

Course: Epistemology

Instructor: Brandon Ashby

## 2. Textbooks and reading materials

Required:

Brian Skyrms, (2010) *Signals*, Oxford: OUP.

Joseph Henrich (2016) *The Secret of Our Success*, Princeton, NJ:  
Princeton University Press.

All other required reading will be made available as PDFs on the course website.

## 2. About the course

Carl Sagan was fond of saying, “we are the universe’s way of knowing itself.” And, from a certain point of view, the fact that knowledge exists at all is quite strange. Human beings are assemblages of sub-atomic particles, just like any other physical object. Yet unlike almost every other physical object that has ever existed or will ever exist, we and perhaps some animals are the only objects in the known universe that know anything at all. This course will concern one of the rarest commodities in existence by asking when and how knowledge is possible.

While much of this course will concern classic issues in epistemology, like justification and skepticism, one of the central themes that we will return to throughout the course is the role of power, value structures, and cultural evolution in the generation and obliteration of human knowledge. While many of us are already concerned about the rise of generative AI and the corresponding escalation of conspiracy theories and misinformation in the culture wars, it is worth considering that knowledge is and always has been both valuable and difficult to attain. What has changed is not the advent of disinformation, but the amount and kind.

Consider a historical example, Tycho Brahe was not only a brilliant astronomer, but also a self-proclaimed sorcerer. And these dual roles forced him to engage with human knowledge in two very different ways. He was a firm believer in the power and importance of scientific enquiry, and he sought to deepen our knowledge of the cosmos through the study of astronomy. But Brahe’s patrons were not interested in knowledge for its own sake. They wanted information that they could use to maintain and expand their wealth and power, and pure astronomy may be many things, but it is not profitable. So, Brahe convinced his patrons and the public at large that he was a sorcerer in part through the construction of mechanical automata. And Brahe would vigorously attack anyone who accused him of faking his sorcery. To afford pursuing the truth through astronomy, Brahe had to obfuscate it for profit through “sorcery”.

With the rise of algorithmic information distribution, we now find ourselves in the shoes of both Brahe and his patron. There is a growing tendency to, like Brahe’s patrons, only listen to and pay for what we want to hear, and, like Brahe himself, to sometimes share content that will get us the most positive attention on social media. And so now we find ourselves adrift between the often conflicting currents of accuracy and marketability.

### 3. Assignments

- Micro-exams, worth 40% of your final grade.
- Essays, worth 50% of your final grade.
- Syllabus quiz, worth 2.5% of your final grade.
- Discussion forum questions, worth 7.5% of your final grade.

#### 3.1 Micro-exams:

You will have a micro-exam every week. Micro-exams can cover any course material (lectures, readings, in-class discussions) presented in the last six weeks of the course. I drop your two lowest micro-exam scores. Micro-exams will be worth 40% of your final grade. Micro-exams will consist of several multiple-choice questions and at least one short answer question.

#### 3.2 Essays:

You will have three essays over the course of the term. Each will be 3000 words in length. You will have the option of submitting an unlimited number of drafts of each paper before you submit it for a final grade. The essays are worth 50% of your final grade and are evenly weighted.

I do not drop any essay scores. However, if you are satisfied with the grade that you receive on your first two essays, then you have the option of applying your combined score on your first two essays to your third essay. In other words, do well-enough on your first two essays and you don't have to do the third. I do this to encourage you to work hard on your first two essays and polish them. You are better off spending time on honing and crafting two essays than you are rushing through three.

#### 3.3 Syllabus quiz:

You will have a quiz on the syllabus and the structure of the course at the end of your first week of term. It is worth 2.5% of your final grade.

#### 3.4 Discussion forum questions:

The class will be divided into two groups. You'll get your group number on the first day of class. For every reading, one of the two groups will be required to post or upvote three questions about that reading on the course website. Discussion forum questions will be worth 7.5% of your final grade. Your questions must be uploaded before 11:59PM the day before we discuss that reading in class; I need time to read them before class so I can prepare accordingly. Your questions will be listed anonymously. Only I will be able to see your names attached to the questions. So, do not worry about asking "dumb" questions in front of the other students. In general, if you have a question about the material, there is almost certainly at least one other student with that same question.

### 4. Course Schedule

#### Week 1: The rise of misinformation and the omni-presence of epistemology in modern society

- Watch 'There is No Algorithm for Truth' with Tom Scott by The Royal Institution, available at this link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leX541Dr2rU>
- Read Samantha Cole, 'Every day is April Fool's Day now', Vice News, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/5d9p3q/april-fools-day-deepfakes-pope-trump-arrest-gpt>

- Read Jacob Stern, 'An unsettling hint at how much fraud could exist in science', *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/science/archive/2023/08/gino-ariely-data-fraud-allegations/674891/>
- Watch *The Inventor: Out for Blood in Silicon Valley* (2019)
- Exercise, prepare to play three rounds of 'Two truths and a lie' in class. For each round, you'll need to think of two facts that are true about you and one lie. You'll be playing in small groups. The goal is to keep your groupmates from correctly guessing what the lie is. Note: interesting stories and factoids about you make the game more interesting, but don't include any information about yourself that you don't want to share.

### Week 2: Some History of Epistemology

- Renes Descartes, (1641/2008) First and Second Meditations in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Michael Moriarty (trans.), Oxford, OUP.
- John Locke, (1689/1975) on deductive knowledge and essences §§2.31.6; 4.3.10-29; 4.6.9-16 and on scientific enquiry §§3.11.19-21; 3.11.25; 4.12.2,9,12. in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, P.H. Nidditch (ed.), Oxford, Clarendon.
- David Hume, (1748/1999) §§2-5, 7 of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, T.L. Beauchamp (ed.), Oxford: OUP.

### Week 3: Skepticism

- Peter Unger, (1975) Ch. 2, 'A language with absolute terms' in *Ignorance: A Case for Scepticism*, Oxford: OUP. Pp. 49-91.
- Barry Stroud, (1984) Ch. 1, 'The problem of the external world' in *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- G.E. Moore, (1962) Ch. 7, 'Proof of an external world', Ch. 9 'Four forms of scepticism', Ch. 10 'Certainty' in *Philosophical Papers*, New York: Collier Books.

### Week 4: Perception, Consciousness, and Evidence

- Susanna Schellenberg, (2013) 'Phenomenal evidence and factive evidence', *Philosophical Studies*, 173(4): 875-896.
- Tyler Burge, (2007) 'Perceptual entitlement', *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 67(3): 503-48.
- Michael Huemer, 'Compassionate phenomenal conservatism', *Philosophy & Phenomenological Research*, 74(1): 30-55.

### Week 5: Justification, Foundationalism, & Coherence (part 1)

- Stewart Cohen, (1984) 'Justification and truth', *Philosophical Studies*, 46(3): 275-295.
- Laurence Bonjour, (1978) 'Can empirical knowledge have a foundation?', *American Philosophical Quarterly*, 15(1): 1-13.
- Robert Audi, (1993) 'Foundationalism, epistemic dependence, and defeasibility' in his *The Structure of Justification*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Pp. 95-116

### Week 6: Justification, Foundationalism & Coherence (part 2)

- Wilfrid Sellars, (1956) 'Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind', in *Minnesota Studies in the Philosophy of Science*, vol. I, H. Feigl & M. Scriven (eds.), Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press: 253-329.

- Donald Davidson, (1986) 'A coherence theory of truth and knowledge', in E. LePore (ed.) *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, Oxford: Blackwell. Pp. 307-319.
- Ernest Sosa, (1980) 'The raft and the pyramid: Coherence vs. foundations in the theory of knowledge', *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 5(1): 3-26.
- **Optional draft of first paper is due**

### Week 7: Virtue Epistemology

- Duncan Pritchard, (2005) 'Cognitive Responsibility and the Epistemic Virtues' in his *Epistemic Luck*, Oxford: OUP. Pp. 181-200.
- Catherine Elgin, (2004) 'True enough', *Philosophical Issues*, 14, epistemology, 113-131.
- John Greco, (1993) 'Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology', *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, 23(3): 413-432.
- **First paper is due**

### Week 8: Is Knowledge Justified True Belief?

- Edmund Gettier, (1963) 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge', *Analysis*, 26: 144-6.
- Julien Dutant, 2015, 'The Legend of the Justified True Belief Analysis', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 29(1): 95-145.
- Timothy Williamson, (2002) Ch. 1, 'A State of Mind' in *Knowledge and its Limits*, Oxford: OUP.
- Gilbert Harman, (1975) Chs. 7-9 of *Thought*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Pp. 112-154

### Week 9: Experimental Philosophy, Armchair Intuitions, and the A Priori

- Joshua Alexander & Jonathan Weinberg, (2006) 'Analytic epistemology and experimental philosophy', *Philosophy Compass*, 2(1): 56-80.
- George Bealer, (1996) 'A priori knowledge and the scope of philosophy' *Philosophical Studies*, 81: 121-142.
- Timothy Williamson, (2021) §§10.1-10.2 *The Philosophy of Philosophy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Oxford: Wiley Blackwell. Pp. 406-430.
- Excerpts from W.V. Quine, (1951) 'Two dogmas of empiricism', *The Philosophical Review*, 60(1): 20-43.

### Week 10: Naturalizing Epistemology

- W.V. Quine, (1969) 'Epistemology Naturalized' in his *Ontological Relativity & Other Essays*, New York: Columbia University Press.
- Jaegwon Kim, (1988) 'What is 'naturalized epistemology'?', *Philosophical Perspectives*, 2: 381-405.
- Louis M. Antony, 'Quine as feminist: The radical importance of naturalized epistemology' in L. Antony & C. Witt (eds.) *A Mind of One's Own*, Boulder, CO: Westview. Pp. 185-225.
- **Optional draft of second paper is due**

### Week 11: Information, Networks, and Payoffs (part 1)

- Fred Dretske, (1983) Chs. 1-3 of *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

- Daniel Dennett, (1991) 'Real Patterns', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 88(1): 27-51.
- **Second paper is due**

#### Week 12: Information, Networks, and Payoffs (part 2)

- Brian Skryms, (2010) Chs. 1, 3-9, 13-14 of *Signals: Evolution, Learning, and Information*, New York: Oxford University Press.

#### Week 13: Cultural Transmission

- Joseph Henrich, (2016) Chs. 4, 7-8, 10-13, 16 of *The Secret of Our Success*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

#### Week 14: Testimonial and Hermeneutical Injustice

- Elizabeth Fricker, (2007) Chs. 1-2 of *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- Elizabeth Barnes, (2016) Ch. 4 of *The Minority Body*, New York, Oxford University Press.
- **Optional draft of final paper is due**

#### Week 15: Agnotology: Ignorance and the Spread of Disinformation

- Naomi Oreskes & Erik Conway, (2008) 'Challenging knowledge: How climate science became a victim of the Cold War' in R.N. Proctor & Londa Schiebinger (eds.) *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Pp. 55-89
- David Michaels, (2008) 'Manufactured uncertainty: Contested science and the protection of the public's health and environment' in R.N. Proctor & Londa Schiebinger (eds.) *Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. Pp. 90-107.
- **Third paper is due**

#### Week 16: Fall/Spring Break [Move to appropriate location]