

**Phil 140H: Knowledge and Society**  
UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2018  
Syllabus

**Instructor:** Prof. Alex Worsnip

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**Class Meetings:** Tues & Thurs, 12:30-1:45pm, Caldwell Hall (CW) 105

**Office Hours:** Wed, 1:30-2:30pm & Thurs, 2:30-3:30pm, Caldwell Hall (CW) 202A

**Course Description.** *Epistemology* is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions about knowledge, rational belief, evidence, and the like. Philosophical introductions to epistemology are often quite abstract, beginning with very general questions like ‘what is knowledge?’ or ‘what is rationality?’ and only turning to applied questions much later. This course inverts that trend by beginning with some of the areas of social human life in which questions about knowledge, rationality and evidence matter to us: areas like democratic politics, the law, science, education, and religion. It investigates particular “knowledge problems” that we, as 21<sup>st</sup> century citizens, face. For example: when there is so much contradictory information out there, how can we know who to trust? Should we be worried about the ways that our upbringings and social characteristics (e.g. gender, race, class, etc) shape and bias our beliefs, and if so what should we do about it? Should we even *have* beliefs about complex policy questions about which we are not experts? Should the existence of widespread disagreement about politics, morality and religion make us less confident in our own views? Is it ever really “beyond reasonable doubt” that someone is guilty of a crime, and why should that be the standard that matters anyway? Through investigating these specific, applied questions, we hope to learn something about the nature of knowledge, evidence and rationality more generally.

**Course Goals.** This course aims

- to help students think more critically and systematically about their beliefs and belief systems, about the “epistemic status” of such beliefs (are they rational? do they amount to knowledge?), and about the methods that they use to form such beliefs
- to introduce students to key philosophical concepts that relate to knowledge, evidence and rationality, and to give them a vocabulary and conceptual framework to express their ideas about these topics in a more sophisticated manner
- to introduce students to the art of reading and writing philosophy, and to prepare them for further philosophical study, as well as to give them philosophical underpinnings for classes in related disciplines (especially the social sciences)

**Enrollment.** This course is designed as an introductory philosophy class, so there are no curricular prerequisites and it is aimed at students who have never studied philosophy before. The class is an honors course, and first priority is given to Honors Carolina students. Enrollment is capped at 24. In the event that the course isn’t full, students from outside the Honors College will be allowed to enroll by instructor permission (provided they meet the Honors College’s requirement of a GPA above 3.0).

## Requirements/Assessment

**Participation** (15% of grade). You will get two participation grades during the course, one for the first half of the semester and another for the second, each worth 7.5% of your grade. Participation will be graded on the basis of

- *Attendance record.* Includes attending each class, arriving in time to be seated and ready to learn when class begins, and waiting until class is over to leave.
- *Alertness/ attentiveness.* Includes (obviously) being fully awake, and not being on your computer, tablet or phone.
- *Regularity of participation in discussion.* You are expected to participate in class discussions regularly. **If you do not participate in discussions at all, your overall participation grade can be no higher than a C (and that's if your attendance and alertness are perfect).** I do understand that participation in discussion can be difficult or intimidating for many students. I want to create an environment in which you feel comfortable participating. If you are having difficulty, please come to office hours or email me and we can set up a meeting to discuss strategies.
- *Respectfulness of participation.* You are expected to be respectful to the instructor and to other students. This includes not talking over others or drowning them out, as well as listening to others and responding to what they say.
- *Preparedness.* Your participation should reflect having done all the reading and having thought about it. You can demonstrate this by referring to specific ideas from the readings in your comments, and by answering when I ask the class to recall something from a reading.

Note: you will not be graded on the philosophical quality of your contributions, as I want people to be able to speak freely and try out new ideas without fear of judgment. I also want to add that asking questions, including clarificatory questions, can be a great way to participate.

**Online forum posts** (15% of grade). I will set up an online discussion forum on Sakai, which will form the basis of two different types of assignment.

- **Opening posts.** For each class (that has new reading), it will be someone's responsibility to write an "opening post" in the forum. This must be posted by 12pm the day before class. The opening post should be roughly 300-500 words (roughly equivalent to 1-1½ double-spaced pages). It should briefly explain some aspect of the reading (it need not summarize the whole thing), and then start a discussion about the reading by offering a reaction to it. The reaction could (for example) be a question about the reading, or about a point that it raises; it could be a criticism of the reading; it could be a further point offered in support of the author's view.
- **Reply posts.** Then, several other students will be assigned to reply to the opening post. These replies must be posted by the start of class. They should be 200-300 words (roughly equivalent to 1 double-spaced page) and address themselves directly to the issue raised by the opening post. Like the opening post, the replies should show familiarity with the assigned reading. (You're also encouraged to post replies on days that you're not assigned to do so – extra replies won't be assigned a grade, but can boost your participation grade.)

I will distribute a schedule early on in the semester for these forum assignments. Over the course of the semester, each of you will write **one** opening post and **three** replies. The opening post will be worth 5% of your overall grade, and the replies will be worth 3.33% of your grade each. I'll grade both reactions and replies as ✓+(100%), ✓(85%), ✓-(75%) or ✗(60%). The ✓ grade means that the post showed a solid understanding of the material and was a good faith effort to contribute to the discussion. The ✓+ grade is reserved for especially helpful or insightful contributions, and the ✓- grade is for contributions that complete the assignment but are problematic in some way (e.g. confused about the main points of the reading, or just a book report without any contribution of your own). The ✗ grade is for perfunctory posts that don't try to engage with the reading or the opening post seriously.

**Papers** (45% of grade). You'll write two (somewhat) longer papers for the class. For each, you'll be given a choice of prompts. Since this will be a first philosophy class for most people, we'll do two drafts of the first paper, with the first draft counting for relatively little of your overall grade. I'll send you comments on your first draft before you write the second. This procedure is intended to get you acclimatized to philosophical writing as quickly as possible. (An excellent guide to writing philosophy papers is also available at <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>.)

- Paper 1 (on Part 1 or 2 of the course; around 1000 words ≈ around 3 double-spaced pages):
  - First draft: due Saturday, Feb 17 at 5pm. 5% of grade
  - I will return comments on your first draft by the end of Sunday, Feb 25.
  - Second draft: due Sunday, March 4 at 5pm. 15% of grade
- Paper 2 (on the “Bridge” or Part 3 of the course; around 1500 words ≈ around 5 double-spaced pages): due Saturday, April 7 at 5pm. 25% of grade

Papers will be graded on a rubric that includes 5 criteria: (i) approach; (ii) cogency & argumentation; (iii) conclusion; (iv) independence of thought; and (v) writing. I will assign a number for each category and base the total grade off of these numbers. A more detailed grading rubric for papers will be available on Sakai.

You should submit your papers through the Assignments function on Sakai; do not submit via email. Additionally, to facilitate anonymous grading, please don't include your name anywhere on your paper. Use your UNC PID instead, and in the title of the file, write the assignment name (e.g. 'Paper 1') followed by your PID.

**Final exam** (25% of grade). To be held Friday, May 4, 12pm-2pm, in our usual classroom. **The exam will be on Parts 4 and 5 of the course only.** It will consist of short to medium-length questions asking you to explain concepts and arguments that we've encountered, and to critically respond to them. More information will be provided closer to the time.

#### **Some Additional Policies about Grades.**

- The grade boundaries for the course are as follows: A = 93% or higher, A- = 90-93%; B+ = 87-90%, B = 83-87%, B- = 80-83%, C+ = 77-80%, C = 73-77%, C- = 70-73%, D+ = 67-

70%, D = 63-67%, F = less than 63%. Note: these boundaries should be interpreted so that 93.0% is an A, but 92.99% is an A-, and similarly for each other boundary.

- In addition to communicating them to you directly, I will post all grades for the course on the Gradebook feature of Sakai. If you want to understand a grade you have received, and the reasons for it, you are more than welcome to meet with me. However, all grades are final: I will not negotiate grades.

### Honor Code

UNC's honor code, which is available at [honor.unc.edu](http://honor.unc.edu), applies to all class assignments. Violations of the honor code will be taken very seriously and will be reported to the Student Attorney General. In addition, please take note of the following points:

- Reusing a paper that you have written for another class qualifies as academic dishonesty.
- Summarizing ideas or arguments that you have found in articles or on the internet, without citing your sources, qualifies as academic dishonesty. **It doesn't matter if you put them into your own words.** If you have got an idea from a source, you must acknowledge the debt by citing the source.

If you are in any doubt at all about whether something constitutes academic dishonesty, **err on the side of caution** and talk to me **before** you submit the assignment to clarify the policies.

### Other Class Policies

- *Electronic Devices.* The use of laptops, tablets and cell phones in class is forbidden, unless they are required for class participation due to a disability.
- *Extensions.*
  - For various reasons, I can't grant any extensions for forum posts. If genuinely extraordinary circumstances prevent you from completing a forum post as scheduled, I will try to reschedule you for a different day, but you must contact me as far in advance as possible to allow for the schedule to be adjusted. (This is especially important for opening posts, since those scheduled to reply to you are relying on you to post your opening post on the forum in a timely manner so that they can reply.)
  - For the papers, I am somewhat more flexible. If you have a good reason and make a reasonable extension request in advance of the deadline, I will usually grant your request. However, I will not grant (i) extensions after the deadline, when the paper is already late; (ii) very lengthy extensions; (iii) more than one extension on any one individual paper; (iv) extensions when you have had to ask for extensions on multiple previous assignments; (v) extensions that will get in the way of your ability to keep up with other required work for the class; or (vi) extensions that get in the way of my ability to submit your final grades in a timely manner.
- If any assignment is late without my having agreed to an extension, it will lose 1/3 of a letter grade per day.
- I am very happy to meet with you at any time to discuss your progress in the class, to discuss assignments (before or after they are submitted) or simply to talk more about the topics of the

class. Please come to my office hours, or if those times don't work, email me to set up an appointment. You are particularly encouraged to meet with me in the early stages of planning your papers. This is free advice and almost always improves your paper (and the grade of the paper) considerably.

- I am committed to making class fully accessible regardless of disabilities. Students who require extra time on exams will be accommodated. If I can do anything to help make the class more accessible to you, please do let me know, or (if you prefer) have UNC Accessibility Resources & Service contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class a safe space for everyone irrespective of gender, ethnicity, race, sexuality, religion, or other individual or group identity. As should go without saying, personal attacks or discriminatory treatment of others on any of these bases will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

### **Course Materials**

Contrary to the UNC bookstore's records, there is no required book for this class. All readings will be posted on Sakai.

### **Schedule of Readings**

#### **Part One: The Project of Criticizing Beliefs**

**Thurs 1/11** Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, ch. 1

**Tues, 1/16** Mark Rowlands, "A Right to Believe?"

Thurs, 1/18 [*Snow day – class cancelled*]

**Tues, 1/23** Michael Lynch, *True to Life*, ch. 3

#### **Part Two: Expertise, Testimony & Trust**

**Thurs, 1/25** Michael Huemer, "Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?"

**Tues, 1/30** Scott Aikin & Robert Talisse, *Why We Argue*, ch. 2

**Thurs, 2/1** Elizabeth Anderson, "Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony"

**Tues, 2/6** Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, sections 1.3, 7.1

**Thurs, 2/8** Luvell Anderson, "Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Race"

**Tues, 2/13** Judith Baker, "Trust and Rationality"

#### **Bridge: Bullshit & Fake News**

**Thurs, 2/15** Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"

**Tues, 2/20** Regina Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology"

#### **Part Three: Bias**

**Thurs, 2/22** Michael Lynch, *The Internet of Us*, ch. 3

- Tues, 2/27** Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning”  
*Please also watch the video available [here](#) from 3:45 to 20:25*
- Thurs, 3/1** Adam Elga, “On Overrating Oneself...and Knowing It”
- Tues, 3/6** Tamar Gendler, “On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias”
- Thurs, 3/8** Kristoffer Ahlstrom-Vij, “Why We Cannot Rely on Ourselves for Epistemic Improvement”
- Tues, 3/13 *[No class – Spring break]*
- Thurs, 3/15 *[No class – Spring break]*
- Tues, 3/20** G.A. Cohen, “Paradoxes of Conviction”
- Thurs, 3/22** Nathan Ballantyne, “Debunking Biased Thinkers (Including Ourselves)”

#### **Part Four: Disagreement**

- Tues, 3/27** Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”
- Thurs, 3/29** Scott Aikin *et al.*, “Epistemic Abstainers, Epistemic Martyrs, and Epistemic Converts”
- Tues, 4/3** R.J. Leland & Han Van Wietmarschen, “Reasonableness, Intellectual Modesty, and Reciprocity in Political Justification”
- Thurs, 4/5** J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2
- Tues, 4/10** Alvin Goldman & James Cox, “Speech, Truth, and the Free Market for Ideas”

#### **Part Five: The Epistemology of Law**

- Thurs, 4/12** Larry Laudan, “The Rules of Trial, Political Morality, and the Costs of Error: or: Is Proof Beyond a Reasonable Doubt Doing More Harm than Good?”
- Tues, 4/17** Georgi Gardiner, “In Defence of Reasonable Doubt”
- Thurs, 4/19** Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Liability and Individualized Evidence”
- Tues, 4/24** Frederick Schauer, *Profiles, Probabilities & Stereotypes*, ch. 3
- Thurs, 4/26** *[Discussion day/final roundup – no new reading]*