

# Philosophy 210: Epistemology

Whitman College – Spring 2014

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## Course Description

The word '**philosophy**' derives from Greek words meaning '**love of wisdom**'. So philosophy attempts to determine some of the deepest truths about our existence and the reality around us. What distinguishes philosophy is not just the issues that it addresses, since some of these are also addressed by other fields (like science and religion). What is distinctive about philosophy is the way in which it attempts to answer those questions: through **reason**. Philosophers attempt to justify their views with arguments, laying out the strongest reasons in favor of their positions and responding to the strongest objections against them.

**Epistemology** is the branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge and justification. We will consider questions such as:

- What is knowledge?
- How is knowledge different from mere opinion?
- Can we really know anything at all?
- What should we believe?
- How can our beliefs be justified?

We will also consider how these kinds of epistemological questions relate to questions in other areas of philosophy, such as metaphysics (what is the ultimate nature of reality?), philosophy of mind (what is the nature of the human mind? how does it work?), and philosophy of language (what is the nature of truth and meaning?), and how all of these different branches of philosophy relate to scientific inquiry.

While epistemology has occupied philosophers for millennia, in this class we will focus primarily on current approaches and theories. This means that we will be examining some difficult and complicated texts in contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, this course is meant as an introduction to philosophy, and does not assume any prior background (though students with more experience with philosophy should also find it rewarding). We will take the time to make sure that at least the main ideas are clear and accessible to everyone.

## Goals of the Course

1. To explore some of the primary questions and issues of epistemology.
2. To gain an understanding of some of the main contemporary approaches to those issues.
3. To develop an appreciation of the relations between epistemology and other areas of philosophy, and between philosophy and science
4. To enhance the abilities to read, think, discuss, and write clearly in a philosophical way.
5. To sharpen general interpretive and analytical skills.

## Texts to be Used

- A good dictionary. (You can't understand the readings if you don't know what the words mean!)
- John Pollock & Joseph Cruz, *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).
- Ernest Sosa, Jaegwon Kim, Jeremy Fantl, and Matthew McGrath, eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Blackwell, 2008).

In addition, there are a number of readings available on the course CLEo site. You will need to be able to mark up those readings, and to have access to them during our class-discussions.

## Technology

- **CLEo:** Being registered for this course automatically gives you access to the (very rudimentary) CLEo site that I will be maintaining. If you're unfamiliar with CLEo or have any difficulty accessing the site, please just let me know.
- **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 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 (the readings, note-taking, etc.). You should *never, ever* take even a moment to check your e-mail, blog your status on The Facebook, tweet your instagram, etc.

## Summary of Requirements and Grading

### Preparation and Participation — 15% of your total grade

Our class meetings will primarily focus on conversation about the readings and the larger issues that they address. It is essential for you to be an active and productive participant in our conversations. Philosophy is not a spectator sport! Understanding and insight take place *in the process* of engaging in discussion; they are not just products of it that you can passively absorb.

To be an effective participant, you must carefully read (and often re-read) the assignment before class, and come to our meetings with questions and ideas to discuss. There will occasionally be additional preparatory assignments for you to complete. More details about expectations and grading standards are printed below.

### Papers — 65% of your total grade (best paper counts 20%; other three count 15% each)

During the course of the semester, you will write four moderate-length essays (about 5 pages each). These essays will allow you to explore the issues at some depth, and to apply and evaluate the ideas that the texts present. More detailed assignments will be available at least a week before each paper is due.

### Final Examination — 20% of your total grade

There will be a comprehensive take-home final examination, which you will be able to complete at your convenience during exam week. The exam questions will give you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have understood, synthesized, and reflected on the issues and views that we've examined throughout the semester. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

## 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 papers. 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, to exchange notes with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other's papers. 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 automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details about the College's policies and procedures, 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 & Assignments

**Note:** This is an ambitious schedule. It would be great if we were able to follow it – I think that all of the readings here are well worth discussing. But if we need more time on some of them, that's perfectly fine; we'll just cut some others. Those changes will be announced in class and/or through e-mail, so be on the lookout for them.

CTK = *Contemporary Theories of Knowledge*

EA = *Epistemology: An Anthology*

### 0. Introduction to Epistemology

- Tue. Jan. 21      Descartes, *Meditations I* – online
- Thu. Jan. 23      Moore, "Proof of an External World," EA pp. 26-28  
Moore, "Four Forms of Scepticism," EA pp. 29-30  
Moore, "Certainty," EA pp. 31-34  
CTK ch. 1 secs. 1-2
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### 1. Foundationalism

- Tue. Jan. 28      CTK ch. 1 secs. 3-5 and ch. 2 secs. 1-3
- Thu. Jan. 30      Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given," EA pp. 80-93
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Tue. Feb. 4 CTK ch. 2 sec. 5

Thu. Feb. 6 Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?," EA pp. 109-123 *skip* sec. III

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\* *Mon. Feb. 10 first paper due*

## 2. Coherentism

Tue. Feb. 11 CTK ch. 3 secs. 1-4

Thu. Feb. 13 Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," EA pp. 124-133

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\* *Mon. Feb. 17 screening of "Vanilla Sky" – time & location TBD*

Tue. Feb. 18 discuss "Vanilla Sky"

Thu. Feb. 20 **NO CLASS** – Symposium on Power & Privilege

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Tue. Feb. 25 Haack, "Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification," EA pp. 134-144

## 3. Externalism

Thu. Feb. 27 Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" EA 192-193  
CTK ch. 4 sec. 1

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\* *Mon. Mar. 3 second paper due*

Tue. Mar. 4 Putnam, "Brains in a Vat" – CLEo

Thu. Mar. 6 Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?" EA pp. 333-347 *skip* sec. III

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\* *Mon. Mar. 10 screening of "Memento" – time & location TBD*

Tue. Mar. 11 discuss "Memento"

Thu. Mar. 6 CTK ch. 4 sec. 4  
Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge," EA 363-378

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**SPRING BREAK**

Tue. Apr. 1 CTK ch. 4 sec. 5  
Plantinga, "Warrant: A First Approximation," EA pp. 429-441

Thu. Apr. 3 Zagzebski, "*Virtues of the Mind*, Selections," EA pp. 442-453

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Tue. Apr. 8 **NO CLASS** – Undergraduate Conference

\* *Wed. Apr. 9* *third paper due*

#### 4. Social Epistemology

Thu. Apr. 10 Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge" – CLEo

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Tue. Apr. 15 Baker, "Trust and Rationality," EA pp. 807-814  
Orwell, 1984, pp. 62-69 & 202-208 – CLEo

Thu. Apr. 17 Brandom, "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons" – CLEo

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#### 5. Challenges to Traditional Epistemology

Tue. Apr. 22 Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," EA pp. 528-37

Thu. Apr. 24 Kim, "What Is 'Naturalized Epistemology'?" EA pp. 538-51  
CTK ch. 6 sec. 4

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\* *Mon. Apr. 28* *fourth paper due*

Tue. Apr. 29 Lewis, "Elusive Knowledge," EA pp. 691-705

Thu. May 1 Weinberg, Nichols, and Stich, "Normativity and Epistemic Intuitions," EA pp. 625-646

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Tue. May 6 Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account" – CLEo

Thu. May 8 Antony, "Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology," EA 552-584

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Tue. May 13 Foley, "Skepticism and Rationality," EA pp. 322-32

## Class Participation Expectations and Standards

Most of our time together will be spent in a group conversation about the issues, views, and questions suggested by the readings. You will learn not only from the authors and from me, but also from each other.

As with any conversation, you can't usefully participate if you don't have anything to contribute or if you don't know what you're talking about. So it is essential that you come to our meetings well-prepared:

- Carefully read (and often re-read) the assignment before class.
- Reflect on the reading, and identify some questions, issues, and ideas that are worth discussing.
- Complete any additional assignments that have been given.

Everyone in the class should be a part of our conversation. With around 20 of us in the room, no one person needs to talk all of the time. As long as you are regularly involved in the discussion, the *quality* of your contributions is much more important than the *quantity* of time that you're speaking. There are many different ways of contributing, all of which are very important. You should work to find the forms of participation that are most effective for you. At the same time, I hope that you don't settle into a rut, but rather try different forms of participation on different occasions.

I understand that everyone has good days and not-so-good days; some of the readings and issues will engage you more than others. Your participation grade will be based on your overall involvement throughout the semester. These are the grading criteria that will be used:

An **OUTSTANDING** participant (A-level) typically:

- Displays genuine enthusiasm and engagement with the readings.
- Plays a leadership role and advances the conversation to new levels.
- Contributes complex insights into the texts and issues.
- Draws connections among the different texts and issues.
- Raises provocative new questions and issues.
- Enhances the participation of others by questioning, actively listening, and sharing time.

A **GOOD** participant (B-level) typically:

- Shows interest and effort.
- Stays on-topic and furthers the conversation.
- Expresses substantial, well-supported ideas.
- Asks good questions about the texts and issues.
- Engages other students, and not just me.

An **ADEQUATE** participant (C-level) typically:

- Listens but does not volunteer.
- Shows acquaintance with the texts and some signs of preparation if called on.
- Offers opinions on and reactions to the texts, but without specific textual references or other support.

**UNACCEPTABLE** (failing) behavior includes any of the following:

- Frequent absence.
- No evidence of preparation.
- Dozing off in class. (If you're that sleepy, you should simply go home and take a nap!)
- Other signs of disengagement: doodling, working for another class, etc.
- "Toxic" or hostile behavior that undermines our intellectual community.