

This is a draft syllabus, still in progress. Lots of details are still subject to change. It'll be finalized by the start of the term.

PHIL 540: Topics in Epistemology

Seminar on Knowledge: Summer Term 2024

This syllabus is available at bit.ly/phil540.

Course Meetings: Wednesdays 1–4pm
Instructor: Jonathan Ichikawa — jonathan.ichikawa@ubc.ca
Office Hours: TBD

Overview:

This is a graduate philosophy seminar in epistemology. This is an advanced course; prior familiarity with academic philosophical investigation into epistemology *will* be assumed. **A previous course in epistemology (PHIL 240 at UBC or the equivalent) is a prerequisite.** It is primarily for UBC Philosophy MA and PhD students. Advanced undergraduates or grad students in other disciplines may be approved on a case-by-case basis, if they have studied the relevant background material. Students seeking such approval should get in touch with me before the start of the term.

The course will be centred primarily around one book: Timothy Williamson's (2000) *Knowledge and Its Limits*. Williamson's book has been extremely influential—it is one of the most important philosophy books of the past several decades. The central theme of the book, as Williamson puts it, is “knowledge first”. Instead of taking knowledge to be something to be explained, Williamson suggests that it is something with which we should explain other interesting phenomena. The result is a particularly *externalist* approach to epistemology, according to which we know a lot of things, but we don't — indeed, in a deep sense we *couldn't* — always know what we know.

Questions we'll focus on include:

- Whether it is possible to analyze the concept of knowledge
- Whether it makes sense to think of mental states that depend on features outside one's head
- How knowledge relates to other mental states
- Whether it is easier to know about one's own experiences than about the external world
- How to think about the difference between knowing something, and knowing that you know it
- What kind of epistemic access is necessary to make sense of responsibility
- What evidence is, and whether we have evidence against skeptical hypotheses
- How knowledge relates to assertion
- Whether there are truths that are by nature unknowable

Texts:

The main text for this seminar is Timothy Williamson's *Knowledge and Its Limits*. The ebook is available via the UBC library, but some students may wish to purchase their own copy as well. Additional readings will be made available via Canvas. Two good sources for secondary literature on Williamson are *Williamson on Knowledge* (2009), edited by Duncan Pritchard and Patrick Greenough, and *Knowledge First: Approaches in Epistemology and Mind* (2018), edited

by J. Adam Carter, Emma Gordon, and Benjamin Jarvis. (The latter is available electronically via the UBC library.)

Background Readings:

Here are readings which you may have studied in your previous work, that will be helpful background. They are not required readings for this course, but you may find it useful to look at them if you don't know them already.

- Gettier, "Is justified true belief knowledge?"
- Stanford Encyclopedia Article: [The Analysis of Knowledge](#)
- Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?"
- Sosa, "How to Defeat Opposition to Moore"
- Pryor, "The Skeptic and the Dogmatist"

Additional background readings are listed for each topic in the schedule below.

Course Expectations:

This is a discussion-driven upper-level seminar. All students are expected to attend all courses, to read all required readings, and to come prepared to discuss them. The seminars will be structured primarily around student discussions, so it is essential that you come prepared and ready to participate. Don't expect to merely listen and learn. See below for coursework expectations.

Schedule:

Each week has a list of required readings and supplemental readings. Only required readings are required for all students, but students are encouraged to engage with at least some of the supplemental readings over the course of the semester as well.

The schedule is still a work in progress; everything is subject to change.

Abbreviations

- **KAIL:** *Knowledge and its Limits*, by Timothy Williamson
- **CGJ:** *Knowledge First: Approaches in Epistemology and Mind* (2018), edited by J. Adam Carter, Emma Gordon, and Benjamin Jarvis.
- **GP:** *Williamson on Knowledge* (2009), edited by Patrick Greenough and Duncan Pritchard

Before our first meeting:

Strongly recommended:

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, ["The Analysis of Knowledge"](#) (esp §§1–5)

May 15:

Required:

- KAIL ch. 1: A State of Mind
- KAIL ch. 2: Broadness

- Nagel, "[Knowledge as a Mental State](#)"

Supplemental:

- McGlynn, "Mindreading Knowledge" in CGJ
- Fricker, "Is Knowing a State of Mind? The Case Against" in GP
- Harman, "[Some Reflections on Knowledge and Its Limits](#)"
- Yablo, "[Causal Relevance](#)"

Background:

- Putnam, "[Meaning and Reference](#)"

May 22:

Required:

- KAIL ch. 3: Primeness
- Ichikawa and Jenkins, "On putting knowledge 'first'", in CGJ or [here](#)
- Zagzebski, "[The inescapability of Gettier problems](#)"

Supplemental:

- Cassam, "Can the Concept of Knowledge be Analysed?", in GP
- Magnus and Cohen, "[Williamson on Knowledge and Psychological Explanation](#)"

Background

- Gettier, "Is justified true belief knowledge?"

May 29:

Required:

- KAIL ch. 4: Anti-Luminosity
- Srinivasan, "[Are We luminous?](#)"
- Hughes, "[Luminosity Failure, Normative Guidance and the Principle 'Ought-Implies-Can'](#)"

Supplemental:

- Reed, "[Shelter for the Cognitively Homeless](#)"
- Cohen, "[Luminosity, Reliability, and the Sorites](#)"
- Cognitive Mobile Homes

Background

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June 5

Required:

- KAIL ch. 5: Margins and Iterations
- KAIL ch. 6: An Application (Surprise Exam!)
- Lasonen-Aarnio, [“Unreasonable Knowledge”](#)
- Simon Goldstein, [“Fragile Knowledge”](#)

Supplemental:

- Das and Salow, [“Transparency and the KK Principle”](#)
- Dorst, [“Abominable KK Failures”](#)
- Conor McHugh, “Self-knowledge and the KK principle”

June 12:

Required:

- KAIL ch. 7: Sensitivity
- KAIL ch. 8: Skepticism
- Sosa, [“How to Defeat Opposition to Moore”](#)
- Ichikawa, *Contextualising Knowledge* ch 2 (on OSO)

Supplemental:

- Dodd, [“The Cookie Paradox”](#)
- Dretske, “Epistemic Operators”
- Rousch, *Tracking Truth*, Ch.3
- Kornblith, [“Does Reliabilism Make Knowledge Merely Conditional?”](#)

June 19:

Required:

- KAIL ch. 9: Evidence
- Williamson ch. 10: Evidential Probability
- Goldman, “Williamson on Knowledge and Evidence,” in GP (draft available [here](#))
- Ichikawa, [“Basic Knowledge First”](#)

Supplemental:

- Littlejohn, “How and why knowledge is first”
- Dodd, “Why Williamson Should be a Skeptic”

June 26:

Required:

- Williamson ch. 11: Assertion
- Brown, [“Knowledge and Assertion”](#)
- Schechter, [“No need for excuses”](#)

Supplemental:

- Simion: [“Assertion: Knowledge is Enough”](#)

- Goldberg, “The Knowledge Account of Assertion and the Nature of Testimonial Knowledge”, in GP

July 3: Knowledge–Action Links

Required:

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Supplemental:

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Background:

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July 10: Contextualism

Required:

- Ichikawa, *Contextualising Knowledge* ch. 1

Supplemental:

- Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge”

Background:

- Ichikawa, “What is Epistemic Contextualism?”

July 17: Justification

Required:

- Miracchi, [“Competence to Know”](#)
- Ichikawa, “Justification is Potential Knowledge”
- Meylan, “In Support of the Knowledge-First Conception of the Normativity of Justification”, in CGJ

Supplemental:

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July 24: Positive Epistemic Norms

Required:

- Ichikawa, “You Ought to Have Known”

Supplemental:

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Background:

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July 31: Classroom Discussion of Paper Topics

August 7: Peer Feedback Discussion Day

August 16: Final Paper Due

Assessment:

This seminar should be in significant part a student-driven discussion; high levels of participation are expected. Attendance is mandatory. All students should come prepared to discuss the week's readings every week; there will also be regular presentations and brief written reactions to readings. Expect a significant amount of reading two or three chapters or papers of required readings each week, with an expectation for some additional supplementary reading guided by students' own research interests.

PHIL 540 students will be assessed according to the following criteria:

- **Précis Responses and ComPAIR Feedback (10%).** This element has two weekly components.
 - First, by midnight each Saturday night (three days before class), students will submit a very brief (maximum 200-word) written reaction to one or more of the week's required readings. The format for this can be relatively free: it might be a summary of the paper, or of a particularly challenging part of the paper, or a presentation of an objection, a connection between different ideas, or even just a question arising from the reading.
 - Second, students will give comparisons and feedback to some of their classmates' (anonymized) work. This will happen online via ComPAIR. You can read more about ComPAIR [here](#). This should happen by the seminar time.
 - Students will receive a grade each week, both for their own submitted work, and for the feedback they give to others. Students may participate in the feedback exercise element even if they do not submit their own work that week.
 - The top ten grades (out of 12 weeks) will be recorded (so each student may skip this assignment up to 2 times without penalty).
- **Presentations (20%).** Twice each semester, on a schedule to be agreed upon in advance, students will make a presentation of 10–15 minutes of some of their thoughts about a required reading to the seminar. It is fine for this to duplicate the material of that week's précis response, but this should be a genuine presentation, not merely a reading of the précis. The use of visual aids such as handouts or slides is encouraged. The point of these presentations is to share ideas and prompt discussions about the material we're all reading.
- **Final Essay (50%).** This should be an original research paper of 4,000–6,000 words, on a central topic in the course. Students are highly encouraged to discuss paper ideas with me well in advance. Students are required to prepare preliminary material in advance as described below. If you find that you need to write a longer term paper, talk to me about it in advance. The deadline for the term paper is **August 16**.
- **Essay Preliminaries (10%).** Students should prepare a preliminary extended abstract for their essays, indicating the main issues discussed, and outlining central views and

arguments. They may optionally include draft material for particular sections of the paper. This should be no more than 1,500 words total. The deadline for this is **July 31**.

- **Peer Feedback on Essay Preliminaries (10%).** Each student will be assigned another student's preliminaries, to offer critiques and suggestions for improvement. While students will be invited to meet personally to discuss these suggestions, it should also be prepared in written form; this feedback will be assessed. Deadline is **August 7**. (I will also give each student feedback on their own preliminaries.)

Note on Accessing Readings

Required readings will be made available electronically. Many readings will be linked in this syllabus via [PhilPapers](#), an online repository of philosophy texts. I suggest that students create a PhilPapers account, indicating their affiliation with UBC—when logged in, you can access, from the pages linked here, either the papers directly, or a link where you can enter your CWL information to download copyrighted material.