

Phil. 3340: Epistemology

Fall, 2007

Class Meets: TR 12³⁰–1⁴⁵, Hellems 267
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Office Hours: Tue., 3:30–4:30

General Description

The central questions of the course are: What do we know, and how do we know it? The course will have 4 units, dealing with specific forms of these questions:

1. *Skepticism*. Do we know anything about the world outside us? How do you know that you're not a brain in a vat?
2. *The Foundations of Knowledge*. Does empirical knowledge have a foundation? Are we directly aware of physical objects? How do we know about such things as good, bad, right, and wrong?
3. *A priori knowledge*. Is there knowledge independent of experience? If so, what kinds of things does it include, and how does it work?
4. *Applications (sort of)*. How should we deal with disagreement, especially among experts? When and why should we rely on testimony? The value of rationality and critical thinking.

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.

Readings

1. Required: *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*, edited by me. Available at the CU book store. Will also be on reserve at Norlin circulation desk.
2. Required: The following eight reading selections will be on electronic reserve:
 - Frank Jackson, *Perception: A Representative Theory*, pp. 141-5.
 - Michael Huemer, "Sense Data".
 - Michael Huemer, "A Version of Foundationalism".
 - Michael Huemer, "Moral Knowledge".
 - W.K. Clifford, "Ethics of Belief".
 - Richard Feynman, "Cargo Cult Science".
 - Brian Weatherson, "Disagreeing about Disagreement".
 - Michael Huemer, "Why People Are Irrational about Politics".

To access these, go to <http://libraries.colorado.edu/search/p?SEARCH=huemer> on the web. You will need your *identikey* and *password*. You may want to print everything in advance. If you don't understand how this works, see the FAQ at <http://ucblibraries.colorado.edu/circulation/ereserves/faqstudents.htm>.

3. Recommended: *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception*, by me. Available at the CU book store.

Course Requirements & Grading

Reading Quizzes (1/3 of grade):

At the beginning of each class, I'll give you a few short-answer questions about the readings, which you'll have about 5 minutes to answer. (These might overlap with the questions in the book.)

Note: If you walk in after I've collected the quizzes, then you won't be allowed to take it, and so you'll get *no credit* for that quiz. ☹

Grading: You'll get full credit as long as you write answers that sound like you did the reading.

Missing quizzes: You can miss three quizzes during the semester without affecting your grade. If you have to miss more than that, you'll have to come up with documentation of your serious medical condition that prevents you from attending class.

Unit Tests (2/3 of grade):

There will be 4 in-class tests, consisting of objective, multiple choice and short answer questions about what was said in class and in the readings (not your own opinions).

Paper (optional): If you don't want to take test #4 on the final exam day, you may instead write me a paper. Length: 6-8 pages. Topic: Take some idea that was defended in the readings or the lecture during the semester, and explain why you think it is wrong. Guidelines: see the Writing Guide on my web site.

Proper attitude about grades:

a) You should be here primarily to learn, not to get a grade. b) Expect to be graded on your observable intellectual performance, not on the basis of effort or need. c) Relax. After you graduate, no one will ever look at your grades again. The grade is mainly for *you*, to let you know how much understanding you displayed.

Who Should Take This Class?

There's one good reason to take this class. That is because you are interested in the nature of knowledge and how we get it.

Warnings and requests: Don't take the class if you are unable to regularly make it 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're a lover of political correctness, if you think a teacher's job is to stoke students' "self-esteem", or if you think there's no truth and all beliefs are equal, then you probably shouldn't take a class from me.

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, and I will probably respond the same day. Or call between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m.; leave a message, since I screen my calls.
2. Feel free come to my office to talk about philosophy, play chess, or whatever. If you have any questions, I will do my best to answer them, but you needn't have a specific question to come.
3. During class, please do not hesitate to comment on or ask about anything we discuss. Feel free to say whatever is on your mind (that has to do with philosophy).
4. I have a web page <<http://home.earthlink.net/~owl232/>>, which includes some information about the class, including this syllabus & some lecture notes, among other, more interesting things. You may wish to view the philosophy humor.

Schedule

This lists what you should read for the class discussion on each day. Note: some days have more than one reading. Also note the test dates .

Readings from *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* are indicated by the last name of the author and the page number that the selection starts on (which is helpful because sometimes there is more than one selection by the same author in the book). Readings that are on electronic reserve with the library are indicated by “(Reserve)”.

Unit 1 Cartesian Skepticism	
T, Aug. 28	Introduction: Course requirements. The concept of knowledge. The importance of knowledge.
R, Aug. 30	Cartesian skepticism. Descartes (513) Optional extra reading: <i>Skepticism & the Veil of Perception</i> , ch. 1-2.
T, Sept. 4	A simple response. Moore (602), Moore (606) Optional extra: <i>Skepticism & the Veil of Perception</i> , ch. 3.
R, Sept. 6	A semantic externalist response. Putnam (524)
T, Sept. 11	The relevant alternatives response. Dretske (539)
R, Sept. 13	Klein’s response. Klein (552)
T, Sept. 18	A direct realist response. Huemer (575)
R, Sept. 20	Test #1.
Unit 2 The Foundations of Knowledge	
T, Sept. 25	Skepticism again. Oakley (375)
R, Sept. 27	The coherence theory of justification. BonJour (387)
T, Oct. 2	Indirect realist foundationalism. Russell (64); Jackson (Reserve)
R, Oct. 4	Objections to indirect realism. Huemer, “Sense Data,” sections 1, 3 (Reserve)
T, Oct. 9	Direct realist foundationalism. Huemer, “A Version of Foundationalism,” pp. 98-115 (Reserve)
R, Oct. 11	An application: Moral knowledge. Huemer, “Moral Knowledge,” pp. 101-110, 117-22 (Reserve)
T, Oct. 16	Test #2.

Unit 3 A Priori Knowledge	
R, Oct. 18	The problem of the synthetic a priori. Kant (142)
T, Oct. 23	What is Kant talking about?
R, Oct. 25	(Il)logical positivism. Ayer (166)
T, Oct. 30	Why hate illogical positivism?
R, Nov. 1	Radical empiricism. Quine (176), skip section IV
T, Nov. 6	Back to rationalism. Russell (152)
R, Nov. 8	More rationalism. BonJour (208)
T, Nov. 13	Test #3.
Unit 4 Applications: Testimony, Disagreement, Critical Thinking	
R, Nov. 15	Evidentialism. Clifford (Reserve); Feynman (Reserve)
T, Nov. 20	<i>No class—Thanksgiving break</i>
R, Nov. 22	<i>No class—Thanksgiving break</i>
T, Nov. 27	Testimony & miracles. Hume (221)
R, Nov. 29	Testimony. Coady (239)
T, Dec. 4	Disagreement. Weatherson (Reserve)
R, Dec. 6	Distrusting reason. Kornblith (275)
T, Dec. 11	Irrationality. Huemer, “Why People Are Irrational...,” sections 1-4 (Reserve)
R, Dec. 13	Irrationality. Huemer, “Why People Are Irrational...,” sections 5-8 (Reserve)
T, Dec. 18, 10:30 a.m.	Test #4. Bye. ☹ (scheduled final exam time)

Please don't kill me!

