

Getting to the heart of sex and love

February 17 2014, by Ryan McNutt



Credit: Adam Foster

Every which way you turn in our culture, you'll find representations of sex and love—even if you're not necessarily looking for them.

The problem, says Letitia Meynell, is that we're often quite terrible at actually talking about them.

"We have this weird situation in our society where [sex](#) is prevalent everywhere in our popular culture, but we don't talk seriously about it," explains Dr. Meynell, who teaches Dal's course on the philosophy of sex

and [love](#) (PHIL 2170) in the Department of Philosophy.

"The same thing is true about love," she continues. "There exist in our society these strange ideas about love, like 'unconditional love.' Surely every loving relationship is conditional, especially between partners. If someone is physically hurting you, for example, you have good reasons to leave them! You may well stop loving them. We don't really talk about the conditions for a loving relationship, though."

Questioning assumptions

This is Dr. Meynell's second time teaching the second-year undergrad class, which she inherited from the late Sue Campbell. ("She is really the mastermind behind it," says Dr. Meynell, "so I'm very much influenced by how she taught it.") The class has about 140 students in it this term and features a broad, wide-ranging syllabus of readings and course material.

"We start with discussions about sex: what sex is in terms of sexual activity, sex differences, sexual identity, sexual politics. What's nice about starting with basic discussions around sex is that when we start talking about love, we have that foundation, because we're talking mostly about erotic love or romantic love, as opposed to something like heavenly love or friendship."

The class then concludes with analysis of several topics ranging from marriage, to sex work, to sexual violence.

Dr. Meynell says she hopes students in the class come away with stronger philosophical skills more generally—reading carefully, thinking clearly, being able to criticize positions and formulate their own—but also an ability and willingness to question their assumptions about sexual relationships and norms, as well as what it means to love and to love

well.

"We have this contradictory mindset about love and sex, and it's also very gendered: what women are expected to put up with and how they're expected to behave can be very different than men, and we don't talk honestly about that."

What strikes her is the enduring power of tropes and norms about sex and love in spite of evidence and lived experience to the contrary: from the fetishizing of non-consent through "seduction," to the romantic ideal of marriage as a life-long bond, to the dismissal of sexual assault perpetrated against men due to its perceived emasculation.

"We not only cling to these things that we know, from our experience, are often false, but we presume our experiences are anomalous, and that what's actually normal and common is still the trope."

Changing norms

And yet, sexual and romantic norms do evolve and change—sometimes, quite rapidly. Dr. Meynell cites attitudes towards homosexuality and differences in sexual orientations more generally as an inspiring sea change: that within a generation, we've gone from a culture where LGBTQ individuals faced widespread prejudice and often violence to one where the popular attitude is that those who engage in heterosexist or homophobic activities are regressive.

"If we've made this kind of advance in terms of personal freedom and recognition of the many ways to love, what else might we do?" asks Dr. Meynell. "What else needs to be changed, or to be better? Let's try to reimagine more positive sexual relationships and love relationships more generally... If you don't stand back and think about how it might be different, you just accept all those norms."

Provided by Dalhousie University

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