

Syllabus, Introduction to Social and Applied Epistemology

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I Overview

In this course we will study knowledge and belief as social phenomena and in relation to important social, political, or cultural issues—contemporary and perennial. Because so much of the tradition in epistemology has focused on the individual and on abstract issues, we will begin with what may seem like a simple question: how much can rational cognition be an *individual* matter? When are we required to rely on other people, and how ought we to do that? And *when* we rely on others, how ought we to do that? Philosophers divide this issue into at least two categories, testimony and disagreement, and we'll look at both. We will end the more theoretical part of the course with a look into what group knowledge and belief might be, and how they might work. In the more applied section, we will look at the epistemology of democracy and of journalism, including: how may we reason in a democracy with one another? And how can we *wrong* one another, epistemically speaking?

2 Prerequisites

This course is meant to serve as an introduction to epistemology, but not to philosophy itself. So a prior introduction to philosophy course is highly recommended, but not required, as is a logic class.

3 Aims

- Introduce students to epistemology.
- Give students a theoretical grasp on important issues around depending on others and on group belief and knowledge.
- Show students how to apply philosophical tools and skills to practical and socially relevant issues.
- Get students to respectfully discuss difficult issues.

4 Schedule¹

The class can be subdivided into practical and applied issues in social epistemology; but as I said, we will begin with a look at *individualistic* epistemology.

4.1 A Very Brief Introduction to Individualistic Epistemology

This section of the course will introduce some of the most classic discussions in individual, abstract epistemology: external world skepticism and how we might reason our way out of it, and the Gettier problem.

- Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, meditations 1–3
- Russell, *Problems of Philosophy*, chapters 1 and 2
- Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” and Zagzebski, “The Inescapability of Gettier Problems”

4.2 Social Epistemology: Epistemic Dependence, Independence, and Interdependence

In this part of the course, we will examine whether we must rely on others, and how we might need to. This means looking at, among other things, testimony, disagreement, and group belief and knowledge.

- *Twelve Angry Men* (film)
- Plato, *Apology*
- Hume, “Of Miracles”
- Fricker, “Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy” (two classes)
- Owens, “Testimony and Assertion”
- Lackey, “Knowledge and Credit”
- Feldman, “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”
- Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”
- Enoch, “Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (but not Too Seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement” (two classes)
- Gilbert, “Collective Epistemology”
- Pettit, “Groups with Minds of Their Own”

¹ I am assuming a roughly thirteen-week course with thirteen meetings, where each bullet point represents a week.

4.3 The Epistemology of Democracy

In this part of the course we will examine how citizens in a democracy ought to reason with one another, and what the epistemic foundations of democracy even *are*.

- Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (selections) (two classes)
- Ebels–Duggan, “The Beginning of Community: Politics in the Face of Disagreement”
- Estlund, *Democratic Authority* (selections) (two classes)
- Anderson, “The Epistemology of Democracy”

5 Epistemic Justice and Injustice

So far we have focused on how individuals and groups can improve their beliefs and deliberation, sometimes with practical goals in mind. But now we will focus on how we can wrong, and avoiding wronging, one another with how we form our beliefs.

- Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (selections)
- Dotson, “Accumulating Epistemic Power: A Problem with Epistemology”
- Basu, “What We Epistemically Owe to Each Other”
- Fricker, “Can There Be Institutional Virtues?”

6 Assignments

Class participation is worth a fixed 15%, and attendance is mandatory. Beyond that, there are *three possibilities*. Each will be worth 55% of the rest of the grade.

1. You and another student might decide you are or will be most interested in one particular topic. Then you may both write a 5–7 page paper, followed by a 3–5 page *reply to* your friend’s paper in which you raise the strongest objections you can, followed by a 3–5 page *response* to your friend’s objections.
2. You may write *four small papers* (3–5 pages) on an issue raised in each section.
3. Finally, you may pick a social topic that we *did not discuss* and apply tools from epistemology to discuss it. The paper should be around 15 pages. Please talk to me and get my approval before you start on this option!

The final exam will be worth 30% of the grade and will ask short essay questions about all the material from the class.

7 Odds and Ends

Regarding plagiarism and other sorts of academic dishonesty, [insert the university's academic dishonest policy here].

This class will require *respectful* participation; in discussion, you will be expected to respond politely to one another and engage one another's points in an open and intellectually honest way. Any sort of insulting or demeaning language will not be tolerated. You will also be expected to pay attention. For some, that means not using laptops, and for others it doesn't. Because I don't want to single anyone out either way, I will rely on your self-knowledge to know which class you're in, and to not distract anyone else in class with them.

And please do come to me with any questions or concerns you have at any point, either by email or by office hours!