

PHIL 140.001: Knowledge and Society

UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2022

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

Class meetings: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 9:30-10:45am, Peabody 2066

Virtual office hour: Wednesdays, 2-3pm (at [this](#) Zoom link)

In-person office hour: Thursdays, 11am-noon

- 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.

Course website: <https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/site/phil140f22>

Credit hours: 3

IDEAs in Action Gen ED: FC-KNOWING or FC-POWER.

Making Connections Gen Ed: PH.

Grading Status: Letter grade.

Official course catalog description. An examination of questions about knowledge, evidence, and rational belief as they arise in areas of social life such as democratic politics, the law, science, religion, and education.

Semester-specific 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, and religion. It investigates particular “knowledge problems” that we, as 21st century citizens, face. For example: should we always defer to experts about complex policy questions, or are we justified in forming beliefs for ourselves? Can it ever be rational to believe a conspiracy theory? Should we try to break out of our “echo chambers”? 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 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.

Prerequisites and Target Audience. There are no prerequisites. The course is designed to be accessible to students who have never taken a philosophy class before, and is taught as such. However, those with prior philosophy classes are also welcome.

Course Materials. There are no required texts for purchase. All readings are either linked on the syllabus below or will be posted on Sakai.

Course Format. The class format will combine short introductory lectures with whole class discussions and smaller group discussions. Three class meetings are designated “skills days” where we work on philosophical skills using collaborative small-group exercises. Near the end of the semester, during the epistemology of law unit, we will devote one class meeting to a “mock trial” exercise (see below) where students work collaboratively in teams. In addition to written assignments, there will also be a final group project.

Course Goals, Learning Objectives, and Focus Capacities

All our philosophy courses aim at the acquisition and nurturing of basic philosophic skills. One of the main goals of our philosophy curriculum is to instill and enable the development of skills that are distinct to philosophy, but which are foundational to all forms of knowledge. These **basic philosophical skills** involve being able to:

- Think critically;
- Deploy philosophical concepts and terminology correctly, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Represent clearly and accurately the views or argument of particular philosophers, in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Identify the premises and conclusion(s) of a philosophical argument and assess both its validity and soundness;
- Apply a philosophical theory or argument to a new topic, and being able to draw and defend reasonable conclusions about that topic;
- Develop an argument for a particular solution to a philosophical problem in either a historical or contemporary setting;
- Write clearly, precisely, and persuasively in defense of a philosophical thesis;
- Participate in respectful, critical, and reflexive dialogues about difficult philosophical positions;
- Read, interpret, and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of different philosophical texts and the philosophical positions presented them.

In addition, PHIL140 satisfies our **metaphysics and epistemology** requirement for the major and thereby aims at developing the following learning outcomes:

- being familiar with some of the most important philosophical answers to fundamental questions about what is real and what we can know;
- Recognize and use distinctly philosophical approach(es) to developing and validating knowledge of the unfamiliar world;
- Being able to evaluate ways that temporal, spatial, scientific, and especially philosophical categories structure knowledge;
- Interrogate assumptions that underlie our own perceptions of the world by recognizing that these presuppose ‘ontological’ and ‘metaphysical’ claims that are not always warranted or sustainable and by recognizing that our knowledge is limited;

- Employ strategies to mitigate or adjust for preconceptions and biases and to address the challenges posed by skepticism and relativism.
- Apply philosophical insights to understand patterns of experience and belief.

Finally, **PHIL 140 specifically** will enable students to:

1. 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.
2. Competently deploy key philosophical concepts that relate to knowledge, evidence and rationality, and master a vocabulary and conceptual framework to express their ideas about these topics in a more sophisticated manner.
3. Recognize the relationship between inequality and social, economic, and political power in our society.
4. Critically reflect on the influence and power and ideology on systems of belief and the bias they produce;
5. Interrogate the epistemological processes by which forms of inequality are sustained and how these processes have been and are resisted and transformed;
6. Understand the ways in which social characteristics like gender, race and class can shape both what a person believes and what is believed about them, as well as how they are treated as a source of testimony;
7. Be prepared for further philosophical study, as well as to be equipped with philosophical underpinnings for classes in related disciplines (especially the social sciences).

This course is part of the **IDEAs in Action General Education curriculum** and satisfies the following two “focus capacities”:

Ways of Knowing

Students develop intellectual humility, learning to question assumptions, categories, and norms that structure their worldviews and to understand the sources and effects of biases. They learn, use, and distinguish strengths and weaknesses of one or more approach(es) to knowledge of the unfamiliar, such as: aesthetically, philosophically, linguistically, historically, or culturally remote forms of knowledge and worldmaking, or formal logic, scientific practice, and similar formalized approaches to countering bias and creating knowledge.

Questions for Students

1. What norms and expectations do I take for granted?
2. What categories and concepts frame my assumptions, experiences, and beliefs?
3. What practices of investigation or inquiry best challenge those assumptions and expectations?
4. How can I consider whether my beliefs might be wrong?

Learning Outcomes

1. Recognize and use one or more approach(es) to developing and validating knowledge of the unfamiliar world.

2. Evaluate ways that temporal, spatial, scientific, and philosophical categories structure knowledge.
3. Interrogate assumptions that underlie our own perceptions of the world.
4. Employ strategies to mitigate or adjust for preconceptions and biases.
5. Apply critical insights to understand patterns of experience and belief.

Power, Difference, and Inequality

Students engage with the histories, perspectives, politics, intellectual traditions, and/or expressive cultures of populations and communities that have historically been disempowered, and the structural and historical processes by which that disempowerment has endured and changed.

Questions for Students

1. What are the relevant structures, institutions, ways of thinking, and practices that create, maintain, and change social, economic, and political inequalities?
2. What practices have been implemented and institutionalized to address social, economic, and political inequalities?

Learning Outcomes

1. Recognize the relationship between inequality and social, economic, and political power.
2. Analyze configurations of power and the forms of inequality and bias they produce.
3. Evaluate dynamics of social, economic, and political inequality in relation to specific historical contexts.
4. Interrogate the systemic processes by which forms of inequality are sustained and how these processes have been and are resisted and transformed.

Course Assignments and Assessments

Participation (20% of total 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.

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.

Short Homework Assignments (SHAs) (35% of total grade).

- SHA #1: Summarizing a Philosophy Article.
Due: Thurs, 8/25, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 500 words ($\approx 1\frac{1}{2}$ -2 double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.
- SHAs #2, #3 and #4: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Article.
 - SHA#2: *Due Tues, 9/13, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2 -2 $\frac{1}{2}$ double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.*
 - SHA #3: *Due: Tues, 10/4, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2 -2 $\frac{1}{2}$ double-spaced pages). 10% of total grade.*
 - SHA #4: *Due: Tues, 10/25, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2 -2 $\frac{1}{2}$ double-spaced pages). 10% of total grade.*
- SHA #5: Spotting Good and Bad Features of a Philosophy Paper.
Due: Thurs, 11/10, 9:15am. Grading Method: Pass/fail. 5% of total grade.

Final Paper (25% of total grade). 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, 12/3, at 11:59pm.

Final (Group) Project (10% of total grade). In place of a final exam, you will present final projects, in groups, at the scheduled exam time (Tuesday, 12/6, 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.

Course Policies and Resources

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, or if you have been ordered to isolate/quarantine (find the full instructions [here](#)). 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.

Office Hours and Meetings. One of my scheduled office hours is virtual (via Zoom); the other is in-person. 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 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.

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. Sakai will hide your identity from me when I grade your paper.

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, 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).
- 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](#).

Course Schedule [tentative]

The below is a draft, and I reserve the right to make changes to it, including assignment due dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

Part One: Introduction

Tues 8/16 Introducing Epistemology

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

Thurs 8/18 The Project of Criticizing Beliefs

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

Tues 8/23 Skills Day 1: Reading and Summarizing a Philosophy Paper

Read: James Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" [\[link\]](#)

Part Two: Deference, Expertise & Conspiracy Theories

Thurs 8/25 Deference and Expertise I

SHA #1 due Read: Michael Huemer, "Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?"

Tues 8/30 Deference and Expertise II

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

Thurs 9/1 Catchup/Discussion

[No new reading]

[Tues 9/6 Well-Being Day – no class]

Thurs 9/8 Skills Day 2: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Paper

[No new reading]

Tues 9/13 Conspiracy Theories I

SHA #2 due Read: Charles Pigden, "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom"

Thurs 9/15 Conspiracy Theories II
Read: M. Giulia Napolitano, “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation”

Tues 9/20 Case Study: Climate Change Skepticism
Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Skeptic and the Climate Change Skeptic”

Thurs 9/22 Catchup/Discussion
[No new reading]

Part Three: Echo Chambers and Media Consumption

Tues 9/27 Echo Chambers I
Read: C. Thi Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber” [\[link\]](#)

Thurs 9/29 Media Consumption Habits
Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources”

Tues 10/4 Echo Chambers II
SHA #3 due Read: Jennifer Lackey, “Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology”

Thurs 10/6 Catchup/Discussion
[No new reading]

Part Four: Bias, Disagreement and Partisanship

Tues 10/11 Motivated Reasoning and Cultural Cognition: The Psychology
Read: Extract from Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning”; extract from Dan Kahn & Donald Braman, “Cultural Cognition & Public Policy”

Thurs 10/13 Motivated Reasoning and Cultural Cognition: Philosophical Upshots
Read: Robin McKenna, “Irrelevant Cultural Influences on Belief”

Tues 10/18 Disagreement
Read: David Christensen, “Disagreement and Public Controversy”

[Thurs 10/20 Fall break – no class]

Tues 10/25 Partisanship
SHA#4 due Read: Hrishikesh Joshi, “What are the Chances You’re Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship”

Part Five: Speech & Truth

Thurs 10/27 Speech, Disagreement & Debate
Read: Extracts from J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2

Tues 11/1 Speech & The Market For Ideas
Read: Extracts from Alvin Goldman & James Cox, “Speech, Truth and the Free Market for Ideas”

Thurs 11/3 Speech on Campus I
Read: Robert Simpson & Amia Srinivasan, “No Platforming”

Tues 11/8 Speech on Campus II

Read: Steve Kolowich, “State of Conflict” [\[link\]](#)

Thurs 11/10 Skills Day 3: Writing a Philosophy Paper

SLA#5 due Read: James Pryor, “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” [\[link\]](#)

Part Six: The Epistemology of the Law

Tues 11/15 Statistical Evidence I: Outside of the Law

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

Thurs 11/17 Statistical Evidence II: In the Law

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

Tues 11/22 Statistical Evidence in the Law: Mock Trial Activity

[No reading]

[Thurs 11/24 Thanksgiving break – no class]

Tues 11/29 The Standard of Proof

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

Tues 12/6 Presentations of (Group) Final Projects

8-11am [in place of Final Exam]