

APA Newsletters

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NEWSLETTER ON LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, AND TRANSGENDER ISSUES IN PHILOSOPHY

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APA NEWSLETTER ON

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Carol Quinn, Editor

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FROM THE EDITOR

Carol Quinn

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Of the issues I have edited thus far (and I believe all have been good), I consider our featured selections by Mark Chekola, Richard Mohr, and Aeon Skoble to be particularly interesting and informative. Unlike the most recent, rather "thin" (in terms of length, not quality) edition, this is both fat, and (as our students would say) *phat!* Our featured selections are particularly noteworthy, as is Raja Halwani's review of Peg O'Connor's, *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*. I hope you enjoy.

Contributions Invited

The editor encourages contributions to the newsletter, especially essays that might fall through the cracks elsewhere for being untraditional in scope or content. Pieces may range from opinion pieces to book reviews to short articles. Commentary on issues important to professional life — teaching, research, and service — are especially welcome. Early contact with the editor is strongly encouraged. Please contact Carol Quinn at Department of Philosophy, 9201 University City Blvd., University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, NC 28223.

FROM THE CHAIR

Mark Chekola

Minnesota State University, Moorhead

Two of our committee members, Pamela Hall and Kelly Oliver, will be completing their terms on the Committee this spring. We thank them for their participation in the work of the Committee. Julie Klein and Margaret O'Connor have been appointed to three-year terms starting July 2003. We welcome them to the Committee!

Those of us in attendance at the APA meeting in Philadelphia met, and one topic of discussion was possible topics for future APA sessions, some of which (at the Central and Pacific meetings) will be co-sponsored with the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy. Topics suggested included: Epistemology and LGBT Issues, Philosophy of Mind and LGBT

Issues, Philosophy of Art and LGBT Issues, Continental Approaches/Perspectives, Philosophies of the Body, Race and Homosexuality, and Fetishism. We would like to have a session on Transgender issues, however it was reported that there are relatively few people working in this area at the present. If you are aware of anyone, let us know.

We co-sponsored with the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy a session at the Pacific APA in San Francisco recognizing a distinguished LGBT Philosopher. The honoree was Richard Mohr, from the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, who was recognized for his scholarship, service and significant contributions. It is expected that this is the first in what will be a regular series of sessions recognizing distinguished LGBT philosophers co-sponsored by the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy and the APA Committee on the Status of LGBT People in the Profession

Update on the Survey of Journals and LGBT Scholarship

At the APA meetings in Chicago in April, 2002, we decided to launch a project to survey relevant journals with regard to papers relating to LGBT issues. There has been a sense that there is a surprising lack of articles on LGBT issues in some appropriate journals, and we decided to look into this by first carrying out a survey. Various people volunteered to check journals for the years 1990 through 2001. Our survey is still under way. Here is a report on what we have found so far:

We are continuing work on the survey and plan to develop a report which we will submit to the APA.

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FEATURES

*LGBT Philosophy and Undergraduate Teaching**

Mark Chekola

Minnesota State University, Moorhead

My remarks fall into three parts: (I) Some general comments about the profession and undergraduate teaching; (II) LGBT philosophy—its nature, questions about objectivity and balance, and whether it is best done in separate courses or integrated into the curriculum; and (III) What can and should we do now with regard to LGBT philosophy and undergraduate teaching?

I. The Profession and Undergraduate Teaching

When my Department carries out a search, I am repeatedly reminded how little attention seems to be paid by professional philosophers to undergraduate teaching, and how much it seems to be devalued. My institution is primarily a teaching institution with a heavy teaching load. Reference letter after reference letter for job candidates written by their graduate school teachers says something like “As far as teaching is concerned, I will leave comments on that to others” and goes on to give yet another summary of the candidate’s dissertation. Though the *Jobs For Philosophers* ad for our position indicates we wish candidates to submit, along with their other materials, evidence of teaching excellence, we often find we have to remind people to give us such evidence. I’ve heard it claimed that some graduate advisors advise job candidates to not send materials related to teaching, because that will suggest one is a teacher rather than a researcher—in effect, lower class as a professional philosopher.

APA meetings also make clear how low a priority seems to be given to undergraduate teaching. There are relatively few sessions devoted to issues related to teaching, and they are often poorly attended.

In my remarks I *will not* be arguing that research in philosophy is not important. It certainly is important. And, without a doubt, it is necessary that our training in graduate school in part train us as researchers in philosophy. And, as far as APA meetings are concerned, they certainly need to be, in large part, a place where people can present research on which they are working, and get reactions. For those of us who teach at colleges and universities with no graduate program in philosophy, the APA meetings sometimes serve as a refreshing opportunity to engage in a level of philosophical discussion we crave.

The writing that is done by most philosophers, papers presented at meetings and submitted to and published in journals, is aimed at others with similar training. Comparatively little is written with the intelligent undergraduate, or even the intelligent general member of the public, in mind. And much of it is inaccessible to non-philosophers. As a matter of fact, I often hear philosophers attending APA meetings say they find some papers too narrow and technical for them to understand, themselves.

As I indicated, I am not arguing that research in philosophy is not important. That said, I *will* be arguing that there is a remarkable lack of attention to issues related to undergraduate teaching.

Let me first note an economic reality about professional philosophy. The economic basis for the field of professional philosophy is overwhelmingly based on undergraduate students taking philosophy courses. That means jobs for people trained in philosophy to teach them. Graduate programs exist to teach those who will be teachers. Thus, jobs in philosophy rely significantly on undergraduates, most of whom will take perhaps only one or at most several courses in philosophy. Yet in the carrying out of professional philosophy they are often ignored and devalued. This, of course, is true of academia in general, and not just philosophy. I wonder how many professions pay so little attention to and devalue those people whose needs are responsible for the existence of their jobs.

Let's shift to the question of influence and impact. Certainly most of us have hopes and dreams of having some impact on "the field." Given the reality of the profession, if we think about it, and if we widen the scope from "the field" to "the society," the largest impact we can have on society would appear to be the influence and impact we have on undergraduate students, by far the largest number of students taught by us. For an organization like the Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy, the sponsor of this session, and the APA Committee on the Status of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender People in the Profession, it would seem that in addition to focusing on how LGBT philosophers are being treated and whether they can work on scholarship related to LGBT issues, we ought to be focusing on how we can have an influence on students, and through having an influence on our students, on society. Indeed, I will be arguing for a view that sees LGBT philosophy as transformative. With regard to this I will be arguing that we need to pay more attention to how we can work LGBT issues into our courses in a variety of ways, and that we need to facilitate the writing of more philosophical essays and papers that are accessible to undergraduate students.

II. LGBT Philosophy

a. Its Nature

I would like to argue that part of the answer to the question "What is LGBT Philosophy?" is that it is *transformative*. Nancy Holland, in a recent essay in the *APA Newsletter on Feminism and Philosophy* draws an analogy between Philosophy in general and Women's Studies, noting that in both people engage not just in "informative teaching," but also in "transformative teaching."¹ Philosophy's teaching of critical thinking skills, and its examination of the texts and ideas upon which "our society's current understanding of the world is based" in ethics courses and courses in the history of philosophy can enable changes in the lives of our students. Women's Studies is similarly transformative, in a more focused way. LGBT Philosophy is, I would argue, also transformative. One of the ways it is transformative is to give a voice to people who have in the past had to be silent and hidden. It brings into the open issues not openly faced before. In our role as teachers we have a powerful opportunity to help transform the lives of our students, both LGBT and non-LGBT, by changing the way they look at themselves and the world.

Richard Mohr has argued that gay studies is inevitably normative. Gay studies should be seen as "moral vision." This follows from recognition that LGBT people are a minority. "The form and end of gay studies is the examination and evaluation of the treatment of gays so viewed and, in turn, the prescription of social forms in the light of that moral evaluation."² Mohr also draws an analogy with Women's Studies, noting that its core of feminism is similarly normative.

Given this, we can note that LGBT philosophy will be distinctly different from some of what is referred to as LGBT studies in particular disciplines such as history, psychology or sociology. The study of LGBT people in those areas can be helpful in LGBT philosophy, in terms of making clear the need for it, giving us facts that show certain views of LGBT persons as clearly incorrect, etc. But LGBT philosophy will be inevitably normative, steering us toward prescriptions for change.

Holland's focus in her discussion of transformative teaching is on students, and how their lives are changed by a study that is transformative; Mohr's focus is on the discipline of gay studies or LGBT studies, and how that discipline is inevitably normative and prescriptive. It seems to me they are two sides of the same coin. The sincere student of the discipline will likely be transformed by it. It is more than accumulating information, learning a history, or learning what people have believed and do believe.

This shows that LGBT philosophy is different from some other areas of philosophy that we teach. I teach Classical philosophy. I love this early period of Western philosophy and the incredible development of thought that occurred at the time. I hope that some of my students come away from that course with a love of ancient Greek philosophy. However, I don't see it as necessarily transformative in the way that feminism and LGBT philosophy are.

b. "Balance," "Neutrality," "Objectivity"

Let us go on to the implications this has on some other issues: concerns about "neutrality," "balance," and "having an agenda," and, following that, the dispute about whether LGBT studies and LGBT philosophy should be integrationist and distributed (dispersed throughout the curriculum) whether there should be LGBT Studies programs and specific courses.

An often-voiced concern about LGBT studies is whether those doing it can be neutral, and whether the treatment of the topics is "balanced," and whether those writing and teaching about it have an "agenda." When this concern is raised, the underlying concern seems to be whether those doing it are capable of objectivity, intellectual independence, or whether their talents are being used to persuade people in some sneaky, illicit way.

LGBT philosophy and LGBT studies have grown out of a movement. Similarly, women's studies has grown out of the women's movement. Without the challenge and changes of a social and political movement it is doubtful that much would have been done in either of these areas of study. But there are movements and there are movements. Both the LGBT movement and women's movement have opened up the possibilities of LGBT studies, and have legitimated them. They are committed to fundamental change in how we see society and how we should live. They are unlike the temperance movement, which arose to encourage people to abstain from alcohol because of increasing levels of problem drinking and its consequences. The focus of that movement is change, but change in response to a particular problem, not fundamental change in how we see society.

Let's connect arising out of a movement with being transformative and consisting of moral vision. If LGBT philosophy is a moral vision and is transformative, it will of necessity have certain commitments. Recognizing LGBT people as minorities, groups treated poorly by society, carries with it a recognition that this is morally wrong, and change is needed. It is an "agenda," but one which those involved in LGBT studies would likely claim is one which should be shared by all people of good will. When the language "having an agenda" is used, it is usually used to indicate that the person

with it is advocating a position the critic does not share (that is, it is not the critic's agenda).

In this context, what does it mean to be balanced, objective, neutral? Let's take balanced first. Some years ago I was contacted by a philosopher who puts together anthologies who wanted some suggestions about what he might include in an anthology on gay and lesbian issues. My name was listed as a contact for SLGP, and that is how he happened to contact me. It is long enough ago that I don't recall the conversation in detail. I do recall I mentioned to him Richard Mohr's "Gay Basics" and some other pieces that I regarded as gay/lesbian positive. He asked about some references to selections he might use "on the other side," that is, critical of homosexuality. When I resisted this and didn't give him suggestions, he angrily said that he wanted to be sure to have "balance."

His use of balance suggests to me the point/counterpoint model used by a whole series ("Opposing Viewpoints"), and often used in introductory anthologies, particularly on moral issues. This model leads to pairing up articles such as Mohr's "Gay Basics" and something critical of homosexuality, such as Michael Levin's "Why Homosexuality is Abnormal." One recent (6th) edition of a contemporary moral issues text retitles essays by John Finnis and Martha Nussbaum. Finnis' essay is given the title "Homosexual Conduct is Wrong" and Nussbaum's is given the title "Homosexual Conduct is Not Wrong." (Could this be a setup for a giveaway multiple choice exam question?) Sometimes this pattern of selection has a usefulness: for instance, it reminds people that some people still do believe homosexuality is a kind of moral degeneracy, etc. And I suspect it's often done to get discussions going and to encourage classroom debate. With the different sides represented in a supposedly "balanced" way, members of the class can square off. However, I think that this approach has some drawbacks. Like the format found often in the news today, particularly TV news, featuring "firestorms" of controversy, even about small matters such as the paving of a street, it risks sensationalizing issues by manufacturing or exaggerating a disagreement. In addition, by pairing, for instance, an anti-homosexual article with a pro article one gives a kind of legitimacy to both sides, and suggests a kind of relativism: "There are those who claim homosexuality is a normal variation among human beings, and there are those who claim they're not normal, but are sick. Who's to say? What side are you on?" And how can a discipline which involves moral vision and is transformative support this?

To be sure, it is often important and necessary to indicate different and opposing positions on an issue. With regard to LGBT philosophy, I am less worried about using a point/counterpoint approach in pairing an essay supporting same sex marriage and an essay opposing same sex marriage, when written by people within LGBT philosophy than I am about pairing an article supporting same sex marriage with one opposing it written from a non-LGBT perspective. The first shows that members of a minority may disagree about whether a certain social change is beneficial or not. It is a disagreement within the same broad moral vision. The second returns us to an "us/them" context, where the moral vision involved in LGBT philosophy will likely be questioned.

Let me also note that we see less of this kind of point/counterpoint strategy to supposedly foster "balance" when it comes to selections on race and sexism. It's hard to imagine someone including in a section on race in an ethics anthology a selection arguing for the inferiority of non-whites to show that it is "balanced." A desire to do so with regard to LGBT

issues based on wanting to achieve balance suggests a belief that LGBT inferiority is a plausible view.

I think we should steer the question of "balance" to questions about "objectivity."

We should expect people doing philosophy to be attentive to clarity and argumentation. Openness to issues, recognition of the need for argument and not just assertion, honest admission of weakness in one's own arguments and fair attention to opposing positions are all aspects of philosophical objectivity. When one fails in these matters, that seems to be what it is to lack balance and to lack objectivity. One can take a position with objectivity, and, in LGBT philosophy, as in feminism, how can one not take a position on the foundational issues? It is when the need for argument, or the existence of differing positions, is simply ignored that charges of a lack of balance and a lack of intellectual independence and objectivity may be fairly claimed.

c. Separate Courses/Programs vs. "Integration"

What about undergraduate LGBT studies programs and separate courses in LGBT philosophy? Again, my context is largely undergraduate teaching. According to the dispersion or integration model, while you may need particular arenas to begin with (such as courses in LGBT studies), the idea is to move the research and discussion about these issues into the particular fields. On that model LGBT topics are raised in general courses, and that is seen as better than having courses devoted to LGBT topics. Perhaps another term one might use here is "mainstreaming."

One of the main concerns about establishing LGBT studies programs and having specifically LGBT courses is that it tends to ghettoize. Such courses are likely to be taught by mostly LGBT faculty, and taken by LGBT students. Non-LGBT students, and some LGBT students may be reluctant to have a recognizably LGBT course title on their transcripts. With regard to an LGBT studies program, there is a concern that it will be isolated from the other disciplines, and perhaps it will be less likely for there to be interchange between the people in the LGBT studies program and the traditional disciplines. And instead of raising LGBT concerns within the disciplines as a whole and within the campus as a whole, they are raised among those already aware of them and committed to change.

I think a strong case can be made for a mix of these two approaches. As moral vision, and as transformative, it does seem that the goal of LGBT philosophy is likely to be a society and a world in which the ideas and concerns it raises are so widespread and accepted, dispersed throughout the particular disciplines, that it is no longer needed. There is enough left to be done that we don't have to worry about it happening very soon.

It does seem that the offering of particular LGBT studies courses does not lead to the particular ghettoization feared. Without the challenge of discussion of LGBT issues on a campus, it seems unlikely that very many people will work to incorporate LGBT issues and concerns into their courses. Particular courses offer such a challenge and serve to legitimize LGBT concerns and make it easier for others to join into the discussion.³

III. What Can and Should We Do Now

If LGBT philosophy is moral vision and transformative, those of us who teach philosophy can play a significant role in carrying this out. I argued earlier that undergraduate teaching is, in the end, the institutional and economic foundation of the profession. Given the number of undergraduates that we deal with, the greatest influence we can have on the society is through the teaching of our undergraduate students. I

recognize that many of us in this room are already involved in this, in the teaching of particular LGBT studies courses and in incorporating LGBT issues in other courses. That must continue to be done and to be further encouraged. Certainly introduction to ethics courses offer easy opportunities to include LGBT issues as do courses in social and political philosophy. Examples of arguments on LGBT issues easily can be used in critical thinking courses. For those of us teaching Classical philosophy, there are places where Plato makes it easy to discuss such issues. There are other courses into which we can work them. In my medical ethics courses I bring them up when we discuss concepts of health and disease. I think they can be worked into other courses as well, with some cleverness such as philosophy of science and philosophy of religion.

The current interest in dealing with diversity and multiculturalism in the curriculum offers us an incredible opportunity. Dealing with diversity is “hot,” popular, and is often being mandated. We can do our best to make sure that LGBT issues are included in this. When there are discussions about multiculturalism and diversity we must make sure that we are included in the lists of relevant groups.

To do this effectively we need to insist on the development of more suitable material for use in courses. Philosophers typically write for other philosophers. The field encourages high-level scholarly writing and rewards it. Who is writing articles that are accessible to intelligent undergraduates and the general public? Richard Mohr’s “Gay Basics,” written for students, and not fellow philosophers, was commissioned by James Rachels for an anthology almost 20 years ago. It has been included in over 35 anthologies. It may well be that “Gay Basics” has influenced more undergraduates on LGBT issues than any other essay written by a philosopher. Some recent anthologies are including the first section of John Corvino’s book, *Same Sex*, and that also is accessible to undergraduates.

People putting together anthologies and reading packets are on the lookout for suitable material. Some of the selections used in ethics anthologies on LGBT issues, taken from journals, simply don’t work with undergraduates: rather than helping them along on the issues, they confuse them. We need more materials written with the intelligent undergraduate in mind. That is true not only with regard to LGBT issues, but with regard to diversity issues in general. At a meeting of diversity committee chairs last year the chair of the Committee on the States of American Indians in Philosophy was bemoaning the lack of inclusion of selections relating to Native Americans in anthologies. I noted that I suspected part of the problem was the lack of suitable essays. Given the interest in diversity at the present, I believe one could almost guarantee that well-written articles accessible to undergraduates will be picked up by editors of anthologies, and sought by people putting together reading packets.

How can we effect this? I know the ready defensive answers: “It isn’t good for my CV,” “It’s not something I can submit to a journal.” Here again it seems that we run into the odd, perhaps even self-destructive neglect and devaluing of our primary clientele, undergraduates. I would like us to try to figure out a way of changing things so that more materials are written that are suitable for undergraduate teaching of LGBT issues. I would like to see more discussion at meetings such as the APA and in relevant publications, such as *Teaching Philosophy*, the *Society for Lesbian and Gay Philosophy Newsletter*, the *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Issues*, about effective strategies of covering LGBT issues in the undergraduate classroom.

In reflecting on undergraduate teaching and LGBT philosophy I have argued for the need for some changes. Change is often resisted. I have argued that change is integral to LGBT philosophy, given its nature as transformative. Given that, it would be odd for us to ourselves resist changes in our practices, once we see the need for them.

Endnotes

*Originally presented at American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division Meeting, December 2002, Group Session V-II.

1. Holland, Nancy J. “Philosophy and the Future of Women’s Studies,” “Newsletter on Feminism,” in *APA Newsletters* Vol. 01, No. 2, Spring, 2002.

2. Mohr, Richard, “Gay Studies as Moral Vision,” in Richard Mohr, *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), 253.

3. Dennis Altman writes about this in an article in the *Advocate* nearly 20 years ago: “Gay Studies and the Quest for Academic Legitimacy,” *The Advocate*, October 13, 1983; pp. 32-34. Initially he opposed specific gay courses. While a visiting lecturer at the University of California Santa Cruz he found that offering a course specifically on gay studies served to “legitimize the area as one deserving of serious attention by academics in the whole range of humanities and social sciences.” (p. 33)

How I Publish Now

Richard D. Mohr

University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign

My 1994 book *A More Perfect Union: Why Straight America Must Stand Up for Gay Rights* was supposed to be the gay *Race Matters* — same editor, same publisher, same contract, same media coach, same author tour. I described the book in publicity as a handshake of greeting from gay experience to the hearts and minds of mainstream America. But as Cornell West’s book soared to a two-month run on the *New York Times* best-seller list and his career danced through the Ivy League, my book fizzled. Hard to know what the problem was. Perhaps it was the overly pushy title that my publisher, Beacon Press, had forced upon the book, or perhaps it was the ending which the Press insisted that I add — an hortatory afterward giving ten pointers on what ordinary citizens can do to nudge the country toward justice for gays. That addition guaranteed that the book would not be reviewed in the *New York Times*, since the *Times* has a policy of not reviewing advice books. Perhaps the problem was that the book appeared in the wrong decade. After all, West was writing three decades after the national black civil rights bill was passed and I was writing at least one or two before the gay one. Or perhaps the book just wasn’t very good. In any case, only half the hardback printing sold and the paperback wasn’t picked up for classroom use. Oh well.

Even after this disappointment, I still hoped to make a difference through my writings, though perhaps I was just a glutton for punishment. I turned my writings toward journalistic outlets and I had a few successes at nuzzling gay pieces into mainstream periodicals. I placed pieces across a fairly wide spread of the political spectrum — in the *Nation*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Chicago Tribune*, and *Reason* magazine. But I was unable to lodge my name in the rolodexes of editors who could sustain my appearance in the mainstream. And despite half a dozen tries, I was never able to place an op-ed in the *New York Times*. The *Times* actually called once. I was

on vacation, which required them to track me down. So you can imagine my heart rate upon getting a message at the front desk instructing me to “call the *New York Times* editorial division.” But it was only a call of encouragement — to try again in the future. No cigar.

Here the problem was soon enough obvious. Mainstream editors want facts and stories, not ideas and arguments. Nothing could be clearer evidence of this than my near-miss with the *Times*. The submission was on the unarticulated gender issues that lay behind and engined the military ban on gays. The *Times* would run a total of six editorial page op-eds on “don’t ask, don’t tell,” but only one got anywhere near the real issues. And it was extraordinary of genre — a Doonesbury cartoon. Across four frames, two Army bunk-mates manage to talk themselves into a frenzy of sexual paranoia about themselves.

I think it telling that the liberal mainstream press has chosen as its gay columnists and special occasion writers pretty much only conservatives, like Andrew Sullivan and Bruce Bauer. Even the *New York Times* could do no better than signing on house gays. When a Lefty like Tony Kushner managed to place an op-ed with the *Times*, it had no gay content. It was on New York’s decaying school system.

The gay press was more forgiving of articulated thought and gay liberalism. I started writing op-eds at least once a month and blanketed the gay urban and regional papers with them. On average, eight to ten papers would run any given piece. I did not syndicate the pieces, so I could write on my own schedule and as topics came along. That could be quickly. When, on a Monday, Dick Arney called Barney Frank “Barney Fag,” I had by Thursday evening a piece on this Freudian slip appearing in several gay weeklies. At least half the papers paid at least something, though too frequently I had to wait a year for the check. It was pin money. Much more than that, it was great fun — for a while.

By 1997 I found that I was simply recycling old ideas onto new sets of facts. I could have done that endlessly, since time always sends facts flowing in new upon us, and I still believed in the validity of the old ideas. But the fun faded with repetition and my energy for writing was getting competition from another of my interests. Through the 1990s, I had begun writing, and then writing more and more, on the decorative arts and architecture. Mostly the pieces were written in an older style that just dealt with issues of identification and connoisseurship. But I chanced — slid sideways — into a project with real substance and the possibility, if played right, to transform scholarship in the decorative arts by infusing into what is a rather fuddy-duddy field the postmodernist techniques I had learned while editing a gay book series in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Most of the projects that had wandered in to the series were from professors in English departments. My project applied these English-honed techniques to three 19th century American potters whose work has a significant social, political, and psycho-sexual content. Now *this* was great fun. And the gay writings stopped altogether.

I found myself in the odd position of being (as it were) a literary executor to my own estate of gay writings. Surprisingly, interest continued in some quarters to re-publish the gay pieces. More than surprising, my 1986 essay “Gay Basics” continues to be reprinted in philosophy, sociology, and political science anthologies, even though the facts in the essay, especially those on the status of discrimination against gays, are embarrassingly dated.

The most complicated bit of literary stewardship I have had arose over my essay “The Pedophilia of Everyday Life.”

This 1997 essay was a belated satellite publication to my 1991 book *Gay Ideas: Outing and Other Controversies*. University presses, twenty-three printers, some distributors, and the Canadian government had considered two photographs in the book, and so the book itself, to be kiddy porn. Puzzled by this reception, I figured that I’d better try to understand what America’s panic over kiddy porn was about. The essay looks at mainstream advertisements which sexualize children and uses analyses of these ads as a vehicle to deconstruct the notion of innocence.

The essay took several years to write because I couldn’t think of any place that would even consider publishing it, and so I kept putting off the actual commitment of it to cursor. But in 1996 the art theory magazine *Art issues* re-printed an essay of mine on federal funding for the arts and invited another essay. I floated the idea for “The Pedophilia of Everyday Life,” and the magazine ran with it. Soon after the illustrated article appeared, it was reprinted in the nationally-distributed gay bar-directory published out of Boston, *The Guide*. So the essay circulated in two distinct, if sometimes overlapping, worlds. From out of the art world, I was asked by Seattle’s Center on Contemporary Art to turn the essay into a slide-show. I’ve presented the resulting slide-show there and in several academic settings. From out of the gay world, I received plaintive notes from several essayists who said that they were trying to put together scholarly anthologies on issues of pedophilia and childhood sexuality, but that they couldn’t get publishers even to look at their proposals.

So in 1999, I was highly skeptical when I got an invitation to include the essay in a proposed anthology with the wooden and — I could imagine to some — off-putting title “Aren’t Children Queer?” Two Canadian academics from Down East were trying to line up authors for the book in advance of seeking a publisher: Would I like to revise the piece before they sent it around to prospective publishers? Would I send along the illustrations originals for review purposes since the images were necessary to the essay’s intelligibility? I told them as nicely as I could that even though they had signed up a very impressive list of contributors (some essays were to be reprints, some to be new), I still didn’t think they could get a publisher to take the proposal, so that though I would like to revise and update the piece, I would do that only after they had a contract in hand. And, by the way, no I don’t let originals out of my clutches; wouldn’t photocopies do for now? They conceded.

One reason that I wanted to be part of the project was that everyone else who was involved in the project — well, everyone whose name I recognized — held academic appointments in English departments. It seemed the disciplinarily subversive thing to do to sneak in, if I could. The contributors included some queer theory all-stars, a number of other academics who are fleshing out the field as a discipline, and a couple of well-known fellow-travelers. The contributors list included Michael Moon, Robert K. Martin, James Kincaid, Ellis Hanson, Lauren Berlant, Robin Bernstein, Paul Kelleher, Kathryn Kent, Judith Halberstam, Eve Sedgwick, and Michael Warner. I figured if I could smuggle my old-fashioned liberalism in amongst that pack, it would be a spiritual coup.

Well, nearly a year passed and the editors couldn’t get any press interested, but then the University of Minnesota Press, one of the hipper of the university presses, agreed to have a look-see. They went on to have the project peer-reviewed. That took another year, and then there was the usual waiting for the actual contract. In April 2002, just at the time contributors were to receive contracts — we had already been

told to have essays in final form by summer's end — the Religious Right latched onto another book that the University of Minnesota Press was to publish. On the Press's website, the Family Research Council found advance extracts from Judith Levine's soon forthcoming *Harmful to Minors: The Perils of Protecting Children from Sex*. The book contains no pictures at all, but had the gumption to suggest that not all sexual relations between adults and children amount to abuse. The book had a forward by Dr. Joycelyn Elders, the U.S. Surgeon General whom President Clinton fired at the behest of the Religious Right for having suggested that it would not be such a bad thing for students to learn about masturbation. The Religious Right smelled blood in the water and mounted letter-writing campaigns to Minnesota legislators and Press administrators. The University bowed to this pressure to the extent that it set up a commission charged to review the Press's acquisitions practices. I thought that this chilling effect would certainly nix *Aren't Children Queer?* I was wrong. The contract arrived.

But my essay was not home free. Suddenly, the very editors who had insisted that I provide them the illustrations' originals as necessary for the essay's intelligibility now informed me that there were to be no images whatever in *Aren't Children Queer?* Though the thought streaked through my mind "I'm too old for this stress," it was time once more to take a stand for my work. I wrote back pointing out that their views on the images were contradictory and that it hardly made sense to publish the essay without the pictures. To my surprise, the Press caved. But the experience shows that there is no end of it.

And there is no end of it. My scribbles on the decorative arts have issued in a book *Pottery, Politics, Art: George Ohr and the Brothers Kirkpatrick*, for which I found a publisher with the University of Illinois Press thanks to the book's regional connections — the Brothers Kirkpatrick potted in far-southern Illinois (1859-96). When the dustjacket was being worked up, the Press's art department, to my delight, used a couple of my ideas to draft two alternative cover designs. As is customary with both trade and university presses, the designs were passed around to all of the press's personnel, who serve as an in-house focus-group. One design used details from a number of vases to convey the content and flow of the book. The other consisted of a single sexy red vase plastered against a pure white ground. It's an eye-ball grabber. Traditionally the vase — one by Ohr, circa 1898 — has been called "the vagina vase." But this baptism underestimates, perhaps intentionally overlooks, much that is going on with the vase. I call it the *pas de deux* vase. In lightly abstracted form, it consists of a set of labia draped languorously and supine over the head of an erect penis. The sexual demographics are 'normal' enough, but the geography is decidedly anal. The prince is bonking the ballerina in the ass. The book's analytical engine spindles between the sexual abject and the sexual grotesque. So the cover was perfect. And it was the unanimous, hands-down favorite with the Press's personnel.

But some conservative contributors of images to the book took such umbrage at the cover design, even at the black-&-white version which appeared in the Press's catalogue, that they mounted a telephone campaign to the Press's Director to try to force him to change the cover. He told callers that if they didn't like the cover, simply to remove the dustjacket. And that's how I publish now.

A Reflection on the Relevance of Gay-bashing in the Comic Book World

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When Robin got beaten up by the bad guys, Batman was understandably angry and vengeful. When Bucky Barnes was in trouble, Captain America was perhaps more than usually efficient about rescuing him. Recently, the Green Lantern's friend and sidekick Terry Berg was severely beaten, prompting Green Lantern to seek harsh vengeance. So what's new? Terry Berg is openly gay, and he was attacked not by a supervillain bent on world domination, but by garden-variety homophobic thugs.

Terry Berg was not the first openly gay character in comics history, but as far as I know his assault was the first explicit treatment of gay-bashing in that medium. In what ways is this significant? To answer that question, let's first consider why comic books might be significant at all.

When comic books were in their infancy, they were generally simple, straightforward tales of crime-fighting, romance, horror, or intrigue. In the 1960s, however, characters became more psychologically complex and stories started to address more serious themes. (It is generally recognized that Marvel Comics pioneered this, but older rival DC soon followed suit, so the general trend I am describing is a broad one). For example, one of the main social concerns in the early 1960s was racism and race relations, so the comics world responded not only with black characters, but with storylines that explicitly dealt with prejudice and discrimination. One should reject the stereotypical cliché that there were no social concerns during the 1950s, but it is fair to say that the comic book world of the 1950s didn't address these concerns. Artists in other media were exploring issues of prejudice and discrimination, just not the artists of the comic book world. But in the 1960s, the comics world did take notice of the civil rights movement, and later, the women's liberation movement, the protests against the Vietnam War, the growing awareness about alcoholism and drug addiction, Cold War paranoia and tensions, and corruption in government. In this way, the average 8th-grade comic book reader in 1972 would have been exposed to a vast array of socially-relevant stories in ways unfamiliar to the 8th-graders of 1952 or even 1962. Additionally, as the comics got more sophisticated, the age-group of readership increased to the point where intellectual college students continued to be devoted to the comics of their high-school days. Consequently, the much-maligned¹ form of the comic book became a vehicle for consciousness-raising every bit as much as popular films and television shows. It is not an exaggeration to say that many comic book readers of a certain age can trace their attitudes towards the social issues listed above to specific storylines in Spider-Man, X-Men, Iron Man, Shang-Chi, Daredevil, The Incredible Hulk, Fantastic Four, Dr. Strange, and so on.²

Given the overlooked fact that comics have been a vehicle for advancing socially aware causes since the 1960s, we should not be surprised to note that, in the 1990s, the comics world addressed prejudice towards and discrimination against homosexuals. One familiar argument is that comics have *always* dealt with these issues, since the very idea of a "secret identity" is a closet of sorts. Why the secret identity? Because others will not understand me (or perhaps despise me) for who I am,³ because I will be a target on a daily basis, because my loved ones will suffer if the world knows the truth about

me – these concerns are hardly unconnected to those of an adolescent struggling to understand his or her sexuality. In another sense, though, these are the sorts of insecurities that *all* adolescents feel at one time or another, so the fact that these themes speak to a gay audience doesn't make them explicitly gay themes. Nevertheless, the addition of specifically homosexual characters has not only brought these connections to prominence, but has allowed the exploration of issues such as coming out versus not, social attitudes toward homosexuality, and now, gay-bashing.

It is readily apparent that despite the increased acceptance of homosexuality by certain segments of the mainstream media audience,⁴ bigotry towards gays is still alive and well, and this continues to manifest itself violently. While not every instance garners the national attention of the Matthew Shepard case, gays still have legitimate cause to be fearful of being assaulted simply because of someone else's attitude. Will a comic-book storyline that treats violence against homosexuals put an end to this problem? Surely not. But all social problems depend for their successful resolution on grassroots-level changes in people's thinking, a shift in general perception from the bottom up, as opposed to edicts from the top down. When the comic book world explicitly portrays violence and bigotry against gays as unacceptable, that's simultaneously an example of this bottom-up change in social attitude and a potential source of it. That, then, is the significance of gay-bashing in the comic book world. Comics both reflect trends in social change and help foster social change. Many of us reading comics in the 1960s and 70s learned about racial bigotry and government corruption⁵ through the comic books. Perhaps Terry Berg's suffering, and the Green Lantern's anguish, will teach others about anti-gay violence and hatred.

Endnotes

1. By everyone – while more “athletic” kids might brand a comic-book reader as a geek, another form of ridicule could be found on the other side, as snobbier geeks could be counted upon to deny the legitimacy of the medium. It is interesting that while comics have made great progress on both fronts, the bi-directional stigma persists. The *New York Times Book Review* now takes “graphic novels” (i.e., book-length comic books) seriously, yet many professionals who enjoy them remain “in the closet” (so to speak) out of embarrassment.
2. Perhaps my list of examples shows my hand as a partisan of the Marvel line, but in fairness, DC's line (Batman, Superman, Green Arrow, Green Lantern, and so on) also matured and explored these social issues. The precipitating event for this essay is breakthrough, for which DC gets credit.
3. The “X-Men” line takes this one step further. Rather than “acquiring” super-powers, these are actual mutants – they really *are* “different,” and themes of toleration and prejudice pervade this series.
4. For example, key gay characters on very popular current and recent television programs such as “E.R.,” “Will and Grace,” “All My Children,” “Dawson's Creek,” “NYPD Blue,” “Homicide: Life on the Street,” “The Simpsons,” “Once and Again,” and “Buffy the Vampire Slayer,” as well as real-life media figures as diverse as Andrew Sullivan and Rosie O'Donnell.
5. Not to mention Taoism and Norse mythology.

BOOK REVIEW

Peg O'Connor, *Oppression and Responsibility: A Wittgensteinian Approach to Social Practices and Moral Theory*.

University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002, XI + 152 pp. (includes bibliography and index).

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Wittgenstein was a philosopher of language, of mind, of psychology, and of a few other areas. But he had very little to say about philosophical ethics in general and normative ethics in particular. Moreover, he was very interested in describing much of our linguistic practices. When a book attempts to rely on Wittgenstein's thought and use it to derive *normative* ethical and political claims, it deserves praise simply in virtue of the difficulty of such a task. This is what O'Connor's book aims to achieve, and for this, it deserves praise. However, the book left me with a few questions regarding the very nature of its enterprise. I am not fully convinced that Wittgenstein's thought has been, and can be, used in a deep and specifically *Wittgensteinian* way to reach the desired results.

O'Connor's main two themes are oppression and responsibility. With respect to the first, an essential part of her claim is that without attending to the social practices of oppressive systems and – more generally – to the backgrounds that underlie such systems, we will not be able to adequately understand and assess a number of morally bad phenomena, such as church burnings and acts of homophobia. Backgrounds are important because “they provide the conditions of possibility and intelligibility” (p. 2), and they are constituted by, in addition to social practices, facts of nature and propositions (p. 3). O'Connor takes attention to backgrounds to be a particularly Wittgensteinian claim, but she also departs from Wittgenstein in that, while the examples that Wittgenstein discusses in his works are apolitical, the examples she focuses on are highly political. This is because O'Connor wants to “argue that attending to the background is necessary because many aspects of the background are anything but harmless and trivial; failing to challenge them means leaving the framework of oppressive systems intact” (p. 6).

The other theme is responsibility. O'Connor argues for a broad yet plausible notion of moral responsibility that covers not only actions but also attitudes and beliefs. The idea is that the particular, oppressive, and harmful actions for which we usually hold their perpetrators responsible “are made possible and intelligible” within particular practices. However, these practices are maintained and kept in place by individuals and other types of agents. And they are maintained largely due to these individuals' beliefs and attitudes. Hence, the argument runs, responsibility should not just attach to particular actions, but to attitudes and beliefs that help maintain oppressive social practices.

The above are the general claims of the book. In the first chapter, “The Necessity of Practices and Backgrounds,” O'Connor outlines her general aims and assumptions, expounds on some Wittgensteinian claims that she will rely

on in her book, and explains a number of concepts central to her project, such as backgrounds, social practices, and agreement. In the second chapter, “The Stability of Rationality,” O’Connor sets aside an essentialist view of rationality, adopts a non-essentialist and Wittgensteinian view of rationality, and exhibits the fruitfulness of such an approach to issues about oppression. The adopted view of rationality is non-essentialist and Wittgensteinian in that judgments and beliefs are not deemed rational or irrational in virtue of being measured by some absolute (essential) standard. Rather, “[o]nly within language games can judgments about rationality make sense. Language games themselves do not have independent rational justification that is some justification not dependent on a language claim” (p. 30). Because language games are contingent, this view of rationality is non-essentialist. To O’Connor, this is a politically and morally useful view because it “provides a tool for radically changing what counts as rational...” (p. 36). Because the backgrounds are not absolute, they allow for changes and for “alternative practices, meaning, and values” (p. 37). O’Connor illustrates this with the examples of marital rape and slavery. Regarding the former, she argues that without changes in the assumptions and beliefs about rape, a woman could not come to rationally believe that what her husband did to her was rape.

In the third chapter, “Conspiracies and Connect the Dots: The Search for Motives in Church Burnings,” O’Connor argues that by not looking at the background of racist acts, white people allow themselves, so to speak, to get off the moral hook by attributing moral responsibility only to the actions of the perpetrators of racist acts. White people also allow themselves to conclude that it is the perpetrators who are racist, thus divorcing the meaning of the latter’s actions from the social practices within which they derive that very meaning. So it is important that we attend to the backgrounds (the example used is that of church burnings). One corollary of this claim is that white people in general might very well be responsible for their attitudes and beliefs since these sustain racist backgrounds (a claim discussed in more depth in the final chapter). Wittgenstein’s notion of being captivated by a picture plays a part in this chapter, since, according to O’Connor, the people who investigated the church burnings were captivated by two particular and connected, yet misleading, pictures: of conspiracy and of what constitutes a racist action.

The fourth chapter, “The Meaning of Assaultive Speech: Its Harmful Uses,” contains an argument to the effect that the Wittgensteinian view of meaning as use provides a better approach to the issue of assaultive or hate speech. This is because it blurs the lines between the content, context, and the harmful consequences of speech. The inseparability, on the Wittgensteinian view, between the content of speech and its effects is “one of the most important reasons for advocating a Wittgensteinian approach to assaultive speech” (p. 73). The reason is that certain expressions, for example, homophobic ones, when put in the right context, are seen for what they are: not as invitations to participate in the market of ideas, but as, say, threats. Because such expressions are threats, they tend to reinforce the very oppressive social practices that give them their meanings to begin with. Since the Wittgensteinian view reveals hate speech for what it is, we ought to be a lot more cautious about defending such speech.

Chapter 5, “Moving to New Boroughs: Transforming the World by Inventing Language Games,” argues that under oppressive social systems, the prevalent language games leave certain people (the examples used are sexual abuse survivors and gay and lesbian teens) bereft of ways and concepts to make sense of who they are. But because language games

can be changed and new ones invented, these people can find new concepts with which they can come to understand their experiences. The Wittgensteinian insight operative in this chapter is that the limits of our language are the limits of our world. Because certain language games leave some people without the linguistic tools to understand their experiences, such people are in a predicament to understand their worlds.

The sixth chapter, “Lesbian Barroom Brawls: Racial Integration in the 1950s,” is on the politics of dissent, on challenging oppressive systems by marginalized groups, and on what this implies. O’Connor focuses on the lesbian communities in Buffalo in the 1950s, describes their general economic and racial makeup, and the implications this makeup has for challenging oppression and organizing resistance. (It is not clear how Wittgenstein’s thought contributes to this chapter. There is a quotation from Wittgenstein on p. 108, but its connection to what precedes it is very obscure.)

The final chapter, “If Everybody’s Responsible, Then Nobody Is,” takes up the theme of responsibility in some depth. O’Connor argues that we need expanded notions of responsibility, and she fastens upon the notions of shared responsibility and collective responsibility. While Larry May’s notion of shared responsibility is useful because it assigns responsibility to *each* member of a group, it is nevertheless too individualistic because it focuses too much, according to O’Connor, on individual choice regarding what to do and to believe. She thinks that the notion of collective responsibility adds to that of shared responsibility the idea that we can be responsible for unintended actions and for beliefs that we have simply due to the fact that we live in racist societies. In this respect, collective responsibility “concerns the ways in which actions and attitudes are undertaken and adopted by members of a collectivity. The collectivity as a whole creates an environment and engenders attitudes that contribute to people’s undertaking some course of action. Collective responsibility attaches to the whole body; white people *qua* whites bear responsibility” (p. 131). Thus, we get an expanded notion of responsibility that covers actions, attitudes, and beliefs, and clarifies how oppressive practices are sustained.

There are two questions asked about O’Connor’s aims. First, to what extent can Wittgenstein’s views be used to successfully derive from them normative moral and political claims? In the chapter on rationality, for example, it does not seem to me that a Wittgensteinian view of rationality has any necessary implications for certain moral and political views. O’Connor favors it because it does not commit itself to a rigid background of absolute beliefs and so allows for changes in particular judgments of rationality and irrationality once those background beliefs are questioned and/or displaced. Yet this very flexibility of Wittgensteinian rationality could also allow for pernicious moral and political views. It has, in other words, no built-in guarantees as to which moral and political views one ought to adopt. In this sense, it does not seem to have any necessary implications for any particular such views. In the chapter on hate speech, to give another example, it does not seem to me that a staunch defender of the right to free speech is one who also cannot accept easily a Wittgensteinian view of speech. In other words, such a staunch defender can agree that meaning is importantly tied to use, rather than, say, private mental states, that the meaning of certain expressions and acts must be put in context to be fully understood, and yet continue to defend the right to hate speech. She could argue that even though hate speech has harmful consequences, the point of the right to free speech is that it does not take into account consequences (with the exception of certain types

of cases). Whether this defense is plausible is not the issue. Rather, it is that such a defense can easily rely on Wittgenstein's views of meaning.

Wittgenstein's thought makes another type of contribution to O'Connor's book. This is via the idea that we need to look at the background of certain beliefs, actions, and attitudes so as to understand these more correctly. If so, the second question that can be raised about the use of Wittgenstein's thought is this: To what extent is the idea that context matters — if I may put it a bit simplistically — Wittgensteinian? It seems to me that when addressing issues in language, meaning, philosophy of mind, etc., Wittgenstein relied to a large extent on the notion of context. But this indicates that this notion is not a particularly Wittgensteinian one. Wittgenstein used it to look at particular philosophical issues in a new and important way. That one can use it, however, to look at moral and political issues (e.g., looking at sexism in general to understand the morality and politics of pornography and prostitution) does not strike me as particularly Wittgensteinian. What would be particularly Wittgensteinian is using Wittgenstein's views in the specific areas of his concern and bring *these* to bear upon the issues of O'Connor's concerns. It may be that my conception of Wittgenstein's relevance is too narrow. But it would have been good had O'Connor addressed this issue. And that is why the chapter on gay teens lacking a language with which to make sense of their experiences is especially powerful and plausible. It extends — and never mind O'Connor's uncharitable characterization of essentialism about sexual orientation — Wittgenstein's views on language by showing us that language games could, and usually do, have power dimensions to them, such that within certain oppressive societies, the dominant language may not contain the concepts and words needed by the oppressed groups to articulate their experiences and feelings.

There are also some more minor quibbles. For example, O'Connor employs in Chapter 7 (p.113) a highly simplistic view of traditional moral theories that no one, it seems to me, should, given what has been written on these theories. Fortunately, this is not a real problem because her argument in that chapter does not require such a view of moral theories. For another example, O'Connor concludes that whites, qua whites, are responsible for racist social practices and institutions. But this both says too much and too little. Does O'Connor mean to say that it is impossible for a white person to not be morally responsible for racism, no matter what beliefs, actions, and attitudes he or she has (this is the too much bit)? And what does such responsibility imply by way of punishment, changes, etc. that agents have to undergo and undertake so as to work towards absolving themselves of this responsibility (this is the too little bit)? O'Connor does not say much about this, but rather simply answers by way of a counter-question, "What couldn't we do?" (p. 134).

It goes without saying that despite the worries I raised in this review, this book needs to be read by anyone who is interested in the possible connections between Wittgenstein's thought and normative moral and political issues. It is a book that will be important scholarship for those who are doing work on these connections.