

PHIL 240 Introduction to Epistemology (section 001) Winter Term I (Fall 2021) Syllabus (May draft)

Lecture: Monday, Wednesday, Friday from 11 a.m. to 11:50 a.m. in Buchanan A202

Instructor: Chris Stephens

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays from noon to 1 p.m., but I'm available at other times and please email to set up appointments. Office: Buchanan E356 Email: chris.stephens@ubc.ca Canvas Course Site: canvas.ubc.ca

Teaching Assistant: TBD

Acknowledgment: UBC's Point Grey Campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xwməθkwəyəm (Musqueam) people. The land it is situated on has always been a place of learning for the Musqueam people, who for millennia have passed on in their culture, history, and traditions from one generation to the next on this site.

Course Description

Phil 240 is an introduction to philosophical issues about the nature of knowledge and evidence (epistemology). In our everyday lives, we often claim that we know or have good reasons to believe many things – that Vancouver is near the Pacific Ocean, that $2 + 2 = 4$, that Orcas are mammals, that the sun will rise tomorrow, and so on. We will begin the course by thinking about common sense principles that provide support for these claims. We will then consider the status of *epistemic relativism*, the view that the kinds of reasons we give for our beliefs are only justified relative to a culture or perhaps even to an individual. We will consider objections to epistemic relativism.

Next, we will turn our attention to philosophical skepticism. Philosophical skeptics doubt or deny that we have knowledge or justification of various sorts. Some deny that we know anything at all, while other skeptics maintain that you don't have *very much* knowledge. We will spend a lot of time thinking about arguments for and against various kinds of philosophical skepticism. How can you tell that you're not dreaming as you read this, or that you're not currently in a Matrix? Are our beliefs about the future justified? How?

We will also spend some time doing applied epistemology. Epistemological issues arise in a number of areas of philosophy. We'll examine some of these, including design arguments for the existence of God. We'll also look at the relationship between epistemology and politics. What should you make of the fact that if you were raised in a different country or with a different family, you might well have very different moral or political beliefs? We'll think about some epistemological issues about conspiracy theories. Are they always irrational? Why are people disposed to believe them? Finally, we'll end with some epistemological questions about the nature of democracy: are there epistemic (as opposed to moral or political reasons) to make decisions in a democratic way?

This course aims to provide the student with an introduction to various epistemological concepts (knowledge, justification, evidence, skepticism, rationality, etc.) and theories about the nature of knowledge. Although we will examine works by historically important figures such as Plato, Sextus Empiricus, Descartes and Hume, the primary focus of this course will be on assessing philosophical arguments and theories for their correctness.

The course also aims to help you develop your critical thinking and writing skills. Besides being a subject, philosophy is also a way of thinking, of asking questions and evaluating the answers to them. In examining your views about epistemological issues, it is important to develop and refine your ability to ask questions and critically examine the arguments offered by various thinkers. Because reasons (arguments) are offered for positions in nearly every subject, the rewards that you may reap from cultivating critical thinking and writing skills extend far beyond the scope of this course.

Texts Note: All of the required course readings are on Canvas. If you enjoying reading textbooks, these are good to have for this course (but are *optional*.) Both are inexpensive paperbacks:

(1) Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press.

(2) Anthony Weston, *A Rulebook for Arguments*, Hackett Publishing Co.

If you find yourself saying "I didn't understand what Chris was going on about this week" you might try reading (1), and if you've never written a philosophy essay before, you should look at (2).

Course Requirements and Marking Formula

(1) Best 10 out of 11 Group Exercises (2% each)	20%
(2) 2 (4-5 page double-spaced) Papers (25% each)	50%
(3) Final Exam (Take home, essay-style)	30%

Marking Scale

90-100% A+	85-89% A	80-84% A-
76-79% B+	72-75% B	68-71% B-
64-67% C+	60-63% C	55-59% C-
50-54% D	0-49% F	

Each of these course requirements is explained below.

Group Exercises

Roughly once a week we will break into small groups of about 3-4 people and each group will complete an exercise. Each member of a given group (who is present) will receive the same mark on the assignment. Your best 10 (out of 11) group exercises count toward your final group exercise grade. Your final group exercise grade can be affected by the performance evaluations of the other members of your group. You will get an opportunity to evaluate your group members on the final exam. Please ensure that you have access to the relevant week's readings during any given class meeting. During two of the meetings your group exercise will consist of peer reviewing one another's papers. See the schedule, below.

Papers

Each student is required to write two analytical essays (approximately 1,500 words each). The topics for the first essay are on the fourth page of this syllabus (they will also be on the Canvas site). Note that rough drafts of the first paper are due in class on Oct. 1st. You should bring *two* copies of your draft to class that day. Although the drafts are not graded per se, *failure to turn in a draft for any of the papers will result in a 10% deduction from the mark you receive on the final version of that paper*. I will pass out information on the second paper topics (and post them on the Canvas site) by . The final version of your first paper is due by 11:59 p.m. on Oct. 8th and should be submitted to Canvas. Late papers are marked down 5% per day late.

Final Exam

The final exam for this course will take place during the final exam period (Dec. 11th to 22nd). Please do not take this course if your travel plans preclude taking final exam during this period. The final exam is designed to test your comprehension of the material that has been covered in class and in the readings. It will involve both short answer and short essay questions. I will post information about the final exam info on (on Canvas).

Attendance and Make up Policy

There is no official requirement that you attend class. However, it is difficult to do well unless you attend regularly. Past experience suggests that *students who come to class perform significantly better in the course*. If you do miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed. Please contact another student, me, or the Teaching Assistant to find out what you have missed.

Keep in mind that group exercises will not always be announced in advance, so that if you miss class you run the risk of missing a group exercise. Furthermore, much of the material I discuss in class will *not* be posted as slides. You are expected to come to class and take notes. Evidence suggests that students who take notes by hand retain the material better than those who type their notes. Please be courteous to those around you and don't surf the web or watch cat videos during class.

If you miss a group activity and you do not have a University-sanctioned excuse, you will receive a "0" for that assignment.

In general, I expect students to be consistently well prepared for class by having read (and thought about) the material. These readings are not to be passively consumed - I welcome (and expect) questions and challenges in class. I also hope that students will stop by to chat with me outside of regular class time to discuss what we're doing or just to say "hello" and let me know how the course is going. You are also encouraged to discuss any problems you may have with the teaching of the course.

The Centre for Accessibility (<https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility>) provides resources for students who need academic accommodation. Please contact me personally as soon as possible so we can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and to facilitate your educational opportunities.

Finally, please note that cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses and will result in an "F" for the course. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic misconduct, please check with me or the University guidelines. See: <http://www.calendar.ubc.ca/Vancouver/index.cfm?tree=3,54,111,959>

Schedule of Readings, Subjects, and Assignments (subject to possible change)

(All required course readings are located at the course Canvas site: <http://canvas.ubc.ca>)

Week Lecture	Subject & Assignments	Readings
1 Sept 8, 10	True opinion vs. Knowledge Correspondence Theory of Truth	Plato excerpt (<i>Meno</i>) Nagel, ch. 1 <i>Knowledge</i>
2 Sept 13, 15, 17	Relativism: Ancient & Contemporary	Plato <i>Theaetetus</i> (excerpt); Barnes and Bloor "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge" Lewis Carroll "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles"
3 Sept 20, 22, 24	Ancient Skepticism & Agrippa's Trilemma	Sextus Empiricus <i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> (excerpts)
4 Sept 27, 29, Oct. 1	Foundationalism; Rationalism	Descartes' <i>Meditations</i> parts I, II & III
Drafts of First Paper due in class on Oct 1st – please bring two copies		
5 Oct. 4, 6, 8	Skepticism - Dreaming	Poundstone "Paradox" & Blumenfelds "Can I know that I'm not Dreaming?"
Final Version of First Paper Due Oct 8th by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas)		
No class Oct. 11th (Thanksgiving)		
6 Oct. 13, 15	Replies to Skepticism: common sense	Pollock "Skeptical Problems"; Moore "Proof of an External World" & "Four Forms of Scepticism"
7 Oct. 18, 20, 22	Replies to skepticism: externalism Contextualism	Nozick "Knowledge" Nagel, ch. 7 "Shifting Standards"
8 Oct. 25, 27, 29	Problem of Induction; Empiricism	Hume's <i>Enquiry</i> (excerpts); Salmon "An Encounter with David Hume"; van Cleve "Reliability, Justification and the problem of induction"
9 Nov. 1, 3, 5	Probability & Epistemology Design Arguments	Sober "An Introduction to Bayesian Epistemology" Paley's Natural Theology (excerpts) Sober, "The Design Argument" Behe <i>Darwin's Black Box</i> (excerpts)
Drafts of Second Paper due in class on Nov 5th– please bring two copies		
10 Nov. 8	Pragmatism & epistemology	Pascal "The Wager"
No class Nov. 10-12 (Midterm Break)		
11 Nov. 15, 17, 19	Pragmatism & Epistemology, continued	Clifford "The Ethics of Belief" James "The Will to Believe" Keller "Friendship & Belief"
Final Version of Second Paper due Nov. 19th by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas)		
12 Nov. 22, 24, 26	Epistemology & politics Conspiracy Theories, Epistemic Vices, & Echo Chambers https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult	Huemer "Why People are irrational about politics" Cassam "Bad Thinkers" Dentith "The Problem of Conspiracism" Nguyen "Escape the echo chamber"
13 Nov. 29, Dec. 1, 3	Epistemology & Democracy	Anderson "The Epistemology of Democracy"
14 Dec 6	No new Readings: Review for Final Exam	

Final Exam: The final exam date is still TBD but will be between Dec. 11th and 22nd. Please don't take this course if your travel plans prohibit you from taking the final exam during this time.

First Paper Assignment

General Information

Your first paper should be approximately 1,200-1,500 words, double-spaced. The final version is due **Friday, Oct. 8th** by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas). You should also turn in your rough drafts (with comments from the other students) at this time. **Two** copies of a double-spaced, word-processed rough *draft* are due in class on **Oct. 1st**. Please keep a copy for yourself in case a paper gets lost or misplaced. The first paper is worth 25% of your course mark. You will peer review each other's papers in discussion sections on Oct. 1st. You are then expected to revise your paper in light of the comments and submit the final version, with the drafts, on **Oct. 8th**. Late papers will be marked down 5% per day late.

Topics

Write your essay on *one* of these topics.

(1) In "Outlines of Pyrrhonism" (see especially the section called "The Ten Modes"), Sextus Empiricus gives several arguments that purport to show that we cannot trust the evidence we get through our senses – arguments that are supposed to support a certain kind of skepticism. Which of his arguments is the strongest? Critically evaluate. What sorts of objections might a 21st century reader give to his arguments? What, if anything, do his arguments succeed in showing?

(2) Critically examine some argument in the Blumenfelds' essay "Can I know what I am not dreaming?" Is there a good objection to Descartes' argument in *Meditation I* that he cannot know that he is not dreaming? Do any of the suggestions that Poundstone makes in his essay ("Paradox") help?

Helpful tips for writing a better paper:

The paper topics (1) and (2) suggest issues to consider and questions to ponder. But the task of deciding what you want to argue remains. You should develop a specific *thesis* and defend your thesis with *arguments*. This paper is *not* like an examination answer. No good essay merely summarizes what you have read and then offers points of comparison – every acceptable essay *integrates* its remarks into an argument of its own. Exposition of the views of others should always be part of *your* argument for *your* thesis. Your essay should *not* simply be a list of answers to the above questions. Nor must you necessarily answer all (or any) of the questions listed under a particular topic.

Marking will be based on how well the thesis is defended and on how well the paper is written. A good paper should show intellectual integrity and struggle. It must also take seriously objections to the thesis. The objections must be developed *as arguments*. If there are passages from the assigned readings that are relevant, these should be cited and discussed. If class lectures or discussion are relevant to your topic, your paper should show awareness of them. In general, it should be intelligent, logical and careful. The paper should also be well organized and grammatically competent.

To help you in organizing your thinking and writing, you should be able to answer the following questions about your paper after you have completed your rough draft:

- 1 What is it that you are trying to maintain or prove in your paper?
- 2 What is the main *argument* for your thesis?
- 3 What is the most important objection to your thesis that you should consider? Formulate the objection or criticism as an *argument*.
- 4 What is your argument in response to the objection mentioned in question 3?

Jim Pryor has helpful advice on how to write a philosophy essay, here:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

If you haven't written many philosophy papers before, I'd recommend looking at the relevant chapters of Weston's book, *A Rulebook for Arguments*.

We will also do a group exercise about paper writing in class.

Finally, please feel free to contact me or the Teaching Assistant if you want help. Good luck!