UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON
Winter 2017

PHIL 406A: PHILOSOPHICAL TOPICS IN FEMINISM
Feminist Philosophy of Science

Instructor: Professor Alison Wylie
Class meetings: Mondays/Wednesdays 1:30-3:20, Sieg Hall 228
Office hours: Tuesdays, 1:00-3:00, Savery M396
or by appointment: aw26@uw.edu

Seminar Description

Critics of the very idea of feminist philosophy of science insist that, because feminism is an explicitly political stance, it can have nothing to do with science or how we understand it philosophically. What distinguishes scientific inquiry and understanding is its ability to transcend partisan, political interests and the relativism that threatens if these are allowed a role in science. The epistemic ideals implicit in such arguments have come in for sharp and sustained criticism in recent decades, especially by feminist philosophers of science who have built a compelling case for recognizing that scientific knowledge – its production, its content and its authority – is inevitably configured by a range of social, contextual factors; there is no escape to a ‘view from nowhere’. And yet, feminist philosophers of science routinely insist that this robust contextualism need not entail a reductive relativism.

The aim of this seminar is to explore the range of positions articulated by feminist philosophers of science in response both to conventional ‘value-free’ ideals and charges of relativism. Following the line of argument developed by Elizabeth Potter in Feminist Philosophy of Science (2006), our point of departure will be an argument for ‘naturalized’ approaches to philosophy of science and a feminist reformulation of empiricism developed by Lynn Hankinson Nelson. We then consider several other responses to the challenge of reconceptualizing the empirical foundations of scientific knowledge and the role of social values in scientific practice as taken up by feminist value theorist Elizabeth Anderson, and contextual empiricist Helen Longino. In the final segment of the course we discuss several variants of feminist standpoint theory, chiefly as developed by Sandra Harding, and consider the prospects for reconfiguring ideals of objectivity in terms of jointly epistemic and social/ethical norms. At the close of the quarter we return to the meta-philosophical questions with which we started and consider the goals and status of feminist philosophy of science as a form of ‘non-ideal’ theory.

Course texts
Elizabeth Potter, Feminism and Philosophy of Science: An Introduction (Routledge, 2006).
All other readings are available on Canvas.

Learning objectives
My central goals for this seminar are that you should come away with the following:

• Content knowledge of the range of positions that have been central to the formation of and debate about feminist philosophies of science.
• Skills of conceptual analysis relevant for disembedding and assessing assumptions that underpin popular, scientific, and philosophical debate about the role of contextual values in scientific inquiry.
• Insights about how ideals of objectivity, epistemic integrity, empirical credibility can be reframed in face of critiques of logical empiricist / positivist conceptions of science.
Requirements

This will be a reading-intensive, discussion-based course. Class meetings will include short lectures and student presentations designed to generate seminar-style discussion. The requirements emphasize close reading and analysis of the assigned texts. In addition to reading responses posted online and one in-class presentation, you are required to write a short expository essay, an abstract and a thesis-driven term paper. Details are posted on the Canvas assignments pages.

Grade breakdown

You must complete all components of the course requirements to receive a final grade. They are weighted as follows:

- Participation: 10%
- Seminar presentation: 15%
- Reading responses: 15%
- Essays and abstract: 60%

Seminar participation

Active, informed contribution to this seminar is essential, and can take many forms, online and in class.

- 10% of the final grade

Seminar presentations

Each week, from Week 3 through Week 9 (except week 7), presentation groups will be responsible for initiating seminar discussion in one of the two weekly seminar meetings. Focus on a selection of the assigned readings and design your presentation to raise questions about puzzling terms or concepts used by the authors you consider, assess the authors’ arguments, and explore concrete examples of research practice on which their arguments bear. Presentations should be brief, roughly half an hour, and can take many different forms; for suggestions and details see the Canvas assignment page.

- The presentation schedule will be set up in the second week of classes.
- Each presentation group is required to pre-circulate a short handout of roughly one page outlining the focal issues you will discuss by 5:00 pm on the evening before your presentation.
- 15% of the final grade

Reading Responses

Everyone is required to post at least five reading responses during the quarter. These should be one to two paragraphs long, and should focus on a particular issue, concept, or argument that you find intriguing, problematic, or in need of explication. Treat these as an opportunity to raise questions about puzzling terms or concepts used by the authors you consider, assess the authors’ arguments, and explore concrete examples of research practice on which their arguments bear. Presentations should be brief, roughly half an hour, and can take many different forms; for suggestions and details see the Canvas assignment page.

- Everyone is required to post a response to set questions in the 2nd and 10th week.
- Choose any three other weeks in which to post, except for the week of your in-class presentation.
- Posts are due by 5:00 pm before the seminar in which the reading you choose will be discussed.
- Everyone is urged to read these posts; come to class prepared to discuss them. Online comments are welcome!
- 15% of the final grade

Term paper

Your major writing assignment for this seminar is a thesis-driven essay, to be developed in several stages. The first is to draft a short expository paper in which you identify a central claim made by one of the authors we’re reading, explain what it comes to and outline the argument given in its support. Second, you are required to develop a one-page abstract in which you outline the thesis you anticipate developing for your final essay and identify the sources you will draw on. Ideally this will build on your initial paper and should be posted online for discussion in a writing workshop in Week 7. In your final paper, due in the exam week, develop an argument for your own position on one of the philosophical issues discussed in the course of the quarter.

- Two page expository essay (500 words): due 5:00 pm February 3rd (10%)
- One page abstract (250 words): to be posted online by 5:00 pm February 12, for discussion in class. (5%)
- Thesis-driven essay, 10-12 pages (2500-3000 words): due 5:00 pm, Monday, March 13th (45%)
- Essay component of the final grade = 60%

Course Policies

Please see the summary, appended to this syllabus, of policies relating to grading, incompletes and academic conduct relevant to this course, as well as university-wide policies and resources for students.
PHIL406A – WINTER 2017
SEMINAR IN FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE
SYLLABUS

Background: optional readings intended as resources for in-class presentations and term papers.

Week 1  Introduction to the seminar
January 4: What does feminism have to do with science?

Week 2  Framing the issues
January 9: Feminist critiques of science
  Reading response assignment: Search out (or choose) an example of a feminist critique of science and post a reading response on it: What are the claims made?: What do they show about scientific knowledge and practice? (Some classic examples are posted on Canvas as ‘supplementary reading’ for this week.)
January 11: The ‘value-free ideal’ and naturalism

Week 3  Naturalism and empiricism
January 16: Martin Luther King Day – no class
January 18: Naturalism, epistemic agency and evidence
- EP: Chapter 1, ‘Naturalized Feminist Empiricism’

Week 4  Evidential foundations
January 23: Building evidential claims
January 25: Triangulation at work in feminist research programs
- EP: Chapter 2, pp. 69-75

Week 5  Facts and values
January 30: The very idea of a ‘feminist’ philosophy of science
February 1: Anderson’s co-operative model of theory justification
- EP: Chapter 3, pp. 81-96

Expository paper due: online by 5:00 pm, Friday, February 3
Week 6  Social-cognitive norms for science
February 6: Gap arguments; how values play a role in science
   •  EP: Chapter 4, ‘Feminist Contextual Empiricism’, pp. 97-124
February 8: Epistemic acceptability
   •  EP: Chapter 4, pp. 124-130

Week 7  Writing workshop week
February 13: one page abstract to be posted online for discussion in class by 5:00 pm, Sunday, February 12
February 15: no class – writing workshop

Week 8  Standpoint theories
February 20: Presidents’ Day – no class
February 22: What is a standpoint?
   •  EP: Chapter 5, ‘Standpoint Epistemologies of Science’, pp. 131-139

Week 9  Objectivity as an ideal
February 27: Strong objectivity
   •  EP: Chapter 5, pp. 140-155
March 1: Epistemic justice and collaborative practice
   •  EP: Chapter 5, pp. 156-161

Week 10  Meta-philosophical implications
March 6: Non-ideal philosophy
   •  EP: Chapter 6, ‘Can philosophy of science be value free?’
March 8: Final thoughts
Reading response assignment: Revisit your answer to the question posed in the first class of the quarter: What does feminism have to do with science? Post a comment online indicating how you would answer it now.

Final paper due: online by 5:00 pm, Monday, March 13