

Time: MWF 9-10
Location: Baxter 33
Office Hours: MF 10-11

Instructor: Charles T. Sebens
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COURSE DESCRIPTION

The first half of the course will be an in-depth exploration of epistemology, the study of knowledge. We will be guided by two challenges: external-world skepticism and the infinite regress argument. Using what we've learned about epistemology, we will ask whether we should believe in the existence of God. We will also ask whether the past and the future exist and what makes someone the same person over time.

An important purpose in asking these puzzling questions will be to develop skills in methodical thinking, persuasive argumentation, and clear writing.

TEXTBOOK

Epistemology (2003), Feldman

We will start by working through Richard Feldman's textbook, which presents the current status of philosophical thought on some central problems in epistemology. The second half of the course will move to more challenging and less closely connected readings.

ASSIGNMENTS

Short Assignments (40%)

To help you develop the skills necessary to think and write philosophically you will be required to complete 20 short assignments throughout the course. Most of these will be in the form of single question homework assignments asking about the reading for the upcoming class. Some of the short assignments will be completed in class. You will only receive credit for an assignment if you attend class on the day the assignment is due. The short assignments will generally be graded on the following scale: "✓+"=100, "✓"=85, "✓-"=70, "✗"=30. You can miss two short assignments without penalty. Submitting a draft of your first essay on 4/25 will count as one short assignment. Participating in the peer review on 4/29 will count as another.

Essays (60%, 30% each)

You must complete two essays of 1,500-1,800 words each, due in class on 5/2 and 6/3. A typed hard copy must be submitted in class and an electronic copy should be emailed to me before class as well. Both copies should be anonymized—write your Caltech ID number, not your name, at the top.

SCHEDULE

[Note page numbers! Sometimes you don't have to read the whole chapter or article.]

- 3/28 **What is epistemology?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 1-7
 Optional: "The Pink Guide to Taking Philosophy Classes" (2009), de Bres
- 3/30 **Do we have knowledge of the external world?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 109-112, 114-119
 Optional: "Meditations on First Philosophy (parts I and II)" (1641), Descartes
 "The Tunnel Under the World" (1955), Pohl; also available as a radio adaption for
X Minus One (1956)
- 4/1 **How do you analyze formal arguments?**
 Reading: "Logical Toolkit" (2013), Perry, Bratman, and Fischer, in *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 6th ed, pg. 9-14
 Textbook, pg. 119-122
 Optional: "Proof of an External World" (1939), G. E. Moore, pg. 165-170
- 4/4 **Is knowledge fallible?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 122-128
 Optional: *Conjectures and Refutations* (1963), Popper, pg. 200-206
- 4/6 **How should you respond to the skeptic challenge?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 141-142, 145-151
 Optional: *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912), Chapter 2: The Existence of Matter, Russell
The Matrix (1999), the Wachowskis (136 min.)
- 4/8 **Do the standard skeptical scenarios really lead to skepticism?**
 Reading: No required reading
 Optional: "The Matrix as Metaphysics" (2003), Chalmers
Reason, Truth and History (1981), Chapter 1: Brains in a Vat, Putnam
- 4/11 **Should we be skeptical about inductive reasoning?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 130-141, 151-152
 Optional: *Introduction to the Philosophy of Science* (1992), Chapter 2: The Confirmation of
 Scientific Hypotheses, Earman and Salmon (especially pg. 55-65)
- 4/13 **How do you write a philosophy essay?**
 Reading: "A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper" (2008), Rippon
 Optional: *Writing Philosophy: A Student's Guide to Writing Philosophical Essays* (2006), Chapter 3:
 Rules of Style and Content for Philosophical Writing, Vaughn
 ❖**First essay prompts distributed.**❖
- 4/15 **What is knowledge?**
 Reading: Textbook, pg. 8-24

- 4/18 **Is knowledge justified true belief?**
Reading: Textbook, pg. 25-38
- 4/20 **Does the search for justification lead to an infinite regress?**
Reading: Textbook, pg. 49-60
Optional: "Meditations on First Philosophy (part III)" (1641), Descartes
- 4/22 **Can we get by without a foundation?**
Reading: Textbook, pg. 60-70
Optional: "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge" (1985), Bonjour (with commentary by Bernecker), in *Reading Epistemology* (2006)
- 4/25 **Can we find an adequate foundation?**
Reading: Textbook, pg. 70-80
Optional: "Problems for Dogmatism" (2006), White
❖**First essay drafts due.**❖
- 4/27 **Must we look outside the mind to assess justification?**
Reading: Textbook, pg. 86-99
Optional: *Metaepistemology and Skepticism* (1995), Chapter 6: Externalism and Skepticism, Fumerton, pg. 173-180
- 4/29 **How do I improve my essay draft?** (at the writing center)
Reading: Peer essays
- 5/2 **What are the standards for knowledge?**
Reading: "Elusive Knowledge" (1996), Lewis, pg. 549-554
Optional: Textbook, pg. 152-155
❖**First essay due.**❖
- 5/4 **Can you approach epistemology quantitatively?**
Reading: *Philosophy of Science: A New Introduction* (2014), Chapter 2: The Analytic Project, Barker and Kitcher, pg. 29-34
Optional: "Notes on Bayesian Confirmation Theory" (2012), Strevens, pg. 5-6, 15-17, 22-31
- 5/6 **How do you read philosophical texts?**
Reading: "Appendix: Reading Philosophy" (2013), Perry and Bratman, in *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, 3rd ed, pg. 841-843
In class: "The Five Ways" from *Summa Theologica* (13th century), Aquinas
- 5/9 **Does the existence of God require proof?**
Reading: "Is there a God?" (1952), Russell, pg. 547-548
Optional: "Atheological Apologetics" (1989), Shalkowski
Reason and Religious Belief (2009), 4th ed, Chapter 4: Faith and Reason: How are they Related?, Peterson, Hasker, Reichenbach, and Basinger
"Can it be Rational to have Faith?" (2012), Buchak

- 5/11 **Is believing in God a good bet?**
 Reading: “Pascal’s Wager” (1670), Pascal, from *Pensées*, pg. 1-3
 Optional: Textbook, pg. 41-45
- 5/13 **Was our world designed?**
 Reading: “The Argument from Design” (1800), Paley, from *Natural Theology*
 Optional: “Darwin and Paley Meet the Invisible Hand” (1990), Gould
 ❖**Second essay prompts distributed.**❖
- 5/16 **Why would a good God allow bad things to happen?**
 Reading: “Hell is the Absence of God” (2001), Chiang
 Optional: “Evil and Omnipotence” (1955), Mackie
- 5/18 **Is evil necessary for freedom?**
 Reading: No required reading
 Optional: “Why God Allows Evil” (1996), Swinburne
- 5/20 **Is the future fixed?**
 Reading: *On Interpretation* (4th century BCE), Chapter 9, Aristotle (with commentary by Annas), in *Voices of Ancient Philosophy*, pg. 56-59
- 5/23 **Do the past and future exist?**
 Reading: *Riddles of Existence* (2005), Chapter 3: Time, Sider, pg. 44-61
 Optional: “The Weed of Time” (1970), Spinrad
- 5/25 **Is time travel possible?**
 Reading: *Philosophy Through Science Fiction* (2009), Chapter 4: Spacetime and Time Travel, Nichols, Smith, and Miller, pg. 200-209
 Optional: “Paradoxes of Time Travel” (1976), Lewis
Timecrimes (2007), Vigalondo (92 min.)
- 5/27 **What makes me me?**
 Reading: *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Chapter 10: What We Believe Ourselves to Be, Parfit, pg. 199-209
 Optional: The Outer Limits: Think Like a Dinosaur (2001), season 7 episode 8 (44 min.)
- 6/1 **Am I ever truly the same person as I was?**
 Reading: No required reading
 Optional: “Survival and Identity” (1976), Lewis, in *The Identities of Persons*, pg. 17-29
- 6/3 **Is philosophy worthwhile?**
 Reading: *Language, Truth, and Logic* (1936), Chapter 1: The Elimination of Metaphysics, Ayer
 ❖**Second essay due.**❖

ATTENDANCE AND READING

Engaged participation and careful preparation are important to your success in this course. As there are only about 15 students in the course, I expect everyone to participate regularly in class discussion. Learning to orally examine questions and present your own ideas in a skilled, accurate, professional, and persuasive manner is an invaluable skill in life. By engaging in class discussion you will improve your ability to do this and come to understand the material covered in the course better.

During discussion you will often find yourself disagreeing with other students. When this happens, strive to be respectful. If you can't understand why someone would believe *that*, then you have something to learn from your interlocutor. The most compelling arguments are offered by those who see the appeal of the other side.

Much of the time you spend learning philosophy will be spent reading and re-reading the texts. Reading philosophy is challenging. I recommend that you re-read confusing parts of the text and take notes, bringing prepared questions with you to class or office hours.

The readings that are not from the textbook are all available on the course website (including optional readings). Readings should be completed in advance of the class meeting they are associated with.

The optional readings are offered to supplement the required reading. For the most part, you should not need to look at them. However, I advise you to look at them if (a) you're having difficulty understanding the required reading, (b) you decide to write an essay on that day's topic but feel you need more material to engage with, (c) you happen to find a particular topic especially interesting and would like to read more about it, or (d) you want to read/watch a fun piece of fiction related to the topic. The optional video material is not available on the course website.

LATE ASSIGNMENTS

Homework assignments will be collected at the beginning of class and any late homework assignments will not receive credit. You can miss two short assignments without penalty. Late essays will receive a one letter grade deduction for each 48 hour period they are late. An extension may be granted if requested in advance of the due date for the assignment. In general, extensions will only be granted for reasons of religious observance, illness, or personal or family emergency.

SENIOR DITCH DAY

Should Ditch Day fall on a Monday, Wednesday, or Friday, class will be canceled and any assignments due will be due instead on the next day class is held. Each class session will be pushed back and the topics for 5/27 and 6/1 will be covered in a single day.

EMAIL

You can reach me at: csebens@gmail.com. Please only email me about logistical concerns: requesting extensions, scheduling additional office hours, etc. I find it is more effective to discuss course content face-to-face. I am happy to meet with you in office hours to discuss any philosophical questions and to schedule additional meetings as needed.

OFFICE HOURS

Office hours are a chance to discuss philosophy with a smaller group of students and a great way to gain knowledge and skills relevant to the course. You may want to stop by to (a) discuss questions about the material covered in the course, (b) talk about other philosophical questions not covered in this course, (c) figure out how to write a philosophical paper or to discuss your plans for a paper, (d) get clarification on the HW problems, or (e) talk about the comments you've received on an essay. I will not read full paper drafts in office hours, but I'm happy to discuss your plan for the paper.

SPECIAL ACCOMMODATIONS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

If you require any special arrangements for completing the course assignments or participating fully in class meetings, please let me know at the beginning of the course.

PLAGIARISM

You are encouraged to discuss your work with other students and even to share drafts with each other to get feedback. However, the work you submit should be your own. If you incorporate the ideas of others, cite those sources. Do not copy language too closely. Even when summarizing and paraphrasing cited sources, you must use your own language and present the ideas in an original way. We will discuss plagiarism further when you are preparing to write your first essay. Please ask me if you have any questions about what counts as plagiarism. More information on plagiarism is available on the Hixon Writing Center's website: www.writing.caltech.edu/students/plagiarism. If I have reason to believe that you have plagiarized, I will report the case to the Board of Control for review. If they determine that it is indeed a case of plagiarism, you will receive a zero on the assignment.