

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

Class 1. True belief and justification. Reading: Plato, *Theaetetus* (excerpt).

Class 2. Gettier's challenge to the "justified true belief" account. Reading: Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?", Robert Nozick, "Knowledge".

Class 3. A causal theory of knowledge. Reading: Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing".

Class 4. Contextualism. Reading: David Annis, "A Contextualist Theory of Epistemic Justification".

Skepticism

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

Class 6. Russell on skepticism. Reading: Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (chapters I and II).

Class 7. Moore's argument against skepticism. Reading: G. E. Moore, "Proof of an External World".

Class 8. DeRose's argument against skepticism. Reading: Keith DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem".

Hume's Fork and the Problem of Induction

Class 9. Hume's Fork and the problem of induction. Reading: David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (from section II to Part 1 of section V).

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

Class 11. *A priori* knowledge. Reading: A. J. Ayer, "The *a priori*".

Class 12. Lawlike statements and the "grue" problem. Reading: A. J. Ayer, "What Is a Law of Nature?", Nelson Goodman, "The new riddle of induction".

Testimony

Class 13. Social epistemology as a species of epistemology. Reading: Alvin Goldman, "Why Social Epistemology Is *Real* Epistemology".

Class 14. Reductionism vs. anti-reductionism. Reading: David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (section X, part I), Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (section 24).

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

Class 16. A new argument against reductionism. Reading: Kevin Zollman, "Modeling the Social Consequences of Testimonial Norms".

Peer Disagreement

Class 17. Peer disagreement: a steadfast view. Reading: Thomas Kelly, "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement".

Class 18. The uniqueness thesis. Reading: Richard Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreements".

Class 19. An intermediate view? Reading: Jennifer Lackey, "A Justificationist View of Disagreement's Epistemic Significance".

Class 20. A formalized view. Reading: Keith Lehrer, "When Rational Disagreement is Impossible".

Gender and Diversity Issues in Epistemology

Class 21. Is the sex of the knower epistemologically significant? Reading: Lorraine Code, *What Can She Know? Feminist Theory and the Construction of Knowledge* (chapter one).

- Class 22. Testimonial injustice. Reading: Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (chapter 1).
- Class 23. Injustice against an inquirer. Reading: Christopher Hookway, “Some Varieties of Epistemic Injustice: Reflections on Fricker”, Miranda Fricker, “Replies to Alcott, Goldberg, and Hookway on *Epistemic Injustice*”.
- Class 24. The epistemological significance of race. Reading: Charles Mills, “White Ignorance”.

Collective Agency and Collective Knowledge

- Class 25. What does it mean for a group to believe something? Reading: Margaret Gilbert, “Modelling Collective Belief”.
- Class 26. Collective belief in science. Reading: Margaret Gilbert, “Collective Belief and Scientific Change”, Brad Wray, “Collective Belief and Acceptance”.
- Class 27. Do we need collective belief to explain scientific consensus? Reading: Melinda Fagan, “Is There Collective Scientific Knowledge? Arguments From Explanation”.
- Class 28. A formal model of collective knowledge. Reading: Christian List, “Group Knowledge and Group Rationality: A Judgment Aggregation Perspective”.