

## *The Social Turn in Philosophy*

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Class meetings: Weds 2-4pm, 5 Washington Place room 302, Office Hours: Tues 2-4pm, room 408

### COURSE DESCRIPTION

I just spent five years in graduate school. When I started, in 2013, social and political philosophy were marginalized subfields; my friends who worked in these subfields would tell me that it was often difficult for them to get philosophers in so-called “core” areas – metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of language, philosophy of mind, philosophy of science – to take their work seriously. But, over the past five years, I witnessed a major discipline-wide shift toward philosophical theorizing about social and political questions. Work in social and political philosophy, as well as more applied work in feminist philosophy, philosophy of race, philosophy of gender and sexuality, and philosophy of disability, is much more well-respected nowadays than it was five years ago. For example, last year I saw substantially more departments hiring for permanent positions in social and political philosophy than in philosophy of language. Moreover, it is currently fashionable for philosophers working in “core” subfields to apply the concepts and methods of these subfields to contemporary social and political questions, the idea being that doing so will provide us with new and useful answers – or, at least, more illuminating ways of asking the questions.

I see this course as my opportunity to induct the newest members of the profession into the discipline of Philosophy, which I am very excited about! I intend to use the semester to bring students up to speed with the “social turn”, as well as teaching them the art of philosophical writing by introducing them to evidence-based writing techniques and offering regular formative feedback. I have also arranged for three junior scholars working on the topics we will be studying, all of whom are awesome, to visit our class in-person and discuss their work, their subfield, and their writing process. This class will thereby prepare my students to write an honors thesis on a cutting-edge topic of significant philosophical and real-life interest.

### COURSE GOALS

By the end of this class, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- An in-depth understanding of contemporary philosophical trends in social epistemology, social ontology, and social and political philosophy of language.
- The ability to *identify the structure of arguments*, and then to *present focused objections to arguments*, which concentrate on either a particular premise or a particular inference in the argument’s structure and suggest reasons to be dubious of it.
- The ability to *analyze the strength of objections to a philosophical view*, thinking about how an objection works, how central to the view is the point that the objection challenges, and how easy it would be to modify the view so as to avoid the objection.
- The ability to *defend a philosophical view*, by presenting arguments for each of its central tenets, and then anticipating and responding to potential objections to the view.
- The ability to provide *formative feedback* on another person’s philosophical work-in-progress.
- The ability to set and review progress toward *writing goals*, based on self- and other-assessment.

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

The requirements of this course are as follows:

- Three short papers (30%)
- Final paper (20%)
- Peer feedback on short papers (10%)
- Peer feedback on final paper (10%)
- Exam (15%)
- Exam question submissions (5%)
- Notes on readings (10%)

### Papers

This class will be more collaborative than the average Philosophy class, in two ways. First, though students are required to individually write and submit their papers (as in most classes), we will provide one another with verbal and/or written feedback on drafts or plans of all papers before the final hand-in date. This means that students will have to start on their papers early, in order to have work to circulate for feedback. We will practice being helpful colleagues by reading one another's drafts or plans and providing comments on each other's work. For short papers, students will submit their plans or drafts via NYU Classes, and will then provide 1-page comments on each other's work. I will distribute guidelines for how to write good plans and helpful comments, and discuss them in class, before the first deadline. We will then present and discuss final papers in an in-class "paper workshop", held a week in advance of the final paper deadline.

The three short papers will be on topics of the student's choice social epistemology, from social ontology, and from social and political philosophy of language, in that order. The final paper will be on a topic of the student's choice from throughout the course – I encourage you to take one of your short papers and develop it into your final paper, but if you'd prefer to do something totally new, that's fine too!

### Exam

The second respect in which this course will be more collaborative than average is that I will ask students to co-create the final exam with me. This means submitting five suggested exam questions, each multiple-choice, with a short explanation of why each one would be a good exam question (e.g. it tests for a common misconception about the course material). I will construct the final exam largely from students' suggested questions, though I may add some questions of my own to ensure that all the material is covered.

### Notes on the readings

This is a reading-based course. There are only eleven required papers, because I want you to do the readings *very* thoroughly. We will be studying a rich and complex set of issues and each article contains a great many philosophical insights. It is essential that students read slowly and carefully, to understand these issues and appreciate what the authors are saying about them. This will go much better if students take notes as they go along. To that end, I incentivize the taking of notes by asking all students to submit a 1-page summary of the required reading before each class. The reading for the first class is all about strategies for effective note-taking in Philosophy; we will discuss these and other strategies for success in our first class.

## COURSE POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

### COURSE WEBSITE

There is a course website site for this course, which can be accessed via NYU Classes. All course documents (syllabus, assignments, readings, and some documents with helpful tips for reading and writing Philosophy papers) will be available on this site. Please check the site regularly for announcements – when I want to send a message to all students, I will do so by posting an announcement on the website.

### ELECTRONICS IN THE CLASSROOM

In this class there is a ban on electronics – including laptops, tablets, smartphones, etc. There is a lot of research indicating that the use of electronics in the classroom prevents you and people sitting around you from learning. If you have a special reason to need electronic equipment for note-taking, that's a different matter; in this case, please contact me to discuss a waiver from the ban.

### EMAILS

When emailing me about this class, please write “Phil UA-201” in the subject line, and maintain a formal tone. I will endeavor to reply to all emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it is okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first.

### PLAGIARISM

You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You must cite any work that you draw from in your papers, both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. You are strongly encouraged to discuss the course material, including assignments, with your classmates, but all written work that you submit must be your own. For more information, see my “Plagiarism” handout on our course website. You should also be familiar with the academic integrity policies of the College of Arts and Sciences, which are available at <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/academic-integrity.html>; I will respond to all cases of possible plagiarism in accordance with sections 2 and 3 of these policies.

### DISABILITY

If you think you need an accommodation for a disability, please let me know at your earliest convenience. Some aspects of this course, the assignments, the in-class activities, and the way the course is usually taught can be modified to facilitate your participation and progress. As soon as you make me aware of your needs, we can work with the NYU Center for Students with Disabilities to determine appropriate academic accommodations. Any information that you choose to provide is confidential and will be treated as such.

### CAMPUS MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES

Taking college courses can be mentally and emotionally challenging. If you or someone you know is feeling overwhelmed, depressed, or in need of support, lots of services are available. You can contact NYU's Counseling and Wellness Services team by calling (212) 998-4780 or emailing [wellness.exchange@nyu.edu](mailto:wellness.exchange@nyu.edu), or by visiting <https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/counseling-services.html> and checking out the links there. They also have walk-in offices in Manhattan and Brooklyn (addresses on the website).

## SCHEDULE & READINGS

Class 1 (Sep 5) – INTRODUCTION (1-hr class; I'm leaving for the airport at 3pm!)

- Optional: Concepción, “Reading Philosophy with Background Knowledge and Metacognition”

## UNIT 1: SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Class 2 (Sep 12) – KNOWING ABOUT OPPRESSION

- Required: Mills, “White Ignorance”
- Optional: Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”
- Optional: Moody-Adams, “Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance”

Class 3 (Sep 19) – STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

- Required: Anderson, “Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense”
- Optional: Polhaus, “Relational Knowing and Epistemic Injustice”
- Optional: Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”

Class 4 (Sep 26) – HOW DOES STANDPOINT MAKE A DIFFERENCE?

- Required: Toole, “Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology”

Class 5 (Oct 3) – SPECIAL GUEST BRIANA TOOLE

- *No readings*

## UNIT 2: SOCIAL ONTOLOGY

Class 6 (Oct 10) – AMELIORATIVE METAPHYSICS

- Required: Haslanger, “Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them to Be?”
- Optional: Jenkins, “Amelioration and Inclusion: Gender Identity and the Concept of Woman”
- Optional: Appiah, “How to Decide If Races Exist”

Class 7 (Oct 17) – HOW DO SOCIAL KINDS EXIST?

- Required: Mason, “Social Kinds, Essence, and Dependence”
- Optional: Sveinsdóttir, “Essentiality Conferred”
- Optional: Thomasson, “Realism and Human Kinds”

Class 8 (Oct 24) – THEORIZING QUEERNESS

- Required: Dembroff, “What is Sexual Orientation?” or “Beyond the Binary” (TBD by vote)

Class 9 (Oct 31) – SPOOKY HALLOWEEN CLASS WITH SPECIAL GUEST ROBIN DEMBROFF

- *No readings*

### UNIT 3: SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

#### Class 10 (Nov 7) – SPEECH AND IDEOLOGY

- Required: Tirrell, “Genocidal Language Games”
- Optional: Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts”
- Optional: Maitra, “Subordinating Speech”

#### Class 11 (Nov 14) – POLITICALLY CHARGED LANGUAGE

- Required: Hesni, “TBD”
- Optional: Leslie, “The Original Sin of Cognition: Fear, Prejudice, and Generalization”
- Optional: Saul, “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation and Philosophy of Language”

No class Nov 21 – Thanksgiving recess

#### Class 12 (Nov 28) – SPECIAL GUEST SAMIA HESNI

- *No readings*

#### Class 13 (Dec 5) – EXTRA CLASS

- Required: Dotson, “How is This Paper Philosophy?” (*Subject to change based on student interests*)

#### Class 14 (Dec 12) – FINAL PAPER WORKSHOP

- *No readings*

### DUE DATES:

Oct 3: First short paper excerpt/plan for comments

Oct 6: Comments on others’ excerpts/plans

Oct 10: First short paper due (word limit: 2,000 words)

Oct 31: Second short paper excerpt/plan for comments

Nov 3: Comments on others’ excerpts/plans

Nov 7: Second short paper due (word limit: 2,000 words)

Nov 28: Third short paper excerpt/plan for comments

Dec 1: Comments on others’ excerpts/plans

Dec 5: Third short paper due (word limit: 2,000 words)

Dec 11: Submit handout for paper workshop

Dec 17: Final paper due (word limit: 4,000 words)

Date TBD: Exam question submissions

Date TBD: Final exam