Course Title: Sex and Gender in Philosophical Focus  
Instructor: Laura Franklin-Hall, Associate Professor of Philosophy  
Meeting Time: Tuesday 9:30 am - 12:00 pm

Course Summary:

What is it to be a female or male *animal*? Or to be a female or male *human being*? What is it to be a woman? To be a man? Or to have some other gender? And how are all these questions connected? This course will explore answers to these and other questions about sex and gender from a philosophical perspective, drawing along the way on relevant research in biology, psychology, and anthropology. More specifically, over the semester we will explore how the sexes evolved across the living world, how gender systems differ across human cultures, the philosophy of classification (as applied to the classification of sex and gender), and the nature of sex and gender.

General Course Goals:

This course aims to introduce students, first, to the diversity of sex and gender systems in humans and other animals, a second, to a variety of philosophical debates concerning the nature of sex and gender.

At the completion of this course, students should have achieved an understanding of:

- evolution by natural selection, including the theory of sexual selection
- the evolution of sexual reproduction and of the sexes (male, female, hermaphrodite, etc.)
- similarities and differences between gender categories and practices across cultures
- philosophical theories of categorization
- philosophical accounts of the nature of sex and gender

Note: though this course will engage, to a limited degree, with feminist theorists, it will not be a traditional introduction to feminism or to feminist approaches to sex and gender.

Skills Goals:

In line with the goals of all First-Year Seminars, this course will provide students with an opportunity to develop research, writing and speaking skills. In particular, students will conduct two research projects. For the first project, participants will research the sex system of a particular species and present this research to the class. For the second project, students will choose either to A) learn about the gender system of a particular culture, or B) carry out a small scale behavioral study on gender and behavior in our own culture. Essay writing skills will be honed via a number of short philosophy papers over the course of the semester.

Topic List
Unit I: The Biology and Evolution of the Sexes

Questions: How does evolution work? How, and to what degree, can evolution explain the features of living things? How and why did sexual reproduction evolve on earth? How and why did the sexes (e.g., male, female, hermaphrodite) evolve? How do the sexes and sexual reproduction differ across species? How might they have evolved differently?

Research project 1: Learn about the sex system of another species (instructor will provide list of candidates) and prepare a short paper and a 5-minute oral presentation about the sex system in that species, including theories of why it evolved as it did.

Unit 2: The Biology, Psychology, and Anthropology of Gender

Questions: How do the genders differ, if at all, in our culture? What challenges face research into gender differences? How is gender manifest differently across human cultures? Why have gender systems taken the forms that they have?

Research project 2 (pick A or B): (A) Learn about the gender system of some culture (or subculture) and prepare a short paper and a 5-minute oral presentation about that system; (B) Conduct a simple study of gender at NYU; may be either interview- or survey-based. (Sample research questions will be provided.). Results will be reported in a short paper and 5-minute presentation to the class.

Unit 3: The Philosophy of Classification

Questions: Why do we group entities and processes into kinds or categories? How do categorization systems differ? Why are different domains categorized in different ways? Does it matter what categories are used? To what degree is categorization influenced by values? What principles should influence categorization, and in particular sex and gender classification?

Essay 1: Students will write one philosophy essay on the philosophy of classification. Candidate topics will be distributed in advance.

Unit 4: The Nature of Sex and Gender

Questions: How have sex and gender been understood by theorists? What are the aims of different theories of sex and gender? How are sex and gender related, if at all? Are sex and gender biological categories, social categories, or some combination of these? In what way are sexes and genders 'socially constructed'--and what does that mean? How should theories of sex and gender be evaluated?

Essay 2: Students will write one philosophy essay on the nature of sex, gender, or their relationship. Candidate topics will be distributed in advance.