

PHIL 335: Theory of Knowledge
UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2022

Instructor: Prof. Alex Worsnip (aworsnip@unc.edu)

Class meetings: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 12:30-1:45, Peabody 2066

Virtual office hour: Wednesdays, 11-12

In-person office hour: Thursdays, 3:30-4:30

- weather permitting: outside, at a table by the Blue Ram Café (at the back of the Campus Y)
- otherwise: in my office (Caldwell Hall, 202B). I'll email if I'm moving my office hour indoors.

Meetings outside of office hours are also always available by appointment.

Official course catalog description. PHIL 335. Theory of Knowledge. 3 Credits. What is knowledge and how does it relate to belief, justification, and truth? What makes beliefs reasonable or irrational? Can skepticism be defeated? Requisites: Prerequisite, one previous PHIL course. Gen Ed: PH. Grading status: Letter grade.

Semester-specific course description. This class is a survey of epistemology, the subfield of philosophy that deals with the nature of knowledge, evidence, and justified or rational belief. The course is divided into four parts. Part 1 will be a whistlestop tour of the classic problems of traditional epistemology, such as the analysis of knowledge (what does it take for a belief to count as knowledge?), the problem of skepticism (can we know anything at all?), and the debate between “rationalists” and “empiricists” about whether we can know anything by reason alone, or whether all knowledge comes from experience. Parts 2-4 of the course will focus on some lively current debates in epistemology. Part 2 focuses on some possible sources of doubt about the accuracy and/or rationality of our beliefs: namely, the existence of widespread disagreement, the phenomenon of our beliefs being causally influenced by irrelevant factors and biases, and the prevalence of what psychologists call “motivated reasoning”. We'll ask to what extent these phenomena should make us less confident in our beliefs. Part 3 focuses on whether pragmatic and moral considerations play a role in determining what it is rational to believe, and if so in what way. Part 4 focuses on various connections between epistemology and issues of social justice, taking in the literature on “epistemic injustice” and “standpoint epistemology,” among other things, to examine how (if at all) the social positions we occupy affect what we should believe.

Course materials. You'll need to get hold of a copy of Jennifer Nagel's book *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, which we'll use extensively in Part 1 of the course. It's very cheap and is available through Student Stores. Other readings will be posted on Sakai, unless linked in the schedule of readings below.

Requirements/assessment

Participation (15% of grade). 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. To help make participation easier, we'll use the "traffic light system" described [here](#). Additionally, if you are finding participating in discussions difficult or intimidating, please get in touch with me, and we will work on strategies and/or workarounds together.

Pop Quizzes (*10% of total grade*). Occasional, unannounced pop quizzes will be administered at the start of some class meetings. Quizzes are designed to check that you completed the reading and to test basic comprehension of its main points. We'll use PollEverywhere software for the quizzes.

- 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 an approved excuse for your absence).
- At the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest pop quiz from your grade.

Reading Responses (*25% of total grade*). You will take turns writing short reading responses (600-750 words \approx 2-2½ double-spaced pages each) on that day's reading. Every student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. Reading responses should be written as if your reader is an intelligent non-expert who has not read the article that you are responding to, and do the following:

- Pick one *specific* argument or claim or point from the reading that interests you and that you would like to discuss, and stay focused on that point.
- Explain exactly as much of the article/author's argument as is necessary to set up your criticism – no more, no less.
- Raise a criticism, problem or worry for the author's argument or view, and explain it in detail, offering reasons in support of it.
- Consider how the author might reply to your criticism.
- Evaluate whether the reply succeeds, or whether the criticism stands.
 - (So, ultimately, you can end up agreeing with the author or disagreeing with him/her. But either way, you should consider a *possible* criticism of his/her view on the way.)

Soon after the start of the semester, I will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due at 8pm on the day before class. The first reading response will be worth 5% of your grade; the remaining two responses will be worth 10% of your grade each.

Longer Papers (*50% of total grade*).

- Midterm Paper: 1500-2000 words (\approx 5-6 double-spaced pages). Due Fri, 3/4, 11:59pm. *20% of grade*.

- Final Paper: 2000-2500 words (\approx 6-8 double-spaced pages). Due Tues, 5/3, 12pm (i.e. noon). *30% of grade.*

Prompts will be provided for both papers. I'll also distribute a grading rubric for the papers.

- Note: in this class, the final paper fulfills the role of the final exam. As per UNC regulations, it is due at the time that the final exam would have taken place. However, also as per UNC regulations, we will still meet for class during the scheduled time for the final exam, and attendance at this final meeting is (like all other class meetings) compulsory. We will use the final session as a round-up to reflect on the themes of the class.

Policies

COVID-19 policies.

- The default mode of instruction for this class is in-person. However, the ongoing pandemic may require changes to this plan. I will be monitoring the situation closely. If I need to change the format of the course temporarily due to outbreaks of illness, I will announce this via email.
- As per UNC's policy this semester, you are required to wear a mask in class at all times. This also applies to in-person office hours when they are held indoors.
- I also encourage you in the strongest possible terms to get vaccinated and boosted if you haven't already done so.

Attendance. I take attendance at each class meeting, and as a general policy (in-person) attendance is required, so long as the class is meeting in person and you do not have a University Approved Absence (consistent with the university's [Class Attendance Policy](#)). However, as per the university's instructions, you should **not** attend class if you are showing any symptoms of COVID-19 (find the full instructions [here](#)).¹ Instead, contact me via email and we will work out a plan. If you are showing symptoms but are well enough to join class remotely via Zoom, that can be arranged. The top priority is your safety and that of your fellow classmates, and I will show flexibility to ensure that we can prioritize this without your grade being affected. I only ask that you stay in touch so that I'm aware of your situation and can make accommodations.

Beyond physical illness, the pandemic is continuing to make life difficult for all of us in myriad other ways. Consequently, you can have up to two further (non-illness-related) absences over the course of the semester, no questions asked, without any impact on your participation grade. If you need more absences than this, please talk to me and we can make a plan together.

Office Hours and Meetings. Since student preferences differ during the pandemic, one of my scheduled office hours is virtual (via Zoom), and the other is in-person (outside when weather permits; in my office [mask required] when it doesn't). See the top of this syllabus for times and locations.

Both the virtual and in-person office hours are "drop in", which means you can attend without giving any prior notice, and anyone is welcome to arrive and depart as they like. You are warmly

¹ This is in addition to those who have been ordered to isolate/quarantine due to a positive test or a recent exposure. Obviously, you should not attend class under those circumstances either! Under these circumstances, you will be eligible for an official excuse from the [University Approved Absence Office](#).

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, 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 writing papers, 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.

- For reading responses: I generally won’t grant significant extensions, since the nature of the assignment involves completing the work *without the benefit of attending class first*. If you are unable to complete the reading response assigned to you on time, contact me and I will reassign you to respond to a **different** day’s reading.
- For papers: if you have a good reason, make a reasonable extension request **in advance** of the deadline, and the extension doesn’t pose any major logistical challenges, I will usually grant your request.
- If any assignment is late without my having agreed to an extension, it will lose 1/3 of a letter immediately, and a further 1/3 of a letter grade every 24 hours thereafter.

Grades.

- 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.*
- If you want to understand a grade you have received, and the reasons for it, you are welcome to meet with me. If I make any arithmetical errors in calculating your grade, please let me know and I will adjust it as appropriate. I hope we can resolve any grade-related issues to your satisfaction informally, but if not, you are entitled to contact the Philosophy Department’s Director of Undergraduate Studies (mkohl17@email.unc.edu) or to appeal the grade through a formal university process that is described [here](#).

Honor Code. UNC’s honor code, which is available at 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.

Accessibility, Equity & Resources.

- 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 an inclusive and safe space for everyone irrespective of gender identity, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or other individual or group identity. Please let me know if I can do anything to improve; I appreciate suggestions.
- The university's Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination is [here](#).
- 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
 - For approval for extended absences requiring a University Approved Absence: University Approved Absence Office, uaao.unc.edu
 - For assistance with academic work: UNC Learning Center, learningcenter.unc.edu; UNC Writing Center, writingcenter.unc.edu
 - For those experiencing mental health challenges: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS), caps.unc.edu
 - For LGBTQ students in need of support or community: LGBTQ Center, lgbtq.unc.edu
 - For those experiencing discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking: visit safe.unc.edu, or contact the Title IX Coordinator (titleixcoordinator@unc.edu), the Report & Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance (EOC) Office (reportandresponse@unc.edu), or the Gender Violence Service Coordinators (gvsc@unc.edu; confidential).

Polling & Use of Electronic Devices.

- 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 if you don't already have one. You can also find answers to FAQ about the software there.

- Bring a device (laptop, tablet or phone) to every class so that you can participate in any quizzes and polls. You can participate through a browser, through the mobile app, or by text message.
- To receive credit for pop quizzes, you must be identifiable when you answer, which means that you must be either logged in to your PollEverywhere account, or participate by text from a number linked to your account. 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.
- When we are not using PollEverywhere, use of electronic devices in class is prohibited (unless they are required for class participation due to a special accommodation).
- Find the university's Information Technology Acceptable Use Policy [here](#).

Schedule of readings (tentative – subject to change)

Part 1: A Whistlestop Tour of “Traditional” Epistemology

1/11	Introduction	Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , ch. 1
1/13	Skepticism	Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , ch. 2
1/18	Rationalism vs. Empiricism	Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , ch. 3
1/20	The Analysis of Knowledge	Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , ch. 4
1/25	Internalism vs. Externalism	Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , ch. 5
1/27	Discussion/Catchup	[No new reading]

Part 2: Current Debates: Sources of Doubt

2/1	Disagreement I	Thomas Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”
2/3	Disagreement II	David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News”
2/8	Irrelevant Influences I	Katia Vavova, “Irrelevant Influences”
2/10	Irrelevant Influences II	Miriam Schoenfield, “Permission to Believe”
2/15	Motivated Reasoning	J. Adam Carter & Robin McKenna, “Skepticism Motivated”
2/17	Discussion/catchup	[No new reading]

Part 3: Current Debates: The Effect of Practical and Moral Factors on Rational Belief

2/22	Evidentialism I	Thomas Kelly, “The Rationality of Belief”
2/24	Pragmatism	Susanna Rinard, “No Exception for Belief”
3/1	Evidentialism II	Keshav Singh, “Evidentialism Doesn’t Make an Exception for Belief”
3/3	Discussion/Catchup	[No new reading]
3/8	Pragmatic Encroachment	Jeremy Fantl & Matthew McGrath, “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification” (abridged)

3/10	Discussion/Catchup	[No new reading]
	<i>[3/15 Spring Break</i>	<i>No class]</i>
	<i>[3/17 Spring Break</i>	<i>No class]</i>
3/22	Moral Encroachment	Rima Basu, “Radical Moral Encroachment”
3/24	Anti-Encroachment	Keshav Singh, “There is No Pragmatic Encroachment”

Part 4: Current Debates: Epistemology and Social Justice

3/29	Epistemic Injustice I	Miranda Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> , section 1.3
3/31	Epistemic Injustice II	José Medina, <i>The Epistemology of Resistance</i> , section 2.1
4/5	Standpoint Epistemology I	Briana Toole, “Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology”
4/7	Standpoint Epistemology II	Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò, “Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference” (link)
4/12	Standpoint Epistemology III	Podcast: Yascha Mounk interview with Rachel Fraser (link)
	<i>[4/14 Wellness Day</i>	<i>No class]</i>
4/19	Externalism Revisited	Amia Srinivasan, “Radical Externalism”
4/21	Internalism Revisited	Zoë Johnson King, “Radical Internalism”
4/26	Discussion/Catchup	[No new reading]
5/3	Final Roundup	[No new reading]
	(12pm)	