

Fall 2020: Special circumstances

We are living through extraordinary times together. There is a global pandemic raging in our country. Racial injustice has prompted large-scale uprisings. And this semester comprises a fiercely polarized national presidential election.

What this means for our class:

- Our plans may be interrupted. Everything in this syllabus is tentative. You must watch your e-mail for updates.
- We all need to practice grace with one another.
 - If you need to miss class but cannot get a university-approved absence, just e-mail me.
 - People may say things you find offensive or hurtful, accidentally or on purpose. We all need to try particularly hard to be both thoughtful with our words and charitable with our ears. We'll draft a list of ground rules in our first class period, to include whether you will allow the class sessions to be recorded.
- I hope you will feel free to e-mail me if you are struggling with anything in the class. I want to help you understand the philosophy we're talking about, and I also care about you. Other resources include our excellent [University Counseling Center](#).
- I'm going to post short lecture videos on our Sakai page, which should help you understand the readings and other content. I recommend you watch my videos before you review the other content. This will allow our class time to be discussion-focused.

Learning objectives

Successful students will have:

- assessed their current practices for forming/revising opinions, passing on information, and influencing others' opinions more broadly.
- read and appreciated historical and contemporary philosophical sources advocating different approaches.
- articulated for themselves, at the end of the course, their own reflective commitments as to the kind of epistemic agent they will be.

Material to be covered

The class will be concerned with five main questions, which will structure the class in five units.

- How skeptical should I be, and what kinds of things might I hope to know?
- How, if at all, should disagreement matter in my forming/revising opinions?
- How, if at all, should I read the news?
- What "knowing" should I outsource, and what (if anything) should I try to appreciate for myself?
- What do I owe to others, as a participant in the flow of information?

Content

All readings, videos, and audio files for this course will be available through our Sakai page.

Grades

Your grade will be determined as follows:

- Short assignments (30%)
 - 4% Epistemology inventories (x2, 2% each)
 - 26% Short writing assignment (SWA) (x26, 1% each)
- In-class (25%)
 - 10% In-class presentation
 - 15% In-class discussion (x3, 5% each)
- Longer assignments (45%)
 - 25% Immersive assignments (IA) (x5, 5% each)
 - 20% Concluding manifesto (5% rough draft due 11/6 + 15% final draft due 11/20)

Epistemology inventories – this is a survey you will take twice: once at the beginning of the term and once at the end. You will not be penalized or rewarded for the content of your answers.

SWA's (short writing assignments) – These due before each class, and they are based on the content you will have read/watched/listened to. They should be 100- 200 words. The goal is to prepare you to discuss the material with your peers. They will be graded on effort. (It should be clear you did the reading/watching/listening.)

IA's (immersive assignments) – These too will be graded on effort. I trust that you are taking this class in good faith. You will get much more out of the class, *and* I will be much less likely to take off points, if you take these seriously. These are due on Friday nights at midnight:

- 8/21 (Cartesian skepticism)
- 9/4 (Pyrrhonian skepticism)
- 9/25 (polarization and the news)
- 10/9 (knowledge and technology)
- 10/23 (religious authority)

In-class presentation & in-class discussion – you are expected to [sign-up](#) (a) to present once this term, for about 10 minutes at the beginning of class (possibly along with another student if there are insufficient spots for everyone to present on their own), and (b) to be a “discussant” for three other class periods (not the one when you’re presenting). (I’ll automatically assign students who have not signed up by the end of the day after our second week of classes.)

Presenters: You need to prepare a short handout or 2-5 slide powerpoint to share with the class. You can e-mail this to me to share or use screen-sharing on Zoom. You should present what you thought was most interesting in the week’s content, as well as 1-3 clarification questions or objections you’d like us to discuss as a class. The goal for these presentations is to kick off our discussion. To get full marks your presentation of the material must be reasonably comprehensive, accurate, interesting, and clear.

Discussants: You need to participate actively in the discussion for that class day. You need to have questions or objections prepared to discuss with the class, although you

might also choose to simply respond to the presenter or comments from other students. You need to talk for at least a few minutes of the class time, and it needs to be obvious that you have read and thought about the material for that day.

Concluding manifesto – An important learning objective for this course is that you will have articulated for yourself your own reflective commitments as to the kind of epistemic agent you will be. This manifesto must include a section on each of the five questions listed above in “Material to be covered.” We will discuss what it should include in more detail in the second half of the term. You will *not* be penalized in any way for the content of your epistemological views. I only expect you to state your views clearly and provide reasons for them.

Tentative schedule

<i>Date</i>	<i>Unit</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Content</i>	
8/10		Introduction		
8/12	Skepticism		Descartes Meditations I-II	
8/17		Skepticism and science	Mandelbaum & Quilty-Dunn (2015)	
8/19			Crash Course Statistics, “The Replication Crisis” video	
8/24		Skepticism and relativism	Srinivasan (2019), sections I-II	
8/26			Srinivasan (2019), sections III-IV	
8/31		Pyrrhonian skepticism	“Sextus Empiricus” podcast; <i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> chapters I, IV-VIII, X-XII	
9/2			<i>Outlines of Pyrrhonism</i> , parts of chapter XIV, chapter XV	
9/7	Disagreement	Philosophy of disagreement	Feldman (2007)	
9/9			Kelly (2005), sections 1 and 4-8	
9/14		Disagreement in the wild		Stephens (2017)
9/16				Lynch (2017)
9/21	The news	Echo chambers and filter bubbles	Nguyen (2020)	
9/23			Hi-Phi Nation, “Chamber of Facts” podcast	
9/28		Fake news (contd.)	Part of On the Media podcast, Arendt (1967), sections I and II	
9/30			Arendt (1967), sections III-V	
10/5	Outsourcing	Outsourcing to devices	Vox (2019); BBC “How technology tries to hack your brain”	
10/7			Howell (2014) introduction ONLY; BBC (2015) “Digital dependence ‘eroding human memory’”	
10/12		Outsourcing to others	Goldman (2001), sections 1-3	
10/14			Goldman (2001), sections 4-7	
10/19		Outsourcing to religious authorities	Zagzebski (2016)	
10/21			James (1896), sections I-IV	
10/26	The ethics of belief	The ethics of belief	James (1896), sections V-X	
10/28			Basu (2019), sections 1 and 2	
11/2		Belief and assertion		Frankfurt (1986); Frankfurt “On bullshit” video
11/4				<i>n/a</i> , writing workshop
11/9		Epistemic injustice		Fricker (2007), “Testimonial injustice”
11/11				Fricker (2007), “Hermeneutical injustice”, sections 7.1-7.3