Introduction to Epistemology and Social Epistemology

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1 Course Description

What does it mean to have knowledge? How do we know things, and what can be known? These are some of the central questions in the discipline of epistemology ("the theory of knowledge"). The answers to these questions are not as obvious as some casual thought may suggest. If you think the senses provide us with knowledge, how will you know when your senses deceive you? If you think knowledge is gained through reasoning, where will you start reasoning?

This course investigates these questions. We start with a general introduction of the discipline, focusing on three questions: what is knowledge (the Gettier problem, classes 1–4), can we know anything at all (the problem of skepticism, classes 5–8), and how do we get knowledge (a priori vs. a posteriori knowledge and the problem of induction, classes 9–12)?

We then zoom in on some recent themes in social epistemology. First we ask how knowledge can be acquired from others (the problem of testimony, classes 13–16). Then we ask how a disagreement between two individuals with equal expertise is resolved (peer disagreement, classes 17–20). Next we consider how issues of gender and diversity affect epistemology (classes 21–24). And finally we ask whether, and if so how, groups of individuals can have knowledge (classes 25–28).

2 Course Objectives

At the end of this course, students should have

- the ability to read argumentative texts (including, but not limited to, philosophical articles) and identify the main thesis, the structure of the argument advanced in support of this thesis, and the premises used;
• the ability to write a well-structured argumentative paper;

• a working understanding of some key questions in epistemology and social epistemology;

• the ability and confidence to engage their fellow students and the instructor in group discussions in a critical but respectful way.

3 Reading List

Analysis of Knowledge


Skepticism

Class 5. Descartes on skepticism. Reading: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditations 1 and 2).


Class 8. DeRose’s argument against skepticism. Reading: Keith DeRose, “Solving the Skeptical Problem”.

Hume’s Fork and the Problem of Induction

Class 10. Kant’s solution. Reading: Immanuel Kant, *Prologomena to Any Future Metaphysics* (pp. 11–33).


**Testimony**


Class 15. The interpersonal view and the transmission view. Reading: Jennifer Lackey, “Testimony: Acquiring Knowledge From Others”.


**Peer Disagreement**


**Gender and Diversity Issues in Epistemology**


**Collective Agency and Collective Knowledge**

Class 25. What does it mean for a group to believe something? Reading: Margaret Gilbert, “Modelling Collective Belief”.


Class 27. Do we need collective belief to explain scientific consensus? Reading: Melinda Fagan, “Is There Collective Scientific Knowledge? Arguments From Explanation”.