

Theories of Knowledge

Fall Semester 2016

Rochester Institute of Technology

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LBR 1309

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MWF 12:00-1:00

or by appointment

Course Description

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, examines a range of questions about the nature of knowledge, justification, and truth, including how and whether we come to have knowledge, how our beliefs are justified, what we mean by the concept of truth, and which of our beliefs qualify as being either true or false. While these questions have a long history, in this course we'll be focusing on some recent work in the field: for the most part, work published since 2010.

This course is about what can go wrong when we try to gain knowledge and true beliefs. While there's no shortage of ways things can go wrong, here we'll be looking at four philosophical problems in particular: epistemic relativism, lies, skepticism, and epistemic injustice. Each of these presents a particular challenge to our having good, true beliefs, and to having knowledge that is dependable and well-supported.

Epistemic relativism is the view that there are no absolute standards for what counts as reasonable, rational, or good evidence: ultimately, there would be no objective basis for, say, treating climate-change deniers or young-earth creationists as unreasonable or irrational. Lies make us have false beliefs (though it's not always clear what counts as a lie, and some lies may be morally justified). Skeptics argue that none of our beliefs are justified—we could, for all we know, be brains-in-vats—so even if we are rational that doesn't mean we're right. And epistemic injustice refers to how some people don't get the credit they deserve, or are put at a disadvantage in understanding their own experiences.

These are not just theoretical problems, of course. It matters on a practical level if someone lies or misleads us, if we lack the concepts to understand what's happening to us, or if we can't really trust our beliefs or the reasons we have for them. So it also matters that we take a good hard look at these problems to better understand why they are problems, and to see what we can do about them.

We'll be looking primarily at books—not articles—so we can thoroughly familiarize ourselves with the issues *and* go deep into the questions they raise. So, while some

of the readings are fairly high-level, we'll take our time to really understand them. By the end of the semester—assuming, of course, that knowledge and truth are real, and that we aren't deluded brains-in-vats—we'll know a *lot* about knowledge and epistemology.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble. All other course readings are in a photocopied course packet that you can pick up outside my office (Liberal Arts 1309).

Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice*

Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason*

Duncan Pritchard: *Epistemic Angst*

Jennifer Saul: *Lying, Misleading, & What is Said*

Expectations

Discussion-oriented

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. This is a discussion-intensive course (which is why it has a low enrollment cap.) Discussion is the only way to make sure we're covering all our bases and considering all the options. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's done the reading: no free-riders. I don't expect everyone to have understood the reading: that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance. I will do everything I can so that everyone can participate in our discussions. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of the final grade.

2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments; these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade.

3. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some degree of self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background information that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd be more comfortable with a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some.

Assignments

4. There will be four short (3 page) writing assignments scattered throughout the semester. In these I'll ask you to reflect critically on particular themes of the readings and of the course. These together will count toward 50% of the final grade.

5. I'm asking everyone to facilitate two class discussions. Here's what I have in mind:

Facilitation

A facilitation should give a brief (5 minute) overview of the day's reading, provide any helpful background information that may add to our understanding of the reading, and help coordinate discussion. The emphasis is on helping frame and lead the discussion. You want to be pretty familiar with the day's reading and be able to ask good, insightful questions about it; it is not expected, however, that you have all the answers.

Please bring a one page handout. The handout should tell a story about the day's reading: the main points, its arc, how the reading takes us from Point A to Point B. It should also list some issues for discussion. I'll provide examples of handouts early in the semester when, by default, I'll be facilitating discussion. I'll also pass around a sign-up sheet early in the semester.

A good facilitation doesn't just summarize the day's reading. Instead, it extracts the essential issues, the points that are especially interesting or problematic, and the themes that are worth discussing. It doesn't attempt to be absolutely comprehensive and it doesn't miss the forest for the trees. That last point is really important.

A good handout is usually a narrative or story of some kind. It isn't, usually, a list of loosely connected bullet points. In your handout you want to describe a certain kind of trajectory and that means showing connections and showing how the author builds an argument.

I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout is not a script.

The facilitations are worth 30% of the final grade.

Additional Information

6. Since I think philosophy in general, and epistemology in particular, is really wonderful and important, I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.

7. Feel free to ask if you have a question about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation.

Readings and Assignments

Please note: a particular day's reading should be done before class.

08.22.16 Introductory Remarks

08.24.16 Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation One

08.26.16 Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* pp. ix-10

08.29.16 Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* pp. 11-30

08.31.16 Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* pp. 31-52

09.02.16 Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* pp. 52-78

Relativism	09.07.16 Michael Lynch: <i>In Praise of Reason</i> pp. 79-95
	09.09.16 Michael Lynch: <i>In Praise of Reason</i> pp. 95-118
	09.12.16 Michael Lynch: <i>In Praise of Reason</i> pp. 119-139
	09.14.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 1-17
Injustice	09.16.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 17-41
	09.19.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 41-59
	Writing Assignment #1 Due
	09.21.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 60-81
	09.23.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 81-108
	09.26.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 109-128
	09.28.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 129-146
	09.30.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 147-161
	10.03.16 Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> pp. 161-177
	10.05.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 1-12
Lies	10.07.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 12-30
	10.11.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 31-50
	Writing Assignment #2 Due
	10.12.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 51-68
	10.14.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 69-86
	10.17.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 86-99
	10.19.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 100-114
	10.21.16 Jennifer Saul: <i>Lying, Misleading, & What is Said</i> pp. 115-138
	10.24.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 11-28
	10.26.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 29-46
Skepticism	10.28.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 46-60
	Writing Assignment #3 Due
	10.31.16 G.E. Moore "Proof of an External World" & "Certainty"
	11.02.16 Ludwig Wittgenstein <i>On Certainty</i> §1-192
	11.04.16 Ludwig Wittgenstein <i>On Certainty</i> §203-612
	11.07.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 63-77
	11.09.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 77-88
	11.11.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp.89-103
	11.14.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 103-119
	11.16.16 Sherrilyn Roush "Closure on Skepticism" pp. 243-249
11.18.16 Sherrilyn Roush "Closure on Skepticism" pp. 249-256	
11.21.16 Duncan Pritchard: <i>Epistemic Angst</i> pp. 123-136	

11.28.16 Duncan Pritchard: *Epistemic Angst* pp. 136-152
11.30.16 Duncan Pritchard: *Epistemic Angst* pp. 153-166
12.02.16 Duncan Pritchard: *Epistemic Angst* pp. 169-188

12.05.16 Schwitzgebel and Moore: "Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World" pp. 564-574

12.07.16 Schwitzgebel and Moore: "Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World" pp. 574-582

12.09.16 Wrap-up

12.14.16 **Writing Assignment #4 Due**