for social change and in defending proposals of their own.

The components of this method of “Social Ethical Analysis” are as follows:

- 1.) *Identify and Describe* the current social system, which requires:
 - a.) Awareness of how it works, its impact on people, and the social norms that support it (and often define it) in practice;
 - b.) Understanding the most important concepts and relationships it presupposes, the practical connections between how it works and its impact on those it affects, and the (moral/ethical) reasons that would be given in support of it in light of its effects on those involved.
- 2.) *Imagine Otherwise Realistically*, which requires:
 - a.) Identifying what we wish for, and what else might come to be, either in place of the existing social system or in place of some part of it;
 - b.) Describing in detail what we wish for, and what else might come to be, either in place of what is or in place of some part of it, but *clearly* described and, in the latter case, in its relationship to the rest of the system;
 - c.) Describing these imagings *realistically*, i.e. in terms of the real likelihood that these alternatives to what is might actually come to be, and then setting aside any that are so unlikely to exist stably or to come to be that further consideration of them is not valuable.
- 3.) *Evaluate* the remaining alternative social systems in light of what has been learned in clearly and carefully describing them, comparing *what is* with *what might be* in terms of relevant moral/ethical criteria.
- 4.) *Make a careful Moral/Ethical Judgment* based on these evaluations, i.e. carefully comparing what is with what might be in order to determine which of the alternatives *ought to be* worked for.

More Specifically

The course will open with a more general study of the relationship between people’s identities and systems of socially accepted concepts about persons and social roles and the challenges that arise because of mismatches between them. We will use most of Hilde Lindemann Nelson’s book, Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair, to guide us through these themes and to provide a framework for the moral/ethical analysis of the three specific topics of identity and mismatch that we will then discuss.

Although the sequence of topics may change, we will most likely begin by learning about intersex persons and the impact on their experience of our society’s either/or (“di-morphic” to say it abstractly) social norms of embodiment, and then evaluating various proposals for social change regarding those norms.

The second section of the course will introduce students to the experience of transgendered persons, both transsexuals and bi-gendered persons. We will discuss the impact on their experience of our society’s either/or, two-and-only-two (“di-morphic”) conceptions of both embodiment and gender, and evaluate various proposals for social change regarding these norms. Two autobiographical books, She Isn’t There (2nd edition) by Jennifer Boylan and Becoming a Visible Man, by Jameson Greene, will most likely be

the reading material on this topic. Several visitors to our classroom from the Chicago transgender community will be invited to provide additional insight into what being transgendered in our current society is like and into what “imagining otherwise” might mean regarding gender and embodiment.

The third section of the course will examine the theme of “Bodies, Norms, and Identities” from the perspective of several authors within the community of persons with disabilities. One of the books we will read together will be The Rejected Body by Susan Wendel. A second book or a selection of readings will be added to this, but the specific sub-topic we will focus on within the (very large) world of disability-ethics and therefore the particular readings for this section of the course have not yet been determined.

As has been the custom with this course, we will also have a guest lecturer who is a specialist in the ethics of one or more of these topics, who will also give a public lecture while she/he is at Loyola.

Course Outcomes

By the conclusion of the course, the students should be able to:

- A.) Employ the “steps” of the method of “Social Ethical Analysis,” to study the moral/ethical issues raised by our society’s norms for embodiment and gender and their impact on people’s identities. More specifically,
- B.) *Identify and Describe* the system of norms of embodiment and/or gender in careful detail as it currently is;
- C.) *Imagine Otherwise*, i.e. carefully describe alternative social systems that might take this system’s place (in whole or in part), and do so *Realistically*, i.e. taking account of the likelihood of a change to the alternative system actually occurring;
- D.) *Evaluate* these alternatives carefully, comparing what is the case and what might be, from the point of view of relevant moral/ethical criteria;
- E.) *Offer a careful Moral/Ethical Judgment* that compares these alternatives and gives careful reasons for concluding which of them ought to be worked for.

Reading Assignments and Discussion

There will be about 100 pages per week of reading for this course since it is an advanced seminar course. Some will be philosophic works, but the autobiographical materials will be easier reading. Since this is a seminar class, it will be assumed that everyone will keep up with the reading and will come to class ready to discuss it. For each reading assignment, I will usually offer some notes or assign a written Exercise to help you focus on what is most important both for your learning from the reading and for your participating in class discussion. Contributions to class discussion will impact the final grade by way of “extra credit.”

Projected Graded Assignments

It is currently projected that there will be three kinds of graded assignments during the course. There will be: a Final Paper in which you apply the method of “Social Ethical Analysis” to a proposal for social change of your choice (that is related to the course and approved by me); a Group Project assignment that will most likely be

delivered in the form of class presentations by each student group (I will assign these groups with input from your about any preferences you might have) at some point about 2/3 of the way through the course; and there will either be a mid-term take-home essay exam (e.g. on the first two topics) or else a number of written Exercises on the reading assignments, or some combination of these. I have not yet determined the exact weight of these three components; but I am currently thinking about something like 40% for the Final Paper, 30% for the Group Project, and 30% for the Exercises/Mid-term.