This course synthesizes fundamental concepts of conventional western philosophy with alternatives drawn from feminist and non-canonic sources meant to be “read against the grain”. Basic acquaintance with the western canon is required – i.e. at least one prior course in classical philosophy or its equivalent. We will consider topics such as uniqueness and individuality; community and independence; private worlds and public spheres; responsibility and choice; my self, yours, and others; memory and forgetting.

Classes will consist chiefly of discussion of assigned readings and relevant auxiliary materials briefly introduced by the instructor. Attendance is therefore mandatory, and grades will be partially determined by students’ classroom participation. In addition, in place of exams, students will write three short papers (3-4 pages) on themes to be suggested at intervals throughout the semester and a final long paper (12-15 pages) on a topic selected by the student in consultation with the instructor.

**Assigned readings:** (available at the Brandeis bookstore)

Duquesne
Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, (2006), Oxford University Press,

(Xeroxes Available from Philosophy Department)

The Nigerian author and Nobel Prize winner, Chinua Achebe, observed in 1984 that Descartes was “the cause of a gigantic philosophical accident” (i.e. individualism) and that, were he alive today, he would become an American citizen.¹ No doubt many feminists, along with non-western and post-colonial critics would agree with him. The individual human hero is much inflated by traditional western philosophy and counts for little according to the Igbo view. This course is not designed to persuade you of an alternative theory by means of proofs and demonstrations; neither is it a disproof. Yet it

should raise doubts and reveal weaknesses in the philosophical doctrines we have
inherited and that, in turn, infect popular beliefs and opinions that follow from them.

My aim is less to win arguments or exhibit failures of reasoning than to draw out
the regrettable consequences of holding certain canonic beliefs and to explore viable
alternatives to them. The topic is important not only for intellectual reasons: It addresses
how we ought to live. This does not presume uniformity or constrain the variety of
behaviors appropriate to different circumstances. Understanding Self(hood) is an entry
and links to all areas of philosophy. The title of this course deliberately combines
philosophical concepts that conventional academic curricula have kept apart. Among
these are identity, self-identity, individual, individuation, self/selfhood,
person/personhood, agency, autonomy, free will, freedom, self-determination,
heteronomy, and responsibility. Some of these ideas are loosely taken as synonymous or
as implying one another; some are ambiguous. Most are reinterpreted within different
contexts and by different disciplines. We will try to pry their meanings apart and consider
their applications in the lived world.

The person is currently a matter of widespread interest. What is a person, and
what is not? Answers to these questions affect our opinions on human and animal rights,
gender issues, reproductive matters, politics, medicine, social organization, education,
and economic structures. No area of inquiry is unaffected by presumptions about
personhood. Yet, many of these presumptions derive from ideas that are deeply – to the
point of invisibility – embedded in a philosophical canon that is irrelevant or invidious to
to the world’s traditional cultures and incompatible with their practices.

Because of their powerful presence in our own educational environment, we will
begin with a brief review of some classical concepts of European modernist reflection on
personal identity: e.g. the mind/body problem, problem of free will and responsibility.
Bear in mind the risk, however, that: “To one side lies parochialism; to the other, false
claims to universality.”

Jan 19 – Feb 2
John Perry, (ed.) Personal Identity (esp. Locke, Butler, Reid, Hume, Shoemaker)
This is intended as background reading to make sure that we are more or less on the same
page and share a common vocabulary. Note that personhood and selfhood are
conceptually distinct. Personhood is an “achievement” ascription bestowed through the
judgment of others: Selfhood is a condition of being. Denying the existence of a single,
continuous self is not a rejection of identifiable persons.

Among the notions taken for granted by the above readings is a binarism that portrays the
world in terms of ultimate opposites. Another is the uniquely exclusive relation of
“ownership” of the self, and the presumption that cultivating the autonomy of “one’s”
self is good (although that condition is not universally achievable.)

Bear in mind the problem that, for any type of research or analysis, the way in which you
formulate a question begs the manner of (and limits) a response to it. My own
formulations are no exception.

University Press, p. xi
Due Feb. 2 Write an essay (ca. 4 pages) reflecting on one of the following questions:
a) What sorts of things shall be considered ‘not-selves’. Why and for what reasons?
b) Consider the “logical exceptionalism” of self. Is this a matter of denotation or of connotation?
c) Can you and I have the same thoughts, yet not be the same person? If two persons can not have the same thoughts, how can they communicate?

Feb. 5 - 12
Bernard Williams, Problems of the Self, Chapters 1,2, 5, 6, and 14.

Feb 15-19 Vacation

Feb. 23 – Mar 2
Kwame Anthony Appiah, In My Father’s House
   “Romanticizing the other is as offensive as its original contemptuous dismissal….The binarism of Self and Other – is the last of the shibboleths of the modernizers that we must learn to live without.”(155)

Due Mar 2 Write an essay (ca 4 pages) reflecting on one of the following questions:
   a) Appiah notes (p. 147-148) that, while exhibited works of American or western-European art are ordinarily identified by the name of an individual artist, African works of art are usually labeled in terms of an “ethnic” group (if not with reference to the collector.) Discuss the significance of this differentiated designation of art in terms of the identity and individuality of the (presumptive) producer.
   b) “….a specifically African identity began as the product of a European gaze.” Might the same formula (with relevant substitutions) apply to the identity of a woman, a college professor, a captain of industry? To what extent might the bearer of such labels subscribe to or repudiate them? What reciprocal relationships might the labels diminish or augment?
   c) “Races, like families, are the organisms and ordinances of God; and race feeling, like family feeling, is of divine origin.” (p. 17) Since impartial universal benevolence is beyond our capability, some proponents of racialism defend it as a basis of moral solidarity. What are the merits and dangers of this position?

Mar 5
Diana Meyers, “Feminist Perspectives on the Self”

Mar 12 - 19
Linda Alcoff, Chapters 1– 5, 7- 9

Mar 18, Attend Symposium at WSRC for Women’s History Month
Due Mar 23 - 2 pg commentary on WHM program
Due April 9: Write a 3-4 pg reflection on the previous weeks’ readings with reference to one of the following questions:

a) Moral responsibility seems to presuppose the conscious and continuous presence of an agent. Several of the authors we have examined, however, challenge one or both of these conditions. Must we abandon attempts to link metaphysical identity with ethical coherence? Would a relational view of selfhood be more productive?

b) Some philosophers (e.g. Charles Taylor, Alasdair MacIntyre) hold that human actions are only intelligible within the context of a (social) community. Does it follow that the agent is thereby accountable for such actions? How might action “against the grain” be justified?

c) Why must “is” precede “ought”? i.e. Is it necessarily the case that metaphysics constrains ethics? Consider the reverse derivation. Might it not be that who we are is consequent upon a moral environment that precedes such identity. How would such an analysis impact the concept of individual responsibility.

Apr 13 – 23

Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*

April 27, 30

Antonio Damasio, segment of *The Feeling of What Happens*

May 4 – review and discussion

Final papers due

FINAL EXAM