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Book Review

Debating Sex and Gender By Georgia Warnke



Reviewed by: Laura Colmenero-Chilberg*

Warnke, Georgia. *Debating Sex and Gender*. Oxford University Press, 2011, 144 pp., \$19.95 paperback.

Georgia Warnke's *Debating Sex and Gender*, the fifth offering in Oxford University Press's Fundamentals of Philosophy Series¹, takes as its central focus a continuing concern in feminist scholarship -- the definitional problem between sex and gender.

The first four chapters of this text review the historical debates that have waged on this topic, reviewing the core questions that have arisen in the past fifty years of scholarship in this area. In Chapter One the key question is, "What are the relationships and/or differences between the biologically based and the culturally based gender?" Using the work of Worthman on hormones and Fausto-Sterling on bone density, Warnke ends the chapter by pointing out that recent research supports a "reciprocal conception of the causal process" (p. 28) where sex may lead to gender but the reverse may also be true.

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¹ Other texts in this series include *Biomedical Ethics* by Walter Glanno;, *Mind: A Brief introduction* by John R. Searle; *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* by Robert Kane, and *Political Philosophy* by A. John Simmons.

Chapter Two begins with the stark binary attitude most western cultures have about gender and then moves onto discussing how intersexed individuals have fit into these social systems as well as how other cultures have created social space for a variety of different gendered identities including *berdache*, *hijras* and American transgendered people. Warnke suggests, "Perhaps, however, we would do better to conceive of both sex and gender as bell curves rather than as absolutes" (p. 51).

Chapter Three focuses on the idea of gender as both performance and performative, beginning with the work of Harold Garfinkel and the "Agnes" research and moving onto more contemporary theorists such as Judith Butler and her discussion of the necessity to move beyond the heteronormativity of much of the modern investigations into gender.

Chapter Four finishes the review of past scholarship on gender by discussing the attempt to broaden feminist inquiry beyond its initial white, middle class base into gender's intersections with race, class, etc. Warnke looks to the work of scholars such as Mohanty and Minh-ha who point out our continued habit of perceiving gender as if it were separate from these other statuses, our failure to understand that "[r]ace is classed and gendered; class is raced and gendered; age is raced, gendered and classed; and so on" (p. 98-99).

In Chapter Five, Warnke pulls together the disparate threads of this issue and considers a broader theory of identity asking us to consider that perhaps "sex and gender are simply ways of understanding who we and others are and, as such, that they must conform to the conditions of understanding" where "our understandings of meaning and context reciprocally constitute each other" (p. 119).

Coherent and well-written, this relatively short text is a useful summary of the key points that are involved in this debate. Warnke's writing style is easily understandable.

Debating *Sex and Gender* will serve as an excellent supplementary text in undergraduate Sociology of Gender and Women's Studies courses.