

PH2243 Epistemology

Lecture Time: Mondays, 10am until noon.

Venue: AS7-0102

Modular Credits: 4

Prerequisites: Nil.

Instructor: Bob Beddor

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Office Hours: Mondays, 1:30pm-2:30pm.

(My office is in the Philosophy Department, AS3, fifth floor.)

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 question in depth. Along the way, we'll look at attempts to rebut skepticism; we'll also look at whether skepticism has practical consequences – would it be so bad if skepticism were true?

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: Rational Debunking We started the course by looking at far-reaching skeptical arguments, which purport to cast into doubt all of our empirical knowledge. We'll conclude by considering more limited skeptical arguments – arguments that themselves rely on empirical

premises. First, we'll look at the empirical fact that we often disagree with other people on important matters and consider whether this fact should lead us to suspend judgment on these matters. Second, we'll consider empirical research that purports to show that humans are systematically irrational in various ways, and we'll consider what import this research has.

Grading:

Attendance/Participation (15%)

Participation – asking questions, raising objections - is an essential part of doing philosophy. I expect students to participate in both the lecture and the recitation sections.

Weekly Online Questions (5%)

Every week there will be a couple of online multiple-choice questions on Luminus. The goal of this is to provide a useful refresher of the material we've covered that week.

First Paper (Short Response) (20%)

The first paper assignment is to write a short written response to one of the articles we have covered thus far in the class. It should be focused on a particular argument in one of the papers – 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 response should be roughly 500 words (750 words max) – the idea is to distill your commentary/criticism down to the essentials.

Second Paper (30%)

The second paper assignment is to write a somewhat longer paper tackling one of the main questions we've covered in class thus far. You will be expected to take a stand on one of the debates we've surveyed, and construct an argument in defense of your view. This paper should be roughly 1000 words (1500 words max).

Exam (30%)

The final exam will be on **Tuesday, 26 November**. The exam will be open-book, and will consist of two short essays. Further details on the exam will be given closer to the exam date.

The breakdown for the final grade will be as follows:

Attendance/Participation: 15%
Online questions: 5%
First Paper: 20%
Second Paper: 30%
Final Exam: 30%

General Expectations:

Inquiry thrives on debate; disagreeing with others is encouraged! At the same time, please strive to be respectful of others when you voice your disagreement: avoid interrupting others, and avoid belittling or ridiculing their views.

A number of studies indicate that using electronic devices in class interferes with student learning. Therefore, *please do not use cell phones or computers during class*. (If I see students using computers or cell phones, I may call on them to answer to questions.)

I am happy to give reasonable extensions on assignments, provided you ask me at least 24 hours in advance of the assignment's deadline.

Readings:

You will be expected to have read the assigned texts in advance. Readings will be made available on Luminus.

Preliminary Schedule

(Note: The following is subject to change as the course develops)

UNIT 1: SKEPTICISM

Week 1 (Monday, 12 Aug) – No class, Public Holiday

Week 2 (Monday, 19 Aug) – Introduction & the skeptical threat

Required Readings:

Descartes, “Meditation 1” in *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Recommended Reading:

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

Week 3 (Monday, 26 Aug) – Can we reason our way out of skepticism?

Required Readings:

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

Vogel, “Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation” (*difficult*)

Recommended Reading:

Rinard, “Reasoning One’s Way Out of Skepticism”

Week 4 (Monday, 2 Sept) – Are skeptical scenarios really skeptical?

Required Readings:

Chalmers, “The Matrix as Metaphysics”

Recommended Reading:

Sosa, “Dreams and Philosophy” (*difficult*)

Week 5 (Monday, 9 Sept) – Can we live with skepticism?

Required Readings:

Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (very short selection)

Stroud, “Philosophical Skepticism and Everyday Life” (*The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*, Chp. 2)

Recommended Readings:

Unger, “Where Ignorance Enjoins Silence” (*difficult*)

UNIT 2: WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

Week 6 (Monday, 16 Sept) – The analysis of knowledge and the Gettier problem FIRST PAPER DUE (BOO!)

Required Readings:

Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

Clark, “Knowledge and Grounds”

Recommended Readings:

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chps.2-3

Nagel, *Knowledge: A Short Introduction* (short selection)

RECESS WEEK (YAY!)

Week 7 (Monday, 30 Sept) – Responses to the Gettier Problem: the Tracking Theory

Required Readings:

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

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

Recommended Reading:

Ichikawa & Steup, “The Analysis of Knowledge”, section 5.2, “Sensitivity” (SEP entry)

Week 8 (Monday, 7 Oct) – Is the Gettier Problem Insoluble?

Required Reading:

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

Williamson, “Knowledge First” (*difficult*)

UNIT 3: WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION?

Week 9 (Monday, 14 Oct) – Evidentialist Theories of Justification

Required Reading:

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

James, “The Will to Believe” (selection)

Week 10 (Monday, 21 Oct) –Reliabilism SECOND PAPER DUE

Required Reading:

Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?”

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

Recommended Reading:

Conee and Feldman, “The Generality Problem for Reliabilism”

Weisberg, “The Bootstrapping Problem”, esp. pp.1-6 (*difficult in parts*)

Comesaña, “Evidentialist Reliabilism”

Week 11 (Monday, 28 Oct) – No Class – Public Holiday

UNIT 4: RATIONAL DEBUNKING

Week 12 (Monday, 4 Nov) – Disagreement and irrelevant influences

Required Reading:

Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”

Vavova, “Irrelevant Influences” (*difficult in parts*)

Week 13 (Monday, 11 Nov) – Psychological work on human rationality

Required Reading:

Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (selections)

Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason* (selections)

FINAL EXAM: TUESDAY, 26 NOVEMBER

Have a good vacation!