

Epistemology: What to Believe? (updated 3/24/2020)

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TTh 10:20 - 11:40

PHIL 314 Zoom

<https://mikedeigan.com/teaching/292>

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username: moore

password: hereisonhand

Description

Epistemology is in large part concerned with answering questions about what we *should* believe and why we should believe it. This course is focused on this *normative* part of epistemology. We will try to figure out the answers to the following questions, among others. Should we give up our beliefs about the material world in response to skeptical arguments? Should we believe simpler theories over more complex ones if they make the same predictions? Should we believe something because it is practically useful for us to do so? Should we believe better of our friends than our evidence suggests? Which experts, if any, should we trust and defer to? How should we respond to disagreement? And whatever the answers to these questions are, what makes them the right answers?

The course will involve working through classical and contemporary works of philosophy, but more importantly it will require the following: careful and creative thinking, active participation in critical and collaborative discussion, and clear argumentative writing. The aim is that by the end of the course, you will have developed the skills and background required to tackle complex philosophical issues on your own.

Prerequisites

At least one previous course in philosophy.

Office Hours

I will have walk-in office hours each Tuesday and Thursday from 11:45–12:30.

My office is ~~211 Russell House (350 High Street)~~ **the class Zoom room**.

I enjoy talking with people about philosophy, so please feel welcome to come to these, even if you don't have any specific thing you feel you need to ask me about. You don't need to schedule a meeting to come to these.

If you need to meet with me one-on-one, you can either email me to find some time that works for us both, or you can schedule an appointment online for for some time on Tuesdays or Thursdays from (9:30–10:15) here: <http://mikedeigan.com/meet>

These meetings will need to be scheduled at least a day in advance.

Assignments

1. *Readings*: there will be a reading assignment to be completed before each class meeting. The typical assignment will not be many pages. However, the content will often be dense, and you will be expected to read it closely and critically.

2. *Class participation*: our class meetings won't be primarily lecture-based. Instead, you'll spend much of class time talking with each other (and maybe doing some writing). Active participation, not just attendance, is required.
3. *Out of class discussions*: twice over the course of the semester, you will meet with a small group of your classmates to have an hour-long philosophical discussion on your own. Afterwards, you will make a brief report about the discussion.
4. *Weekly write-ups*: each week (except those with the out of class discussions), you will ~~write a paragraph or two~~ **post at least twice on the online forum** responding to some issue related to the week's reading or class discussion **or to posts by your classmates**. These are to be completed Saturday by 2:00 pm.
5. *Papers*:
 - i. a 1,500–2,000 word paper
 - ii. a 2,500–3,000 word paper, in two drafts

Grading

Participation:	25%
Discussion reports:	15%
Weekly write-ups:	15%
Paper 1:	15%
Paper 2:	30%

Participation grades will be the average of 3 participation grades given over the course of the semester.

Discussion reports and weekly write-ups are pass/fail.

The second paper grade will be determined by a weighted average of the grades of the two drafts you turn in to me: $(0.25 \times \text{grade of non-final draft} + 0.75 \times \text{grade of final draft})$.

Books

I will post all the readings on the course webpage.

If you want to have some of the books we're reading parts of and are unsure of which edition/translation to get, I'm happy to make recommendations.

Policies

Electronics:

Phones should be on silent and put away, except when you need to be available to leave class to take some urgent call.

Laptops and tablets can be used for looking at the readings and for note taking, not for other stuff. ~~Turn off your wifi~~ and close your browsers to avoid temptation.

Late Policy:

For papers, I'll take off a third of a letter grade each day after the deadline.

For weekly write-ups, I'll give you half-credit if you get it to me within a week of the deadline, no credit after that.

For all deadlines, I'm willing to be reasonably flexible. If you need an extra couple days because of other commitments, just let me know a few days in advance and I don't mind giving an extension, even for non-emergency situations. If you need a longer extension or a last minute extension, then there needs to be some special and unforeseeable circumstance justifying it.

Schedule

The assigned readings are subject to change. I will notify you of any such changes at least one week in advance.

Should I believe anything?

Week 1	1/23	Introduction, no reading
Week 2	1/28	Al-Ghazālī: selections from <i>Deliverance from Error</i> Descartes: selections from <i>Discourse on Method</i> and <i>Meditations 1 & 2</i>
	1/30	Descartes: selections from <i>Meditations 3, 4, & 6</i>
Week 3	2/4	Sextus Empiricus: selections from <i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i>
	2/6	Hume: selection from <i>Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>
Week 4	2/11	Russell: "The Existence of Matter" from <i>The Problems of Philosophy</i>
	2/13	Sober: selection from "What is the Problem of Simplicity?" Rinard: selection from "External World Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation"
Week 5	2/18	Williamson: selection from <i>Knowledge and Its Limits</i> Srinivasan: selections from "Normativity without Cartesian Privilege"
	2/20	Moore: selection from "Proof of an External World" Lycan: "Moore against the new skeptics"
		First discussion reports due, first paper topics assigned
Week 6	2/25	Lewis: selection from "Elusive Knowledge"
	2/27	Plantinga: "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?"
Week 7	3/3	In-class paper workshop, no reading

What determines what I should believe?

- 3/5 Plato: selection from *Meno*
Gettier: "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"
Kvanvig: selection from "Why Should Inquiring Minds Want to Know?"
3/10 **First paper due**

Spring Break!

- Week 8 3/24 Pascal: selection from *Pensées*
Clifford: selection from "The Ethics of Belief"
3/26 James: selections from "The Will to Believe"
Week 9 3/31 Kelly: selection from "The Rationality of Belief and Some Other Propositional Attitudes"
Arpaly and Brinkerhoff: selection from "Why Epistemic Partiality is Over-rated"
4/2 Rinard: selection from "No Exception for Belief"

When should I trust others? When should I trust myself?

- Week 10 4/7 Huemer: "Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?"
Editorials about expertise and the pandemic (linked from course page)
4/9 Goldman: "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?"
Second discussion reports due, second paper topics assigned
Week 11 4/14 Mills: "White Ignorance"
4/16 Anderson: "The Epistemology of Democracy"
Week 12 4/21 Nguyen: "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"
4/23 Kelly: selection from "Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization"
Week 13 4/28 Paper workshop (no reading)
4/29 **Draft of second paper due**
4/30 Schoenfield "Why do you believe what you do?"
Week 14 5/5 Conclusion and/or catch-up
Finals 5/14 **Revised second paper due**