

**Phil 303 – Theory of Knowledge**  
**Fall 2015**  
**T/TH 9:25-10:40**  
**HUM 227**

**Instructor**

Sophie Horowitz      sophie.horowitz@rice.edu  
HUM 210              Office hours: Tuesday 12-1 or by appointment

**Overview and course objectives:**

This is an advanced introduction to epistemology. We will focus mostly on questions about *knowledge* and *epistemic rationality*. What does it take to have knowledge, and what can we know? What do we have reason to believe? What do we have reason to doubt? How are reasons to believe different from (and related to) reasons for action? In the last part of the class we will get into some contemporary questions about disagreement: should you doubt your previously-held beliefs when you find out that others disagree with you?

The aim of this course is to familiarize you with various questions and considerations in the theory of knowledge, to have a basic understanding of some of the major debates in recent epistemology, and to have more in-depth understanding of the topics you choose to write about in your papers. You will also develop and improve your skills at philosophical writing and discussion.

**Assignments:**

***Email to a friend***

Your first writing assignment is due in the second week. The assignment is to write a short (500 words at most) email to a friend explaining Gettier's argument. Pick a friend (or family member, or roommate) who has never taken philosophy before. Then, *actually send* the email to your friend (and cc me). Your sole aim in this assignment is to explain Gettier's argument in clear and accessible language that your non-philosopher friend can understand.

***Papers***

There are three short papers required for this class. Length: 4-5 pages (double-spaced, 12-pt font) for the first two, and 8-10 pages for the third. You have the option of rewriting the first two within a week of receiving grades and comments; if you rewrite the paper, the original grade and the rewrite grade will both count. I will distribute paper prompts in advance. If you prefer to propose your own paper topic, talk to me well in advance of the due date to get your topic approved. Only papers on assigned or approved topics will be accepted.

***Extra credit***

Periodically throughout the semester, there will be philosophy department talks and events, which you are always welcome to attend. (I'll remind you when they happen.) For extra credit, you can attend one of these events and write up a 1-2 page reflection (about

500 words). The content of this reflection should include: (a) what was the talk about? what was the speaker's thesis? (b) what was the most interesting argument or idea presented? (c) if anything was especially unclear, do you have ideas about what the speaker could have done better? and (d) what was the most helpful question, comment, or exchange that came up during the discussion, and why was it helpful?

An excellent (A-grade) extra credit reflection write-up will bump one of your paper grades, on either Paper 1 or Paper 2, by 1/3 grade (for example, from B to B+). One extra credit allowed per paper.

**Grading:**

Grades are calculated as specified below. Late work will be marked down 1/3 of a grade per day (for example, from B+ to B). If you need an extension, come ask at least a week in advance and it will generally be granted.

Email to a friend	10%
Paper 1	20%*
Paper 2	20%*
Paper 3	40%
Attendance & Participation	10%

\*If you rewrite Paper 1 or 2, your original grade and your rewrite grade will be averaged to calculate the overall grade.

**Absence Policy:**

Attendance is required to pass the class. We will regularly distribute a sign-in sheet (after the initial shopping period). If you miss more than three meetings, are regularly late to class, or regularly violate the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Policy, you can expect this negatively affect your grade for that portion of the class.

**20<sup>th</sup> Century Policy:**

This classroom exists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Please do not make use of any electronics that would not have been available to you in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This includes all cell phones smaller than a Coke can and laptops weighing less than five pounds. Please let me know if you have a disability or special circumstance that will make it especially difficult to do the work required for class while adhering to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Policy. If any student makes a serious request along these lines, the policy will be lifted for everyone.

**Course Materials:**

There are no required textbooks for this class. Readings are available on Owlspage.

**Honor Code:**

All assignments in this class are covered by the Honor Code. This means that written work should be written entirely by you (and written for the purpose of this class, this semester) unless otherwise specified. You are encouraged to talk to one another about assignments at early stages, but any sources you consult – including one another – must

be properly cited. It is common philosophical practice to cite the names of those whose remarks in philosophical discussion (verbal or written correspondence), or comments on drafts of your paper that influenced your revisions.

If you are unsure of how or whether to cite a source, come ask me. It is always better to err on the side of too many citations rather than too few! You can also look here for guidelines: <http://honor.rice.edu/>

It is easy to feel overwhelmed by work, and sometimes plagiarism can seem like the only solution. If you find yourself in this situation, it is always best to come talk to me, a dean, or a counselor, rather than committing an Honor Code violation.

**Students with disabilities:** Please contact me to discuss your needs. You should also contact Disability Support Services in the Allen Center.

*This syllabus is subject to change. I will notify you of any changes.*

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## **Schedule:**

### **What is knowledge?**

**Week 1**      8/25, 8/27

Gettier, Edmund. [1963] "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"  
Feldman, Richard. [2003] "Modifying the Traditional Analysis of Knowledge."  
(Chapter 3 of *Epistemology*.)

**Week 2**      9/1, 9/3

Zagzebski, Linda [1994]. "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems"  
Bonjour, Laurence [2010]. "The Myth of Knowledge"

*\*\*\*Email to a friend due Friday, 9/4.*

### **What is epistemic rationality?**

**Week 3**      9/8, 9/10

Pascal, Blaise. [1660] *Pensées*, Section 233.  
Rinard, Susanna. [Forthcoming] "No Exception for Belief"

### **Skepticism**

**Week 4**      9/15, 9/17

Descartes, Rene. [1641] *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy: Meditation 1.*

Stroud, Barry. [1984] "The Problem of the External World", in *The Philosophical Significance of Skepticism*. pp. 7-12

Descartes, Rene. [1641] *Meditations on First Philosophy: Meditation 2.*

Stroud, Barry [1984] "The Problem of the External World", pp. 12-end.

**Week 5** 9/22, 9/24

Putnam, Hilary. [1981] "Brains in a Vat." from *Reason, Truth, and History*

Bostrom, Nick. [2003] "Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?"

\*\*\*Paper 1 Due Friday, 9/25.

### **Internalism and Externalism**

**Week 6** 9/29, 10/1

Bonjour, Laurence. [1980] "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge"

**Week 7** 10/6, 10/8

Goldman, Alvin. [1999] "Internalism Exposed"

Vogel, Jonathan. [2000] "Reliabilism Leveled"

### **Moore's Proof**

**Week 8** 10/13 (no class), 10/15

Moore, G. E. [1939] "Proof of an External World"

Pryor, James [2004] "What's Wrong with Moore's Argument" (selections)

10/16, 4:15pm. Talk: Kate Norlock.

**Week 9** 10/20, 10/22

Pryor (continued from last week)

Kelly, Tom. [2005] "Moorean Facts and Belief Revision or Can the Skeptic Win?"

### **Intuition and Philosophical Methodology**

**Week 10** 10/27, 10/29

- Nagel, Jennifer. [2012] “Intuitions and Experiments: A Defense of the Case Method in Epistemology”  
Stich, Stephen. [2013] “Do Different Groups Have Different Epistemic Intuitions? A Reply to Jennifer Nagel”

\*\*\*Paper 2 Due Friday, 10/30.

### **Disagreement and Permissivism**

**Week 11**      11/3, 11/5

- Feldman, Richard. [2005] “Reasonable Religious Disagreements”  
Schoenfield, Miriam. [2014] “Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism is True and What it Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief”

*11/5, 3pm. Talk: David Owens.*  
*11/6: Rainer Forst Workshop*

### **Disagreement and Self-Doubt**

**Week 12**      11/10, 11/12

- Kelly, Tom. [2005] “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”

**Week 13**      11/24, 11/26 (no class)

- Lackey, Jennifer. [2010] “A justificationist view of disagreement’s epistemic significance” (selections)  
Vavova, Katia. [2013] “Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement”

**Week 14**      12/1, 12/3

- Feldman, Richard. [2007] “Respecting the Evidence.”  
Coates, Allan. [2012] “Rational Epistemic Akrasia.”

**Final paper due 12/16 (the last day of exams).**