

**Phil 140H: Knowledge and Society**  
UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2021

**Instructor:** Prof. Alex Worsnip ([aworsnip@unc.edu](mailto:aworsnip@unc.edu))

**Instructional Mode:** Synchronous Remote

**Class Meetings:** Tues & Thurs, 9:30-10:45am, via Zoom

**Drop-In Office Hours:** Tues, 11:30am-12:30pm & Wed, 2:30-3:30pm, via Zoom

**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 in the media, how can we know which sources 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).

**Format.** The course will:

- *be highly discussion-oriented.* Given that this is an Honors class, I will assume you have done the readings carefully, and will not exhaustively summarize them or their arguments. This will allow us to devote more time to discussing the readings (and to thinking about how they apply to current, topical issues). This will be productive and fun – but it relies on your doing the reading! So please do it – we will all get more out of the course this way.
- *be skills-oriented.* As well as introducing you to the course content, the course also aims to cultivate some of the skills needed to read, write, and talk philosophy. There will be four devoted “skills days” aimed at building these skills through short lectures and in-class exercises, and a short at-home assignment corresponding to each skills day. These assignments build cumulatively toward a longer paper that you will write toward the end of the semester, and which draws together all the skills that you will have been practicing.
- *feature some exciting guest appearances* where the authors of some of the works we’re reading will (virtually) visit class to discuss them with you. We will have visits from [Thi Nguyen](#), [Regina Rini](#), [Michael Lynch](#), and [Georgi Gardiner](#).

### **Requirements/Assessment**

**Participation (20%).** You will receive two participation grades over the course of the semester, each worth 10% of your course grade. Your participation grade will reflect both your attendance record (including punctuality) and – since this is a discussion-oriented class – your contributions to class discussions. Your contributions to class discussions will be assessed in terms of whether you made a good-faith effort to make productive and helpful contributions. This includes contributing with at least moderate frequency, in a way is respectful, reflects having listened to others’ contributions, and reflects having done the reading and thought carefully about it. However, you will not be graded on the philosophical quality of your contributions: I want class to be a place to speak freely and try out ideas without fear of judgment. Please also bear in mind that asking questions, including clarificatory questions, can be a great way to contribute.

Perfect attendance without any contributions to the discussion will earn you a maximum participation grade of C. If you are finding participating in discussions difficult or intimidating, please contact me, and we will work on strategies and/or workarounds together.

**Pop quizzes (10%).** To be administered in class, unannounced, on an occasional basis over the semester, using PollEverywhere software (see below). Quizzes are designed to check that you completed the reading and to test basic comprehension of its main points.

Each quiz will consist of 4 multiple-choice questions. If you get 4 right, you get an A (100%). If you get 3 right, you get a B (85%). If you get 2 right, you get a C (75%). If you get 1 right, you get a D (65%). If you get 0 right, you get an F (50%). If you aren’t present, you get a 0 (unless you have the Office of the Dean of Students write to me to excuse you). At the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest pop quiz from your grade.

**Short Homework Assignments (SHAs) (30%).** There will be five short homework assignments:

- Homework Assignment #1: Summarizing a Philosophy Article.  
*Due: Thurs, 1/28, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: 300-500 words (≈ 1½ double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.*
- Homework Assignment #2: Argument Reconstruction.  
*Due: Thurs, 2/11, 9:15am. Grading Method: Points, converted to a letter grade (A-F). 5% of total grade.*
- Homework Assignment #3: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Article #1.  
*Due: Tues, 3/2, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). 500-750 words (≈ 2 double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.*
- Homework Assignment #4: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Article #2.  
*Due: Tues, 3/23, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). 500-750 words (≈ 2 double-spaced pages). 10% of total grade.*
- Homework Assignment #5: Spotting Good and Bad Features of a Philosophy Paper.  
*Due: Tues, 4/13, 9:15am. Grading Method: Pass/fail. 5% of total grade.*

**Final Paper (25%).** A longer paper – around 1500 words (≈ 5 double-spaced pages) – defending a philosophical view in response to one of several distributed prompts. The paper will be assigned a letter grade (A-F), based on a grading rubric that will be made available on Sakai.

*Due: Sunday, 5/2, at 11:59pm.*

**Final (Group) Project (15%).** In place of a final exam, you will present final projects, in groups, at the scheduled exam time (Tuesday May 11, 8-11am). Your final project will discuss one of the topics we’ve debated in class as it relates to a recent news event of your choosing. You will be graded as a group. Further guidelines will be provided closer to the time.

## Policies

**Attendance.** I will take attendance at each class meeting. The pandemic has made life difficult for all of us in myriad ways, and you can have up to two absences over the course of the semester, no questions asked. Beyond that, absences will be reflected in your participation grade, unless you obtain an official excuse from the Office of the Dean of Students.

**Office Hours and Meetings.** My scheduled (Zoom) office hours are “drop in”, which means you can attend without giving any prior notice, and anyone is welcome to enter and leave as they like. You are warmly encouraged to attend whenever you like, and/or to coordinate with classmates to attend together. This is a terrific opportunity to discuss the material of the class further and understand it better, typically in a setting resembling a “[tutorial](#)” with a very low teacher-to-student ratio.

If you want to meet in a private one-on-one setting (also via Zoom), where the time is reserved for you and others can’t enter the conversation, I am also happy to do this (outside of my scheduled office hours); please email me to set up an appointment. This would be the appropriate setting to meet in if you want to discuss (e.g.) your individual progress in the class, among other things.

I strongly recommend that you take the opportunity to meet with me (either in drop-in office hours or in a one-on-one appointment) ahead of assignments, especially the final paper, to try out your ideas and get feedback. This is free advice that almost always improves your paper (and grade).

**Submitting Assignments.** All written assignments should be submitted via the Assignments function on Sakai. I grade all written assignments in anonymized form. To facilitate this, please don't include your name in the text or the file name; include your PID instead.

**Extensions.** I typically won't grant extensions for short homework assignments, since the nature of these assignments involves completing the work *without the benefit of the lecture/class discussion*. If you have an emergency that means you cannot complete a short homework assignment by the deadline, please seek an official excuse from the Office of the Dean of Students, and do not complete the assignment; instead, I will give you a replacement assignment with a different due date.

I can be more somewhat flexible about the deadline for the final paper, within reason. But you must email me *before* the deadline; I won't grant extensions after the deadline (except with an official excuse from the Office of the Dean of Students).

**Penalties for Late Submissions.** Unauthorized/unexcused late submissions will lose 1/3 of a letter grade (e.g. from C to C-) immediately, and a further 1/3 of a letter grade every 24 hours thereafter. Additionally, (unauthorized/unexcused) late submissions for short homework assignments will receive a maximum grade of C.

**Grade Boundaries** 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 = <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.*

**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 gotten 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.

**Zoom Expectations.** We are all still figuring out how to teach and learn on Zoom. Following these guidelines will help make things go smoothly for everyone.<sup>1</sup>

1. Make sure that you display your preferred name. I also encourage (but don't require) you to display your preferred pronouns.
2. Be on time and be ready to participate.
3. Be engaged; ask questions via chat (private or public), raise your hand, use the clap button when you like a point, participate in polls, etc.
4. If your circumstances allow, keep video on.

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<sup>1</sup> With thanks to my colleague Jennifer Morton, from whom this list of expectations is adapted.

5. If you are not talking, mute your audio.
6. Avoid disruptions during Zoom sessions if possible. But if your roommate, pet, sibling, etc. walks into your room while you are Zooming, do not sweat it. Deal with the disruption and turn your focus back to the class as soon as possible.
7. Keep in mind that I will be recording the sessions so you and other classmates can access them later.

**Slack Channel.** I have set up a Slack channel for our course. This is a place to chat informally about course-related topics online – including (but not limited to) continuing discussions and debates from class, asking unresolved questions, posting relevant news items and op-eds, and posting (relevant) memes or GIFs. Participation in the Slack channel is not required, but it is strongly and warmly encouraged. Substantive, philosophical engagement with the course material on the Slack channel will count as participation in class discussions and thus may boost your participation grade if it is otherwise imperfect.

**PollEverywhere.** We will periodically use PollEverywhere software in class, for pop quizzes and other purposes. To prepare for this:

- Sign up for a PollEverywhere account at [poll.unc.edu](http://poll.unc.edu) if you don't already have one.
- Join the PollEverywhere group for our class.
- Make sure that you have a device (either the computer you're Zooming from, or a phone) logged in to PollEverywhere ahead of our class meetings. This is important for pop quizzes, for which your answers must be identifiable in order for you to receive credit. Other polls will typically be anonymized.
- Let me know if you have any questions or concerns. We will do a test of the software before the first quiz to sort out any issues.

### **Accessibility & Equity.**

- I am committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If I can do anything to help make class more accessible to you, please let me know, or have UNC Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS) 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.
- I am a Safe Zone Ally, trained and certified by the university LGBTQ center. I am available to meet during office hours or by appointment to offer support.
- I encourage you to make use of the following campus resources as appropriate:
  - For accommodations for students with disabilities or other accessibility needs: Accessibility Resources & Service (ARS), [ars.unc.edu](http://ars.unc.edu)
  - For those experiencing mental health challenges: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), [caps.unc.edu](http://caps.unc.edu)
  - For LGBTQ students in need of support or community: [lgbtq.unc.edu](http://lgbtq.unc.edu)

- For those experiencing discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking: visit [safe.unc.edu](http://safe.unc.edu), or contact the Director of Title IX Compliance ([adrienne.allison@unc.edu](mailto:adrienne.allison@unc.edu)), the Report & Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance (EOC) Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), or the Gender Violence Service Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential).

### **Schedule of Readings**

All readings will be posted in the Resources folder on Sakai, except for the web items linked below.

#### **Part One: Introduction**

**Tues 1/19     Introducing Epistemology**

Read: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, ch. 1

**Thurs 1/21     The Project of Criticizing Beliefs**

Read: Mark Rowlands, “A Right to Believe?” [[link](#)]

**Tues 1/26     Skills Day 1: Reading and Summarizing a Philosophy Paper**

Read: James Pryor, “Guidelines on Reading Philosophy” [[link](#)]

#### **Part Two: Deference and Expertise**

**Thurs 1/28     Deference and Expertise I**

*SHA #1 due* Read: Michael Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?”

**Tues 2/2     Deference and Expertise II**

Read: Allan Hazlett, “The Social Value of Non-Deferential Belief”

**Thurs 2/4     Deference and Expertise III**

Read: C. Thi Nguyen, “Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts” (Prof. Nguyen will visit class to discuss his paper!)

**Tues 2/9     Skills Day 2: Argument Reconstruction**

[No reading]

**Thurs 2/11     Case Study: The Epistemology of Climate Change**

*SHA#2 due* Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Skeptic and the Climate Change Skeptic”

[Tues 2/16     *No class – Wellness Day*]

#### **Part Three: Bullshit, Fake News, and the Media**

**Thurs 2/18     Bullshit**

Read: Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit”

Optional reading: Matthew Yglesias, “The Bullshitter-In-Chief” [[link](#)]

**Tues 2/23     Fake News I**

Read: Nikil Mukerji, “What Is Fake News?”

- Thurs 2/25 Skills Day 3: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Paper**  
[No reading]
- Tues 3/2 Fake News II**  
*SLA#3 due* Read: Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology” (Prof. Rini will visit class to discuss her paper!)
- Thurs 3/4 Media Consumption Habits**  
Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources”
- Tues 3/9 Balance and Bias in the Media**  
Read: Carrie Figdor, “Trust Me: News, Credibility Deficits, and Balance”
- [Thurs 3/11 *No class – Wellness Day*]
- Part Four: Bias, Disagreement and Polarization
- Tues 3/16 The Psychology of Bias: Motivated Reasoning and Cultural Cognition**  
Read: Extract from Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning”; extract from Dan Kahan & Donald Braman, “Cultural Cognition & Public Policy”
- Thurs 3/18 Irrelevant Influences on Belief**  
Read: G.A. Cohen, “Paradoxes of Conviction”
- Tues 3/23 Disagreement**  
*SLA#4 due* Read: Richard Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”
- Thurs 3/25 Polarization**  
Read: Michael Lynch, “Polarization and the Problem of Spreading Arrogance” (Prof. Lynch will visit class to discuss his paper!)
- Part Five: Speech & Truth
- Tues 3/30 Speech, Disagreement & Debate**  
Read: Extracts from J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2
- Thurs 4/1 Speech & The Market For Ideas**  
Read: Extracts from Alvin Goldman & James Cox, “Speech, Truth and the Free Market for Ideas”
- Tues 4/6 Speech & Education I**  
Read: Kate Manne & Jason Stanley, “When Free Speech Becomes a Political Weapon” [\[link\]](#)
- Thurs 4/8 Speech & Education II**  
Read: Steve Kolowich, “State of Conflict” [\[link\]](#)
- Tues 4/13 Skills Day 4: Writing a Philosophy Paper**  
*SLA#5 due* Read: James Pryor, “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” [\[link\]](#)

Part Six: The Epistemology of the Law

**Thurs 4/15 Statistical Evidence I: Outside of the Law**

Read: Extract from Tamar Gendler, “On The Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias”

**Tues 4/20 Statistical Evidence II: In the Law**

Read: Extract from Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Liability & Individualized Evidence”

**Thurs 4/22 Statistical Evidence in the Law: Mock Trial Activity**

[No reading]

**Tues 4/27 The Burden of Proof I**

Read: Larry Laudan, “Is It Finally Time to Put “Proof Beyond a Reasonable Doubt” Out to Pasture?”

**Thurs 4/29 The Burden of Proof II**

Read: Georgi Gardiner, “The Reasonable and the Relevant: Legal Standards of Proof” (Prof. Gardiner will visit class to discuss her paper!)

[Sun 5/2 *Final Paper due at 11:59pm*]

**Tues 5/4 Final Roundup/Discussion**

[No reading]

**Tues 5/11 Presentations of (Group) Final Projects**

8-11am [in place of Final Exam]