

24.211 Theory of Knowledge

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This is a course in epistemology, a discipline in which we evaluate the way that we form and maintain our beliefs. Depending on your background in philosophy, some of the material may be difficult. We will not read a large volume of material, but what we do read we will read very carefully and critically.

There is more than one way to approach epistemology. In the first half of the course, we will approach it through the lens of skeptical puzzles. When philosophers have looked critically at our purported knowledge they have often started to wonder how we can know anything at all within a certain domain. But surely we know a lot! Examining the different ways that we might respond to such worries can lead us into the central issues of epistemology. The second half, we will explore how some of these issues of knowledge and skepticism might apply in real life cases.

This will be a discussion-based class. We will present material each week but students are expected to show up ready to talk about the readings and the arguments presented.

Assessment:

Pop quizzes on the readings: 15%

These will happen randomly throughout the semester (about once a week). These don't test your philosophical skills or deep comprehension. If you do all the readings you should get 100%.

Participation: 10%

There is more than one way to participate. Turning up and engaging with others in class is best. We understand some will be more comfortable speaking up than others. We are going for quality more than quantity.

Paper 1: 25%

5 pages, due October 7

Paper 2: 25%

5 pages, due December 6

Final Exam: 25% (To be held during the exam period)

The exam will test your knowledge and understanding of some of the main ideas discussed throughout the semester.

Readings: Some of these are fairly straightforward, and some more challenging. Here's a strategy for reading difficult stuff. Read the article quickly straight through once, without stopping over anything difficult or confusing. Read it again more carefully, underlining or highlighting what looks important. Read it through a third time making a note of anything that still doesn't make sense, and bring your notes to class. Readings will be posted on the Canvas site.

First Half – Knowledge and Skepticism

Primary Instructor: Roger

9/5 – Introduction: Belief, Truth, Knowledge

9/10 – Rene Descartes, 'Meditation I: On What Can Be Called into Doubt' from *Meditations on First Philosophy*.

9/12 - G. E. Moore, 'Proof of an External World', 'Four forms of Skepticism'

9/17 - Edmund Gettier 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?', Linda Zagzebski, 'The Inescapability of Gettier Problems' (excerpts)

9/19 – Background to Nozick: Possible worlds, propositions, conditionals.

9/24 – Robert Nozick, R. 'Knowledge and Skepticism' from *Philosophical Explanations*

9/26 – Nozick continued

10/1 – Keith DeRose 'Solving the Skeptical Problem'

10/3 – Jim Pryor, 'The Skeptic and the Dogmatist'

10/8 – Hilary Putnam, 'Brains in a Vat' from *Reason, Truth, and History*

10/10 – Putnam continued

10/15 – STUDENT HOLIDAY

10/17 – Timothy Williamson, 'Scepticism' from *Knowledge and its Limits*

10/22 – Williamson, continued.

Second Half – Knowledge and Skepticism in your life

Primary instructor: Josh

Topic 1 - Externalism and internalism in your life

10/24 - Srinivasan “Radical Externalism”

Topic 2 - Knowledge and the law

10/29 - Smith “When Does Evidence Suffice for Conviction?”

10/31 - Moss “Knowledge and Legal Proof”; Lewis “Elusive Knowledge” (excerpts from both)

11/5 - (Election day!) - Recap/writing advice

Topic 3 - Knowledge and dogmatism

11/7 - Kripke “On Two Paradoxes of Knowledge” (very short excerpt);

11/12 - Lasonen-Aarnio “The Dogmatism Puzzle”

Topic 4 - The Problem of Disagreement (preparation for thanksgiving!)

11/14 - Feldman “Reasonable Religious Disagreement”

11/18 - Kelly “The significance of peer disagreement”

Topic 5 - The problem of Irrelevant influences

11/21 - Schoenfield “Why do you believe what you do? Run some diagnostics on it” (short article); Street “Does anything really matter or did we just evolve to think so?”

11/26 - White “You just believe that because...” (excerpts)

11/28 – THANKSGIVING BREAK

Wrapping up

12/3 - Hawthorne and Srinivasan “Disagreement without transparency: some bleak thoughts”

12/5 – Paper workshop

(12/6 - assignments due)

12/10 - Exam revision day. We will meet for a general discussion and answer questions about any of the material from the semester.