

Phil. 4340: Epistemology

Spring, 2015

Lecture: TR 3:30-4:45, Hellems 177
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Office Hours: TR 2:30-3:30
Hellems 266
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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 true 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 (<https://learn.colorado.edu/d2l/home/>). 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 (90% 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. After-class/office discussions also count.

Optional Paper (15%)

You may write a 5-10 page paper *instead of* taking one of the unit tests. If you want to do so, let me know before you start writing, and I will give you some guidelines for it.

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, not 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 course 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, 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?		
T, Jan 13	Course requirements, what is knowledge?	Gettier, 444 Clark, 447
R, Jan 15	Defeasibility	Lehrer & Paxson, 464
T, Jan 20	Counterfactual analysis, closure	Nozick, 475
R, Jan 22	Contextualism	DeRose, 491
T, Jan 27	Test #1.	
Unit 2 Structure of Knowledge		
R, Jan 29	Skepticism	Oakley, 375
T, Feb 3	Coherence	BonJour, 387
R, Feb 5	Infinitism	Klein, "Is Infinitism ..." (D2L)
T, Feb 10	Foundationalism, phenomenal conservatism	Huemer, <i>Skepticism & the Veil of Perception</i> , ch. 5. (D2L)
R, Feb 12	Test #2.	
Unit 3 External World Skepticism		
T, Feb 17	Cartesian skepticism	Descartes, 513
R, Feb 19	Semantic externalism	Putnam, 524
T, Feb 24	Relevant alternatives	Dretske, 539
R, Feb 26	Begging the question	Klein, 552
T, Mar 3	Common sense, Direct realism	Moore, 602 + 606 Huemer, 575
R, Mar 5	Test #3.	
Unit 4 A Priori Knowledge		
T, Mar 10	Positivism	Ayer, 166
R, Mar 12	Radical Empiricism	Quine, 176
T, Mar 17	Kantianism	Kant, 142
R, Mar 19	Rationalism	Russell, 152
T, Mar 24	<i>No Class - Spring Break</i>	
R, Mar 26		
T, Mar 31	Test #4.	

Unit 5 Induction		
R, Apr 2	Skepticism	Hume, 298
T, Apr 7	New riddle of induction	Goodman, 320
R, Apr 9	Inf. to the best explanation	Foster, 333
T, Apr 14	Probability & induction	Stove, 352
R, Apr 16	Test #5.	
Unit 6 Applied Epistemology		
T, Apr 21	Irrationality	Huemer, "Why People Are Irrational..." (spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/irrationality.htm)
R, Apr 23	Critical thinking	Huemer, "Is Critical Thinking..." (D2L)
T, Apr 28	Expert reliability	Menand, "Everybody's an Expert" (D2L)
R, Apr 30	Expert reliability	Freedman, "Lies, Damned Lies..." (D2L)
R, May 7 7:30 p.m.	Scheduled final exam time. Test #6.	