Theories of Knowledge

Syllabus

Winter term 2006
Kalamazoo College
Steve Petersen
$Revision: 1.4$

Theories of Knowledge meets on Tuesdays and Thursdays 12:40-2:30p in the fancy new Upjohn Library, room 305.

Course description

This course will cover some of the major problems of the theory of knowledge, such as:

- How do we know the things we know?
- Do we know we're not dreaming, or in The Matrix?
- What does it mean to "know" something, anyway?
- More generally, what are good reasons to believe something?
- How can we tell whether our beliefs are good or not?
- What does it mean for a belief or reasoning process to be a "good" one?
- How should we actually go about forming good beliefs?

A lot of your time here in college is dedicated to learning new things, and improving your set of beliefs. This course questions the very presumptions of that enterprise. We will read mostly contemporary authors on these issues; classes will be a mixture of lecture and active discussion.

Class goals

Let me expand a bit on the goals outlined in the section above. One way to organize the class goals is around three separate areas:

- **knowledge goals**: to learn the major philosophical debates we study, and the various positions on them, and the various objections to these positions.
- **skills goals**: to become adept at reason-giving, argumentation, and appreciating opposed positions; to get in the habit of critically evaluating assumptions about good thinking.
- **values goals**: to value reasons, inquisitiveness, and open-mindedness; to value the leverage such abstract reasoning gives us.

To reach these goals, I plan both to **challenge** and to **support** you in equal measure. Do not be afraid to ask for either when you don't feel you're getting it.

Notice that the skills and values goals are at least as important as the knowledge goals, and this will be reflected in my grading. Achieving these goals is likely to require more interactive learning than you are
used to. You can no longer afford simply to read and regurgitate -- at least, not for a good grade. You must engage the material yourself. This requires taking more responsibility for your own learning than you might be used to. Remember, though: I'm here to help you take this responsibility.

Contact information

The best way to reach me is by email, which is just peterson (at kzoo.edu, of course). You can also try calling me in my office, 337-7040, but I rarely check my voicemail. As a last resort, and with a good excuse, you can call me at home: 978-6876. You had better not call before 9am or after 11pm. My office hours are Wednesday and Thursday 3-5p, in 201 Humphrey House. You can also make separate appointments with me.

Text

We'll be using an anthology called Epistemology: The Big Questions, edited by Linda Alcoff. You should be able to buy it at the campus bookstore, or search foogle.com for ISBN 0631205802.

There will also be some additional class readings and other "virtual handouts" from me. In general it will be important to follow the development of the class website on moodle,

http://moodle.kzoo.edu/

The moodle page can have lots of useful things: announcements, online assignments, class notes, handouts, syllabus changes, glossary, student forum, etc.

Requirements and grading

Requirements

- 3p paper, 15%
- midterm exam, 15%
- 6p paper, 20%
- final exam, 30%
- section participation, 10%
- 5 reading questions, 5%
- 5 forum posts, 5%

You must do every assignment by the last day of exams in order to pass the class. The 3p paper will be an expository paper on an argument and an objection. You will be given a chance to rewrite this paper for a better grade. The 6p paper will include your own thoughts on an issue; you will not be able to rewrite it. With special permission from me in advance, students can write one 10p paper instead of the two shorter papers. If you write the 10p paper, a draft or outline will be due when the 3p paper is due.

The general expectation for a class with almost 4 class-hours is that you will spend about, and on average, another 8 outside of class each week, and my syllabus is designed to reflect this. Though the readings tend to be short relative to other classes, the material is very dense, so that you'll need to spend
a lot of time on each page. For the kind of understanding required in this class, you will almost surely have to read each assignment at least twice. (And yes, that is already adjusting for the fact that you're smart!) In other words, I am giving you some break on the amount of material required, but with the expectation of greater rigor with the material assigned.

Reading questions

The 5 reading questions are questions about readings that you email to me. They do not have to be long, or complicated, or even clever. Your goal is not to show me that you understand everything about the reading - it is just to show me you have read the paper and tried to understand it. They should be the most important thing you could ask me to help you understand the reading better. Most questions will simply count toward your five, but it is possible for a question not to count. Examples of bad questions:

- requesting a definition of some word in the article
- picking a random line from the reading and asking what the author meant by it

Reading questions are due the midnight before the class for which the paper was assigned. I will not generally answer reading questions directly; they are for me to get a sense of how the class is responding to the readings, and to help you engage them. If I do not respond, you can assume your question received credit.

Forum posts

The 5 forum posts are to be posted on moodle. Like the reading questions, they are credit / no credit. You can get a point by responding to another's post or by making a new one of your own. My standards for a good post will be higher than for the questions, but the good news is that you can post as often as you like to get your five points (you cannot get more than five points, however).

Grading procedures

Since many students ask me about it, I'll tell you now how I determine grades: I give you a percentage score on all your assignments. For each major assignment I will give a rough idea of what the letter-grade curve would be ("about 83 and above was an A for this paper", etc.). In the end though, only the numbers count (so for example a high B+ will count more than a low B+ in the final reckoning). I then might curve the assignment, guided by statistics like the standard deviation, the average, and the median. After all grades are in, I weigh them by the proportions above on my spreadsheet to get final statistics. I use the spreadsheet to order these numbers from highest to lowest, without looking at the names associated with the numbers. I then decide "natural" cutoff points for an A, an A-, a B+, etc., guided in part by the statistics and in part by my gut. Finally, I look at the names associated with borderline cases (if any) and let my intuition guide me.

This is a deliberate mix of curved and absolute grading that I think is most fair. This way it is possible for almost everyone to get A's - or, for that matter, for almost everyone to get to get C's and D's - something impossible with precisely curved grading. Your grades thus don't depend entirely on the skill of your classmates. But, this way, I also don't have to pretend to know exactly the level of understanding required for each grade, as absolute grading presumes. Instead, if for example I teach at too high a level, I can still give better grades to those who did relatively well. In practice, the grades almost always curve around a B- mean.
I will grade the second paper and both exams *blindly*; I won't grade the first blindly because I want to give you an opportunity to bring in drafts.

**Late assignments**

The philosophy department's policy on late assignments is this:

- Up to 24 hours late: one half-grade off (in my class, I approximate this by a loss of 3 points)
- 24 hours to two weeks late: one full grade off (in my class, a loss of 6 points)
- After two weeks: failure for the assignment

**Grade changes**

Of course you should feel comfortable asking me about your grades, or pointing out mistakes in my grading. I'm open to the idea that I might have made a mistake! But I've also found that this openness can be abused. So here is my policy on grade-change requests:

- Unless it's a straightforward mistake (on an exam, say) you must submit your explanation for exactly *why* you deserve a better grade in writing (email is fine). We might then make an appointment to discuss it if I think you have at least some good cause.
- If you ask me to reconsider a paper or exam essay, you accept the possibility that my closer evaluation might bring your grade down instead of up.
- The request must be within two weeks after the assignment was returned.
- Reasons that in the past have *not* been acceptable for changing a grade include:
  - "I have to get into a good law school."
  - "I was really tired that day."
  - "Other teachers / classes / departments / universities are easier."

**Class policies**

There are some other things I should mention up-front.

**Academic integrity**

You should be familiar with Kalamazoo's honor system and academic policies. If I have good evidence for any intentional academic dishonesty, including plagiarism or cheating on an exam, the result will be an automatic failure of the class for those involved, and a report to the Dean's office. Remember that *all* websites or papers you used in your writing -- directly or indirectly -- must be cited. If you are unclear about what counts as plagiarism, please ask me or an academic adviser.

**Accommodations**

I try to accommodate all learning styles and disabilities. If you have a disability already documented with the college, I will be informed of it in writing, but you may want to discuss it with me anyway -- if so, please do so soon, in the way that makes you most comfortable. If you have a disability that is *not* documented with the college, please *do* get it documented as soon as possible, so that I can extend accommodations -- see the policies on disability.
Respect

As suggested in the honor system, it is a basic groundrule for this class that all students treat each other with respect for differences. That includes differences in ethnic or economic background, differences in opinions, differences in facility or difficulty with the material, differences in hesitancy or eagerness to participate, etc.

Class procedures

- All cell phones and such should be turned off for class.
- You can call me "Steve".
- At least initially, all students are expected to raise hands before speaking. Though a little formal, this helps ensure equal time for those less eager to speak out or interrupt.
- I may call on you randomly in class. I know some aren't so comfortable with that, but I think it's important for everybody. Please don't panic. If you're confused by the question or topic, just say so, and we'll work it out -- chances are others will be grateful you said something.
- Though I will encourage all of you to speak in class, there are several other ways to participate in class. For example, you can contribute to groups, post to our online forum, ask questions for me or the class by email, or visit office hours.
- Relax, enjoy, and don't hesitate to ask questions.

Course schedule and assignments

Here is a tentative schedule of the material we will be covering in class. It is subject to change. In general your assignments are to read the material before it's discussed in lecture. This first reading is just to get the basic idea, and to know enough about it to ask about the things you don't understand. (Most of this reading is very hard and you should not expect to understand it all the first time - if you do feel like you understood all of it, I can almost guarantee that you actually understood none of it!) You should then definitely read the material after it's discussed in lecture as well - you will find that you get much more out of it the second time around. Also, notice that the readings for some days are quite heavy, while the readings for other days are light to nonexistent. I suggest you plan ahead for these differences.

Readings are in Epistemology: The Big Questions unless otherwise noted. Remember that though the class topics may not always follow this schedule exactly, still the readings will remain assigned for these days unless I explicitly say otherwise.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Readings</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>week 1</td>
<td>1/3</td>
<td>Intro</td>
<td>(none)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1/5</td>
<td>Skepticism</td>
<td>1 Descartes (9p)</td>
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<td>week 2</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>2 Ayer, 3 Wittgenstein (12p)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1/12</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>19 Hacking (14p)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/17</td>
<td>Truth</td>
<td>20 Rorty (12p)</td>
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<tr>
<td>week 3</td>
<td>1/19</td>
<td>Back to skepticism</td>
<td>21 Vogel, 22 Stroud (13p)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1/24</td>
<td>Internalism</td>
<td>6 Ginet (10p)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>1/26</td>
<td>Externalism</td>
<td>7 Goldman (20p)</td>
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<td>week 4</td>
<td>1/31</td>
<td>Internal vs external</td>
<td>5 Alston (half, 17p)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2/2</td>
<td>Internal vs external, ctd</td>
<td>5 Alston (second half)</td>
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<td>week 5</td>
<td>2/7</td>
<td>Two skepticisms</td>
<td>(online paper by yours truly)</td>
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<td>2/9</td>
<td>Midterm (1 hour test, then discussion)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2/14</td>
<td>Foundationalism</td>
<td>11 Chisholm (18p)</td>
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<td>week 6</td>
<td>2/16</td>
<td>Coherentism</td>
<td>13 BonJour (22p)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2/21</td>
<td>Alternative epistemologies</td>
<td>26 Tiles and Tiles (half, 14p)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2/23</td>
<td>Alternative epistemologies</td>
<td>26 Tiles and Tiles (second half)</td>
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<tr>
<td>week 7</td>
<td>2/28</td>
<td>Catchup day / discussion</td>
<td>(none)</td>
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<td>week 8</td>
<td>3/2</td>
<td>Applied epistemology: deduction</td>
<td>BLOGIC, online</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3/7</td>
<td>Applied epistemology: reflective equilibrium</td>
<td>Daniels, online</td>
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<td>week 10</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Applied epistemology: inference to the best explanation</td>
<td>Thagard, online</td>
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The final is as the registrar has (unfortunately) set it, on March 15th from 8a-11a (ugh!).