MSc / PGDip / PGCert
Advanced Epistemology (online)
(PHIL11136)

Course Guide 2018-19
Course aims and objectives

The course aims to offer online postgraduate students engagement with a selection of advanced topics in contemporary epistemology, and as such presupposes a prior understanding of some of the main issues in the field. We will be focusing on three main topics: virtue epistemology and epistemic dependence; epistemic injustice; and radical skepticism.

Intended learning outcomes

On completion of this course, the student will be able to:

- Articulate central issues, views and concepts in contemporary epistemology.
- Critically analyse and engage with the contemporary epistemological literature, including connecting this literature to broader social issues.
- Present arguments clearly and concisely both in the classroom and in writing.
- Gain transferable skills in research, analysis and argumentation.
- Critically discuss philosophical arguments with peers.

Writing the coursework essay and participating in class discussion will develop these skills.

People

Course organiser:

Prof Duncan Pritchard; duncan.pritchard@ed.ac.uk

Recorded lectures from other Edinburgh faculty:

Dr. Elinor Mason; elinor.mason@ed.ac.uk
Dr. Aidan McGlynn; amcglynn@ed.ac.uk

Teaching Assistant:

Dr. Emma Gordon; emma.gordon@ed.ac.uk

Course secretary:

Ms Becky Verdon; Rebecca.Verdon@ed.ac.uk

Office hours
Please email Prof Duncan Pritchard (duncan.pritchard@ed.ac.uk) or Dr Emma Gordon (emma.gordon@ed.ac.uk) to make an appointment if you need to discuss material covered in the course or essay topics.

Syllabus

Schedule of lectures, seminars, and assessed forum posts

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Weekly topics and readings

Since this is an advanced epistemology course at MSc level, I’ve opted for a research-led approach to the seminars. This means that a lot of the primary and further readings are, inevitably, from me! Naturally, it goes without saying that you are welcome to disagree with my views. Note in places there are quite a lot of secondary, background and even exploratory readings listed. Don’t feel that you
need to read all of these. Instead, focus on the primary readings and dip into the other readings as you see fit.

For general background reading for this course, please consult the following textbook:


You may also find the following reference work useful as it contains general readings on nearly all the topics covered in this course:


**SECTION 1: Virtue Epistemology and Epistemic Dependence**

We will begin by looking at some foundational work on the theory of knowledge, and in particular the role of the virtues (both in the sense of cognitive abilities and in the sense of intellectual virtues proper) in this regard. We will also examine the relationship between knowledge and other epistemic standings like cognitive achievement and understanding. We will be exploring the claim that certain epistemic standings, like knowledge, exhibit a particular kind of epistemic dependence, one aspect of which is a distinctively social kind of dependence. We will investigate how this claim plays out with regard to a range of different disputes, such as the epistemology of testimony and the goal of inquiry. Moreover, we will also consider what practical ramifications this point might have, such as for the epistemology of education, and concerning the possibility of knowledge acquired via extended cognitive processes (including socially extended cognitive processes).

**Week 1 – Knowledge, Luck and Virtue (Prof Duncan Pritchard)**

**Background reading:**


**Primary reading:**


**Further reading:**


**Exploratory reading:**

- Zagzebski, L. (1996). *Virtues of the Mind*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. [This is a seminal work on virtue epistemology, which advances a neo-Aristotelian account of the intellectual virtues and applies it to issues in contemporary epistemology].

**Week 2 – Knowledge, Epistemic Value and Understanding (Prof Duncan Pritchard)**

**Background reading:**


**Primary reading:**


**Further reading:**


**Exploratory reading:**

- Elgin, C. (2017). *True Enough*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. [A really important book on scientific understanding. It takes a radically different line to the one we have explored here in that Elgin argues that truth is not as important to scientific understanding as many epistemologists and philosophers of]
science, including yours truly, suppose].

**Week 3 – Applied Epistemology (Prof Duncan Pritchard)**

**Background reading:**

**Primary reading:**

**Further reading:**

**SECTION 2: Epistemic Injustice**

Hearers sometimes treat speakers as less credible than they really are. One reason that a hearer might treat a speaker in this way is due to identity prejudices, such as race or gender stereotypes. Authors have suggested that to treat a speaker in this way is to cause her a distinctively epistemic variety of harm. In this part of the course, we will explore the nature of this and other kinds of epistemic injustice. Our central questions include the following. What are the distinctively epistemic forms of injustice? How do epistemologies of race and gender contribute to the understanding of epistemic injustice? How do issues concerning epistemic injustice relate to the
issues pertaining to testimony, disagreement and diversity?

**Week 4 – Epistemic Injustice I (Dr Elinor Mason)**

**Primary reading:**

**Further reading:**

**Week 5 – Epistemic Injustice II (Dr Aidan McGlynn)**

**Primary reading:**

**Further readings:**

**Week 6 – Hermeneutic Injustice I (Dr Aidan McGlynn)**

**Primary readings:**
- Miranda Fricker (2009). *Epistemic Injustice*. OUP. Chapter 7 • **Further reading:**

**Week 7 – Hermeneutic Injustice II (Dr Aidan McGlynn)**

**Primary reading:**

**Further reading:**

**SECTION 3: Radical Scepticism**

In this section we will be exploring the perennial problem of radical skepticism. We will begin by looking at how best to formulate the skeptical problem, and considering the relationship between underdetermination-based and closure-based formulations. Next we will consider Wittgenstein’s treatment of knowledge and certainty in his final notebooks, published as *On Certainty*. In particular, we will be examining the notion of a *hinge commitment*, and the anti-sceptical work it might do. Finally, we will consider epistemological disjunctivism, and how this might bear on the skeptical problem. In addition, we will look at the ‘biscopic’ treatment of radical skepticism that I defend which aims to blend hinge epistemology with epistemological disjunctivism in order to offer a unified treatment of the problem.

NB. Note that the further reading for each week in the section is the same—i.e., this is effectively further reading for the section as a whole.

**Week 8 – The Sceptical Paradox (Prof Duncan Pritchard)**

**Primary reading:**

**Further reading:**
Week 9 – Wittgensteinian Hinge Epistemology (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

Primary reading:

Further reading:

Week 10 – Epistemological Disjunctivism and the Biscopic Response (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

Primary reading:

Further reading (for Section 3):
Week 11 – Review (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

This week brings together the themes of the course, and covers essay strategies and any other matters arising. There are no readings for this week.

Resources

Reading list materials are available via the course LEARN site.

Please ensure you have completed the library induction tutorial. Should you have any problems accessing any of the materials for the course please contact the course librarian, Mrs Anne Donnelly: anne.donnelly@ed.ac.uk

Facilitating forum discussions

We will aim to exemplify virtues of philosophical discussion, such as:

- Respect towards the other members of the group.
- Charity and care in interpreting others’ contributions.
- Open-mindedness towards other points of view.
- A constructive attitude towards critiquing others’ arguments.

Assessment

Assessment for this course has two components: coursework (85% of course grade) and participation (15% of course grade).

Coursework (85%)

Students will be assessed by a 2,500-word essay (excluding references), due at 12:00 BST Tuesday 23rd April 2019. NB. Please select from the list of essay questions available below. More details available on the course LEARN site.

Participation (15%)

Students will be assessed by participation which has two components:

- 5% Students must participate in the forum discussion at least every two weeks. To get the best out of the course students are recommended to participate every week. However, if a student misses 2 weeks or more (without a reason approved by either the course organizer or teaching assistant), then 5% will be deducted from their grade.

- 10% Students must submit a plan of their final essay (no more than 1 page of A4). This is due at 12:00 GMT Thursday 7th March 2019. This should be submitted to Turnitin via LEARN. The plan is not graded but will receive
comments. Acceptable, good or excellent essay plans will be awarded a standard 10%. If the plan is clearly incomplete or inadequate it will receive 0%.
Essay Questions

1. What is the best way of understanding the anti-luck requirement on knowledge?
2. Should knowledge be understood as a particular kind of achievement? Explain what this proposal involves, and critically evaluate its prospects.
3. Is knowledge finally valuable? If so, then in virtue of what does it have this value? If not, then is any epistemic standing finally valuable?
4. What is understanding? Is it a kind of knowing?
5. Describe, and critically evaluate, one way in which contemporary epistemology has contributed to an ‘applied’ debate in a field outside of philosophy.
6. What is epistemic injustice, and what is it about this form of injustice that makes it specifically epistemic?
7. What is hermeneutical injustice, and how (if at all) is it different from epistemic injustice? Is either of these forms of injustice more important than the other? If so, why? If not, why not?
8. Does it matter whether scepticism is cast as a paradox rather than a position? Defend your answer.
9. What is a hinge commitment? What role, if any, can this notion play within a response to radical scepticism?
10. Can there be rational support for our beliefs that is both reflectively accessible and factive? If so, what import, if any, would it have for the problem of radical scepticism?