PHIL 217: Knowledge, Skepticism, and Film

Syllabus

Winter 2005: MWF 1:15 – 2:30
Instructor: Dr. Ashley McDowell

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Office Hours: Mondays and Wednesdays 9 – 10, Tuesdays and Thursdays 10:30 – 11:30 (unless a change is announced), and by appointment

Brown bag discussions: Fridays before class – 12:00 – 1:00 (these are informal discussion sessions with me and others in the class, about course material and related topics)

Texts:
Landesman and Meeks, eds., Philosophical Skepticism
Ernest Sosa and Jaegwon Kim, eds., Epistemology: An Anthology
Articles on reserve at the library

Description:
This is an upper-level seminar-style course exploring some issues in epistemology – the study of knowledge – using films as examples and discussion centers. In particular, we'll focus on a few key issues surrounding the possibility and nature of knowledge.

Many films have explored situations that cast doubt on characters' knowledge. The worry can be a global one – what if nothing I believe is really true? After all, I could be having all of the experiences I am having now, while those experiences are not reflecting reality. These so-called “global skeptical scenarios” will be studied through the films The Matrix, Total Recall, The Truman Show, and through academic philosophical works dating back to Descartes, the father of the global skeptical scenario.

Even if we reject absolute skepticism, there are still questions about our evidence for our beliefs, and when we are reasonable in holding various kinds of beliefs. We will study various issues and theories regarding philosophical “justification”: good reason for believing. Films that will help us here are Fight Club, Memento, Rear Window, Rashomon, and Twelve Angry Men.

Course Goals:
From our reasoned responses to such films, we can learn a lot about the concepts of good evidence, rationality, assessment of belief-forming practices, and other epistemological issues. We will continually read contemporary academic philosophical articles presenting arguments regarding these issues as well. The combination of our powerful responses to examples and our intellectual struggle with theory should lead us to deep and rewarding insights about thinking, knowledge, and how we should conduct our mental lives.

We will meet outside of class during the evening in seven of the ten weeks to watch the films required for this class. Previous viewing of the films will not count – you will be expected to watch the film again, in your role as an epistemologist. Classes will include a combination of lecture and discussion, and all students will be expected to contribute. In-class discussions will be conducted with respect and a mutual interest in solving these problems, so that all views will be open to thoughtful criticism. We will be approaching other views – and our own – with an open-minded but critical eye. The focus will be on providing and assessing arguments for positions, to try to come to the most thoughtful position possible on these questions. Students will be evaluated on how well you have learned the views and arguments of the authors studied, and how well you formulate original arguments for your own positions.

Class Format
This class will consist of a combination of lecture and discussion. In general, I will spend time every day taking your questions about the reading and the previous class's material, and we will then go over and talk about the current day's material. I may sometimes have you break up into pairs or groups to work on an in-class assignment or discussion. Since philosophical learning is best done in an environment of discussion, attendance and participation are expected.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, and being prepared to discuss those readings. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course will most likely be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. Those who want to truly excel in this class will most likely want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings. I will often provide study questions to guide your reading. You must bring with you to class whatever text(s) we are working on for that day.

In this class, we will be discussing issues that most people find important, and on which many people have strong opinions. We will not be merely exchanging opinions, but will be seeking the truth. In that spirit, everyone's contributions will be both respected and open to thoughtful criticism.

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Response papers: 15%
Every Monday (excluding First Week), you will write a response paper on an assigned topic related to the material currently being covered. This will be a typed, double-spaced short essay, and it should be a page or two in length (a little over or under is okay).
Response papers will generally involve you thinking about the material we’ve been discussing or reading in a personal way, either grappling with your own view on a topic or applying the ideas to things in your own life. These response papers might be shared with the class, unless you ask me (on the paper) not to do so – you may also ask me to only share your paper with the class anonymously, if you like.

I will be assigning these papers either ü+ , ü, or ü-. These correspond approximately to grades of A, B, and C, respectively. (Papers straddling the borders between these grades will have a grade indicating as much, such as “ü+ / ü.”) In extreme cases where the paper does not approach answering the question asked, one may receive no credit for a reaction paper turned in (an ×).

The point of the essays is to integrate your academic learning of the material into your personal life and thinking, and to have the experience of constructing statements of your own reactions to the topics studied. They are meant to help you see the material as relevant to your life, and to see yourself as able to take a place in the ongoing debate about philosophical issues. I will grade these on the basis of how well I see you trying to do those things, not on the basis of your ability to regurgitate facts from the readings, or parrot back to me thoughts I or the philosophers studied have expressed.

Long papers: 25% each

You will be writing three relatively long (about 10-page) papers for this course. Each paper will defend an original thesis contributing to the arguments and theories studied. At least one of these papers will incorporate discussion of an additional film chosen by you.

Assignment responsibilities:

I will be able to look at rough drafts, either turned in or during office hours; I will let you know details as the time gets nearer. I also encourage you to run rough drafts by each other or your peers at the Writing Center. Whether I look at them or not, rough drafts and outlines of each of your long papers will be due along with the final drafts.

All assignments must be turned in as hard (paper) copies – no emailed assignments will be accepted except by special permission. It is your responsibility to retain copies of all assignments you turn in, in a reliable format. An assignment that is between one hour and 24 hours late will receive a ½ grade reduction. An assignment that is between one day and two weeks late will receive a full grade reduction. Assignments will not be accepted more than two weeks late.

You will be permitted one “freebie”: an assignment turned in as much as two days late, no questions asked, as long as you let me know you’re taking your freebie. Be mindful not to use it lightly.

The formal requirements for all assignments will be announced in detail well ahead of time in class, and most likely on the website and through the email listserv.

A note on changing grades: if you feel you have been assigned a grade unfairly or inaccurately, you should by all means talk to me about it. My only requirement is that you prepare an argument (a set of reasons and facts) before you do so.

A note on reading: don’t succumb to the misconception that in order to read something you only have to move your eyes over the lines, or “read it out loud in your head,” so to speak. What I expect is that you will read the material in a more sophisticated way, thinking as you go. You should be asking yourself the main points, making sure you understand the structure of the reading, thinking about how this reading relates to others you’ve done, and otherwise working to comprehend the material, not just to complete a technical “reading” of it. You might try highlighting, underlining, making marginal notes, or outlining – whatever helps you focus and understand.

Participation, class conduct, and other assignments: 10%

Participation is expected. In a philosophy class of this kind, discussion is absolutely essential, and may be the way you learn most about the material. I know that participation is difficult for some people, but you can consider this a safe place to practice contributing to a group discussion, which you will surely need to do throughout your life. I will require and ensure that conversation in class, although probably critical of ideas, will not be critical of people.

I will keep general track of your contributions in class. Keep in mind that contributions can take various forms, including asking for clarification, participation in group work, and giving helpful examples. Keep in mind also that more does not necessarily mean better: those who excessively dominate discussions, speak disrespectfully, or otherwise use their voices in a negative way may be penalized for doing so. If you are in doubt, ask me.

Your conduct in this class includes improvement and effort. It also includes issues of respectful behavior, such as tardiness, distracting behavior, or disrespectful behavior towards members of the class. We will go over this in class.

I will occasionally give you in-class or perhaps out-of-class assignments in addition to your papers and response papers. I may have you turn in answers to study questions I’ve given out, for example; or answer a short question in class to help me gauge the level of understanding in the class. These assignments will be included in this portion of the grade.

Attendance:

Attendance is expected: three or more unexcused absences will result in a full grade reduction for the course. Absences will only be excused for required sports activities or practices or for a dire personal circumstance.

Academic integrity and the Honor System

“it is always important to think of the intellectual world as a community of mutual dependence, mutual helpfulness, mutual protectiveness, and common delight. We take ideas from others and we give them to others. We are indebted to others, and others are indebted to us. In sharing and acknowledging the community, we define ourselves more certainly as individuals. The ability to describe our sources is also an ability to define our own originality and our own selves. All communities depend on generosity, trust, definition,
and the proper use of sources is part of the mortar that holds the community of the mind together.”
- Richard Marius, Expository Writing Program, Harvard University

In this class, as in all classes at Kalamazoo College, we will be operating under the Honor System. It is important that you familiarize yourself with that system. You should also familiarize yourself with proper procedures for collaborating, doing research, and citing sources. I expect each of you to visit my webpage and read the essay there called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It” (http://kzoo.edu/~mcdowell/Academic_integrity_and_plagiarism.htm). Should you have any questions about citations, plagiarism, or honor system issues, please visit or contact me.

Any assignment you turn in that I find to violate academic integrity, either through dishonesty, plagiarism, lack of appropriate citations, or unauthorized collaboration, will receive a grade of 0. Any further instance of a violation of academic integrity will be punished by a failing grade in the class as a minimum sanction.[1]

Special needs
If you have any special needs that I can accommodate, please let me know as soon as possible.

Office hours
My office hours are posted above. They will be conducted on a first-come, first-served basis, and by appointment, with appointments taking precedence. You should feel absolutely free to come to them and discuss the course, the material, the assignments, or philosophy.

I request that each of you take a few minutes to visit me during my office hours sometime in the first week or two of classes. It will be an opportunity for us to chat one-on-one for the first time, and to get to know each other a bit more.
Schedule of Readings

This schedule is tentative. Any changes will be announced in class and by email. The reading assignments listed for each day must be completed before that class. All readings are found in your textbooks or are on reserve at the library.

**WEEK ONE**

M 1/3 Introduction to Class and Epistemology

**Global Skepticism**

W 1/5 Diogenes Laertius, from *Pyrrho*; Cicero, from *Academica*; and Sextus Empiricus, from *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (all in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

Thurs 1/6: **Movie night: Total Recall in lounge at 8:30 p.m.**

F 1/7 Descartes, “Meditation I” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*); discussion of Total Recall

**WEEK TWO**

M 1/10 Hume, from *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

W 1/12 Nagel, from *The View from Nowhere*; and Unger, “A Defense of Skepticism” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

Thurs 1/13: **Movie night: The Truman Show in lounge at 8:30 p.m.**

F 1/14 movie discussion: The Truman Show

**WEEK THREE**

M 1/17 MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR. HOLIDAY: NO CLASS

**Other Minds**

W 1/19 Nagel, “Other Minds;” and Russell, “Analogy” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

Thurs 1/20: **Movie night: Fight Club in lounge at 8:30 p.m.**

F 1/21 Malcolm, “Knowledge of Other Minds” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*); discussion of Fight Club

**WEEK FOUR**

**Religious Belief**

M 1/24 de Montaigne, from “Apology for Raymond Sebond;” Pascal, from *Pensees*; Hume, from “Of Miracles” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

**Responses and Reactions**

W 1/26 Descartes, from “Meditation VI” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

F 1/28 Moliere, from *The Forced Marriage*; Hume, from *A Treatise of Human Nature* (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

**WEEK FIVE**

M 1/31 Kant, from *Prolegomena* and *Critique of Pure Reason* (in *Philosophical Skepticism*)

W 2/2 Quine, from “Two Dogmas of Empiricism” and “Epistemology Naturalized” (in *Philosophical Skepticism*); Chalmers, “The Matrix as Metaphysics” (online at [http://jamaica.arizona.edu/~chalmers/papers/matrix.html](http://jamaica.arizona.edu/~chalmers/papers/matrix.html)); discussion of The Matrix

**Defining Knowledge**

F 2/4 Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” (in Sosa & Kim) and Nozick, “The Experience Machine” (on reserve at the library)

**WEEK SIX**

M 2/7 Nozick, “Knowledge and Skepticism” (in Sosa & Kim)
Contemporary Foundationalism and Coherentism

W 2/9  Sosa, “The Raft and the Pyramid” (in Sosa & Kim)
F 2/11  Haack, “A Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification” (in Sosa & Kim)

WEEK SEVEN

Epistemic Justification

M 2/14  Feldman and Conee, “Evidentialism” (in Sosa & Kim)
Tues 2/15:  Movie night: *Rear Window* in lounge at 8:30 p.m.
W 2/16  Foley, “Skepticism and Rationality” (in Sosa & Kim); discussion of *Rear Window*
F 2/18  Pollock, “Epistemic Norms” (in Sosa & Kim)

WEEK EIGHT

M 2/21  Kim, “What is ‘Naturalized Epistemology’?” (in Sosa & Kim)
Tues 2/22:  Movie night: *Rashomon* in lounge at 8:30 p.m.
W 2/23  Movie discussion: *Rashomon*

WEEK NINE

M 2/28  Fumerton, “Externalism and Skepticism” (in Sosa & Kim)
Tues 3/1:  Movie night: *Memento* in lounge at 8:30 p.m.
W 3/2  Alston, “An Internalist Externalism” (on reserve at the library), and movie discussion: *Memento*

WEEK TEN

Virtue epistemology and Proper Cognitive Functioning

M 3/7  Plantinga, “Warrant: A First Approximation” (in Sosa & Kim)
W 3/9  Zagzebski, “Virtues of the Mind” (in Sosa & Kim)
Thurs 3/10:  Movie night: *Twelve Angry Men* in lounge at 8:30 p.m.
F 3/11  Greco, “Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology” (in Sosa & Kim), and movie discussion: *Twelve Angry Men*

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I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Prof. Vaughn Maatman