

# Philosophy 419: Epistemology

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Course Location and Time: LEA 15, T & R 14:35 – 15:55

## COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course is a survey of central issues in contemporary epistemology and offers a comprehensive overview of both classical and present-day topics in analytic epistemology. It is divided into four substantive units (not including the introductory material covered in the first week):

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

Typically, we will spend 2-3 weeks on any given unit. We will begin with a general introduction to epistemology as a philosophical discipline and consider Gettier’s famous counterexamples to the view that knowledge is justified true belief. In Unit 1 we will then discuss revised analyses of knowledge (causal and counterfactual analyses). In Unit 2 we turn to the problem of scepticism (Do you know that you are reading these lines, given that you might be merely dreaming?), while Unit 3 is devoted to more recent epistemological issues and study the semantics of ‘knowledge’-ascriptions. In this unit we will discuss the view that the predicate ‘knows  $p$ ’ changes its content with the ascriber’s context (epistemic contextualism) and the view that knowledge is sensitive to the subject’s context (subject-sensitive invariantism). Unit 4 is then concerned with evidence and justification and the relationship between the two.

## REQUIREMENTS

Students who take this course must *complete readings on time* and must *participate in class*. Students are expected to have their texts with them at each class, and students may be called upon at random to discuss or explain parts of the week’s readings. 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.

## FORMAT

There will be two lectures per week, although as much time as possible will be devoted to discussion. Normally, the first class of each week will involve a presentation of the relevant literature and the second will consist of a mixture of lecturing and discussions. Students are required to *prepare short presentations* for their tutorial groups (see below).

## ASSESSMENT

Attendance and Participation: 10%

Midterm Exam: 30%

Final Essay: 60%.

Additionally, each student must prepare a short presentation together with a group of fellow stu-

dents. Failure to participate in a group presentation will result in the deduction of 6% from the final course grade.

Students are urged to read Jim Pryor's excellent guidelines on how to read and write philosophy: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html> and <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

## EXTENSIONS

Late papers will be downgraded at a rate of 5% per day (e.g. from 72% to 67%, 90% to 85%, etc.), including weekend days/holidays. Late submissions will not be accepted 10 days after the deadline and the paper will count as 0%. 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.

## MYCOURSES

The webpage for this course is located at <http://www.mcgill.ca/lms/>. It will be used to post the syllabus, readings, and periodic announcements. There is also a discussion function, and you are encouraged to post questions there. I will check regularly and respond to questions. Please feel encouraged to answer each other's questions and to discuss actively on MyCourses! 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)'):

- Bernecker, S. and Dretske, F. (eds.), *Knowledge: Readings in Contemporary Epistemology* (OUP, 2000).

For useful introductory reading see the following textbooks and articles. Always read up on the topics discussed in class on the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* and the *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*:

- Steup, M., *Epistemology in the Twentieth Century*, in: Moran, D (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Twentieth Century Philosophy*, Routledge, New York: 2008: pp. 469-521. [**very useful overview!!**]
- Dancy, J., *Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology* (Blackwell, 1985).
- Everitt, N. and Fisher, A., *Modern Epistemology* (McGraw-Hill, 1994).
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## SCHEDULE OF TOPICS

N.B. Readings given for a particular week are the readings that apply to that week of classes. Students are expected to have completed *all* of the readings before the Tuesday class.

Readings in square brackets are optional. All texts are available electronically on MyCourses.

### **Unit 1. The Analysis of Knowledge**

#### *Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?*

- Bernecker & Dretske, 'Justified True Belief', in: B&D 2000: 3-6.
- Ayer, 'Knowing as Having the Right to Be Sure', in: B&D 2000: 7-12.
- Gettier, 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?'
- Feldman, 'An Alleged Defect in Gettier Counter-Examples'.

#### *Causal and Reliabilist Theories:*

- Goldman, 'A Causal Theory of Knowing'.
- Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge, pp. 162-83. Reprinted as 'The Thermometer Model of Knowledge', in B&D 2000.

#### *Counterfactual Theories:*

- Nozick, Philosophical Explanations, 167-78. Reprinted in B&D 2000.
- BonJour, 'Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge'.
- Williamson, T., Knowledge and Its Limits, ch. I.3, esp. pp 31-33

### **Unit 2: Scepticism, Closure, and Transmission**

#### *Scepticism:*

- Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, Meditation 1, Sections 1-8.
- Moore, 'Proof of an External World'.
- [Unger, 'A Defense of Skepticism'.]

#### *Closure and Transmission Failure:*

- Wright, 'Warrant for Nothing (and Foundations for Free)?'

### ***Midterm Exam: October 17th***

### **Unit 3. The Semantics of 'Knowledge'-Ascriptions**

#### *Epistemic Contextualism:*

- Lewis, 'Elusive Knowledge'.
- Schaffer, 'Lewis on Knowledge Ascriptions'.
- [Cohen, 'How to be a Fallibilist'.]
- [Schiffer, 'Contextualist Solutions to Scepticism'.]

#### *Subject-Sensitive Invariantism:*

- Stanley, Knowledge and Practical Interests, ch. 5.
- DeRose, 'The Problem with Subject-Sensitive Invariantism'.
- [Hawthorne, Knowledge and Lotteries, ch. 4.]

### **Unit 4. Evidence and Justification**

#### *Coherentism and Foundationalism:*

- Price, Perception. Relevant passages reprinted as 'The Given' in B&D 2000.
- Sellars, 'Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?', also in B&D 2000.
- [Chisholm, 'The Directly Evident'. Reprinted in: B&D 2000.]

*Induction:*

- Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part III, esp. §§11-14.
- Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy*, ch. 6, pp. 60-69.
- Goodman, *Fact, Fiction and Forecast*, pp. 72-83. Reprinted in B&D 2000.
- [Reichenbach, H., 'The Pragmatic Justification of Induction', reprinted in B&D 2000.]

*E=K:*

- Feldman & Conee, 'Evidentialism'.
- Williamson, *Knowledge and Its Limits*, Oxford: OUP, 2000, ch. 9 – 'Evidence'.
- Goldman, 'Williamson on Knowledge and Evidence', pp. 85-91.
- Williamson, 'Reply to Goldman', pp. 308-312.

*Naked Statistical Evidence:*

- TBA

## **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 [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

Submissions to this course will be automatically checked for plagiarism by means of Turnitin or equivalent software.

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*No audio or video recording of any kind is allowed in class without the explicit permission of the instructor.*

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