
FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY

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One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be?

– Simone de Beauvoir

ABSTRACT

This is a wide-ranging 200-level survey course that touches on the important contemporary debates in feminist philosophy. This course is not historically complete or exhaustive of the present field, though it gives a conceptual topography of feminist philosophy useful for students moving forward in philosophy and women's studies. The course is structured to give students adequate practice and familiarity with feminist critique so they can write a constructive essay of feminist philosophy as their term paper.

I. COURSE DESCRIPTION

Feminist philosophy is both a style of critical questioning that takes gendered experiences seriously and a body of theorizing that has created its own domain of philosophical categories in its own right. In this class we will not only learn to critique the canon of philosophy, but to understand key concepts that have arisen from feminist philosophy. Many, if not all, traditional philosophical categories have a domain of feminist critique that applies to them. In this course we will introduce important organizing concepts in feminist philosophy such as oppression, gender, race, sex, power, and knowledge. We will focus on questions such as how to theorize "woman" as a subject of unique experiences, and the philosophical problems that result. We will critically examine theories of gender constitution and analyze the ways in which the process is inflected by race, class, ability, size, and sexuality. Next we will ask whether the knower of epistemology is gendered and how power and knowledge relate, which will ground a critique of traditional epistemologies.

REQUIRED TEXT

The Feminist Philosophy Reader Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, Eds. McGraw Hill: 2008 (ISBN 0073407399 / 9780073407395)

II. GRADING BREAKDOWN

- Participation = 10%
- Short essay #1 = 10%
- Short essay #2 = 10%
- Short essay #3 = 10%
- Term paper = 30%
- Final exam = 30%

III. COURSE REQUIREMENTS

THREE SHORT ESSAYS

Short essays are due on Fridays and there will be a sign-up sheet the first week of class. You should pick three Fridays during the term on which you would like to hand in your paper. The day that you hand in your paper you will be expected to send it to me electronically by 9:00 am. You will be expected to give a five minute presentation on the critical question you raised. You will not be marked on the presentation. Fridays we will discuss the critical question papers that were handed in that day in a more informal group setting. I will hand out copies of the questions I received so that we may discuss them more in depth in class. Section VIII of the syllabus contains two examples of short essays. To support your ability to translate essay guidelines into practice, I include examples in the syllabus, and I will provide extensive feedback on your first essay to help you to improve with each of the three essays.

FINAL PAPER

The essay topics are contained in section X. You will be given the opportunity to submit a draft and receive comments. The length of the paper will be between eight and ten pages.

FINAL EXAM

The final exam will consist of three short answer questions and one essay. Practice questions, from which the actual exam will be composed, will be handed out on the last day of class and can be found in section XI.

PARTICIPATION

This component will be composed of two halves; one for attendance and one for in class participation. Class will often involve active learning (writing, speaking, and listening) in which you are expected to be engaged. You are expected to have the reading completed and to be prepared to think critically about the text.

IV. CLASS GUIDELINES

Late assignments will not be accepted unless you make arrangements with me well before the deadline. In the case of illness or personal matters, you may make arrangements with me, but you must come to me as much in advance as possible.

The grading schema will comply with University of Alberta standards for undergraduate performance. There will be no curve.

<i>Description</i>	<i>Letter</i>	<i>Percentage</i>	<i>Grade Point</i>
Excellent	A+	94-100	4.0
	A	88-93	4.0
	A-	82-87	3.7
Good	B+	78-81	3.3
	B	74-77	3.0
	B-	70-73	2.7
Adequate	C+	66-69	2.3
	C	62-65	2.0
	C-	58-61	1.7
Needs work	D+	54-57	1.3
	D	50-53	1.0
Unsatisfactory	F	0-49	0

V. ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

Please see the University of Alberta Undergraduate Student Guide to Integrity in Academia for full details. "I didn't know" is not an excuse! It is your job to learn what plagiarism is. All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Office of the Dean of Students.

VI. TEACHING STYLE AND OBJECTIVES

Teaching philosophy requires active engagement with both philosophical materials and student learning. This is best accomplished by teaching philosophy as a critical thinking, skill building exercise rather than simple memorization and regurgitation. I foster a classroom environment where students can hone their critical reasoning skills through discussion, writing, and active listening, which forces students to participate in their own understanding and incorporate the materials at hand. This class meets three days a week. Each Monday and Wednesday I will perform a brief lecture (20 minutes) and then I will hand out comprehension questions and have the students discuss in groups (15 minutes). Students will then present their answers and share the points of discussion and tension that arose from answering the questions. Fridays we will have an informal seminar where we discuss the short essays that were submitted. My teaching philosophy has three main goals:

LECTURE EFFECTIVELY: My lecture style is to give students two main things that they need; I always show students how the philosophical passage is structured, which aids in their reading comprehension and also makes them aware of various rhetorical styles, and I focus on analyzing why philosophers argue what they do by expanding on context, definitions, and clarifying examples.

ACTIVATE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT: I often pause during lectures to give students short breaks to discuss what I am presenting. Students will often be filled with questions and comments during a lecture but they have to suppress this energy and they often find this distracting. Giving them a few moments to discuss ideas or do a short assignment engages their understanding. This requires proper guidance as students can become frustrated because they are largely accustomed to a passive learning style.

FACILITATE GROUP SAFETY FOR EFFECTIVE DIALOGUE: In a medium-sized group I try to learn all of my students' names on the first day of class, and get the students to learn each others' names too. This creates an environment of collegiality and safety. In a larger group discussion I try to create dialogue between the students by creating links among their ideas. They are usually interested in looking to me for validation of their ideas, but instead I remind them of each other's views and put their differing ideas in meaningful contact. Group safety is especially important for the discussion of the students' short essays.

SAMPLE COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS HANDOUT

Comprehension questions for Judith Halberstam's "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum"

QUESTION ONE: How can FTM and lesbian butches accuse each other of gender normativity? What is a "transgender butch?" Why do you think Halberstam mentions that homosexuality is no longer included in the DSM III and that transexuality remains firmly in the control of medical and psychological technologies?

QUESTION TWO: How does Halberstam interrogate social construction as it relates to transexuality? Explain the tension between "queer theory" and transgender activists.

QUESTION THREE: Explain the masculine continuum and how Halberstam uses it to explain tensions in lesbian feminism. Explain the difference between a sense of humor about discomfort and how those situations can suddenly become "tragic."

QUESTION FOUR: Explain the tensions Halberstam brings up around transsexual tips on how not to "look like a butch lesbian." Explain this in relation to a "reverse discourse."

QUESTION FIVE: Explain Halberstam's discussion of "some of the dangers in demanding discrete and coherent sexual and gender identities." Why does she resist the language of "home and border"?

QUESTION SIX: What is the main point of this article? Or: What is the most important philosophical argument in this article?

VII. SCHEDULE OF READINGS AND GUIDING QUESTIONS:

(All readings are in the course text unless noted otherwise)

- **Week One:** Oppression and History: What is oppression and how is it sustained and maintained in kinship arrangements?

Readings: Marilyn Frye "Oppression," and Gayle Rubin's "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex."
- **Week Two:** Gender Oppression: How is gender constructed and maintained in individual encounters and more broadly?

Readings: Simone de Beauvoir's "Introduction to The Second Sex" and Judith Butler's "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory."
- **Week Three:** Race and Gender: How does the example of race complicate theorizing about gender?

Readings: bell hooks's "Reconstructing Black Masculinity" and María Lugones's "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception."
- **Week Four:** Gender and Sexuality: How do gender and sexuality co-constitute identity and how does this inform our political struggles for queer rights?

Readings: Judith Halberstam's "Transgender Butch: Butch/FTM Border Wars and the Masculine Continuum" and Chris Cuomo's "Claiming the Right to be Queer."
- **Week Five:** Sex and the Body: How do our understandings of sexed bodies affect our philosophizing?

Readings: Anne Fausto-Sterling's "Should There Be Only Two Sexes?" and Luce Irigaray's "This Sex Which Is Not One."
- **Week Six:** Sex and Objectification: What is objectification and how does it pose problems for feminism?

Readings: Catherine Mackinnon's "Sexuality" and Martha Nussbaum's "Objectification," *Philosophy and Public Affairs* (24, no. 4 (1995): 249-291).
- **Week Seven:** Categories of Identity: How do we theorize overlapping and interlocking aspects of identity?

Readings: Elizabeth Spelman's "Gender & Race: The Ampersand Problem in Feminist Thought" and Maria Lugones's "Purity, Impurity, and Separation."
- **Week Eight:** Race and the Law: How are present institutions and gender violence produced by histories of colonialism and slavery?

Readings: Angela Davis's "The Prison Industrial Complex" and Andrea Smith's "Sexual Violence as a Tool of Genocide." Film: *Finding Dawn* directed by Christine Welsh (2006)

- **Week Nine:** Autonomy and Postcolonial Critique: How do white, Western notions of autonomy alienate women and reinforce colonial logic?

Readings: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "From A Critique of Postcolonial Reason" and Marilyn Friedman's "Autonomy, Social Disruption, and Women."
- **Week Ten:** Body Politics: How does body size relate to gender oppression?

Readings: Susan Bordo's "Reading the Slender Body" from *Unbearable Weight: Feminism Western Culture, and the Body* (L.A., California: California UP, 2003. pp. 185-212) and Kathleen Lebesco's "Organization and Embodiment: Politicizing and Historicizing Fatness" and "Citizen Profane: Consumerism, Class, Race, and Body" from *Revolting Bodies: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (Boston, MA: Massachusetts UP, 2004. pp11-28, pp. 54-64).
- **Week Eleven:** Knowledge and Objectivity: How does mainstream epistemology maintain concepts and values hostile to feminist philosophy?

Readings: Susan Bordo's "Purification and Transcendence in Descartes's Meditations" and Lorraine Code's "Taking Subjectivity into Account."
- **Week Twelve:** Feminist Epistemology: How does feminist critique of mainstream epistemology lead to better methods of knowledge production?

Readings: Sandra Harding's "'Strong Objectivity' and Socially Situated Knowledge" and Nancy Tuana's "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance."
- **Week Thirteen:** Review of key concepts and movie "Passion and Power: The Technology of the Orgasm" Written and directed by Emiko Omori and Wendy Blair Slick (2007).

VIII. SAMPLE SHORT ESSAYS

IS CATHERINE MACKINNON HURTING WOMEN?

BY BRITTNE TINK*

In "Sexuality", Catherine Mackinnon argues that the almost universal domination of men over women is founded in the sexual, that in order to better understand gender inequality it is necessary to understand that sexuality itself, and that male sexuality informs and produces hierarchies of both sex and gender. She uses rape, which can easily be conceived of as the ultimate act of dominance—how it has been defined, how it has been appropriated within our cultural context—to demonstrate that the sexual domination that she has identified as male sexuality has been normalized to such an extent that it is understood as a natural, *a priori* force; and indeed, we only understand the act of rape as differentiated from the act of sex on the requisite presence of the woman's or the "feminine" victim's resistance to it.

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Although this kind of dominance is primarily conceived of within a heterosexual context, Mackinnon argues that it is just as applicable to gay or lesbian contexts: first, on the basis that the masculine/feminine roles remain the same, and second, that because women are differentiated from men on the basis that they are not men, there is a sufficient degree of relationality between the two. Although I find Mackinnon's argument to be persuasive, particularly insofar as it articulates something that I have always found troubling about my own dating and sexual experiences (specifically, that they have been marked by a kind of will-he-won't-he, don't-be-easy, "resistance"), I have to wonder, as a feminist: is there an inherent danger in adopting a stance such as the one that Mackinnon proposes?

In the beginning of her piece, she argues that for a theory of sexuality to be conceived as feminist, it needs to "treat sexuality as a social construct of male power: defined by men, forced on women, and constitutive of the meaning of gender" (205). I would agree with her basic proposition that we conceptualize acts of dominance as erotic acts, but I think that there is harm in the comparison she draws between the acknowledgement of women's sexuality (which she argues is not really women's, but men's insofar as it has been forced upon women) as a kind of bad faith. She writes that women's sexualities are "a response to powerlessness...exist[ing] as they do because of lack of choice...created out of social conditions of oppression and exclusion [and] may be part of a strategy for survival" (216).

I would add that Mackinnon should seek to avoid reproducing paternal attitudes as well as privileged epistemic standpoints regardless of whether they belong to men or enlightened feminist scholars. Even if data on the frequency of "acquaintance rape" seem to support what Mackinnon is arguing, it troubles me that she is so quick to dismiss women's experiences of their own sexuality and, in specific, the recognition of women as active sexual agents. Even if female sexuality is defined and structured around male sexual dominance, what is inherently valuable about a "liberated" female desire, even if it does come about through a process of women fucking like men, is that it gives them autonomy when they are very often denied it. For Mackinnon to argue that such a position is merely "a response to terms men set" (205) is not only paternal but also homogenizing because it fails to take into account the myriad of ways in which women resist patriarchy every day, albeit on a local rather than meta level.

WORKS CITED

Mackinnon, Catherine. "Sexuality" in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. (pp. 204-222) eds Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

ALTERITY AND LOVING PERCEPTION

BY JOSHUA ST. PIERRE[†]

In her essay, "Playfulness, 'World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," María Lugones argues that in order to exercise loving perception instead of arrogant perception across racial and social boundaries, it is necessary to enter into the world of the other and understand them on their own terms. Lugones's definition of 'world' is central to understanding her argument. A world is an inhabited culturally/socially constructed space which may or may not be a subset of society at large. Within these worlds it is

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possible to feel "at ease" due to shared language, history, being humanly bonded to people within it or being generally happy within it. Yet, what is important to Lugones's argument is that people inhabit various worlds but do not feel at ease in all of them. Within these worlds of unease it is easy to practice an arrogant perception of people, or to enter into the worlds violently and assimilate the world into one's own construction of how people should act or be. Therefore Lugones believes it important to "travel" between worlds with a type of playfulness. Moving into worlds playfully, one is open to being re-constructed within different worlds because one does not rigidly define oneself. This playful orientation allows one to understand "what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes" (79). Lugones's argument is quite compelling and is an important move in attempting to understand how we can identify across differences.

While Lugones makes strides to identify across differences, there are some interesting philosophical questions that crop up around the issue of alterity. The telos of Lugones's argument is a love for the other: "Knowing other women's 'worlds' is part of knowing them and knowing them is part of loving them" (79). There is some ambiguity in her argument here. How, besides the given methodology of being "playful," are we supposed to enter into another's world? More specifically, how is the alterity supposed to be gapped? The statement that "we can understand what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves *in their eyes*" (79, italics mine) is somewhat worrisome. Either Lugones is saying that people are reducible down to their worlds or social construction and therefore to know their world is to see through their eyes, or else that alterity is collapsed in entering into another person's world. I doubt that Lugones would argue for the former, but the latter also has difficulties. To argue that we can understand someone enough to see through their eyes is quite a violent move because otherness can never be collapsed without becoming sameness. I agree with Lugones that we can identify with the other through world travelling, but it seems that in not giving an account of how the other is encountered within their world, Lugones overlooks the radical irreducibility of the other and the fact that we necessarily bring our own constructions into any interpretation. Thus while Lugones appropriately resists arrogant perception and imperialist orientations, in playful traveling there is the possible danger of being naïve and forgetting oneself in the attempt to bridge alterity which would lead to a violent interpretation of the other.

WORKS CITED

Lugones, María. "World'-Travelling, and Loving Perception," in *The Feminist Philosophy Reader*. (pp. 69-79), Eds Alison Bailey and Chris Cuomo, Toronto, ON: McGraw-Hill, 2008.

IX. GRADING RUBRIC FOR SHORT ESSAYS

	Needs work	Adequate	Good	Excellent
CONTENT				
Summary of basic argument				
Explanation of key concepts				
Strength of critical question				

	Needs work	Adequate	Good	Excellent
Understanding of the text				
Creativity, originality				
WRITING				
Technicalities (spelling, grammar, etc.)				
Adherence to a citation style				
Structure				
Overall coherence				

This grading rubric is useful because it is easy for the instructor to convey a lot of information in a short space. Students will view their grade through this schema and they will attribute marks gained and lost to the information on the chart, which lessens their reliance on hand-written comments and still conveys the information they need to write better essays. The four qualitative categories roughly map on to the A, B, C, D, letter-grade system.

X. FINAL ESSAY QUESTIONS AND INSTRUCTIONS

These essay questions are purposefully broad. The exercise invites students to prove that they have understood the topography of feminist philosophy offered in this course such that they can formulate a theory that begins to answer one of these questions.

Question One: What does it mean to be part of an oppressed group?

Question Two: How do race, class, gender, and size relate and how do we foster political resistance on the basis of this understanding?

Question Three: What does it mean to say that gender is constructed? What is it constructed out of? How?

Question Four: What is the relationship between racial and sexual oppression? Can we think one without the other? Why or why not?

Question Five: Make one up and check with me.

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

- Pick a question ASAP. You need not be absolutely in love with the question that you pick but you do not want to tarry away a couple of weeks through indecision either. Chances are that the good points you want to make can be made via any one of the four questions.

- I will accept a draft from students and I will return it with comments. I will accept no late drafts and I will not look at the same paper more than one time. Treat the draft deadline as the deadline—the better the paper is at that time, the better your final product will be.
- Exchange drafts with other students as much as possible. Be critical of each other. Push your peers further on points of clarity, consistency, and accuracy.

PARTICULAR INSTRUCTIONS

- Do some freewriting on the topic that you choose. Try to get at your intuitions on the subject so that you know which theorists to align yourself with and which ones you will want to criticize. Do not use this freewriting in your paper.
- Reread the important people in the discussion (outside research isn't necessary and can often distract from the issue at hand). If there are ideas you want to use, spend time carefully explaining the ideas. Don't worry yet about how in particular you will use them, the important thing is that you accurately summarize the arguments.
- Write a draft. See where the ideas go when you put them together and add your own voice as the narrator of the logical flow.
- From what you have written you should be able to extract a thesis statement and then be able to write your introduction and conclusion. Doing this last will avoid the "Preface Fallacy" which is promising to do something that you do not actually do in the paper.

XI. FINAL EXAM

Section One: Of the following six questions, three will appear on the exam and you will be required to write on all three that appear. These are short answer questions and you need not be critical or raise objections. (5 points each)

1. What does it mean to be "at ease" in a Lugonesian world? How does this relate to the modes of travelling?
2. Judith Butler says that the gendered body is the "legacy of sedimented acts." What does this mean?
3. Explain the rise of the "playboy ideal" in bell hooks's "Reconstructing Black Masculinity."
4. What is the "border war" in Judith/Jack Halberstam's work?
5. What is porn's social function according to Catherine Mackinnon?
6. According to Kathleen Lebesco, in what ways do we give value to bodies, specifically fat bodies?

Section Two: Write an essay on the following question. (15 points)

What should a feminist response be to either the model of objectivity proffered by Descartes, or the "S knows that P" (Knowledge=True Justified Belief) tradition in epistemology? Explain the view that you will respond to and argue for a thesis. Leave time and space to answer at least one objection to yourself.