

Theory of Knowledge (AKA Epistemology)

Instructor: Bob Beddor

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Class Location: MAT0116

Class Meeting Times: Tuesday, 10:40am-11:30am, Thursday, 10:40am-12:35pm

Office Hours: Office hours Tuesdays, noon-1pm, and by appointment

Office Location: Office 308, Griffin Floyd Hall (3rd Floor, Philosophy Dept)

Brief Synopsis:

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. Epistemologists want to know what knowledge is, how we acquire it, and how we should respond to arguments for philosophical skepticism, according to which there is very little that we know. We'll read major attempts to engage with these issues. Along the way, we'll also discuss related topics having to do with justification, rationality, and the reliability of human reason.

Course Overview:

This course will be divided into several units:

Unit 1: Skepticism. What – if anything – can we know about the world? This question can seem puzzling. On the one hand, we take ourselves to know many things: e.g., that the earth rotates around the sun, that Kuala Lumpur is the capital of Malaysia, that the earth is more than 1,000 years old, etc. On the other hand, there are seemingly powerful skeptical arguments – arguments that purport to show that virtually none of these claims can qualify as knowledge. We'll investigate this puzzle in depth, looking at some of the leading attempts to rebut the skeptic's argument.

Unit 2: What is Knowledge? The skeptic claims that we know nothing (or at least very little). But what is knowledge, anyway? In this unit we'll take a closer look at the question. We'll start with the traditional analysis of knowledge as justified true belief, and then look at a famous problem for this analysis – the so-called "Gettier problem". We'll then consider various attempts to provide a better analysis of knowledge – one that solves the Gettier problem. Along the way, we'll discuss how these analyses relate to the skeptical arguments in Unit 1; we'll also discuss whether we should expect there to be an analysis of knowledge in the first place.

Unit 3: What is Justification? In addition to asking whether a belief amounts to *knowledge*, we can also ask whether that belief is *justified*. Indeed, some philosophers have thought that the right response to the puzzles presented in Units 1 and 2 is to dismiss knowledge as unimportant and to focus on justification instead. In this unit, we'll look at two leading theories of justification: evidentialism and reliabilism. We'll discuss the arguments for each, as well as their associated problems.

Unit 4: The Epistemology of Graded Belief Beliefs come in degrees: I am more confident that it will rain in the next 10 years than that it will rain tomorrow. So in addition to inquiring into the

conditions under which a belief is justified or unjustified, we can also inquire into the conditions under which particular degrees of belief are justified or unjustified. This unit will take up this question, and consider how this issue relates to the lessons of Unit 3. Along the way, we'll discuss some paradoxes that arise for attempts to reduce belief to degrees of belief.

Unit 5: Social Epistemology. Much of what we believe comes from testimony: we believe things based on what our teachers, friends, and family tell us. But testimony is not always perfectly reliable: there is, after all, a lot of misinformation out there. Moreover, sometimes we get conflicting testimony from multiple sources. This raises a host of tricky epistemological issues. Along the way, we'll examine what makes us justified in believing what others tell us, and whether it is incumbent on us to "vet" our sources (and, if so, how we should go about doing so).

Unit 6: Debunking Arguments. Lots of things influence what we believe: testimony (discussed in Unit 5), our environment, our culture, our specific life experiences. Time permitting, the course will conclude with a short unit on whether learning about the influences of our beliefs sometimes gives us reason to question or revise those beliefs.

Learning Outcomes:

By end of the module, student should be able to:

- (1) Clearly explain some of the central questions in epistemology.
- (2) Articulate some of the leading philosophical answers to these questions, and reconstruct the arguments that philosophers have offered in support of their answers.
- (3) Do philosophy by engaging critically and creatively with these positions and arguments, by e.g., pointing out fallacies, developing novel counterexamples and counterarguments, and proposing new philosophical perspectives on the questions at issue.

Grading:

Weekly Online Questions (15%)

Every week there will be an online multiple-choice question on Canvas, which students should complete by 10:30am on Thursday (before the Thursday class meeting). These questions are designed to check your comprehension of the readings/material to be covered that week.

Attendance/Participation (20%)

Participation – asking questions, raising objections - is an essential part of doing philosophy. The attendance/participation grade will be determined as follows:

Attendance (10%)

Participation (5%) The participation grade is based on your in-class participation over the course of the semester. In general, a good goal is to aim to try to ask (or answer) at least one question per class (it is fine if you ask more than one, and it is also fine if some weeks you do not ask any). I realize that some students are shy about speaking up in class, but I hope to create a constructive and supportive environment where everyone feels comfortable sharing their questions and comments.

Discussion Group Responses (5%): In order to foster participation and collaboration, I will be assigning students into discussion groups. Each week, usually on Thursday, I will provide a couple of open-ended questions designed to prompt reflection on the readings. You will then have 15-20 minutes of class time set aside to discuss these questions. Each week your group should send me a short document summarizing some of the ideas that your group came up with (a google doc is a convenient way to do this). This does not need to be long or polished (bullet points are fine); this is mostly a matter of allowing me to see how you are thinking about the material we are covering.

First Paper (30%)

Your first paper should develop a focused response to one of the arguments in the readings. You should briefly summarize the argument, and then engage with it critically, by either offering an original criticism of it, or extending the argument in some way.

Second Paper (35%)

The final paper assignment is to write a more sustained response to one of the questions we've tackled in the second half of the class.

More detailed guidelines for the two papers will be distributed closer to assignment due dates.

Note: there is no final exam for this class.

General Expectations:

Discussion Expectations

We want to create an atmosphere of collaboration and mutual respect in our classroom. This course emphasizes discussion and debate: I firmly believe that the best way to learn philosophy is to practice doing philosophy, which involves formulating hypotheses, raising questions, and considering objections.

In the course of our discussions, disagreements will naturally arise. That is fine; disagreement is an integral part of philosophical activity. That said, it is important to pay attention to the way you voice your disagreement with others; we want to ensure everyone feels respected even in the midst of disagreement. Here are some general guidelines to achieve this goal:

- Please try to listen to your classmates, and avoid interrupting them.
- When you disagree, please take care to challenge the idea being discussed, rather than the person.
- When you disagree with a position, try to articulate your grounds for disagreement (backing up your position with reasons is an integral part of doing philosophy).

Other Classroom Expectations

A number of studies suggest that learning is more effective when screens aren't present in the classroom. Because of this, please also avoid using cell phones or computers during class, except when working in discussion groups on the discussion questions.

Readings

You will be expected to have read the assigned texts *before* coming to class. (So if some reading is listed as required for, say, February 6, you should have read the required reading before class on February 6.) The readings will be posted on canvas, under “Files”.

If you are looking for an overview of a topic or further reading, the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) is a good guide.

Note: In this class, I’ll be asking you to read some pretty difficult and dense texts! If you find some of the readings hard, don’t worry – you are not alone. Learning to read philosophy takes time, and one goal of this course will be to equip you with the background knowledge and skills to make sense of these challenging texts. In class, we’ll work together to make sense of some particularly challenging parts of the text. And if you have questions about other sections that we do not discuss, please do not hesitate to ask questions! Chances are that many other students have a similar question.

Academic Honesty

UF students are bound by The Honor Pledge, which states, “We, the members of the University of Florida community, pledge to hold ourselves and our peers to the highest standards of honor and integrity by abiding by the Honor Code. On all work submitted for credit by students at the University of Florida, the following pledge is either required or implied: “On my honor, I have neither given nor received unauthorized aid in doing this assignment.” The Conduct Code (<https://sccr.dso.ufl.edu/process/student-conduct-code/>) specifies a number of behaviors that are in violation of this code and the possible sanctions. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Canvas e-Learning Environment

This course is supplemented by online content in the e-Learning environment known as "Canvas." If you encounter any difficulties logging in or accessing any of the course content, contact the UF Computing Help Desk at (352) 392-4537. Do not contact the course instructor regarding computer issues.

Online Course Evaluation

Students are expected to provide professional and respectful feedback on the quality of instruction in this course by completing course evaluations online via GatorEvals. Guidance on how to give feedback in a professional and respectful manner is available at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/students/>. Students will be notified when the evaluation period opens, and can complete evaluations through the email they receive from GatorEvals, in their Canvas course menu under GatorEvals, or via <https://ufl.bluera.com/ufl/>. Summaries of course evaluation results are available to students at <https://gatorevals.aa.ufl.edu/public-results/>.

Accommodation for Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities who experience learning barriers and would like to request academic accommodations should connect with the disability Resource Center (<https://disability.ufl.edu/get-started/>). It is important for students to share their accommodation letter with their instructor and discuss their access needs, as early as possible in the semester.

Health and Wellness Resources

- [*U Matter, We Care*](#): If you or someone you know is in distress, please contact umatter@ufl.edu, 352-392-1575, or visit the U Matter, We Care website to refer or report a concern and a team member will reach out to the student in distress
- [*Counseling and Wellness Center*](#): Visit the Counseling and Wellness Center website or call 352-392-1575 for information on crisis services as well as non-crisis services.
- [*Student Health Care Center*](#): Call 352-392-1161 for 24/7 information to help you find the care you need, or visit the Student Health Care Center website.
- [*University Police Department*](#): Visit UF Police Department website or call 352-392-1111 (or 9-1-1 for emergencies).
- [*UF Health Shands Emergency Room / Trauma Center*](#): For immediate medical care call 352-733-0111 or go to the emergency room at 1515 SW Archer Road, Gainesville, FL 32608; Visit the UF Health Emergency Room and Trauma Center website.
- [*GatorWell Health Promotion Services*](#): For prevention services focused on optimal wellbeing, including Wellness Coaching for Academic Success, visit the GatorWell website or call 352-273-4450.

Academic Resources

- *E-learning technical support*: Contact the [UF Computing Help Desk](#) at 352-392-4357 or via e-mail at helpdesk@ufl.edu.
- [*Career Connections Center*](#): Reitz Union Suite 1300, 352-392-1601. Career assistance and counseling services.
- [*Library Support*](#): Various ways to receive assistance with respect to using the libraries or finding resources.
- [*Teaching Center*](#): Broward Hall, 352-392-2010 or to make an appointment 352- 392-6420. General study skills and tutoring.
- [*Writing Studio*](#): 2215 Turlington Hall, 352-846-1138. Help brainstorming, formatting, and writing papers.
- *Student Complaints On-Campus*: [Visit the Student Honor Code and Student Conduct Code webpage](#) for more information.
- *On-Line Students Complaints*: [View the Distance Learning Student Complaint Process](#).

COVID recommendations

In response to COVID-19, the following recommendations are in place to maintain your learning environment, to enhance the safety of our in-classroom interactions, and to further the health and safety of ourselves, our neighbors, and our loved ones.

- If you are not vaccinated, get vaccinated. Vaccines are readily available and have been demonstrated to be safe and effective against the COVID-19 virus. Visit one.ufl.edu for screening/testing and vaccination opportunities.

- If you are sick, stay home. Please call your primary care provider if you are ill and need immediate care or the UF Student Health Care Center at 352-392-1161 to be evaluated.

- Course materials will be provided to you with an excused absence, and you will be given a reasonable amount of time to make up work.

Preliminary Schedule

(Note: The following is subject to change as the course develops)

Unit 1: Skepticism

- 1. Tuesday Jan 9 – Introduction to the Class; First Encounters with the Skeptic**
- 2. Thursday Jan 11 – Can We Reason our Way out of Skepticism? Part I: Inference to the Best Explanation**

Required Reading:

Descartes, "Meditation 1" in *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, Chp. 2

Further Reading:

Al-Ghazali, *Deliverance from Error*, paragraphs. 5-17

- 3. Tuesday Jan 15 – Can We Reason our Way out of Skepticism? Part II: Is Skepticism Self-Undermining?**

Required Readings:

Rinard, "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism"

- 4. Thursday Jan 18 – Are skeptical scenarios really skeptical?**

Required Readings:

Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics"

- 5. Tuesday Jan 22 – Can the skeptic be refuted? In-class Debate**

No new readings (please review the readings thus far)

Unit 2: WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE, ANYWAY?

- 6. Thursday Jan 25 - The Analysis of Knowledge Introduced: the Gettier Problem**

Required Readings:

Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"

Dharmottara, "Explanation of the Ascertainment of Valid Cognition" D:4229, 9a2-3

Further Readings:

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chps.2-3

7. Tuesday Jan 29 – The Causal Theory of Knowledge

Required Readings:

Goldman, “A Causal Theory of Knowing”

Further Readings:

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section I “The Causal Theory” (pp.1-86)

8. Thursday Feb 1 – The Tracking Theory of Knowledge

Required Readings:

Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations*, selections (*difficult*)

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section II “Truth Tracking” (pp.86-90)

9. Tuesday Feb 6 – Is there a Universal Concept of Knowledge?

Required Readings:

Machery et al., “Gettier Across Cultures”

10. Thursday Feb 8 – Is knowledge analyzable? In-class debate

Required Reading:

Zagzebski, “The Inescapability of the Gettier Problem” (*difficult*)

11. Tuesday Feb 20 – Catch-up/Review

12. Thursday Feb 22 – Catch-up/Review – First Paper Due (BOOOO!)

UNIT 3: WHAT IS JUSTIFICATION?

13. Tuesday Feb 27 – Evidentialism

Required Reading:

Feldman, *Epistemology*, chp.4 (“Evidentialist Theories of Knowledge and Justification”), pp.39-49 (up to section 2, “The Infinite Regress Argument”)

14. Thursday Feb 29 – Reliabilism

Required Reading:

Goldman, “What is Justified Belief?”

Feldman, *Epistemology*, Chp.5, section III, “Reliabilism”, pp.90-99.

15. Tuesday Mar 5 – reliabilism continued

Required Reading:

Conee and Feldman, "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism"

Further Reading:

Conee and Feldman, "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism"

Comesaña, "Evidentialist Reliabilism"

16. Thursday Mar 7 – TBD

SPRING BREAK! WOOOHOOOOOO!!!!

UNIT 4: THE EPISTEMOLOGY OF GRADED BELIEF

17. Tuesday Mar 19 – Reasoning with Degrees of Belief

Required Reading: Bradley, *A Critical Introduction to Formal Epistemology*, chp.1

18. Thursday Mar 21 – The Relation between Belief and Degrees of Belief: Two Paradoxes

Required Reading: Bradley, *A Critical Introduction to Formal Epistemology*, chp.2

19. Tuesday Mar 26 – The Relation Between Belief and Degrees of Belief, Continued: The Puzzle of Statistical Evidence

Required Reading: Buchak, "Belief, Credence, and Norms"

Further Reading: Jackson, "The Relation Between Belief and Credence"

UNIT 5: SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY: TESTIMONY AND MISINFORMATION

20. Thursday Mar 28 – Forming Beliefs Based on Testimony

Required Reading:

Lackey, "Acquiring Knowledge from Others"

21. Tuesday April 2 – Trusting Experts

Required Reading:

Baier, "Trust and Antitrust"

Goldman, "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?"

22. Thursday April 4 – Responding to Disagreement

Required Reading:

Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”

Further Reading:

Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”

23. Tuesday April 9 – fake news and echo chambers

Required Reading:

Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber”

UNIT 6: DEBUNKING ARGUMENTS (time permitting)

24. Thursday April 11 – Uniqueness and Debunking Arguments

Required Reading:

Roger White, “Epistemic Permissivism”

Vavova, “Irrelevant Influences”

25. Tuesday April 16 – Debunking Arguments, Continued

Required Reading:

Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma”

26. Thursday April 18 – Catch-up/Review – Final Paper Due (⊗)

27. Tuesday April 23 – Catch-up/Review

Summer Vacay!!! Hurray!!!