

Epistemology Syllabus

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. This course is a non-exhaustive introduction to core issues in epistemology. Specifically, we will consider questions like the following:

- (a) What is knowledge and where does our knowledge come from?
- (b) Does inquiry in natural science and mathematics differ from inquiry in social sciences and humanities?
- (c) Is human knowledge different from animal knowledge?
- (d) Is it possible for us to be 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?
- (h) Can our status as epistemic agents – beings who know things – be harmed or hampered in certain circumstances?
- (i) Under what circumstances should we defer to experts and what counts as expertise in a domain?
- (j) How does social media impact our epistemic relationships?
- (k) How can we combat implicit cognitive biases to be better knowers?
- (l) Can we cultivate productive public disagreement without it leading to polarization?

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 and how these issues are playing out in our current world, especially with the rise of political polarization, social media, and ever-increasing knowledge specialization. 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 while applying them to current issues facing us as epistemic agents.
- 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 life.

Course Readings

There is no required textbook for this class. All readings and course materials are provided 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	20%
Reflection	15%
Short Paper	20%
Case Study	10%
Final Paper	25%
Participation	10%

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 20% of your grade.

Reflection Assignment

There is a short reflection assignment of a rather informal nature which asks you to reflect on the course readings on skepticism and our viewing of *The Matrix* and connect them. These should be about 1000-1500 words (~3-4 pages) and are worth 15% of the final grade.

Short Paper

There is a short paper, due a little after mid-semester, which will be around 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.

Case Study

Students will analyze and critically reflect on a real-world case study revolving around epistemic agency and apply concepts and arguments from the class and readings to illuminate how we should understand the epistemic dimensions of the case. Possible cases on social media and misinformation, epistemic injustice in the judicial system, and expert disagreement will be provided. Students will answer a series of questions about their case and the assignment is worth 10% of the final grade.

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 10% 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.

Provisional Course Schedule

Course schedule and readings subject to change

Dates	Topic	Reading	Notes	Assignments
Week 1	Introduction & Knowledge: The Gettier Problem	Class Intro (no readings) Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"		
Week 2	Knowledge: Responses to Gettier	Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing" Armstrong, "The Thermometer Model of Knowledge"	Add/Drop Ends	
Week 3	Knowledge: Coherence and Incoherence	Bonjour, "The Elements of Coherentism" Field, "Embracing Incoherence"		
Week 4	Skepticism	Descartes, <i>Meditations I & II</i> Moore, "Proof of an External World"	Watch: The Matrix (in class)	
Week 5	Skepticism	Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics"	Watch: The Matrix (in class)	Reflection Assignment Due
Week 6	Sources of Knowledge: Induction and Memory	Russell, "On Induction" & Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction" Barnett, "Is Memory Merely Testimony from One's Former Self?"		

Week 7	Sources of Knowledge: Testimony and Observation	Lackey, “Acquiring Knowledge from Others” Saul, “Feminism, Science, and Bias”		Short Paper Due
Week 8	Epistemic Injustice	Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> (selections) Palazzi, “Epistemic Injustice and #MeToo”		
Week 9	Belief and Disagreement	Williams “Deciding to Believe” Hieronymi, “Controlling Attitudes”		Case Study Due
Week 10	Belief and Disagreement	Lackey, “What Should We Do When We Disagree?” Vavova, “Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement”		
Week 11 Thanksgiving Break	No class	No class		
Week 12	Misinformation and Fake News	Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles” “Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”	Watch: Zuckerman, “The Public Sphere Needs Public Social Media” (in class)	
Week 13	Misinformation and Fake News	Blanchard, “Playing the		Final Paper Outlines Due

		<p>Expert: Doing Your Own Research as Epistemic Cosplay”</p> <p>Kozyreva et al, “Critical Ignoring as a Core Competence for Digital Citizens”</p>		<p>Final Papers Due During Exam Period</p>
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