Philosophy 203  
Topics in Philosophy:  
PHILOSOPHY AND POLITICS OF IDENTITY

Course Description

Philosophy 203 will investigate the meanings, problems, and possibilities of contemporary identity politics. The course will begin with an examination of three very different approaches toward identity and politics: liberal conceptions of individual rights and religious liberties; existential explorations of nihilism and freedom; and traditionalist understandings of virtue and action. The heart of the course will then trace the emergence of a new kind of identity politics out of racial, feminist, and queer movements of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The term will end by trying to make sense of contemporary discussions of identity and politics, in relation to both the history of Western thought and contemporary cultural and political life. Note that this course is also cross-listed as Feminist and Gender Studies 206, “Topics in Feminist and Gender Studies,” and American Cultural Studies 208, “Topics in Cultural Studies.” Students may enroll under any of these rubrics.

Course Goals

The primary aim of the course will be to help students understand some basic philosophical approaches to understanding identity – both in personal and political or social senses. The course will explore dilemmas and controversies associated with such approaches to identity. An equally important aim of the course will be help students gain perspective on contemporary political controversies associated with the emergence of various forms of identity politics, particularly forms associated with racial, feminist, and queer political movements of the last 40 years or so. Finally, the course will also seek to develop students’ ability to make judgments on controversial issues, using philosophical principles and arguments in combination with social, cultural, and historical interpretations of the changing contexts that shape philosophical horizons.

Philosophy 203 course will seek to develop students’ abilities to read, interpret, and respond to complex texts. Refining and developing interpretations of the texts we read will be emphasized through a number of short writing assignments, combined with discussion and presentations in class. Two longer papers will aim to give students opportunities to develop and defend their judgments about the problems the course will investigate. The second of those papers will enable students to explore in more depth one problem using or another different disciplinary approach and literature. A final informal review essay will allow students to form some conclusions about the materials and problems explored during the block.

Course Requirements

Reading. This course will have a heavy yet quite rewarding reading list. Students will be expected to keep up with the reading throughout the block. Plan to spend a fair amount of time reading before attending class and, at times, re-reading after class. In general, texts are to be brought to our meetings so that they may be referred to in our discussions.

Course Meetings and Discussion. Most course meetings will consist largely of discussion, with some lecturing from time to time. Individual students may be assigned to lead discussions or take part in debates on particular topics periodically. Students should expect to attend class meetings consistently and punctually; and to discuss the subjects and texts under investigation in a civil manner. Performance in discussions will strongly influence the participation grade.
**Writing and Examinations.** Students will write four 1½-2 page reaction papers, two longer essays (4-5 and 6-8 pages, respectively), and a final, longer reaction and review paper (3-4 pages). The short reaction papers may be presented in an informal style, and they will be graded minimally. The two longer essays are to be typed (i.e., word-processed), double-spaced, and annotated in accordance with accepted norms of scholarship (that is, with citations and notes). The longer essays will be given letter grades. The final reaction paper may also be presented in an informal style; however, it will be given a letter grade. Unexcused late papers will be downgraded one step per hour tardy. For detailed explanations of the grading policy, see the end of this syllabus.

**Required Texts**

Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963)

**Additional Readings**


Judith Butler, selections from *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge, 1990, 1999)


Linda M. G. Zerilli, “Feminists Know Not What They Do: Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and the Limits of Epistemology,” from *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom* (University of Chicago Press, 2005)


Other supplemental readings may also be assigned as the block unfolds. All additional and supplemental readings will be available as electronic reserves at:

Grading and Attendance Policies

Grades will be assigned on an 100-point scale and weighted in the following manner:

1. First paper (4-5 pages) Fri., 27 April 25%
2. Second paper proposal Thurs.-Fri., 3-4 May 1%
3. Second paper draft/writing workshop Thurs.-Fri., 10-11 May 2%
4. Second paper (6-8 pages) Tues., 15 May 40%
5. Four reaction papers (2 pages, each) Various dates 8%
6. Final reaction/review paper (3-4 pages) Wed., 16 May 4%
7. Participation All block! 20%

TOTAL: 100%

The two-page reaction papers will be graded minimally: check, minus, zero. For detail on this requirement, see p. 6.

Regular, timely attendance and active participation in discussion are essential parts of the course – worth 20% of your final grade. Unexcused absences and regular tardiness will be noted and will affect grades negatively. Students who miss three or more classes for any reason may be required to withdraw from the course. If you have a good reason to be absent or late, notify me as soon as possible. Be sure to write a note (so that I remember!), as well as to speak to me.

The schedule of assignments appears above. You will be expected to meet all of these deadlines. Exceptions will be made only in extreme and unavoidable circumstances. If you expect to miss submit a paper late, contact me immediately. Either see me in my office, or give me a note or an e-mail message explaining your circumstances. If religious observances or other serious obligations conflict with the course schedule, let me know as soon as possible, and we can work out an alternate schedule for you.

Plan to attend class for the whole period, focusing on coursework throughout. “Attending for the whole period” means, among other things, that you will not leave class to visit the restroom, get a drink of water, chat with friends, call Mom on the cell, and the like. We will take a break about after about an hour and 15 minutes – that is when you may leave class (except in an emergency, of course). If you have a good reason for arriving late or leaving early, please notify me in advance. As a courtesy to all, please turn off all telephones and electronic devices while in class, and if you bring a notebook computer to class, please do not surf the web while we are in session. Note that this entire syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

Honor Code

Students will be expected to abide by the Honor Code. Among other things, the Honor Code specifies that you will be responsible for producing all of your own work and that you will always cite the works or ideas of others used in your work. However, discussing your ideas and your writing with others is not a violation of the Honor Code. In fact, it is a good idea to compare your ideas and writings with those of others and to ask others for criticisms of your work. And using other people’s ideas can also be a good idea – if their ideas are good and you credit the authors for developing the ideas.

Disability Accommodations

If you believe you are eligible for learning accommodations as the result of a qualified disability, please contact me privately. If you believe you may have a disability that impacts learning, and you have not identified yourself to the College’s Disabilities Services Office, please do so immediately. You will find their office in the Colket Student Learning Center at Tutt Library. You may also contact the College’s learning consultant, Dr. Bill Dove, at the Learning Center or directly at extension 6168. I will make appropriate learning accommodations in accordance with the Disabilities Service Office’s instructions.

Office Hours/Communication

I will hold office hours on Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:30-3 p.m. I am also generally be in my office (130 Armstrong) in the afternoon. The easiest way to meet with me would be to make an appointment after class, or via telephone (x6564) or e-mail (dmcennerney@coloradocollege.edu).
SCHEDULE OF MEETINGS, TOPICS, AND ASSIGNMENTS

Note: All assignments are to be completed before class.
Class will meet from 9:20 a.m. to 11:45 a.m., with a 15-minute break around 10:30, except where noted.
* Indicates electronic reserve reading. Roman numerals identify reaction paper groups.

I. Three Conceptions of Identity and Politics

Monday, 23 April  Introduction – Identity, Philosophy, and Politics
Reading: Begin reading Locke and Sartre as soon as possible!

Tuesday, 24 April  Lockeian Consciousness and the Right of Liberty

FIRST PAPER TOPICS DISTRIBUTED

Wednesday, 25 April  Existentialism, the Problem of the Self, and Modern Freedoms
**Class Meets at 1PM**
a. Sartre, Nausea, pp. 1-94. [III]
b. Sartre, Nausea, pp. 94-178. [IV]

Thursday, 26 April  Selfhood: Experiences, Choices, Virtuous Roles?
b. *MacIntyre, “Virtues, Unity of Life, and Concept of Tradition,” pp. 204-225. [VI]

SECOND PAPER ASSIGNMENT DISTRIBUTED

Friday, 27 April  Writing Day
No class meeting – individual appointments available.
FIRST PAPER DUE AT 7 PM

II. New Identifications and New Forms of Political Action

Monday, 30 April  Colonization, Racism, Violence, and National Identity
a. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, pp. 35-106. [I]
b. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, pp. 206-248. [II]

Tuesday, 1 May  Losing Identity: Problem or Good?
a. Fanon, Wretched of the Earth, pp. 249-316. [III]

Wednesday, 2 May  The Liberal State and the Problem of Oppression
a. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, pp. 3-38. [V]
b. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, pp. 39-95. [VI]

Thursday, 3 May  From Impartial Justice to Difference Politics
a. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, pp. 96-163. [I]
b. Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, pp. 163-91. [II]
Afternoon: appointments to discuss paper proposals.
SECOND PAPER PROPOSALS DUE BY APPOINTMENT
Friday, 4 May

**Individual Conferences**

No class meeting – appointments to discuss paper proposals.

**SECOND PAPER PROPOSALS DUE BY APPOINTMENT**

Monday, 7 May

Queering Identity/Difference, Performing Sex/Gender


b. *Jagose, “Queer” and “Afterword,”* pp. 72-100, 127-132; and

Davis, “Gaining a Daughter,” pp. 1-4. [IV]

Tuesday, 8 May

**Honors Convocation**

**Class Meets 9:20-10:30**

**& 1-2:10**

Queering Identity/Difference, Performing Sex/Gender


b. *Jagose, “Queer” and “Afterword,”* pp. 72-100, 127-132; and

Davis, “Gaining a Daughter,” pp. 1-4. [IV]

Tuesday, 8 May

**Honors Convocation**

**Class Meets 9:20-10:30**

**& 1-2:10**

Questioning Identity Politics: Friendly Linguist/Hostile Moralist


Wednesday, 9 May

Tensions and Ambiguities of Contemporary Identities


Thursday, 10 May

Writing Day

No class meeting.

**SECOND PAPER DRAFT DUE AT 3 PM**

Friday, 11 May

**Class Meets in**

**Manitou Springs**

**10 a.m. – 3 p.m.**

A Work in Progress? Philosophical Reflection on Recognition


Afternoon: small group writing workshops, 12:30-3 p.m.

II. Making Sense of Identity and Politics

Monday, 14 May

Selves Beyond Recognition – Yet Ethical?


Tuesday, 15 May

Writing Day

No class meeting – individual appointments available.

**SECOND PAPER DUE AT 3 PM**

Wednesday, 16 May

Democracy and Identification: What’s Missing?


c. Review Locke, Sartre, and MacIntyre.

**FINAL 3-4 PAGE REACTION/REVIEW PAPER DUE**
Two-Page Summary and Reaction Statements

Over the course of the block, students will write at least four short, informal summary-and-reaction statements. These pieces should be divided into two parts:

a) Summary: stating in summary form what strikes you as the most significant or interesting point (or two points) made in the assigned text or texts (½ – 1 page); and

b) Discussion: explaining your reaction to that aspect of the reading (1 – 1 ½ pages).

These statements should be the equivalent of about two word-processed, double-spaced pages – so about 500-600 words long. The format is informal: your statement should list your name, the date, the assignment (the authors, titles, and chapters/pages discussed), and your own title at the top. You should divide the statement into two parts (“Summary” and “Discussion”), one summarizing the reading’s most important point or points and the other giving your reaction to the reading. You need neither quote nor cite the text, though you can, if you think it important to do so. The statements should be written in clear, Standard English prose. The style may be informal.

As you write, don’t try to summarize all the points made in the reading. Focus on one or two points that seem highly significant to you. This point or these points ought to have led you to think about something that seems important, significant, or meaningful. This point or these points need not be central to the reading, although in most cases I expect they will be. You may well write about some minor aside that an author makes, if that aside has led you to begin thinking. Just be sure to explain clearly and accurately what the authors say when you claim the authors argue something. Also, explain your reaction, your interest, your thought process. When I say, “explain,” I don’t mean saying that something is “interesting” or it has “made you think.” Instead, identify what in particular strikes you as interesting, or what specific problems or ideas the reading raised for you, and then give the reader some sense of why any of these ideas seem important or significant to you. What has led you to react in the way you have?

This assignment is meant to focus both on the reading and on your thoughts insofar as they relate to the readings. For the second half of the papers, you may explain why the authors' claims seem to you wrong-headed, or really cogent; why they excite or repel you; why they have made you think of something in a new way, or why they seem to point to a dead end. You may explain why the piece seems really bad or really good to you. This assignment lets you think aloud, as it were. However, the first part of the paper should accurately summarize what the author says.

The assignment also, I hope, will further four other aims. First, it will give you a chance to work on mastering the readings, as well as to demonstrate to me that you have done the reading. If there are parts of the readings that you don’t understand, then write about the problems you have in seeing the author’s points. I’ll try to address those problems, either directly, by commenting on your paper, or indirectly, in class. Second, these assignments are designed to give you some easy practice in writing clearly and coherently. The more you learn to clarify your thoughts on paper, the better off you will be as a writer and student. Third, your comments may provide food for thought for you and your fellow students in class discussion and when you prepare to write essays that are more formal.

These papers will be graded minimally: check, check/minus, minus, zero. I may add no or only a few comments.

- Check: a) the paper clearly and coherently develops an idea; b) it also accurately and fully summarizes what the readings say; and c) it convincingly and clearly shows why this point or line of thought is significant to you.
- Minus: the paper is just thrown together, it lacks careful thought, or it is wildly inaccurate about the reading.
- Check/Minus: somewhere in between the above.
- Zero: nothing or not much submitted.
Checks will earn full credit (2%), check/minus (1.5%) and minuses (1%) partial credit. A check is the equivalent of an “A+” already for 2% of your final grade.

You must write reaction papers on at least four works, but you may write on additional readings – in which case only the four best grades will be counted for the final grade. No late papers will be accepted. Finally, all papers will be e-mailed by 7 a.m. the day they are due, not only to me, but also to the entire class, for use in our discussions.

Note: Students will be assigned to one of six groups, corresponding to numbers listed on reading schedule. These groups and readings are summarized below:

**Group I**

24 Apr. – Locke, *Human Understanding*  
30 Apr. – Fanon, pp. 35-106  
3 May – Young, pp. 96-163  
9 May – Nicholson, or Appiah, “African Identities”

**Group II**

24 Apr. – Locke, *Toleration*  
30 Apr. – Fanon, pp. 206-248  
3 May – Young, pp. 163-191  
9 May – Seidman; or Patton

**Group III**

1 May – Fanon, pp. 249-316  
7 May – Butler, *Gender Trouble*  
11 May – Taylor, pp. 25-51

**Group IV**

25 Apr. – Sartre, *Nausea*, pp. 94-178  
1 May – Rawls  
7 May – Jagose; or Davis  
11 May – Taylor, 51-73; or Appiah, “Identity”

**Group V**

26 Apr. – Sartre, *Existentialism*  
2 May – Young, pp. 3-38  
8 May – Zerilli  

**Group VI**

26 Apr. – MacIntyre  
2 May – Young, pp. 39-95  
8 May – Elshtain  

NOTE: All students will write a 3-4 page reaction and review paper for the final class (4% - formally graded) in the Laden and Norval readings, considered in light of the block, but especially the first four major authors (Locke, Sartre, and MacIntyre).
FURTHER READING

Inquiry into the meaning and lived experience of identity cuts across many fields, including sociology and anthropology (often focusing on the construction of collectivities in particular times and places); psychology (typically examining the development of “the self”); and political science (analyzing the success or failure of national or subcultural group formations). In philosophy, investigations of identity tend to fall into three main categories: accounts of personal identity; inquiry into the logic of identity; and examination of social or political identity.

Below, I have collected—in a very unsystematic way—references to works in each of these areas that Tutt Library owns. I have also included a few important works that Tutt does not yet own. Articles and books appearing in the syllabus are not listed below.

In some cases, the works below are extremely important; others appear here just because our library carries them and a brief look at the book or article led me to think that it might be worth some study. I’ve added a comment or two to some entries. Bear in mind, however, that this bibliography is a work-in-progress. Some important works are neglected, and some of the works here are probably not that significant. I offer this list, partly, to give students a sense of what else might be available on the broad topic of identity; and, partly, to give a way into materials that may be useful in developing a second paper topic.

Identity – Logical and Analytic Accounts


Commonly regarded as one of the founding works of the analytic philosophical tradition.


More in the way of a historical account that debunks logical analysis.

Personal Identity – Philosophical Accounts


A very useful overview of the literature – a good place to start.


The first section contains a good, short historical introduction to the problem of identity.


Very comprehensive collection of articles on the philosophy of personal identity. The introduction presents an extremely thorough (and long) overview of every major Western thinker’s view of personal identity. The subsequent articles cover mainstream (largely analytic) philosophical accounts of identity published since 1970.
Provocative collection of essays by feminist philosophers calling into question the more mainstream philosophical accounts of identity.

Often regarded as the most influential 20th-century account of personal identity – one that belittles the focus on identity.


Christine M. Korsgaard. “Personal Identity and the Unity of Agency: A Kantian Response to Parfit.”  

A good collection of the historical literature on personal identity, including influential works by Locke, Butler, and Hume, as well as the 1971 Parfit article.

A journal issue devoted to the topic of personal identity.

**Social and Political Identity – Philosophical Accounts**


A philosophical inquiry into contemporary identities and identity politics, focusing on gender and race.

A work of political theory questioning whether justice requires recognition.


A short exploration of the problems and possibilities of modern notions of self-fulfillment.


**Historical Approaches to the Self and Identity**


**Social and Political Identity – Sociological and Cultural Accounts**


A sprawling popular book connecting the rise of parochial identifications to the threatening anonymity of the global market order.


Focuses on expressivity and performance, and the ways in which “the new social movements” are not necessarily agents of social change but are instead a more heterogeneous phenomenon.


Examines identity from a traditional sociological and anthropological perspective.


Critiques Anglo-American interest in identity, using classic sociological and political arguments to dispute the significance of cultural identity.


Ethnographic anthropological study of identities in Japan, the U.S., and Hong Kong, questioning whether unique cultural identities exist.


Reflections of prominent anthropologist on the contemporary condition.


Essays on identity from a post-colonial perspective.


A collection of conference papers on modernity and postmodernity that addresses the transformation of identity in a world marked by fluidity and change.


Sprawling inquiry into the rise of new forms of identification in an age in which globalization and massive information flows undermine states and traditional forms of organizing.


Very thorough collection of essays on the problems and promise of identity politics, especially as it involves feminist movements.


Histories of identities in transition in a globalizing world.


One of the most influential accounts of how peoples come to acquire nationalist identifications.
Keywords: Identity: For a Different Kind of Globalization. Other Press, 2004. [Not owned by CC]
A collection of philosophical essays about the meaning of identity as seen from the perspectives of scholars from Africa, the United States, the Arab world, China, Europe, and India.

Psychological Approaches to Personal and Social Identity

Examines collective identities, especially among disadvantaged, dysfunctional minority groups.

Psychoanalytic inquiry into identity politics, its problems and possibilities, as seen from a Black feminist perspective.

Essays building on a model of “social identity” as developed by social psychologists and covering a wide range of topics and behaviors.

Essays from the Blackwell Handbook on Social Psychology addressing the interplay between the individual self and collective selves.