

PHIL 528: Social Ontology

Spring 2026

Instructor

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Office: University Hall #1402

Office Hours: T 2:00-4:00pm, or by appt

Course Description

Social constructionism has emerged as the dominant position in the metaphysics of race and gender. Social constructionists deny that race and gender are natural categories, yet nonetheless maintain that they are real, albeit social, kinds; this position is often supported by the assertion that we need race and gender in order to adequately identify and explain systematic injustice, or to ground political resistance movements. This seminar will explore the social constructionist position, considering questions such as: what do social constructionist claims amount to? What is it, exactly, that is constructed, and how? How do specific social constructionist views of race and gender compare? Are race and gender necessary for explaining systematic injustice, or for political resistance? Does holding on to race and gender unwittingly reinforce essentialism about these categories?

Meeting Time and Location

We will meet on Thursdays from 3:30-6:00pm in University Hall #1430.

Texts

PDFs of all of the readings will be made available through the Course Box:

<https://uofi.box.com/v/528-SocialOntology> (password: SocialConstruction)

Course Requirements

- 1. Reading Précis:** You will be required to submit a document that includes a brief reading précis for each reading through Canvas by noon before each class. Each précis should cover the following:
 - (1) What key question(s) is this paper tackling, or what debate are they responding to or taking a position on?
 - (2) What is the author arguing? (What do they have to say about that question, what is their main view?)
 - (3) For Discussion: A question, passage, or response to the reading that you want to bring up in our discussion, with some brief context. Questions can be clarificatory or pose an objection, and responses can include remarking on something that you found particularly interesting or helpful in the reading.

(4) Optional (purely for you): Any details or quotes you want to flag

I will post a guide with more details and examples about the précis on Canvas.

2. **Discussion-Starter Rotation:** Each regular class session will have an assigned Discussion Starter. The Discussion Starter will spend the first ~10 mins of class introducing and summarizing the reading, and another ~10 mins leading the initial discussion. It is okay if there are places where you are uncertain about how to interpret the reading— you can raise these questions as part of your summary and discussion-starting. The role of Discussion Starter will rotate among course participants each week.
3. **Seminar Project:** You will choose a path for your seminar project, selecting among an APA-Style Paper, Public Philosophy Portfolio, or Area Guide. Each option will have a series of scaffolded deadlines throughout the semester— see the next sections for a more detailed breakdown of these different paths. The hope is that each of these paths offers an assessment style that will allow you to practice and develop career-relevant skills. If there is another style of assessment that you would like to propose as an alternative, I would be happy to work with you to figure out an alternative set of scaffolded assignments-- you should speak to me by the end of Week 6. **A final draft of the seminar project will be due by the end of May. Extensions may be granted with prior approval.**
4. **Seminar Project Presentation:** During the last week of classes (and possibly bleeding into finals week, depending on numbers and scheduling) you will give a presentation related to your project. Your presentation can very much be framed as work-in-progress that invites collaborative, constructive contributions; or, it can be a more traditional, more assertive talk.

Project Path 1: APA-Style Paper

For this path, you will write an APA colloquium-style paper (3000 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography, with an abstract of no more than 150 words) or an APA symposium-style paper (5000 words, excluding footnotes and bibliography, with an abstract of no more than 300 words) paper. The paper is expected to make an original contribution to a topic that intersects with the topics discussed in the course.

If you have not tried to write a paper like this before, you may find that the word count is surprisingly small, requiring you to be efficient in your exposition and to keep your idea focused and targeted. I encourage you to aim for a 3-5k word paper, but I will accept a longer paper (up to 8,000 words).

Milestone 1: Mind map and Reflection

Your mind map should sketch out key questions, debates, and/or views that we have been discussing, and relations between them. It can also include your responses to these questions, debates, or views. This is intended as a brainstorming exercise that helps you to step back and think about how the course contents hangs together at a higher level of analysis. Your mind map does not have to be fully comprehensive – it can have a definite perspective and be focused on what you find most interesting. But, if you're at a loss for what you find interesting, it can be helpful to aim for a more systematic approach, and see what comes out of it. Your mind map can be hand drawn and scanned, or it can be done digitally. It doesn't have to be pretty.

Your reflection should be ~1-2 pages long, and reflect on specific questions, debates, or topics that stand out from what we have discussed so far. This is an opportunity to explore what you are finding interesting and might want to write about, or to start developing a specific line of thinking.

Milestone 2: Anticipatory Abstract (300-600 words)

Often conferences will ask you to submit an abstract for a paper that you have not actually written yet. You will practice the skill of producing such abstracts by writing an anticipatory abstract for your seminar paper. This requires having an idea for a position or view you want to defend, and a sense for how you would do this in your paper. You will not be beholden to your abstract – things can and likely will change – but writing it should help you to develop an idea for your seminar paper.

Milestone 3: Outline with Updated Abstract of 150-300 words

Milestone 4: ~20 min WIP Talk with Discussion

Milestone 5: Full Draft of Paper

Project Path 2: Public Philosophy Portfolio

For this path, you will produce at least 3 public philosophy pieces (e.g. Substack-style post, podcast episode, op-ed, magazine article) that substantively connect to topics from the courses. There will be deadlines for drafts of each piece at various points throughout the semester.

Additionally, at the end of the semester you will give a ~20 min talk presenting one of your pieces (or a combination thereof, if that makes sense and you prefer it).

At the end of the semester, you will submit a portfolio with revised drafts of your work.

Project Path 3: Area Guide

For this path, you will produce an area guide of ~20 pages, that (i) gives an opinionated overview of some area of/connected to social ontology, (ii.) highlights open questions

and interesting research opportunities in that area, and (iii.) is overall visually compelling or includes some visual representation(s).

The guide should provide enough background context and explanation that a non-specialist could understand and appreciate why the questions or lines of thinking that you are highlighting are worth pursuing. You could, for instance, imagine that you are presenting this information to someone who is looking to fund exciting research projects in social ontology, but doesn't know much beyond a general introduction to philosophy. You could structure this more like a Philosophy Compass article with diagram(s), or more like a [consultant report](#).

Milestone 1: Mind map and Reflection

Your mind map should sketch out key questions, debates, and/or views that we have been discussing, and relations between them. It can also include your responses to these questions, debates, or views. This is intended as a brainstorming exercise that helps you to step back and think about how the course contents hangs together at a higher level of analysis. Your mind map does not have to be fully comprehensive – it can have a definite perspective and be focused on what you find most interesting. But, if you're at a loss for what you find interesting, it can be helpful to aim for a more systematic approach, and see what comes out of it. Your mind map can be hand drawn and scanned, or it can be done digitally. It doesn't have to be pretty.

Your reflection should be ~1-2 pages long, and reflect on specific questions, debates, or topics that stand out from what we have discussed so far. This is an opportunity to explore what you are finding interesting and might want to focus on for your area guide.

Milestone 2: Proposal for Area Guide

A 1-2 page proposal that identifies a specific topic that your guide will focus on, and that provides a basic sketch of the specific questions/debates/views that you will present and how you see them relating to each other.

Milestone 3: Outline of Area Guide

Your outline should include a more solidified map of what your guide will focus on and begin to sketch out the open questions/ areas of research.

Milestone 4: ~15-20 min Presentation of Area Guide with Discussion

Milestone 5: Final Area Guide

Disability Accommodation Procedures

UIC is committed to the full inclusion and participation of people with disabilities in all aspects of university life. If you face or anticipate disability-related barriers while at UIC, please connect with the Disability Resource Center (DRC) at drc.uic.edu, via email at drc@uic.edu, or call (312) 413-2183 to create a plan for reasonable accommodations. In order to receive accommodations, you will need to disclose the disability to the DRC, complete an interactive registration process with the DRC, and provide me with a Letter of Accommodation (LOA). Upon receipt of a LOA, I will gladly work with you and the DRC to implement approved accommodations.

Please note that the legal definition of disability is broad, such that rights to equal access also protect students who have chronic or mental health conditions. If you want more general information, I encourage you to visit the DRC website at drc.uic.edu, or you can contact the DRC directly at (312) 413-2183, drc@uic.edu, or by stopping by the office in SSB 1070.

Generative AI Policy

While I think it is probably prudent to generally avoid AI use in contexts such as this course, if you do use AI, you should read, think, and write before you turn to AI. Thus, you should limit your use to cases like expanding on brainstorming that you have already done without the use of AI, or polishing writing that you have already produced without the use of AI. Further, if you use AI in completing work that you submit, you should cite your use by including a disclosure statement at the end of your work that describes what tools you used and how you used them.

My general thought (and expectation) is that you should do the readings, and not just have AI summarize them for you; that you should do the thinking, and not let AI think for you; and that you should do the bulk of the writing, and not let AI write for you.

If you have questions, suggestions, or want to discuss the policy further, I am happy to think more about this with you.

Other Policies

I expect all participants to adhere to norms for respectful and inclusive discussion, and to engage thoughtfully and generously with both each other and the texts. I also expect participants to adhere to norms of academic integrity. If you have questions about this, please come and talk to me.

If something is inhibiting your ability to be successful in this seminar or you need help accessing university resources, don't hesitate to reach out to me.

The course schedule (below) is subject to change as needed. I will send out revised versions of the syllabus as needed.

Course Schedule

Week 1 (Jan 15)

1. Epstein (2025), Sects 1-3.1 of *Social Ontology* (pp. 1-25)
2. Mallon (2017), "Social Roles and Reification." In *The Routledge Handbook of the Philosophy of the Social Mind* (ed. Julian Kiverstein).

Week 2 (Jan 22)

1. Hacking (1999), Ch. 1 of *The Social Construction of What?*
2. Haslanger (2003 [2012]), "Social Construction: The 'Debunking' Project," reprinted as Ch. 3 of *Resisting Reality*

Week 3 (Jan 29)

1. Frye (1983), "Sexism"
2. Butler (1988), "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution"

Week 4 (Feb 5)

1. Sundstrom (2002), "Race as a Human Kind"
2. Taylor (2013), *Race: A Philosophical Introduction*, Sect. 3.5 (Focus on pp. 173-197, 213-229; skip or skim pp. 198-212)

Week 5 (Feb 12)

1. Asta (2013), "The Social Construction of Human Kinds"
2. Haslanger (2000 [2012]), "Gender and Race: (What) Are They? (What) Do We Want Them To Be?", reprinted as Ch. 7 of *Resisting Reality*

Week 6 (Feb 19)

1. Appiah (1985), "The Uncompleted Argument: Du Bois and the Illusion of Race"
2. Taylor (2000), "Appiah's Uncompleted Argument: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Illusion of Race"

Public Philosophy Path: Draft of Piece 1 due by end of week

Week 7 (Feb 26)

1. Hardimon (2014), "The Concept of Socialrace"
2. Mallon (2006), "'Race': Normative, Not Metaphysical or Semantic"

Week 8 (Mar 5)

1. Singh and Wodak (2023), "Does Race Best Explain Racial Discrimination?"

2. Fields and Fields (2012), parts of Introduction (bottom of p. 15-21) and Ch. 4 ("Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America" of *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life*)

Week 9 (Mar 12)

1. Spelman (1988), "Woman: The One and the Many"
2. Harris (1990), "Race and Essentialism in Feminist Legal Theory"

Week 10 (Mar 19)

1. Frye (2011), "Metaphors of Being a Φ ." In *Feminist Metaphysics* (ed. Charlotte Witt)
2. Lugones (1994), "Purity, Impurity, and Separation"
Knowledge Guide and Paper Paths: Milestone 1 due by end of week

SPRING BREAK - No class March 26

Public Philosophy Path: Draft of Piece 2 due by end of week

Week 11 (Apr 2)

1. Young (1994), "Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective"
2. Stone (2004), "Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy"

Week 12 (Apr 9) - Writing Session (I need to leave ~4pm)

Knowledge Guide and Paper Paths: Milestone 2 due by end of week

Week 13 (Apr 16)

1. Collins (2003), "Some Group Matters: Intersectionality, Situated Standpoints, and Black Feminist Thought." In *A Companion to African-American Philosophy* (ed. Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman).
2. Ritchie (2021), "Essentializing Language and the Prospects for Ameliorative Projects"

Week 14 (April 23) - No Class / Recommended Writing Session

Public Philosophy Path: Draft of Piece 3 due by end of week

Knowledge Guide and Paper Paths: Milestone 3 due by end of week

Week 15 (April 30) / Finals Week *

In-Class Presentations (All Paths)

(*We may need to find an additional time for talks, depending on numbers)

May 30 - Final projects due (extensions may be granted upon request)

