

Philosophy 319: Theory of Knowledge
Spring 2009 - Syllabus

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Class time: MWF 3:00-4:30pm, Swart 3

Office hours: MW 4:30-5:30pm, F 1:00-2:00pm, Polk 69

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Main Text: *Knowledge & Inquiry*, K. Brad Wray (ed.)

Epistemology (knowledge theory) is a very old field of philosophy, tracing its roots back to the Sophists of ancient Greece, around 500 B.C.. It deals with such broad questions as “Just what *is* knowledge?”, and “Can anything *really* be known?” – issues that arise soon after we begin *any* inquiry. Given the generality of such issues, epistemology should interest everyone seeking *any* sort of knowledge.

Class requirements/Grading

Your grade for the course will be based on two papers (approximately 5 pages apiece) and a cumulative in-class final exam, each worth 25% of your grade. I will assign recommended paper topics. If you wish to write on a different topic (covering aspects of the same material), you may, but only if you obtain my permission *first*. Your papers will be submitted on the internet via Turnitin. I will include instructions for using Turnitin in your first paper assignment. The final 25% of your grade will be based on your regular attendance and participation in class. “Participation” includes making cogent comments and asking thoughtful questions (i.e., questions that show that you are struggling to understand an obscure point, or a line of argument that has not been well expressed in the text).

In addition to asking substantive questions or making cogent comments, I want to encourage you to ask merely *clarificatory* questions in class – for instance, questions about what a given word means. Many of our readings involve vocabulary you probably have never encountered before. Some of these terms are defined in different ways by different philosophers (or worse, left only implicitly defined by the context), and in such cases it is unlikely that a dictionary will be of much help. It is important that this not discourage you from trying to understand the views being expressed. You are doing everyone in class a service by asking such questions, but if you feel uncomfortable asking them in class, please come see me during office hours. I’m here to help!

Class Desire2Learn Site

Handouts, weekly reading assignments, and other class information will be available on our class D2L site.

Unit 1- Skepticism

We will begin by considering an issue that often motivates philosophers to focus on epistemology, the skeptical possibility that all (or at least most) of our beliefs are false. While this is a problem that concerned the ancients, we’ll examine a relatively modern

and extremely influential formulation of it found in **Descartes'** Meditations. Is it possible that *everything* we have ever thought to be true is actually false? If so, does this make it reasonable or rational for us to doubt *all* of our beliefs? What are the reasonable limits of such skepticism, if any? We'll next examine a recent attempt to argue that the sort of skeptical possibilities about the world that Descartes considered possible are actually *logically incoherent*: **Hilary Putnam's** "Brains In A Vat" argument. Finally, we'll turn to **Thomas Nagel's** article "Knowledge", where he argues that anti-skeptical arguments like Putnam's ultimately fail, but that this should not dissuade us from seeking knowledge of the physical world. **Your first paper will concern material from this unit.**

Unit 2- Analyses of knowledge

Whether or not we actually have any knowledge, what do we *mean* when we say that knowledge is possible (or that it is impossible)? Most analysts agree that knowledge consists (at least) of a *belief* that is *true* and *justified*, but they disagree over what these terms mean. In this unit we will focus mainly on debates about *justification*. We'll begin by reading **Roderick Chisholm's** essay on "The Myth of the Given" for a defense of *foundationalism*, the view that at least some beliefs are *self-justifying*, and that these beliefs ultimately provide the rational basis for all other beliefs that are justified. We'll then turn to **Laurence Bonjour's** objections to this view in "Can Empirical Knowledge Have A Foundation?", and to his defense of his alternative viewpoint in "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge". Finally, we'll discuss **Robert Audi's** attempt to integrate coherentism into a foundationalist framework in "The Foundationalism / Coherentism Controversy."

A further debate in analyses of knowledge and justification concerns the question of whether to *know* that a statement is true, one must *understand* the justification for believing it. *Internalists* about justification – like Lawrence Bonjour – affirm this as a condition for having knowledge, while *externalists* – like **Alvin Goldman** in "What is Justified Belief?" – reject it. We'll finish this unit by considering the puzzling cases raised by **Edmund Gettier** in his brief paper "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", along with **Richard Feldman's** extension of them. **Your second paper will concern the material in this unit.**

Unit 3- Recent trends in epistemology

Time permitting, we will discuss **W. V. Quine's** view that epistemology should be "naturalized". Epistemology, Quine thinks, makes sense only as a branch of psychology, one which studies how theories are formed on the basis of sensory experience. We may also discuss feminist approaches to epistemology, and/or various "contextualist" views that hold that what properly counts as knowledge changes in different social or conversational contexts. **Material from this unit will appear on the cumulative final exam**, along with questions from the previous units.

Now you know what this course is all about... or do you?