

Phil 162-01: Introduction to Epistemology

Fall, 2014

TR, 5:00 pm - 6:15 pm in Maguire 101

Instructor: Benjamin Elzinga
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Office Hours:

Time: TR, 1:00-2:00 pm

Location: New North 2nd Floor

Course Description:

Epistemology studies the nature, structure, and extent of knowledge. The first unit of this course is thus structured around three questions. The first is a skeptical question: is knowledge possible for human beings? To address this, we will read texts by Descartes, G.E. Moore and Hilary Putnam among others. We will soon find that we are required to address the second question: what is the structure of knowledge? More specifically, does knowledge require access to reasons for our beliefs or merely reliable belief formation? Here, we will consider foundationalist, coherentist and virtue epistemological positions. The third question, which is also important for responding to skepticism, focuses on the nature of knowledge. Knowledge is more than true belief, but what turns true belief into knowledge? Grappling with this issue will require attending to the famous "Gettier problem" for the definition of knowledge.

In the second unit of the course we will apply concepts from the first unit to issues in social and feminist epistemology and the philosophy of science. Here we will be interested in the politics of knowing. How does your status in the political world (e.g. your gender, your race etc) affect your ability to engage in knowledge seeking practices like, e.g., science? And might people with a minority status have unique access to features of the world that those in the majority do not? Might not the perspectives of women, for example, have an important role to play in gaining objective knowledge in the sciences? If so, do moral and political values have a fundamental role in the internal practices of science? In the second unit, we will be concerned to address questions such as these.

Course Goals:

- 1) Students will gain knowledge and appreciation of some of the deep problems in the history of epistemology and will also have an opportunity to grapple with more recent issues in social and feminist philosophy.
- 2) Students will develop a set of analytic tools that will help them to find answers to hard theoretical questions, whether philosophical questions or questions that arise in their broader engagement with the world.

Required Texts:

- 1) *On Epistemology* by Linda Zagzebski. Cengage Learning. ISBN-13: 978-0534252342; ISBN-10: 0534252346
- 2) All other required materials for the course will consist of philosophical articles or brief excerpts from larger philosophical works distributed via Blackboard.

Course Requirements:

Your course grade will be based on four short papers (4-5 pages, times new roman, 12 point font) and participation including weekly reflection assignments:

1) Four Short Papers (20% of total grade each)

In these papers, your task will be to do some philosophy yourself. For example, I might assign you a paper consisting of three parts:

a) explaining an argument that is developed by one (or more) of the philosophers whose work we have examined; b) offering the most plausible objection that you can to this argument; and c) explaining how the philosopher in question would respond to your argument.

2) Participation (20% of total grade)

The material that we are going to cover in this class is difficult and likely to be unfamiliar. Thus, careful attention to each text will be expected and required. There will always be some opportunity for you to ask pressing and important questions, bring up something you find confusing, raise an objection against something we've read, etc.

Your participation grade will be determined by your active, participation in class. Receiving full credit will require zero unexcused absences and a consistent effort to genuinely engage with the material and with your classmates each time we meet. To receive an excused absence, the student must have permission beforehand.

Your participation grade will also be determined in part by weekly reflection assignments.

Late Work and Extensions:

Late papers will automatically be penalized 1/3 of a grade (A- to a B+, B+ to a B, etc) for each day that they are late. Extensions may be possible if requested before the due date.

Grading:

These are the general criteria I use for assigning specific grades on written work. What matters most is not the content of your ideas, but the expression of them.

A: original ideas very clearly expressed and organized; full grasp of the material and its implications; especially insightful reflection on the relevant texts

B: reasonably original ideas clearly expressed and organized; good grasp of the material and its implications; good reflection on the relevant texts

C: adequate expression and organization of ideas; adequate grasp of the material and its implications; adequate reflection on texts

D: inadequate expression and organization of ideas; inadequate grasp of the material and its implications; inadequate reflection on texts

F: mostly for serious sins of omission, like turning in only part of an assignment

Academic Integrity

This course will be conducted under the strictest standards of academic integrity. Plagiarism or other forms of dishonesty are contradictory to the goals of this class and hence, will not be tolerated. Cases of suspected academic dishonesty will be referred to the Honor Council for investigation, and I reserve the right to fail a student for the entire course in the case of demonstrated violation. Please see *The Undergraduate Bulletin* or, for more information, visit the university's Honor System website at <http://www.georgetown.edu/honor>. The website has useful guidelines about what constitutes plagiarism and how to cite properly.

**Course Schedule:
(subject to revision)**

Unit 1: Traditional Issues in Epistemology

Week 1: Introduction to Epistemology.

R, August 28: Zagzebski, p. 1-9. (recommended: Roderick Chisholm "The Problem of the Criterion")

Week 2: Epistemic Care and Bullshit

T, September 2: Zagzebski, p. 9-19 (Recommend: William James, "The Will to Believe"; W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief")

R, September 4: Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit". Zagzebski, p. 19-22 (recommended: Robert Brandom, "Asserting")

Week 3: Skepticism and the Regress of Reasons

T, September 9: Zagzebski p. 23-32

R, September 11: Zagzebski p. 32-38 (Recommended: Wilfrid Sellars, "Does Empirical Knowledge have a Foundation?")

Week 4: The Skepticism of Descartes

T, September 16: Descartes Mediations 1 and 2

R, September 18: Descartes Cont. (Recommended, Barry Stroud "The Problem of the External World")

F, September 19: First Paper Due

Week 5: Responses to Cartesian Skepticism

T, September 23: G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World; Zagzebski p. 44-46

R, September 25: Zagzebski p. 46-54

Week 6: Metaphysical and Semantic Responses to Skepticism

T, September 30: Zagzebski p. 55-64

R, October 2: Zagzebski p. 65-76

Week 7: Responsibility and Getting in Touch with Reality

T, October 7: John Haugeland, "Authentic Intentionality"

R, October 9: Haugeland continued

F, October 10: Second Paper Due

Week 8: Trust and the Intellectual Virtues

T, October 14: Zagzebski, p. 77-87
TR, October 16: Zagzebski, p. 87-104

Week 9: What is Knowledge?

T, October 21: Zagzebski, p. 105-114
R, October 23: Zagzebski, p. 114-129 (Recommended: Zagzebski, "On the Inescapability of Gettier Problems".)

Week 10: Epistemic Goods and Transition to Unit Two

T, October 28: Zagzebski, p. 131-152

Unit Two: Science and Social Knowledge

R, October 30: Carl Sagan, "Skepticism and Wonder"
Steven Novella, "The Anti-Vaccine Movement"

Week 11: Being Situated in "Epistemic Space"

T, November 4: D. L. Rosenhan, "Being Sane in Insane Places".
R, November 6: Miranda Fricker, "Epistemic Injustice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing"
(Recommended: Karen Jones, "The Politics of Credibility")

F, November 7: Third Paper Due

Week 12: Implicit Bias and the Sociality of Knowledge

T, November 11: Elizabeth Anderson, "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions"

Week 12: Standpoint Epistemology

T, November 18: "Jenny Saul, "Scepticism and Implicit Bias"
R, November 20: Alison Wylie, "Why Standpoint Matters"

Week 14: Science, Values and Objectivity

T, November 25: Helen Longino, "Can There be a Feminist Science?" (Recommended: Sandra Harding, *The Science Question in Feminism*, Ch. 1)
R, November 27: No Class

Week 15: TBD

T, December 2: TBD
R, December 4: TBD

Final Paper Due on Exam Day