

Philosophy 251 (A01): Knowledge, Certainty and Skepticism
FALL 2020

Scheduled class times

Monday & Thursday, 1:00-2:20

Professor

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Office Hours: Format and time TBA

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Provisional Draft: This outline is intended to give students a sense of what the course is like. It is not the final, official course syllabus

*This course will combine synchronous and asynchronous elements. The lecture materials will be delivered asynchronously – posted at the start of a given week on the course web site, along with any other teaching materials. The scheduled *Thursday* course slot will be used for on-line discussion sessions, hosted by the instructor. (This is the synchronous element of the course.) Students will be divided into groups; those groups will rotate through the Thursday slot. Depending on the enrollment numbers, students can expect to be required to ‘attend’ *approximately* one third of these sessions. Details and final plan will be announced near the start of term.

Course Description

We think we have knowledge of a real, objective, material world – we think we know such things as that humans are mammals, that water is wet, that Bo Horvat plays for the Canucks, that the earth revolves around the sun, etc. But what, exactly, does such ‘knowledge’ consist in? What, if anything, do each of the cases of knowledge just mentioned have in common? If we lack a clear understanding of what knowledge is, can we be sure that we know what we think we know? Sceptics claim that we don’t have any, or much, knowledge at all. Other philosophers insist that while we do have knowledge, this isn’t – *can’t be* -- knowledge of a material world that exists independently of our thoughts. In the first part of the course, we will look at some central historical writings centering on the problem of our knowledge of the external world. In addition to giving us some historical grounding, this will introduce some key concepts and issues (knowledge, justification, scepticism, doubt, certainty, etc.). In the second part of the course, we will turn to more recent attempts to give a systematic theory of just what these notions – centrally, knowledge and justification – involve, and to respond to sceptical challenges to our everyday belief in an independently-existing material world.

Texts

(1) *Human Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Approaches*, Moser and vander Nat, eds., 3rd edition; Oxford, 2003; ISBN 0-19-514966-1. [Available through the UVic Bookstore.]

(2) Several additional required readings will be made available via the course’s web page.

Evaluation

Students’ grades will be based on:

- a) Two short essays (worth 20% and 25%, respectively).

- b) A cumulative, open-book final exam (25%).
- c) Several short assignments (20%). Students must write at least 4 of these, but can do up to 6. (The top 4 will be counted.) Topic questions will be distributed at start of a given week; students will have until the end of the week to complete them.
- d) Participation in Thursday discussion sessions (10%). The emphasis here is on *attending* (virtually) the minimum number of such sessions. Details to be announced as the term approaches.

The short papers might also be thought of as take-home exams. You will be given questions calling for short, essay-style responses. You will have some choice in which you answer. Your response should be concise, well-structured, and to the point; it must be between 800 and 1000 words in total length. The short essays will be explained further when the first topics are distributed.

Beyond the student’s having adequately addressed the topic question(s) on which he/she writes, evaluation of the short assignments, essays, and any essay question(s) appearing on the exam will be based on: evidence of comprehension of the materials and issues addressed; evidence of original and critical thought with regard to that material; the extent to which the student stakes out a position and provides good reasons and arguments for it; the extent to which the student communicates his/her ideas clearly (using complete and grammatical sentences, correct terms, a clear essay structure, and so on). For the short assignments, essays, and final exam, *the use of outside materials (i.e., any readings not assigned for the course) is permitted only if you have received the instructor’s permission ahead of time.* Any materials used for the essays and final exam (i.e., any course readings) must be properly cited in the standard way.

Expectations

Students are expected to do the readings for a given week ahead of time, to watch/read the posted lecture materials as they are made available, and to be prepared to talk and ask questions about the course material (either directly, or in the scheduled discussion sessions).

Three quick tips for doing well in the course

1. *Keep pace with the class materials.* Watch/read the posted lecture materials as they are made available.
2. *Do the readings ahead of time, and read ‘actively’* – pay attention to what you’re reading, ask yourself what point(s) the author(s) is trying to make, why this matters, what questions you’d like to ask the author, and so on.
3. If you’re having difficulty with any of the course material (readings or lecture content), speak to the instructor – *take advantage of office hours (TBA) and discussion sessions.*

The standard University grading scheme will be used. Here is an excerpt from it (the full version is here:

<https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/S1AAgoGuV?bc=true&bcCurrent=14%20-%20Grading&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItemType=policies.>)

Grade	Point Value	Percentage	Description
A+	9	90 – 100	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the
A	8	85 – 89	

A-	7	80 – 84	case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
B+	6	77 – 79	A B+, B, or B- is earned by work that indicates a good comprehension of the course material, a good command of the skills needed to work with the course material, and the student's full engagement with the course requirements and activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
B	5	73 – 76	
B-	4	70 – 72	
C+	3	65 – 69	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
C	2	60 – 64	
D	1	50 – 59	A D is earned by work that indicates minimal command of the course materials and/or minimal participation in class activities that is worthy of course credit toward the degree.
F	0	0 – 49	F is earned by work, which after the completion of course requirements, is inadequate and unworthy of course credit towards the degree.

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. It is each student's responsibility to know the University's regulations in this regard. The Policy on Academic Integrity is published on the University website:

https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk_0xsM_V?bc=true&bcCurrent=08%20-%20Policy%20on%20Academic%20Integrity&bcGroup=Undergraduate%20Academic%20Regulations&bcItemtype=policies.

Intellectual property of materials on the LMS website

Please note that all assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of myself and the University of Victoria. Do not circulate this material or post it to note-sharing sites without the instructor's permission. Posting course materials to note-sharing sites or otherwise circulating course materials without the permission of your instructor violates the Policy on Academic Integrity (link above). Any evidence that you are circulating materials without permission will be referred to the Chair of the Philosophy Department for investigation.

Schedule of Topics and Readings: TBA as the start of term approaches. Students who wish to get a head start can begin perusing the required texts.

Some important administrative dates: <https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/dates/>.