

# PHIL 240A Introduction to Epistemology (section 001) Summer Term 1 Syllabus

*In Person Class Meetings:* Mondays and Wednesdays 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Buchanan A202

**Note:** course content will be provided *in-person*; the lectures will *not* be recorded or livestreamed. Please also note that I often do *not* use overhead slides. Do not take this course if you are unable to attend in person. UBC continues to require mask wearing in class.

## Instructor: Chris Stephens

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays from 1-2 p.m., but I'm available at other times and please email to set up appointments either in person or over Zoom. Email: [chris.stephens@ubc.ca](mailto:chris.stephens@ubc.ca) Canvas Course Site: [canvas.ubc.ca](https://canvas.ubc.ca)

**Acknowledgment:** UBC's Point Grey Campus is located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the xwməθkwəy̓əm (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. But what is it that distinguishes knowledge from mere opinion? There is a long history of attempts to describe what it is that all cases of knowledge have in common. We will spend some time examining this history, with an eye to figuring out what knowledge is, and how we might go about obtaining it.

In addition to thinking about what knowledge is, we will also worry about whether (or to what extent) we have knowledge. 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 morality. Is it wrong to believe things for which you have insufficient evidence? Finally, we'll think about some epistemological issues about conspiracy theories. Are they always irrational? Why are people disposed to believe them?

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 might look at (2).

## Course Requirements and Marking Formula

(1) Best 10 out of 11 Group Exercises (2% each)	20%
(2) 2 (1,500 word) Papers (25% each)	50%
(3) Final Exam (between June 26 & June 30)	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

You will be divided into groups of 3-4 students. Each class meeting will have a group 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. Group exercises are open book: please ensure that you have access to the relevant day's readings in class. 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 Monday, **May 30<sup>th</sup>**. You should bring *two* copies of your draft to your discussion section (you can email your paper to your group members or post on a google doc, if you prefer). 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 June 1<sup>st</sup>. The final version of your first paper is due by 11:59 p.m. on **Thursday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>**. It should be submitted to Canvas. Late papers are marked down 5% per day late.

## Final Exam

The final exam for this course will be between June 26<sup>th</sup> and June 30<sup>th</sup>. Please do not take this course if you plan to travel out of town before June 30<sup>th</sup>. The final exam is designed to test your comprehension of the material that has been covered in class and in the readings, though the primary focus will be on what is covered in class. It will involve a combination of short answer and short essay questions. I will post information about the final exam info on June 15<sup>th</sup> (on Canvas). I will also set aside some class time on June 22<sup>nd</sup> for review. Come with questions.

## Attendance and Make up Policy

There is no official requirement that you attend lectures. However, it is difficult to do well unless you attend regularly. Past experience suggests that *students who come to class and take notes (ideally on paper) perform better in the course*. Keep in mind that since we will have a group exercise every day, if you miss class you will get a "0" for that assignment if you do not have a University sanctioned excuse. If you do miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed. Please contact another student or me. Although I will post any overhead slides I use, I will not always use slides!

If you are sick, *let me know as soon as possible* so we can find a way to make up the assignments you missed. Please don't wait until the end of the term and then mention that the reason you missed the first group exercise 5 weeks earlier is because you were sick, etc.

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 meet 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. Please email me to set up an appointment if you want to meet outside of my regular office hours. You are also encouraged to discuss any problems you may have with the teaching of the course.

*Laptops and other electronic devices*: I recognize that some of you like to take notes or access the course readings on your electronic devices. This is OK, but please be courteous to those around you. If you can't resist frequently checking your Instagram or looking at the latest cat videos, consider taking notes on paper. I don't want you distracting other students around you. Studies suggest that students generally do better if they don't use such electronic devices: you retain the information better if you take notes by hand.

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should contact me personally as soon as possible so we can discuss accommodations necessary to ensure full participation and to facilitate your educational opportunities. <https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility>

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>)

<b>Date</b>	<b>Subject &amp; Assignments</b>	<b>Readings</b>
Mon May 16 <sup>th</sup>	True opinion vs knowledge; logic	Nagel <i>Knowledge</i> (ch. 1); Plato excerpt ( <i>Meno</i> ) Logic & Argument Handout
Wed May 18 <sup>th</sup>	Relativism: Ancient & Contemporary Are there alternative ways of knowing?	Plato excerpt ( <i>Theatetus</i> ); Barnes and Bloor “Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge”; Kimmerer <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> (excerpts) Lewis Carroll “What the Tortoise Said to Achilles”
Mon May 23 <sup>rd</sup>	<b>Victoria Day</b> <i>No class!</i>	
Wed May 25 <sup>th</sup>	Ancient Skepticism	Sextus Empiricus Outlines of Pyrrhonism (excerpts) <i>Zhuangzi</i> (excerpts) Video: Liam Kofi Bright and Aaron Novick, “Free and Easy Conversing: Zhuangzi and Scepticism”: <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1vvqM6esJs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y1vvqM6esJs</a>
Mon May 30 <sup>th</sup>	Foundationalist response to Skepticism <b>Draft of first paper due in class</b>	Descartes’ <i>Meditations</i> , parts I, II & III
Wed June 1 <sup>st</sup>	Contemporary Dreaming Skepticism <b>Final version of first paper due Thursday June 2<sup>nd</sup> (11:59 p.m.) on Canvas</b>	Poundstone “Paradox”; David & Jean Blumenfeld “Can I know that I’m not dreaming?”
Mon June 6 <sup>th</sup>	Replies to Skepticism: Common Sense & Contextualism	Moore “Proof of an External World”; “Four Forms of Scepticism” Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> , ch. 7 “Shifting Standards”
Wed June 8 <sup>th</sup>	Problem of Induction; Empiricism (optional)	Hume’s <i>Enquiry</i> (excerpts); Salmon “An Encounter with D. Hume” Van Cleve “Reliability, Justification and the Problem of Induction”
Mon June 13 <sup>th</sup>	Probability & Epistemology Design Argument <b>Draft of second paper due in class</b>	Intro to Bayesianism Handout; Paley <i>Natural Theology</i> (excerpt) Sober “Intelligent Design & Probability Reasoning” (optional) Behe <i>Darwin’s Black Box</i> (excerpts)
Wed June 15 <sup>th</sup>	Pragmatism & Epistemology <b>Final version of second paper due Thursday June 16<sup>th</sup> (11:59 p.m.) on Canvas</b>	Pascal’s Wager; Clifford “The Ethics of Belief”; James “The Will to Believe”; Preston-Roedder “Faith in Humanity”
Mon June 20 <sup>th</sup>	Epistemology & politics Conspiracy Theories, Epistemic Vices	Huemer “Why People are irrational about politics” Cassam “Bad Thinkers” <a href="https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists">https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists</a> Dentith “The Problem of Conspiracism” Nguyen “Escape the echo chamber” <a href="https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult">https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult</a>
Wed June 22 <sup>nd</sup>	Hermeneutical Injustice Review for Final	Fricker “Powerlessness and Social Interpretation” Come with Questions!

June 26 – June 30<sup>th</sup> The final exam will be scheduled between these days (inclusive). *Please do not take this course if you plan to leave town before July 1<sup>st</sup>.*

## First Paper Assignment

### General Information

Your first paper should be approximately 1,200-1,500 words, double-spaced. The final version is due **Thursday, June 2<sup>nd</sup>** 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** (electronic or printed) copies of a double-spaced, word-processed rough *draft* are due in class Monday May 30<sup>th</sup>. 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 class sections on May 30<sup>th</sup>. You are then expected to revise your paper in light of the comments and submit the final version, with the drafts, on **June 2<sup>nd</sup>**. 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 21<sup>st</sup> 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 their argument that one cannot know that one 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>

We will also do a group exercise about paper writing in your discussion sections.

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