

Phil. 5340: Epistemology

Fall, 2013

Lecture: MWF, 1:00 - 1:50, Econ 2
Professor: Michael Huemer
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Web page: spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/
Office Hours: MWF, 12:00-12:50
Hellem 266

What Is This Course About?

This course is about knowledge and justified belief. Most of it will focus on whether and how we are justified in believing the sorts of things most of us believe. There will be six units, dealing with the following questions:

- 1 *What is knowledge?* How, if at all, is “knowledge” to be defined? Do the conditions for “knowing” vary depending on conversational context?
- 2 *The structure of knowledge.* Does knowledge have a foundation? Are beliefs justified by coherence? Do we have an infinite regress of reasons for belief?
- 3 *External world skepticism.* How do you know you’re not a brain in a vat?
- 4 *A priori knowledge.* Is there knowledge that is not based on observation?
- 5 *Induction.* Is inductive reasoning justified? Why should we assume that what was observed in the past will continue to hold true in the future?
- 6 *Applied epistemology.* When and why do we think irrationally? Should we think for ourselves? Should we trust experts?

I assume that you are all familiar with basic logical terminology and symbolism (as in propositional logic), which you should have learned in Phil. 2440.

Educational Philosophy & Goals

- a. Philosophy in general is a search for truth. Philosophers try to figure out which beliefs are most likely to be true, and discard the others.
- b. The way we search for truth is through argumentation: we examine different sides of an issue, formulate logical arguments, consider objections, and look for replies to the objections. If you find this sort of thing fun, you will like the course; otherwise, you won’t.
- c. The way I try to teach philosophy is by doing philosophy in the classroom – advancing arguments, addressing objections, and so on. I hope that you will then pick it up.
- d. As a result of this course, you should learn the most important theories about each of the topics addressed, understand the reasons why people hold these theories, be able to form more rational and accurate thoughts about these issues, and improve your ability to think clearly and logically in general.

Texts

The required readings are found in two sources:

1. *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, available at the CU book store. Most readings are from here.
2. Online: Some readings are available online through D2L (learn.colorado.edu/d2l/home/52421). In the schedule below, it says “(D2L)” after each of these readings. I recommend that you print them all now to ensure that you have them when you need them.

In addition, there is a “recommended” reading at the book store, *Skepticism & the Veil of Perception*, which is recommended because it is closely related to units 2-3 and is an awesome book.

Course Requirements & Grading

Unit Tests (50% of final grade)

There will be six tests. See schedule below for dates. The tests will consist of multiple choice & short answer, objective questions about what was said in the readings and in class.

Participation (10%)

This is based on the professor's subjective sense of how well you contributed to class discussion and how regularly you attended class.

Term Paper (for grad students only) (40%)

See the attached "writing assignment" page.

Notes about grades: Grades are based on observable performance, rather than effort or virtue. Do not ask for a higher grade because you tried really hard, or you really need it. Also, do not be obsessed with your grades. After you graduate, no one will ever look at them again. You should come here to increase your understanding, rather than to get a grade.

Who Should Take This Class?

There is one good reason to take this class. That is because you want to understand the nature of knowledge and how we get it. If you don't want that, then you're in the wrong place.

Warnings and requests: Don't take the class if you are unable to make it here on time. Be forewarned that the objective nature of my tests means that if you don't do the readings and come to class, you will be pretty much screwed on the tests. Lastly, if you love political correctness, if you want someone to stoke your self-esteem, or if you think there's no truth and all beliefs are equally good, then you are not going to like this class.

The benefit of the class is that you will learn about some ideas and theories that are fundamental to the rest of philosophy, and indeed to the rest of human intellectual endeavor.

Other Guidelines

1. *To contact me:* Send email to the address listed above. *Type it in carefully.* If I don't respond within a day, assume I didn't get it.
2. *Office hours:* Come to my office to talk about philosophy, play chess, etc. I will try to answer any questions you have, but you needn't have a specific question to come.
3. *Classroom discussion:* During class, you are encouraged to raise questions, comments, objections, etc. Don't be afraid of contradicting other people, expressing unpopular views, or asking a "stupid" question. You're here to learn, which you will do by interacting freely.
4. *Course web page:* <spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/>. Includes information about the course, including this syllabus and course lecture notes. You should download the notes and study them before each test.

Schedule

Readings from *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* are listed by author's last name and starting page number. Use the page numbers since the book may contain more than one selection by the same author.

Unit 1 Introduction, What Is Knowledge?		
M, Aug. 26	Course requirements, what is knowledge?	Gettier, 444 Clark, 447
W, Aug. 28	Defeasibility	Lehrer & Paxson, 464
F, Aug. 30	Counterfactual analysis, closure	Nozick, 475
M, Sept. 2	<i>No Class – Labor Day</i>	
W, Sept. 4	Contextualism	DeRose, 491
F, Sept. 6	Commentary: Against analysis	Optional: Huemer, "Failure of Analysis" (D2L)
M, Sept. 9	Review	
W, Sept. 11	Test #1.	
Unit 2 Structure of Knowledge		
F, Sept. 13	Skepticism	Oakley, 375
M, Sept. 16	Coherence	BonJour, 387
W, Sept. 18	Infinitism	Klein, "Is Infinitism ..." (D2L)
F, Sept. 20	Foundationalism, phenomenal conservatism	Huemer, <i>Skepticism & the Veil of Perception</i> , ch. 5. (D2L)
M, Sept. 23	More about foundationalism	
W, Sept. 25	Commentary: A nonstandard taxonomy of knowledge	
F, Sept. 27	Review	
M, Sept. 30	Test #2.	
Unit 3 External World Skepticism		
W, Oct. 2	Cartesian skepticism	Descartes, 513
F, Oct. 4	Semantic externalism	Putnam, 524
M, Oct. 7	Relevant alternatives	Dretske, 539
W, Oct. 9	Begging the question	Klein, 552
F, Oct. 11	Common sense	Moore, 602 + 606
M, Oct. 14	Direct realism	Huemer, 575
W, Oct. 16	Review	
F, Oct. 18	Test #3.	

Unit 4 A Priori Knowledge		
M, Oct. 21	Positivism	Ayer, 166
W, Oct. 23	Radical Empiricism	Quine, 176
F, Oct. 25	Kantianism	Kant, 142
M, Oct. 28	Rationalism	Russell, 152
W, Oct. 30	More rationalism	
F, Nov. 1	Commentary: Empiricism & scientism in modern culture	
M, Nov. 4	Review	
W, Nov. 6	Test #4.	
Unit 5 Induction		
F, Nov. 8	Skepticism	Hume, 298
M, Nov. 11	New riddle of induction	Goodman, 320
W, Nov. 13	Inf. to the best explanation	Foster, 333
F, Nov. 15	Probability & induction	Stove, 352
M, Nov. 18	More on probability	
W, Nov. 20	Review	
F, Nov. 22	Test #5.	
M, Nov. 25	<i>No Class – Thanksgiving Break</i>	
W, Nov. 27		
F, Nov. 29		
Unit 6 Applied Epistemology		
M, Dec. 2	Irrationality	Huemer, “Why People Are Irrational...”, §1-3 (spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/irrationality.htm)
W, Dec. 4	More irrationality	Huemer, “Why People Are Irrational...”, §4-8
F, Dec. 6	Critical thinking	Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking...” (D2L)
M, Dec. 9	Expert reliability	Menand, “Everybody’s an Expert” (D2L)
W, Dec. 11	Expert reliability	Freedman, “Lies, Damned Lies...” (D2L)
F, Dec. 13	Review	
S, Dec. 14 7:30 p.m.	Scheduled final exam time. Test #6.	

Writing Assignment for Grad Students

Timeline

By Oct. 15: Discuss with me (email or office hours) what your paper will be about. *Note:* This will prevent you from wasting your time by writing about something that isn't going to work out and then having to rewrite the entire paper.

Nov. 1: Give me a 1st draft of your paper. I will comment and return it.

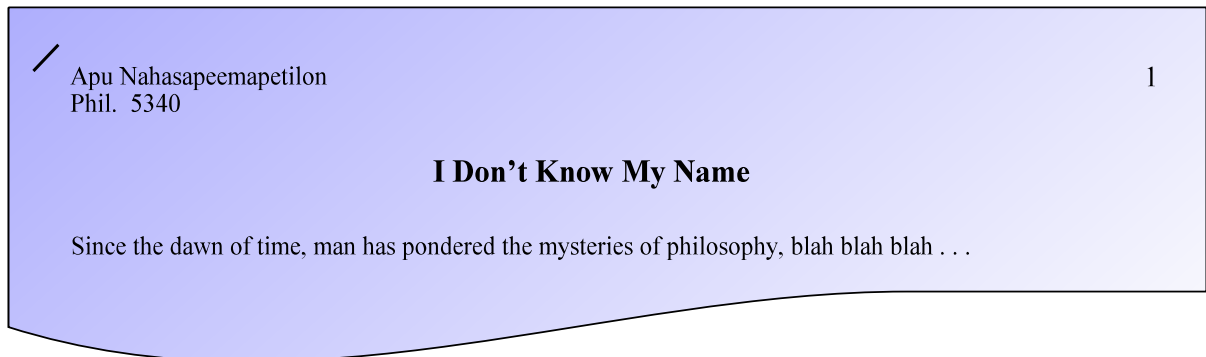
Nov. 15: Give me a 2nd draft, taking into account my comments.

Dec. 11: Assuming I still had criticisms of your second draft, give me a 3rd and final draft.

Note: Yes, you really have to turn in the drafts. Talk to me in advance if there's any problem getting it done on time.

General Guidelines: *Pay attention to this!*

Format: At the top of page 1, include your name, the course number, and paper title. Number and staple all pages. If you can't do this, you shouldn't be in graduate school. Example:



Length: Between 4,000 and 10,000 words. *Do not give me more; I won't read it.*

Send it to me by email (see email address above on the syllabus). Acceptable formats: rtf, txt, pdf, doc, wpd, or pasted into an email message. *If you send something I can't read, or you use the wrong address, your paper will be counted late!*

Grading First draft will just be checked off; however, you can lose points for lateness, blatant incompleteness, or violation of these guidelines. The second and third draft will be graded for content.

Writing Guide: <spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>. Read that. All papers should conform to paragraph 29 in that guide. Some of the more important points:

- Have one and only one thesis. State it explicitly at the start.
- Focus on one argument for that thesis. Make it non-trivial, non-question-begging, and logical.
- Think about and address how someone might object to your argument.
- Write *dearly* and *directly*.
- Do not repeat yourself.
- Do not waste time with unnecessary verbiage or with discussion of anything not essential to making your overall point.

Topic

Write something philosophical about knowledge. Possibilities include:

- Explain what knowledge is.
- Explain why the concept of knowledge is philosophically important.
- Explain how we know what we know in some particular area (e.g., perceptual knowledge, mathematical knowledge, moral knowledge, religious knowledge, knowledge of the past, etc.).
- Defend or criticize a thesis that is advanced in one of the course readings.
- Something else philosophical about knowledge.

Notes:

- If you write about something discussed later in the course, read the readings on that subject before writing your paper.
- If you write about something not discussed in the course, you should read something about it first. Start with the Stanford Encyclopedia <plato.stanford.edu/>. See also the Phil Index <search.proquest.com/philosophersindex?accountid=14503>.