

Syllabus

PHL 321K, Theory of Knowledge
Tues. + Thurs., 8:00 - 9:15 am, WEL 4.224

Professor: Sinan Dogramaci

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Office Hours: 11:30am - 12:30pm Tuesdays, and 2:30 - 3:30pm Thursdays, in WAG 410C

Course Information:

We'll read about, discuss, and aim to critically evaluate arguments for different positions on some major debates concerning knowledge and rational belief. Topics will include:

(Skepticism) A paradox is created by the existence of apparently strong arguments that we have little to no genuine knowledge. Since we surely do have knowledge, the argument must have a false assumption, but there is a big debate over exactly which assumption is the false one.

(Relativism and Contextualism about Truth and Knowledge) What does it mean to say that truth, or knowledge, is *relative*? The position risks quickly turning out to be incoherent or self-defeating. How can it be defended by a compelling argument? Is relativism, or so-called *contextualism*, best understood as a thesis about how the world is constructed, or rather as a thesis about the functioning of our language?

(Permissible Disagreement) To what extent can reasonable people disagree after they've been exposed to all the same evidence and arguments? Is it that no difference of opinion at all is tolerable? Or, could any conclusion at all be rationally permissible? Or, if the answer is somewhere in between, where can we draw principled lines?

(Education—or Indoctrination?—in Childhood and Early Life) Sometimes we can trace the origins of one or another lifelong belief to various contingencies of our upbringing. When, if ever, does such reflection on the origins of a belief undermine the rationality of maintaining that belief? We'll examine arguments for and against the ability of such reflections to undermine beliefs.

(Psychological Studies of How People Form Their Beliefs) What do recent psychological studies of human cognition reveal about the status of our beliefs as rational or irrational? Are humans less rational than we think we are? Can “evolutionary psychology” teach us about the function of reasoning?

(Value of Knowledge and Truth) Assuming there is some difference between knowing something and just having a true belief, what could make knowledge more valuable than mere true belief? Does knowledge play any special role in justifying actions?

(Finding Ourselves in a Finely-Tuned Universe) Some philosophers have asked, why does the universe exist? Some have answered this question by drawing on discoveries in modern physics suggesting that the laws of nature have been finely-tuned in ways that make a universe like ours a highly likely one. Philosophers have then debated whether this is any good evidence for an intelligent designer, or is not.

Readings:

Readings will be articles by contemporary philosophers (professors), all available as free PDFs.

Grading:

This course carries the writing flag; it is a writing intensive course. You'll write three essays. These make up your course grade. (+/- is used in the grading.)

For all three essays, before you hand in your final draft, you must write an initial **full-length** draft and bring it to an in-class peer-review session. *Don't miss any of these peer-review sessions: **each** absence will result in a reduction in your course grade by two-thirds of a letter!* You'll have options to make the second and third essays substantively revised versions of your earlier assignments.

Class attendance is mandatory! Delinquency in attendance will reduce your course grade by a third of a letter.

Late Work:

Any paper handed in after **the start of the class** when it is due will be penalized a third of a letter. An additional third will be docked every 24 hours after that.

Medical excuses for late work require written notice from your doctor to avoid penalty. The last paper may not be handed in late at all (documented medical exemptions aside).

No Laptops, Phones or Tablets in Class

Exceptions may be made on a case by case basis for students with special circumstances.

Plagiarism:

Any unquoted use of others' words or uncredited use of others' ideas qualifies as plagiarism. I have a zero tolerance policy for plagiarism. Students are caught plagiarizing *all the time*. If you plagiarize, it will be caught, you will fail the course, and you will be reported to the dean.

Disabilities:

"Students with disabilities may request appropriate academic accommodations from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Services for Students with Disabilities, 471-6259." (quoted from a memo from Vice Provost Ritter.)

Date	Do the listed reading <i>before</i> the given date! (Then <i>re-read</i> it after the lecture!)
Aug 28	Introductory meeting. No reading assigned.
Sept 2	NEW TOPIC: Skepticism. Descartes, 1st Med.; Pryor, "What's So Bad about Living in the Matrix?"
Sept 4	Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics". (First paper assignment distributed.)
Sept 9	DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem"
Sept 11	DeRose, continued
Sept 16	PEER - REVIEW SESSION
Sept 18	NEW TOPIC: Disagreement. Van Inwagen, "It Is Always Wrong to Believe Anything..."
Sept 23	Kelly, "Higher-Order Evidence and Peer Disagreement" *First paper final draft due.*
Sept 25	Christensen, "The Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News"
Sept 30	NEW TOPIC: Eduction or Indoctrination? Cohen, "Paradoxes of Conviction"
Oct 2	Vavova, "Irrelevant Influences"
Oct 7	Schoenfield, "Permission to Believe"
Oct 9	White, "You Just Believe That Because..."
Oct 14	NEW TOPIC: What Implications Does Empirical Psychology Have for Philosophy? Kahneman, "A Perspective on Judgement and Choice". (Second paper assignment distributed.)
Oct 16	Mercier, "Using Evolutionary Thinking to Cut Across Disciplines"
Oct 21	Gopnik, "Scientific Thinking in Young Children"
Oct 23	PEER - REVIEW SESSION
Oct 28	NEW TOPIC: Externalism vs. Internalism. Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowledge"
Oct 30	Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?" *Second paper final draft due.*
Nov 4	Huemer, "Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism"
Nov 6	Williamson, "On Being Justified in One's Head"
Nov 11	NEW TOPIC: The Value of Truth and Knowledge. Craig, <i>Knowledge and the State of Nature</i>
Nov 13	Pillar, "Desiring the Truth and Nothing but the Truth"
Nov 18	Hawthorne & Stanley, "Knowledge and Action"
Nov 20	NEW TOPIC: Fine-Tuning and Self-Location. Elga, "Defeating Dr. Evil w Self-Locating Belief"
Nov 25	Parfit, "Why Anything? Why This?". (Third paper assignment distributed.)
Thanksgiving	no class
Dec 2	White, "Fine-Tuning and Multiple Universes"
Dec 4	PEER - REVIEW SESSION. *Third paper final draft due on December 8th.*