

AS.150.215: PROBLEMS WITH KNOWLEDGE, EVIDENCE, AND ACTION

Spring 2022

Meeting times: TuTh 9-10:15, Gilman 288

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course covers a selection of recent work in epistemology and serves as an introduction to these topics. Issues to be discussed include new approaches to the nature of knowledge and skepticism, normative aspects of the way we handle information in our decision-making, epistemic injustices, and epistemic requirements for democratic discourse.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The primary goal of this course is to provide students the background they need to access the contemporary literature on epistemology, and to develop an understanding of the different approaches to the topics being discussed. More broadly, this will also help building several reasoning and expression skills in general: engaging with complex readings and closely analyzing them will improve your ability to read carefully and attend to detail as well as to weigh the different readings. Critical assessment of the arguments expressed in those readings will allow you to learn thinking and expressing yourself clearly and precisely both in conversation and in writing.

STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Grading for this course consists of three components:

- Three essays (60% total)
- Four preliminary writing assignments (20% total)
- Class participation (20%)

The essays are the most significant part of your grade, because the skills that can be acquired while writing them are the most valuable thing you can take away from this course (or most other philosophy courses). A list of two or three topics for the essays will be given out at least three weeks prior to their due date (four weeks for essay 1, but a draft will be due two weeks before the final due date). You must choose exactly one of these topics – if you have an idea for a different topic, please clear this with me before you start writing. The topics will become more liberal as the semester progresses.

The essays have different lengths and will contribute to your overall grade to different extents:

- Essay 1: about 4 pages, will count 15% of your final grade.
- Essay 2 OR course project: about 5 pages, will count 20% of your final grade.
- Essay 3: about 7 pages, will count 25% of your final grade.

I will circulate a longer document with more specific guidelines and tips for writing those essays. I also encourage you to talk to me while you are in the early stages of writing your paper. The secret to writing a good paper, however, is this: start writing early, so you have time to sleep over your ideas.

Given the writing-intensive listing of this course, you will be allowed to submit at least one draft of a paper. To facilitate this, one of the preliminary writing assignments will be a draft of the first paper, to be submitted 1.5 weeks before the due date of that paper (see schedule). I will grade these papers informally as drafts, meaning that they will not be held to the same standard as the paper itself. (Note that this means that an A for the draft does not mean that your paper will receive an A as well.) You have the option of submitting drafts or paper outlines for the remaining papers as well, but these are not mandatory and are not graded. If you plan on doing so, please submit those drafts at least one week ahead of the deadline, giving me time to read them, to give you feedback, and for you to make revisions.

You have the option of substituting essay 2 with a course project. You can come up with your own idea for a project like this, but you will need to agree with me on the setup. I will also provide some examples of project setups. One such example: limit your news intake to one outlet (e.g. one daily cable news show) for a week and write down what you took to be the main news items over that week. Then compare your list with a partner who was limited to a different news outlet. You will need to write a 5-page report on your project, which should include the immediate results, but should also include at least 2 pages of philosophical analysis, and the analysis should make reference to at least one course reading. The deadline for the report is the same as for the regular paper, so make sure you plan the timeline for your project well in advance.

For papers 2 and 3, you will be assigned to a “workshop group” and will share ideas for those papers within that group, present on a reading for paper 3, and give each other feedback. I will reserve a part of class time for the meetings of these groups.

The preliminary writing assignments are as follows (each is worth 5% of your overall course grade):

- A draft of the first paper (as outlined above)
- A short presentation of the structure of your second paper or the plan for your course project to your workshop group (submit 1-page handout to me)
- A peer review report on the presentations given in your workshop group (submit to me and to presenters)
- A short presentation on a reading you did in preparation for the third paper to your workshop group (submit 1-page handout to me)

Finally, your class participation will be part of your grade. There are two aspects to this grade:

- Once a week, submit an online comment in response to the discussion questions I will post on MS Teams (worth 10% of your overall grade). These comments need to be submitted by 7pm on Monday (even if they are concerned with a reading assigned for a Thursday). You don’t need to submit these comments for the first week of class. You can miss one of these comments without an excuse, every further missed comment will result in a penalty on this part of your grade.
- Your in-class participation will be worth 10% of your overall grade. This is mainly about being active (including in group work) and engaging with others, less about quality or quantity of your contributions to in-class discussions. If you do the readings, show up, and are willing to talk, your grade should be good.

All grades will be calculated as percentages. At the end of the semester, I will convert your overall percentage into a letter grade, using the following scale: A+ beginning at 97, A beginning at 93, A- beginning at 90, B+ beginning at 87, B beginning at 83, etc. If you are very close to a better grade, I will consider rounding your score up.

COURSE POLICIES

- Attendance is required. You can miss up to 3 classes without any penalty (and you don’t have to send me an apology). Beyond that, you can only miss classes with a valid excuse. If you miss more than 3 classes without a valid excuse, there will be a penalty on your participation grade. Arriving more than 15 minutes late to class counts as an absence. (If you have a letter from the disability office that exempts you from attendance requirements, you can ignore this paragraph.)
- Late assignments: assignments are always due at midnight at the end of the day specified on the course schedule. I will allow a “grace period” until 4am, but after that the assignment counts as late. For every day an assignment is late, there will be a deduction of 5% from the grade of that essay. However, if the assignment is late more than 5 days, it will simply be graded 0%. If you have received a homework assignment, the daily deduction is 10%, the 5-day rule applies in the same way.
- Research demonstrates that classes in which students are not allowed to use laptops and smartphones have far better learning outcomes. For that reason, using laptops, smartphones, etc. is not allowed in class. The only exceptions to this policy are e-readers which do not have a browser function and students with disability accommodations that allow them to use electronics.
- We will comply with Covid-19 related university policies. Currently, this means that you need to wear a properly fitted mask (covering your mouth and nose) during class, except when drinking. It also means that you will need to stay home for a period if you are symptomatic or tested positive. I will make accommodations and will make remote attendance available. If a large number of people cannot attend in person (but feel well enough to attend remotely), or if I cannot attend, we will move the class online until the in-person format makes sense again.

DISABILITY ACCOMMODATIONS

Johns Hopkins University values diversity and inclusion. We are committed to providing welcoming, equitable, and accessible educational experiences for all students. Students with disabilities (including those with psychological conditions, medical conditions and temporary disabilities) can request accommodations for this course by providing an Accommodation Letter issued by Student Disability Services (SDS). Please request accommodations for this course as early as possible to provide time for effective communication and arrangements.

For further information or to start the process of requesting accommodations, please contact Student Disability Services at Homewood Campus, Shaffer Hall #101, call: 410-516-4720 and email: studentdisabilityservices@jhu.edu or visit the website <https://studentaffairs.jhu.edu/disabilities/>.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The strength of the university depends on academic and personal integrity. In this course, you must be honest and truthful. Ethical violations include cheating on exams, plagiarism, reuse of assignments, improper use of the Internet and electronic devices, unauthorized collaboration, alteration of graded assignments, forgery and falsification, lying, facilitating academic dishonesty, and unfair competition.

Report any violations you witness to the instructor. You may consult the associate dean of student conduct (or designee) by calling the Office of the Dean of Students at 410-516-8208 or via email at studentconduct@jhu.edu.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Detailed references are at the end of this syllabus.

Day	Topic	Readings	Notes
Jan 25	Introduction		
I. Skepticism			
What kind of access do we have to facts about the world we live in? How can the problem of skepticism be addressed?			
Jan 27	Skeptical Problems	Williams	
Feb 1	Externalism about Evidence	Bonjour	
Feb 3	Internalism about Evidence	Madison	
II. Epistemic Normativity			
What are the normative implications of how well-informed we are? When do we have the right to assert something, belief something, or act on an assumption?			
Feb 8	Norms of Assertion	Williamson (read only to end of sec. 2, p. 508)	paper 1 assigned
Feb 10	Norms of Assertion	Kelp & Simion	
Feb 15	Epistemic Norms of Action	Hawthorne & Stanley	
Feb 17	Epistemic Norms of Action	Neta	Paper 1 draft due class ends at 9:55
Feb 22	Epistemic Norms of Belief	Rinard	
Feb 24	Review Session		
III. Social Epistemology			
Can two reasonable people with the same access to evidence disagree? What forms of epistemic injustice are there, and how can they be rectified?			
Mar 1	Peer Disagreement	Christensen	paper 1 due
Mar 3	Peer Disagreement	Hawthorne & Srinivasan	
Mar 8	Testimonial Injustice	Fricker, Introduction and ch. 1 (pp. 1-29)	
Mar 10	Testimonial Injustice		paper 2/project assigned
Mar 15	Hermeneutical Injustice	Fricker, ch. 7	
Mar 17	Review Session		Presentation session 1
Mar 21-25	Spring Break – no class		
IV. Epistemology and Democracy			
How should democratic discourse be organized to allow for beneficial decisions? What role does empathy play? What is the role of religion?			
Mar 29	Political Epistemology	Hannon & Edenberg	Presentation session 2
Mar 31	The Epistemology of Democracy	Anderson	Peer reviews due
Apr 5	Empathy	Steinberg	
Apr 7	Epistemic Effects of Diversity	O’Connor & Bruner	paper 2/project report due
Apr 12	Rational Public Discourse	Habermas	
Apr 15	Review Session		

V. Misinformation and Conspiracy Theories			
<i>How Do Conspiracy Theories arise and what exactly is problematic about them? Are they similar to propaganda?</i>			
Apr 19	Vice Epistemology	Cassam	
Apr 21	Conspiracy Theories	Hawley	final paper topics due
Apr 26	Propaganda	Stanley	
Apr 28	Review Session		
May 10			final paper due

READINGS

Here are the full citations of the readings, listed in the order of the course schedule. All readings are available on MS Teams.

- Williams, Michael (2000). Problems of Knowledge. Oxford University Press. – Chapters 5 and 6 (pp. 58-80).
- Bonjour, Laurence (1980). Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5, 53–73.
- Madison, B.J.C. (2010). Epistemic Internalism. *Philosophy Compass* 5, 840-853.
- Williamson, Timothy (1996). Knowing and Asserting. *The Philosophical Review* 105: 489-523.
- Kelp, Christoph and Mona Simion (forthcoming). A Social Epistemology of Assertion. In Jennifer Lackey and Aidan McGlynn (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Social Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawthorne, John and Jason Stanley (2008). Knowledge and Action. *Journal of Philosophy* 105: 571-590.
- Neta, Ram (2009). Treating Something as a Reason for Action. *Noûs* 41:594–626.
- Rinard, Susanna (2017). No Exception for Belief. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 94: 121-143.
- Christensen, David (2007). Epistemology of disagreement: The good news. *Philosophical Review* 116: 187-217.
- Hawthorne, John and Amia Srinivasan (2013). Disagreement Without Transparency: Some Bleak Thoughts. In David Christensen and Jennifer Lackey (eds.), *The Epistemology of Disagreement: New Essays* (pp. 9-30). Oxford University Press.
- Kappel, Klemens. 2017. Fact-Dependent Policy Disagreements and Political Legitimacy. *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 20, 313-331.
- Fricker, Miranda (2007). *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford University Press.
- Hannon, Michael, and Elizabeth Edenberg (forthcoming). A Guide to Political Epistemology. In Jennifer Lackey & Aidan McGlynn (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Social Epistemology*. Oxford University Press.
- Anderson, Elizabeth (2006). The Epistemology of Democracy. *Episteme* 3, 8–22.
- Steinberg, Justin (2014). An Epistemic Case for Empathy. *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 95, 47-71.
- O'Connor, Cailin & Justin Bruner (2019). Dynamics and Diversity in Epistemic Communities. *Erkenntnis* 84, 101–119.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1984). *The Theory of communicative action. Vol. I: Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, T. McCarthy (trans.). Boston: Beacon. [Ch. 1, section C]
- Cassam, Quassim (2016). Vice Epistemology. *The Monist* 99, 159-180.
- Hawley, Katherine (2019). Conspiracy theories, impostor syndrome, and distrust. *Philosophical Studies* 176, 969–980.
- Stanley, Jason (2015). *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton University Press. [Ch. 3]