# THE MISMEASURE
# OF DESIRE

# INTRODUCTION

## Questions

The setting of Plato's classic dialogue, *The Symposium,* is a drinking party. Socrates, Aristophanes, and several others are celebrating the success of their friend Agathon (who was, like Aristophanes, a playwright) at the annual Athens theater festival. The celebration involved drinking and taking turns giving speeches to each other about love. As part of his speech, Aristophanes told a story about how humans came to be in their current form. According to Aristophanes' myth, the human race was once made up of three sexes, "that is to say, besides the two sexes, male and female, . . . there was a third which partook of the nature of both, which we [call] . . . 'hermaphrodite' . . . a being which was half male and half female" (Plato 1935b, 189d–e). The human race, in addition to having an additional sex, looked rather different. Each human was "globular in shape, with . . . four arms and legs, and two faces, both on the same cylindrical neck, and one head, with one face on one side and one on the other, and four ears, and two lots of privates" (189e–190). Because these humans were too powerful and threatened the power of the gods, Zeus split each human in half down the middle, leaving "each half with a desperate yearning for the other" (191). Once they had been divided, the three original types of humans gave rise to different types of people, defined by the kind of other-half he or she desired.

> The man who is a slice of the hermaphrodite sex . . . will naturally be attracted by women . . . and the women who run after men are of similar descent . . . . But the woman who is a slice of the original female is attracted by women rather than by men . . . while men who are slices of the male are followers of the male. (191d–e)

A natural (though, as I will show, a contentious) interpretation of this myth says Aristophanes was talking about heterosexuals, lesbians, and gay men and that he was claiming sexual orientation is an important, defining, and inborn feature of a person.

Like Socrates and his companions, most humans spend a great deal of time talking about, thinking about, trying to have, and (if we are lucky) having sex. Most of us have a desire for sex, what is sometimes called a sexual appetite or a sex drive. We vary widely, however, with respect to the particular forms our sexual appetite takes, what might be called our sexual desires, our sexual interests, or our sexual tastes. Some people, for example, like to have sex outdoors; some people want to have sex with multiple partners; some people like to engage in certain specific kinds of sexual acts, for example, nonreciprocal oral sex; some people like to have sex with particular kinds of people, for example, people with blond hair or people with long legs. The list of possible variations in sexual tastes is almost endless. In this sense, the variation among people with respect to sexual desires is like the desire for food—almost everyone has the general desires for sex and food, but in each individual the desires are manifested in very different ways.

A person's sexual orientation is one part of a person's overall sexual desires. Just as whether a person likes to have sex indoors or outdoors is part of a person's sexual desires, whether a person is (primarily) attracted to and likes to have sex with men or women is also part of a person's sexual desires. This part of a person's sexual desires is his or her sexual orientation. Today, in North America and in many other parts of the world, discussions about sex and sexual desire frequently concern sexual orientation. In particular, there has been a remarkable increase in discussions concerning homosexuality. Not more than a hundred years ago, engaging in sexual acts with a person of the same sex was a "love that dare not speak its name." Today, whether to celebrate or deride it, homosexuality is frequently discussed in public forums, in films, on television, in court rooms, and in almost every other context. The love that dare not speak its name is now unwilling to keep quiet. Among the issues that are frequently discussed are: Should lesbians and gay men be discriminated against in employment, housing, or military service? Should people of the same sex be allowed to marry? Is homosexuality inborn? Is homosexuality a choice? These days, questions about sexual orientation abound in our society. In all sorts of contexts, we want to know who a person has had sex with, whether a person is *really* heterosexual or homosexual, and what causes people to have one sexual orientation rather than another. Although the questions clearly took different

forms, Socrates, Aristophanes, and their friends were clearly interested in matters sexual as well. We may claim to know a great deal more about human sexual desire than Aristophanes did, but do we?

This book is about sexual orientation: what it is, how it develops, and what its significance is. Much has been written about sexual orientation and sexual desire more generally, but this book examines the basic underlying questions about these issues in a way that few have tried to do. I will carefully examine what we mean by the term sexual orientation. I will also examine how this term gets deployed in the sciences, the social sciences, the humanities, the law, and everyday thinking. I will also examine various ethical and political issues connected to sexual orientation. In general, I shall attempt to convince you that much of what most people think about sexual orientations is probably wrong, or at least misguided. Many people think that a person's sexual orientation is inborn in the sense that a person's eye color is inborn. Most of the popular scientific theories concerning the origins of human sexual orientation—as well as our commonsense theories about them—accept this claim or one similar to it. Further, many people of various political stripes think that this claim and the scientific theories that relate to it are relevant to ethical and legal questions relating to sexual orientations. I am skeptical of each of these commonly held views, and in subsequent chapters, I will provide reasons for this skepticism. I will argue that much of what is widely believed about human sexual orientations is not that much more likely to be true than Aristophanes' story about the origin of humans and our varied sexual tastes. Aristophanes' theory and contemporary theories of the nature and origin of sexual orientation, in effect, *mismeasure* desire.

This book has three parts: the metaphysical part, the scientific part, and the ethical part. *Metaphysics* is the branch of philosophy that concerns the underlying nature of the world. Aristotle wrote books on almost every philosophical subject of his time (for example, *Ethics, Politics, Physics, Poetics*). The book he wrote after *Physics* was called *Metaphysics* (literally "after physics"), and it concerned features of the world that he considered more abstract and farther from human perception than the things dealt with in *Physics* (which included most of what today we would call science). Although the line between metaphysics and science is somewhat blurry, philosophers typically understand metaphysics as the study of the kind of things that there are and the forms that their existence takes, whereas science is concerned with the details of the entities that exist and the laws that operate on them. In the parts of the book that concern metaphysics and science, I explore a range of questions about the nature of sexual orientation including:

- What is it to have a sexual orientation?
- How many sexual orientations are there?
- How does a person develop a sexual orientation?
- Does a person in any sense *choose* his or her sexual orientation?
- Does it make sense to talk about a person in a dramatically different culture as having a sexual orientation?
- Does it make sense to talk of other primates as having a sexual orientation? Nonprimates?
- Is sexual orientation amenable to scientific study? If so, in what way?
- Is it useful for our understanding of human nature to divide people into categories in virtue of their sexual desires?

These issues are intrinsically interesting and important. Understanding human sexual desire is, I will argue, an important part of understanding human nature.

Socrates aside, philosophers as a group—and, until recently, most researchers (though certainly not all)—have had remarkably little to say about human sexual desires, leaving this matter to the poets, novelists, and other of their ilk. Although artists have had—and continue to have—much of interest to say about sex and sexual desire, there is no need for the rest of us to ignore sex and sexual desire in our intellectual pursuits. Insofar as we are interested in human nature, we should be interested in human sexual nature. In fact, given our special interest in having sex, and in knowing who has had sex and with whom, it seems that our interest in sex and sexual desire should be a crucial part of our attempt to understand ourselves. There is no obvious reason why science, social science, and philosophy should be silent about sex and sexual desire.

There is, however, another set of reasons to be interested in sexual desires. Metaphysical and scientific matters connect, albeit in complex and contested ways, to ethical, political, and legal matters. An understanding of human nature is (in some way) relevant to what we ought to do (ethics), how society ought to be structured (politics), and what our laws should be (legal). If after the drinking party Socrates and one of his comrades (they were all men) engaged in particular sorts of sexual acts (but not others), they would have been subject to severe social sanctions. If, for example, a young man at the party not yet old enough to be a citizen of Athens inserted his penis into the anus of a willing Socrates, Socrates would have been viewed as behaving shamefully. In England in the late nineteenth century, for example, men who engaged in such behavior faced severe legal penalties.

Many people today think that scientific evidence about how people develop sexual orientations is relevant to ethical and legal matters concerning sex

and sexuality. For example, some scientists, lawyers, and lesbian and gay advocates have argued that if a person's sexual orientation is innate or immutable, then it follows that people should not be discriminated against in virtue of their sexual orientation. Whether or not this argument is a strong one will be taken up in the third part of this book, but, even setting this argument aside, there seems at least a plausible connection between the metaphysics of sex and sexual desire and the ethics of sex and sexual desire (by which I mean to include ethical, legal, and political matters relating to sex and sexual desire). Given this possible connection, it is appropriate that the third part of this book deals with ethical issues that stem from the metaphysical and scientific issues of the first two parts of this book. Among the issues I examine are:

- Is scientific research on sexual orientation relevant to ethical questions?
- Are there ethical considerations that bear on whether such research should be done and the form it should take?
- What are lesbian and gay rights?
- Are there ethical considerations that bear on what a person's sexual behavior (or sexual desires) should (or shouldn't) be?
- Should parents try to affect the sexual orientation of their children?

Although these issues connect to quite general issues about "sexual morality" and "sexual ethics," I do not attempt a detailed or systematic discussion of these issues in general or of lesbian and gay rights in particular. Instead, I focus on some (but not all) of the more pressing ethical, political, and legal questions that are connected (or at least plausibly connected) to the metaphysical questions surrounding sexual desires and sexual orientations in particular.

## Interdisciplinary Background

The subject matter of this book is multifaceted and multidisciplinary. I draw considerably on lesbian and gay studies, the scientific study of sex and sexuality, feminism, and the lesbian and gay political movement. The method of this project comes from the discipline of philosophy. This might be somewhat surprising since philosophers have had less to say about sex and sexual desire than might have been expected (Baker and Elliston 1984). Although I draw on both lesbian and gay studies and the scientific study of sex and sexual orientation, I raise questions about what is probably the central theoretical principle of each of these emerging interdisciplinary fields. With respect to lesbian and gay

studies, I raise doubts about constructionism, the thesis that sexual orientations are mere social constructs. With respect to the scientific study of sex, I raise doubts about essentialism, the thesis that, in contrast to constructionism, sexual orientations are more than mere social constructs. Additionally, the ethical portion of my book is informed both by feminism and by what is sometimes called *queer politics.* In what follows, I say something about these interdisciplinary influences on my project. In the next section, I discuss philosophy, which provides my primary methodology.

### *The Scientific Study of Sex*

In the last several years, scientific research on sexual orientation has garnered a great deal of attention in various realms. Some scientists and some nonscientist commentators have gone so far as to suggest that a *new scientific paradigm* for the study of human sex and sexuality is emerging. Scientific research on sex and sexual orientation is a primary catalyst for my project, and its claims will be prominently discussed throughout.

If we want to understand the phenomenon of sex and the human desires involved with it, contemporary science seems the right place to turn. Science has great explanatory power, and in this century, it has made dramatic strides towards understanding human nature. It seems certain that, in the long term, science will make important contributions to our understanding of sex, sexual orientation, and sexual desire. For this reason, a detailed discussion of scientific research on sexual orientation is central to my project. Throughout this book, I will be drawing on research in the sciences and the social sciences, in particular as it relates to sexual orientation. This is not, however, because I necessarily believe that the theories science currently has to offer are true. Looking back over the history of science, one can see that scientists, like practitioners of other fields of inquiry, make mistakes and unquestioningly accept premises that are later rejected. It is quite possible that much of the research on sexual orientation that is grabbing headlines in the 1990s will prove to have been nothing more than a wrong turn in the development of the advanced scientific understanding of human sexual desire that, for all we know, might develop in the latter part of the twenty-first century. For this reason, I do not assume the validity of the most recent scientific studies but, rather, engage and critique them. At times, I will do so from within, but I will also examine the putative emerging paradigm from without, for example, by looking at its theoretical assumptions and its ethical implications.

### *Lesbian and Gay Politics*

In 1969, a group of gay men and drag queens were arrested as part of what was, for that time and place, a not-atypical raid on a gay bar, this one at the Stonewall, a bar in the Greenwich Village section of New York City. The group resisted, and over the next couple of days, a series of riots broke out pitting members of the gay community against New York City police officers (D'Emilio 1983; Duberman 1993). Although this event has developed something like biblical significance for lesbians, gay men, and transgendered people in the United States and many other parts of the world, it was hardly the first act of resistance by lesbians and gay men nor necessarily the most significant. In the middle of the nineteenth century, Karl Heinrich Ulrichs, a German jurist and writer, single-handedly and quixotically urged the repeal of all laws that criminalized same-sex sexual activity (Kennedy 1988); some have claimed that this was the first time a self-proclaimed homosexual publicly spoke out for lesbian and gay rights (Dynes 1990, 1339; LeVay 1996, 11–16). Even in the United States, there was significant lesbian and gay political activity before Stonewall—just after World War II, the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Billitis began organizing gay men and lesbians for mutual support and to struggle for legal and political goals (D'Emilio 1983). A more vocal lesbian and gay political movement coalesced around the time of Stonewall partly due to the influence of the women's movement and the civil rights movement (Blasius and Phelan 1997; Newton 1997; Radicalesbians 1973). At a time in which feminists examined the sexism inherent in society and demanded equal rights and African Americans proclaimed "Black is beautiful" and fought for racial justice, it does not seem surprising, in retrospect, that lesbians and gay men responded to deeply entrenched homophobia and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation by organizing their own political movement. Nevertheless, Stonewall has become perhaps the most important symbol of the emergence of the contemporary lesbian and gay movement.

A decade or so after Stonewall, lesbians, gay men, and their allies had a higher profile and had obtained some of their political goals. In the process, gay liberation, with its goal of changing the sexual character of society and "bringing out the homosexual in everyone" (Wittman 1997, 388), had been replaced by a more mainstream assimilationist strategy that emphasized the commonalities between heterosexuals and homosexuals. For assimilationists, the goal was to be treated fairly and to be left alone. The dramatic impact of AIDS on gay men starting in the 1980s was both a huge setback and a remarkable

catalyst for lesbian and gay social and political action around the world, especially in America and Western Europe. ACT-UP, a loosely knit collection of local political action groups that primarily used confrontational tactics to address the wide array of social and political issues associated with the AIDS crisis, marked something of a return to the gay liberationist politics of the 1970s, but with greater success in getting national and international attention (Blasius and Phelan 1997, 561–708). In the late 1980s, Queer Nation brought the confrontational style and grassroots organizational structure of ACT-UP to the full range of lesbian and gay political issues ("Queers Read This" 1997). Queer politics rejected assimilationism as well as the labels "lesbian" and "gay." The lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, transgendered people, and others who embraced the label "queer" did not want to assimilate, and they proudly announced their difference from heterosexuals by their slogan "We're here; we're queer; get used to it."

Through its multiple origins and varied forms, lesbian and gay activism has made possible the development of an open, self-affirming, politically active, culturally involved, and intellectually engaged lesbian and gay community. Without this community, a book like this one would simply not be possible.

### *Lesbian and Gay Studies*

Just as the civil rights movement to some extent spawned the interdisciplinary field of African American studies and the women's movement spawned women's studies, the interdisciplinary field of inquiry known as *lesbian and gay studies* began to emerge in the shadows of the gay liberation movement (Escoffier 1990). Gay men, lesbians, and their allies began to openly and self-consciously study themselves and how they were represented in history and culture. This has led them to inquire how sex and sexual orientations have been and are constructed and conceptualized. The resulting field of lesbian and gay studies examines same-sex desires, preferences, orientations, erotics, lifestyles, sentiments, and conceptions—how they differ (and remain the same) when the variables of time, place, culture, gender, class, race, and so forth, are changed; how they are constructed and interpreted; and how they interact with other human phenomena such as law, scientific inquiry, medicine, government, art, popular culture, family, and education (see, for example, the essays in Abelove et al. [1993]). Research in lesbian and gay studies has focused attention on the importance of historical and cultural factors in situating these issues. Lesbian and gay studies raises critical questions that challenge the controlling gaze long directed at homosexuals by disciplines and professions primarily focused on

and populated by heterosexuals. Lesbian and gay studies both informs my project and provides some of its subject matter.

*Queer theory* emerged from lesbian and gay studies, but it also has roots in the more radical strands of the lesbian and gay community and its activism in the 1980s. The relationship between queer theory and lesbian and gay studies can be understood in various ways. On one reading, queer theory is simply the theoretical wing of lesbian and gay studies, roughly like the relationship between historiography and history or literary theory and the study of literature. On another reading, queer theory is both more radical and more all-encompassing than lesbian and gay studies (Warner 1993). According to this view, whereas lesbian and gay studies attempts to use existing disciplinary lenses (for example, history, political science, literature) to look at homosexuals and sexual orientation in a more positive light than they had been previously, queer theory attempts to "queer" these disciplines, that is, to change them by weeding out the deep heterosexist biases within them. "Queer commentary shows that much of what passes for general culture is riddled with heteronormativity [the view that heterosexuality is and should be the norm]" (Berlant and Warner 1995, 349). What makes queer theory *queer* is not that it concerns homosexuality or that its practitioners are lesbians and gay men, but that it questions assumptions that are steeped, often subtly, in heterosexist biases. Based on this interpretation, whereas lesbian and gay studies, applied to history, might chronicle the lives of ostensibly lesbian and gay historical figures like Michelangelo, Shakespeare, and Socrates (Garde 1964; Rowse 1977), a queer theory approach to history might eschew our contemporary categories of sexual orientation and look instead at sexual deviance in history. I offer this example of what might be considered the main difference between lesbian and gay studies and queer theory, although I believe this view of the difference between them suggests a negative assessment of lesbian and gay studies. In truth, a substantial portion of lesbian and gay studies scholarship adopts a queer-theoretical approach albeit under a different rubric (Altman 1971; Bronski 1984; Newton 1972; Weeks 1977).

The present project draws on lesbian and gay studies in various ways. My subject is sexual orientation and sexual desire, how we conceptualize, study, and experience them. Lesbian and gay studies provides a foothold on this topic. By focusing on same-sex desires, I approach sexual desire and orientation from the margins. Because I question the adequacy of our categories of sexual orientation as they are used in science, theory, and ethics, this project can be appropriately called queer.

## Philosophy

What is philosophy? If you asked a physicist or a historian what it is that practitioners in her field study, she would probably be able to give a rather straightforward answer. No doubt, there might be a difference of opinion among some historians or physicists as to the nature of their subject matter and their method. The same question posed to a philosopher, however, is rather more complex. This is because the question, What is philosophy? is itself a philosophical question, while the question, What is physics? is not in the same way a question for physics; in fact, the question What is physics? is probably a philosophical question. With that disclaimer in mind, I shall try to say something about what philosophy is. Philosophy is the critical examination of fundamental concepts, concepts that ground human thought, both of the everyday and the academic sort. Perhaps the best way to understand what "the critical examination of fundamental concepts" means is through examples; throughout the book, there will be many examples of this sort of critical reflection. For now, I pick two, both of which are outside the main purview of this book; I do this in order not to confuse the nature of my specific topic with the nature of philosophy in general.

Consider the concept of a person. Certainly, this concept is a basic and fundamental one. Consider, for example, how the concept "person" functions in law—*people* have certain rights, certain responsibilities, certain legal relationships with others—and how it functions in our everyday talk—as in, "There were fifty *people* in the movie theater yesterday." In both contexts, the concept "person" is a central one. But what constitutes a person? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person? Or similarly, what constitutes being the *same* person over time? What are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being the *same* person? We think, for example, that I am the same person who began writing this book a couple of years ago and that I am the same person who several decades ago was quite small, had no teeth and very little hair, and spent most of the day crying, suckling, and looking around a crib. Why do we think that the person writing this book somewhere in front of a computer is the very same person as that baby called "Eddie"? After all, that baby and this adult have very little in common physically and intellectually.

Or consider this possibility. What if my brain were removed and destroyed and Bill Clinton's brain were put into my skull and attached to my spinal cord? Would the resulting person be me or Bill Clinton, or would I be dead and replaced (in some sense of the term) by some new and distinct person with a body like mine and a brain like Bill Clinton's? Or what if scientists developed

a human photocopier that could make an exact physiological and psychological copy of a person? Would the output of a human photocopier (that is, a physiological and psychological copy of the person being copied) be a person? And more interestingly, especially to my mother, if I were put in such a device, would the resulting person be *me?* If so, does this make it the case that the photocopying process alters my status as a person? After the photocopying process, would there now be *two* people competing for the label "Edward Stein"? Or would we just say that after the photocopying process I would be twice as large as I am now?

These questions may seem lifted from an episode of *Star Trek,* but they have deep importance—they push us to articulate the nature of personhood. If you think such questions are unimportant or uninteresting, think not only about how frequently we use the concept person, but think also about the debates surrounding abortion and the question of when a developing fertilized egg becomes a person. Such questions fall into the broad area of philosophy known as metaphysics. As I mentioned before, metaphysics is the part of philosophy concerned with the kinds of things that there are and the forms that their existence take. The question, What kind of thing is a person? thus fits into metaphysics. Chapters 1 through 4 concern metaphysical questions relating to sexual desire and sexual orientation.

Another example of a philosophical question, a question that involves critical examination of a fundamental concept, concerns knowledge. We all think we *know* lots of things: how many people there are in a particular room at a particular moment, the name of the president of the United States, the result of multiplying 17 by 19, and that it is morally unacceptable to torture a baby for amusement. There are also lots of things that we admittedly do not know, but that we think we know what it would be to know them. Although I do not know how many feet tall the building that I live in is or how many pounds it weighs, I know what it would be to know these things and I have a good idea what I would need to do to acquire this knowledge. Knowledge is, however, much trickier than my discussion so far makes it seem. Consider this question: is knowing something merely believing something that is true? Compare two people, who when faced with the question, "What is the product of 17 and 19?" both answer "323." One, a skilled mathematician, says "323" because she got out a paper and pencil and did the calculations. The other did not make any mathematical calculations at all; he just said "323" in a parrotlike fashion because that number just happened to spring into his mind. The mathematician *knows* that 17 times 19 is 323, but the lucky guesser does not; at best, he has a mere belief that 17 times 19 equals 323, a belief that just happens to

be right. This just shows that having a true belief is not enough to have knowledge. This, however, only tells us what knowledge is not, not what knowledge is (Gettier 1963).

There are many other problems associated with the concept of knowledge. Consider my *belief* that I am sitting in front of a computer wearing jeans and a T-shirt. I would say that I *know* that I am sitting in front of a computer wearing such clothing. But do I really *know* this? How can I be certain? Sometimes I dream that I am sitting in front of a computer wearing jeans and a T-shirt when in fact I am lying supine in my bedroom asleep and wearing just underwear. While having such a dream, if asked I probably would say, "I *know* that I am in front of a computer wearing jeans and a T-shirt," but I would be wrong—I am in a bedroom sleeping. If this is sometimes the case, it might also be the case at this very moment: I might well be dreaming *now,* dreaming that I am working on a computer when I am actually sleeping. So, what looked like knowledge (that is, my knowing that I am in front of this computer and my knowing that this room exists) is *not* in fact knowledge since for all I know none of these things is true (Descartes 1691). The branch of philosophy that examines knowledge is *epistemology.* Epistemology differs from metaphysics in that it concerns what we know; metaphysics does not concern what we know, but concerns the way the world is. In several places later, in the context of my discussion of sexual desire, I will say more about the contrast between metaphysics and epistemology.

So far I have given two examples of philosophical issues: personal identity and knowledge. What do these two issues have in common? In both instances, concepts that we take for granted, that we use every day in certain ways, are critically examined: are we right to use the concepts in the way that we do? what grounds do we have for using them in the common way? and so on. Further, these philosophical questions are about general and abstract concepts, and the purpose of these questions is to clarify these concepts and the various concepts related to them. Philosophy, then, is the critical examination of centrally important general concepts—such as knowledge, person, justice, right and wrong—for the purpose of clarifying the concepts and strengthening the foundations of human thought. In this book, I will be attempting to strengthen the foundations of human thought concerning sexual desire and sexual orientation and clarifying the concepts we use to think about them.

Note that the term "philosophy" gets used in colloquial talk in a way that is quite different than the way I use it here. I recently read a discussion of Newt Gingrich's philosophy for welfare reform, and I have seen a sign at my local grocery store that outlined the store's pricing philosophy. In cases such as these,

the word "philosophy" is being used as a synonym for "strategy" or "policy." Not *any* sort of planned strategy or set of abstract rules count as philosophy in the sense I use it here. Food Mart's policy of providing its customers with the freshest produce at the lowest price is not a *philosophical* principle. And this is not just because of the narrowness of the principle. Philosophy can be done about relatively narrow topics, such as philosophy of mathematics, philosophy of economics, philosophy of sex, and even philosophy of food. What distinguishes philosophy from nonphilosophy and what would distinguish the fictional field of the philosophy of food from Food Mart's (nonphilosophical) pricing policies is the relative *depth* of the statements and questions that characterize philosophy as compared to nonphilosophy.

This much having been said about what the subject matter of philosophy is, what is the *method* of philosophy? How does one answer questions like, What is a person? What is knowledge? or What is a sexual orientation? Again, this is a tricky question. To begin, compare philosophy to some other academic disciplines. Philosophers, unlike many scientists, do not have laboratories. And although philosophers sometimes read texts written centuries ago, their relation to these texts is quite different from the way historians relate to the historical texts that they read. More than any other scholars, philosophers are like mathematicians with respect to their methods. How do mathematicians go about their work? Consider the mathematical question, Is there a highest prime number? First, the mathematician would develop a clear sense of what it is to be a prime number. So, for this example, the clear sense of the term would be that a number is prime if and only if it is a positive integer larger than one and evenly divisible only by one and itself. With this definition in hand, the mathematician would try to deduce as much as possible from this definition, by abstractly exploring its logical implications and the like. The mathematician would do all this, so to speak, from her armchair, with paper and pencil. No special equipment or venue is required. She would just try to think clearly and creatively, applying her other logical and mathematical knowledge to the problem before her. She would consider various proposals, for example, "1,021 is the largest prime number." First, she could test to see whether this number is prime. Discovering that it is, she could look for a prime number that is larger. But when she discovered that 1,031 is *also* prime, she would have determined that 1,021 is not the largest prime number. And, when she comes up with the thesis, for example, that there is no largest prime number, she needs to find an abstract proof for it that does not cite empirical evidence (that is, evidence obtained by observation or experimentation).

Now, the method of the mathematician is not exactly like the method of

the philosopher (for example, there is no definite method of proof in philosophy while there does seem to be in mathematics), but there are many illuminating similarities. When I explained one of the central problems of epistemology under the guise of whether I know that I am really sitting in front of a computer at the moment, I was encouraging you to reflect on the concept "knowledge," to focus on what we take to be its definition and to see what follows logically from that. I did nothing out of the ordinary. I asked you simply to reflect on an everyday concept and to use your common sense. We did not need to run any laboratory experiments or consult any historical texts.

In a nutshell, the method of the philosopher involves taking a general, central, abstract concept or question and reflecting on it, challenging our assumptions about it, attempting to clarify the concept, and doing so using our common sense and our logical abilities. A philosopher considers counterexamples to the potential clarifications and answers, considers counterarguments to the arguments that favor one answer or definition over another, and considers how these answers fit with other philosophical theses. I will be exhibiting this method in various places throughout this book as I analyze sexual orientation and related concepts; I do so, for example, in chapter 1 with respect to the concepts of sex and gender.

Bertrand Russell, in his essay "The Value of Philosophy," said that philosophy is valuable because it can free those who study it from "the tyranny of custom" (Russell 1956, 157). Russell is suggesting that we have all been taught—both explicitly and implicitly—a whole host of things that we typically accept unquestioningly. "The tyranny of custom" refers to our unthinking acceptance of many things, from what counts as a just society and the degree of responsibility we have for our own actions to what counts as a sexual orientation and the degree of responsibility each of us has for our own sexual desires. Philosophy, according to Russell, can help free us from this unthinking acceptance by challenging our assumptions through critical examination. That is what I hope to do with regards to sexual orientation and sexual desire more generally: to challenge assumptions about these notions (as they occur in science, politics, theory, and everyday thinking) through critical reflection.

Some commentators on philosophy (from both inside and outside of the field) have claimed that philosophy has not made any significant progress since its inception thousands of years ago: the philosophical problems that puzzled Socrates and Aristotle, for example, remain unsolved. These commentators say philosophy has made no progress and has accomplished nothing except perhaps keeping some philosophers off the streets. I do not think this criticism rings true, but it does merit discussion. It is certainly true that some of the very

same problems that philosophers worried about centuries ago are still very much with us today—the problems in epistemology and metaphysics that I discussed prviously are such examples. This does not, however, mean that philosophy has not made any progress with respect to these questions. Although it is true that the majority of philosophers would not agree on the answers to the long-standing questions of philosophy, to a certain extent, there is agreement about the range of answers that should be considered, about what would count as a good answer, and more importantly, there is some agreement as to what are the interesting questions.

Much of what is now considered science as well as many of the social sciences and humanities were once considered part of philosophy. Under the rubric of philosophy, Plato and Aristotle wrote about what we today call physics, biology, mathematics, astronomy, and a lot of other things that today we would not call philosophy. As an area of knowledge becomes more delineated, as the questions it asks become better defined and become more open to empirical testing, and so on, this area of knowledge will often break off from philosophy and become established as its own discipline, a discipline in which progress can be more concretely measured. A fairly recent example of this would be the emergence of psychology. Much of what we now call academic (as opposed to clinical) psychology was part of philosophy over a hundred years ago. Only recently has psychology established itself as its own discipline, with its own methods, explanations, and subject matter. This spawning of other disciplines is a significant kind of progress, although it does not lead to progress *internal* to philosophy. In fact, because the questions with the more definite answers are removed from the purview of philosophy, the field, when looked at just within its own boundaries, looks like it is *regressing* rather than progressing. There is, however, progress in terms of overall collective human knowledge. We know, for example, much more about how the human mind works today than we did two hundred years ago, thanks in part to the development of psychology. But if we are keeping score, philosophy should get some credit for that intellectual advancement. In fact, some people have called philosophy "the queen of the sciences" or "the master discipline" because of the role that philosophers play in establishing and providing foundations for other disciplines. I am not prepared to defend such a grand vision of philosophy here. I will, however, say that the picture of philosophy as contributing to the overall development of the tools, disciplines, and foundations for the progress of knowledge in general offers a promising answer to the charge that philosophy has failed to accomplish anything in two thousand years. I would defend the picture of philosophy that sees it playing a crucial role in the formation of new fields of inquiry (past and

present). Partly for this reason, the method of philosophy is especially useful for this project as it involves two emerging fields of inquiry, lesbian and gay studies and the scientific study of sex.

### Coming Attractions

The remainder of this book is divided into three parts that concern, respectively, metaphysical, scientific, and ethical questions concerning sexual orientation. In part I, "Metaphysics," I explore the conceptual landscape related to sexual orientation and sexual desire, considering in particular what a sexual orientation is and whether the concept applies to people in cultures dramatically different from ours. This conceptual exploration provides a foundation for the discussions that follow. Most discussions of sexual orientation, whether scientific, legal, political, sociological, or historical, adopt what are presumed to be commonsense views about the various foundational questions related to sexual orientation and sexual desire. Such commonsense views, accepted unquestioningly, may lead to both practical and theoretical problems. In part II, "Science," I survey and critically examine scientific research on sexual orientation in order to understand more about the nature of sexual orientations and how people develop them. In part III, "Ethics," I consider the relevance of the scientific and metaphysical questions to ethical and legal questions relating to sexual orientation. I also consider the relevance of ethical issues to science and metaphysics.

The intended audience for this book is quite broad. I have tried to write this book in a way that my discussion of such diverse topics as endocrinology and epistemology will be readable and accessible to almost any interested reader. At the same time, I hope this book will be read by scientists, social scientists, and humanists interested in human sexuality and human nature; by people with an interest in social and political questions relating to things sexual; and by people who simply want to better understand their own sexual desires and those of others. In order to accommodate all sorts of readers, I try not to presume any specific knowledge of the subject, and I try to avoid using technical vocabulary and, if unavoidable, to define the terms I use. Because of my broad audience, portions of what follows may be quite familiar to some readers. Even for these readers, there are substantial portions of what follows that should engage them.

This book is meant to speak to people interested in sexual orientations and sexual desires. Lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgendered people,

because of their marginal status, may be more inclined than others to think about how sexual orientations develop and about legal and ethical matters concerning sexual orientations. Despite this fact, this book is not in any way directed only to lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, feminists, and their political allies. People of all sexual orientations, genders, political affiliations, and intellectual styles have reason to be interested in sex and sexual desires and will adopt various views on the issues discussed herein.

The next two chapters, which begin the metaphysics part of the book, lay the groundwork for much of the discussion that follows. Chapter 1 concerns the relationship between sexual orientation and the categories of sex and gender. A person's sexual orientation has something to do with his or her sex or gender and the sex or gender of the people to whom he or she is attracted. What is the difference between a person's sex and a person's gender? Which one is relevant to sexual orientation and how? In chapter 1, I introduce the concept of a person's *sex-gender,* which encompasses both a person's sex and a person's gender. This concept allows me to sidestep certain complicated questions about the metaphysics of sex and gender. Chapter 2 builds on chapter 1 and focuses on what a sexual orientation is. Together, these two chapters lay the foundation for the rest of the book.