

Professor: Jennifer Carr

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Office Hours: Th. 2–4

H&SS 8037

## 1 Overview

This course is an introductory survey of epistemology: the theory of knowledge and rational belief. We'll discuss a wide range of topics, including: whether we can really *know* anything; the possibility that we might be brains in vats; whether we can rationally hold beliefs about the external world, given that we might be brains in vats; whether “knowledge” can be defined or analyzed; whether beliefs come in degrees and how degrees of belief can be evaluated; how to be reason clearly and rigorously in the face of uncertainty; whether it's rational to believe in God; how it might be rational to respond to disagreements; and whether you should believe you're stupid.

**Structure:** There will be new assigned readings for each Monday and Wednesday class. Friday classes will not include new readings; these sessions will focus heavily on discussion. You should reread the Monday and Wednesday readings before each Friday session.

**Readings:** All readings will be available on the course website. The course has no required textbook. (You're welcome.)

**Advice:** This class will not be an easy A or even an easy B. In order to do well in this class, you will need to attend class consistently, complete all readings before class, and most importantly, *ask questions when you're confused about something*. Even if you think the answer might be obvious to other students. Even if you think it was already answered in class, but you accidentally tuned out the answer. In order to receive a passing grade on your papers, you will need to show a strong understanding of the topics under discussion in this course and to develop your own original philosophical arguments. I also strongly suggest you start work on your papers early, and outline your ideas before you begin drafting your papers.

## 2 Assignments

- Paper 1: 32%
- Paper 2: 36%
- Biweekly online reading responses: 20%
- In-class discussion and clicker participation: 12%

**Papers:** A week before papers are due, I'll circulate a list of paper topics. If you'd like to write on some other topic, you must explain your idea to me and receive permission from me in advance. Papers must be a minimum of 1500 words (approximately six pages). I will provide a checklist explaining the requirements for each paper. For advice about writing philosophy papers, please see Jim Pryor's [Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#). Extensions will be granted leniently, but must be requested at least 12 hours in advance. Without an extension, late papers will be deducted one third of a letter grade per day (A will become A–, B+ will become B, etc.). All papers must include a bibliography. Collaboration on papers is not permitted.

**Online reading responses:** The course website contains a discussion board. There will be separate posts for each day's readings.

- Each Monday and Wednesday **before class**, students must post a reading response with comments or questions about the day's readings (at least five sentences). Your posts may start new threads or may be responses to other students' comments and questions.
- Reading responses **must engage carefully with the content** of the reading. If you ask a question, explain why you're confused about that question and what some possible answers might be. If you make a comment, it shouldn't be merely evaluative. (Not merely: "I liked this reading. It was really interesting. I'd been wondering about epistemic closure.")
- If your reading responses make it obvious that you haven't done the reading—for example, by asking some question about the beginning of the reading that was addressed at great length later in the reading—you will not receive credit.

Late reading responses will not be accepted. These reading responses will be used to structure Friday discussions. Your reading responses may at any point be read aloud and discussed.

**In-class discussion:** You'll be expected to participate in discussion in basically every session. This includes small group discussions, full-class discussions, and frequent low-stakes cold-calling. Because this class is discussion-based, any more than **two** absences from lecture or section will result in a reduction of your in-class grade, except in special circumstances. If you think your circumstances warrant more than two absences, please contact me before each further class that you miss and be prepared to provide documentation.

### 3 Policies

**Laptop/tablet/phone policy:** Use of laptops, tablets, and phones won't be permitted in class, except in special cases. Contact me for permission if you have specific reasons why you will need to use any of these devices.<sup>1</sup>

**Email policy:** Email me before each class that you miss. If you'd like to ask detailed philosophical questions, please come to my office hours!

**Syllabus policy:** To ensure that students are aware of all course requirements and policies, there will be a required syllabus review quiz on the course website. You must pass this test with a perfect score by Monday of week 2. You may consult the syllabus while taking the test and you may retake the test as many times as necessary to get a perfect score.

### 4 Academic Integrity

Please familiarize yourself with [university policies](#) on plagiarism, cheating, and academic integrity. Note: "plagiarism," in academic contexts, is defined very broadly. It includes any presentation of others' ideas without proper attribution, even paraphrased, even from informal resources (websites, conversation with your roommate, ...). Proper attribution requires both in-text citation and bibliographic citation.

Note also that plagiarism need not be knowing or intentional to be penalizable. *Always err on the side of citing any sources that have influenced your thinking.*

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<sup>1</sup> Justification: Undergraduates who use laptops in lecture spend 40% of their time using non-course-related software. Academic performance is inversely correlated with multitasking on laptops. Even controlling for multitasking, students who take notes on laptops show reduced comprehension, in short and medium-term examination, compared with students who take notes by hand. Most importantly: being seated near someone using a screen to multitask impedes academic performance. See Mueller & Oppenheimer (2014), "The Pen Is Mightier Than the Keyboard: Advantages of Longhand Over Laptop Note Taking," *Psychological Science*; Kraushaar & Novak (2010), "Examining the Affects of Student Multitasking with Laptops during the Lecture," *Journal of Information Systems Education*; Sanaa, Weston, Cepedab (2013), "Laptop multitasking hinders classroom learning for both users and nearby peers," *Computers & Education*.

Any form of cheating or plagiarism will be reported immediately. Penalties for academic integrity infractions may include failing the assignment, failing the course, suspension, and expulsion.

## 5 Tentative schedule

This schedule is subject to change. Week 1 is Oct. 2–6; you can figure out the rest. Monday readings are listed first after each week number and topic; Wednesday readings are listed second.

### I. Knowledge and Skepticism

#### Week 1 Skepticism

Descartes, *Meditations* 1 and 2

Moore, “Proof of an External World” and “Four Forms of Scepticism”

#### Week 2 Responses to Skepticism

Rinard, “Reasoning One’s Way out of Skepticism”

DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”

#### Week 3 Brains in Vats

Bostrom, “Are We Living in a Computer Simulation?”

Putnam, “Brains in a Vat”

#### Week 4 The Analysis of Knowledge

Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” and Feldman, “Modifying the Traditional Analysis of Knowledge”

Goldman, “A Causal Theory of Knowing”

[Paper 1 due Saturday, Oct 28, at noon](#)

### II. Rational Uncertainty

#### Week 5 Knowledge and Probability

Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries* ch. 1, “Introducing the Puzzle”

Christensen, *Putting Logic in its Place*, 1.1, 2.1

#### Week 6 Rational Uncertainty and Decisions under Uncertainty

Christensen, *Putting Logic in its Place*, 2.2, 2.3

Sinnott-Armstrong and Fogelin, *Understanding Arguments* ch. 12, “Choices”

#### Week 7 Motivated Belief

Pascal *Pensées*, Section 233, & Hájek, “Pascal’s Wager,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

More Hájek

### III. Disagreement and Self-Doubt

#### Week 8 Disagreement

Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements"

Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement"

#### Week 9 Epistemic Permissiveness

White, "Epistemic Permissiveness"

Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism is True and What it Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief"

#### Week 10 TBA; possibly epistemic paradoxes.

[Paper 2 due by 10:30 am on the last session of the class.](#)

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