

## Biology and Feminism

This book provides a unique introduction to the study of relationships between gender and biology, a core part of the feminist science research tradition which emerged nearly half a century ago. Lynn Hankinson Nelson presents an accessible and balanced discussion of research questions, background assumptions, methods, and hypotheses about biology and gender with which feminist scientists and science scholars critically and constructively engage. Writing from the perspective of contemporary philosophy of science, she examines the evidence for and ethical implications of biological hypotheses about gender, and discusses relevant philosophical issues including understandings of scientific objectivity, the nature of scientific reasoning, and relationships between biological research and the scientific and social contexts in which it is pursued. Clear and comprehensive, this volume addresses the engagements of feminist scientists and science scholars with a range of disciplines, including developmental and evolutionary biology, medicine, neurobiology, and primatology.

LYNN HANKINSON NELSON is Professor Emerita of Philosophy at the University of Washington. She has published *Who Knows* (1990) and numerous articles on feminist science scholarship. She is co-author of *On Quine* (1999), and is co-editor of *Feminism, Science, and the Philosophy of Science* (1997) and of a special issue of *Hypatia* on Feminist Science Studies (2004).

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# Biology and Feminism

## A Philosophical Introduction

LYNN HANKINSON NELSON

*University of Washington*



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**For my granddaughters, Charley Grace and Elyse Cate  
O'Connor**

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## Preface

In the preface to the first edition of *The Selfish Gene*, Richard Dawkins identified three kinds of reader he had in mind as he wrote it. I also had groups of readers in mind and they helped shape the level, foci, and content of the forthcoming discussion.

The first and most important group of readers are senior undergraduate and graduate students who are assigned this text for a course, or who find it on their own, and are largely unfamiliar with feminist engagements with the biological sciences and/or without an extensive background in biology or philosophy of science. Accordingly, I have worked to present relevant topics and arguments with as much clarity as possible, and to include cases of feminist engagements with biology that are not only representative but also accessible to these readers.

The second and third groups of readers are those I felt, to paraphrase Dawkins, “looking over my shoulder” as I wrote: those with substantial background and expertise in some or even all the topics discussed here. Let’s put feminist scientists and science scholars in the second group, and biologists and philosophers of biology in the third. But let’s remember that many of those whose work we will study are both biologists and feminists, or both philosophers of biology and feminists.

I separate the groups because the “voices” I had in mind reflect different backgrounds and/or interests. Although I don’t always follow the advice of those I think of as looking over my shoulder, at least not in the ways or to the extent they might have me do, keeping them in mind has led to this being a better discussion than it would have been had I not done so.



## Acknowledgments

Writing a book can be a lonely process, but it is also one that, at least in my case, relies heavily on those whose work I have studied and learned from, and on the support of others. Colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Washington, particularly members of the Philosophy of Science and Feminist Philosophy reading groups, provided support and critical feedback, as did graduate and undergraduate students majoring in Biology and/or Philosophy, who read parts of the manuscript. My undergraduate research assistant, Sarah Weigelt, helped me to clarify issues so that students could understand them. Over many years, I have received support from feminist philosophers and scientists, and other philosophers and scientists, whose work has inspired me and whose constructive criticisms have been invaluable.

My husband, philosopher Jack Nelson, helped make this book come about in every way possible, reading and providing insightful comments about each chapter. My daughter Rebecca O'Connor's love, wise counsel, full support, and sense of humor have, as always, sustained me as I wrote the book.

A grant from the University of Washington's Royalty Research Fund supported my research and writing in 2014, for which I am very grateful.

Hilary Gaskin at Cambridge University Press consistently provided encouragement and support. Michael Ruse, general editor of the series of which this book is part, prodded and encouraged me when I felt discouraged (it is hard, I learned, to write a book that neither presupposes knowledge of the science discussed nor a familiarity with the philosophical issues raised by it, yet also does not oversimplify or misrepresent the science or philosophical

issues). He provided constructive feedback during every stage of the project, although it will be clear we don't agree about everything.

I dedicate this book to my four-year-old granddaughters, with love and in the hope that by the time they are able to read it, many of the issues it discusses will have been resolved.