

Philosophy 137: Skepticism, Relativism, and Truth

Whitman College – Fall 2018

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Mon. 2-4 & Fri. 1-2:30

Course Description

In philosophy, and for many people in everyday life, a genuine “truth” is something that reflects the way things really are, objectively speaking. Skepticism either opposes the idea that there are such objective truths, or claims that we can never really have adequate access to them. Relativism claims that something can be true only within a particular individual’s or culture’s perspective, but not absolutely or universally.

In this class, we will examine different forms of skepticism and relativism, and different responses from defenders of objective truth. We will briefly consider the views of the ancient Greek skeptics and the 16th century French philosopher René Descartes, but most of the readings in the course were written by recent and contemporary English-language philosophers.

We will consider views that are skeptical or relativist about everything, as well as views that focus on more specific topics:

- Science: Do our best scientific theories capture (or at least get closer and closer to capturing) the way the world really is? Does science make progress toward truth?
- Language: Do different languages reflect or even impose fundamentally different ways of understanding the world? Can the speaker of one language fully understand the speaker of another language?
- Culture: Do different cultures reflect or even impose fundamentally different ways of understanding the world? Can a member of one culture fully understand a member of another culture?
- Ethics: Are there universal ethical truths, apart from what any individual or society thinks is right and wrong? And if there were, how could we be legitimately confident about figuring them out?

As well, we will consider the practical and other impacts of skepticism and relativism, if there *are* any:

- Does truth have its own inherent value?
- What relationship, if any, is there between truth and happiness?

Class Format

Our class meetings will primarily focus on discussion of the readings and the larger issues related to them. I will sometimes also present important background or related views. As much as possible, however, you will have a chance to apply and evaluate the ideas that the texts present, and to propose and consider alternatives. In order for our meetings to be as productive as possible, it is essential that *each* of you *actively* engage the material.

Course Materials

There are no books that you need to buy for the course. Instead, all of the readings are available on the course CLEo site's "Resources" tab, divided by month.

You will need to have the readings available in class, and I strongly recommend that you be able to mark them up, either by hand or electronically. If you print them out, I strongly encourage you to print on both sides of the paper, if possible. (Most campus printers can print double-sided – if you're unsure how, please just ask someone.)

Finally, you should get into the habit of consulting a dictionary while you're reading. You can't understand the authors' ideas and arguments if you don't know what all of the words mean!

Technology

- **E-Mail:** I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through the class list-server. It is your responsibility to *check your Whitman e-mail account every day!* If you have questions, ideas, information, and/or links that you'd like to share with the class, you're also welcome to use the class list-server, which can be accessed through the CLEo site.
- **In the Classroom:** You are welcome to use a computer, tablet, or smart-phone in the classroom, as long as it is *exclusively* focused on our immediate tasks: accessing the readings and taking notes. You should *never ever EVER* take even a moment to check your e-mail, skype your instagram, blog your tumblr on lyft, etc.

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Participation — 20% of your total grade

You are expected to be an active and productive participant in our conversations. To do this, you must carefully read (and sometimes re-read) the assigned texts before class, and come to our meetings with questions and ideas to discuss. There will sometimes be more specific assignments for you to complete. More details about expectations and grading standards are provided below.

Brief Essays — 60% of your total grade (best essay 20%, other essays 10% each)

As we are examining the different issues and arguments, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own ideas in response. About once every two or three weeks (as indicated on the schedule below), you will articulate and support your views on the material in a brief essay. More details are provided below.

Final Essay — 20% of your total grade

At the end of the semester, you will compose a longer, less formal essay in which you sketch out some of your own overall views about skepticism and/or relativism in relation to the course material. That will give you a chance to step back and consider the broader issues addressed by the readings, and how your own thinking has been impacted. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

Writing Fellow

XXX is an outstanding senior Philosophy major who will be serving as the “Writing Fellow” for the class this semester. Having honed her own skills in composing clear and convincing philosophical essays, she will now be working with you to develop yours. Of course, I will also be happy to meet with you at any point in the semester; XXX’s help is meant to supplement mine, not to replace it.

Before the due-date for each of the brief essays, XXX will be available for one-on-one meetings to help you develop your ideas and map out your arguments. And starting with the second essay, she will also discuss the feedback you’ve received to help you determine how to address my comments and suggestions in the next essay. More details about how those meetings will work are included with the explanation of the paper assignment at the end of the syllabus.

You will be **required** to meet with XXX before each of the first two papers. You will be **strongly encouraged** to meet with her before each of the remaining essays. Simply put: the more you work with XXX, the better your essays will be!

Please be sure to respect XXX’s time and schedule at least as much as you would respect mine. Skipping a meeting with her, or cancelling less than 24 hours in advance, will result in your overall grade for the course being lowered by 1% (i.e., about a third of a notch) each time that happens.

Support for Students with Disabilities

I believe that every student should have an equal opportunity to succeed in this course. If you are a student with a disability who might need accommodations in order to have that opportunity fully, please meet with Antonia Keithahn in the Academic Resources Center for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. All information about disabilities is considered private, and so if I receive notification that you are eligible to receive an accommodation due to a verified disability, I will provide it in as discreet a manner as possible.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you’re working on the essays. So it is **permitted** (and even encouraged!) for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other’s essays. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else’s words or specific ideas in your written work without providing a proper citation to the source. Even if it’s an accident, it’s still plagiarism! You have a responsibility to keep track of the origins of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will be reported to the Dean of Students’ office for academic misconduct.** For a first offense, the consequence could range up to failing the course. For a second offense, the consequence could range up to dismissal from the College. For more details, see the Student Handbook.

If you have *any* questions about what would or wouldn’t be plagiarism in this context, please just talk with me about it *in advance*.

Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

- Wed. Aug. 29** opening discussion: Why be a skeptic and/or a relativist? And how would it matter?
- Fri. Aug. 31** Cartesian skepticism
Descartes, *Meditations* 1
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- Mon. Sep. 3** Descartes' response to his own skepticism
Descartes, *Meditations* 2-4
- Wed. Sep. 5** the allegedly unavoidable basis of Cartesian skepticism
Nagel, "Knowledge" (excerpts)
- Fri. Sep. 7** a defense and application of Cartesian skepticism
Schwitzgebel, "1% Skepticism"
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- Mon. Sep. 10** Moore's defense of common sense
** brief essay due* Moore, "Proof of an External World" (excerpts)
- Wed. Sep. 12** Lycan's defense of Moore
Lycan, "Moore against the New Skeptics"
- Fri. Sep. 14** Pyrrhonism: skepticism and tranquility
Diogenes Laertius, *Life of Pyrrho* (excerpts)
Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (excerpts)
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- Mon. Sep. 17** Pyrrhonian skeptical arguments: the ten modes
Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (excerpts)
- Wed. Sep. 19** more Pyrrhonian skeptical arguments: the five modes
Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (excerpts)
- Fri. Sep. 21** an attempt to reconcile realism and relativism politically
Seller, "Realism versus Relativism"
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- Mon. Sep. 24** an explanation and defense of scientific realism
** brief essay due* Blackburn, "Realism as Science; Realism about Science"
- Wed. Sep. 26** Kuhn's challenge: "normal science" and anomalies
Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ch. 1, excerpts of chs. 2-3, and ch. 8
- Fri. Sep. 28** Kuhn's challenge: scientific revolutions
Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, chs. 9-10 and pp. 147-49
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- Mon. Oct. 1** Kuhn's challenge and scientific "progress"
Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, ch. 13
- Wed. Oct. 3** concerns about Kuhn
Meynell, "Science, the Truth, and Thomas Kuhn"
- Fri. Oct. 5** NO CLASS – FALL BREAK
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- Mon. Oct. 8** a proposed third option between realism and Kuhn
Longino, "Scientific Objectivity and the Logics of Science"
- Wed. Oct. 10** an original proposal of linguistic relativism
Whorf, "Relation of Habitual Thought and Behavior to Language"
- Fri. Oct. 12** concerns about linguistic relativism
Pullum, "The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax"
Devitt & Sterelny, "Linguistic Relativity" (excerpts)
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- Mon. Oct. 15** the reemergence of linguistic relativism?
** brief essay due* Reines & Prinz, "Reviving Whorf"
Gordon, "Numerical Cognition without Words: Evidence from Amazonia"
- Wed. Oct. 17** from linguistic relativism to cultural relativism
MacIntyre, "Relativism, Power, and Philosophy"
- Fri. Oct. 19** understanding across cultures and the nature of respect
Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword"
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- Mon. Oct. 22** understanding across cultures and how to engage about values
Appiah, "Relativism and Cross-Cultural Understanding"
- Wed. Oct. 24** understanding across cultures and how to assess "progress" in development
Nussbaum & Sen, "Internal Criticism & Indian Rationalist Traditions," pp. 307-17
- Fri. Oct. 26** understanding across cultures and how to assess "progress" in development
Nussbaum & Sen, "Internal Criticism & Indian Rationalist Traditions," all
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- Mon. Oct. 29** some reasons for moral skepticism
** brief essay due* Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values" (excerpts)
- Wed. Oct. 31** response to Mackie about moral disagreement
Brink, *Moral Realism and the Foundations of Ethics*, pp. 198-209
- Fri. Nov. 2** a proposed form of moral relativism
Harman, "Moral Relativism Defended"
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Mon. Nov. 5 concerns about moral relativism and an objectivist alternative
Shafer-Landau, "Ethical Relativism"

Wed. Nov. 7 concerns about the contingency of our moral beliefs
Sher, "But I Could Be Wrong"

Fri. Nov. 9 a challenge to moral relativism
Postow, "Dishonest Relativism"

Mon. Nov. 12 a moderate form of moral relativism
Wong, "Pluralism and Ambivalence"

Wed. Nov. 14 further concerns about moral relativism and sketch of another alternative
Nussbaum, "Women and Cultural Universals"

Fri. Nov. 16 Nussbaum, cont.
** brief essay due*

— — **THANKSGIVING BREAK** — —

Mon. Nov. 26 for the inherent value of truth
Lynch, "The Truth Hurts"

Wed. Nov. 28 against the inherent value of truth
Wrenn, "Truth is Not (Very) Intrinsically Valuable"

Fri. Nov. 30 for the importance of understanding, not truth
Elgin, "True Enough"

Mon. Dec. 3 proposed connections between truth and happiness
Lynch, "Truth and Happiness"

Wed. Dec. 5 questioning the connections between truth and happiness
Griswold, "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?"

Fri. Dec. 7 semester wrap-up

**** Mon. Dec. 10 @ 11:00 a.m. – final essay due**