

Philosophy 251 (A01): Knowledge, Certainty and Skepticism [22405]
SPRING 2022

Scheduled class times

Monday & Thursday, 10:00-11:20, Clearihue A207

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.

Professor

Patrick Rysiew

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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 Brightspace page.

Evaluation

Students’ grades will be based on:

- two short essays, worth 25% and 30% respectively
- a final exam: 30%
- several short assignments. Approximately 10 of these will be given. Students must write at least 4, 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 the assignment if they choose: 15%

The short essays 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 900 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 must be properly cited in the standard way.

Late assignments unaccompanied by a legitimate documented excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, starting as soon as the due date and time have passed.

The standard University grading scheme will be used. Here is an excerpt:¹

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 case of an A+ offers original insight and/or goes beyond course expectations. Normally achieved by a minority of students.
A	8	85 – 89	
A-	7	80 – 84	
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.

¹ The full version is here:

<https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/future/undergrad/index.php#/policy/S1AAgoGuV?bc=true&bcCurrent=14%20-%20Grading&bcItem=policies>.

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 in the University Calendar.² You can also consult the Libraries' plagiarism guide.³

Expectations

Students are expected to come to class having read the assigned readings, and prepared to talk and ask questions about the material. Students who miss a class are responsible for any material covered therein, as well as for finding out what announcements, if any, were made.

Three quick tips for doing well in the course

1. *Come to class* (when you must miss, let the instructor know ahead of time; afterwards, talk to a class-mate about what happened – get their lecture notes, visit the instructor in office hours).
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 trouble with any of the course material, speak to the instructor right away.*

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.

Expectations Regarding Conduct

All members of the University community have the right to experience, and the responsibility to help create, a respectful and supportive learning environment. These rights and the responsibilities are present both in interactions in person and online. Racism, sexualized violence, and any form of discrimination, bullying or harassment are not acceptable and will not be tolerated. By logging into UVic's learning systems and interacting with online resources you are engaging in a university activity. This means that your conduct is subject to University policies in those settings.⁴

Professionalism is expected from all students enrolled in courses in the Faculty of Humanities. As part of professionalism, students, faculty and staff are expected to be familiar with University policies, including the Tri-Faculty's *Standards for Professional Behaviour*.

Academic Supports

² https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/future/undergrad/index.php#/policy/Sk_0xsM_V?bc=true&bcCurrent=08%20-%20Policy%20on%20Academic%20Integrity&bcItemType=policies.

³ <https://www.uvic.ca/library/research/citation/plagiarism/index.php>.

⁴ <https://www.uvic.ca/services/studentlife/student-conduct/online-student-conduct/index.php>.

The University has a number of academic support services that may help you in this course, including the Centre for Academic Communication,⁵ the Library's Research Anywhere,⁶ and the Library's "Ask Us" service.⁷ Information about academic supports can be found through the University's Learn Anywhere site.⁸

Academic Accommodations

The University of Victoria is committed to creating a learning experience that is as accessible as possible. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with me. If you believe you will require academic accommodations to address barriers to your education in this course and you are not already registered with the Centre for Accessible Learning, please do so.⁹ The Centre for Accessible Learning is the office designated to make arrangements for accommodations. You can find information about academic accommodations through the Centre for Accessible Learning's website.¹⁰

Schedule of Topics and Readings

What follows is *provisional* and *subject to revision* at the instructor's discretion. Any changes to the schedule will be announced in class. (Students are responsible for staying apprised of any such changes.) As a default, readings for a given subject/week are listed in the order in which you should read them. Where an 'HK' reading is not followed by page numbers, read the entire selection.

HISTORICAL SOURCES AND FOUNDATIONS

Week 1 (Jan. 10, 13): Introduction; Knowledge vs. opinion, Appearance vs. reality

- Pollock, excerpt from *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge* (Brightspace) (only 2.5 pp.)
- Russell, "Appearance, Reality, and Knowledge by Acquaintance"
 - *optional: Plato, excerpt from the Theatetus (HK pp. 48-61)*
 - *optional: Cahn, Kitcher, Sher & Markie, "Introduction: The Elements of Argument" (Brightspace)*

Week 2 (Jan. 17, 20): Descartes' rationalism

- Descartes, excerpts from the *Meditations* (HK)

Week 3 (Jan. 24, 27): Locke's empiricism (and his materialism)

- Locke, excerpts from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (HK)
- Leibniz, excerpt from *New Essays on the Human Understanding* (HK pp. 149-152, to bottom of first column on p. 152)
 - *optional: Plato, excerpt from the Meno (HK pp. 35-38)*

Week 4 (Jan. 31, Feb. 3): Berkeley's empiricism (and his idealism)

⁵ <https://www.uvic.ca/learningandteaching/cac/>

⁶ <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/ResearchAnywhere/>

⁷ <https://www.uvic.ca/library/research/ask/index.php>

⁸ <https://onlineacademiccommunity.uvic.ca/LearnAnywhere/academic-supports/>

⁹ <https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/onlineservices/register/index.php>

¹⁰ <https://www.uvic.ca/services/cal/programs/academic/index.php>

- Berkeley, excerpts from *A Treatise Concerning The Principles of Knowledge* (HK)

****1st essay topics distributed Thursday, Feb. 3rd***

Week 5 (Feb. 7, 10): Hume’s ‘scepticism’

- Hume, excerpts from the *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (HK)

PERCEPTION AND BASIC KNOWLEDGE

Week 6 (Feb. 14, 17)

- Ayer, “The Argument from Illusion” (Brightspace)
- Reid, excerpts from *An Inquiry Into the Human Mind* (HK)
 - *recommended: re-read Russell, “Appearance, Reality, and Knowledge by Acquaintance” (from Wk.1)*

****1st essay due at the start of class Monday, Feb. 14th***

*****Feb. 21-25: No classes - Reading break*****

SCEPTICISM AND COMMON SENSE

Week 7 (Feb. 28, March 3):

- Moore, “Proof of an External World” (HK)
- Bonjour, “Skepticism” (pp. 257-267 are the most important) (Brightspace)
- Strawson, “Skepticism, Naturalism, and Transcendental Arguments” (HK)
 - *optional: Wittgenstein, “Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness” (HK)*
 - *optional: Sextus Empiricus, excerpts from “Outlines of Pyrrhonism” (HK)*

THE ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE AND THE GETTIER PROBLEM

Week 8 (March 7, 10):

- Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (HK)
- Feldman, “An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counterexamples” (HK)
- Pollock, “The Gettier Problem” (HK)

****2nd essay topics distributed Thursday, March 10th***

THE NATURE OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION – FOUNDATIONALISM AND COHERENTISM

Week 9 (March 14, 17):

- Sosa, excerpt from “The Raft and the Pyramid...” (HK pp. 380-387, to end of Section 5)
- Audi, “Contemporary Foundationalism” (Brightspace)
 - *optional: Lehrer, “Systematic Justification” (Brightspace)*

THE NATURE OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION – RELIABILISM AND EVIDENTIALISM

Week 10 (March 21, 24):

- Goldman, “Reliabilism: What is Justified Belief?” (Brightspace)
 - *optional: Feldman and Conee, “Evidentialism” (HK)*

****2nd essays due at the start of class, Thursday, March 24th***

THE NATURE OF EPISTEMIC JUSTIFICATION – DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON EPISTEMIC AGENTS

Week 11 (March 28, 31):

- Fumerton, “The Internalism/Externalism Controversy” (Brightspace)
- Foley, “Rationality and Knowledge” (Brightspace)

Week 12 (April 4, 7): Continued, Catch-up; Review

**Final Exam:* The first term exam period runs April 11-29. The date and time of the final exam will be set by the University as the end of term approaches.

Some important administrative dates:¹¹

- Sun., Jan. 23: last day for 100% reduction of fees.
- Wed., Jan. 26: last day to for adding first-term courses.
- Sun., Feb. 13: last day for 50% reduction of tuition fees. 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date.
- Mon. Feb. 28: last day for withdrawing from second-term courses without penalty of failure.

¹¹ <https://www.uvic.ca/calendar/dates/>.