

## PH2243: Epistemology Syllabus

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**Office Hours:** Zoom office hours Tuesdays, 9am-10am, and by appointment

### Brief Synopsis:

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Epistemologists want to know what knowledge is, how we acquire it, and how we should respond to arguments for philosophical skepticism, according to which there is very little that we know. We'll read major attempts to engage with these issues. Along the way, we'll also discuss related topics having to do with justification, rationality, and the reliability of human reason.

### Course Overview:

This course will be divided into four units:

*Unit 1: Skepticism.* What – if anything – can we know about the world? This question can seem puzzling. On the one hand, we take ourselves to know many things: e.g., that the earth rotates around the sun, that Kuala Lumpur is the capital of Malaysia, that the earth is more than 1,000 years old, etc. On the other hand, there are seemingly powerful skeptical arguments – arguments that purport to show that virtually none of these claims can qualify as knowledge. We'll investigate this puzzle in depth, looking at some of the leading attempts to rebut the skeptic's argument.

*Unit 2: What is Knowledge?* The skeptic claims that we know nothing (or at least very little). But what is knowledge, anyway? In this unit we'll take a closer look at the question. We'll start with the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, and then look at a famous problem for this analysis – the so-called "Gettier problem". We'll then consider various attempts to provide a better analysis of knowledge – one that solves the Gettier problem. Along the way, we'll discuss how these analyses relate to the skeptical arguments in Unit 1; we'll also discuss whether we should expect there to be an analysis of knowledge in the first place.

*Unit 3: What is Justification?* In addition to asking whether a belief amounts to *knowledge*, we can also ask whether that belief is *justified*. Indeed, some philosophers have thought that the right response to the puzzles presented in Units 1 and 2 is to dismiss knowledge as unimportant and to focus on justification instead. In this unit, we'll look at two leading theories of justification: evidentialism and reliabilism. We'll discuss the arguments for each, as well as their associated problems.

*Unit 4: The Epistemology of Graded Belief* Beliefs come in degrees: I am more confident that it will rain in the next 10 years than that it will rain tomorrow. So in addition to inquiring into the conditions under which a belief is justified or unjustified, we can also inquire into the conditions under which particular degrees of belief are

justified or unjustified. This unit will take up this question, and consider how this issue relates to the lessons of Unit 3. Along the way, we'll discuss some paradoxes that arise for attempts to reduce belief to degrees of belief.

#### Learning Outcomes:

By end of the module, student should be able to:

- (1) Clearly explain some of the central questions in epistemology.
- (2) Articulate some of the leading philosophical answers to these questions, and reconstruct the arguments that philosophers have offered in support of their answers.
- (3) Do philosophy by engaging critically and creatively with these positions and arguments, by e.g., pointing out fallacies, developing novel counterexamples and counterarguments, and proposing new philosophical perspectives on the questions at issue.

#### Note On How the Class Will Be Structured:

In view of the Coronavirus pandemic, the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences has made all modules 100% E-Learning for Sem 1 2020/2021. This means that all of the class will be conducted online; there will be no in-person instruction.

This course will be a mixture of *synchronous* and *asynchronous* learning. (Synchronous learning means that the students and the instructor are all participating in the class during a designated time-slot; asynchronous learning means that students can engage with the material at whatever time fits best into their schedule.)

*Lectures:* The weekly lectures (held from 12-2pm on Wednesdays) will be asynchronous: I will be uploading the lecture (typically broken down into smaller components) on a weekly basis, and students can view it at their leisure. Students are encouraged to use this time slot to meet with their discussions groups. The one exception to this is the first lecture (on Wednesday 12 August), which will be held over a Zoom call: this will allow me to meet all of you face to face (albeit virtually) and address any questions.

*Tutorials:* The tutorial sections will be synchronous, and conducted via Zoom. I will also have weekly office hours on Zoom, and I encourage students to stop by with any questions.

#### Grading:

##### *Weekly Online Questions (10%)*

Every week there will be one or two online multiple-choice questions on Luminus, which students can complete anytime before lecture the following week. (So, for example, questions about the material for Week 2 need to be completed before 12pm of Week 3.) Everyone will have two chances to answer each question correctly. The goal of this is to provide a low-stakes refresher of the material we've covered that week.

##### *Participation (20%)*

Participation – asking questions, raising objections - is an essential part of doing philosophy. In this class, participation primarily comes in two forms:

*Tutorial Participation (10%):* Students can participate by asking questions (or answering questions) in the tutorial sections, which start on week 3.

*Discussion Groups (10%):* In order to foster participation and collaboration, I will be assigning students into discussion groups (which may or may not overlap with your tutorial groups). Each week I will post one or two discussion questions about the reading. You are in charge of arranging a ~30 minute Zoom call with your discussion group to discuss these questions. (Since we do not actually meet during lecture every week, the 12-2pm Wednesday lecture time offers a convenient time block when everyone is free.) Each week your group should send me a short document summarizing some of the ideas that your group came up with. This does not need to be long or polished (bullet points are fine), and will not be graded harshly; this is mostly a matter of allowing me to see how you are thinking about the material we are covering. (I will leave it up to each group to decide how they want to compile this document, but a convenient way to do so is to open a Google Doc and collaboratively jot down your ideas.)

*First Paper (30%)*

Your first paper should develop a focused response to one of the arguments in the readings. You should briefly summarize the argument, and then engage with it critically, by either offering an original criticism of it, or extending the argument in some way. The paper should be around 900 words (1000 words max). More detailed guidelines for the short responses will be posted closer to the deadlines.

*Second Paper (40%)*

The final paper assignment is to write a more sustained response to one of the questions we've tackled in the second half of the class. This paper should be roughly 1200 words (1500 words max).

More detailed guidelines for the two papers will be distributed closer to assignment due dates.

*Note:* there is no final exam for this class.

Expectations:

We are in rather unprecedented times; this is certainly my first time teaching a 100% online course, and this may well be the first time some of you have taken such a course. So there will undoubtedly be a period of adjustment as we figure out which aspects of the class are working well and which aspects are not. To that end, I encourage you to talk to me candidly with any problems that are arising, or any suggestions. I will post periodic polls soliciting your opinion on this, but you should not feel like you need to wait for one of these polls to communicate with me: feel free to email me or come to one of my Zoom

office hours. I also ask you to be patient and flexible; some aspects of this syllabus may be changed if I decide that some features of the course are not working well.

In a similar spirit, I understand that these are difficult times for everyone, and that students may face new obstacles due to the current pandemic. So I will strive to be accommodating if you need extensions on assignments. If you are facing obstacles and/or need an extension, it is important that you contact me in advance to let me know.

#### *Expectations for Zoom Meetings*

Since we'll be spending a lot of time on Zoom, please abide by the following conventions to ensure the meetings run smoothly:

- Please keep your video on, but your mic muted unless you are speaking.
- Use the "raise hand" function to indicate that you have a question.
- Use the "coffee" button to indicate that you are on a bathroom break.
- Feel free to use the chat function to raise questions or make comments.

#### *Expectations for Discussions*

We want to create an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual respect. This course emphasizes discussion and debate: I firmly believe that the best way to learn philosophy is to practice doing philosophy, which involves formulating hypotheses, raising questions, and considering objections.

In the course of our discussions, disagreements will naturally arise. That is fine; disagreement is an integral part of philosophical activity. That said, it is important to pay attention to the way you voice your disagreement with others; we want to ensure everyone feels respected even in the midst of disagreement. Here are some general guidelines to achieve this goal:

- Please listen to your classmates, and avoid interrupting them.
- When you disagree, please take care to challenge the idea being discussed, rather than the person.
- Please try to articulate your grounds for disagreement (backing up your position with reasons is itself an essential part of learning to do philosophy).

#### *Readings:*

All readings will be made available on LumiNUS (in the "Files" section).

## Schedule

### Unit 1: Skepticism

#### **Week 1 (Weds, Aug 12) - First Encounters with the Skeptic**

*Required Reading:*

Descartes, "Meditation 1" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, paragraphs. 5-17

*Further Reading:*

Stroud, "The Problem of the External World" (*The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Chp. 1)

#### **Week 2 (Weds, Aug 19) Can we reason our way out of skepticism?**

##### **Part 1: Inference to the Best Explanation**

*Required Readings:*

Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chp. 2

Vogel, "Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation"

#### **Week 3 (Weds, Aug 26) Can we reason our way out of skepticism? (Tutorials begin)**

##### **Part 2: Is skepticism self-undermining?**

*Required Readings:*

Rinard, "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism"

#### **Week 4 (Weds, Sept 2) – Are skeptical scenarios really skeptical?**

*Required Readings:*

Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics"

*Further Reading:*

Sosa, "Dreams and Philosophy"

### Unit 2: WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE, ANYWAY?

#### **Week 5 (Weds, Sept 9) - The analysis of knowledge (Tutorial week)**

*Required Readings:*

Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"

Clark, "Knowledge and Grounds"

*Further Readings:*

Dharmottara, *Explanation of the Ascertainment of Valid Cognition* D:4229, 9a2-3.

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chps.2-3

### **Week 6 (Weds, Sept 16) - The Causal Theory**

*Required Readings:*

Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing"

*Further Readings:*

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section I "The Causal Theory" (pp.1-86)

### **RECESS WEEK (YAY!)**

Week 7 (Weds, Sept 30) - **The Tracking Theory** (Tutorial week)

**First paper due (BOO!)**

*Required Readings:*

Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, selections (*difficult*)

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section II "Truth Tracking" (pp.86-90)

Week 8 (Weds, Oct 7) - **Is the Gettier Problem Insoluble?**

*Required Reading:*

Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of the Gettier Problem" (*difficult*)

### **UNIT 3: WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION?**

**Week 9 (Weds, Oct 14) – Evidentialism** (Tutorial week)

*Required Reading:*

Feldman, *Epistemology*, chp.4 ("Evidentialist Theories of Knowledge and Justification"), pp.39-49 (up to section 2, "The Infinite Regress Argument")

**Week 10 (Weds, Oct 21) – Reliabilism**

*Required Reading:*

Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?"

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section III, "Reliabilism", pp.90-99.

*Further Reading:*

Conee and Feldman, "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism"

Comesaña, "Evidentialist Reliabilism"

### **UNIT 3: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GRADED BELIEF**

Week 11 (Weds, Oct 28) - **Reasoning with Degrees of Belief** (Tutorial week)

*Required Reading:*

Bradley, *A Critical Introduction to Formal Epistemology*, chp.1

Week 12 (Weds, Nov 4) – **The Relation Between Belief & Degrees of Belief**

**Part 1: Two Paradoxes**

*Required Reading:*

Bradley, *A Critical Introduction to Formal Epistemology*, chp.2

Makinson, “The Paradox of the Preface”

**FINAL PAPER DUE MONDAY, NOVEMBER 9<sup>TH</sup>**

Week 13 (Weds, Nov 11) – **The Relation Between Belief & Degrees of Belief**

(Tutorial week)

**Part 2: Justified Belief and Statistical Evidence**

*Required Reading:*

Buchak, “Belief, Credence, and Norms”

*Further Reading:*

Jackson, “The Relationship Between Belief and Credence”

**Have a good vacation!**