

# Epistemology in the Social World

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**Description** This course surveys philosophical theories of knowledge and rationality in order to examine contemporary social issues. In particular, we will consider the phenomena of epistemic bubbles and echo chambers; the epistemic value of testimony and the perils of assigning too little credibility to some groups and too much to others; what should we believe when we discover that others disagree with us about scientific, political, or religious matters; the role of statistical evidence in the law; what distinguishes scientific from conspiracy theories; and whether we should revise some elements of the scientific process, such as peer review.

**Level** Advanced undergraduate course.

**Prerequisites** No previous work in philosophy is required or assumed.

**Requirements** This course will be held in a lecture format. You will review the assigned materials in advance of each lecture, and then discuss them in your weekly seminar.

Student grades are determined by five components:

- First paper (1000 words): 20%
- Second paper (1500 words): 20%
- Third paper (2000 words): 25%
- Class participation: 25%
- Oral presentation: 10%

Class participation is very important in this course. I am asking you do two things:

- Post a reaction to at least one of the assigned materials on the course discussion board by midnight on the day before the seminar. You can clarify a tricky aspect of the paper, raise an objection, ask a pertinent question, bring attention to an interesting case study, or simply identify an issue that you would like us to talk about during the seminar. I will read your comments and do my best take them up during the seminar.
- Actively participate in discussions during the seminar. Please bear in mind that the topics covered in this course can be controversial. At the same time, do not hesitate to argue in support of unpopular positions or object to those that are widely held.

You are required to do one oral presentation on a topic of your choosing. A presentation should be no more than 8-10 minutes. It can consist of a philosophical commentary on one of the readings, an explanation of the 'technical' aspects of one of the discussed issues, or a case study applying philosophical concepts to a specific practical issue. You must meet with your TA a few days before your presentation to go over an outline.

**Blind grading** Please submit your work with no identifying information other than your student number.

**Office hours** I hold weekly office hours. I welcome you to use this opportunity. You don't need to come with a specific question about the readings or an assignment. We can just grab a cup of coffee and talk about philosophy.

**Resources** Don't be discouraged if you have difficulty following an argument in an assigned reading or if you misunderstand something. Philosophy is challenging and many philosophers are not gifted stylists. I often read philosophical articles twice and encourage you to do the same. You can find many helpful tips about reading philosophical texts, participating in seminars, and writing essays in this [Pink Guide to Philosophy](#) by Helena de Bres. Another excellent resource, regularly used by students and professors alike, is the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#).

## I. INTRODUCTION

### Week 1: Echo chambers, epistemic bubbles, and fake news

Nguyen distinguishes between echo chambers and epistemic bubbles, and suggests how they might be escaped. Blake-Turner explains several ways in which fake news threatens knowledge and degrades our epistemic environment.

- C. Thi Nguyen. (2018). Escape the Echo Chamber. *Aeon Magazine*. (11 pages)
- Christopher Blake-Turner. (2020). Fake news, relevant alternatives, and the degradation of our epistemic environment. *Inquiry*. (21 pages)

## II. TESTIMONY AND DISAGREEMENT

### Week 2: The epistemic value of testimony and testimonial injustice

Nagel outlines attractions and downsides of three popular views on whether testimony supplies us with knowledge. Fricker describes the phenomenon of ‘testimonial injustice’ in which an identity-based prejudice leads one to give too little credibility to another’s testimony.

- Jennifer Nagel. (2014). Testimony. In her *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. (9 pages)
- Miranda Fricker. (2007). The Central Case for Testimonial Injustice. In her *Epistemic Injustice*. (13 pages)

### Week 3: Testimonial injustice in practice

Barnes critiques different forms of scepticism about the disability-positive testimony of disabled people. Archer and colleagues argue that with great epistemic power comes great moral responsibility, using celebrities and the COVID-19 pandemic as a case study.

- Elizabeth Barnes. (2016). Taking Their Word for It. In her *The Minority Body*. (24 pages)
- Alfred Archer, et al. (forthcoming). On the Uses and Abuses of Celebrity Epistemic Power. *Social Epistemology*. (23 pages)

### Week 4: How to respond to disagreement

Kelly argues that if you discover that an epistemic peer disagrees with you about something, then you should stand your ground. Elga proposes that you should instead give their view equal weight and conciliate.

- Thomas Kelly. (2005). The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement. *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. (30 pages)
- Adam Elga. (2007). Reflection and Disagreement. *Nous*. (25 pages)

### Week 5: Religious disagreement and belief polarization

Lackey considers whether genuine disagreement about religious matters is even possible. Begby argues that belief polarisation can result from applying rational procedures for updating our beliefs in the face of agreement and disagreement.

- Jennifer Lackey. (2014). Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously. (22 pages)
- Endre Begby. (Forthcoming). From Belief Polarisation to Echo Chambers: A Rationalising Account. *Episteme*. (21 pages)

### Week 6: Open-mindedness

Shah argues that freedom of speech is essential for us to maintain our values rationally, and not as mere prejudices. Paul suggests that empathetically assessing evidence that contradicts your current beliefs can be epistemically dangerous.

- Nishi Shah. (2021). Why Academic Freedom Matters. *The Raven*. (15 pages)
- L. A. Paul. (2021). The Paradox of Empathy. *Episteme*. (20 pages)

### III. STATISTICAL EVIDENCE

#### Week 7: Probability theory and its discontents

Bradley and Galef explain how to use probabilities to figure out the extent to which a given claim is supported by the evidence. Gendler explains problems associated with relying on this model in a society structured by a legacy of racism.

- Darren Bradley. (2015). Belief and probability. In his *A Critical Introduction to Formal Epistemology*. (14 pages)
- Julia Galef. (2015). A visual guide to Bayesian thinking. YouTube Video. (11 minutes)
- Tamar Gendler. (2011). On the epistemic costs of implicit bias. *Phil. Studies*. (31 pages)

#### Week 8: Predictive algorithms in the criminal justice system

Angwin and colleagues argue that a predictive algorithm used widely in the criminal justice system is biased against Black people. Long critiques this argument and one measure of algorithmic fairness.

- Julia Angwin, et al. (2016). Machine Bias. *ProPublica*. (6 pages)
- Robert Long. (2021). Fairness in Machine Learning: Against False Positive Rate Equality as a Measure of Fairness. *Journal of Moral Philosophy*. (30 pages)

#### Week 9: Individualized vs. statistical evidence

Thomson considers the distinction between individual and statistical evidence, and argues that the latter should not be used in the law because it does not give rise to knowledge. Enoch and colleagues contend that the law should not care about knowledge.

- Judith Thomson. (1986). Liability and Individualized Evidence. In *Rights, Restitution, and Risk*. (22 pages)
- David Enoch, et al. (2012). Statistical Evidence, Sensitivity, and the Legal Value of Knowledge. *Philosophy & Public Affairs*. (28 pages)

### IV. SCIENCE AND CONSPIRACY

#### Week 10 : How science works

Popper gives a brief statement of the idea that a scientific theory must be falsifiable. Thagard explains why astrology falls short. Cowie examines the debate whether 'Oumuamua, detected in 2017, was an extra-terrestrial artefact.

- Karl Popper. (1962) Chapter 1, §1-2. In his *Conjectures and Refutations*. (5 pages)
- Paul Thagard. (1978). Why Astrology is a Pseudoscience. *PSA*. (13 pages).
- Chris Cowie. (forthcoming). Arguing about extraterrestrial intelligence. *Philosophical Quarterly*. (20 pages)

#### Week 11: Conspiracy theories

Keeley claims that there is nothing inherently problematic about conspiracy theories. Napolitano disagrees.

- Brian Keeley. (1999). Of Conspiracy Theories. *Journal of Philosophy*. (18 pages)
- M. Giulia Napolitano. (2021). Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation. In *The Epistemology of Fake News*. (25 pages)

#### Week 12: Scientific process

Bright examines the extent to which scientists omit, mislead, and lie in their work, why it happens, and whether it's a problem. Heseen and Bright argue that prepublication peer review should be abolished.

- Liam Kofi Bright. (2021). Why do scientists lie? *Royal Institute of Phil. Supplement*. (13 pages)
- Remco Heseen and Liam Kofi Bright. (2021). Is Peer Review a Good Idea? *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*. (29 pages)