BOOK REVIEWS AND CRITICAL STUDIES


This is a very useful collection of essays for those interested in topics relating to sexual morality and in what analytic philosophers have been writing about those topics recently. The book is divided into sections on (1) the relation of sexual practices and concepts to feminist issues and male chauvinism, (2) sexual morality, (3) the application of sexual ethics to issues relating to marriage, (4) conceptual analyses or models of sex and perversion, (5) abortion. One might have preferred to have the essays providing general conceptual models first rather than fourth, as these are useful to keep in mind and apply to the other narrower issues.

As there are far too many articles to be considered each separately in a review of this sort, I will select one or two from each section for brief discussion. Baker's own article, "Pricks" and "Chicks": A Plea for "Persons," is representative in its topics, theme and method of others in the opening section. In the first part of his paper he elicits a male chauvinist view from an analysis of slang terms of identifying reference to women. He repeats the method and the claim with slang terms for sexual acts, showing how the grammar of such terms typically implies an aggressive role for males. Some of the apparatus of linguistic analysis seems superfluous here, the points being familiar. Some interesting points are made as well, however, especially in the
analysis of the metaphorical uses of these slang terms as indicating harm or ill will (the verbs taking terms for females as objects in their literal uses). The style of the essay at times tends to become too cute (example: 'it might be argued that the female fox is chased and slain if she is four-legged, but chased and layed if she is two' (56)). This is a problem that plagues much of the writing on the topic of sex, and much of the writing in this collection. One prone to the method of linguistic analysis exemplified in Baker's essay might have contributed an article on just that stylistic affection, and the attitude toward sex it might be taken to reveal.

Several other essays in this first section employ philosophical methods similar to Baker's. Much is made of the etymology of slang words for sexual acts and practices as indicative of the idea of male dominance being embedded in our conceptual scheme for sex. Strong Whorfian assumptions are perhaps at work here, and the underlying philosophical thesis regarding language is not adequately defended or even acknowledged in any of these essays. It may be at least that language is naturally slower to change than are social views. This is not to say that we are not justified in advocating linguistic change when terms referring to women or sex reflect degrading attitudes. Of course many of these terms are intentionally degrading, but the parallel with terms for blacks is clear, and change in the frequency of their use is at least a welcome sign. There may be, as is implicitly suggested in these papers, reciprocal causal influences between our attitudes and our terms, in which case we indeed ought to watch our language. It is another question whether at this stage elaborate analysis of such terms is required to reveal familiar objectionable attitudes to us.

The common theme uniting the essays in the second section on sexual morality is the question of whether there is a specific morality of sex, as opposed to the application of more general moral principles to sexual relations. Sara Ruddick's loosely organized essay, "Better Sex," touches on many points, some with good sense and some more questionable. The main thesis appears to be an application of Nagel's model to the evaluation of sexual relations (another indication of why the section providing general conceptual models, including Nagel's, should have been placed first in the anthology). A sexual act complete in Nagel's sense (where the partners are aware of and aroused by each other's desires) is viewed as better sex by Ruddick. While she has some interesting comments on perversion and sexual pleasure, this central claim is dubitable. It is not clear whether moral evaluation is intended here, but if so, while a moral sexual act