Philosophy 419: Epistemology

Course Information
Term & Year: Fall 2020
Prerequisites: PHIL 210 or equivalent and one intermediate course in philosophy
Course Time: T & R 13:05-14:25
Course Location: Online (see below)

Instructor Information
Instructor: Professor Michael Blome-Tillmann
Office: Leacock, 9th floor
Office Hours: M 10:00-12:00
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Course Description
This course is a survey of central issues in analytic epistemology and offers an overview of both classical and present-day topics. It is divided into five substantive units (not including the introductory material covered in the first week):

Unit 1. The Analysis of Knowledge
Unit 2. Scepticism, Closure, and Transmission
Unit 3. The Semantics of ‘Knowledge’-Attributions
Unit 4. Evidence and Justification

Typically, we will spend 2-3 weeks on any given unit. Individual topics may include the following:

1) Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?
2) Causal and Reliabilist Theories of Knowledge
3) Counterfactual Theories of Knowledge
4) Arguments for Scepticism
5) Closure and Transmission Failure
6) Epistemic Contextualism
7) Subject-Sensitive Invariantism
8) Testimonial Injustice
9) Legal Standards of Proof
10) Coherentism and Foundationalism
11) Induction
12) Evidentialism
13) E=K

This schedule is tentative and subject to change.

The course presupposes knowledge of propositional and first order predicate logic (Prerequisite: Introduction to Deductive Logic 1). Knowledge of probability theory is desirable but not necessary.
Learning Outcomes
After taking this course students will:

• Be familiar with key philosophical problems and positions in contemporary epistemology
• Be able to identify key theses and argument structures in epistemological texts
• Be able to differentiate between epistemological positions and compare their claims and assumptions
• Be able to express their own epistemological theses in writing and argue for it in a clear and concise manner
• Be able to critically evaluate epistemological arguments, both others’ and their own

Format
The ongoing Covid-19 pandemic has compelled courses to move from the classroom to an online-only format, for the time being. This course will be taught through a combination of pre-recorded lectures and ‘live’ review/Q&A sessions with the instructor.

Lectures: lectures will be pre-recorded and posted on MyCourses. They replace the Tuesday meetings on our schedule. For the best results, students should read the assigned materials before watching the lecture, just as they would be expected to do for a normal in-class lecture. The only exception is the very first lecture, which will be delivered live at class time (Thursday, Sept. 3rd, 13:05-14:25), in which we will have a chance to meet each other and to go over this course outline.

Live Sessions: Live sessions complementing the lecture will take place on Thursdays, during the time of the course (13:05-14:25). Live sessions will take place on Zoom. The first 25 minutes of each live session will be recorded and will consist of a review of the main points of the material discussed during the week, followed by a Q&A session. The remainder of the Thursday live sessions will be available for further discussion and will not be recorded. Non-recorded parts of the live session are optional.

Office hours: I will hold office hours on Mondays from 10:00-12:00 on Zoom.

Assessment
1. Weekly reactions to readings: 15%
   By Wednesday evening, students will submit, via MyCourses, a reaction to the week’s readings. These reactions should be short (~50-100 words) ideas or questions relating to the material from the readings and the Tuesday lecture. These will be assessed for credit only. Students will receive 1.5 points for each completed exercise, up to a maximum of 15 points possible. (This builds in leeway for up to three missed exercises in the term.) Students should complete this assignment even if they need to miss our Zoom class that week. No late or make-up assignments are available for this component.

2. Short written exercise 1: 15%
   About 500 words. Focuses on identifying and summarizing philosophical views and arguments. You will be asked to find an argument you wish to focus on in one of our assigned readings. State the argument in premise-conclusion form and then explain what the author is doing, and why they think the argument should be compelling. Include enough background material so that it will make sense to someone who isn’t familiar with the topic already. You should be very clear about what assumptions are being made
as premises, and exactly what conclusion the author is arguing for. Do not evaluate the argument. Due date: October 5th.

3. **Short written exercise 2: 25%**
   
   About 1,000 words. Focuses on detailed evaluation of arguments. Students are asked to offer a critical analysis of their own. As with the first written exercise, it will be based on a particular argument in a particular reading (distinct from the previous exercise). Explain the argument, as you did in the previous exercise, but this time, argue against it, giving reasons why the argument should be resisted. Be clear about exactly what you are objecting to—which premise, or premises, are you going to deny? Or why do you think the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premises? You should also consider possible objections to your response—that is, what might the original author say in response to you, and what is your response to that? It may be appropriate to bring in arguments or ideas from other sources here; make sure to cite everything you’re relying on. This exercise should be about 1,000 words. Due date: October 26th.

4. **Group presentation: 5%**
   
   Students must prepare a short presentation together with a group of fellow students. Possible formats include podcasts, Zoom-lectures, or other remote delivery as deemed appropriate by the lecturer. Group presentations will be assessed for credit only. Students will receive a 5% credit for a completed group presentation.

5. **Final Essay: 40%**
   
   Students are asked to organize their final papers around a central epistemological question, instead of one particular philosopher’s argument. So, you will be writing an essay that tackles one of the “big questions”, like “is it possible to know anything at all?” or “can epistemology be genuinely normative if it depends on factors outside of individuals’ awareness?” You should introduce, explain, and evaluate various authors’ views as they pertain to your chosen question, but your own framing and organization is central here. This should be between 2,000-2,5000 words. The Deadline is December 3rd.

All work is to be submitted through MyCourses. Weekly reactions to readings will be submitted as plain text (there will be a box where you can either type in or copy/paste your answers). Written exercises and the final essay must be submitted as DOCX (MS-Word) files to allow for reviewing and commenting.

Students are asked to read Jim Pryor’s excellent guidelines on how to read and write philosophy: [http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html) and [http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html)

**Extensions**

Late submissions will be downgraded at a rate of 1/3 of a grade per day (e.g. from A- to B+, C to C-), including weekend days/holidays. Evidence of a consistent lack of preparation (including non-attendance without a medical excuse) results in a deduction of up to 5% from the final course grade. Requests for extensions will be considered (but not automatically granted) only when requested at least 24 hours before the paper is due and substantiated at the time of request by a doctor’s note documenting illness. Extensions will not be more than seven days. No extensions will be granted for Weekly Reactions to Readings.
MyCourses
The webpage for this course is located at https://www.mcgill.ca/mycourses/. It will be used to post the syllabus, readings, lectures, and periodic announcements. You must check the course webpage regularly. If you have technical problems with MyCourses, contact ICT customer support at: http://www.mcgill.ca/mycourses/students/help/.

IMPORTANT: papers must be submitted on MyCourses as MS Word documents. Submissions by email or in hard copy will not be considered.

Textbooks
This course does not use a textbook, but many of the articles we shall read can be found in the following anthology (henceforth ‘Bernecker and Dretske (2000)’):


For useful introductory reading see:


Always read up on the topics discussed in class on the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy and the Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy:

Academic Integrity
McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures” (see McGill’s guide to academic honesty for more information). (Approved by Senate on 29 January 2003)

Plagiarism
“Plagiarism” means the representation of another’s work, published or unpublished, as one’s own or assisting another in representing another’s work, published or unpublished, as his or her own. (a) No student shall represent another person’s work, published or unpublished, as his or her own in any academic writing, such as an essay, thesis, research report, project or assignment submitted in a course or a program of study, or represent as his or her own the work of another, whether the material so represented constitutes a part or the entirety of the work submitted. (b) No student shall contribute any work to another student with the knowledge that the latter may submit the work in part or whole as his or her own. Receipt of payment or other forms of compensation for work contributed shall be cause for presumption that the student had such knowledge.

Copyright and Intellectual Property
Instructor-generated course materials (e.g., video recordings, notes, summaries, exam questions, etc.) are protected by law and may not be copied or distributed in any form or in any medium without explicit permission of the instructor. Note that infringements of copyright can be subject to follow up by the University under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures.
**Inclusivity and Accessibility**

As the instructor of this course I endeavor to provide an inclusive learning environment. However, if you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me and the Office for Students with Disabilities, 514-398-6009.

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded. This does not apply to courses in which acquiring proficiency in a language is one of the objectives.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.