

PHIL 153: Ways of Knowing



(Philosopher Kristie Dotson)



(Philosopher Helen Longino)



(Philosopher Jennifer Nagel)



(Philosopher René Descartes)

Summer 2015
MTWR 3:15-5:15pm
Maguire 102

Course Instructor: Matthew Shields

Email: mbs98@georgetown.edu

Office Hours: TBD

Course Description

What does it mean to *know* something? And how can we be sure that what we take to be true lines up with how the world in fact is? In this course, we will examine these questions in detail by delving into the philosophical tradition known as epistemology. In the first two weeks, we survey some of the main positions in this literature. We consider skeptical challenges to the idea that we can have knowledge of the world *at all*. We look at different ways of responding to these challenges and different accounts of the nature of knowledge. In the second half of the course, we look at more specific areas of epistemology: discussions of how to be a responsible knower, debates over the relationship between values and scientific inquiry, and disagreements over the relationship between knowledge of facts and knowledge of skillful activities. All of this should lead to a picture of just how interesting and complex the project of getting the world right is.

Course Objectives and Learning Goals

- ◆ Learn to construct, analyze, and critique arguments
- ◆ Develop a more sophisticated understanding of what it means to make claims relating to knowledge and truth
- ◆ Develop an understanding of the practices that are involved in being a responsible knower
- ◆ Read and engage with foundational texts in philosophy

Requirements and Assessment

Readings: In philosophy, reading texts closely is essential. Readings in this class will therefore be on the shorter side – no more than roughly 25 pages each class. But that also means I will expect you to have gone through the texts carefully and thought about them in detail, a skill we will work on practicing together. I will set up the following day's reading in the second half of each class to provide you with some guidance for how to approach the material.

We will also be using film and other media to work our way through the philosophical problems we are thinking about.

Reading Responses: For three of the four days each week, I would like you to post a 3-4 sentence reading response on our Blackboard Discussion Board page. This response can be an observation about the reading, a question you have (these are usually the best kinds of responses!), or a worry/objection you want to raise. As a general rule, I do not call on students in class if their hand is

not raised, but I will expect to come prepared to talk about your response and may ask you to share it with the class.

Assignment 1: You will write a 1,250 word letter to one of the philosophers we have read or to one of the characters in a film we have watched, explaining why you think they are correct or mistaken in their philosophical position or why they have not accurately represented a certain philosophical view.

Assignment 2: Using a format of your choosing (examples could include a g-chat or Facebook conversation, a video, or an email), you will look at a real-world example of an epistemic practice we have discussed in class and analyze it in detail using the categories and resources from our readings.

Final Paper: Here you will develop one of your first two assignments into a 1,750 word paper. You can also work on a new topic for the final paper if you would like (pending my approval of the topic). The idea here is that you will use the skills we have worked on for the first two assignments to transition to writing a more traditional, academic paper.

Participation: Since this is a summer course with a smaller class size, participation is very important. I will expect you to come prepared having done the reading and ready to engage in discussion about the material. ‘A’ grade participation does not necessarily mean speaking as frequently as you can. While I will not be evaluating you on the content of your comments, I will be looking for thoughtful contributions that demonstrate a serious attempt to think about the ideas discussed in the readings and in section. I also expect you to be respectful of and courteous toward both your peers and me during discussion. Not only is this important for creating a welcoming environment, but it is essential for doing good philosophical work. Engaging charitably, even with ideas with which you strongly disagree, is a central philosophical and intellectual virtue.

If you are shy or nervous about public speaking, or worried for any reason about your ability to participate in discussion, I am very sympathetic to these concerns, and we will figure out alternative ways for you to meet your participation requirement.

Grading Guidelines

Assignment 1: 25%	Final Paper: 30%
Assignment 2: 25%	Participation: 20%

Provisional Schedule of Units

Week 1: Introduction to epistemology and the nature of skepticism

- ◆ What is epistemology?
- ◆ What is skepticism?
- ◆ What are the different varieties of skepticism?
- ◆ What are some possible replies to skeptical worries?

Week 2: Gettier cases, internalism/externalism, and responsibility

- ◆ Should we take knowledge to be justified true belief?
- ◆ Can we have knowledge without knowing it?
- ◆ What is it to justify our beliefs?

Week 3: Figuring out what it is to be a responsible knower

- ◆ What sort of practices make us responsible knowers?
- ◆ Are different types of knowledge available to knowers who occupy different social positions?
- ◆ Can we harm someone as a knower?

Week 4: Science and values

- ◆ Is science a value-free enterprise?
- ◆ What are the sort of values that might be involved in scientific practice?
- ◆ Does an account of science as involving values mean that we should give up on the idea of objectivity?

Week 5: Know-how vs. know-that

- ◆ Is there a difference between knowing facts and knowing a skill?
- ◆ What role does 'knowing' ultimately play in our everyday lives?