

PHIL 4224/5224G: Advanced Introduction to Epistemology

Revised version

Fall 2020, 11-12.15 Tu and Th on Zoom

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Zoom (Classes): [4819748871](https://vt.zoom.us/j/4819748871)

Zoom (Office Hrs): [4819748871](https://vt.zoom.us/j/4819748871)

Office hours: Tuesday 2-4pm, via Zoom

Course Summary

Epistemology is the study of *knowledge* and *justification*. Classic epistemological questions include: What is knowledge? What is the best way get it? How can you know for sure you're not dreaming? What makes a belief *rational*? How ought we to revise the beliefs we have when we receive new evidence?

Besides addressing those classic questions, we will

also look at more topical issues. How does fake news inhibit our ability to acquire knowledge of current events? What about deepfake videos? Can racist or sexist beliefs ever be rational? To aid our discussions, we will study a mix of classic and contemporary philosophical texts.



Class Schedule

Every two weeks, I will give you a list of study questions that are connected to the upcoming readings. Your job in those two weeks will be to formulate your own answers to those questions by discussing them with your peers and by doing the readings carefully. At the end of each two-week period, you will hand in your written answers to those questions. These assignments will be graded — half of the questions will be graded for completion, and the other half on a scale.

Tuesday classes will be centred around a lecture, in which I introduce the topic and the main concepts. You will also have an opportunity to ask me questions. During the Thursday classes, you will be working through the study questions with your peers, discussing them in small groups. Graduate students and BA/MAs enrolled in this course will have the option to substitute the Thursday class for an in-person, seminar-style discussion session (time and place TBD).

Assessment

Participation (15% of grade). Showing up to class, camera on during Zoom meetings, doing the readings, staying focused, participating in discussion, paying attention to what other students say.

Answers to Study Questions (30% of grade). Short responses to study questions.

Midterm Paper (25% of grade). A structured, 1000-word essay assignment due October 23rd.

Final Term Paper (30% of grade). An open, 2000-word essay assignment due December 18th.

Reading. You should prepare for each class by doing the assigned reading. A provisional schedule for the readings is provided below. Often you will only be required to read a portion of the article or chapter — the rest will be optional; sometimes I will designate a whole paper as optional reading. Since many of the readings contain complex and subtle arguments, you should do the required readings carefully and slowly, making an effort to understand all the reasoning steps the author makes. Write down questions you have about the readings, and things you did not understand. There will be plenty of opportunity to discuss those questions in class.

Homework Submission. All assignments should be submitted through Canvas. Your essay submissions will be scanned for plagiarism using Turnitin.

Zoom Etiquette. Excepting bathroom breaks, you **must** have your camera on throughout the class — otherwise I will count you as absent. I can make occasional exceptions to this rule, but you will have to contact me in advance to explain your reasons. Make sure you are in a room that is quiet enough that you can concentrate on the class, and we can hear you when you speak. Much as with an in-person class, you should be on time, and not be in your dressing gown.

Final Paper. In your final paper, your job will be to (i) explain one of the philosophical issues discussed in class in your own words, in a way that can be easily understood by someone who has not taken the course, (ii) summarise one of the arguments given in the readings about that issue and (iii) provide your own response to that argument — for instance, you might give an objection or reply to a possible objection. I will suggest a few possible essay topics, but you should stay on the lookout throughout the semester for topics you might want to write about. I encourage you to discuss paper ideas with me in office hours.

Collaboration on Assignments. You're *encouraged* to talk with other students about the assigned reading, and the homework assignments! You can also share drafts with one another. Be generous in sharing ideas: it pays dividends. However: (1) Document who you talked to, and if there is a particular insight you end up using, credit that person. (2) The work you produce should arise from your own understanding of the material. In other words, talk with others to help understand the material or question, but then create your own work based on that discussion. Do not, under any circumstances, copy another person's work: that is plagiarism, and a violation of the Hokie honor code. When in doubt about what counts as copying, or how to make a proper attribution, ask me!

Academic Integrity. The Academic Integrity expectations for Hokies are the same in an online class as they are in an in-person class. Hokies are expected to meet the academic integrity standards of Virginia Tech at all times. The normal sanction for a violation of the Honor Code is an F* as your final course grade, where the * indicates an integrity violation.

Missing class. If you need to miss a class, always email me *in advance*. If you do miss a class, it is your responsibility to contact a fellow student to fill you in. If, after that you still have questions about what was covered, please meet with me (for instance during office hours) to discuss them.

Late assignments. All homework assignments should be handed in by 8pm on the due date. The default policy is that late submissions are not accepted, and incur a D or F grade. If you foresee that you will not be able to hand in your assignment on time, I *may* grant you an extension if you let me know *well in advance* — no later than two days before the due date. Even if an extension is granted, there could still be a grade penalty. Don't be a perfectionist.

Office Hours. You are always welcome to come see me during office hours with any questions you have about the course, about probability, or about paper ideas. If you are struggling to keep up with the course for any reason, you should definitely come to see me.

Wellness Principles. Virginia Tech is committed to protecting the health and safety of all members of its community. By participating in this class, all students agree to abide by the Virginia Tech Wellness principles. To uphold these principles, in this class you must do the following:

- ▶ Wear a face covering during class, including as you enter and exit the classroom
- ▶ Maintain the designated distancing guidelines of the classroom
- ▶ Enter and exit class according to posted signage

If you are exhibiting even the slightest sign of illness, you must not attend an in-person class. Notify me by email and follow the instructions posted at <https://vt.edu/ready/health.html#tips> .

Tentative Schedule

Introduction

August 25. First Class

August 27. Regina Rini, Deepfakes and the Epistemic Backstop

Is Knowledge Possible?

Skepticism

September 1. Descartes, First Meditation

September 3. Nick Bostrom, Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?, §1-3

Dogmatism

September 8. G.E. Moore, Proof of an External World

September 10. Jim Pryor, The Skeptic and the Dogmatist

Externalism

September 15. Robert Stalnaker, On What's in the Head

September 17. Hillary Putnam, Brains in Vats

What is Knowledge?

Justified True Belief

September 22. A.J. Ayer, *Knowing as Having the Right to be Sure*.

September 24. Edmund Gettier, *Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?*

Defeaters

September 29. Keith Lehrer, *Knowledge: Undefeated justified true belief*.

October 1. Colin Radford, *Knowledge by Example*.

Truth-Tracking and Primitivism

October 6. Robert Nozick, *Knowledge*, p. 475-9.

October 8. Timothy Williamson, *Knowledge and its Limits*, p. 1-8.

optional: Laurence Bonjour, *Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge*.

Contextualism

October 13-15. David Lewis, *Elusive Knowledge*, 549-63

optional: Peter Unger, *A Defense of Skepticism*

October 16. **Midterm Paper Draft**

Who Should We Believe?

Bullshit and Fake News

October 20. Harry Frankfurt, *On Bullshit*, p. 1-3, 48-67.

October 22. Regina Rini, *Fake News and Partisan Epistemology*

October 23. **Midterm Paper Due**

Epistemic Injustice

October 27-9. Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, p. 1-29

Testimony

November 3. Election Day (No Class)

November 5. Jennifer Lackey, *Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission*, §1-3

Puzzles about Knowledge

The Lottery Paradox

November 10-12. Dana Nelkin. *The Lottery Paradox, Knowledge, and Rationality*.

optional: John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*, Ch. 1.

Closure (and Counterclosure)

November 17. Jonathan Vogel, Are there any Counterexamples to the Closure Principle?

November 19. Stephen Yablo, Open knowledge and changing the subject.

optional: Ted Warfield, Knowledge from falsehood.

November 21-9. Thanksgiving break

Rational Inquiry*Suspension of Judgment*

December 1-3. Jane Friedman, Why Suspend Judging?

optional: C.S. Peirce, The Fixation of Belief.

Norms of Inquiry

December 8-10. Jane Friedman, The Epistemic and the Zetetic.

December 11. **Final Paper Draft Due**

December 18. **Final Paper Due**