

# Knowledge and Reality

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- Description** This course is an introduction to epistemology and metaphysics. On the epistemology side, we will examine: Is it reasonable to believe without evidence? Should you change your beliefs in the face of disagreement? What is knowledge? Can we know that the external world exists? Can testimony, statistical evidence, or induction supply us with knowledge? On the metaphysics side, we will consider: Does a god exist? Do we have free will? What makes you as a child and you right now the same person? What is consciousness? Why is there something rather than nothing?
- Level** Introductory 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): 25%
  - Final exam: 30%
  - Participation: 25%
- 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. Your TA will read your comments and do their best take them up during the seminar.
  - Actively participate in the 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 present arguments in support of unpopular positions or objections to those that are widely held.
- 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 writings 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. EPISTEMOLOGY

### Week 1: Is it reasonable to believe without evidence?

Clifford offers a classic argument for the evidentialist view that we should believe something if and only if it is supported by the evidence. James argues that, in certain contexts, it is fine to form a belief even though we don't have sufficient evidence for it.

- W. K. Clifford. (1877). *The Ethics of Belief*. (10 pages)
- William James. (1896). *The Will to Believe*. (9 pages)

### Week 2: Should you change your beliefs in the face of disagreement?

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

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

### Week 3: What is knowledge?

Gettier offers a famous argument against the view that justified true belief is sufficient for knowledge. Zagzebski suggests that similar problems are inescapable for any attempt to provide an analysis of knowledge.

- Edmund Gettier. (1963). *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?* *Analysis*. (3 pages)
- Linda Zagzebski. (1994). *The Inescapability of Gettier Problems*. *Philosophical Quarterly*. (9 pages)

### Week 4: Can we know that the external world exists?

Descartes considers the sceptical possibility that he is dreaming or that an evil demon is deceiving him. Stroud argues that we cannot, in fact, rule it out. Vogel suggests that the sceptical hypothesis is a worse explanation of our experiences than the non-sceptical one. Moore gives a controversial proof of the existence of an external world.

- Rene Descartes. (1641). *Meditation I: What Can Be Called Into Doubt*. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. (4 pages)
- Barry Stroud. (1984). *The Problem of the External World*. In his *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*. Selections. (Selections TBD)
- Jonathan Vogel. (1990). *Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation*. *Journal of Philosophy*. (9 pages)
- G. E. Moore. (1939). *Proof of an External World*. *Proceedings of the British Academy*. (4 pages)

### Week 5: Can induction supply us with knowledge?

Hume asks how we can know that the sun will rise tomorrow. Harman suggests that we never really rely on inductive reasoning, but rather on the inference to the best explanation, so it doesn't matter.

- David Hume. (1748). *Selections from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. (9 pages)
- Gilbert Harman. (1965). *Inference to the Best Explanation*. *Philosophical Review*. (8 pages)

### Week 6: Can testimony supply us with knowledge?

Nagel outlines the attractions and downsides of three popular views about 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 7: Can statistical evidence supply us with knowledge?**

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)

## **II. METAPHYSICS**

### **Week 8: Does a god exist?**

Conee critiques several influential arguments for and against the existence of a god. Stump responds to the argument that the existence of evil demonstrates that a Christian god does not exist.

- Earl Conee. (2005) God. In *Riddles of Existence*. (26 pages)
- Eleonore Stump. (1985). The Problem of Evil. *Faith and Philosophy*. (32 pages)

### **Week 9: Do we have a free will?**

Sider outlines three main views on whether freedom of the will is possible in a deterministic world. Frankfurt presents an objection to the view that one is morally responsible for something only if they were able to act otherwise.

- Theodore Sider. (2005). Free Will and Determinism. In *Riddles of Existence*. (23 pages)
- Harry Frankfurt. (1969). Alternate Possibilities and Moral Responsibility. *Journal of Philosophy*. (11 pages)

### **Week 10: How do persons persist through time?**

Locke argues that a person's survival over time does not consist in the survival of our soul, body, or brain, but rather in psychological continuity. Parfit argues that personal identity and psychological continuity can go apart and that, when they do, we should care about the latter.

- John Locke. (1689). Of Identity and Diversity. In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. (29 pages)
- Derek Parfit. (1984). Personal Identity. In his *Reasons and Persons*. Selections. (12 pages)

### **Week 11: Can consciousness be explained in physical terms?**

Jackson argues that consciousness is an additional ingredient in nature, over and above the ingredients recognized by physics and chemistry. Churchland rebuts Jackson's argument.

- Frank Jackson. (1982). Epiphenomenal Qualia. *Philosophical Review*. (12 pages)
- Patricia Churchland. (1989). Are Mental States Irreducible to Neurobiological States? In her *Neurophilosophy*. (Selections TBD)

### **Week 12: Why is there something rather than nothing?**

Conee asks why there are objects, natural laws, or anything at all, and finds no satisfactory answer. Parfit considers why the universe is the way it is.

- Earl Conee. (2005). Why Not Nothing? In *Riddles of Existence*. (26 pages)
- Derek Parfit. (1998). [Why Anything? Why This?](#) *London Review of Books*. (10 pages)