

Philosophy 342: Introduction to Epistemology Syllabus

Instructor

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Room: TBD
Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

Epistemology is, broadly construed, the study of knowledge. However, epistemology is also concerned with the nature of how our knowledge is justified, how it's possible, and where it comes from, in addition to concerns about related topics such as the nature of belief, inquiry, and disagreement. Specifically, we will consider the following: (a) What is knowledge? (b) Where does our knowledge come from? (c) Is human knowledge different from animal knowledge? (d) Are we massively mistaken about most of the things that we believe? (e) How do our beliefs relate to the world? (f) What is the nature of disagreement and can two people who are both justified in their beliefs still rationally disagree? (g) Can we choose what we believe? and (h) Can our status as epistemic agents – beings who know things – be harmed or hampered in certain circumstances? The aim of this course is to give students a general introduction to epistemology via readings on core topics, as well as introduce students to more recent debates in the discipline. Students will come out of the course with a solid understanding of this branch of philosophy and how epistemology relates to other branches of the discipline, as well as how some of these seemingly abstract and theoretical issues can have profound influence on our everyday epistemic conduct.

Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

In this course, we will explore one of the foundations of philosophy through an investigation of the central topics of epistemology. By the end of the course, you will be able to:

- Characterize many of the central issues in contemporary epistemology.
- Discuss and evaluate the main theses and arguments about those issues in a reasoned and neutral way.
- Articulate and defend your own views on those issues.
- Make connections between epistemology and other areas of philosophy.
- Write a research paper in a philosophically rigorous, analytic, and concise manner.
- Think at a very high level of abstraction about knowledge and justification but also be able to connect the concepts and theories to issues in daily human life.

Course Readings

Students require a copy of *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* edited by Sven Bernecker and Fred Dretske (Oxford University Press, 2000). We will use the majority of this anthology. All other course readings will be made available on the course website.

Grading

Letter grades (corresponding to a 4-point scale: A=4, A-=3.7, B+=3.3, etc.) will be assigned based on the following:

SNTs	25%
First Paper	15%
Mid-term Paper	20%
Final Paper	25%
Participation	15%

Assignments

Socratic Note Taking (SNT)

The purpose of these assignments is to help you read articles more effectively, and to provide accountability for completing the readings. “Socratic Note Taking” is named after Socrates, who famously taught by asking questions. In these notes, you will write questions as you read. Think of it as a reading quiz that you create yourself, along with an answer key. A set of notes is due for each reading. Students will be required to produce three questions and answers per reading, roughly equidistant throughout each reading. Collectively, these are worth 25% of your grade. Complete and submit your questions/answers on the course website prior to the start of the class for which they’re due.

First Paper

The first paper should be approximately 1000-1500 words (~3-4 pages), is worth 15% of your grade, and will take the form of a ‘compare and contrast’ paper. Students will focus on two authors we’ve read and compare and contrast their respective views on the relevant topic/issue. Students will identify points of agreement and disagreement, including background assumptions between the two authors’ views.

Mid-term Paper

The second paper, due a little after mid-semester, will be 1500-2000 words (~5-6 pages), is worth 20% of your grade, and will summarize, evaluate, and take a position on, some debate or argument for one of the views we discussed in the first half of the course. Prompts are available on the course website, though if students wish they can come up with their own, however, they must run them by me first.

Final Paper

The final paper should be 2500-3000 words (~8-10 pages), is worth 25% of your grade, and will be your own contribution to one of the debates we look at during the course. Students will develop an argument for some position that we discussed and consider and respond to potential objections. Students will turn in an outline, which I will return with comments, and then submit the final paper at the end of the semester, during finals.

Participation

There is a participation grade worth 15% of your final grade, awarded on the basis of participating in class discussions. Coming to office hours to discuss the course material can count towards the participation grade.

Class Expectations

- **Course Readings:** Students should do all the assigned readings before the class in which they're discussed as this is necessary to complete the SNTs, but also because class discussion will be much more fruitful if we're all on the same page.
- **Attendance:** As this is an upper division course, I expect you to attend (though I understand that things come up). I will keep track of attendance and you should notify me of any absences.
- **Electronics Policy:** Laptops, tablets, and phones are not permitted during class unless needed for in-class work. Using electronics is distracting to both yourself and others, and studies have shown that it lowers grades of the user and those around them. If you require a special accommodation regarding electronics please come see me to request an exemption.
- **Communication:** You can contact me via e-mail. I will endeavour to respond within 24 hours, but usually don't respond after 5pm on weekdays nor on weekends. My principal method of communicating with you will be via e-mail, so be sure to check this daily.
- **Late Work Policy:** Late assignments without an extension will be downgraded by 1/3 of a letter grade per day after the due date (e.g. A to A-), up to a penalty of 2 full letter grades (after which they won't be accepted). Consult with me to request an extension. Extensions will not be granted for the SNTs; late SNTs will be graded as 0.
- **Grade Disagreement:** I am happy to discuss your graded assignments with you. I ask that you first read through my comments on your assignment, write down any questions you have, and then schedule an appointment with me. Note that I require a 24-hour "cooling off" period before discussing grades. If you think a grade you have received is unfair, please write a paragraph explaining why and send it to me via email. Note that this can result in your initial grade being *either raised or lowered*.
- **Extra Credit:** As a matter of general policy, no extra credit will be offered in this course unless *extremely* unusual circumstances arise which necessitate it.
- **Classroom Etiquette:** Students are expected to respect each other, allow others the chance to speak, and be open-minded to views different from their own. We're here to learn and that's best done through community building, a prerequisite of which is respect and toleration.
- **Syllabus:** Readings and schedule are subject to change. Any changes will be announced in class and on the course webpage.

Provisional Course Schedule

Unit 1: Knowledge

Week 1: The Gettier Problem

Meno, Plato (ca. 350 BCE; selections)

"Knowing as Having the Right to be Sure", Ayer (1956)

“Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”, Gettier (1963)

Week 2: Responses to Gettier

“A Causal Theory of Knowing”, Goldman (1967)

“Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief”, Lehrer and Paxson (1969)

Unit 2: Internalism and Externalism

Week 3: Externalism

“The Thermometer Model of Knowledge”, Armstrong (1973)

“Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge”, Goldman (1976)

Week 4: Internalism

“The Indispensability of Internal Justification”, Chisholm (1988)

“The Elements of Coherentism”, Bonjour (1985)

Week 5: Criticisms and Compromises

“What’s Wrong with Reliabilism?”, Foley (1985)

“A Rationale for Reliabilism”, Bach (1985)

“An Internalist Externalism”, Alston (1988)

Unit 3: Skepticism

Week 6: Motivations

Meditations I & II, Descartes (1641)

“A Defense of Skepticism”, Unger (1971)

First Papers Due

Week 7: Responses to the Skeptic

“Proof of An External World”, Moore (1939)

“Brains in a Vat”, Putnam (1981)

“Elusive Knowledge”, Lewis (1996)

Unit 4: Sources of Knowledge

Week 8: Perception

“The Causal Theory of Perception”, Grice (1961)

“Perception and Its Objects”, Strawson (1979)

Mid-term Papers Due

Week 9: Testimony

“Acquiring Knowledge from Others”, Lackey (2011)

“Knowledge from Trust in Testimony is Second-Hand Knowledge”, Fricker (2006)

Week 10: Induction

“On Induction”, Russell (1912)

“The Pragmatic Justification of Induction”, Reichenbach (1938)

“The New Riddle of Induction”, Goodman (1955)

Unit 5: Belief and Disagreement

Week 11: Doxastic Involuntarism

“Deciding to Believe”, Williams (1973)

“Controlling Attitudes”, Hieronymi (2006)

Week 12: Disagreement

“What Should We Do When We Disagree?”, Lackey (2008)

“Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement”, Vavova (2014)

Unit 6: Epistemic Injustice

Week 13: Knowledge and Oppression

Epistemic Injustice, Fricker (2009; selections)

“Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression”, Dotson (2014)

Down Girl, Manne (2017; selections)

Final Paper Outlines Due

Final Papers Due During Exam Period