

Social Epistemology (PHIL 3024)

Professor: Karen Kovaka

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Class Hours: Tues/Thurs 2-3:15pm
Class Room: N/A, online

Course Description

Traditionally, epistemology asks about individual knowledge—how to get it and when a person can consider their beliefs justified. Social epistemology asks, not how do I know, but how do we know? Human knowledge is typically a community achievement. We pursue scientific investigation in groups, and we accept knowledge claims on the basis of testimony of other people. What we know or think we know also has profound effects on our social arrangements, for good and evil. This course will survey a number of topics related to social epistemology, including the epistemology of testimony, epistemic injustice, and peer disagreement.

Course Structure

This is an online course with a live (synchronous) class meeting once per week, on Thursday afternoons from 2-3:15 pm. You will have asynchronous content to work through on your own prior to our Thursday meeting. Together, the asynchronous and synchronous content form 5 layers. Engaging with each layer makes up your coursework for the week.

- Layer 1: Reading the texts.
- Layer 2: Reviewing my detailed notes on the texts.
- Layer 3: Watching a recorded lecture about the texts.
- Layer 4: Actively participating in our Zoom discussion each Thursday.
- Layer 5: Keeping an intellectual journal about what you are learning.

You will complete Layers 1-3 before our Thursday meetings. You have until Friday afternoon each week to complete Layer 5.

Evaluation

1. Paper: 35% (split into 5 assignments, 5-10% each)
2. Midterm exam: 25%
3. Final exam: 25%
4. Journal: 15%

Homework

You will write a 6-8 page philosophical paper over the course of the semester. If you aren't used to philosophical writing, don't worry—I will walk you through the process. You will write the paper in 5 stages: first you'll identify a topic, then submit an outline, rough draft, and final draft, as well as a peer review of someone else's rough draft. I will walk you through each stage before it is due so that you know exactly what to expect. Submit these through our Canvas site. The due dates and grade percentages for these different stages are below:

- Paper topic (5%): 3/16
- Outline (5%): 3/30
- Rough Draft (10%): 4/15
- Peer Review (5%): 4/22
- Final Draft (10%): 5/4

Exams

Both the mid-term and final exams will be short answer, take-home style in format. The mid-term will be assigned on 2/26 and due on 3/5. The final exam will be available on or before the last day of classes (12/5) and due on 5/12.

Journal

Every Friday by 5pm, you will complete and submit a journal entry via our Canvas site. By the end of the semester, you'll have a record of which ideas you found interesting, challenging, tedious, or incomprehensible, as well as a sense of how your own views about social epistemology have developed over time. I will provide open-ended prompts to guide you, and I'm looking for about one page per week. You are, of course, welcome to add as much additional content as you like. I will grade the journal entries based on completion.

Fine Print

- **Attendance:** I expect you to come to every single live class session except when illness or other personal circumstances prevent you. You should be prepared to contribute to the discussion by sharing your own thoughts, answering my questions, and responding to your classmates' observations. I will keep track of attendance each week and forgive 2 absences with no questions asked. After 2 absences, I will deduct points from your final grade for each additional absence. If your circumstances require you to miss more than 2 classes, you and I need to speak in person about alternative ways for you to participate in the course.
- **Accessibility:** We all learn differently, and I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. Please come talk to me if some aspect of the course isn't working for you: we can collaborate on alternatives that suit your needs, interests, and learning style. If you have a disability (or think you might), it's also a good idea to contact [Services for Students with Disabilities](#).
- **Technology:** Our phones, tablets, and laptops are crucial tools for online learning, yet they can also distract us during a live class. I want to free you from these distractions as much as possible. For that reason, I am providing notes on all the texts I ask you to read, which means you do not have to take notes during our live sessions. In return, I ask that during our 75 minutes of live time each week, you do not check your email, message people, or use the Internet for anything that isn't course-related.
- **Academic integrity:** I take academic integrity very seriously. It's important that all the assignments you complete are your own work and that you know how to credit and cite sources appropriately. If you have any questions about my expectations for a particular assignment, be sure to talk to me!

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states: "As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do." Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code. For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: <https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/>.

- **Changes to the syllabus:** I may adjust the course readings and schedule as the semester goes along. It is your responsibility to pay attention to Canvas and your email so that you are aware of any changes.

Texts

There are no required books for this course. All of the texts I assign are available on our Canvas site.

Reading Schedule

1 Introduction

Date	Content
Week 1 1/19 & 1/21	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Individual Epistemology • Read: Bertrand Russell, <i>The Problems of Philosophy</i>, chapters 1 and 2
Week 2 1/26 & 1/28	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Social Epistemology • Read: John Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence" • Read: Alvin Goldman, <i>Knowledge in a Social World</i>, ch 1

2 Trust and Testimony

Date	Content
Week 3 2/2 & 2/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Trust • Read: Annette Baier, "Trust and Antitrust" • Spring Break Day Fri 2/5, no Journal Entry
Week 4 2/9 & 2/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: What Is Testimony? • Read: Jennifer Lackey, "The Nature of Testimony" • Read: Elizabeth Fricker, "Second-Hand Knowledge"
Week 5 2/16 & 2/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Testimony and Expertise • Read: Alexander Guerrero, "Living with Ignorance in a World of Experts" • Read: Catherine Elgin, "The Mark of a Good Informant"
Week 6 2/23	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Skills Building • No reading • Live Zoom writing workshop Tues 2/23 (meeting link and login on Canvas) • Spring Break Day Thurs 2/25

3 Peer Disagreement

Date	Content
Week 7 3/2 & 3/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: The Equal Weight and Steadfast Views • Read: Adam Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement" • Read: Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement" • Midterm Exam due 3/5, no Journal Entry
Week 8 3/9 & 3/11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: The Justificationist and Total Evidence Views • Read: Jennifer Lackey, "What Should We Do When We Disagree?" • Read: Thomas Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence"

4 Pragmatic and Moral Encroachment

Date	Content
Week 9 3/16 & 3/18	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Pragmatic Encroachment • Read: Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath, "Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification" • Optional Reading: Mark Schroeder, "Stakes, Withholding, and Pragmatic Encroachment on Knowledge" • Spring Break Day Wed 3/17
Week 10 3/23 & 3/25	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Moral Encroachment I • Read: Sarah Moss, "Moral Encroachment" • Read: Rima Basu and Mark Schroeder, "Doxastic Wronging"
Week 11 3/30 & 4/1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Moral Encroachment II • Read: Renee Jorgensen Bolinger, "The Rational Impermissibility of Accepting (Some) Racial Generalizations" • Read: Renee Jorgensen Bolinger, "Varieties of Moral Encroachment"
Week 12 4/8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Skills Building • Spring Break Day Tues, 4/6 • No reading • Optional: Live Zoom paper workshop Thurs 4/8

5 Ethics of Belief and Epistemic Injustice

Date	Content
Week 13 4/13 & 4/15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Ethics of Belief • Read: William Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief" • Read: Allen Wood, "The Duty to Believe According to the Evidence"
Week 14 4/20 & 4/22	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Can Beliefs Wrong? • Read: Rima Basu, "Can Beliefs Wrong?"
Week 15 4/27 & 4/29	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Topic: Epistemic Injustice • Miranda Fricker, Epistemic Injustice, selections • Spring Break Day Mon 4/26
Week 16 5/4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No reading • Optional: Live Zoom session