

Knowledge, Individual, and Society

Suggested Syllabus

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Description

Epistemology is often described as the study of *knowledge*. Knowledge is arguably the aim of inquiry: we investigate the world so that we may come to *know* what it's like. Even when we fail to know, we might still manage to do something right: we might form a false belief for good reason, for example. If so, we might say that our belief, though regrettably false, is *justified*. Moreover, it seems that justification is a necessary condition (or constituent) of knowledge: for belief that's true but that lacks justification does not seem to amount to knowledge.

Accordingly, this course treats both knowledge and justification as core concepts, and we will spend much of our time trying to understand them. The topics covered are chosen for their research relevance: each of them have received significant attention by researchers in the field in recent years; so being acquainted with these topics provides a good starting point for those that might be interested in studying epistemology further.

Slightly unusually, the aim of this course is *not* to give a birds-eye view of the field, or to explain how it all hangs together. That's a worthy and interesting pursuit in its own right, but not one we'll undertake in class. (A good way to start, if an overview is what you're after, is to read the concise introductory textbook, some of which is also required reading, called *What is this thing called knowledge?* (by Duncan Pritchard, Routledge, 3rd edition). A much less accessible but much more comprehensive resource is Robert Audi's *Contemporary Introduction to the Theory of Knowledge*.)

Instead, we'll aim to delve a little deeper on each topic, but also to bring in a perspective that is often left out, namely the connection between epistemology and *justice*.

We begin by asking what we should care about in epistemology, and why we should care about that thing. As noted, a widely held view is that knowledge is somehow more valuable than mere true belief. But it is not easy to say exactly why that should be so. The first week's readings is about this issue, 'the Value Problem'. We also focus on a challenge to the view that knowledge is especially valuable, by reading an argument for the claim that justified belief is what really counts.

Knowledge is central to epistemology, but it can play two very different roles. The orthodox view, as noted, is that it's the central thing *to be explained*: we try to find out in what it consists, or what it takes to have knowledge, for example. On this view both *belief*, *justification*, and *truth* soon take centre stage, since it seems you can't know what you don't believe; you can't know something without justification; and you can't know something if it's not *true*. In weeks 2 and 3 we consider two of these. We ask, first, what belief is: this mental state at the centre of our attention, and then whether justification depends only on evidence.

In week 4 we consider a recent, and extremely influential challenge to the orthodoxy, namely that according to which knowledge is not a thing to be explain, but a thing that does the explaining: so-called *knowledge first* epistemology.

Weeks 5 – 7 concern a topic that courses and textbooks in epistemology sometimes omit, namely the connection between epistemology and justice. If your philosophical experience to date is anything like what mine was at this stage, you may find these weeks really challenging. One of the challenges will be to resist the temptation to reject ideas that may initially seem outlandish without due consideration. You should always be critical, but criticism that's based on a misunderstanding is a waste of time. So, *especially* for this part of the course I ask you to try hard to understand, first.

We begin by considering the rationale for an underlying critique of much traditional epistemological theorising, namely that it has been far too *individualistic*, whereas in reality, human inquiry is a thoroughly *social* affair. In week 6 we discuss *testimonial injustice*, the phenomenon whereby a speaker's word is not given the weight it should be, because of a prejudice the listener holds against her. Finally we consider, in week 7, Charles W. Mills' argument that, as a cautious generalisation, white people, by virtue of constituting the dominating and oppressing social class, suffer a 'group-based cognitive handicap' which plays a profound role in perception, conception, memory, testimony, and reasoning.

In the next three weeks, we will consider the problem of scepticism. A *sceptical challenge* is an argument purporting to cast doubt on the idea that we know many of the things we ordinarily take ourselves to know. We will take point of departure in the following sceptical argument:

1. If I know that I have hands, I know that I am not a (handless) brain-in-a-vat (BIV)
2. I don't know that I'm not a BIV
3. So, I don't know that I have hands.

We will consider three responses. The first response, the topic of week 8, says that premise 1 is false. The second, Contextualism, which we consider in week 9, says that both premises are true yet the conclusion false, since the sense of 'knows' is not the same throughout. The third response, Mooreanism, the topic of week 10, rejects the second premise.

Finally, we turn to the matter of the *structure* of knowledge or justification. Must all our knowledge be 'built upon' certain basic tenets, that we know, or are justified in believing, for some special reason? Or can the items in the structure provide support to each other, simply in virtue of the way they relate to one another? The first of these is called 'foundationalism', the second 'coherentism', and we end the course by considering an argument in favour of each.

Resources

Articles will be made available electronically. In addition, the following two books are required:

Pritchard, Duncan. 2014. *What is this thing called knowledge?* (3rd edition). Routledge.

Steup, Matthias; Turri, John; and Sosa, Ernest (eds). 2012. *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (2nd edition). Wiley.

	Title	Description	Reading
1	The Value Problem	What should we value in epistemology? Why should we value that thing?	<u>Required:</u> --WTK, Chapter 2 --Mark Kaplan, 'It's Not What You Know That Counts', <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> , 1985, pp. 350-363.
Weeks 2 – 5: The Orthodox Approach, and 'Knowledge First'			
2	What is Belief?	On the orthodox approach, belief, justification, and truth are critical concept. This week we focus on belief. Aim: Get an idea of the views on offer, including the constitutive aim approach.	<u>Required:</u> SEP: 'Belief', Intro and §1, minus §1.1.1 IEP: 'The Aim of Belief', §§1-2 <u>Further:</u> --Nishi Shah and J. David Velleman, 'Doxastic Deliberation', <i>Philosophical Review</i> 114, pp. 479-534. Stop at 'First Objection: A Practical Syllogism for Belief?' on p. 519, and skip the marked section on pp. 498-99. --'No Norm Needed: On the Aim of Belief', Asbjørn Steglich-Petersen, <i>Philosophical Quarterly</i> 56, pp. 499-516.
3	Evidentialism	This week we focus on an aspect of <i>justification</i> : whether justification depends <i>only</i> on evidence.	<u>Required:</u> SEP: 'Ethics of Belief'. Introduction, §§1.1, 2, 4, and 5. <u>Further:</u> --Richard Feldman and Earl Conee, 1985. 'Evidentialism'. <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 48, pp. 15 – 34. --Sarah Stroud, 2006. 'Epistemic Partiality in Friendship'. <i>Ethics</i> 116, pp. 498 – 524. --(On truth): Goldman, Alvin. 1999. 'Epistemology and Postmodern Resistance'. In <i>Knowledge in a Social World</i> . OUP.

	Title	Description	Reading
4	Knowledge First	Knowledge as the explanation	<p><u>Required:</u> --Timothy Williamson, 'Knowledge First'. In <i>Contemporary Debates in Epistemology</i>, pp. 1-9.</p> <p>--Trent Dougherty and Patrick Rysiew, 'Experience first. In <i>Contemporary Debates in Epistemology</i>, pp. 17 – 21.</p> <p><u>Further:</u> --The rest of Chapter 1, in <i>CDE</i>.</p> <p>--Timothy Williamson. 'Introduction'. In <i>Knowledge and its limits</i>.</p>
Weeks 5 – 6: Epistemology and Justice			
5	Social Epistemology	Introduction to social epistemology. Why the individualistic approach needs correction. Collective epistemic agents.	<p><u>Required:</u> SEP: 'Social Epistemology'</p> <p><u>Further:</u> --Goldman, Alvin. 2010. 'Why Social Epistemology is <i>Real Epistemology</i>'. In <i>Social Epistemology</i>, Haddock, Adrian; Millar, Alan; and Pritchard, Duncan (eds). OUP.</p> <p>--SEP: 'Feminist Social Epistemology'</p>
5	Epistemic Injustice	Testimonial Injustice	<p><u>Required:</u> --Miranda Fricker, 'Testimonial Injustice'. In <i>Epistemic Injustice</i>, OUP. (excerpts)</p> <p><u>Additional Reading:</u> -- Langton, R., 2010. 'Review of <i>Epistemic Injustice</i>. <i>Hypatia</i>, 25, pp.459–464.</p> <p>--Ishani Maitra. 2010. 'The Nature of Epistemic Injustice'. <i>Philosophical Books</i> 51: pp. 195-211 (excerpts).</p> <p>-- Saul, Jennifer. 2013. 'Scepticism and Implicit Bias'. <i>Disputato</i> 5: 243 – 245.</p>
7	Ignorance	Structural group-based misconception, the interplay between race-based ignorance on perception, conception, memory / amnesia, testimony, and motivated reasoning. Colour-blindness as the new white ignorance.	<p><u>Required:</u> --Charles W Mills, 'White Ignorance'. In <i>Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance</i>, Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds)</p> <p>--SEP: 'Feminist Social Epistemology', §§1 – 2.</p>

	Title	Description	Reading
Weeks 8 – 10: Three Responses to Scepticism			
8	Closure	What is epistemic closure? Should we believe in it? What is its role in sceptical arguments?	<p><u>Required:</u> -- Dretske, Fred. 1970. 'Epistemic Operators'. <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> 67: 1007 – 1023.</p> <p><u>Further:</u> WTK, Chapter on Radical Scepticism, section on closure.</p> <p>--John Hawthorne, 'The Case for Closure', in CDE pp. 40-56, but skipping §1 until the paragraph beginning "If the closure debate were over (3) or (3')", on p. 43.</p> <p>--Vogel, 'Are There Counterexamples to the Closure Principle'</p> <p>--Nozick, 'Knowledge' (providing a reason to deny closure, in the tracking theory of knowledge)</p>
9	Contextualism	In what does the contextualist response to scepticism consist? How can we motivate Contextualism?	<p><u>Required:</u> --Keith DeRose, 'Contextualism. An Explanation and Defence'.</p> <p><u>Further:</u> --WTK, Chapter on Radical Scepticism, last section</p> <p>--Jonathan Schaffer, 'What Shifts? Thresholds, Standards, or Alternatives?'</p>
10	Mooreanism	The role of experience in justification What can we know in perception Are there really differences in what it is rational to believe?	<p><u>Required:</u> --James Pryor, 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist'.</p> <p><u>Further:</u> --WTK, section on Mooreanism</p> <p>--Stewart Cohen, 'Why Basic Knowledge is Easy Knowledge'</p>
Weeks 11 – 12: The Structure of Justification			
11	Foundationalism	Does our knowledge or justification have the structure of an edifice, with a secure foundation? What could function as that foundation?	<p><u>Required</u> --Chisholm – The Myth of the Given</p> <p><u>Further</u> -WTK, The Structure of Knowledge</p>

	Title	Description	Reading
12	Coherentism	Can we know things, or be justified in believing things, simply because of how those things hang well together?	<u>Required:</u> Elgin, Catherine Z. 'Non-foundationalist Epistemology: Holism, Coherence, and Tenability', Chapter 10 in <i>CDE</i> . <u>Further</u> --The rest of CDE, Chapter 10

Assessment and Participation

You will be assessed on two short essays, each about 2000 words long. (+/- 10% is ok, but I stop reading at 2200 words.)

You are required to formulate your own essay question or topic. You can do this as early as you'd like, but the topic must be finally approved by me in writing at least two weeks before the due date, and it's *up to you* to ensure that this happens. Simply write me with your suggestion; I'll approve or suggest amendments.

This course has 5 parts, separated out in the above schedule. Your two essays cannot both draw their topics from the same part of the course. (The parts are: Week 1; Weeks 2 – 5; Weeks 5 – 6; Weeks 8 – 10; and Weeks 11 – 12.)

In addition, over the course of the semester you are required to write 10 memos, and 20 comments. (You're by no means required to stop at this number: more is better.) This is a course requirement, meaning that you will fail the course if you don't do this.

To count against the course requirement, comments and memos must be submitted on time, and be original to you and relevant to the text or memo in question. It's a good idea to plan to have all your memos and comments finished a few weeks before the end of the semester, to allow unforeseen circumstances.

Memos and comments are to be submitted to the course's online discussion board, always using full names.

Meeting this course requirement guarantees you 15% of the total mark, so long as your memos and comments engage appropriately with the texts and with other students' contributions. Memos and comments are not otherwise assessed for quality.

Writing memos and comments richly repays the effort.

Memos

A memo is a text of about 300 words that you write in response to an assigned reading. Memos can do various things, including: outline an argument from the text, argue or show that there is a hidden presupposition in the text, clarify or disagree with a thesis, or with a premise to an argument, give a counterexample to a claim made in the text, question the meaning of a section of the text, offer an interpretation of a section of the text, etc. I will initially provide prompts for the Memos; if things go well, this might change later on.

Memos are always due by 8pm, three days before class.

Comments

A comment is a short response to another student's Memo. It may be one or more sentences (it doesn't have to be long).

When you write a comment, be constructive and respectful. You are allowed to disagree with what the student has written, just take care to express yourself properly. (Note that there's no value in saying simply that you disagree: please say why.) You can also provide additional argument in support of the student's conclusion, give examples that support the student's conclusion, or are challenging to it, challenge a hidden presupposition of the student, etc.

Comments are always due by 8pm two days before class.