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 talk about knowledge and truth, how these concepts can be misused and twisted, and how confusions about knowledge and truth can lead to bad decisions. While there’s no shortage of ways things can go wrong, here we’ll be looking at four philosophical problems in particular: epistemic relativism, “post-truth,” epistemic injustice, and skepticism. 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. The problem of “post-truth” is of people denying the importance or existence of truth (e.g., “truth isn’t truth”), facts (e.g., “alternative facts”), and objectivity—with obvious dangers for our democratic way of life. 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. Finally, we’ll be approaching the topic of skepticism—philosophically, the position that it is impossible to know anything—from the standpoint of fallibilism and the question of whether knowledge requires having conclusive reasons or proof.
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. This course will give us a better understanding of the epistemic terrain so that if someone casts doubt on the existence of truth or good reasons, or questions our expertise or dismisses our point of view, or sets an unusually high standard for having knowledge, then we'll know how to respond.

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. Some of the readings are fairly high-level but by being steady and methodical we'll understand them. In addition, don't be concerned if you don't follow every line of every reading: the readings are there not just to convey information but also to spark interesting thoughts so even if we don't follow every twist and turn we'll still have lots of interesting thoughts to discuss and share. 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 truth and knowledge.

**Texts**

Here are the books we'll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble and no doubt many other places. All other course readings are downloadable from myCourses.

Jessica Brown: Fallibilism*
Miranda Fricker: Epistemic Injustice
Michael Lynch: In Praise of Reason
Lee McIntyre: Post-Truth

*I've put a photocopy of this book on reserve at the Library.*
Expectations

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 best way to make sure we’re covering all our bases and considering all the options. We can’t do this individually on our own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone’s done the reading: no freeriders. 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 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.

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 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:

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.

Discussion-Oriented

Writing Assignments

Discussion Facilitation
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.

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.

General Policies and Additional Information

Readings and Assignments

08.27.18  Introductory Remarks
08.29.18  Descartes: *Meditations on First Philosophy* Meditation One
08.31.18  Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth* 1-15

09.05.18  Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth* 17-62
09.07.18  Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth* 63-87

09.10.18  Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth* 89-122
09.12.18  Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth* 123-172

09.17.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* ix-10

Writing Assignment #1 Due

09.21.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* 31-52
09.24.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* 52-78
09.26.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* 79-95
09.28.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* 95-118

10.01.18  Michael Lynch: *In Praise of Reason* 119-139
10.03.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 1-17
10.05.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 17-41

10.10.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 41-59
Writing Assignment #2 Due
10.12.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 60-81

10.15.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 81-108
10.17.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 109-128
10.19.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 129-146

10.22.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 147-161
10.24.18  Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 161-177

Writing Assignment #3 Due
11.02.18  Jessica Brown: *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* 50-60, 66

11.05.18  Sherrilyn Roush: “Closure on Skepticism” 243-249
11.07.18  Sherrilyn Roush: “Closure on Skepticism” 249-256

11.14.18  Jessica Brown: *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* 100-113
11.16.18  Schwitzgebel and Moore: “Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World” 564-574


11.28.18  Jessica Brown: *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* 133-152
11.30.18  Jessica Brown: *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* 153-165

12.03.18  Jessica Brown: *Fallibilism: Evidence and Knowledge* 165-185
12.05.18  Cheryl Misak: “A Culture of Justification: The Pragmatist’s Epistemic Argument for Democracy”
12.10.18  Final Class Discussion
          Writing Assignment #4 Due

TBA    Exam Period Meeting