PHIL 106: Theories of Knowledge
Winter 2010
MWF 11:50-1:05, Upjohn Library 305

Syllabus

Instructor: Prof. Ashley McDowell
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Availability: I’m usually available for a little while after class,
I’m in my office from 1:00-4:00 Tuesdays,
and we can meet by appointment

Description:
This is an introductory course exploring some issues in epistemology — the study of
knowledge and what we call “justified belief” — belief that is reasonable, warranted, acceptable,
or entitled. We’ll be reading scholarly philosophical articles to get a general feel for some of the
major issues in this subfield of philosophy, and to examine some debates in detail.

The main question you should have in mind as we move through this course is the one
that ties it all together:

[What is it to believe well?]

Course Goals:
I want you to learn how to do philosophy, and epistemology in particular; to gain
appreciation for epistemology and its issues and arguments; and to learn the views and
arguments of the specific academic philosophers we’ll study.

Most of all, though, I want you to make progress on your own views regarding what it is to
believe well, and to begin applying them to yourself, others, and the world around you. This is
not a spectator class — you are expected to change as a result of studying this material.

Class Format:
Although the difficult material we’ll be reading will mean I’ll have to do a good bit of
outright lecturing, I also intend to engage in as much discussion as possible, and all students will
be expected to contribute. 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. In-class discussions will be conducted
with respect and a mutual interest in gaining better understanding and knowledge, 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 can demonstrate thoughtful, personal engagement with the material.

Preparing for Class:
You must bring with you to class whatever text(s) we are working on for that day and the one before, any homework or assignment due that day, and any study or reading questions I might have provided.

You will be responsible for completing the readings before each class, well enough that you can discuss them intelligently. You should be aware that some of the readings in this course most likely will be quite challenging for you. Give yourself plenty of time to do these readings carefully. By the way, 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 margin notes, or outlining – whatever helps you focus and understand.

Finally, in preparation for class, you should be keeping up with the Moodle forums.

What I expect you to achieve:

abilities to:
- understand basic epistemological concepts and their significance, and engage in philosophical activities like reconstructing others’ arguments, illustrating concepts by example, and responding to positions critically.
- grasp the issues the philosophers are trying to resolve, comprehend the differences between approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches, and defend your choice of the most reasonable positions and views.

progress on questions like:
- what can I understand about why the question “what is it to believe well” is so hard?
- what concepts and theories will deepen my understanding of the possible answer to the question?
- what can I learn about myself, my pursuits and avocation, and other people by studying this question?
- how can I use what I learn to increase my own chances of believing well?

Course Requirements and Grading Scheme

Participation and Demonstrated Preparedness: 65%

This grade will be a qualitative measure of your achievements regarding the aims and expectations of this class, which are explained in this syllabus as well as during my lectures. For further insight into my ideas about quality of thinking and engagement, you should study the handouts on “Stages of Intellectual Development,” “How to Approach My Course,” and Plato’s “Allegory of the Cave.”

You should be participating regularly in class and on the Moodle forums – this is hard to quantify, especially since the grade will ultimately be a qualitative one, but you need to be giving me enough data on which to gauge your understanding, skills, and achievements. As a guess, I’d say regular participation would involve a few significant in-class questions or comments and a
couple of substantive Moodle forum posts (starting a thread or responding to others’ posts) a week. Short comments or posts, perhaps simply saying what you like about someone else’s contribution, or asking for clarification from someone, would be in addition to “substantive” or “significant” comments, questions, or posts – but would count toward overall quality of participation, especially since they show that you’re engaged in class and looking at the forums regularly.

**Moodle forums:**

The general expectation for your Moodle contributions is that they engage with the material in a sophisticated way that shows genuine effort and comprehension, but in an informal format. Of course, sometimes your posts might just be basic questions or comments, which is okay. I might pose questions to focus your thinking, but there will be a good amount of flexibility in what you choose to post or say. I do not expect polished essays on Moodle, with things like thesis statements and conclusions – just provocative, insightful, helpful, or reflective comments and questions.

One purpose of the Moodle contributions is for you to be 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.

**Class participation:**

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 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, or if you are interested in advice about how to participate more effectively or more easily, ask me.

**Demonstrated preparedness:**

Demonstrated preparedness includes evidence of your having read the assignments carefully, thought about and tried to answer any study questions or tasks I’ve given, prepared questions or comments in advance of class, and kept up with ongoing work on terms and concepts, and on your final creative project. I’ll sometimes give a brief reading check to see if you were prepared. I won’t grade these – they’re just for my information – but they will play a role in your overall preparedness grade.

**Final creative project and presentation: 35%**

The main point of this project is to do something that pushes you out of your comfort zone while integrating something from the course into your own thinking. What I’ll be looking for isn’t primarily you proving that you understand or can replicate the material. I will be looking for genuine engagement and effort to incorporate something in the course material with your own thinking, in a way that is unique to yourself. The project should not just show that you know something about the material, but that you’ve absorbed something about the material, and worked to externalize what you’ve learned.

Be ready to devote meaningful time to working on this project. I do not expect a polished essay, with things like thesis statements and conclusions, either for the project or accompanying it.
Rather, I'm looking for good quality, sincere consideration and representation of deeper implications of the course material; as well as appropriate and effective incorporation of the ideas in the readings. This project should engage with the material in a sophisticated way that shows genuine effort and comprehension, but in a format that is nontraditional and self-directed.

You can **focus** on something relatively specific from the course, or a broad range of material we've studied. One way to find a good topic and format for yourself is to think about what you would ideally like to get out of this class, and what might help you get that.

**Length or size** of the finished project: Sorry, but this depends on the project. If this were a paper, I'd probably make it around 10 pages in length, so think of it in terms of putting at least as much time and effort into it as would be involved in that case.

The **form of the project** is, for the most part, up to you. It could be something artistic, something you organize as an event, a play or dialogue, fiction, a board game, a website, a music video, a “mind map,” a personal reflection, or various other things – again, you'll need to check in with me for advice and approval. The project should in some way tie together various ideas, views, issues, or readings.

Unless it's contained in your project, you'll need to provide a **short explanation or interpretation** that accompanies it when you turn it in (depending on the project, usually about a page or two). This should include some explanation of what you were trying to convey, show, or accomplish, and how you think your project did that. If the project itself didn't reveal your use of specific course material, this explanation should accomplish that.

When you're doing an **in-class presentation**, you should find a way to convey the essence of your project, although you probably won't be able to describe or present the whole thing. You could present part of it, a summary, the piece if it's an artwork, a video or audio file, a skit or dialogue, or various other things appropriate to the nature of your project. We'll talk about this. If you'd like a brief (one-page) handout printed and given out to everyone, I'll be happy to print and copy it if you get it to me ahead of time. I highly recommend practicing your presentation ahead of time.
Schedule of Readings

WEEK ONE
W  Plato, “The Allegory of the Cave”
    “The Stages of Intellectual Development”
F  McDowell, “Thinking About Thinking About Sex”
    “Philosophical Health Check”

WEEK TWO
M  Pryor, “Theory of Knowledge,” part 1
W  Pryor, part 2
F  Recapitulation and application

WEEK THREE
W  Presentation: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day and Epistemology
F  Pollock & Cruz, “Skeptical Problems”
    Moore, “Proof of an External World”

WEEK FOUR
M  Stroud, “The Problem of the External World”
W  Pryor, “What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?” (Sections 1-3)
F  Pryor, “What's Wrong with Moore's Argument?” (Sections 5-7)

WEEK FIVE
M  BonJour, “The Concept of Epistemic Justification”
    Stevenson, “First Person Epistemology” (selections)
W  Foley, “Skepticism and Rationality”
F  Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification” (Sections I-V)

WEEK SIX
M  Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification” (Sections VI-VIII)
W  Heil, “Doxastic Agency”
F  Church, “Taking It to Heart”

WEEK SEVEN
M  Christensen, “Rationality and Deontology”
W  Feldman and Conee, “Evidentialism” (Sections I-III)
F  Bach, “A Rationale for Reliabilism”

WEEK EIGHT
M  Zagzebski, selections from “Virtues of the Mind”
W  Leite, “On Justifying and Being Justified” (Sections I and II)
F  Leite, “On Justifying and Being Justified” (Sections III-VI)

WEEK NINE
M  Creative Project workday
W  Kornblith, “Distrusting Reason”
F  Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Rational?”

WEEK TEN
Creative project presentations