

Theory of Knowledge

University of Houston
Phil 3335 (12338)
AH 201
Tue-Thu 2:30pm-4:00pm

Instructor: Dr. Luis R.G. Oliveira

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Office Hours: Wed, 1:00 – 3:00, in Agnes Arnold Hall 505.

Course Description: Epistemology is the philosophical study of human knowledge. Philosophers working in this area (epistemologists) ask questions such as: What does it take to know something? Do we actually know anything? What is it, exactly, that marks the difference between mere belief and real knowledge? The first part of this course clarifies the traditional approach to these questions and discusses some of its classic difficulties. The second part of this course examines one of the leading approaches to handling these difficulties—what we will call the Internalist Research Program. We here discuss contemporary versions of foundationalism and coherentism, as well as the challenges they each face. The third part of this course examines the other leading approach—what we will call the Externalism Research Program. We here discuss process reliabilism and anti-luck epistemology, as well as the challenges they each face. Coursework consists in heavy reading, 3 short assignments, and 3 take-home exams.

Course Objectives: This course has three goals and your success in it will be measured by how well you achieve them. The *first goal* is introducing you to central topics in the philosophical study of knowledge. On each of the three take-home exams, you will be expected to display the knowledge that you have acquired in this class. The *second goal* is developing the philosophical skill of critical thinking. You will be encouraged to exercise this skill during classroom discussion, and you will be required to apply it on the three short assignments. The *third goal* is developing the important skills of reading comprehension and clear writing. The readings, short assignments, and the exams, all provide you with an opportunity to get better and better at understanding complex texts and effectively communicating your own ideas. Altogether, this class will challenge you to *receive, process, and convey* philosophical ideas about knowledge. This is not an easy class. But if you apply yourself, it will be incredibly rewarding.

Required Text: *All readings will be made available as PDFs on the course webpage*

Course Requirements:

Participation (5%)
Assignments (30%) ----- See below for due dates
First Take-Home Exam (15%) ----- Thu (02/14)
Second Take-Home Exam (20%) ----- Thu (03/28)
Final Take-Home Exam (30%) ----- Thu (05/02)

Grade Curve: Once all the grades are determined, I will subtract the highest final grade from the max grade to determine the size of the curve. Every grade will receive a boost equal to the difference between the highest final grade and the max grade. Final letter grades will follow the following distribution:

A+	97-100	B+	87-89	C+	77-79	D+	65-59
A	93-96	B	83-86	C	73-76	D	60-64
A-	90-92	B-	80-82	C-	70-72	F	0-59

Course Policies

Short Assignments: There are 3 short assignments. The purpose of these assignments is developing and exercising the skills of critical thinking and clear writing. For each assignment, you will be directed to a short passage and asked to (a) clarify the argument in that passage, and (b) state your thoughts on it. Assignments are worth progressively more of your grade. This allows you to “warm-up” to the type of content and activity that this class requires, and prevents you from front-loading your effort and merely cruising through the final weeks. All assignments should be submitted through Blackboard. You are not allowed to miss any assignment, and no grade will be dropped.

Take-Home Exams: There are 3 take-home exams. They will each ask you to explain and evaluate two or three debates that we will read and discuss in class. You will be given the exam questions one week before they are due. You are allowed to consult your notes and the assigned readings, but you are required to use your own formulation of the relevant ideas and arguments—no quoting from the texts. This is how I will evaluate your understanding, your critical thinking, and your capacity to communicate your ideas clearly. You are not allowed to miss any exam. Exams are also worth progressively more, and for the same reasons.

Late Submissions: With the exception of *well-documented* emergencies, your grade on short assignments will suffer a 1-point deduction per late day. (This is equivalent to losing 10% of your grade for that assignment per day.) No exceptions will be made for excuses such as: “I was too busy with other coursework,” “I found it too hard to understand,” “I am going through a hard time in my life,” and so on. You should come talk to me in advance about any of these issues.

Participation: I do not take attendance in my classes. This means that missing classes will not affect your attendance grade. When you come to class, however, you will be required to follow certain common sense rules. Minimally: (a) you cannot use your phone, (b) you cannot carry unrelated conversations during class, (c) you cannot use your computer for class-unrelated activities, and (d) you cannot take naps during class-time. Violation of these rules will affect your participation grade.

Grade Complaints: As already noted, coursework in this class counts progressively more towards your final grade. This gives you an opportunity to work your way out of a bad start, but also prevents you from not needing a good grade at the end. In light of this, *I will not provide anyone with an opportunity for extra credit*. Of course, I am happy to talk to you about your grade throughout the course. If you are confused about why you received the grade that you did, or if you disagree with the grade that you received, then you should email me about this, or come see me during office hours, or schedule an appointment. I will not, however, look over your work and discuss your grade informally after a class.

Office Hours and Appointments: You are encouraged to make good use of my office hours. I am here to help you succeed in this course, and I am more than happy to review your lecture notes, to explain difficult material a second time, and to discuss any questions or insights that you may have. I love talking about philosophy and it will be my pleasure to discuss any aspect of it with you.

Academic Honesty: Do not cheat. Punishment will be harsh if you do. You're expected to be familiar with the University of Houston's policies: <http://www.uh.edu/provost/policies/honesty/>

Disabilities: If you have the need for disability-related services, please get in touch with the University of Houston's *Center for Students with Disabilities*. I will be happy to work with you and the center in arranging for reasonable accommodations: <http://www.uh.edu/csd/>

Mental Health: Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) can help students who are having difficulties managing stress, adjusting to college, or feeling sad and hopeless. You can reach CAPS (www.uh.edu/caps) by calling 713-743-5454 during and after business hours for routine appointments or if you or someone you know is in crisis. No appointment is necessary for the “Let's Talk” program, a drop-in consultation service at convenient locations and hours around campus. http://www.uh.edu/caps/outreach/lets_talk.html

Class Schedule

Introduction

Jan 15 - Class Intro

PART I: THE PROBLEMS OF KNOWLEDGE

The Traditional Account

Jan 17 – The Traditional Account of Knowledge ----- Plato (*Theaetetus*)
Jan 22 – Belief and Truth ----- Kevin McCain (2016, Chs. 3-4)
Jan 24 – Internalism About Justification ----- Mathias Steup (1999, 372-384) - **Assignment #1 (5%)**

The Classic Problems

Jan 29 – The Regress Problem ----- Sextus Empiricus (*OS*, Book I)
Jan 31 – Foundationalism and Solipsism ----- René Descartes (*Meditations* I, II, III)
Feb 05 – Fallibilism About Knowledge ----- Baron Reed (2002, 143-157)
Feb 07 – Infallibilism About Knowledge ----- Laurence Bonjour (2010, 57-83)

First Exam Week

Feb 12 – No Class
Feb 14 – **First Take-Home Exam Due by Midnight (15%)**

PART II: THE INTERNALIST RESEARCH PROGRAM

Foundationalism

Feb 19 – Foundationalism and the Sellarsian Dilemma ----- Laurence Bonjour (2003, Ch. 1)
Feb 21 – Constitutive Awareness ----- Laurence Bonjour (2003, Ch. 4)
Feb 26 – Experience and the External World ----- Laurence Bonjour (2003, Ch. 5)
Feb 28 – The Myth of the Given ----- Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 5) - **Assignment #2 (10%)**

Coherentism

Mar 05 – Epistemic Conservatism ----- Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 2)
Mar 07 – Reasons Without First Philosophy ----- Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 3)
Mar 12 & 14 – **Spring Break**
Mar 19 – Explanation and Justification ----- Ted Poston (2014, Ch. 4)
Mar 21 – Challenges to Coherentism ----- Laurence Bonjour (2003, Ch. 3)

Second Exam Week

Mar 26 – No Class
Mar 28 – **Second Take-Home Exam Due by Midnight (20%)**

PART III: THE EXTERNALIST RESEARCH PROGRAM

Process Reliabilism

Apr 02 – Externalism About Knowledge ----- Alvin Goldman (1986, Ch. 3)
Apr 04 – The Awareness Problem ----- Laurence Bonjour (1980, 53-73)
Apr 09 – The Generality Problem ----- Conee and Feldman (1998, 1-29)
Apr 11 – Justification and Reliability ----- Alvin Goldman (1986, Chs. 4-5) - **Assignment #3 (15%)**

Luck and Ability

Apr 16 – Truth-Tracking ----- Robert Nozick (1981, Ch. 3)
Apr 18 – Virtue Epistemology ----- Ernest Sosa (2007, Ch. 2)
Apr 23 – Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology ----- Duncan Pritchard (2012, 247-279)
Apr 25 – Are Externalists Missing the Point? ----- Barry Stroud (1999, Ch. 8)

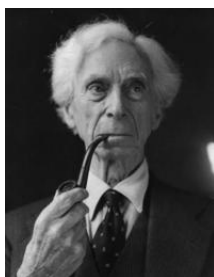
Final Exam Week

May 02 – **Third Take-Home Exam Due by Midnight (30%)**

Bibliography

1. Bonjour, Laurence (1980). "Externalist Theories of Knowledge."
2. Bonjour, Laurence (1985). *The Structure of Empirical Knowledge*.
3. Bonjour, Laurence (2003). *Epistemic Justification*.
4. Bonjour, Laurence (2010). "The Myth of Knowledge."
5. Conee, Earl and Feldman, Richard (1998). "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism."
6. Descartes, René (1641). *Meditations on First Philosophy*
7. Empiricus, Sextus (ca. 200). *Outlines of Skepticism*.
8. Goldman, Alvin (1988). *Epistemology and Cognition*.
9. McCain, Kevin (2016). *The Nature of Scientific Knowledge*.
10. Nozick, Robert (1981). *Philosophical Explanations*.
11. Poston, Ted (2014). *Reason and Explanation*.
12. Pritchard, Duncan (2012). "Anti-Luck Virtue Epistemology."
13. Reed, Baron (2002). "How to Think About Fallibilism."
14. Sosa, Ernest (2007). *A Virtue Epistemology, Volume One*.
15. Steup, Mathias (1999). "A Defense of Internalism"
16. Stroud, Barry (1999). *Understanding Human Knowledge*.

Warning: You should be very careful with information acquired through the Internet. Be wary of simply searching for help on issues discussed in class. Most of the stuff that you will find originates from people who have less education than you, and it often ranges from poorly informed opinion to complete and utter nonsense. If you do search the Internet for additional information, you *must* keep to reputable publications (but be critical even then!). For philosophical matters in general, here are two trustworthy online resources: the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://plato.stanford.edu/>) and the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/>). Despite its other values, Wikipedia *is not* an adequate resource for serious academic work.



Bertrand Russell

"The value of philosophy is, in fact, to be sought largely in its very uncertainty. The man who has no tincture of philosophy goes through life imprisoned in the prejudices derived from common sense, from the habitual beliefs of his age or his nation, and from convictions which have grown up in his mind without the co-operation or consent of his deliberate reason. To such a man the world tends to become definite, finite, obvious; common objects rouse no questions, and unfamiliar possibilities are contemptuously rejected. As soon as we begin to philosophize, on the contrary, we find... that even the most everyday things lead to problems to which only very incomplete answers can be given. Philosophy, though unable to tell us with certainty what is the true answer to the doubts which it raises, is able to suggest many possibilities which enlarge our thoughts and free them from the tyranny of custom. Thus, while diminishing our feeling of certainty as to what things are, it greatly increases our knowledge as to what they may be; it removes the somewhat arrogant dogmatism of those who have never travelled into the region of liberating doubt, and it keeps alive our sense of wonder by showing familiar things in an unfamiliar aspect." (*The Value of Philosophy*, 1912)