

a.a. 2024-2025

Seminario Scienze Umanistiche

“Feminism, Autonomy and the New Technologies”

Prof.ssa Beate Roessler

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Abstract

In this course, I would like to focus on the interplay between (individual) autonomy, feminist critique, and the digitization of our society, becoming ever more powerful and interfering with our daily life. Is autonomy still possible, and how do we conceptualize these developments from a feminist point of view? I want to explore these questions in more detail with the help of texts, some of which have now become classics (for instance Nancy Fraser, Iris Marion Young) and which should help us understand why autonomy is so important, especially, but not only, for women.

For philosophers like Kant, the ability to act autonomously is the basis for human dignity but contemporary critics re-interpret autonomy as ‘relational autonomy’. In the course, we will discuss texts from the various positions and reflect on the role of autonomy in the digital world. The first meeting will already raise many of the important issues: how could an autonomous life be a life in relations? Can an autonomous person be immoral? Other questions will be discussed in the following meetings, dealing with the influence of how culture, society, and politics need to be taken into account when we think about autonomy in the age of new technologies, especially social media. The course aims not only to provide an overview of the issues, but also to help students develop their own position.

Overall structure of the course

The course is structured in 4 seminars: an introductory seminar to the meaning, concept, relevance of autonomy; a seminar on autonomy, privacy and the public sphere; a seminar on autonomy and social media; and a Lecture on autonomy and its social contexts. The readings, background readings and an (additional) bibliography are provided below. It would be good if you could read the first two background readings before the start of the seminar. If you have time to read the other texts as well, that would be great but is not obligatory.

Assessment: A brief essay on one of the problems involved, the student can choose the topic, and I will help finding it; 2 or 3 pages.

Schedule

Seminar 1 (November 12th, afternoon): Introduction to Autonomy

Background Reading: Roessler, Beate, Introduction, plus Chapter 1: What is Autonomy?. Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well Lived, James C. Wagner (trans.), Cambridge/Medford 2021. pp. 10-27.

Mackenzie, Catriona, Natalie Stoljar, "Introduction. Autonomy Refigured", in: Id. (Eds.), Relational Autonomy. Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self, Oxford 2000, pp. 3-34.

Seminar 2 (November 13th, morning): Autonomy, the Public Sphere, and Privacy

Recommended Reading 1: Fraser, Nancy, "Sex, Lies, and the Public Sphere: Some Reflections on the Confirmation of Clarence Thomas", in: Critical Inquiry 18:3 (1992), pp. 595-612.

Recommended Reading 2: Roessler, Beate, Chapter 7: Private Life. Autonomy: An Essay on the Life Well Lived, James C. Wagner (trans.), Cambridge/Medford 2021. pp. 135-153.

Seminar 3 (November 13th, afternoon): Autonomy and Social Media

Recommended Reading 1: Norlock, Kathryn, "Free and Always Will Be? On Social Media Participation as it Undermines Individual Autonomy", in: Canadian Journal of Practical Philosophy 5:1 (2021), pp. 1-13.

Recommended Reading 2: Sax, Marijn, "Optimization of What? For-Profit Health Apps as Manipulative Digital Environments", in: Ethics and Information Technology 23 (2021), pp. 345-361.

Recommended Reading 3: Lanzing, Marjolein, "The transparent self", in: Ethics and Information Technology 18:1 (2016), pp. 9-16.

Recommended Background Reading: Young, Iris Marion, "Five Faces of Oppression", in: Justice and the Politics of Difference, Princeton 1990, especially pp. 48–65.

Seminar 4 (November 14th, morning)

My public lecture on '*Autonomy and its Social Contexts*'

During the third hour of this Friday seminar, we will have a summarizing discussion with the participants of this course and have space for questions, also about the end-of-the-seminar Essay.

The students can find all the Recommended Readings in Teams – Scuola di Studi Superiori "G. Leopardi".

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