

Philosophy 251 (A01): Knowledge, Certainty and Skepticism
FALL 2025 [CRN 12677, 1.5 UNITS]

Scheduled class times

Monday & Thursday 10:00-11:20, ECS 130

Professor

Patrick Rysiew

Office Hours: Monday, 11:30-1:00, Friday 10:30-11:30, or by appointment; Clearihue B321

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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.

I acknowledge with respect the Lək'wəḡən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the University of Victoria stands, and the Lək'wəḡən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples (including the Tsartlip, Pauquachin, Tsawout, Tseycum and Malahat nations) in whose territories and waters the university operates and whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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.

This course will:

- introduce you to key concepts and issues in epistemology (the theory of knowledge)
- give you a basic understanding of major philosophical theories of knowledge and justification, both historical and contemporary
- help you improve your ability to critically engage with academic literature
- help you improve your philosophical writing skills

Texts

(1) *Human Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Approaches*, Moser and vander Nat, eds., 3rd edition; Oxford, 2003. (Be sure that you get the correct edition!) Available through the UVic Bookstore. ([Publisher's page](#).) Two copies are on 2-hour reserve at McPherson library. You can check to see whether they are currently checked out through the [library website](#) or by looking at

‘Course Reserves’ under the ‘Course Tools’ tab on the Brightspace page.

(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 be given. Students must complete at least 4, but can do up to 6. (The top 4 will be counted.) Which ones a student writes on is up to them. However, it is *strongly* recommended that students get a start on these early in the course. Topic questions will be distributed at the start of a given week; students will have until the end of the week to complete them; responses will be a maximum of 250 words: 15%
- two short essays, worth 25% and 30% respectively
- a multi-day, open book final exam: 30%

In order to be eligible to pass the course, students must successfully complete the two short essays and the final exam. Failure to complete one of these required components will result in a grade of ‘N’ for the course.

The short essays might also be thought of as take-home exams. You will be given topic questions calling for short, essay-style responses. You will have some choice in which topic question you write on. 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 discussed further when the first topics are distributed. The final exam will be discussed towards the end of the term.

Beyond the student’s having adequately addressed the topic question(s) on which they write, evaluation of the short assignments, essays, and any essay question(s) appearing on the final 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 ideas clearly (using complete and grammatical sentences, correct terms, a clear essay structure, and so on). For the short assignments, essays, and final exam, any materials used must be properly cited in the standard way. *The use of outside materials, including any readings not assigned for the course, is permitted only if you have received the instructor’s permission ahead of time.*

Late assignments unaccompanied by a legitimate excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, to a maximum of 30%. Exceptions to this penalty will only be considered in cases where an alternate deadline was arranged ahead of time or lateness was caused by an unexpected or unavoidable circumstance, as described in the University’s [policies regarding academic concessions](#). If you are unable to meet a deadline because of conflicting responsibilities or unexpected or unavoidable circumstances, *you must contact me as soon as you are aware of the circumstances or conflict.*

The standard [University grading scheme](#) will be used. Here is an excerpt:

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.

Expectations

This course is in-person only; lectures will not be recorded. Students are expected to come to class, to come to class having read the assigned readings, and to be ready 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. In general, this course is reading- and writing-intensive. It is very important to keep up with the readings and assignments as we go along.

Three quick tips for doing well in the course

1. *Come to class* -- when you must miss, try to let the instructor know ahead of time; afterwards, talk to a classmate about what happened; ask for their lecture notes and/or 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* -- office hours are not just for crises; they are meant to provide you with an additional everyday means of improving your understanding of the course material.

Academic Integrity and Professional Conduct

Chat GPT and similar technologies are not permitted for this course. 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](#). You can also consult the [Libraries' plagiarism guide](#) or the [Tri-Faculty Standards for Professional Behavior for Students](#), which draws together a number of existing UVic policies in

one place for ease of reference. 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 Standards.

Intellectual Property & Materials on the LMS Website

All assignments for this course and all materials posted to the LMS website are the intellectual property of the instructor 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 the 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](#), the [Library's Research Support page](#), and the [Library's "Ask Us" service](#). Information about academic supports can also be found through the [University's Learn Anywhere site](#).

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 have not already registered with the [Centre for Accessible Learning](#), please [do so](#). 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.

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. 'HK' refers to our main course textbook, *Human Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Approaches*, 3rd edition. Where an HK reading is not followed by page numbers, read the entire selection.

I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Week 1 (Sept. 4): Introduction to the course

- no required readings

Week 2 (Sept. 8, 11): 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" (HK)
 - optional: Cahn, Kitcher, Sher & Markie, "Introduction: The Elements of Argument" (Brightspace)
 - optional: browse Plato, excerpt from the *Theatetus* (HK pp. 48-61)

II. HISTORICAL SOURCES AND FOUNDATIONS

Week 3 (Sept. 15, 18): Descartes' Rationalism

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

Week 4 (Sept. 22, 25): 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: browse Plato, excerpt from the *Meno* (HK pp. 35-38)

Week 5 (Sept. 29, Oct. 2): Berkeley's Empiricism (and his Idealism)

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

**1st essay topics distributed Thursday, Oct. 2*

Week 6 (Oct. 6, 9): Hume's 'scepticism'

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

Week 7 (Oct. 13, 16): Catch-up, continued [no class Oct. 13: Thanksgiving]

- no new readings

**1st essay due at the start of class Thursday, Oct. 16*

III. KNOWLEDGE AND JUSTIFICATION: CURRENT CONTROVERSIES

Week 8 (Oct. 20, 23): Perception and Basic Knowledge

- 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 Week 2)

Week 9 (Oct. 27, 30): Scepticism and Common Sense

- Moore, "Proof of an External World" (pp. 439 & 449-452 are most important) (HK)
- Bonjour, "Skepticism" (pp. 257-267 are most important) (Brightspace)
 - recommended: Strawson, "Skepticism, Naturalism, and Transcendental Arguments" (HK)
 - optional: browse Wittgenstein, "Cause and Effect: Intuitive Awareness" (HK)

Week 10 (Nov. 3, 6): The Analysis of Knowledge and the Gettier Problem

- 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, Nov. 6*

Week 11 (Nov. 10, 13): The Nature of Epistemic Justification – Foundationalism and Coherentism [*no class Nov. 10: Reading Break Nov. 10-12*]

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

Week 12 (Nov. 17, 20): Continued (Nov. 17), then (Nov. 20) starting on next topic....

**2nd essays due at the start of class, Thursday, Nov. 20*

Week 13 (Nov. 24, 27): The Nature of Epistemic Justification – Reliabilism and Evidentialism; Different Perspectives on Epistemic Agents

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

Week 14 (Dec. 1): Continued, Review

- optional: Fumerton, “The Internalism/Externalism Controversy” (Brightspace)
- optional: Foley, “Rationality and Knowledge” (Brightspace) (only 4 pp.)

**Final Exam:* The first term exam period runs Dec. 6-20. The date and time of the final exam will be set by the University as the end of term approaches.

Some Important Administrative Dates

- Tues. Sept. 16: last day for 100% reduction of fees.
- Fri. Sept. 19: last day to for adding first-term courses.
- Tues. Oct. 7: last day for 50% reduction of tuition fees. 100% of tuition fees will be assessed for courses dropped after this date.
- Fri. Oct. 31: last day for withdrawing from second-term courses without penalty of failure.

Other Resources

Student Resources

- [UVic Learn Anywhere](#). UVic Learn Anywhere is the primary learning resource for students. It offers many learning workshops and resources to help students with academics and learning strategies.
- [Library resources](#). Information for students wishing to use the UVic library.
- Indigenous [student services](#)
- [Centre for Academic Communication](#)
- [Learning Strategist Program](#)
- [Academic Concession Regulations](#)
- [Academic Concessions and Accommodations](#)
- Academic accommodation & access for students with disabilities – [Policy AC1205](#)
- [Student wellness](#) resources.

- j. [Ombudsperson](#). A resource to help resolve disputes or complaints.
- k. Other [student groups and resources](#).

University Statements and Policies

- a. University Calendar – [“Information for all students”](#)
- b. [Creating a respectful, inclusive and productive learning environment](#)
- c. [Accommodation of Religious Observance](#)
- d. [Student Conduct and Non-Academic Student Misconduct](#)
- e. [Accessibility](#)
- f. [Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#)
- g. [Equity and Human Rights](#)
- h. [Sexualized Violence Prevention and Response](#)
- i. Discrimination and Harassment [Policy](#)