

Philosophy/Women's Studies 393
Preview Document #2:
Content of the Course

One aspect of the course that may not be adequately discussed in this section, because it is obvious from the syllabus, is that about half of the cases of “abnormality” that we will discuss are disabilities, both “ordinary” disabilities like as paraplegia, blindness, deafness, autism, etc., and unusual disabilities like Tourette’s syndrome, prosopagnosia, apotemnophilia (look it up), and intersexuality. Two topics are obviously relevant, but cannot fit in the semester. One is people’s various sexual preferences (e.g. homosexuality), and the other is psychiatric disabilities. Each is important, but I just cannot fit them in (except for small discussions). However, you will have the opportunity to do a course project on one of these topics if you wish. Other conditions might not strike you as matters of normality or disability at all -- body size (fatness) for example. Or eye shape. But we’ll discuss them.

So those kinds of phenomena, together with their social context and our philosophical understanding of them, are what the course will be about. I’d be glad to answer questions about whether or no a particular phenomenon will be discussed in the course. Now some more details from the syllabus:

*** From the Syllabus ***

Phil/WS 393 is unusual, in that it does not cover one of the traditional areas in Philosophy. However the general topic of normality studies (or the closely related field of disability studies) is an academically growing area, and programs are springing up around the world. We will be studying 1) the ways in which society distinguishes between normal and abnormal individuals, 2) how this differs between situations, and between societies, and 3) how the abnormal are treated by the normals. At first we will examine these questions in a very general way, with Goffman’s reading on “stigma.” Then we will examine many different examples of abnormality, beginning with examples of illness (Sontag and Wendell on illness, Parsons on the “sick role” etc.). After the discussion of illness we will examine a number of kinds of disability. We will pay careful attention to the difference between the affects and disadvantages of disability that are inherent to the disabilities themselves, and compare them with the affects and disadvantages that are caused by the *normal* world’s reaction to people who have the *abnormal* conditions. In the midst of all this we will be examining conditions that are not-quite-abnormal, such as body size and eye shape.

The topic of normality (or disability) studies has been closely associated with feminist theorizing. This connection is obvious in several of the writings during the semester, especially Wendell, West and Zimmerman, Fausto-Sterling, Goodman, and Parker et al. We will examine some of the theoretical bases of feminism (e.g. the sex/gender distinction and its criticism) and see what they imply about other areas of normality studies. We will also examine the philosophical (or maybe biological) question of normality itself: Is it a fact of biology, or an ideal that was invented for social reasons?

The work in this course will be based on the assumption that some groups of people are disadvantaged by others, and that understanding the processes by which this disadvantage comes about may help us to understand and ultimately to remove that disadvantage. So the purpose of the course is not only to *understand* the way society operates, but also to help *change* it. For this reason we will be very careful not to use language that stigmatizes and further oppresses people who are already disadvantaged. (Racially and sexually abusive language is an example of that kind of language, and it will be strictly forbidden in this course.)

Many people do not believe that this is true: they believe that people who are disadvantaged in this world mostly deserve it, and they should simply work harder to remedy their disadvantage. Some of these people believe that racially and sexually abusive language is merely “free speech” and that it is just “political correctness” that forbids it. If you believe this – if you believe that disadvantaged groups are to blame for their own disadvantage and anyone who says anything different is merely being “politically correct” – then you will probably not be happy in this course, and you should not enroll in it.