

Philosophy 251 (A01): Knowledge, Certainty and Skepticism
SPRING 2023 [22569]

Scheduled class times

Monday & Thursday, 10:00-11:20, Cornett A129

Professor

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

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 Elias Pettersson 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. Available through the UVic Bookstore. (Publisher’s page: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/human-knowledge-9780195149661?cc=ca&lang=en&>.)

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

Evaluation

Students’ grades will be based on:

- several short assignments. Approximately 10 of these will given. Students must complete 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: 15%
- two short essays, worth 25% and 30% respectively
- a final exam: 30%

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 papers unaccompanied by a legitimate excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, to a maximum of 30%.

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&bcItemType=policies>.

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.*

Academic Integrity and Student Conduct

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 guide³ or the Tri-Faculty Code of Professional Behavior for Students,⁴ which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in one place for ease of reference.

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.

Academic Supports

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

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/advising/assets/docs/tri-fac-student-code-of-conduct.pdf>.

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/>.

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: TBA, as the start of term approaches. Students who wish to get a head start can begin perusing the required text.

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

I acknowledge and respect the lək'wəḡən peoples on whose traditional territory the university stands and the Songhees, Esquimalt and WSÁNEĆ peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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

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