

Philosophy 4300 - Epistemology - Spring 2017

Professor Charlie Huenemann

T/Th 12-1:15, Huntsman 220

Epistemology is the study of knowledge. We might be interested in **what knowledge is** - how it differs from mere opinion or belief (if it differs at all). What has to happen in order for my belief to count as knowledge? Is it that I must be able to prove it to be true, or have some sufficient amount of evidence for it? Or is it that my culture or society has to “bless” my belief in some way, and regard it as true? Or is it some measure of both? And we might be interested in **how to get knowledge** - how to refute skepticism, and find truths we can be confident of, on the basis of reason or experience or both. In this class we’ll explore all these questions, reading some classic philosophical works along with some more contemporary works having to do with our cognitive weaknesses and the global shape of knowledge among learned disciplines.

Required texts: *The Empiricists* (Locke, Berkeley, Hume) (Anchor, ISBN 978-0385096225); Michael Shermer, *The Believing Brain* (St. Martin’s Griffin, ISBN 978-1250008800); Edward Wilson, *Consilience* (Vintage, ISBN 978-0679768678).

Instructor information: Charlie Huenemann, Main 208, phone 797-0254; office hours 10-12 on Wednesdays, but I’m also generally available on T/W/Th, and by appointment, email charlie.huenemann@usu.edu. I’m always happy to meet with you - really, I’m a friendly and encouraging fellow who enjoys talking with students - so please feel welcome to knock on my door. I have a blog if you are interested: huenemanni.com. Also, on the subject of blogs, you may wish to check out usuphilosophy.com to stay abreast of local philosophical happenings.

Work. You will have to write four essays, and be part of a group presentation. Each essay will be about 1000 words (roughly four pages). Your part of the group presentation will be to write and present a 750-word response to some given essays. You are expected to attend class, and participate as suits you. Each of these items - the four essays, the presentation, and your contribution - count equally toward your final grade.

Cheating. In class - as in life - never try to pass off someone else’s work as your own. I’m completely intolerant of this kind of intellectual theft; it’s a cardinal sin of the academy.

Lateness in turning in work: generally there should be none, but life packs surprises, and sometimes work has to be delayed. Be mature about this, and talk to me about it. If you need an extension, or need some alternative arrangement due to disability, please let me know, and we’ll work something out. Please note that no late work will receive an “A”.

Syllabus (subject to revision):

Date	What will be discussed on that day in class:
1.10	Introduction
1.12	Discussion - What is knowledge?
1.17	Analogy of the Cave (reading provided in class)
1.19	Skepticism about the external world: Cartesian skepticism (lecture and discussion)
1.24	Locke, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 7-40: focus on primary vs. secondary qualities
1.26	no class
1.31	Locke, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 75-133: focus on what we can know and what we can't know (and why) essay 1 due
2.2	presentations, group A
2.7	Magic and the Scientific Revolution (lecture and discussion)
2.9	Rationalism vs. Empiricism (lecture and discussion)
2.14	Berkeley, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 135-163: focus on his discussion of language in the introduction, and his criticism of Locke's primary vs. secondary distinction
2.16	Berkeley, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 163-215:
2.21	no class - follow Monday schedule
2.23	presentations, group B
2.28	<i>The Matrix</i> essay 2 due
3.2	Discussion of various metaphors in <i>The Matrix</i>
3.14	Hume, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 307-333: focus especially on his arguments about causal knowledge
3.16	presentations, group C
3.21	Hume, <i>Empiricists</i> , pp. 334-404: focus on sections V and X, and skim the others. The main question to think about is the connection between what he claims about causal knowledge and what he claims about miracles.
3.23	Hume, cont.'d

3.28	Shermer, parts I and II	essay 3 due
3.30		presentations, group D
4.4	Shermer, part III	
4.6	Shermer, part IV	
4.11		presentations, group E
4.13	Wilson, chapters 1-4	
4.18	Wilson, chapters 5-8	
4.20		presentations, group F
4.25	Wilson, chapters 9-12	
4.27	Concluding discussion	
5.2		essay 4 due (by midnight)

Essays

My tips on writing philosophy:

<https://usuphilosophy.com/2016/01/07/how-to-write-a-philosophical-essay/#more-3188>

If you would like an even more detailed set of tips for writing about philosophy, see this:

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

Each of your essays should provide a decent, general overview of the article. Be sure to capture what you take to be the central ideas, and leave out the inessential details. You should also provide a response to the article. It may be that you can see problems with its main point, and you have objections to raise. It may be that you don't see any problems with it, but it prompts you to wonder about some other things. So, basically, summarize the article and provide an intelligent, engaging response to it.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to write a rough draft, and then work repeatedly at making that rough draft clearer, better, straighter, and more accurate. Rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite, until you can confidently say that you have made it as good as you can. When I am reading a paper and see an author's name misspelled, or come across more than one grammatical mistake or spelling mistake on a page, or have some trouble following what the writer is saying, some part of my mind concludes that the writer really didn't work that hard on the paper, and that sort of pisses me off. It is to your advantage that I not be pissed off when I assign your grade.

Essay 1 - reply to "Is the External World Invisible?" by Mark Johnston

Essay 2 - reply to "How Berkeley Can Maintain Snow is White" by Margaret Atherton

Essay 3 - reply to "Miracles" by Richard Swinburne

Essay 4 - reply to "Against Unity" by Richard Rorty

Group presentations

Articles to be read by presentation groups:

Group A:

<https://aeon.co/essays/the-logic-of-buddhist-philosophy-goes-beyond-simple-truth>

<https://aeon.co/essays/does-knowledge-of-the-past-and-present-determine-the-future>

<https://aeon.co/essays/forget-prophecy-the-i-ching-is-an-uncertainty-machine>

Group B:

<https://aeon.co/essays/when-does-science-finally-take-no-for-an-answer>

<https://aeon.co/essays/science-needs-the-freedom-to-constantly-change-its-mind>

<http://www.iep.utm.edu/kuhn-ts/>

Group C:

<https://aeon.co/essays/what-have-we-lost-now-we-can-no-longer-read-the-sky>

<https://aeon.co/essays/medieval-technology-indistinguishable-from-magic>

<https://aeon.co/essays/magical-thinking-still-haunts-all-our-thoughts>

Group D:

<https://aeon.co/essays/how-can-we-be-bored-when-we-have-google>

<https://aeon.co/essays/a-life-of-tests-is-no-preparation-for-the-tests-of-life>

<https://aeon.co/essays/can-school-today-teach-anything-more-than-how-to-pass-exams>

Group E:

<https://aeon.co/essays/the-intellectual-character-of-conspiracy-theorists>

<https://aeon.co/essays/when-are-you-better-off-not-knowing-the-truth>

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2011/12/i-was-wrong-and-so-are-you/308713/>

Group F:

<https://aeon.co/essays/why-should-science-have-the-last-word-on-culture>

<http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR23.5/Orr.html>

<http://www.americanscientist.org/bookshelf/pub/e-o-wilsons-consilience-a-noble-unifying-vision-grandly-expressed>

On these articles: You will see from the list that almost all of the articles are drawn from *Aeon*, an online journal. I've chosen them because they present a decent ideal of writing: they deal with substantive issues, but with clarity and focus, and they aim to engage a curious reader who isn't a specialist. In my opinion, we all should strive to be able to write like these authors. (Other ways of writing are fine too, of course, as the circumstances demand: sometimes you should write for specialists, or sometimes you should adopt more creative styles. But - as a baseline - it is good to be able to write engagingly for people who don't know a lot about your subject.)

How these groups work: I'll assign 4-5 students to each group. Each group must then assign the job of "moderator" to one of their members; the other members of the group are "speakers."

Each **speaker** will read the articles and will write a three-page (~750 words) response to them. An adequate job (roughly, "C" level) will note interesting connections, questions, or problems raised by the articles, and discuss the issues in a competent and engaged manner. A better job ("B" level) would do not only this, but also connect the issues raised by the articles to readings or discussions we have had in class, and possibly other articles or books. An excellent job ("A" level) would stay connected to the articles, but take the discussion in an interesting new direction, probably connecting the articles with some other surprising area of thought. The speakers should share their papers, or rough drafts of them, with the moderator, at least one week before the scheduled presentation. Then, at the presentation, each speaker is expected to participate in a panel discussion, reading their papers to the class, and fielding questions and comments.

The **moderator** is expected to read the articles, and read the essays written by the participants. The moderator should write a three-page (~750 words) paper which does two things: (1) the paper should provide a general summary of the articles so that people who haven't read the articles have a fairly clear, general idea of what's going on, and (2) it should provide a short preview of what each of the speakers will be talking about in their presentations ("Abigail will be discussing how the question of free will is involved in these topics, while Bruce will connect these issues to the North Atlantic slave trade...").

All papers should be submitted on Canvas by the time of the presentation.

Ideally, the groups will be able to meet and discuss these articles outside of class, trading ideas and insights and making connections to one another's papers. I understand this isn't always possible, and sometimes a group just doesn't get it together - so the bulk of each individual's grade is tied to the written paper. But if a group does manage to work productively together, so that there is greater unity among the parts, that will boost everyone's grade somewhat. It will also be more fun.

The **audience**, by the way, is expected to listen attentively, and engage with the speakers after the presentation, raising questions or comments for general discussion. Be the audience you'd like to have for your own presentation.