

**Feminism: Concepts and Theories**  
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**Key Concepts: Conceptual Literacy**  
**Key Concepts in Feminist Theory and Research**

So, let me continue this lecture by reading to you a few random aspects from our text, which is “Key concepts in Feminist theory and research” by Christina Hughes. This is what the text looks like.

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And, today we are going to look briefly at Chapter one – Concepts: meaning games and contests from which I reduced a couple of key points for our presentation.

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my students. I want to know what it 'really' means *as if this were possible*. My desire for the boundedness of knowing also leads to a sense of muddle and confusion when that feeling of safe boundaries, clear frameworks or absolute meanings is absent. And, this sense of muddle quickly moves into a sense of self-blame. Somehow it is my fault there is this confusion and this is probably due to some personal failing in my education, my IQ, the fact that I haven't read enough, and so forth. In terms of my learning career, therefore, I experience confusion and failure. I want to give up. I am inclined to close down rather than open up to this veritable array of diversity of meaning.

Relatedly, my concern that the text is perceived to open up, rather than close down, understanding is not simply due to a commitment to these elements of postmodern discourse. Rather, it is because I am acutely aware of what I have not said, what I have edited out and, of course, what I do not know. In this I am drawn to Crick (1976: 11) who, in the introduction to the publication of his doctoral thesis, comments on how his work was to a large extent 'the result of a situation brought about by the naiveté thesis'. Naiveté is a relative term that is usually used with pejorative overtones. As such, one's naiveté can only be understood by looking back from some point of greater and more respectable wisdom. The ignominious nature of naiveté means that we have a tendency to refuse it a place in our learning careers. Rather, we focus on the progressive myths of learning that are concerned with the acquisition of expertise as the only credible prize. Such myths focus us on the end points of education – the book, the thesis, the dissertation, the exams passed – as ends in themselves and ultimately as acts of closure. A phrase that was popular in Britain a couple of years ago rather sums this up. 'Been there. Done that.' In this progressive myths disallow the importance of foolishness, naiveté and not knowing as moments of continual beginnings that absolutely require openness and openings.

It is, therefore, for these reasons that I offer the term conceptual literacy as an act of sensitization that opens us to the variety of ways that we can understand the evidence of multiple meanings. Fuzzy, blurred and multiple meanings are not signs of the personal failure of the naive. Their recognition is a prelude to unveiling the broader political significance of conceptual contestation. As such, this text explores the contested and varied meanings of equality, difference, choice, care, time and experience within their usage in feminist theory and research. To this end I now offer an overview of my pedagogic approach to the construction of this text and, of course, a brief commentary on what is to come.



So, pay attention to Page four where Hughes explains that she offers the term conceptual literacy as an act of sensitization. That opens us to the variety of ways that we can understand the evidence of multiple meanings. Fuzzy, blurred and multiple meanings are not signs of personal failure of the naive. Their recognition is a prelude to unveiling the broader political significance of conceptual contestation.

As such, this text explores the contested and varied meanings of equality, difference, choice care, time and experience within their usage in feminist theory and research. This, is important because I think a lot of us do not quite like working with uncertainty and what Hughes is offering to us, is that the moment we begin to take cognizance of such multiplicity, we begin to open out the text in ways that allow for political intervention. If meaning is fixed, if meaning cannot be contested, then we cannot bring change about change in world.

And therefore she's encouraging us to at looked at multiplicity as naïve in precision but as a political possibility. Now, this is politics with a small p, not politics with giant capital P, it is a way of saying that power, rationality, difference, equality; these are things through which we can bring about change in the world.

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INTRODUCTION 5

**Pedagogic Concerns**

As the brief review of the contents of this text will indicate, an analysis of key concepts draws on a range of theoretical and methodological terms. I am conscious that for many students even the word 'theory' is off-putting and acts as a point of closure. Many students comment that they do not understand theory, they are not 'theoretical' people or they are more concerned with practice. My response is usually to say that theory simply means explanation and how are we to explain our social worlds or what we find in our research if we do not have some kind of theory? However, I am also conscious that any form of writing is a pedagogic act. By this I mean that it is an opportunity for teaching and learning. For this reason I need to say a few words about how I have responded to my pedagogic concerns.

Whenever I hear a student say that they are not interested in theory, I understand this as reflecting on the mental barriers that are set up by the expectation that theory is a difficult subject. I agree that it can be. However, I would also suggest that finding many and varied ways into a topic can greatly facilitate understanding. Texts such as Brooks (1997), Beasley (1999) and Freedman (2001) that outline key theoretical positions are an excellent way of developing knowledge about the social theory that underpins feminism. Yet they are only one genre through which knowledge can be enhanced. In turning to this text I appreciate that readers may focus their attention on single chapters because of their particular relevance or importance. However, I would suggest that you may find it valuable to consult those chapters that are not necessarily of immediate or primary concern. This text offers an alternative approach to understanding some of feminism's more formal theoretical concerns because particular theoretical perspectives give rise to alternative conceptual meanings and implications for how to proceed. These theoretical perspectives form cross-cutting ties within the text. Therefore within the discussion of each of the concepts you will find commentary on, for example, liberal, cultural, materialist, postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial feminism.

In addition, and somehow, theory is often viewed as detached from empirical research. One either 'does' theory or one 'does' research. However, there is another form of detachment that operates across this binary. This is the theory is abstract and empirical research is concrete. Because of my concerns about these kinds of false separation, you will find interleaved within the discussion of the varied conceptualizations of equality, difference, choice, care, time and experience a number of



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illustrative case studies. These are drawn from contemporary research in the fields of education, employment and family and have been selected to concretize the more abstract nature of the discussion. As I am primarily concerned to illustrate how concepts are applied in different forms of research I mainly focus on the methodological approaches and theoretical frameworks of these case studies. This allows us to understand the 'results' of research with the necessary contextualization of how these results were obtained and theoretically framed.

Finally, as a text focused on developing a form of literacy, I have included suggested further readings. This text provides an introduction and an overview of the central issues of meaning, as I see it, in the varied definitions of feminism's key concepts. The further reading has been selected to provide examples of work that can build on the material that has been presented here.

**Conceptual Concerns**

Any text is built on some kind of theoretical or conceptual framework that may or may not be made explicit. This places the knowledge presented in a broader epistemological and ontological field. This further allows us to judge its claims and justifications. Chapter 1 therefore outlines the field of language theorizing that has informed my own development of conceptual literacy. A key point to note here is that this review is necessarily selective because it is based on what has been personally relevant in terms of my own learning journey. In developing your own conceptual literacy other theorizations may well be equally if not more relevant. As part of opening up rather than closing down, therefore, this chapter provides a useful starting point to which further theoretical frameworks might be added.

Chapter 1 includes a number of issues related to the analysis and theorization of multiple meaning. I begin by discussing Derridean notions of difference and analyses of meaning that focus on language dualism. I next turn to Wittgenstein's analysis of language with particular attention to his conceptualization of language games. This is to illustrate the place of context as giving meaning to specific discourses within language. Finally, I explore the politics of conceptual contestation. Here I illustrate the conditions for contestation in terms of Connolly's (1993) analysis of cluster concepts. In addition, I discuss how contestation may masquerade as a simple issue of accurate



Also, pay attention to how Hughes says theory is often viewed as detached from empirical research. One either does theory or one does research. There is another form of detachment that operates across the binary. That theory is abstract and empirical research is concrete.

Because of my concerns about these kind of false separations you will find interleaved within the discussion of the varied conceptualization of equality, difference, choice, care, time and experience, a number of illustrative case studies. Now, I ask that you go through these case studies on your own and in detail because they will really help advance your understanding of a lot of the concepts that we are discussing in this class.

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## Concepts: Meanings, Games and Contests 1

I am suggesting neither that there are differences of opinion about concepts which possess an uncontestable core, nor that concepts are linked to incommensurable theories. Rather I see concepts and categories as shaped by political goals and intentions. Contests over the meaning of concepts, it follows, are contests over desired political outcomes.

(Bacchi, 1996: 1)

**‘I did not have sexual relations with that woman.’** When I first heard this statement from President Clinton in respect of his relationship with Monica Lewinsky my first response was to judge it in terms of its truth or non-truth. While, of course, there are many kinds of sexual activity surely, I thought, he either had or had not. Yet the Clinton case is a classic example of what would be defined as conceptual contestation. By this I mean two things. First, that in the everyday the meanings of particular terms are varied. Second, that in certain circumstances different protagonists will forcefully and protectively deploy their specific definitions in a contest over meaning. Thus Clinton drew on what I personally would understand as an extremely narrow, even technical, definition of sex. Others deployed a wider meaning that might accord with more everyday meanings. The truth did not lie in the physical act that was or was not undertaken. The truth lay in which definition was going to take precedence.

For those of us who might have some vicarious enjoyment from the contest over meaning in the Clinton case, the turn to the drier academic field of texts and theory has perhaps rather less of a hold on our attention. Yet such texts are full of issues of conceptual contestation that are enacted in much the same way as the Clinton case. Here the contests over meaning are central to the development of a particular field of theorization and, in consequence, to the political implications of that field. Moi (1999) offers a useful example in this respect when she discusses the sex/gender distinction that provides the basic framework



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I begin with poststructuralist understandings of language and meaning. These draw on Derridean notions of the deferral of meaning through *différance*. There are several points that I have found important here. The first is the recognition that is given to the role of language in shaping our understandings of reality. The second is the attention that has been given to the instability of meaning. This has given a focus, for example, to the lack of guarantee over the transference of meaning. A third point is the attention that is given to the power relations of language.

In the section that follows I explore issues of power and language through Plumwood’s (1993) deconstruction of dualism. Plumwood’s work is exceptionally useful in highlighting the embedded nature of power relations within language. This is because she illustrates how we need to look beyond the coupling or pairing of terms in language. For example, language operates in terms of binaried pairs through which each term in the binary draws its meaning. However, Plumwood’s analysis illustrates something of a rhizomatic quality as she also explores how meaning draws from networks and webs of connection that extend beyond the binaried pair.

The third section of this chapter is illustrative of how my own conceptual literacy draws from what I now understand to be Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. There is considerable debate in the literature on Wittgenstein in terms of whether he is a deconstructionist or a pragmatist (see, for example, Nagl and Mouffe, 2001). For example, Moi (1999) suggests that the central point where Wittgenstein and Derrida part company is on the Derridean idea that meaning is *always* deferred. Such debate is, of course, evidence of the multiple ways in which we might read a particular author. My own concerns with Wittgenstein are rather more mundane. My beginnings here arose from a concern to recognize the contextual dependency of meaning and to find an analytic framework that offered a useful explanation. Meaning may be multiple, varied and diverse. It may carry on beyond our intentions and it may be taken up in a host of ways. However, meaning is not idiosyncratic in the sense that any meaning goes at any time. If it were, it would be virtually impossible for us to communicate. These issues are not denied in poststructuralist theorizing. Meaning is derived from the discourse within which it takes place (Weedon, 1997). Yet my (mis)reading of work in this field has left me with a strong impression that within standard accounts of poststructuralism the contextualization of meaning is usually in the background of a more fully foregrounded concern to emphasize the transience of meaning. In my brief acquaintance with Wittgenstein I do not believe that



Let us now read from Chapter one, which is Concepts: Meanings, games and contests. Let us turn to page thirteen. Hughes begins by saying “I begin with poststructuralist understandings of language and meaning. These draw on Derridean notions of the deferral of meaning through *différance*.” There are several points that I have found important here, the first is the recognition that is given to the role of language in shaping our understanding of reality.

Remember this Saussurean understanding of language is that which allows you to see one world rather than the other. If you do not have access to one kind of language, the world provided by that language is not available to you, you are forever excluded from it. The second is the attention that has been given to the instability of meaning. This has given a focus for example, to the lack of guarantee over the transference of meaning.

And this lack of guarantee is an interesting thing because it is both dangerous and provide possibilities. Third point is the attention that is given to, as we mentioned the power relations of language such as in difference. This is a summary of this chapter.

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Pay attention to the paragraph on page fifteen starting with “although meanings cannot be fixed, we live our lives as though they are”. And this is important because as much as in the social sciences we do claim that every thing is constructed, one has to draw a fine distinction between constructed and unreal.

Just because something is constructed does not mean that is not real or that it does not matter and what Hughes is gesturing at and here she says the appearance of fixity is maintained through the suppression of it is opposite. In everyday discourse, the fact that what it means to be masculine relies on what it means to be feminine is hidden from view.

We are not conscious for example, that every time we use the word woman we are using the reference point of man to derive our meanings. This construction operates in a variety of intersectional ways most of which are neither conscious nor intended. They are more like an effect of what we might call speaking as usual, and the speaking as usual or this question of the usual itself is something that we are deconstructing

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relationship, constructing central cultural concepts and identities so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable.  
(Plumwood, 1993: 47)

Plumwood illustrates an important feature of the organization of language and its relations to power. This is that of the embedded nature of hierarchization that goes beyond a simple binary. The key elements of dualistic structuring in Western thought include culture/nature, reason/nature, male/female, mind/body, reason/emotion, reason/matter, public/private, subject/object and self/other (ibid.: 43). These, however, are not discrete pairs that bear no relation to other concepts in language. Rather, dualisms should be seen as a network of strongly linked and continuous webs of meanings. For example, 'the concepts of humanity, rationality and masculinity form strongly linked and contiguous parts of this web, a set of closely related concepts which provide for each other models of appropriate relations to their respective dualised contrasts of nature, the physical or material, and the feminine' (ibid.: 46). In this respect, as Hekman (1999: 85) notes, rationality, humanity and masculinity form 'the ideal type that forms the central core of modern social and political theory'.

Plumwood sets out five features that she argues are characteristic of dualism. These are:

- **Backgrounding (denial)** Plumwood comments that the relations of domination give rise to certain conflicts as those who dominate seek to deny their dependency and reliance on those they dominate. Denial of this dependency takes many forms. These include making the depended upon *inessential* and denying the importance of the other's contribution. The view of those who dominate is set up as universal 'and it is part of the mechanism of backgrounding that it never occurs to him that there might be other perspectives from which *he* is background' (1993: 48).
- **Radical exclusion (hyperseparation)** Plumwood argues that radical exclusion is a key indicator of dualism. Radical exclusion or hyperseparation arises because those who are superior need to ensure that their distinctiveness is perceived to be more than mere difference. For example, there may be a single characteristic that is possessed by one group but not the other. This is important in eliminating identification and sympathy between members of the dominating class and the dominated, and in eliminating possible confusion between powerful and powerless. It also helps to establish



On page seventeen, we speak about the binaries that we illustrated in our presentation: culture nature, reason nature, male female, etcetera. Here Hughes makes an important point that dualism should be seen as a network of strongly linked and continuous webs of meaning. For example, the concepts of humanity, rationality, and masculinity form strongly linked and contiguous parts of this web, a set of closely related concepts which provide for each other models of appropriate relations to their respective dualised contrasts of nature, the physical or material, and the feminine.

In other words each part of this dyad corresponds to the similarly powerful or powerless part of the other dyad. Let me give you an example. Often, you see that in public discourse or public speech the general referral is always a 'he' or 'his'. If he should show up in public and do this than this will happen to him or if there's is a certain kind of commonsensical understanding. Men are by nature animals. Women are never included, she is never included. So, in language when we make a push for that kind of visibility we are trying to visibilize the other part of the dyad or the powerless part of the dyad.

Plumwood explain this through five features that she argues are characteristic of dualism. Plumwood is who Hughes is depending upon to makes this argument, and what I just spoke about in relation to visibilization and invisibilization, Plumwood calls this backgrounding or denial. These include making the "depended upon" inessential and denying the importance of the other's contribution, or even their presence in public life.

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- separate "natures" which explain and justify widely differing privileges and fates" (ibid.: 49).
- Incorporation (relational definition) Incorporation or relational definition occur where masculine qualities, for example, are taken as primary. While the meanings of femininity and masculinity rely on each other, this is not a relationship of equals. Rather, 'the underside of a dualistically conceived pair is defined in relation to the upperside as a lack, a negativity' (ibid.: 52).
  - Instrumentalism (objectification) Instrumentalism or objectification is the process whereby those on the lower or inferior side of the duality have to put their interests aside in favour of the dominant and indeed are seen as 'his instruments, a means to his ends. They are made part of a network of purposes which are defined in terms of or harnessed to the master's purposes and needs. The lower side is also objectified, without ends of its own which demand consideration on their own account. Its ends are defined in terms of the master's ends' (ibid.: 53).
  - Homogenization or stereotyping Homogenization or stereotyping are ways through which hierarchies are maintained because they disregard any differences amongst the inferiorized class. Such a view would suggest, for example, that all women are the same.

Plumwood's approach to this analysis of dualism would be described as deconstructive. Deconstruction has been a significant tool in the politics of feminism that has facilitated an understanding of how truths are produced (Spivak, 2003). In this, deconstruction is not simply concerned with overturning binaried thinking but in illustrating how terms draw on their meaning from their dualistic positioning.

Deconstruction

Building on the notion of difference, deconstruction sees social life as a series of texts that can be read in a variety of ways. Because of this multiplicity of readings there is, therefore, a range of meanings that can be invoked. Moreover, through each reading we are producing another text to the extent that we can view the social world as the emanations of a whole array of intertextual weavings. While there is this variety, as we have seen, texts contain hierarchical concepts organized as binaries. Deconstruction does not seek to overturn the binary through a reversal



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of dominance. This would simply maintain hierarchization. Deconstruction is concerned to illustrate how language is used to frame meaning. Politically its purpose is to lead to 'an appreciation of hierarchy as illusion sustained by power. It may be a necessary illusion, at our stage in history. We do not know. But there is no rational warrant for assuming that other imaginary structures would not be possible' (Boyne, 1990: 124).

To achieve this deconstruction involves three phases (Grosz, 1990a). The first two of these are the reversal and displacement of the hierarchy. In terms of reversal we might, for example, seek to reclaim the terms Queer or Black for more positive interpretations of their meaning. However, it is insufficient simply to try to reverse the hierarchical status of any binary. At best, this simply keeps hierarchical organization in place. At worst, such attempts will be ignored because the dominant meanings of a hierarchical pairing are so strongly in place. This is why it is necessary to displace common hierarchized meanings. This is achieved by displacing the 'negative term, moving it from its oppositional role into the very heart of the dominant term' (ibid.: 97). The purpose of this is to make clear how the subordinated term is subordinated. This requires a third phase. This is the creation of a new term. Grosz notes that Derrida called the new term a 'hinge' word. She offers the following examples:

such as 'trace' (simultaneously present and absent), 'supplement' (simultaneously plenitude and excess), 'difference' (sameness and difference); 'pharmakon' (simultaneously poison and cure); 'woman' (simultaneously virgin and bride, rupture and totality), etc . . . These 'hinge words' (in Frigary, the two lips, fluidity, maternal desire, a genealogy of women, in Kristeva, semantaxis, the semiotic, polyphony, etc.) function as undecidable, vacillating between two oppositional terms, occupying the ground of their 'excluded middle'. If strategically harnessed, these terms rupture the systems from which they 'originate' and in which they function. (ibid.)

Grosz comments that this is both an impossible and necessary project. It is impossible because we have to use the terms of any dominant discourse to challenge that discourse. It is necessary because such a process illustrates how so much of what is said is bound up with what cannot be, and is not, said.

In this respect, Plumwood's analysis illustrates the systematization of power relations that operate through networks of conceptual dualisms. She refers to the five features she has identified as a family and thereby indicates that they each have complex kinships with each other. Finlayson (1999) denotes the attention given to issues of power relations



The next concept to pay attention towards is deconstruction. Deconstruction sees social life as a series of texts that can be read in a variety of ways. Life itself is a text and this is important because some of you may come up with this very often, where you say something or observe something about social life, and somebody says, do not think too much. It is because you are thinking to much than this is a problem, when this causes actually a certain kind of de-legitimation to this kind of overthinking supported by deconstruction.

Deconstruction sees social life itself has a variety of texts that must be interpreted, that must be read, that must be thought about. While there is this variety, as we have seen texts contain hierarchical concepts organized as binaries. Deconstruction does not seek to overturn the binary through a reversal of dominance. This would simply maintain hierarchization and this

is terribly important to understand because it not that feminism ofr the feminist movement seeks to achieve its target by putting women where men are at.

In fact, post-structural feminism or deconstructive feminism,—I might be getting a little ahead of myself using those terms where I am just saying specificity—post structural feminism seeks to understand power and urges that we address these forms of power instead of saying that now it’s women’s turn to be powerful. The problem is power the problem is not men.

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basis of similarities adhering to them, *but to describe is to characterize a situation from the vantage point of certain interests, purposes, or standards'* (Connolly, 1993: 22–3, emphasis in original). When claims are made that the 'woman' of early second-wave feminism is Western or White or middle class, the central issue is not one of empirical fact. The issue is one of values. To assert the empirical facts of the diversity of 'woman' is to make claims about the values that we attach to that concept. White, Western and middle class are not descriptors but are in themselves concepts imbued with a host of value-led meanings. Thus:

Essentially contested concepts . . . are typically *appetitive* in that to call something a 'work of art' or a 'democracy' is both to describe it and to ascribe a value to it or express a commitment with respect to it. The connection within the concept itself of descriptive and normative dimensions helps to explain why such concepts are subject to intense and endless debate. (ibid.)

In this light we can see that contests over meaning are not technical issues. Rather, they arise because conceptualization has an inferential-justificatory role. To claim that a particular meaning of a concept is the only valid one is to license the future use of that particular meaning. This means that contests over meaning are accounts of how terms should be used which, if successful, impact upon practices and theorization. Tanesini comments here that:

Meaning-claims then do not perform any explanatory role; their purpose in language is that of prescribing emendations or preservations of current practices. In particular, their function is not that of describing the inferential-justificatory role of any linguistic expression. That is, they do not explain the content of an expression. Instead, meaning-claims are proposals about emendation or preservation of the roles of expressions; these claims become prescriptive, if one is entitled to make them. As proposals for influencing the evolution of ongoing practices, meaning-claims are grounded in social practices. (1994: 207–8)

As we have seen in the case of 'What is "woman"?' feminists who do not want to be seen as either racist, classist, colonialist or essentialist may at minimum qualify the term by adding what Butler (1990) refers to as the 'embarrassed ceteras' of 'race', class, etc. etc. This has certainly functioned to add to the list of descriptors what we might mean by 'woman'.

However, Tanesini also notes that more recently the concern over 'What is "woman"?' has taken a new epistemological turn. The list of descriptors has encouraged a sense of fragmentation of the concept



And lastly Hughes comes to this question of contests over meaning and argues that contests over meaning are not technical issues. Rather they arise because conceptualization has an inferential justificatory role. To claim that a particular meaning of a concept is the only valid one is to license the future use of that particular meaning. This means that contests over meaning are accounts of how terms should be used which, if successful impact upon practices and theorization.

Which means that multiplicity is reorganized to say that only one meaning has primacy over other meanings. Thereby influencing the kind of world that that concept will then go on to build and at the end of the chapter it is important to consider therefore how to re-approach the question of what is woman? If woman its self is a non-fixed category bearing multiple meanings, what kind of meaning has primacy at any point of time depend on the power relations of those using the term.

Keeping this in mind, we move forward behaving as if it means something that does not necessarily need to exclude other things. Keeping in this mind, let us return to the question of what is woman and if what is women cannot be quite an all-encompassing category of women than it must be necessarily include everything that means woman that can be deployed differently depending on who's speaking when.

At the same time, the question cannot answered by excluding everything else that is not a woman. So we deploy it knowingly with caveats as an organizing principle rather than one that has fixed meaning. For the next lecture, we will than take these concepts and understand them in relation to the question of equality which is of paramount importance to the feminist movement. So, until next lecture.