

Laurie J. Shrage and Robert Scott Stewart  
*Philosophizing about Sex*  
Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2015  
ISBN 978-1554810093

Matt L. Drabek (University of Iowa)

**Matt L. Drabek** is a content specialist at ACT, Inc. and a visiting assistant professor of philosophy at the University of Iowa. His main areas of philosophical interest are social philosophy, feminist philosophy and other areas of anti-oppression work, and philosophical issues in the social sciences. He is the author of *Classify and Label: The Unintended Marginalization of Social Groups* (Lexington Books, 2014).

Website: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/mattdrabek>

Email: [matt.drabek@gmail.com](mailto:matt.drabek@gmail.com)

\*\*\*\*\*

Laurie J. Shrage and Robert Scott Stewart offer *Philosophizing about Sex* as a textbook and critical guide to the emerging field of the philosophy of sex and sexuality. To organize the many topics that characterize this field, they sort the literature into major issues of philosophical and public concern. As a textbook, the book's main goals are to introduce students to this field in an effective way and to provide motivation for class discussion. One important way the authors try to accomplish this is by updating a body of introductory literature that quickly becomes dated. Much of the introductory literature in this field was written before, for example, the Internet, which has been a fount of new issues concerning sex and sexuality. This is a noble goal, as this field is receiving much overdue, well-deserved attention in both academic philosophy and philosophy's engagement with issues of public concern. Toward these ends, this book provides a useful but limited pedagogical tool, which generally improves upon the existing supplementary material to the philosophical literature on sex and sexuality.

Each chapter introduces a cluster of philosophical issues under a common label (for example, "Defining Sex," "Sexual Attraction," "Sexual Objectification," and "Autonomy"). The authors organize these large clusters of issues into several subsections organized around an important philosophical question. For example, chapter 2, "Sexual Attraction," contains three subsections: "Do Opposites Attract?"; "How Are a Person's Sex, Gender, and Sexual Orientation Related?"; and "Are We Born Gay or Straight?" Within each subsection, the authors include a number of more specific questions to motivate class discussion, questions that are interspersed with philosophical histories and summaries of various positions philosophers have taken on the issues. Each chapter ends with a highlighted list of discussion questions and a beginning guide to the existing philosophical literature. The broad strategy here is to provide just enough philosophical content to guide students toward an engaged class discussion and to provide starter

questions to begin those discussions. It's an ambitious strategy, and each chapter contains a wealth of philosophical issues, positions, and information.

This interplay between philosophical content and philosophical discussion starters is key to this book and an evaluation of its success. Although the book does make original philosophical contributions regarding several issues, that is not its main focus nor should the book be used primarily as source material for researchers. As a series of discussion starters, the material here is not designed to be exhaustive of either the field of the philosophy of sex and sexuality or the current literature on any particular question or issue within that field. The authors are willing to sacrifice depth of coverage in order to introduce as wide a range of important issues as possible. As the book is structured, its ideal use would be as a supplementary text in a course on the philosophy of sex and sexuality or social philosophy (primarily) or the philosophy of sex and gender (secondarily). It would be best paired with detailed instructor lectures and/or a collection of primary readings from the philosophical literature. An instructor may find this text to be helpful for introducing students to the vast array of philosophical literature on these topics.

The authors frequently begin a chapter by briefly providing a history of the given topic, and situating contemporary views with respect to that historical tradition. When done particularly well, this strategy enables the authors to draw useful insights about contemporary views. For instance, in chapter 6, "Sex and Marriage," the authors begin with a brief history of marriage traditions in the West. They move on to discuss traditionalist accounts of marriage that appeal to a sometimes-fictionalized version of that same history. Thus the reader is invited to discuss the merits of contemporary claims by drawing upon knowledge gleaned from a section that might appear to be a throwaway section upon first glance. However, in other chapters the authors miss the opportunity to draw out these insights. In chapter 11, "The Scientific and Medical Study of Sex," for instance, the authors again begin with a history, this time of sexual classification in the context of the emerging scientific field of sexology. However, the ensuing discussion of the female orgasm and the medicalization of sex feels, at best, loosely connected to the introductory history lesson. This could also be due, in part, to the overlap in coverage between chapter 11 and the quite excellent chapter 5, "Sexual Perversion and Sodomy Laws."

One major strength of this book is the sheer breadth of questions and issues raised. The authors do this in a way that doesn't feel forced and doesn't detract from the flow or the readability of the text. The lists of discussion questions and literature at the end of each chapter provide accessible and effective guideposts for students looking to dig deeper into the materials. In chapter 10, "Sex and Responsibility," the authors provide an especially effective list of questions that would not only serve as an entry point into the literature but could be built out into student paper topics. Consider, for example, the question "is the idea that each committed couple must work out the terms of their sexual relationship too individualistic? Is it better to have these terms debated and worked out by communities, especially those groups that share our basic values (such as the religious or political organizations to which we belong)?" (214). This question could serve as the

basis for an interesting class discussion, but it's also rich enough to invite further theorizing. A student wishing to write a paper on this topic could draw upon issues as broad as the definition and boundaries of a culture, the extent to which seemingly individualistic commitments are actually socially influenced, and the legitimacy of political and religious authority, among many other issues.

Although making original philosophical contributions is not a primary goal of this book, the authors do add to the existing philosophical literature in some areas. Nowhere is this more evident than in chapter 5, "Sexual Perversion and Sodomy Laws." The authors begin with a historical overview of teleological accounts of sexual perversion, before moving on to Freudian, intentionalist, and reductionist accounts. They show in a convincing way the influence of particularly the intentionalist accounts on modern psychiatry. Most impressively, they provide a critical discussion of the relationship between intentionalist accounts and the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM).

It's in this discussion of intentionalist accounts of perversion and the DSM where the original contributions shine. They directly engage and critically discuss some of the actual language of the DSM, particularly the DSM-IV-TR, which is a move not often made by philosophers (see Radden 2004 and Drabek 2014 for two exceptions). They argue that the DSM's account of paraphilias, or atypical sexual interests that are problematic, dovetails with Thomas Nagel's intentionalist account of sexual perversion (Nagel 1969). The feature they share is a kind of reciprocal, interpersonal awareness where each party is aware of both one's own increased arousal by the sexual activity and also the increased arousal of one's partner. This provides us with a novel way to evaluate the claims made by the DSM that certain paraphilias (for example, sexual sadism, sexual masochism, pedophilia) constitute mental disorders. They point out quite helpfully that if the DSM is making use of an intentionalist account, it is potentially susceptible to the philosophical criticisms of intentionalism already available in the literature (for example, Goldman 1977).

These are issues worth taking up further in the philosophical literature, but we do have some reason to doubt that the APA is making use of an intentionalist account of sexual perversion, at least in any clear or straightforward way. The authors helpfully cite a passage from the DSM-III-R showing emphasis in the document on reciprocity in affection, but it's less clear that the DSM consistently implements anything as strong as the notion of awareness built into intentionalist accounts like Nagel's. DSM authors seem to have in mind a much more modest notion of reciprocity with or without awareness. A second point is that whereas the direct discussion of paraphilias in the DSM may place emphasis on lack of reciprocity, the DSM's underlying definition of mental disorder (see, for example, Gert and Culver 2009) places its main emphasis on the distress or impairment of functioning in the patient. An additional consideration is that what is most heavily emphasized in the discussion of paraphilias--indeed, which can be seen in the names and descriptions of each of the paraphilias--is that sexual desire takes an object that is unusual in a way that is taken to be problematic. This is particularly clear with disorders like pedophilia or coprophilia, but can also be seen in disorders like sexual

sadism and sexual masochism. These latter two are listed as disorders in part because they involve taking something evaluated as problematically unusual, pain, as an object of sexual desire. So long as the objects of sexual desire are unusual in a way that's evaluated as problematic, it's less clear what actual work the appeal to reciprocity is doing in the application of DSM diagnoses. Indeed, these last two paraphilias--sexual sadism and sexual masochism--are potentially complementary. I do not see anything in the DSM that would prevent diagnosis of a sadist and a masochist in a reciprocal relationship that both enjoyed, assuming the distress or impairment of functioning condition was met.

The authors are somewhat beholden to the state of the existing philosophical literature. Although they breathe new life into a number of topics, they are not always able to rehabilitate sputtering debates. Chapter 8, "Sexual Speech and the Freedom of Expression," centers on a discussion of pornography. Much of the philosophical work is more situated in the philosophy of language than in social philosophy or the philosophy of sex and sexuality, and much of it is quite dated at this point. The authors provide an extensive history of philosophical discussion of pornography (156-60), and do a capable job of summarizing this literature. But among the more glaring weaknesses of the philosophical literature on pornography is that it has not yet adequately accounted for changes within the pornography industry in the age of the Internet, has not fully accounted for the thriving alternative pornography industries (for example, feminist pornography, BDSM pornography, LGBTQ pornography, and so on), and has not fully considered the implications of the increasing use of pornography among young women. The authors of this book missed an opportunity to introduce these issues as a series of questions for student discussion.

Another difficult issue in any classroom discussion that encompasses both moral issues and their policy implications is that of how to cross the divide between these two things. Merely showing that some activity is morally questionable or that we ought not do it is not sufficient for arguing that it ought to be restricted by the state. Despite the intuitiveness of this claim, I find it a difficult point to impart to students. Since the book routinely crosses this divide, instructors will need to take great care to draw this distinction while navigating these issues with students.

With any book that addresses such a rich range of topics, we can raise various criticisms about what the authors chose to cover and not cover. Chapter 6, "Sex and Marriage," considers the implications of same-sex marriage for legalized polygamy, a topic sure to pique student interest. But there is only very minimal coverage of movements to abolish marriage or remove marriage from the realm of state interest and regulation. This is unfortunate, as these movements carry the potential to reinvigorate conversations by undermining the assumption that marriage is a positive and valuable institution. Chapter 7, "Sex and Children," extensively engages controversial views on whether sex is harmful to children. But rather than focus on the seemingly philosophically interesting topic of sexual exploration between one child and another, and the issues of consent raised by this topic, the authors focus on addressing (and debunking) the arguments provided by the North American Man-Boy Love Association, a group that promotes sex between adults

and children. This seems less likely to lead to debate using more than one intuitively plausible position.

Shrage and Stewart provide a sorely needed textbook on timely topics of great philosophical interest. In its goal of sparking interesting class discussion, I believe it will be successful. As a course instructor, I would use it as a starting point for philosophical discussion and a reference point for a wide range of practical issues. I would advise supplementing this text with both lectures and an array of primary sources.

## References

Drabek, Matt L. 2014. *Classify and label: The unintended marginalization of social groups*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books.

Gert, Bernard, and Charles M. Culver. 2009. Sex, immorality, and mental disorder. *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 34 (5): 487-95.

Goldman, Alan B. 1977. Plain sex. *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 6 (3): 267-87.

Nagel, Thomas. 1969. Sexual perversion. *Journal of Philosophy* 66 (1969): 5-17.

Radden, Jennifer. 2004. Identity: Personal identity, characterization identity, and mental disorder. In *The philosophy of psychiatry: A companion*, ed. Jennifer Radden. Oxford: Oxford University Press.