

Introduction to the Philosophy of Race and Racism

I. Content Overview

This course serves as an introduction to contemporary theories of race and racism. Race is a highly salient feature of modern social life, but it has become such a core part of the “common sense” of certain societies that we do not often pause to ask: what is race, after all? Is it merely “skin-deep,” nothing but inherited skin color and appearance? If so, how could it have such a powerful influence on the way politics are conducted and the way people relate to one another in their daily lives? Moreover, racial injustice has likewise been an enduring feature of modern societies. What kinds of injustice flow from our social practices around race? What causes these injustices? What can we do about them?

This course will unfold over four interconnected parts. First, we’ll explore the question of what *race* or *races* are—what philosophers call the “metaphysics of race.” Is race a natural feature of human biology, or is it something created by human social practices—and if so, how? Second, we’ll look at several accounts of the historical origins of our ideas and practices around race, considering in particular the formation of the white/Black racial distinction in the United States, the formation of the complex hierarchy of race, color, and indigeneity in Latin America, and the formation of ideas of racial and civilizational difference arising from European colonialism in the Middle East and Asia. Third, we will consider the question of what *racism* is—is racism a kind of prejudice that resides in our hearts and minds? Or is it built into our institutions and social structures? Lastly, we’ll consider the relationship between racism and other salient features of modern society—particularly social and economic class, and gender.

II. Format Overview & Learning Objectives

This course takes the format typical to those given in philosophy departments, which means that we will focus on reading selected texts very carefully in order to examine 1) the particular claims and viewpoints presented within each excerpt of text we read, and 2) the arguments given in support of these viewpoints. You may find that compared to some courses given in other disciplines, we cover somewhat less an amount of reading; however, we will read the texts we do more closely and carefully than sometimes happens in the courses for other disciplines.

Some texts will be denser and more difficult than others—sometimes because they come from a very different philosophical context than our own. You will need to read each text more than once in order to begin to understand it. If you do, you will find that these texts are immensely rich and rewarding, revealing new things to you each time you look at them.

You will not understand everything said—even those of us who study philosophy for years don’t understand everything we read, especially on the first or second reading, and I have many questions about these texts I hope we can explore together. If you attempt to chew on this dense material, you will find that the philosophical activity itself *is* the chewing and the difficulty—the activity of philosophy is having new questions and ideas raised for you that you can’t immediately make sense of.

It is crucial that you read each text *before* class, and you will also find it helpful to reread the texts after class in order to incorporate new understandings we develop during the class. When you read, you should write notes in the margins or on a separate document, trying to write down what you think the key ideas and arguments are, as well as what terms or arguments you don't understand. The focus is to get a sense of how the philosophers we read make the case for the viewpoints—not to merely get a summary of some of their key ideas, but rather to enter into their argumentative stance and see *why* they make they claims that they do.

By the end of the course students will:

1. Have a *working familiarity* with some key concepts in the philosophy of race, including *social construction, racial essentialism, racial bias and prejudice, structural/institutional racism, intersectionality*, and others.
2. Have gained *significant practice* reading and interpreting difficult philosophical texts in order to analyze and evaluate their claims and arguments.
3. Have gained *significant practice* in formulating objections and criticisms, backed up by arguments, to philosophical claims about race and racism.
4. Apply concepts from the course to their experiences of race and racism in everyday life.

III. **Assignments and Grading**

Attendance and Participation: Students will be expected to attend every class. 10 percent of your final grade will be based on your attendance and participation; if you miss a very large number of classes (in the ballpark of a quarter to a third of classes total), then your final grade may be penalized beyond this 10 percent.

Reading Responses: For each reading, students will have to complete one reading response. These will be graded more on the quality of engagement with the text and effort than correctness of capturing the author's views. Students will have the option to write a short interpretation and reconstruction of the main argument in the reading, or to answer a brief set of questions about the argument and voice an objection to a claim in the reading.

Papers: There will be two papers.

Grade Breakdown: The final grade will be a weighted average of the following:

20% Attendance and Participation
25% Paper 1
30% Paper 2
25% Reading Responses

IV. **Discussion Norms**

We will be discussing some contentious topics. You and others may feel strongly about these, and also think that those who disagree with you are making quite serious moral mistakes. You and others may also have been personally affected by some of the issues we

are discussing. To make sure that everyone gets the most out of the discussion, it is important that the discussion is governed by some ground rules. The point of these is to encourage an atmosphere in which everyone feels comfortable, and that fosters debates everyone learns from. (I borrow these, with some revisions, from this very helpful website: <http://crlt.umich.edu/publinks/generalguidelines>):

- Listen respectfully, without interrupting.
- Listen actively and with an ear to understanding others' views. (Don't just think about what you are going to say while someone else is talking.)
- Criticize ideas, not individuals.
- Commit to learning, not debating. Avoid blame, speculation, and inflammatory language.
- Allow everyone the chance to speak.
- Avoid assumptions about any member of the class or generalizations about social groups. Do not ask individuals to speak for their (perceived) social group.

To be clear, you should feel free to disagree with what the readings, the professor, the TAs, or your fellow students are saying. But when you disagree with the readings or one of your peers, try to back up your response with reasons, rather than just state your opinion. And when you advance your view, ask yourself why others (perhaps especially those who have personal experience with a phenomenon) may disagree with you. Our aim in philosophical discussion is not to win an argument, but to better understand the issue we are discussing - including why there may be important disagreement about it.

Because the topics we are discussing are important and contentious, your professor and TAs will likely have views on them. But our purpose in the class is not to convince you of our views. It is to explore with you the arguments for and against different views, and to assess their force and plausibility. We will not, for instance, grade you based on whether your views are the right ones (as we see the matter). An essay that thoughtfully defends what I think is a mistaken view will get a better grade than one that asserts, without good argument, the position I myself think is correct.

V. **Course Policies and Accommodations**

Accommodations for students with disabilities: Academic accommodations are available to any students with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should register with NYU's Henry and Lucy Moses Center for students with Disabilities, 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, New York NY 10003-6675. Tel. 212-998-4980. Website: www.nyu.edu/csd

Laptops & Smart Devices: I will allow laptops and smart devices in class for the purpose of accessing the readings—it's good to have these in front of you in class. And I will allow you to take notes on one of these devices if you choose to.

However, I strongly discourage you from doing so, and instead encourage you to take notes by hand. Research has shown that laptop use is detrimental to learning for the user

(<https://doi.org/10.1177/095679761667731>), for those sitting nearby (<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2012.10.003>), and that taking notes by hand helps many people learn better (<https://doi.org/10.1177/0956797614524581>).

Instead, I encourage you to take notes by hand, and refer to your device just for the readings, or print the readings out if you prefer.

If someone in class is using their laptop in a manner that is distracting to you, I encourage you to first ask them if they could keep to just the reading and/or their notes, and then to talk me or one of your TAs if it keeps happening.

VI. Office Hours

I will hold regular office hours.

VII. Schedule

Below is a schedule for the course describing what we will cover each day and week. It is subject to change, and if I make changes, I will update the syllabus on Brightspace.

The required reading that is listed below a day must be read *before* that day's class, to be discussed in class on that date. All readings are posted as PDFs on Brightspace.

Again, you will need to read each text more than once in order to begin to understand it. It is crucial that you read each text *before* class, and you will also find it helpful to reread the texts after class in order to incorporate new understandings we develop during the class. When you read, you should write notes in the margins or on a separate document, trying to write down what you think the key ideas and arguments are, as well as what terms or arguments you don't understand.

Part 1: What is race? (the 'metaphysics of race')

Class 1 – Introduction to the class and syllabus

Class 2 – Jim Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy"; David W. Concepción, "Reading as a Philosopher"

Class 3 – Anthony Appiah, "Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections"

Class 4 – Appiah, continued

Class 5 – Sally Haslanger, "Tracing the Sociopolitical Reality of Race," in *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*

Class 6 – Haslanger, continued

Class 7 – Chike Jeffers, "Cultural Constructionism," in *What is Race? Four Philosophical Views*

Class 8 – Jeffers, continued

Class 9 – Ian Hacking, “Why Race Still Matters”

Class 10 – Hacking, continued

Part 2: What are the historical origins of race and racism?

Class 11 – Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Chapters 1-3

Class 12 – Omi and Winant, continued

Class 13 – Barbara Jeanne Fields, “Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America,” in *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*

Class 14 – Fields, continued

Class 15 – Edward Telles, *Pigmentocracies: Ethnicity, Race, and Color in Latin America*, Chapters 1-2

Class 16 – Telles, continued

Class 17 – Edward Said, *Orientalism*, excerpts from Chapters 1 and 3

Class 18 – Said, continued

Part 3: What is racism? What is structural racism? What is racial prejudice?

Class 19 – J. L. A. García, “The Heart of Racism”

Class 20 – Charles Mills, “‘Heart’ Attack: A Critique of Jorge Garcia's Volitional Conception of Racism”

Class 21 – Charles V. Hamilton and Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*, excerpts

Class 22 – Hamilton and Ture, continued

Class 23 – Ron Mallon and Daniel Kelly, “Making Race Out of Nothing: Psychologically Constrained Social Roles”, in the *Oxford Handbook of the Philosophy of Social Science*

Class 24 – Eric Bayruns-García, “Are Our Racial Concepts Necessarily Essentialist Due to Our Cognitive Nature?”

Part 4: How is racism related to class, gender, and other social structures?

Class 25 – Tommie Shelby, “Ideology, Racism, and Critical Theory

Class 26 – Claudia Jones, “An End to the Neglect of the Problems of the Negro Woman!”

Class 27 – Patricia Hill Collins, “Relationality within Intersectionality,” in *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory*

Class 28 – Jones and Collins, continued

VIII. Further Resources

Moses Center: Academic accommodations are available to any students with a chronic, psychological, visual, mobility, learning disability, or is deaf or hard of hearing. Students should register with NYU’s Henry and Lucy Moses Center for students with Disabilities, 726 Broadway, 2nd Floor, New York NY 10003-6675. Tel. 212-998-4980.

Website: www.nyu.edu/csd

University Learning Center: The University Learning Center's mission is to assist students in developing the knowledge base, skills, and strategies that will help them to become confident, independent, and active learners. Its various academic support services are intended to help students meet the challenge of NYU's rigorous academic standards.

Website: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/academic-services/university-learning-centers.html>

Writing Center: The Writing Center is a place where any NYU student can get help with his or her writing. It is a place where one-on-one teaching and learning occur, as students work closely with faculty and experienced peer tutors at every stage of the writing process and on any piece of. Website: <https://cas.nyu.edu/content/nyu-as/cas/ewp/writing-center.html>

Wellness Exchange: The Wellness Exchange is your greatest mental health resource at NYU. Call the 24-hour hotline at (212) 443-9999, chat via the Wellness Exchange app anytime, speak with a certified counselor about any day-to-day challenges or health concerns, including medical issues, stress, depression, sexual assault, anxiety, etc. No concern is too big or too small. Website: <https://www.nyu.edu/students/health-and-wellness/wellness-exchange.html>

NYU Immigrant Defense Initiative: The NYU Immigrant Defense Initiative (IDI) offers free and confidential legal services to NYU students and employees, and their immediate family members, on their immigration cases. Contact IDI at immigrant.defense@law.nyu.edu or (212) 998-6435.