

## PHIL 240 Introduction to Epistemology (section 001) Winter Term I 2025 – 2026 (Fall 2025) Syllabus

Monday & Wednesday from 10 a.m. to 10:50 a.m. in Leonard S. Klinck (LSK), Floor 4, Room 460. You must also be enrolled in one of the discussion sections (L01: Fridays, 10 a.m. – 10:50 a.m. LIFE (floor 2, room 2214); L02: Fridays, 10 a.m. – 10:50 a.m. LIFE (floor 2, room 2109); or L04: Fridays 12:00 – 12:50 p.m. Buchanan B318).

**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.

**Note:** course content will be provided *in-person*; the lectures will *not* be recorded or livestreamed.\* Please also note that I usually do *not* use overhead slides. Do not take this course if you are unable or unwilling to attend in person. See *Attendance & Make Up Policy*, below.

### Instructor: Chris Stephens

Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays from 1 p.m. to 2 p.m., but I'm available at other times. Please email to set up appointments (over Zoom or in person) Office: Buchanan E356 Email: [chris.stephens@ubc.ca](mailto:chris.stephens@ubc.ca)

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### 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. Are there equally good “ways of knowing”? 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?

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. 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 also think about some epistemological issues about conspiracy theories. Are they always irrational? Why are people disposed to believe them? What is the role of trust in our epistemic lives?

### Course Goals and Learning Outcomes

Successful students will

- distinguish arguments for and against epistemological relativism and skepticism
- recall & explain epistemological concepts such as evidence, rationality, knowledge, justification and skepticism
- identify and describe the problem of induction & critically assess attempted solutions
- criticize, compare and evaluate arguments for and against external world skepticism
- read, interpret and interrogate abstract philosophical texts, including works by Plato, Sextus Empiricus, Descartes & Hume
- develop skills at asking abstract questions and writing analytical essays.
- reflect on your own ways of forming beliefs and opinions
- engage in dialogue with your peers about epistemological issues.
- construct your own philosophical arguments in an essay about external world skepticism or the justification of induction
- write your own epistemological manifesto, inspired by or in reaction to Clifford and James' essays.
- apply epistemological tools and distinctions to think about the nature of conspiracy theories

**Texts Note:** All of the required course readings except for the Nagel book are on Canvas.

Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: a very short introduction*, Oxford University Press. Available at UBC bookstore or can be ordered on line.

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\* Course materials – including exams, assignments, lecture notes and the lecture itself – are all protected by copyright. Recording, copying or sharing these materials without permission may be a violation of Canadian copyright law and UBC policies. Please check with me first if you need to record a class meeting.

## Course Requirements and Marking Formula

(1) Best 10 out of 11 Group Exercises (2% each)	20%
(2) 2 Essays (1,500 words each) (20% each)	40%
(3) Final Exam (in class, essay-style)	40%

## 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

Approximately 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.

### Essays

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 Jan 31<sup>st</sup>. 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 Feb 10<sup>th</sup>. The final version of your first paper is due by 11:59 p.m. on Feb. 7<sup>th</sup> and should be submitted to Canvas. Late papers are marked down 5% per day late. Papers more than one week late will receive fewer comments/feedback.

### Final Exam

The final exam for this course will take place during the scheduled final exam period (April 12<sup>th</sup> to April 27<sup>th</sup>). 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 at the end of March on Canvas. The final exam will be closed note and closed book.

### Attendance and Make up Policy

There is no official requirement that you attend the lectures. 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 are sick, you should stay home. However, if you do miss class, it is your responsibility to find out what you missed. Please contact another student, me, or Ivy. Please ask for help as soon as you are able. I am happy to meet in person or over Zoom to answer any questions you might have.

Most of the material I discuss in class will *not* be posted as slides or handouts. 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. You must check with me in advance if you would like to record a class session; in general, this is prohibited.

If you miss a group activity and you do not have a University-sanctioned excuse, you will receive a "0" for that assignment. Only the 10 best assignments count towards your group exercise mark.

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.

Any student in this course who has a disability that may prevent him or her from fully demonstrating his or her 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. Please also contact the UBC Centre for Accessibility:

<https://students.ubc.ca/about-student-services/centre-for-accessibility>

Finally, please note that cheating and plagiarism are serious offenses. Your work should be your own: this means that you should not use **Chat-GPT** or other AI devices to write your essay for you. (see <https://academicintegrity.ubc.ca/chatgpt-faq/#:~:text=The%20use%20of%20ChatGPT%20or,use%20in%20teaching%20and%20learning.>) Doing so in this course constitutes academic misconduct. If you do use an LLM to aid in your paper, *you should explain in your "references" section how you used it*. I reserve the right to examine students orally about their essays. If you have any questions about what constitutes academic misconduct, please check with me or the University guidelines. See:

<https://academicintegrity.ubc.ca/regulation-process/academic-misconduct/>

### Statement of UBC values and policies:

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated, nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious and cultural observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available here: <https://senate.ubc.ca/policies-resources-support-student-success/>.

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

(All required course readings (except for Nagel's book) are located at the course Canvas site: <http://canvas.ubc.ca>)

Readings marked with an asterisk are necessary only if you choose certain paper topics; they will not be covered on the final exam.

Week	Lecture	Discussion	Subject & Assignments	Readings
1	Sept 3		True opinion vs. Knowledge	Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> , (Ch. 1) p. 1-11
<b>Note: No discussion meetings week 1 (Sept. 5<sup>th</sup>)</b>				
			Correspondence Theory of Truth	<i>Handout #1 Truth &amp; Logic</i>
2	Sept. 8, 10	12	Relativism Are there alternative ways of knowing?	Plato <i>Theaetetus</i> (excerpt); Barnes and Bloor "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge" Kimmerer <i>Braiding Sweetgrass</i> (excerpts)
3	Sept. 15, 17	19	Ancient Skepticism	Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> , (Ch. 2), p. 12-18 Sextus Empiricus <i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> <i>Zhuangzi</i> (excerpts); Video: Liam Kofi Bright and Rose Novick, "Free and Easy Conversing: Zhuangzi and Scepticism": <a href="https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIvvqM6esJs">https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIvvqM6esJs</a>
4	Sept. 22, 24	26	Foundationalism; Rationalism	Descartes' <i>Meditations</i> parts I, II & III Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> (Ch. 3), p. 30-38
<b>Drafts of First Paper due in tutorial on Sept. 26<sup>th</sup> (for peer review in class: please submit to Canvas before class begins!)</b>				
5	Sept. 29, Oct. 1	3	Skepticism - Dreaming	Poundstone "Paradox" & Blumenfelds "Can I know that I'm not Dreaming?"

### Final Version of First Paper Due Oct 10<sup>th</sup> by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas)

6	Oct. 6, 8	10	Replies to Skepticism Common Sense	Pollock "Skeptical Problems"; Moore "Proof of an External World" & "Four Forms of Scepticism"
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### No class Monday, Oct. 13<sup>th</sup> (Thanksgiving)

7	Oct 15	17	Replies to skepticism: externalism Contextualism	Nozick "Knowledge"; Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> , (Ch. 5) (esp. p. 62-65) Nagel, <i>Knowledge</i> , (Ch. 7)
8	Oct 20, 22	24	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	Oct 27, 29	31	Probability & Epistemology  Design Arguments	Carroll <i>The Big Picture</i> , ch. 9-10 (p. 69-83) Titelbaum "How to Think Like a Bayesian" <a href="https://psyche.co/guides/how-to-think-like-a-bayesian-and-make-better-decisions">https://psyche.co/guides/how-to-think-like-a-bayesian-and-make-better-decisions</a> Paley's <i>Natural Theology</i> (excerpts) Sober, "What's wrong with Intelligent Design?" *McGrew "Testability, Likelihoods, and Design" * Behe <i>Darwin's Black Box</i> , excerpts.

### Drafts of Second Paper due in tutorial Oct. 31<sup>st</sup> for peer review

10	Nov. 3, 5	7	Pragmatism & epistemology	Pascal "The Wager"; Clifford "The Ethics of Belief" James "The Will to Believe" Preston-Roedder "Faith in Humanity"
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11	Nov. 14 <sup>th</sup> (tutorials only this week)		Epistemology & Genealogy	Sher "But I could be wrong"
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### Final Version of Second Paper due Nov. 14<sup>th</sup> by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas)

12 Nov. 17, 19 | 21

Conspiracy Theories, Epistemic Vices Cassam “Bad Thinkers”

<https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>

Nguyen “Escape the echo chamber”

<https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult>

Levy “Echoes of Covid Misinformation”

13 Nov 24, 26 | 28

Testimony

Hermeneutical Injustice

Nagel, *Knowledge*, (Ch. 6) “Testimony”

Fricker “Powerlessness and Social Interpretation”

14 Dec 1, 3, 5

No new Readings: Catch up & Review for Final Exam

***The final exam will be between December 9<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup>. Please do not 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. 10<sup>th</sup>** by 11:59 p.m. (submitted on Canvas). Rough *drafts* are due on Canvas **before** class on **Sept 26<sup>th</sup>**. The first paper is worth 20% of your course mark. You will peer review each other’s papers in class on Sept. 26<sup>th</sup>. You are then expected to revise your paper in light of the comments and submit the final version on **Oct 10<sup>th</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. Critically evaluate one or two (related) modes. 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 the 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. This is an analytical essay for thinking carefully about these readings – it is not a “research” essay in the sense that you do not need to consult any further essays or readings. If you do consult additional readings, you must explain in your “references” section what you consulted and how you used it. This also applies to the use of any LLMs. *If you use an LLM, you must explain how you used it.* You should not use it to simply write your essay for you. I reserve the right to orally examine students about their essays. We will discuss this further in class.

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 class.

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