

PHIL 255 Theory of Knowledge

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Spring 2014
4-365 Kresge Hall
T/Th 11-12:20

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Course Description:

What can we know? What does it mean to have knowledge? What is it rational to believe? These are some of the most fundamental questions in philosophy. We will consider some influential answers to these questions given by both historical and contemporary philosophers. Topics include the nature of knowledge and belief, skepticism, relativism, the nature of evidence, the nature of rationality, and the source of epistemic norms.

Required Texts:

Boghossian, Paul. 2007. *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*. Oxford: Oxford U.P.
Feldman, Richard. 2003. *Epistemology*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
Fumerton, Richard. 2006. *Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Readings by Linda Zagzebski, Valerie Tiberius, and Louise Antony on Blackboard.

Required Work:

Two papers and daily reading reports:
1st paper (5 pages): 30% of the final grade
2nd paper (8 pages): 40% of the final grade
Reading reports (1 page each): 30% of the final grade
Excellent class participation may also factor into the final grade.

Course Policies:

- (1) Computers and other electronic devices must be off during class time.
- (2) In order to pass the course, all assignments must be completed.*
- (3) Extensions must be requested before the due date.
- (4) I reserve the right to institute an attendance policy.
- (5) ***Very Important:*** plagiarism will not be tolerated. All cases of alleged violation of academic integrity will be referred to the Assistant Dean for Advising and Academic Integrity. Possible penalties range from failing the course to permanent exclusion from the university. For more on plagiarism, see:
<http://www.weinberg.northwestern.edu/advising/integrity/index.html> and
<http://www.northwestern.edu/provost/students/integrity/plagiarism.html>.

Students with Disabilities:

Any student with a documented disability needing accommodations is requested to speak directly to the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) (847-467-5530) and the instructor, as

early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first two weeks of class). All discussions will remain confidential.

Blackboard:

Much of the business of this course will be conducted through the Course Management System (Blackboard). You are encouraged to check it frequently, as I may post announcements there. To access Blackboard, you will need to use your NetID and password. The web address for Blackboard is: <http://www.it.northwestern.edu/education/course-management/>

Reading Reports:

The reading assignments must be read *before* class on the day they are listed. You will answer the assigned question and turn it in at the beginning of class. Each answer should be no more than one page (double-spaced, normal font, etc.). The questions are meant to get you thinking about at least one of the most important issues to be discussed in that day's lecture. The reports will be graded on a 5-point scale:

5 = excellent (high A)

4 = very good (A-/B+)

3 = somewhat good (B-)

2 = not good (C)

1 = not good at all (D)

0 = now that you have mastered writing your name on a piece of paper, let's try this again (F)

*You may drop your two lowest scores, including instances in which you did not turn one in.

Schedule of Readings:

[Recommended reading in brackets]

Apr. 1 Introduction

[Feldman, ch. 1; Errol Morris (on Blackboard)]

Apr. 3 The analysis of knowledge

Feldman, ch. 2 [Fumerton, ch. 1]

Q: What is justification, and why is it needed for knowledge?

Apr. 8 Fallibilism and the Gettier problem

Feldman, pp. 25-38; Fumerton, pp. 14-18, 24-25

Q: What is the Gettier problem?

Apr. 10 Evidentialism and the regress argument

Feldman, pp. 39-52; Fumerton, pp. 37-42

Q: What is the regress argument?

Apr. 15 Internalist foundationalism

Fumerton, pp. 59-69; Feldman, pp. 70-78 [Fumerton, ch. 4; Feldman, pp. 52-60]

Q: What is acquaintance, and how does it provide foundations for knowledge?

Apr. 17 Externalism (I): the causal theory and the tracking theory

Feldman, pp. 81-90; Fumerton, pp. 75-80, 84-86

Q: How are the causal theory and the tracking theory different from one another?

Apr. 22 Externalism (II): reliabilism

Feldman, pp. 90-99; Fumerton, pp. 80-83, 86-98

Q: What is reliabilism, and what is the most serious objection to it?

Apr. 24 Internalism, externalism, and inference

Fumerton, ch. 6

Q: What is the difference between inferential internalism and inferential externalism?

Apr. 29 Review

1st paper due

May 1 Virtue epistemology

Zagzebski (on Blackboard)

Q: How do the emotions play a role in knowledge, according to virtue epistemology?

May 6 Skepticism (I): fallibilism

Feldman 114-128; Fumerton 117-120

Q: What is fallibilism, and how does it relate to skepticism?

May 8 Skepticism (II): the problem of induction and inference to the best explanation

Feldman 130-152 [Fumerton 120-133]

Q: What is the alternative hypotheses argument, and how might one reply to it?

May 13 Scientific challenges to rationality

Feldman, pp. 157-160; Tiberius (on Blackboard)

Q: How much does it matter if reflection is unreliable?

May 15 Embodiment and epistemology

Antony (on Blackboard)

Q: What role, if any, should recognition of embodiment play in epistemology?

May 20 The social construction of knowledge

Boghossian, ch. 1-2 [Feldman, ch. 9]

Q: What is social constructivism about knowledge?

May 22 Epistemic relativism defended

Boghossian, ch. 5

Q: How does the existence of different epistemic systems motivate epistemic relativism?

May 27 Epistemic relativism rejected

Boghossian, ch. 6

Q: On what basis does Boghossian say that epistemic relativism is an inconsistent view?

May 29 Circularity

Boghossian, ch. 7

Q: Can the challenge posed by norm-circularity be defused?

June 3 Reading period

June 9 **Final paper due by 5 PM**