

PHIL 1460: Theory of Knowledge

Spring 2021

Professor: Kevin Dorst

Lecture: T/Th, 2:50–4:05pm

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“Classroom”: https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/89216/external_tools/322

“Office”: <https://pitt.zoom.us/j/4971426138>

Office hours: Wed 3–5pm; by appointment

Class Description: We each know a lot. And not just humdrum things, like what we had for breakfast this morning. Important things, like how urgent (if at all) climate change is, which political party should be in power, and whether God exists.

Or so we think. But this knowledge is constantly under threat. Smarter, better-informed people disagree with us about climate change; biases appear to have played an ineliminable role in the formation of our political beliefs; if we had grown up in a slightly different environment, our opinion about God could easily have been the opposite of what it is; and yes, there may even be reasons to doubt that we know what we had for breakfast this morning.

This course is about such skeptical threats. We’ll try to get a handle on what the most serious ones are, and how (or whether) our knowledge can withstand them. What should we make of the fact that many of our beliefs are the subject of massive disagreements, are driven by biased processes, are dependent on arbitrary circumstances, or are afflicted with the ever-present possibility of error? To address these questions, we’ll read contemporary and classic works in epistemology with an eye toward what they teach us about our knowledge in the context of an increasingly contested public discourse.

Readings: All readings will be made available on Canvas in the “Files” section:

<https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/89216/files>

Grading: Your grade will be determined by 3 papers (75%), a handful of quizzes (15%), and class participation (10%).

Papers (75%). You will write three papers, each around 1500 words (\approx 5 double-spaced pages). Paper prompts will be distributed at least 2 weeks before the due date.

Paper 1 (20%): Due **March 2nd**.

Paper 2 (25%): Due **April 1st**.

Paper 3 (30%): Due **April 29th**.

Note: Writing philosophy papers is a distinct skill that can be tough to get the hang of—even if you’ve done it a few times before. It requires, in effect, making a single contribution to an ongoing conversation started by the readings and in class. We’ll devote class time to discussing what is expected, and I’ll send out some materials with advice beforehand. I strongly encourage you to come chat with me (during office hours, or scheduling a meeting) when you set out to write your first paper.

Quizzes (15%). There will be six in-class pop quizzes. We’ll do these at the beginning of class to check that you’ve done the reading. They will be posted on Canvas: <https://canvas.pitt.edu/courses/89216/quizzes>. Your lowest quiz-grade will be dropped.

Participation (10%). Attendance is mandatory. (When you join the zoom room, please send a “here” message to the group chat so that I have an attendance record.)

This will be partially a discussion-based class: the only way to learn philosophy is to *do* it, so we will have class discussions and breakout rooms to give you a chance. In addition to attendance, you can satisfy (or make up) your participation grade by contributing to class discussions, emailing me questions or thoughts about the readings and topics we cover, or coming to office hours.

Course Policies:

Announcements. I'll send class communications via announcements on Canvas, so make sure you've set things up to receive notifications.

Late papers. Papers will be marked down $\frac{1}{3}$ of a letter grade per unexcused day late (so a B+ would become a B). You each have a total of **4 no-questions-asked, free late days** to use at your discretion throughout the semester—but *you must email me when you decide to use them*.

Class recordings. Class sessions will be recorded via zoom. The recordings will only be made available to those who miss classes for a legitimate reason.

Covid. If you or a loved one gets sick, and as a result you start to fall behind on the course, the best approach is to email me about it as soon as possible so that we can construct a plan for catching up, getting you access to the class recordings, etc.

Academic Integrity. This is serious. Academic integrity violations will not be tolerated. Evidence of dishonesty will be seriously pursued, and confirmation that plagiarism has occurred will result in an "F" for the course and notification of the undergraduate dean, with further consequences (such as expulsion) on the table. You are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism. The short, sweet version: any words that are not your own must be in quotes with a proper citation; any ideas that are not your own must be clearly cited. See <https://www.provost.pitt.edu/faculty/academic-integrity-freedom/academic-integrity-guidelines>. Please reach out to me if you have any questions. Asking beforehand is never an issue.

Disability Accommodations. If you have a disability that requires special testing accommodations or other classroom modifications, please reach out to me about it. You must notify both me and Disability Resources and Services no later than the second week of term. You may be asked to provide documentation of your disability to determine the appropriateness of accommodations. To notify Disability Resources and Services, call 412-648-7890 to schedule an appointment. The office is open virtually; please visit <https://www.diversity.pitt.edu/disability-access/disability-resources-and-services> for more information and to apply for accommodations.

Self-Care and Well-Being

College is hard. All the more so during a pandemic. So, please, get into the habit of building self-care into your schedule—whether it's in the form of exercise, time talking to friends/family, or even just to relax. Do it! You'll find that you are much more productive if you do.

Pitt also has resources to help. If you or anyone you know experiences overwhelming academic stress, persistent difficult feelings and/or challenging life events, please seek support

seek support. In addition to reaching out to friends and loved ones, consider connecting with a faculty member you trust for assistance connecting to helpful resources. The University Counseling Center is also here for you. You can call 412-648-7930 at any time to connect with a clinician.

If you or someone you know is feeling suicidal, please call the University Counseling Center at any time at 412-648-7930. You can also contact Resolve Crisis Network at 888-796-8226. If the situation is life threatening, call Pitt Police at 412-624-2121 or dial 911.

Schedule

I. The Problem of Disagreement

- 1.19 Deane and Gramlich 2020, “The election reveals two broad voting coalitions fundamentally at odds”
Schoenfield 2020, “Why do you believe what you do? Run some diagnostics on it.”
- 1.21 Feldman 2006, “Reasonable Religious Disagreement”

II. *Reasonable* Disagreement?

- 1.26 O’Connor and Weatherall 2019, pp. 46–77
- 1.28 Singer et al. 2019, “Rational Social and Political Polarization” pp. 2244–2254 and 2258–2262.
- 2.2 Rini 2020, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”
- 2.4 Nguyen 2020, “Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers”
- 2.9 Kelly 2008, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization”
- 2.11 McWilliams 2019, “Evidentialism and Belief Polarization”, pp. 1–16, 23–4; 28–9.
(I.e. read sections 1–4.5, 5.0–5.1, and 5.3.2.)

III. Reacting to Disagreement

- 2.16 Kelly 2005, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”
- 2.18 Elga 2007, “Reflection and Disagreement”
- 2.23 **NO CLASS** [Self care day! Take a break :)]
- 2.25 McGrath 2008, “Moral Disagreement and Moral Expertise”
- 3.2 **PAPER 1 DUE at 11:59pm**
Christensen 2015, “Disagreement and Public Controversy”
- 3.4 Review Session

IV. Irrelevant Influences

- 3.9 Siegel 2019, “On the Problem of Culturally Normal Belief” (skip section 3)
- 3.11 Mills 2007, “White Ignorance”
- 3.16 Fricker 2007, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 1–4 and Chapter 1.
- 3.18 Fricker 2007, *Epistemic Injustice*, pp. 1–4 and Chapter 1 (discussion).
- 3.23 Street 2015, “Does Anything Really Matter or Did we Just Evolve To Think So?”

3.25 White 2010, “You just believe that because...”, pp. 573–595.

3.30 White 2010, “You just believe that because...”, pp. 595–611.

4.1 **PAPER 2 DUE at 11:59pm**

Vavova 2018, “Irrelevant Influences”

4.6 Review

V. Skepticism?

4.8 Stroud 1984, “The Problem of the External World”

4.13 Gettier 1963, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?”

Nozick 1981, “Knowledge and Skepticism”

4.15 Stine 1976, “Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure”

4.20 Lewis 1996, “Elusive Knowledge”

4.22 Review Session (Last class meeting)

4.29 **PAPER 3 DUE at 11:59pm** (No class, of course! Grade deadline is May 5, so even if you save all your free late-days till the end, the *absolute last* day to turn in the paper is May 3.)