

PHILOSOPHICAL THEORIES OF OPPRESSION

Note: This is an abridged sample syllabus designed for a 15-week semester. The course is an introductory undergraduate course that does not assume any familiarity with philosophy. It is oriented towards students with interests in philosophy, race and ethnicity studies, gender studies, politics, sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, literature, and related disciplines.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is oppression? How do social structures and practices create and reinforce systems of oppression? And what can we do about it? In this course, we will explore philosophical approaches to theorizing about oppression, with a focus on theories which arise from anti-racist, Black feminist, and other feminist philosophical traditions. We will examine some of the ways racism, transphobia, classism, homophobia, and sexism create conditions of oppression, look at some of the conceptual tools (privilege, intersectionality, agency) activists and scholars have developed to help us understand how oppression works, and critically evaluate different proposals about how we should resist oppression. Some of the questions we will examine include:

- What does it mean to be oppressed?
- How do systems of oppression intersect and reinforce one another?
- How does oppression shape how we speak and what we know?
- Who is responsible for resisting oppression?
- What challenges face efforts to resist oppressive systems?
- What would a society without oppression look like?

This course will be relevant to students with interests in philosophy, race and ethnicity studies, gender studies, politics, sociology, psychology, economics, anthropology, and literature.

COURSE GOALS

Students in this course will develop and cultivate the following skills and forms of knowledge:

- An understanding of key philosophical theories, concepts, and debates about oppression and resistance
- The ability to charitably read, interpret, and critically evaluate complex texts in philosophy and other humanities disciplines
- The ability to apply philosophical theories and tools to issues related to oppression
- The ability to develop your own perspective on different approaches to theorizing about oppression and justify and explain this perspective to others

- The ability to respectfully discuss high-stakes topics with a diverse group of thinkers
- The ability to clearly explain complex ideas verbally and through writing

ASSESSMENT

- **Participation (26%):** Active participation in discussion sections over the course of the semester. Some ways you can participate include:
 - Contributing verbally in whole-class discussions (especially in a way that shows completion of the reading and critical reflection on the text and course concepts).
 - Contributing verbally in small group discussions (especially in a way which helps others in your group join the discussion).
 - Bringing a specific question you have about the reading or lecture to class.
 - Coming to my office hours to have a discussion about the reading or course content.
- **Reading reflections (24%):** reflections are due weekly, by the night before our first class. Reflections should be around 3-4 sentences and should raise a question or offer a comment about one of the upcoming readings/viewings. Each reflection is worth 2%. You can miss 3 reflections over the semester.
- **Three short papers (30%):**
 - Paper 1 (10%, 800 words): Identify and explain one similarity and one difference between two of the forms of oppression we have examined.
 - Paper 2 (10%, 800 words): Explain how one of the concepts we have examined can be used to analyze a case study (chosen from three alternatives).
 - Paper 3 (10%, 800 words): Find an example of a discussion of knowledge (e.g. belief, ignorance, credibility) or language (e.g. slurs, oppressive speech) in the media. Explain how one thinker from this Unit might analyze this example.
- **Final paper (20%, 1,500 words):** Using a case study of your choice, explain how two (or more) forms of oppression interact in this case study. Identify one or two challenges which face people attempting to overcome or resist the forms of oppression at work in your case study. How do you think they should respond to these challenges?

CONTENT NOTE

This course will explore difficult and challenging issues. We will discuss the ways systems of oppression—including transphobia, racism, misogyny, and homophobia—shape our lives. This means that we will discuss some forms of violence, including racialized violence, sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and transphobic violence. These issues can bring up intense emotions, sometimes in unexpected ways. Throughout the course, our focus will be on investigating the difficult and important questions which arise from studying oppression while taking care of ourselves and one another. This means being attentive to the real-life impact of

these issues on students in this course. I encourage you to reach out at any point in the semester if there are any ways I can support your engagement with the course material.

SCHEDULE & READINGS

UNIT 1: WHAT IS OPPRESSION? (3.5 WEEKS)

Day 1: What is oppression? Part I

- Marilyn Frye, “Oppression,” in *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*

Day 2: What is oppression? Part II

- Iris Marion Young, “The Five Faces of Oppression,” in *Justice and the Politics of Difference*

Day 3: Forms of oppression—White supremacy

- Charles W. Mills, “White Supremacy as Sociopolitical System: A Philosophical Perspective”

Day 4: Forms of oppression—Sexism & misogyny

- bell hooks, “Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression,” in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*

Day 5: Forms of oppression—Homophobia

- Adrienne Rich, selections from “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence”

Day 6: Forms of oppression—Transphobia

- Susan Stryker, “A Hundred Years of Transgender History,” in *Transgender History*

Day 7: Forms of oppression—Capitalism & class

- Erik Olin Wright, “The Class Analysis of Poverty”, in *Interrogating Inequality*
- Nancy Fraser, “Expropriation and Exploitation in Racialized Capitalism”

Short paper 1 due

UNIT 2: KEY CONCEPTS & TOOLS (4 WEEKS)

Day 8: Phenomenology I—What is it like to be oppressed?

- Frantz Fanon, “The Lived Experience of the Black Man,” in *Black Skin, White Masks*

Day 9: Phenomenology II—What is it like to be oppressed?

- Iris Marion Young, “Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Bodily Comportment, Motility, Spatiality”

Day 10: Phenomenology III—What is it like to be oppressed?

- Talia Mae Bettcher, “Evil Deceivers and Make-Believers: On Transphobic Violence and the Politics of Illusion”

Day 11: Privilege—Do some people benefit from systems of oppression?

- Alison Bailey, “Privilege: Expanding on Marilyn Frye’s Oppression”
- Gina Crosley-Corcoran, “[Explaining White Privilege to a Broke White Person](#)”

Day 12: Entitlement—Do some people benefit from systems of oppression?

- Amia Srinivasan, “[Does Anyone Have a Right to Sex?](#)”
- Eleanor Gordon-Smith, “[Hollaback Girl](#),” *This American Life*

Day 13: Agency—What kinds of agency do members of oppressed groups have?

- Maria C. Lugones, “Structure/Antistructure and Agency Under Oppression”

Day 14: Intersectionality I—How do systems of oppression combine?

- Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I A Woman?”
- Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color”

Day 15: Intersectionality II—How can systems of oppression combine?

- Jennifer Nash, “Re-thinking Intersectionality”

Short paper 2 due

UNIT 3: LANGUAGE & KNOWLEDGE (2.5 WEEKS)

Day 16: Subordinating speech—Can saying something be an act of oppression?

- Rae Langton, “Speech Acts and Unspeakable Acts”

Day 17: Slurs—Can saying something be an act of oppression?

- Robin Jeshion, “Slurs, Dehumanization and the Expression of Contempt”

Day 18: Epistemic injustice—Who is denied the status of knower?

- Miranda Fricker, “Testimonial Injustice,” in *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*

Day 19: Epistemic injustice—Who is denied the status of knower?

- Kristie Dotson, “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing”

Day 20: How do we gain knowledge about how oppression works?

- Paolo Freire, Chapter 1, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Day 21: How do we gain knowledge about how oppression works?

- Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger”
- Catherine A. MacKinnon, “Consciousness Raising”

Short paper 3 due

UNIT 4: FROM OPPRESSION TO RESISTANCE (4.5 WEEKS)

Day 22: Challenges to change I—Double binds

- Sukaina Hirji, “Oppressive Double Binds”

Day 23: Challenges to change II—Who gets to speak on behalf of “us”?

- Linda Martín Alcoff, “The Problem of Speaking for Others”

Day 24: Challenges to change III—How can change be co-opted?

- Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House”
- Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, “[Identity Politics and Elite Capture](#)”

Day 25: Modes of change—Solidarity

- Iris Marion Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity”

Day 26: Modes of change—Protest

- Martin Luther King Jr., “Letter from Birmingham City Jail”
- Bernard R. Boxill, “Self-respect and Protest”

Day 27: Modes of change—Social movements

- Elizabeth Anderson, “Social Movements, Experiments in Living, and Moral Progress: Case Studies From Britain’s Abolition of Slavery”

Day 28: Case study—Prisons

- Michelle Alexander, “Introduction,” in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color-blindness*
- Ava DuVernay, *13th*

Day 29: Case study—Prisons

- Angela Davis, “Introduction—Prison Reform or Prison Abolition” & “Slavery, Civil Rights, and Abolitionist Perspectives Toward Prison,” in *Are Prisons Obsolete?*

Day 30: Where do we go from here?

- Kathryn J. Norlock, “Perpetual Struggle”
- Myisha Cherry, “Solidarity Care”

Final paper due