

PHIL 0450: THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE AND REALITY

Spring 2017

Instructor

Robert Howton
(robert.howton@pitt.edu)

Office Hours

MoWe 9–11 A.M. and by appt.
1028-A CL

Course Website

CourseWeb
(courseweb.pitt.edu)

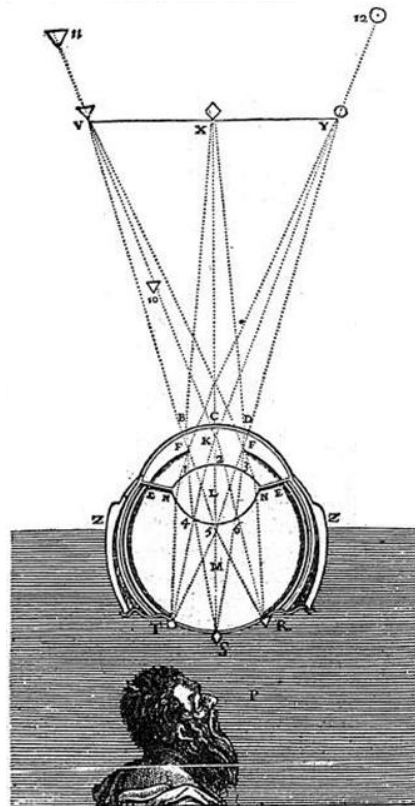
Lectures

TuTh 2–2:50 P.M.,
324 CL

Section Leaders

Alison Springle
(alisonspringle@gmail.com)

Douglas Vaaler
(dqv1@pitt.edu)



COURSE DESCRIPTION

We tend to think of ourselves as creatures connected to a world outside of us, a world populated at once by the myriad objects that appear to us via the senses—tables, chairs, plants, animals, mountains, planets, stars, and other macroscopic objects—and by the still more numerous minute entities studied by the natural sciences: cells, molecules, atoms, electrons, and most fundamentally quarks, leptons, and bosons. Are we correct in this assumption? Does perception give us direct access to an external reality, as our senses might lead us to believe? Or is this mistaken? Is our access somehow mediated by internal *representations* of an external reality, or is that reality not external to us after all? How, moreover, does the nature of our access to reality affect our ability to acquire *knowledge* of it, scientifically or otherwise? Under what conditions, if any, are we in a position to know a world outside of us?

These questions lie at the interface between two fundamental philosophical disciplines: **metaphysics** and **epistemology**. Metaphysics is the study of reality in its most general features; it seeks answers to questions like: what sorts of thing exist; what is the nature of their existence; and how do existing things relate to and interact with one another? Epistemology is the study of knowledge; it seeks answers to questions like: what is it to know that something is the case; and what conditions must obtain if we are to acquire knowledge of some aspect of reality? This course gives a general introduction to metaphysics and epistemology, focusing in particular views of external reality and the possibility of our knowledge of it.

We'll begin by looking at what our senses tell us about the external world. This examination will introduce us to the two philosophical characters who will serve as the *dramatis personae* of the course: the **dogmatist**, who insists that knowledge of some aspect of reality is possible; and the **skeptic**, who denies it. The rest of the course will take us through different theaters of the conflict between the dogmatist and the skeptic, including controversies about the possibility of empirical knowledge, inductive inference, the state of knowledge itself, and various aspects of "social" epistemology, including testimony, the role of experts, and epistemic disagreement.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

The course aims to establish a broad understanding of core issues in epistemology and metaphysics and to develop the skills necessary for appreciating these and other topics in contemporary philosophy. The successful student will demonstrate the ability:

- to state and articulate, verbally and in writing, major ideas and positions in epistemology and metaphysics,
- to read and critically assess the basic philosophical literature in these disciplines,
- to identify the elements of an argument and assess it for soundness and validity, and
- to apply these skills to novel cases.

The key to success in this course is to keep up with the assigned readings and to attend and participate regularly in class activities. *If you keep up with the course you will not be assigned anything for which you are unprepared.*

COURSE COMPONENTS

The course has *two* components: twice-weekly lectures led by me and weekly (or twice-weekly for writing section students) recitation sections led by your section leader. Both components are *mandatory*, and will moreover be crucial for your success in this course. The point of the lecture is to introduce you to the theories, concepts, and problems that make up the content of the course. The recitations are there for you to discuss and interrogate those ideas, as they arise both in lecture and in the required readings for the course, through conversation with your fellow students and the section leader.

Attending recitation sections is important for any large lecture course of this kind, but it is especially important for philosophy. That's because philosophy is a discursive enterprise: progress in understanding and evaluating philosophical ideas is most effectively made through interpersonal discussion, where you can test, correct, and improve your understanding of those ideas. Large lectures do not allow for this sort of discussion. This is what the recitation sections are designed to facilitate, so you will be doing yourself a major disservice if you elect not to attend.

N.B. My lectures will be accompanied by a slide show presentation, which I will typically post to CourseWeb before (probably right before) the first lecture of the unit. If you want to take notes on the slides during lecture, you are encouraged to bring a laptop (but also to resist the urge to distract yourself with frivolous internet ephemera), or else to consult the slides after class.

EVALUATION

Recitation Section Students will be expected to write **two term tests** and **two term papers**. *Writing Section Students* will additionally be expected to **outline** and **revise** their term papers in light of comments from me and from their peers. Additionally, Section Leaders will administer a series of **reading quizzes** covering the reading assigned for that meeting. (There will be at least 10 quizzes given, though Section Leaders reserve the right to give more, in which case the top 10 quizzes will count toward the student's final grade.) With the exception of University excused absences, which must be supported by official documentation, students are expected to attend all other recitations and lectures. Finally, to promote in-class participation, students will alternate as **lead discussants** for one of the readings assigned for that week. The role of the lead discussant is to *present* and *act as primary advocate* for the position articulated in the assigned reading, presenting the position in class and answering questions about it from the other lead discussant(s), her peers, and the section leader. Students scheduled to serve as lead discussant are highly encouraged to meet with their section leader to discuss the reading and potential challenges to it prior to presenting in recitation section.

Final grades will be determined according to the following rubric:

Recitation Section Students

Term Paper 1	15%
Term Paper 2	25%
Term Test 1	20%
Term Test 2	25%
Lead Discussant	5%
Participation	10%
Total	100%

Writing Section Students

Term Paper 1	10%
Term Paper 2	15%
Revisions 1,2	10% each
Term Test 1	20%
Term Test 2	20%
Lead Discussant	20%
Participation	10%
Total	100%

Students must complete all assignments in order to pass the course.

IMPORTANT DATES

Term tests will be administered during lecture meetings, reading quizzes during recitations; term papers are due by midnight (i.e. no later than 11:59 P.M.) on the assigned due date.

Dates subject to change.

DATE	ALL SECTIONS	WRITING SECTIONS
1/17	Term Paper 1 Posted	
1/31	Term Paper 1 Due	
2/14		Term Paper 1 Revisions Due
2/16	Term Test 1	
3/7-9	<i>No Class (Spring Break)</i>	
3/16	Term Paper 2 Posted	
3/30	Term Paper 2 Due	
4/13		Term Paper 2 Revisions Due
4/20	Term Test 2	

COURSE MATERIALS

There are two required texts for the course, which you should purchase online ASAP:

1. R. Descartes (2006). *Meditations, Objections and Replies*. Ed. by R. Ariew and D. Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett
2. G. Berkeley (2009). *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Both are cheaply available on Amazon. All other readings will be posted on CourseWeb. Students looking for additional material are encouraged to consult the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (plato.stanford.edu).

DISABILITIES AND DIFFERENT STYLES OF LEARNING

Education is a pluralistic enterprise: there are several and often incompatible styles of learning. If you believe there is an alternative approach to this material that would better suit your style of learning, do not hesitate to bring it up with me. If you have a disability for which you are or may be requesting accommodation, you are encouraged to contact both me and Disability Resources and Services, 140 William Pitt Union, (412) 648-7890 or (412) 383-7355 (TTY) as early as possible in the term. DRS will verify your disability and determine reasonable accommodations for this course.

A NOTE ON ACADEMIC HONESTY

The goal of this course is to promote and assess *your* satisfaction of the above-stated course objectives. Plagiarism and all other forms of academic dishonesty will be treated with the greatest severity. Students should familiarize themselves with the University of Pittsburgh's policy on academic integrity, which may be found here: <http://www.provost.pitt.edu/info/ai1.html>

EMAIL POLICY

Allow me two business days to respond to emails. Please do not email me with questions of philosophical substance—that is what lecture, recitation, and office hours are for—and please consult this syllabus before asking questions about course policy.

TENTATIVE SCHEDULE OF TOPICS AND READINGS

Schedule, topics, and assignment due dates are subject to change.

1/5	<i>Introduction: Syllabus + Course Basics</i>
<hr/>	
UNIT 1	<i>The Problem of Perception</i>
<hr/>	
1/10	Russell 1912, pp. 9–25
1/12	Ayer 1963, pp. 1–19
1/17	Descartes, <i>Meditation I</i>
<hr/>	

UNIT 2	<i>Historical Responses to the Skeptic I: Descartes</i>	
1/19	Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> II	
1/24	Descartes, <i>Meditations</i> V–VI	
1/26	Descartes, <i>Objections & Replies</i> (selections)	
UNIT 3	<i>Historical Responses to the Skeptic II: Berkeley</i>	
1/31	Berkeley, <i>Dialogue</i> I	
2/2	Berkeley, <i>Dialogues</i> II–III (selections)	
UNIT 4	<i>Skepticism about Scientific Knowledge: the Problem of Induction</i>	
2/7	Bonjour 2010, ch. 4	
2/9	Goodman 1983, ch. 3	
2/14	<i>No Reading: Catch-Up & Review</i>	
2/16	<i>No Reading</i>	<i>Term Test 1</i>
UNIT 5	<i>What is Knowledge?</i>	
2/21	Gettier 1963, Feldman 1974	
2/23	Zagzebski 1994	
UNIT 6	<i>Analyses of Knowledge I: Internalism vs. Externalism about Justification</i>	
2/28	Nagel 2014, ch. 5	
3/2	Goldman 1967	
3/7	SPRING BREAK	
3/9	SPRING BREAK	
UNIT 7	<i>Analyses of Knowledge II: Foundationalism vs. Coherentism</i>	
3/14 & 3/16	Sosa 1980, sects. 1–6	

UNIT 8	<i>Critiques of Knowledge</i>	
3/21	Code 2011	
3/23	Levin 2003	
UNIT 9	<i>The Epistemology of Testimony</i>	
3/28	E. Fricker 1987, pp. 57–69	
3/30	Lackey 2008, ch. 2	
UNIT 10	<i>Expertise and Authority</i>	
4/4	Hardwig 1991	
4/6	M. Fricker 2011	
UNIT 11	<i>The Epistemology of Disagreement</i>	
4/11	Elgin 2010	
4/13	Feldman 2011	
4/18	<i>No Reading: Catch-Up + Review</i>	
4/20	<i>No Reading</i>	<i>Term Test 2</i>

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ayer, A. J. (1963). *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*. London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd.
- Berkeley, G. (2009). *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bonjour, L. (2010). *Epistemology: Classic Problems and Contemporary Responses*. 2nd ed. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Code, L. (2011). "Taking Subjectivity into Account". *Education, Culture and Epistemological Diversity*. Springer Nature, 85–100.
- Descartes, R. (2006). *Meditations, Objections and Replies*. Ed. by R. Ariew and D. Cress. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Elgin, C. (2010). "Persistent Disagreement". *Disagreement*. Ed. by R. Feldman and T. A. Warfield. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 53–68.
- Feldman, R. (1974). "An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counter-Examples". *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 52.1, 68–69.

- (2011). “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”. *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Ed. by A. I. Goldman and D. Whitcomb. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 137–157.
- Fricker, E. (1987). “The Epistemology of Testimony”. *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 61, 57–83.
- Fricker, M. (2011). “Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology”. *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Ed. by A. I. Goldman and D. Whitcomb. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 54–68.
- Gettier, E. L. (1963). “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” *analysis* 23.6, 121–123.
- Goldman, A. I. (1967). “A Causal Theory of Knowing”. *The Journal of Philosophy* 64.12, 357–372.
- Goodman, N. (1983). *Fact, Fiction, and Forecast*. 4th edition. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hardwig, J. (1991). “The Role of Trust in Knowledge”. *The Journal of Philosophy* 88.12, 693–708.
- Lackey, J. (2008). *Learning from Words: Testimony as a Source of Knowledge*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.
- Levin, M. R. (2003). “A Defence of Objectivity”. *The Theory of Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Readings*.
- Nagel, J. (2014). *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Russell, B. (1912). *The Problems of Philosophy*. New York: H. Holt and Co.
- Sosa, E. (1980). “The Raft and the Pyramid: Coherence versus Foundations in the Theory of Knowledge”. *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 5.1, 3–26.
- Zagzebski, L. (1994). “The Inescapability of Gettier Problems”. *The Philosophical Quarterly* 44.174, 65–73.