

Knowledge and Truth Syllabus

Fall 2014

Course Description

Knowledge is a goal—perhaps *the* goal—of rational inquiry. While what we “believe” true may in fact be true or false, what we “know” *must* be true. But both “knowledge” and “truth” raise significant philosophical problems. How is knowledge justified? Do you know what you think you do? Do others share your knowledge? Do you know anything at all? Are truths relative to the society in which we live? Do we really seek truth, or merely justified beliefs? Do only some methods of inquiry (e.g. scientific, theological, mystical) yield truths, and if so, how can we establish that the others don’t without begging the question against them?

This course examines some core problems in *epistemology*, the theory of knowledge. Our investigation will equip you with the conceptual tools and vocabulary needed to orient your beliefs about our ability to know. We shall begin with a brief historical introduction to Descartes’ celebrated skeptical method of inquiry, the Gettier problems that plagued attempts to provide an analysis of knowledge in the 20th century, and the traditional debate about the proper structure for a theory of justification. This background will position us to investigate four recently important topics. Firstly, which forms of skeptical doubt about our knowledge (if any) can we refute? Secondly, is truth the standard by which we evaluate claims to knowledge, or is some weaker norm (such as warranted assertability) the standard we employ? Thirdly, does treating knowledge as a natural phenomenon—“naturalizing” epistemology—satisfactorily answer traditional problems or merely change the subject? Finally, when should we trust other inquirers and take our disagreements with them to cast doubt upon what we believe?

By the end of this course, you will have developed a conceptual map with which to navigate the territory of contemporary epistemology—and, to the extent that they purport to give you access to “knowledge,” the other courses you take at college. You will write weekly response papers to the assigned readings that will sharpen your analytical writing skills. You will also give an oral presentation to the class that will improve your speaking skills. In your term paper, you will have the opportunity to write in detail about an aspect of the course that has particularly interested you.

Course Requirements

Your grade for this course will be calculated using a 100-point scale:

Weekly Response Papers – 30%

Each week you may write a one-page response paper to the assigned readings. These are due at the beginning of class on Tuesday. The purpose of these very short papers is to improve your skill at clear, concise, analytic writing. You should write about an issue or an argument in the reading that has particularly interested or confused you. (See the “Response Paper Guidance” handout.) You must turn in at least *ten* (of the possible thirteen) papers over the course of the semester.

Mid-Term Exam – 10%

There will be a take home mid-term exam for this class on November 6. You will write a number of short essay responses to prompts that will be based upon topics that have arisen in

both the readings and in our class discussions. I encourage you to discuss the questions on the exam with each other, but will expect you to carefully cite any ideas that are generated by such discussions. The eventual written work on your exam must be yours and yours alone.

Term Paper – 40%

At the end of the course, by noon on Monday, December 15, you are required to turn in a hard copy of a term paper to my office (ten-twelve double-spaced pages, 12 point Times New Roman font, with 1” margins). This paper will give you an opportunity to explore in detail a part of the course that has particularly interested you. You will be expected to book an appointment with me to discuss your plan for the final paper.

Participation and Presentation – 20%

Merely attending class will not earn you a participation grade. To participate is to arrive at class punctually and to regularly contribute to collegiate discussion. You are also encouraged to use the online discussion board, available through Blackboard, to talk about the readings and classroom discussions with other students. Individual posts will not be graded, but your contribution to the forum will be taken into account when determining your final participation grade.

At the start of the semester, each of you will also be expected to sign up for a presentation. You will prepare a five-ten minute introduction to the reading you present, briefly summarizing what you consider to be its focus, and highlighting issues it raised that you found particularly interesting, confusing or challenging. You will then field questions about the reading from the class. You will be expected to make significant contributions to the class discussion concerning the article which you present. Your presentation will be evaluated as part of this component of your final grade.

How to do well in this class

Come to class prepared. Being prepared means that you have completed the assigned readings, thought carefully about them, and have begun to formulate questions concerning the issues they raise. Participate actively in class; ask questions in our discussions, and respond to each other’s questions. These class experiences, in which you will have to clearly explain yourselves to each other, will be invaluable when you come to complete your written assignments. I expect a high level of argumentative clarity in your papers, which means that, in addition to carefully proofreading your work for spelling and grammar mistakes, you should anticipate, articulate and respond to objections that your reader might have to your view.

Although you are always welcome to email me and/or to come by my office hours, consider posting any questions that you have about the course material to our Blackboard discussion board. Your classmates will almost certainly have similar questions, and may be able to help you out.

Textbook and Class Reading Schedule

Sosa, Ernest, Jaegwon Kim, Jeremy Fantl, and Matthew McGrath. *Epistemology: An Anthology*. 2nd edition. Oxford: Blackwell, 2008. (Referred to in Reading Schedule as “EA”)

Additional readings will be made available online through Blackboard. You are expected to print your own copy of each assigned paper and bring it with you to class.

Class Reading Schedule

1. Thursday Sep 4 Course Introduction

Unit 1: Historical Background

2. Tuesday Sep 9 READ: René Descartes. Excerpt from *Meditations*.
Blackboard.
3. Thursday Sep 11 READ: Edmund Gettier. “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”
EA, pp. 192-193.
READ: Linda Zagzebski. “The Inescapability of Gettier
Problems.” EA, pp. 207-212.
4. Tuesday Sep 16 READ: Roderick Chisholm. “The Myth of the Given.”
EA, pp. 80-93.
5. Thursday Sep 18 READ: Donald Davidson. “A Coherence Theory of Truth and
Knowledge.” EA, pp. 124-133.
6. Tuesday Sep 23 READ: Ernest Sosa. “The Raft and The Pyramid.”
EA, pp. 145-164.

Unit 2: The Problem of Skepticism

7. Thursday Sep 25 READ: Barry Stroud. “The Problem of the External World.”
EA, pp. 7-25.
8. Tuesday Sep 30 READ: Peter Klein. “How a Pyrrhonian Skeptic Might Respond to
Academic Skepticism.” EA, pp. 35-50.
9. Thursday Oct 2 READ: Michael Williams. “Epistemological Realism.”
EA, pp. 51-72.
10. Tuesday Oct 7 READ: Robert Nozick. “Knowledge and Skepticism.”
EA, pp. 255-279.
11. Thursday Oct 9 READ: Jonathan Vogel. “Are There Counterexamples to the
Closure Principle?” EA, pp. 290-302.

Unit 3: The Norm of Knowledge

12. Tuesday Oct 14 READ: Linda Zagzebski, “*Virtues of the Mind*, selections.”
EA, pp. 442-453.
13. Thursday Oct 16 READ: Duncan Pritchard. “Cognitive Responsibility and the
Epistemic Virtues” EA, pp. 462-476.
14. Tuesday Oct 21 READ: Ernest Sosa. “The Place of Truth in Epistemology.”
EA, pp. 477-491.

15. Thursday Oct 23 READ: Jonathan Kvanvig. "Why Should Inquiring Minds Want to Know?" EA, pp. 492-506.
16. Tuesday Oct 28 READ: Catherine Elgin. "True Enough." EA, pp. 507-520.
17. Thursday Oct 30 READ: Donald Davidson. "Truth Rehabilitated." Blackboard.
18. Tuesday Nov 4 READ: Akeel Bilgrami. "Is Truth a Goal of Inquiry?" Blackboard.

Unit 4: Naturalized Epistemology

19. Thursday Nov 6 READ: W.V. Quine. "Epistemology Naturalized." EA, pp. 528-537.
- TAKE HOME MIDTERM ASSIGNED**
20. Tuesday Nov 11 Veterans' Day – NO CLASS
- 20a. Wednesday Nov 12 READ: Jaegwon Kim. "What is 'Naturalized Epistemology'" EA, pp. 538-551.
21. Thursday Nov 13 READ: Louise M. Antony. "Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology." EA, pp. 552-584.
- TAKE HOME MIDTERM DUE**
22. Tuesday Nov 18 READ: Jonathan M Weinberg, Shaun Nichols, and Stephen Stich. "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions." EA, pp. 625-646.
23. Thursday Nov 20 READ: Hilary Kornblith. "Investigating Knowledge Itself." EA, pp. 647-660.

Unit 5: Testimony and Disagreement

25. Tuesday Nov 25 READ: Judith Baker. "Trust and Rationality." EA, pp.803-806.
26. Thursday Nov 27 Thanksgiving Break – NO CLASS
27. Tuesday Dec 2 READ: Elizabeth Fricker. "Against Gullibility." EA, pp.807-814
28. Thursday Dec 4 READ: Adam Elga. "Reflection and Disagreement." Blackboard.
29. Tuesday Dec 9 READ: Thomas Kelly. "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence." Blackboard.
30. Thursday Dec 11 Reading Day – NO CLASS
31. Monday Dec 15 FINAL PAPERS DUE AT NOON