

Moral Dimensions of Power: An Annotated Syllabus

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This class, will examine how power works—both in theory and in everyday practice—by focusing in on its subtler and more diffuse forms; we will undertake this examination with an eye toward the moral imperatives related to power. We are quite familiar with many of the obvious ways in which power operates: a campus police officer confiscates a case of beer, a professor assigns grades, one boxer defeats another, and the like. However, few would argue that the mere fact that one can act in a particular way means that she ought to. Political philosophers have insightfully distinguished license (the ability to do as one wishes) from liberty (the legitimate right to so act); yet, there has been little in the way of discussion about the way in which power serves to make license appear to be liberty. In this course, we will focus on the expressly moral dimensions of power: the ways in which power structures enable our license outstrip our liberty; the ways in which the license of others serves to limit our liberty; and how we (whether we are the powerful or the powerless) ought to act when we come to recognize these facts.

To this end, we will draw on the philosophical analyses of power provided by various philosophers, among them Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault. Subsequently, we will apply the insights of these philosophers to various contexts, using them to highlight the operations of power and illuminate the imperatives which might be hidden by not treating these contexts as loci of power. We will begin with a brief, focused discussion of wealth, a highly concentrated form of power; we will examine the way uses of wealth (America's classic form of license) are morally constrained. Subsequently, we will look at philosophical accounts of more subtle and diffuse forms of power, including some familiar contexts (race, gender, and sexual identity) and some perhaps surprising ones (mass media discourse and software distribution).

■ **N.B.** This syllabus is a combination of material from different versions of this course. I've not yet taught some of the sections or material (e.g., the Disabilities and Fat Studies sections).

Required Texts

In addition to online resources available through various sources (course website, JSTOR, etc.), there are two required books:

1. Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche—*On the Genealogy of Morals/ Ecce Homo* (Translated by Walter Kaufmann)
2. Michel Foucault—*Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*

Topics and Readings

Wealth, Power, and License

- Peter Singer, “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”

Power as Mastery of Self and Others

- Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

Power as Social Control

- Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*

Gender as Mastery and Control

- Marilyn Frye, “Sexism”
- Sandra Bartky, *Femininity and Domination*, chapter 5. (“Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization Power of Patriarchal Power”)
- William Pollack, *Real Boys*, Chapter 2 (“Stories of shame and the haunting trauma of separation: how we can connect with boys and change the ‘boy code’ ”)
- Pat Califia, “Manliness”
- **Media:** “Boys will be girls” and “Girls will be boys,” Harvard Sailing Team <http://harvardsailingteam.com/>
- **Media:** *The Simpsons: Homer’s Phobia*

Race, Power, and Privilege

- bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, chapters 1 (“Black Women: Shaping Feminist Theory”) & 2 (“Feminism: A Movement to End Sexist Oppression”)
- Kimberle Crenshaw, “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color,” *Stanford Law Review*. Vol. 43, No. 6 (Jul., 1991), 1241-1299
- Angela Y. Davis, “Race and Criminalization: Black Americans and the Punishment Industry” and “Racialized Punishment and Prison Abolition”
- W.E.B. Du Bois
 - “The Dilemma of the Negro” and “Separation and Self-Respect”
 - Richard T. Schaefer, “Double Consciousness.” *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*. 2008. DOI : 10.4135/9781412963879 Print pages: 412-414

■ Singer’s “Famine, Affluence, and Morality” gives us a glimpse into how privilege and power make us unaware of their operation by highlighting how something that we do, seemingly unproblematically, on a regular basis might be immoral.

■ Nietzsche’s *Genealogy* introduces two features of power: (i) production of a new kind of person via the internalization of norms and (ii) power camouflages itself as a natural feature of humans.

■ *Discipline and Punish* provides a second perspective on power and internalization of norms by examining the operations of “discipline” on “docile bodies” in institutions throughout post-Enlightenment culture.

■ There is much to say about gender, but here we focus on how gender is the embodiment of norms, and so the operation of power in both the “master” and “social control” manners.

■ A natural development is to highlight how feminist discourse has surreptitiously understood “woman” to mean “white, middle-class, straight, cis-gendered, etc” woman. This section highlights how privilege created the conditions for that sort of feminism by focusing on race and intersectionality. We also revisit the prison to see how racism and imprisonment work in the US. Du Bois plays two roles here, diagnosing a source of the problem and offering a solution.

■ There are two parts of Du Bois’s thought that are relevant to this discussion: the concept of “double consciousness” and his prescription of separatism as a solution for racism.

- Ernest Allen Jr., “On The Reading Of Riddles: Rethinking DuBoisian ‘Double Consciousness’ ” <http://www.umass.edu/afroam/downloads/allen.riddles.pdf>

- **Film:** *The Black Power Mixtape 1967-1975*

Other Dimensions of Embodiment: Disabilities Studies

- From: *The Disabilities Studies Reader*, Leonard Davis (ed.), Routledge, 2010
 - Tom Shakespeare, “The Social Model of Disability”
 - Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, “Deaf Studies in the 21st Century: ‘Deaf-Gain’ and the Future of Human Diversity”
 - Nirmala Erevelles and Andrea Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses: Untangling Race and Disability in Discourses of Intersectionality”
 - Margaret Price, “Defining Mental Disability”
 - Joseph N. Straus, “Autism as Culture”
 - Catherine Prendergast, “The Unexceptional Schizophrenic: A Post-Postmodern Introduction”

■ Disabilities Studies examines the institutions and representations that define, create, and reinforce disability, resisting the reduction of a disability to a problem to be solved.

Other Dimensions of Embodiment: Fat Studies

- A.C. Saguy and K.W. Riley, “Weighing Both Sides: Morality, Mortality, and Framing Contests Over Obesity,” *J Health Polit Policy Law*. 2005 Oct;30(5):869-921
- From: *The Fat Studies Reader*. edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay; foreword by Marilyn Wann., New York University Press, 2009
 - Joyce L. Huff, “Access to the Sky: Airplane Seats and Fat Bodies as Contested Spaces,”
 - Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig, “Sitting Pretty: Fat Bodies, Classroom Desks, and Academic Excess”
 - Julie Guthman, “Neoliberalism and the Constitution of Contemporary Bodies”
 - D. Neumark-Sztainer, “The Weight Dilemma: A Range of Philosophical Perspectives,” *International Journal of Obesity* (1999) 23, Suppl 2, 31–37

■ Much like Disabilities Studies, Fat Studies examines institutions and representations of a phenomenon while resisting the impulse for medicalization and the reduction of it to a problem to be solved; here, the subject is body size.

Discursive Power

- Michel Foucault, “What is Enlightenment?” In *The Foucault Reader*, edited by Paul Rabinow. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984. 32-50.
- Jürgen Habermas, “Taking Aim at the Heart of the Present,” in Hoy, D (ed) *Foucault: A critical reader*. Basil Blackwell. Oxford, 1986

■ Moving beyond the body, we turn to some of the ways that discourse can embody power. The “Foucault–Habermas Debate” (which never actually happened) addresses issues regarding the value and efficacy of methods (i.e., genealogical vs communicative) in critiquing power. *Manufacturing Consent* (the book) highlights how public discourse can be shaped by problematic-yet-invisible assumptions; *Manufacturing Consent* (the film) gives a nice overview of Chomsky’s life and work.

- Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, Chapter 1 (“A Propaganda Model”)
- **Film:** *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*

Power on Campus

- “Power in the Classroom: How the Classroom Environment Shapes Students’ Relationships with Each Other and with Concepts,” Lindsay L. Cornelius and Leslie Rupert Herrenkohl, *Cognition and Instruction* Vol. 22, No. 4, (2004), 467-498
- Washington and Lee University policy on consensual relationships <http://www2.wlu.edu/x32854.xml>
- AAUP report on consensual relationships <http://www.aaup.org/report/consensual-relations-between-faculty-and-students>

■ One way to bring the issues of the course home to students is to highlight the power structure that they occupy *as* students: the classroom. Material about classroom environments and the rationale for university prohibitions on faculty/student relationships are one way to go; an alternative might be more systematic critiques of the neo-liberal agenda in higher education.

Intellectual Property and Power: The Free Software Movement

- Free Software Lots of good information and further reading can be found at: <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/philosophy.html>
 - <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/free-sw.htm>
 - <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/shouldbefree.html>
 - <http://www.gnu.org/philosophy/why-free.html>
- **Film:** *Revolution: OS*

■ The Free Software movement raises important questions about what it means to control one’s own hardware, whether we ought to conceive of software along the lines of physical objects or discourse, what moral values are embedded in a distribution model (i.e., what sorts of activity do they license and prohibit), etc. I’ve taught this module several times, and it is an interesting and fun way to close discussions of the problems raised by institutions.

Rationality, Transgression, and Solidarity

- Iris Young, “From Guilt to Solidarity: Sweatshops and Political Responsibility”
- Immanuel Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”
- Mill, “On Liberty” <http://www.bartleby.com/130/>

■ The solution(s) to the sorts of problems highlighted in this course are frequently difficult to discern, and as a philosopher, I’m not professionally situated to offer any. But there are instructive texts that might prove helpful in showing students the way forward. The Young piece highlights that people with privilege aren’t (or at least might not be) guilty (i.e., of creating these institutions), but that they might nonetheless have solidarity-based obligations to undermine them. Both the Kant and Mill offer pictures of transgression—the ability to critique and subvert institutions without exiling oneself from them (a theme of “What is Enlightenment?”). This requires the kind of creativity and experimentation highlighted in *On Liberty*.