MSc / PGDip / PGCert

Online MSc in Epistemology, Ethics and Mind

Epistemology (online)

PHIL11131
Course Guide 2019-20

Welcome and Introduction

Welcome to the course. We will covering some of the core issues in contemporary epistemology, such as the theory of knowledge, modal and virtue epistemology, the nature of epistemic justification, the meaning of ‘knows’, epistemic agency and normativity, the epistemology of assertion, radical scepticism, and the rationality of religious belief.

People

Course Organiser:
Name: Josh Thorpe
Email: jthorpe@exseed.ed.ac.uk

Course Secretary:
Name: Ms Becky Verdon
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Course Librarian:
Name: Mrs Anne Donnelly
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Office hours:
Please email Josh Thorpe to make an appointment if you need to discuss material covered in the course or essay topics.
Course aims and objectives

The course aims to offer online postgraduate students engagement with a selection of core topics in epistemology. No previous philosophical or logical expertise is required. Any technical and/or unfamiliar terms will be defined as we go.

Intended learning objectives

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

- Articulate central issues, views and concepts in epistemology.
- Critically analyse and engage with the contemporary epistemological literature.
- 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.

Learning, teaching and assessment

Syllabus

Schedule of lectures, seminars, tutorials and assessments

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Topics and readings

For general reading for this course, please consult the following textbook (which is also used for several of the weeks of the course):


If you feel that you need a more introductory textbook to help you through this course, then you may find this textbook helpful:


For example, there are sections in this introductory textbook on most of the topics covered in the weekly seminars. You may also find the following reference work useful as it contains general readings on nearly all the topics covered in this course:


**Week 1 – Theory of knowledge and modal epistemology**

*Prof Duncan Pritchard*

A perennial question in epistemology is, “What is knowledge?” What conditions must be satisfied for someone to know that such-and-such is the case? Recent attempts to give a theory of what knowledge is, or an analysis of the concept of knowledge, have been heavily influenced by the Gettier problem: how to give a satisfactory account of the nature of knowledge that accounts for cases which according to a wide consensus, involve subjects who hold a belief that is true and justified, but is not known. Within this project of analysing knowledge,
one lesson drawn from Gettier cases is that knowledge excludes a certain kind of luck. Modal epistemology proposes to put an anti-luck condition at the centre of the analysis of knowledge. In doing so, modal epistemology appeals to the notion of possible worlds—the way things might have been, as distinct from the way they actually are. We will examine two prominent implementations of modal epistemology, one centred on the sensitivity principle, the other on the safety principle.

Reading material:

**Week 2 – Virtue epistemology (Prof Duncan Pritchard)**

Virtue epistemology centres on the idea that knowledge depends fundamentally on the cognitive abilities or intellectual virtues of the knower. Virtue reliabilism proposes to analyse knowledge as true belief that is the product of a reliable cognitive faculty in the knower. Virtue responsibilism argues that the virtue reliabilist analysis is insufficient for knowledge; what is needed is exercise of cognitive virtues, cultivated and maintained by the knower. We will explore this debate and the question of whether appeal to reliable cognitive faculties or cognitive virtues is sufficient for solving the Gettier problem.

Reading material:

**Week 3 – Epistemic justification I (Dr Nick Treanor)**

What is it for a belief to be justified, as we ordinarily understand that notion? Can epistemic justification be understood independently of having reasons to believe something? Here we will introduce the problem of epistemic justification, and some arguments for the view that epistemic justification has a foundationalist structure. Then we will examine three prominent objections to the foundationalist treatment of epistemic justification.

Reading material:
Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics, Book 1, parts 2-3*

**Week 4 – Epistemic justification II (Dr Nick Treanor)**

Having already introduced the problem of epistemic justification, and some arguments for the view that epistemic justification has a foundationalist structure, we will now consider the coherentist view.

*Reading material:*
Bonjou, L (1976) *The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge* *Philosophical Studies*, 30:5; 281-312

**Week 5 – The meaning of ‘knows’ (Dr Matthew Chrisman)**

This week centres various views about the meaning of the term ‘knows’ and how they might bear on traditional puzzles in epistemology. We’ll cover Classical Invariantism, Contextualism, Subject-Sensitive Invariantism, and Expressivism

*Reading material:*
Brown, J (2005) *Comparing Contextualism and Invariantism* *Grazer Philosophische Studien* 69

**Week 6 – Epistemic agency and normativity (Dr Matthew Chrisman)**

This week focuses on the agency involved in believing. On the one hand we evaluate beliefs very much like actions (e.g. whether they are based on adequate reasons, whether they accord with various norms, and so on). On the other hand, believing seems to be much more automatic than ordinary action (e.g. choosing to believe something is not common). We’ll discuss the implications of these issues for epistemology.
**Reading material:**

**Further reading:**

**Week 7 – Epistemology of assertion I (Dr Martin Smith)**

Assertion is a familiar, everyday speech act. To a first approximation, assertion is a speech act in which something is presented as true or, equivalently, presented as being the case. Here we’ll consider the rules that govern the practice of assertion: the conditions under which an assertion is in/appropriate or il/legitimate. In particular, we’ll examine the truth account of the norm of assertion—one should only assert P if P is true—and the knowledge account of the norm of assertion—one should only assert P if one knows P.

**Reading material:**
McGlynn, A (2014) ‘*Assertion*’ in *Knowledge First?* Palgrave 82-124

**Further reading:**
Lackey, J (2007) *Norms of assertion* Noûs 41: 594-626
Weiner, M (2005) *Must we know what we say?* Philosophical Review 114: 227-251

**Week 8 – Epistemology of assertion II (Dr Martin Smith)**

We have already introduced the notion of assertion, and the truth and knowledge accounts of the norm of assertion. We have also considered problems for these accounts. Here we’ll consider whether the knowledge account can be defended successfully. Then we’ll examine and compare the justified belief account of the norm of assertion: one should only assert P if one justifiably believes P.

**Reading materials:** See Week 7, above.
Week 9 – Radical Scepticism (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

We will be looking at an influential version of the problem of radical scepticism that turns on the so-called 'closure' principle for knowledge. We will consider what makes this formulation of the sceptical problem so interesting, and then turn to critically consider some key responses to this puzzle. These include responses that involve denying the closure principle, attribute contextualism, and neo-Mooreanism.

Reading material:

Week 10 – Epistemology of Religious Belief (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

For this final week we will be doing something a little different—and also a bit more demanding—from previous weeks. Rather than watching content recorded especially for the course, we will be looking at a recorded lecture that I gave for a conference in Amsterdam in 2016. The aim of the lecture was to explain a particular way of thinking about the epistemology of religious belief that can be found in the final notebooks of Ludwig Wittgenstein (and which I claim is in turn found in earlier work by John Henry Newman). Along the way, I introduce some of the main themes in the epistemology of religious belief, and also draw on some epistemic terrain (e.g., the closure principle) that will be familiar to you from previous weeks.

Video:
‘Faith and Reason’, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brY--9So29o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brY--9So29o)

Reading material:

Week 11 – Review (Prof Duncan Pritchard)

This week brings together the themes of the course, and covers essay strategies and any other matters arising.
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: an essay plan (15% of course grade) and an essay (85% of course grade).

Essay Plan (15%)

Students must submit a plan of their final essay (no more than 1 page of A4, excluding bibliography). This is due at 12:00 GMT, Tuesday 12th November 2019, 12pm.

Essay (85%)

Students will be assessed by a 2,500-word essay (excluding references), due at 12:00 BST, Tuesday 17th of December 2019, 12pm. NB. Please select from the list of essay questions available below. More details available on the course LEARN site.

Live Seminars

There will be five live seminars held throughout the semester. Dates are shown in the Schedule of lectures, seminars, tutorials and assessments above, and times will be made available on Learn.

Discussion boards

For each week when there is no live seminar (i.e. every other week, starting from week 1), you must post in the discussion forum. The post itself will not be assessed. However, for each week where you fail to post without good reason you will lose 1% of your final mark. If for some reason you cannot post, please email Josh to let him know.

How to submit assessments

Instructions for online essay submission will be made available on Learn.
Essay Questions

1. What is the Gettier problem? Is this problem resolvable? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Does knowledge entail safety or sensitivity (or neither)? Defend your answer.
3. How does robust virtue epistemology attempt to resolve the Gettier problem? Is it successful?
4. What is the foundationalist account of epistemic justification? Is it defensible?
5. What is the coherentist account of epistemic justification? Is it defensible?
6. How are beliefs different from actions? What bearing does this have on how we should conceive of the nature of epistemic normativity?
7. Is ‘knows’ a context-sensitive term? How, if at all, might thinking of ‘knows’ along these lines enable us to resolve some key epistemological problems?
8. Explain, and critically evaluate, the knowledge account of assertion.
9. What role does the closure principle play in the radical sceptical paradox? Is denying such a principle a possible way of resolving the paradox?
10. Critically evaluate responses to the problem of radical scepticism that maintain that one can know the denials of radical sceptical hypotheses. Are any of these anti-sceptical proposals plausible?
11. Is there something inherently epistemically problematic about religious belief? If so, why? If not, why do some claim that there is, and how are they mistaken?