

# Phil 2237

## Feminist Philosophy

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Mount Royal University Fall 2012 3 credits

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### Course Overview

This course is an introduction to feminist philosophy. The course has two main objectives: first, to engage with feminism as an institutionalized area of study within the discipline of philosophy, becoming familiar with the debates, methods, and concepts that preoccupy feminist philosophers; second, to engage with feminism as a political, moral, and ethical endeavour, learning about historical as well as current and ongoing feminist projects.

Rather than attempting to secure any ultimate definition of feminism or any conclusive decisions about feminist philosophy, we will explore, evaluate, and test out a variety of arguments and practices. We will focus especially on those debates and disjunctions that seem irresolvable or incommensurable in order to orient ourselves to the commitments, choices, and constraints that characterize intellectual and activist feminisms. Ideally, this course will involve considerable self-reflection, as our own choices and commitments will be implicated in our readings and discussions.

This seminar on feminist philosophy coincides with a three-day philosophy conference, *Theorizing the Body, Embodiment, and Body-Practices*, which will be held on our campus on Oct 26-28. In the first two months of the semester, we will study texts written by various conference participants, including the keynote speaker. The conference itself will be a pivotal component of this course, not only because of the philosophical presentations that we will attend together but also because it will enable us to notice and discuss the conventions that underpin the academic production of knowledge. It is *necessary* that every student plan to attend the conference. The theme of the conference will also supply a major thematic focus of our course, since the study of the body and bodily practices constitutes much of the discipline of feminist philosophy and the ongoing development of feminist activism.

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### Course Texts

These are the texts to buy for this class. There will also be articles to read, available via authorized links to library sources on our course Blackboard site; one article, which has been cleared for copyright by the library, will be handed out to you in class.

1. Janet Halley, *Split Decisions: How and Why to Take a Break from Feminism*. (Princeton, 2008)
2. Cressida J. Heyes, *Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies* (Oxford, 2007)
3. Alison Bechdel, *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2008)
4. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1* (Vintage, 1990)
5. Nella Larsen, *Passing* (Rutgers, 2000)

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### Course Policies and Assignments

#### Participation

The participation grade will result from sincere engagement with the readings and from considerate and respectful responses to classmates' comments. This will be a very collaborative seminar, given the

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highly personal and interpersonal nature of the curriculum. Everyone's voice is valuable and significant. Since we only meet once a week and since several holidays interrupt our regular meetings, unexcused absences will be not only noted but taken very seriously. It's important to commit to attending every meeting.

Throughout the semester, we will be exploring different forms of feminism and different approaches to feminist philosophy, not only by reading and discussing material but by *performing* the various ideas in class. This means in part that we will experiment with the limits and boundaries of arguments, and we will explore overarching ideals like equality, pluralism, and inclusivity. In order to do justice to the course itself, we'll each need to pay attention to our classroom dynamics, opening them up to discussion and theorizing when necessary.

As well, the conference *Theorizing the Body, Embodiment, and Body-Practices* (held at MRU on Oct 26-28) is a compulsory component of our course, and every student needs to attend at least several sessions of the event. We will do a lot of preparing in class, and we'll set up groups before-hand so that everyone will have comfortable company for this experience. It won't be possible to make up the conference if you aren't able to attend at least several of the sessions, so make sure that you are able to come to campus that weekend. Many of our in-class exercises and discussions will hinge up participating in this philosophy event. Throughout the term, we will read scholarship by conference participants, and there will be links to additional other articles and books by participants on Blackboard.

## 1. Reading Responses

Learning objectives: to be able to read a text closely; to be able to identify the main premises and conclusion of an argument in order to outline a pressing debate or open-ended question; to be able to explain this debate to the class succinctly and clearly.

During the semester, you will sign up for *three* class periods for which you will prepare a careful two-page explication of the arguments in the reading(s) of the day. **The two-page response is due in class on the day of the assigned readings.** Ideally, choose one reading from each unit (3 in all).

The main task in this writing assignment is to outline the debate(s) about feminism or feminist philosophy that you encounter in the text. Since some of our readings are polemical, at times the debates will be explicitly called out and named within the text itself; in this case, the challenge will be to clarify what questions and tensions constitute the debate and what is at stake (politically or morally) in how we choose to adjudicate this debate. Since some of our readings are literary and creative, at times the debates will be subtle and implicit, necessitating some inventive and careful thinking on your own part as the reader in order to find, name, and unpack a debate.

You'll be graded on **two main criteria** for these responses: how clearly you identified the questions or concepts or interpretations that animate the debate that you find most significant in the assigned reading; how thoughtfully you elaborated the stakes of the debate, either in terms of its import for feminist politics or for feminist philosophy or for morality/politics/ethics more broadly.

One word of advice: since you'll be signing up for a specific week of readings, there isn't going to be an excusable reason for not being prepared. **Read ahead!** Read slowly, take careful notes, and enjoy the tasks involved with understanding a complicated argument. This work will be extremely useful, I promise, for all of the other assignments in this course.

## 2. Alison Bechdel, Embodiment, and Feminism

Learning objectives: to be able to apply abstract philosophical questions to a literary depiction of both real-world political and economic situations and fictional intimate relationships/ communities.

Here are some of the relevant questions for this assignment:

How is feminist activism connected to the production of knowledge, particularly feminist forms of knowledge? How does the history of the feminist movement within North America intersect with the development of feminist philosophy? How has feminism as a movement changed, over the past two decades, and how has philosophy as an academic discipline changed? What's the difference between "second wave" and "third wave" feminism, and do they put forward *differing* conceptions of bodily practice and embodiment?

Why does it matter, both philosophically and in terms of feminist critique, how we understand the body? What are the philosophical implications of bodily practices, especially those bound up with sexed and gendered identity claims and those that enact political and ethical commitments? How gendered is bodily desire? How can embodiment itself be seen as a resource for feminist transformation? Conversely, how does embodiment pose real problems of repression and oppression, especially when we consider the broader context of global market capitalism?

Since our course has a twofold emphasis—on feminist *philosophy* and on feminist *activism*—we will be exploring philosophical questions alongside actual socially and politically charged scenarios. One way in which we'll engage with these themes is to read together the graphic novel, Alison Bechdel's *The Essential Dykes to Watch Out For*. Bechdel's book does two things (among many others): it sketches out the recent history of feminist politics, and it portrays the specific relationships and crises of a group of characters who are clearly invested in the questions that animate our own course.

As well as reading the book, students will present in class a *close reading* of the text. You'll work in groups, and you can choose which portion of the text (assigned to you in advance) to focus on in class.

You'll have ten minutes to raise several questions (chosen from the list above), point out crucial elements in the text, and provoke discussion. Be selective and succinct! Remember that our course is focused on the open-ended or irresolvable tensions within feminism. In order to keep focused on the debates that characterize historical and contemporary feminist projects, try to orient your presentation towards such tensions. Look, for example, at the questions that Bechdel's text itself seems to open up (especially in terms of dissent among the characters).

Feel free to be personal in your presentation: are there versions of feminist thought that you identify with, that you find compelling or persuasive? At the same time, are there arguments or positions that you find off-putting or problematic? We are reading Bechdel in part because this text supplies a broader context for the concepts and questions we'll be engaging with throughout the semester. It's not a neutral kind of story-telling, however, and so it's entirely appropriate to interact with the text in politically or existentially committed ways. Bechdel's own characters enact differing political commitments and presumptions, and so you might advance your own analysis of the text by testing your own reactions to the various characters' identity-politics, arguments, and transformations.

### 3. Group Project—conference attendance and analysis

Learning objectives: To think collaboratively about the nature of feminist philosophy by reading articles, attending presentations, and analyzing the *Theorizing the Body, Embodiment and Body-Practices* conference that we'll attend as a class.

In groups, you will work on specific questions about philosophy and feminism, thinking especially about the sessions that you'll observe at the conference. We will discuss your findings in class on the Monday after the conference. This group project will enable each of you to observe and think about the very production of knowledge, as demonstrated by the graduate students and faculty members who are presenting new research at the event. There will be many philosophical questions for each group to reflect on, as well as social, political, and ethical questions related to the relation of feminist philosophy to the broader discipline of philosophy and to the university itself.

### 4. Feminist Philosophy Project—research & response

Learning objectives: To further deepen the examination of the themes of the course through research; to identify a research question that is of personal interest and develop it into a paper

This project is your chance to expand one of the three short reading responses into a longer analysis *or* to develop an analysis of one of the feminist debates at you (or another student) presented to the class or that we discussed together during our seminar meetings. It could be an excellent idea to focus on the scholarship by one of the conference presenters, since you'll get the chance to observe many feminist philosophers in action.

The project should be 7-8 pages long, and you should incorporate some sources other than what we've read in class. If you choose to analyze contemporary media or pop culture, you can possibly incorporate non-academic internet sites (as long as you can justify their theoretical value for your project).

The project should do two things: identify one specific debate or question within feminist thought and assess its philosophical significance for any broader theme (ethics; morality; law; freedom; anti-racist, anti-homophobic, or anti-sexist critique; postcolonial self-reflection; class and consumption). The point is to clarify what's at stake in this debate and to think through your own choices and commitments as you adjudicate the arguments and concepts that are implicated by the debate. It is up to you whether you'd like to focus this project more on feminist activism or on feminist philosophy. It will be due at the end of exam week.

## Grades

- Participation: 20 %
  - In-Class Facilitation of Alison Bechdel: 10 %
  - Three Reading Responses: 10 % each
  - Group Conference Project: 20 %
  - Feminist Philosophy Project: 20 %
- Note: this course has received exemption from the mandated final exam policy and therefore will not have a final exam.

Mark (%)	95-100	85-94	80-84	77-79	73-76	70-72	67-69	63-66	60-62	55-59	50-54	0-49
Grade	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	F
GPA	4.0	4.0	3.7	3.3	3.0	2.7	2.3	2.0	1.7	1.3	1.0	0
Description from Policy 507, Grades and Examinations	Excellent. Superior performance, showing comprehensive understanding of subject matter.			Good. Clearly above average performance with knowledge of the subject matter generally complete.			Satisfactory. Basic understanding of the subject matter.			Marginal performance. (Generally insufficient preparation for subsequent courses).		Fail. Assigned to students: a)who do not meet the academic requirements of the course, or b)who cease to continue in the course, but do not withdraw as per Mount Royal University policy.

## TENTATIVE SCHEDULE

- Unit 1**
- Sept 10** Introduction; sign up for 2-page readings
- Sept 17** Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (3-35); Cressida Heyes, "Foucault Goes to Weight Watchers" in *Self-Transformations* (63-88)  
Sign up for Bechdel presentations

**Foucault,  
Body-  
Practices,  
Sexuality,  
and Critique**

**Sept 24** Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol 1* (3-13; 36-49); Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (41-60; 79-90)

Bechdel presentations

**Oct 1** Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol 1* (77-114); Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (119-150).

Bechdel presentations

**Oct 8** *Canadian Thanksgiving—no class*

**Oct 15** Cressida Heyes, "Feminist Solidarity after Queer Theory: The Case of Transgender" *Self-Transformations* (38-62); Talia Mae Bettcher, "Full Frontal Morality: The Naked Truth about Gender" (*Hypatia* 2012) (posted on Blackboard); Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (227-279).

Bechdel presentations

**Unit 2**

**Gender,  
Sex, Sexuality  
, and the  
Problem of  
Knowledge/  
Norms**

**Oct 22** Alexis Shotwell, "Open Normativities: Gender, Disability, and Collective Political Change" (*Signs* 2012; handout provided in class); Cressida Heyes, "Somaesthetics for the Normalized Body" and "Life Style?" *Self-Transformations* (111-136).

Guest Speaker: Alexis Shotwell

**Oct 26-28** *Theorizing the Body, Embodiment and Body-Practices conference*

**Oct 29** Post-conference group presentations, debriefing, discussion

**Nov 5** Luce Irigaray, "When Our Lips Speak Together" (from *This Sex Which is Not One*, posted on Blackboard); Nancy Tuana, "Coming to Understand: Orgasm and the Epistemology of Ignorance," (*Hypatia* 2004, posted on Blackboard)

Bechdel presentations

**Nov 12** *"Remembrance day"—no class*

**Unit 3**

**Desire, Race,  
and the Law**

**Nov 19** Ladelle McWhorter, "Sex, Race, and Biopower: A Foucauldian Genealogy," (Blackboard); Cressida Heyes, "Aesthetic Surgery, Aesthetic Ethics," *Self-Transformations* (89-110); Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol 1* (135-159).

Bechdel presentations

**Nov 26** Angela Y. Davis, "Race, Gender, and the Prison Industrial Complex" (2011 *Meridians*, posted on Blackboard); Mel Y. Chen, "Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections" (GLQ 2011, posted on Blackboard);

*Optional reading:* Janet Halley, *Split Decisions* (348-363)

Bechdel presentations

**Dec 3** Nella Larsen, *Passing: A Novella*

## Final Project presentations