

# Contemporary Epistemology

Philosophy 331, Spring 2009

Wednesday 1:10pm-3:50pm | Jenness House Seminar Room

Joe Cruz, Associate Professor of Philosophy

Epistemology is one of the core areas of philosophical reflection. In this course, we will study the literature in analytic philosophy on the nature of knowledge and rational belief.

Epistemologists seek answers to the following kinds of questions:

- When is it rational to have a particular belief?
- What is knowledge (as opposed to opinion)?
- In order to be justified in holding a belief, must someone know (or believe) that she is justified in holding that belief?
- What justifies our scientific knowledge?

These questions are typically asked within a framework where the overarching goal is attaining truth and avoiding falsity. Beyond this common ground, however, epistemologists are much divided. Some maintain that these issues are solely the province of philosophy, using traditional methods of *a priori* analysis and intuition about cases. Others maintain that these questions will only yield to methods that incorporate our broader insight into the structure of the world including, perhaps, science or feminist thought. Both stances face severe difficulties. Further, even where there is agreement as to the proper way of answering epistemological questions, there is a stunning variety of possible answers to each question.

## REQUIRED READINGS

*Required readings are available in a reading packet available through the College.*

## GRADING

### 1. *Participation*

Discussion is essential to the vitality of the seminar. Your first priority is reading the assignments carefully and working diligently on the writing for the course. Thoughtful, honest, and respectful participation derives from these. Every effort will be made to ensure that the class is a welcoming forum for sharing serious ideas. In addition, participation is more inclusive than many students realize. Being attentive and engaged in class, asking clarificatory questions, and discussing aspects of the course with the instructor during office hours all fall

under this heading. Advanced students typically need not worry about this element of their performance, but the instructor reserves the privilege of treating participation as constituting up to 10% of the final grade.

No laptops in class.

## 2. Seminar papers

You are required to write 8 short papers. These assignments are intended to stimulate class discussion and to help you master the material.

There are 12 weeks in the course. Thus, you may skip 4 of these weeks over the span of the semester in order to complete work for other courses or for personal reasons. You must, however, write at least 4 seminar papers before Spring vacation.

I will recommend topics that you may write on, but at any point you may choose any element of the week's reading to engage. For example, you may briefly summarize the epistemological issues of the reading and critically respond by using other material from the course. Or, you may pick a direct quotation from the readings and attempt to show that the ideas contained in it are misguided or fail to take into consideration important factors. Note that your responses need not be negative. You may take these papers as an opportunity to sympathetically review or to elaborate on proposals made in the literature.

*About 2 pages (3 pages is the absolute maximum, as I will simply stop reading).* Typewritten, double spaced in a 12 point font. No title page. 50% of final grade with each paper weighted equally.

## 3. Final paper

The final paper may be an extension of a weekly paper or may advance completely new ideas. This will be an opportunity for extended discussion of any topic in the course. You are not required to seek additional sources for final papers, though you may.

Papers must reflect original thoughts and ideas. Any direct quotations or paraphrased material from outside sources must be credited and footnoted in your favorite style. Violation of this constitutes plagiarism. If you have questions about how the honor code applies to written work, please do not hesitate to contact me.

12-15 pages (18 pages absolute maximum). Typewritten, double spaced in a 12 point font. No title page. 40% of final grade. Essays are due on the third-to-last day of the exam period (the latest time the Dean's office allows written work to be turned in).

*Grading on all writing assignments will be anonymous. Please turn in your papers with only your Williams ID number on it in some unobtrusive place.*

Anonymous grading is one way of assuring that the collegiality of our interactions does not cloud my assessment of your work. Grading blindly is not a perfect mechanism for this purpose. One crucial disadvantage to anonymous grading is that the instructor will not know when your work is systematically inadequate and will not approach you with concerns about your writing. As a result, there is an additional burden of maturity and responsibility on your

shoulders. You must elect to visit office hours, to discuss your work with the teaching assistant, and to seek out informal opportunities to improve your writing.

The desire to preserve the integrity of the anonymous grading system should never prevent you from seeking advice on assignments for this course. You are encouraged to speak with me with your work in hand. Naturally this will reveal facts of authorship, and may give the instructor some insight into your style and interests. Still, your success in meeting the challenges of this course should always be our first concern.

## SEMINAR RESOURCES

*Office hours* - The instructor holds office meetings each week in North Academic Building 306. They are:

Mondays	2:30-4pm
Wednesdays	11am-12:30pm
Thursdays	2:30-4pm

Additional times are available by special arrangement. Students are welcome to visit individually or in groups.

*Instant Messaging* - The instructor will occasionally be available via AIM. You may check anytime, and you may assume that if I am logged on, I am available (and eager) for conversation. My screen name is professorjcruz.

Students with disabilities who may need disability-related classroom accommodations for this course are encouraged to set up an appointment to meet with me as soon as possible and to contact the Dean's Office (at extension 4262) to better insure that accommodations are provided in a timely manner.

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### Schedule of Topics and Readings

(For each class meeting, you are advised to read the material in the order presented in the schedule)

#### SKEPTICISM & KNOWLEDGE

February Discussion: On Skeptical Arguments  
11 Readings: Descartes, from *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations I&II  
Moore, "Certainty"  
Stroud, "The Problem of the External World"

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18 Discussion: On Skeptical Arguments II  
Readings: Lehrer, "Why Not Skepticism?"  
Vogel, "Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation"  
Cruz, "Is There Reason for Skepticism?"

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25 Discussion: The Gettier Problem and Justificationism

Readings: Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"  
Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing"  
Lehrer & Paxson "Knowledge: Undefeated Justified True Belief"

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March 4 Discussion: Causal and Tracking theories  
Readings: Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge"  
Nozick, "Knowledge and Skepticism" (abridged from *Philosophical Explanations*)

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11 Discussion: Contextualism  
Readings: DeRose, "Solving the Skeptical Problem"  
Schiffer, "Contextualist Solutions to Skepticism"

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## JUSTIFICATION

March 18 Discussion: Empirical knowledge  
Readings: Price, from *Belief*, "Belief and Evidence"  
Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given"  
Sellars, "Does Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?"

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April 8 Discussion: Foundationalism & Coherentism  
Readings: Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?"  
Bonjour, "The Coherence Theory of Empirical Knowledge"

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15 Discussion: Foundationalism & Coherentism II  
Readings: Pryor, "There is Immediate Justification"  
Bonjour, "Toward a Defense of Empirical Foundationalism"

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22 Discussion: Reliabilism and the move to externalism  
Readings: Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid"  
Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?"  
Connee & Feldman, "The Generality Problem for Reliabilism"

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29 Discussion: Internalism versus Externalism  
Readings: Goldman, "Internalism Exposed"  
Cruz & Pollock, "The Chimerical Appeal of Epistemic Externalism"

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## EPISTEMIC NATURALISM

May

6 Discussion: Epistemic Naturalism I  
Readings: Quine, "Epistemology naturalized"  
Kim, "What is naturalized epistemology?"

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13 Discussion: Epistemic Naturalism II  
Readings: Antony, "Quine as Feminist"  
Bonjour, "Against Naturalized Epistemology"

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23 FINAL ESSAY DUE at 5pm (email or Professor's mailbox)

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