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 of 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 of 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 20th. Students will present a draft of their term paper in class on April 10th. You should also submit an (at least) 3,000-word draft on April 10th. Final papers are due by Saturday, May 4th at the latest, though students are encouraged to turn in their papers by the end of the term (April 27th). Keep in mind that if you’re an MA student hoping to graduate this term you may have an earlier deadline.

January 10th
Pascal’s wager

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 17th
Pragmatic and moral belief in Kant

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 24th
Kierkegaard & the rationality of faith

Optional Background and Further Readings
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/kierkegaard/

January 31st
Nietzsche on art, illusion and the value of truth

Optional Background and Further Readings
https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/nietzsche/#Trut
February 7th  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/


February 14th  Carnap-Quine debate: what is pragmatism? What should it be?
Primary Readings: 1. R. Carnap (1950) “Empiricism, Semantics and Ontology” in Meaning and Necessity

Optional Background and Further Readings

February 28th  Pragmatic responses to skepticism

Optional Background and Further Readings

March 6th  Free will illusionism

Optional Background and Further Readings
W. James “The Dilemma of Determinism” (1884) reprinted in The Will to Believe and Other Essays.

March 13th  Moral faith

Optional Background and Further Readings
March 20th

**Friendship & partiality**

Primary Readings:

*Optional Background and Further Readings*


March 27th

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

Primary Readings:

*Optional Background and Further Readings*


April 3rd

**Positive illusions & the mind**

Primary Readings:

*Optional Background and Further Readings*


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


April 10th

**Your Presentations!**