

## PHIL 540 Winter Term II 2023-2024 Pragmatist Epistemology (Core) Syllabus (Dec Draft)

**Instructor:** Chris Stephens      **Class:** Wednesdays, 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. in Buchanan D324

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“It wrong always, everywhere and for anyone to believe on insufficient evidence.” W. K. Clifford, “The Ethics of Belief”

“The wise man proportions his beliefs to the evidence.” D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*

“Truth is ugly. We possess art lest we perish of the truth.” F. Nietzsche, *Will to Power*, sec. 822.

“[O]nce we have a clear view on the matter, most of us will not find any value, either intrinsic or instrumental, in having true beliefs.” S. Stich, *The Fragmentation of Reason*.

### Introduction

Philosophers usually take for granted that we are better off with true or evidentially supported beliefs. The hard part is then determining the truth about whether God exists, whether we have free will, whether there are moral facts, whether external world skepticism is true, and so on. Philosophers such as Clifford are attracted to *evidentialism*: the view that we ought to form our beliefs always and only in accordance with the evidence. Evidentialism is viewed by many as an ideal of epistemic rationality, though there are many disputes about what exactly counts as evidence. There is also a lively debate about whether ethical considerations can or should influence what we *believe* (as opposed to merely influencing what we *do*). Is it ever *morally* wrong to believe on insufficient evidence? Although we will touch on this issue about the ethics of belief (this was the focus of Prof. Ichikawa’s seminar last year), we will focus more on whether evidentialism is good for you (i.e. prudent). The prudential benefits of evidentialism are clear in many cases: if there is a cliff in front of me, I’m better off believing there is one, so that I can avoid falling. But what about our beliefs concerning more philosophical matters such as the claim *that God exists, that I have free will, or that life has a meaning*? Critics of evidentialism, such as William James, Nietzsche and Stich, argue that sometimes we are better off *not* believing the truth or proportioning our beliefs to the evidence.

Besides its own intrinsic interest, whether and why we should be evidentialists relates to many broader issues in philosophy. Philosophers sometimes argue that we cannot get evidence for or against metaphysical claims, and so if we are evidentialists, we shouldn’t have metaphysical beliefs. Metaphysicians sometimes respond by arguing that we *can* get evidence for such claims. But they also sometimes respond by saying that even if we *cannot* get evidence for or against certain metaphysical claims, we ought to believe in them for some pragmatic reason. It is this second kind of response that will interest us in this seminar.

The first half of the course will focus on a historical thread of pragmatic style arguments that begins with Pascal’s wager and goes through Kant, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Clifford & James.

In the second part of the course, we will examine questions such as: Should we believe we have free will, even if the evidence suggests we don’t have any? Are there good pragmatic arguments to reject external world skepticism? We will also evaluate arguments by philosophers who suggest that friendship & love sometimes require that we violate the norms of epistemic rationality. Some moral philosophers have also argued that virtue can require us to believe things about others that are unsupported by the evidence. What should we make of their arguments?

Finally, how does evidence from social psychology about so called “positive illusions” bear on what is good to believe? Could delusions and illusions benefit us?

Each week we will consider a topic to which we could devote an entire semester. However, as a “Core” course, we will survey a number of issues and topics. It also means that I won’t presuppose an extensive epistemology background. I will only assume a general philosophical sophistication typical of philosophy graduate students. If you are not a graduate student in philosophy, please check with me about whether this course is appropriate.

## Course Requirements

**(1) Presentation (20%)** Each student is expected to give an in-class presentation (with an associated presentation paper of about 1,500 words) once during the term. I will pass around a sign-up sheet on the first day.

**(2) Weekly Participation (10%)** You are expected to write a short (1-2 pages, double-spaced) paper each week (except for the first & last week, and the week of your presentation) on some issue in that week's readings as well as participate actively in class discussion (including asking questions about the other students' presentations). Weekly papers should be emailed to me the day *before* the relevant class and are marked on a "pass-fail" basis.

**(3) Term Paper (70%)** You must write an approximately 5,000-word term paper on some issue concerning pragmatist epistemology. (It does not have to be on one of the topics on the syllabus, but should be related to the course theme). The topic of your term paper must be approved by March. 20<sup>th</sup>. Students will present a draft of their term paper in class on April 10<sup>th</sup>. You should also submit an (at least) 3,000-word draft on April 10<sup>th</sup>. Final papers are due by Saturday, May 4<sup>th</sup> at the latest, though students are encouraged to turn in their papers by the end of the term (April 27<sup>th</sup>). Keep in mind that if you're an MA student hoping to graduate this term you may have an earlier deadline.

January  
10<sup>th</sup>

### Pascal's wager

Primary Readings: 1. Pascal's *Pensées* (part III, section 233)  
2. Mougin & Sober "Betting Against Pascal's Wager" *Nous* XXVIII, 382-395.

#### Optional Background and Further Readings

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pascal-wager/>

Buden "Pascal and His Wager in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries"

Bartha "Pascal's Wager and the Dynamics of Rational Deliberation"

Sober "The Arbitrary Prudentialism of Pascal's Wager and How to Overcome it Using Game Theory"

(All three of these articles are in *Pascal's Wager*, eds. Bartha and Pasternack, CUP 2018.)

January  
17<sup>th</sup>

### Pragmatic and moral belief in Kant

Primary Readings: 1. Kant excerpts  
2. Chignell "Belief in Kant," *Philosophical Review* 116: 323-360.

#### Optional Background and Further Readings

Pasternack "The development and scope of Kantian belief: the highest good, the practical postulates and the fact of reason," *Kant-Studien* 102: 290-315.

January  
24<sup>th</sup>

### Kierkegaard & the rationality of faith

Primary Readings: 1. Kierkegaard *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, esp.  
2. Adams "Kierkegaard's Arguments against objective reasoning in religion" *The Monist* 1976, 60 (2) 228-243.  
3. Buchak "Can it be rational to have faith?" in Chandler and Harrison (eds) *Probability in the Philosophy of Religion*, OUP 2012.

#### Optional Background and Further Readings

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/>

I. J. Good "On the Principle of Total Evidence" *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 1967 (17) 4, 319-321.

J. Ichikawa "Faith and Epistemology," *Episteme* 17 (1):121-140 (2020)

January  
31<sup>st</sup>

### Nietzsche on art, illusion and the value of truth

Primary Readings: 1. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good & Evil* 24; *The Genealogy of Morals* Preface & III, 25; *The Gay Science* 107 (bk. 2) and 299 (bk. four) & book five (esp. 344)  
2. Landy "Nietzsche, Proust and will to ignorance" *Philosophy & Literature* 2002, 26 (1) 1-23.  
3. L. Anderson "Nietzsche on Truth, Illusion and Redemption" *European Journal of Philosophy* 2005, 185-225.

#### Optional Background and Further Readings

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/#Trut>

T. Jollimore "Miserably ever after: Forgetting, Repeating and Affirming Love in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*," in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, ed. C. Grau, Routledge 2009, p. 31-61.

- February 7<sup>th</sup>**      **The ethics of Belief: Clifford v. James**  
 Primary Readings: 1. W. K. Clifford "The ethics of belief" (1877)  
 2. W. James "The sentiment of rationality" (1882)  
 3. W. James "The will to believe" (1896)  
 (Both James' essays are in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays* (1897))  
  
*Optional Background and Further Readings*  
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/ethics-belief/>  
 P. Van Inwagen "Is it Wrong, Everywhere, Always and for Anyone to Believe Anything on Insufficient Evidence?" (1996) Jordan and Howard-Snyder, eds., *Faith, Freedom and Rationality Rowman & Littlefield*, 137-154.
- February 14<sup>th</sup>**      **Carnap-Quine debate: what is pragmatism? What should it be?**  
 Primary Readings: 1. R. Carnap (1950) "Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology" in *Meaning and Necessity*  
 2. W. V. O. Quine (1953) "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" *From a Logical Point of View* Harvard University Press, 1953.  
 3. G. Harman "Pragmatism and Reasons for Belief" in Harman *Reasoning, Meaning and Mind* 1999. Oxford U. Press, 93-116.  
  
*Optional Background and Further Readings*  
 Quine "On Carnap's views on ontology" in *Ways of Paradox and Other Essays* (1966) Harvard U Press.  
 R. Creath "Every dogma has its day" *Erkenntnis* (1991) 35: 347-389.  
 E. Sober "Quine's Two Dogmas" (2000) *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, vol. 74: 1, p. 237-280.
- February 28<sup>th</sup>**      **Pragmatic responses to skepticism**  
 Primary Readings: 1. R. Pasnau "Snatching Hope from the Jaws of Epistemic Defeat" *Journal of the American Philosophical Association* 2015, 257-75.  
 2. S. Rinard "Pragmatic Skepticism" *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research* (2022), vol. 104: 2 p. 434-453.  
  
*Optional Background and Further Readings*  
 E. Olsson "Not giving the skeptic a hearing: pragmatism and radical doubt," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (2005), vol. LXX, no. 1, January.  
 D. Pritchard "Wittgenstein's *On Certainty* and contemporary anti-scepticism," in D. Moyal-Harrook & W. H. Brenner (eds.) *Investigating On Certainty: Essays on Wittgenstein's Last Work*. Palgrave-Macmillan (2005).  
 S. Rinard "Believing for Practical Reasons" *Nous* vol. 53, issue 4 (2019), p. 763-784.
- March 6<sup>th</sup>**      **Free will illusionism**  
 Primary Readings: 1. P. F. Strawson "Freedom and Resentment" in G. Watson (ed.) *Proceedings of the British Academy*, vol. 48 Oxford U Press (1962), 1-25.  
 2. S. Smilansky "Free Will, Fundamental Dualism, and the Centrality of Illusion" in Kane (ed.) *The Oxford Handbook of Free Will* (2002) Oxford U Press, 489-505.  
 3. T. Nadelhoffer & A. Feltz "Folk Intuitions, Slippery Slopes and Necessary Fictions..." *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31 (1) 2007, 202-213.  
  
*Optional Background and Further Readings*  
 W. James "The Dilemma of Determinism" (1884) reprinted in *The Will to Believe and Other Essays*.  
 S. Smilansky, *Free Will and Illusion* (2000) Oxford University Press.
- March 13<sup>th</sup>**      **Moral faith**  
 Primary Readings: 1. J. Driver "The Virtues of Ignorance," *The Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 86, No. 7 (Jul., 1989), pp. 373-384.  
 2. R. Adams "Moral Faith," *Journal of Philosophy* Vol. 92, No. 2 (Feb., 1995), pp. 75-95.  
  
*Optional Background and Further Readings*  
 J. Driver *Uneasy Virtue* (2009) Cambridge U Press.  
 M. Winter "Does Moral Virtue Require Knowledge? A Response to Julia Driver," *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 15 (4): 533-546 (2012)  
*Utilitas* 16 (2004) is devoted to Driver's book (commentaries by O'Neill, Skorupski & Slote & reply by Driver).

**March  
20<sup>th</sup>**

**Friendship & partiality**

Primary Readings: 1. S. Keller “Friendship and Belief” *Philosophical Papers* (2004) 33:3, p. 329-351.  
2. S. Stroud “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship” *Ethics* (2006) vol. 116 (3) 498-524.  
3. K. Hawley “Partiality and Prejudice in Trusting” *Synthese* (2014) (191) 2019-2045.

*Optional Background and Further Readings*

S. Goldberg “Against epistemic partiality in friendship: value-reflecting reasons,” *Philosophical Studies* (2019) 176: 8, p. 2221-2242.

**March  
27<sup>th</sup>**

**Love’s illusions & faith in humanity**

Primary Readings: 1. E. du Châtelet *Discourse on Happiness*, from *Selected Philosophical and Scientific Writings*, U of Chicago Press, (2009), p. 349-367.  
2. T. Jollimore *Love’s Vision*, ch. 3 & 4. Princeton U Press (2011).  
3. R. Preston-Roedder “Faith in Humanity,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 2013 (3) 664-687.

*Optional Background and Further Readings*

G. Fletcher & P. Kerr “Love, Reality, and Illusion in Intimate Relationships” in *The Oxford Handbook of Close Relationships*, OUP 2013.

R. Preston-Roedder “Three Varieties of Faith,” *Philosophical Topics* (2018) 46: 1, pp. 173-199.

**April  
3<sup>rd</sup>**

**Positive illusions & the mind**

Primary Readings: 1. Taylor & Brown “Illusion & Well Being” *Psychological Bulletin* 1988 (103) 2: 193-210.  
2. L. Bortolotti “The epistemic innocence of motivated delusions” *Consciousness and Cognition* (2015) 33: 490-499.

*Optional Background and Further Readings*

Dufner, Michael; Gebauer, Jochen E.; Sedikides, Constantine; Denissen, Jaap J. A. (2018). “Self enhancement and psychological adjustment” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*.

Schütz, A., & Baumeister, R. F. (2017). Positive illusions and the happy mind. In M. D. Robinson & M. Eid (Eds.), *The happy mind: Cognitive contributions to well-being* (pp. 177–193). Springer International Publishing/Springer Nature.

L. Bartolotti *The Epistemic Innocence of Irrational Beliefs* (2020) OUP.

L. Bartolotti *Why Delusions Matter* (2023) Bloomsbury.

**April  
10<sup>th</sup>**

**Your Presentations!**