

McGill University

Topics in Feminist Theory PHIL 442 – Winter 2014

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Office Hours: 11.00 am -12.30 pm Tuesdays or by appointment (or send questions by email)

Topic: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy

Autonomy is usually understood by feminist writers in the same way as it is understood within moral psychology generally, namely, as self-government or self-direction: being autonomous is acting on motives, reasons, or values that are one's *own*. Early feminist literature regarded the notion of autonomy with suspicion because it was thought to promote unattractive "masculinist" ideals of personhood; that is, to presuppose a conception of the person as "atomistic," as ideally self-sufficient and operating in a vacuum unaffected by social relationships, or as an abstract reasoner stripped of distorting influences such as emotions. Recently, however, feminists have sought to rehabilitate the notion of autonomy. Some have argued that articulating the conditions of autonomous choice is essential to understanding gender oppression and related concepts such as that of objectification. The challenge facing feminist theorists therefore is to reconceptualize autonomy from a feminist perspective. The term "relational autonomy" is often used to refer to feminist reconceptualizations of the notion of autonomy to contrast feminist accounts with those that presuppose atomistic conceptions of the self. Our basic question in this course will be: "Does patriarchal oppression, including internalized oppression, interfere with women's autonomy?" This will require us to answer subsidiary questions such as: "What is autonomy?" and "Is autonomy a value that feminists should promote?"

Teaching resources

A 'map' of the course is provided by:

Stoljar, N., 2013, "Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), E. N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/feminism-autonomy/>

Most readings will be available either on the web for download or on MyCourses.

For further background, and some readings, see also:

Mackenzie, C. and N. Stoljar (eds.), 2000, *Relational Autonomy Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency and the Social Self*, New York: Oxford University Press.

Lectures and discussions

This is a seminar-style course, so the format will be presentation and discussion. All participants must come to the seminar well-prepared, i.e. (having done the reading for that week) and ready to participate in the discussion.

Evaluation and grading scheme

1. Attendance and Participation 20%
2. Exercise in lieu of January 23: 5 %, due January 28
3. Exercise in lieu of February 27: 5 %, due March 4
4. Mid-term essay: 30%, due March 11
5. Final essay: 40%, due Monday April 14

In accord with McGill University's Charter of Students' Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

Additional note: In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University's control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

Extensions or exceptions for written work.

These will be granted only in exceptional circumstances like serious illness or family emergency and documentation will be required. To apply for an extension, see Natalie Stoljar, or submit a letter with your documentation to the Philosophy Office – Leacock Building Room 908. Extensions will be granted in writing (including by email) and must be attached to your paper when it is submitted.

In the absence of an extension, late penalties will be applied as follows: 3 marks will be deducted for each day of lateness.

Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see <http://www.mcgill.ca/integrity/> for more information).

Note: these issues will be discussed in class after essay topics are distributed.