

Feminist Ethics and Epistemology

PHL 456

Fall 2011

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M, W, 12:40-2:30, 409 Agriculture Building
Office hours M, W 10:00-noon or by appointment

Philosophers have typically thought about knowledge as if the social position of the knower were irrelevant. So, for example, standard conceptions of what can be known are based on an idealized representation of selves who are fully mature, able-bodied, self-sufficient, unencumbered by dependent others, in control, and the social equals of other selves. Not coincidentally, philosophers have thought about morality in the same way—the social position of the moral agent is irrelevant, and the picture of the moral agent is an idealized one of a self who is fully mature, able-bodied, self-sufficient, and so on. In this course, by contrast, we'll look at the social position of mothers, to see what it is they have to know to do the work of mothering. And then we'll consider an argument to the effect that morality is not a body of idealized knowledge, but rather a complicated practice, engaged in from many social positions, of being responsible for things worthy of care, and holding ourselves and others accountable for this.

The course aims to give students the methodological skills that allow them to think clearly and critically about these matters. Students should acquire an understanding of the gendered context in which knowledge is created and morality is practiced, how culture and social position complicate any adequate account of ethics and epistemology, and how resistance of oppressive practices of knowing and responsibility are possible.

Required Texts:

Sara Ruddick, *Maternal Thinking: Toward a Politics of Peace*.

Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Understandings: A Feminist Study in Ethics*, 2nd edition.

How We Proceed:

The point of this course is to teach you how to think carefully and critically about the ethical and epistemological issues we'll be addressing. Much of our class time will therefore be devoted to showing you how to do this kind of thinking and then letting you practice on each other.

If I have to make minor changes to the syllabus because something isn't working right, I will of course let you know immediately.

Grades:

Midterm project (30%): Instead of a midterm paper or exam, you'll present a group project to the class. Each group will consist of no more than five people, and this is your chance to get creative with them. Your assignment is to research any group of women except mothers: women in a foreign country, women in U.S. politics, women in factories, disabled women, elderly women, African American women, Native American women, women on farms, women physicians—you name it. The presentation can be

anything from a skit to a video, to a poster session, to an interview, or whatever you think would be informative and fun. Each group will have half a class period for the presentation, and it must be accompanied by a report (5 pages or so) explaining which member of the group did what.

Short essay (20%): You'll write a 5-page paper in which you identify some aspect of Ruddick's book, offer an opinion about it, and argue for your view.

Final paper (40%): You'll identify any issue in feminist ethics or epistemology that interests you, develop an argument in support of your own view of the issue, and then summarize an article in the peer-reviewed professional literature that argues *against* your view. Finally, you'll explain what is wrong with the argument in the literature—that is, why it does *not* show that your view is incorrect. A draft of the paper will be due two weeks ahead of the due date. You should be able to do this assignment in 5-6 pages.

Class participation (10%): This has to do with how well you participate in class discussions. Occasionally, to prepare you for these discussions, I will ask you to write a one-page reflection—and I mean *one* page—on the reading that is due for the next class meeting. These will consist of two well-developed paragraphs, one summarizing the argument of the reading and the other assessing the argument.

Good Manners:

Ordinary forms of politeness will be observed: you are expected to come to class prepared, to arrive on time, not to slip out early, not to surf the Internet or multitask when you should be giving me or your teammates your attention, and to turn off your cell phones. Attendance is required, and while I'm happy to be reasonable about this, excessive absences will be reflected in your grade. Please let me know via e-mail if you will not be in class on a given day.

Course Schedule

W, Aug. 31. Getting your feet wet.

M, Sept. 5. Labor Day. Classes do not meet.

W, Sept. 7. Ruddick, "Love's Reason" and Chapter 1

M, Sept. 12. Ruddick, Chapter 2

W, Sept. 14. Ruddick, Chapter 3

M, Sept. 19. Ruddick, Chapter 4

W, Sept. 21. Ruddick, Chapter 5

M, Sept. 26. Ruddick, Chapter 6

W, Sept. 28. Ruddick, Chapter 7

M, Oct. 3. Ruddick, Chapter 8

W, Oct. 5. Midterm project preparation day. Class does not meet.

M, Oct. 10. Ruddick, Chapter 9

W, Oct. 12. Midterm project preparation day. Class does not meet.

M, Oct. 17. Short essay due. Groups 1 and 2

W, Oct. 19. Class cancelled due to flu

M, Oct. 24. Group 3 and discussion

W, Oct 26. Walker, Chapter 1

M, Oct. 31. Walker, Chapter 2

W, Nov. 2. Walker, Chapter 3

M, Nov. 7. Walker, Chapter 4

W, Nov. 9. Harding, "Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is 'Strong Objectivity'? Guest: Sandra Harding

M, Nov. 14. Walker, Chapter 5. Final papers workshop

W, Nov. 16. Final paper drafts due. Walker, Chapter 6

M, Nov. 21. Walker, Chapter 7

W, Nov. 23. Class does not meet. It's Thanksgiving, for heaven's sake!

M, Nov. 28. Walker, Chapter 8

W, Nov. 30. Walker, Chapter 9

M, Dec. 5. Walker, Chapter 10

W, Dec. 7. Final papers presented in class.