PHIL 240-002: Introduction to Epistemology Syllabus

Winter Term 1 2024

University of British Columbia

Delivery Method: Online synchronous lectures

Class Meetings: Tuesdays and Thursdays, 9:30-11:00 via Zoom

INSTRUCTOR INFORMATION

Instructor: Elena Holmgren

Email: elenahm@mail.ubc.ca

Office Hours: By Zoom. Please email to set up an appointment.

Teaching Assistant: Ivy Spector

COURSE INFORMATION

Description:

This course will explore fundamental questions in epistemology (the study of knowledge) such as: What is knowledge and what are its limits? We tend to think that we know a great many things. But how can we tell that even our most firmly held beliefs count as knowledge, rather than being mere opinions? Philosophical skeptics have a long tradition of arguing that once we poke at the foundations of our system of beliefs, we will find that what we once held to be firmly established dissolves into air. That is, we will find that we may have little or no grounds to justify our claims that we know much at all. How can we respond to skeptical arguments that deny that we have much, if any, knowledge at all? In addition to exploring classical skeptical arguments, we will explore modern variants of skepticism. We will also explore epistemic relativism, which claims that there are equally good alternative ways of knowing and that the norms that determine what counts as knowledge can only be specified relative to social and cultural contexts.

We will also explore the question of whether we can give a naturalistic explanation of knowledge. That is, science purports to explain the natural world and, increasingly, the human mind, but can it also explain the act of knowing that generates science?

After studying knowledge as a property of an individual knower, we will explore knowledge as a social phenomenon. We will do so by addressing questions such as: To what extent can groups be knowers? How do social processes and institutions help and hinder the production of knowledge? And how can we understand the epistemic merits of collective knowledge practices embodied in democratic institutions and internet communities? To what extent does the proliferation of online content by artificial agents (e.g. AI-disseminated misinformation) affect our knowledge practices? By studying knowledge as a social phenomenon, we will explore how we can apply epistemology to real-world issues.

The aim of this course is to introduce students to these dominant accounts of the nature of knowledge and to provide them with the means to critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of each. We will explore each of these approaches through an in-depth study of classical and contemporary texts arguing for these views. Along the way, the course will introduce students to basic concepts in the field, such as justification, evidence, the distinction between *a priori* and empirical knowledge, and skepticism. Since there are no prerequisites for this course, no prior experience with philosophy will be assumed.

Learning Objectives:

Aside from introducing students to some of the most influential philosophical theories of knowledge, the larger goal of this course is to give students a sense of what philosophy is like as an activity with its own characteristic set of skills. Upon successful completion of this course, you will be able to:
- Identify, explain, critically evaluate and construct arguments concerning the nature of knowledge;
- Identify and critically evaluate the strengths and limitations of arguments contained in classic and contemporary philosophical texts;
- engage in dialogue by exercising **the principle of charity**; that is, internalizing others' perspectives and understanding them in their most rhetorically-forceful and aesthetically-appealing light (regardless of how antithetical to our own these views may be) prior to critiquing them.

Course Materials:

No textbook is required. All readings will be posted on our Canvas course website:
https://canvas.ubc.ca/
The readings are located in "Modules" -> "Course Readings."

ASSESSMENTS

General Assignment Instructions:

All assignments test your understanding of content covered in this class. Thus, assignments should show evidence of engagement with the material *as covered in class*. That being said, be sure to explain the content *in your own words*, rather than merely replicating lectures.

Assignment and Date:	Weighting:
Test 1: Oct. 8	30%
Test 2: Nov. 5	30%
Final Exam: to be scheduled during the final exam period (Dec. 10-21)	30%
Weekly Group Discussion Worksheets: distributed during various class periods; dates not announced ahead of time.	10%

2 Tests:

Each test consists of a list of prompts, of which you can select three and construct long answer/mini-essay-style responses to them. All tests (including the final exam) for this course will be closed-book and must be completed in class (over Zoom). For the tests, you are responsible for all the required readings and class lectures.

Final Exam:

The final exam will be 3 hours long, in class (over Zoom) and will be scheduled during the final exam period (Dec. 10-21). It will consist of a list of prompts, from which you are to select one and construct an essay response to it. The prompts will be released at least a week ahead of time, so that you can have a chance to gather together your thoughts on the prompt. The purpose of the exam will be to enable you to gather your thoughts on some big-picture themes we will have explored together throughout the course, to form a coherent stance on that issue and to then defend it.

I encourage you to write a rough outline or plan of your response to the test prompt you have chosen in order to have a sense of the structure of your response before you come to write your test in person. You are welcome to bring your outline to me for feedback prior to the exam date. **However, you *cannot* bring your outline or any other notes to the test.** More instructions on how to prepare for this assignment will be provided in due time.

Group Discussion Worksheets:

Philosophy is best learned through practice and dialogue. To this end, active participation in our regular discussion activities is essential. These activities are designed to help you develop the critical thinking skills that are essential not just for doing well in this course and on the assignments, but also for learning to do philosophy for yourself, which ultimately matters more than simply memorizing and reproducing the results of other people's philosophizing.

The discussion activities are also designed to train your ability to articulate your views clearly, to provide argumentative support for your views, to question your most taken-for-granted assumptions, and to internalize other perspectives (as opposed as they may seem to your own!) before identifying their strengths and shortcomings. Students are expected to engage respectfully with all opposing views presented in class discussions.

Your grade for this course component will be based on the level of your constructive engagement in the weekly discussions, and on your completion of **10 discussion worksheets (11 will be distributed in total)**. Discussion worksheets will be graded on a Pass/Fail basis, and each is worth 1%. You must attend class and participate in the discussion in order to submit your worksheet.

EXPECTATIONS

I expect you to come to class prepared to discuss the assigned readings, take notes, ask questions, complete assignments on time, practice academic integrity, and engage in respectful and productive reasoned dialogue with peers.

Email me *any time* if you require any clarification at all, or if you just wish to chat about philosophy!

Regular Lecture Attendance and Good Study Habits:

Since each and every lecture is designed to give you the theoretical tools needed to unpack the course readings and prepare you for the assignments, regular attendance is necessary in order to do well in this course. If you miss any class, you are responsible for acquiring any content we covered, either by referring to the slides posted on our Canvas website, by asking a fellow student to share their notes, or by emailing me or by setting up a Zoom appointment with me. Note that generative AI or Google cannot replace the information you get through regular attendance and quality note-taking.

Taking detailed notes is essential for cementing your understanding of the content. It is also advisable to review and organize your notes regularly by highlighting important overarching

themes that came up, as well as summarizing (in your own words) the different theorists' takes on these themes. Then, make note of any **key claims** made by the authors we have discussed, as well as noting the **key arguments** they have presented in support of those claims. Also, make note of any **definitions** introduced, as well as of any **examples** that helped clarify any key concepts we covered. Lastly, make sure to take note of the areas where you **agree** and **disagree** with the authors. For each major author and theory we cover, jot down the "pros" and "cons" of adopting their view. Doing all this will greatly assist you when preparing for the tests.

Active Close Reading:

Students are expected to read all assigned materials before the start of the first class of each week. Readings are essential preparation for our discussion activities.

Few things train and focus the mind quite as well as the practice of close reading does. This practice involves two complementary movements of thought: the first "zooms in" to closely analyze and evaluate the various steps in an argument, while the second "zooms out" to consider how the particular passage at hand, and the text as a whole, each shed light on significant big-picture themes. As we go through the course, you will have ample chance to work on cultivating these close reading skills.

These can be quite challenging and richly-layered texts. Thus, aim to read each assigned work *at least twice*: first, read it once over in order to get a general "bird's eye" overview of the topics discussed. Then, re-read it at least one time in order to get a more detailed grasp of the different steps in the argument/s presented.

In order to *read actively*, briefly summarize the key points of the reading in your own words. Focus your reading by identifying the core claim (or conclusion) that the author is trying to argue for. Then, identify the claims provided in support of that conclusion. Can you identify any problems with any of these claims? If so, make note of them.

SCHEDULE

The following schedule and course components are subject to change with reasonable advance notice, as deemed appropriate by the instructor.

WEEK	TOPICS and ACTIVITIES	READINGS
1. Sept. 3 - 5	*No class Sept. 3: Imagine Day UBC*	-Russell: "Appearance and Reality."

	Introduction to Epistemology: Knowledge *vs* Reality	
2. Sept. 10-12	Ancient Skepticism and Modern Relativism	-Plato: Excerpt from the *Theaetetus* -Sextus Empiricus: Excerpts from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* -Barnes and Bloor: "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge"
3. Sept. 17-19	Rationalism	-Descartes: *Meditations I-III*
4. Sept. 24-26	Empiricism	-Hume: Excerpts from "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding"
5. Oct. 1-3	Replies to Skepticism: Contextualism and Common Sense	-Moore: "Proof of an External World" -Nagel: "Shifting Standards?" -Strawson: "Skepticism, Naturalism and Transcendental Arguments"
6. Oct. 8-10	**TEST 1 - OCT. 8** The Analysis of Knowledge and the Gettier Problem	-Gettier: "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" -Zagzebski: "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems"
7. Oct. 15-17	Naturalism and Knowledge	-Kornblith: "In Defense of a Naturalized Epistemology"
8. Oct. 22-24	Pragmatism and Knowledge	-Pascal's Wager -Clifford: "The Ethics of Belief" -James: "The Will to Believe"
9. Oct. 29-31	Introduction to Social Epistemology Testimony	-Goldman: "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?" -Feldman: "Reasonable Religious Disagreements"
10. Nov. 5-7	**Test 2 - NOV. 5** Knowledge Production and Power Relations	-Fricker: "Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology" -McKinnon: "Epistemic Injustice"

	Epistemic Wrongs	
11. Nov. 14	***No class Nov 12 - Midterm Break*** Collective Epistemology: Groups as Knowers?	-Lackey: "Collective Epistemology"
12. Nov. 19-21	Collective Epistemology, Cont'd	-Gallagher and Crifasi: "Mental Institutions" -Weisberg and Muldoon: "Epistemic Landscapes and the Division of Cognitive Labour"
13. Nov. 26-28	The Influence of AI and the Internet on Our Epistemic Environment	-Nguyen: "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles" -Koskinen: "We Have No Satisfactory Social Epistemology of AI-Based Science"
14. Dec. 3-5	The Epistemology of the Democratic Process	-Christiano: "Democracy and Social Epistemology"

POLICIES
Academic Integrity:

By enrolling in this course, you are responsible for familiarizing yourself and complying with the university's policy on academic integrity. Ignorance is no excuse. As a part of a research community, you are responsible for engaging with existing knowledge and contributing ideas of your own. Academics—including you!—build knowledge through rigorous research that expands on the contributions of others, both in the faraway past and around the world today. This is called scholarship. However, when another person's words (i.e. phrases, sentences, or paragraphs), ideas, or entire works are used, the author must be acknowledged in the text, in footnotes, in endnotes, or in another accepted form of academic citation. Where direct quotations are made, they must be clearly delineated (for example, within quotation marks or separately indented). Failure to provide proper attribution is plagiarism because it represents someone else's work as one's own. Plagiarism should not occur in submitted drafts or final works. A student who seeks assistance from a tutor or other scholastic aids must ensure that

the work submitted is the student's own. Students are responsible for ensuring that any work submitted does not constitute plagiarism. Students who are in any doubt as to what constitutes plagiarism should consult their instructor before handing in any assignments.

A Note About Generative AI Use:

The TA and I want to read your thoughts, not those of a piece of technology. If used, generative AI technology should be approached like any other reference tool (e.g. an encyclopedia), rather than being relied on as the author of your work. Relying on AI as one research tool among others is acceptable. However, *if you rely on AI to produce any content for you, you must acknowledge this through a citation.*

Academic Misconduct:

https://vancouver.calendar.ubc.ca/campus-wide-policies-and-regulations/student-conduct-and-discipline/discipline-academic-misconduct/3-academic-misconduct-ubc-students

Academic misconduct includes any conduct by which a student gains or attempts to gain an unfair academic advantage or benefit thereby compromising the integrity of the academic process, or helping or attempting to help another person commit an act of academic misconduct or gain, or attempt to gain, an unfair academic advantage.

Academic Concession:

If you miss an in-class test for a reason that the university recognizes as warranting a concession (e.g., illness, family emergency, religious observation, etc.), immediately submit a Student Self-Declaration form to me so that your in-term concession case can be evaluated. You can download the form here:

https://www.arts.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2019/10/Student-Self-Declaration-Form-1.6-Arts.pdf

If this is not the first time you have requested concession or classes are over, fill out Arts Academic Advising's online academic concession form immediately, so that an advisor can evaluate your concession case. If you are a student in a different Faculty, please consult your Faculty's webpage on academic concession, and then contact me where appropriate.

Academic Accommodation:

Academic accommodations help students with a disability or ongoing medical condition overcome challenges that may affect their academic success. Students requiring academic accommodations must register with the Centre for Accessibility (previously known as Access &

Diversity). The Centre will determine that student's eligibility for accommodations in accordance with Policy LR7: Academic Accommodation for Students with Disabilities. Academic accommodations are not determined by your instructors, and instructors should not ask you about the nature of your disability or ongoing medical condition, or request copies of your disability documentation. However, your instructor may consult with the Centre for Accessibility should the accommodations affect the essential learning outcomes of a course.