

Frontiers of Social Philosophy: Social Categories

Mondays at 14:05–15:40, and Wednesdays at 14:05–15:40
Room 512, Teaching Building 5

Peter Finocchiaro

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Scan the QR code to add me on WeChat

Course Description:

Every (human) society categorizes people. Often, the categories they use seem inevitable and immutable, as basic as the elements of the periodic table. And yet they seem to change over time and from society to society. Most people in Medieval England were peasants; now, ‘peasant’ is an old-fashioned insult. Some people point to ancient Greece as an example of socially sanctioned bisexuality; but Socrates never would have thought of it in those terms. In this course, we will examine the origins of social categories and ask in what sense some social categories could be better than others. While we will consider the full range of social categories, we will pay extra attention to those that seem to dominate contemporary societies: gender, race, sexual orientation, and class.

This course is an advanced seminar in Social Philosophy. While there are many ways to design an advanced seminar, I have designed this one to be discussion-based and topic-oriented. We will read and discuss three books on the topic of social categories. In addition, you will write three short reply-style papers, one for each book.

Required Texts: Ron Mallon’s *The Construction of Human Kinds*; Ásta’s *Categories We Live By*; Katharine Jenkins’s *Ontology and Oppression*

Optional Texts: There are many excellent articles that discuss social categories, too many to mention on a syllabus. But here are some additional books you may consider acquiring:

- Elizabeth Barnes’s *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*
- Brian Epstein’s *The Ant Trap: Rebuilding the Foundations of the Social Sciences*
- Joshua Glasgow, Sally Haslanger, Chike Jeffers, and Quayshawn Spencer’s *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*
- Ian Hacking’s *The Social Construction of What?*
- Sally Haslanger’s *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*
- John Searle’s *Making the Social World: The Structure of Human Civilization*

- Edward Stein's *The Mismeasure of Desire: the Science, Theory, and Ethics of Sexual Orientation*
- Charlotte Witt's *The Metaphysics of Gender*

(I will provide a PDF file of one of these texts if you send me a picture of a happy cat; eight pictures gets you eight PDFs.)

Letter Grade Distribution: In this course I will use the following scale to convert between numerical and letter grades:

96.00 - 100.00	A+	70.00 - 74.99	B-
90.00 - 95.99	A	67.00 - 69.99	C+
85.00 - 89.99	A-	63.00 - 66.99	C
80.00 - 84.99	B+	60.00 - 62.99	C-
75.00 - 79.99	B	00.00 - 59.99	D

Grade Distribution: The overall grade is determined by the following:

Participation	25%
Paper #1	25%
Paper #2	25%
Paper #3	25%

Course Goals: My goal is help you become a productive junior researcher. In service to that goal, I offer the following three smaller goals:

- to improve your ability to effectively and efficiently read contemporary research (particularly research on the philosophy of social categories);
- to improve (or develop) your ability to fruitfully discuss issues (particularly those issues related to the philosophy of social categories) with your peers;
- to develop your ability to produce philosophical research, especially in the form of insightful reply-style papers.

Assignments

Participation: This course is a discussion-based seminar. I will not lecture. Instead, I will act as one of your peers, and we will all discuss and think through the reading material together. Consequently, your participation is essential. If you have taken a course of mine before, you know how I think about participation: we should be engaged in a soccer match, not a game of ping-pong. To that end, everyone must come to class prepared to discuss. Being prepared to discuss means, at a minimum, that you have read all of the material, you have come up with questions or thoughts to share, and you are ready to respond to the questions and thoughts shared by your peers. Please come

to class prepared to discuss. It will be a painful semester if you do not.

To promote your participation, every week I will send you a personal “progress report”. In this progress report, I will briefly identify some of the ways you have successfully modeled good participation and some of the ways that you could improve as a participant. (My intention is for these progress reports to facilitate an open and honest conversation about how we can all contribute to the quality of a classroom discussion. Please try to not be intimidated by them. I will not be mean.)

Papers: After we finish reading one of the three books, you will write a paper that engages with the ideas presented in that book. This paper should take the form of a “reply” or “discussion note”. In general, discussion notes can be constructive, solve some sort of problem that occurs in the original material, extend the ideas to a new context, and so on. But in this course I want you to write a “critical” discussion note that develops some kind of argument or objection against the ideas presented in the book. Above all else, this discussion note must be concise.

Reading List and Schedule:

Below is a tentative schedule of the material that we will cover throughout the semester. The exact schedule will depend on a variety of factors, the primary factor being how fast we are able to collectively work through the material.

Book 1: Mallon’s *The Construction of Human Kinds*

- Day 1:** Introductions (Optional: Introduction)
- Day 2:** Chapter 1, Sections 1 + 2 (approximately 17 pages)
- Day 3:** Chapter 1, Sections 3 + 4 (approximately 16 pages)
- Day 4:** Chapter 2 (approximately 20 pages)
- Day 5:** Chapter 3 (approximately 26 pages)
- Day 6:** Chapter 4 (approximately 17 pages)
- Day 7:** Chapter 5 (approximately 26 pages)
- Day 8:** Chapter 6, Sections 1 + 2 (approximately 11 pages)
- Day 9:** Chapter 6, Sections 3 + 4 + 5 + 6 (approximately 15 pages)
- Day 10:** Chapter 7 (approximately 20 pages)
- Day 11:** Chapter 8 (approximately 25 pages)
- Day 12:** Chapter 9 (approximately 10 pages)

Book 2: Ásta’s *Categories We Live By*

- Day 13:** Chapter 1, Sections 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 (approximately 17 pages)

Day 14: Chapter 1, Sections 5 + 6 + 7 (approximately 10 pages)

Day 15: Chapter 2 (approximately 20 pages)

Day 16: Chapter 3 (approximately 16 pages)

Day 17: Chapter 4 (approximately 23 pages)

Day 18: Chapter 5 and Conclusion (approximately 23 pages)

Book 3: Katharine Jenkins's *Ontology and Oppression*

Day 19: Chapter 1, Sections 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 (approximately 20 pages)

Day 20: Chapter 1, Sections 5 + 6 + 7 (approximately 10 pages)

Day 21: Chapter 2, Sections 1 + 2 + 3 (approximately 14 pages)

Day 22: Chapter 2, Sections 4 + 5 + 6 (approximately 16 pages)

Day 23: Chapter 3, Sections 1 + 2 + 3 + 4 (approximately 14 pages)

Day 24: Chapter 3, Sections 5 + 6 + 7 + 8 (approximately 25 pages)

Day 25: Chapter 4 (approximately 20 pages)

Day 26: Chapter 5 (approximately 22 pages)

Day 27: Chapter 6 (approximately 17 pages)

Day 28: Chapter 7 (approximately 25 pages)

Day 29: Chapter 8, Sections 1 + 2 + 3 (approximately 19 pages)

Day 30: Chapter 8, Sections 4 + 5 + 6 and Conclusion (approximately 23 pages)

Day 31: Reserved for holiday cancellations, delays in class, or other unexpected events

Day 32: Reserved for holiday cancellations, delays in class, or other unexpected events

(**NB:** if you take a picture of yourself next to a statue at East Lake and send it to me before we finish Mallon's book, I will give you 1 extra credit point.)