PHIL 106: Theories of Knowledge

Syllabus¹

| Winter 2006:       | MWF 2:40-3:55, Upjohn Library 305 |
| Instructor:       | Prof. Ashley McDowell               |
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| Office Hours:     | MTWF 1:00-2:00 and by appointment   |

Texts: Michael Huemer, ed., *Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*
Jay F. Rosenberg, *Three Conversations about Knowing*
Articles on electronic and hard copy reserve at the library

Note on Moodle: this course website will include useful information – go to [https://moodle.kzoo.edu/](https://moodle.kzoo.edu/) and find our course, and get yourself logged on.

Note on email: I will be sending mail to the class alias, which only knows your K email address. Make sure your K email is forwarded to whatever email account you use regularly, if it’s something else.

Description:

This is an introductory course exploring some issues in epistemology – the study of knowledge and what we call “justified belief” – belief that is 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. Your grade in the class will be based on your performance on a number of small assignments (generally a couple a week) culminating in a portfolio to be turned in at the end of the course, and on your participation in the class (see below for more details on the assignments).

We will start by getting a handle on some of the most fundamental issues in epistemology. What are the basic, contrasting intuitions people can have about knowledge and justified belief? What’s interesting about distinguishing good from bad beliefs, or successful from unsuccessful thinking? How do we know what we know and don’t know; and should this concern us? These are all basic human questions, more formally studied by epistemologists.

Once we’ve gotten some preliminaries under our belts, we’ll spend some time on one of the most well-known issues in epistemology: skepticism. Many novels and 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. This kind of worry – called skepticism by philosophers – will be studied through academic philosophical works dating back to Descartes, the father of the global skeptical scenario. We will then study potential replies to skepticism, ranging from pretty much outright acceptance that we know nothing to outright rejection of the idea that we know nothing, with lots of permutations.

After getting skeptical doubts out of the way, or at least thought out, we’ll study some of the crucial debates in epistemology about the nature of justification. The issues here are all interconnected, so it will take some careful work to get a good working understanding of the terrain among concepts like internalism and externalism, reliabilism, coherence and foundations theories, and senses of justification. These notions are all tied together in a kind of web-like way, so it’s not possible to introduce them one at a time.

¹ This is a long syllabus – my tendency is to put as much helpful material in writing as I can. I’d like you to read it all, but I’ve marked especially crucial material with a line in the left margin, for quick reference.
a time – we’ll move from one focus to another, getting the web’s supports better and better tied down, until you can see the structure as a whole, and how the debates within it work.

Finally, we’ll be examining two specific sources of belief, to find out what arguments there are regarding how much knowledge or justification those sources can give us. We’ll look at the topics of memory and testimony, the basis for a huge proportion of our beliefs and knowledge.

Course Goals:

From our reasoned responses to articles and discussion, 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. 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.

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. 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. 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 most likely will 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 want to read each assignment at least twice, and take notes on the readings (before and after class). I will sometimes provide study questions to guide your reading. 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.

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 argument. Be careful not to take it personally if a view that you put forward is criticized; this is helpful if what we’re after is really solving the problems.

What you can learn about and gain from this course:

Unless you have plans to become a professional philosopher, which I expect few of you do, the most important things you will gain from this course will not be detailed retention of specific philosophical positions. Rather, you should hope and strive to gain abilities in three main areas:

Theoretical learning, like appreciation of epistemological issues and their importance; the ability to recognize epistemological problems and considerations in many contexts; and the ability to recall, articulate and apply various approaches to particular epistemological problems.

Practical learning, like the ability to reproduce and compare various approaches to solving problems and the ability to apply philosophical thinking to the “real world.”

Philosophical methodology, with skills falling into three main sub-areas, as follows.

First, Critical thinking and problem solving, like extracting the main points from difficult material, following and reconstructing arguments, and thinking questions through; and also learning to analyze and
solve problems, considering them from many points of view and assessing the pros and cons of different proposals.

**Second, Communication**, such as learning to express yourself clearly and persuasively, and to make decisions and then justify your position in a clear, logical, and compelling way.

**Third, Creativity, research, and investigation**, like gaining proficiency at conducting investigations - learning to ask the right questions, and to develop and assess methods and standards for answering those questions; and solving problems using careful but innovative techniques and basing your conclusions on reliable evidence.

**What I expect you to achieve:**

As the course goes on, I will expect different things out of you in terms of mastery and achievement. At first, assignments will be designed to help you gain skills in understanding basic epistemological concepts and their significance, and engaging in philosophical activities like reconstructing others’ arguments, illustrating concepts by example, and responding to positions critically. You will learn about various theories, principles, and tools, and learn how to apply all those things for yourself.

As we study more specific epistemological problems, I will expect you not just to understand the basics, but see how philosophical – and, in particular, epistemological – thinking plays out in rigorous argumentation on particular issues of importance. I will assess your achievements in grasping the issues the philosophers are trying to resolve, and comprehending the differences between approaches and the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches.

By the end of the course, I will expect you to be pulling everything together – in particular, to locate yourself in the world of philosophical concerns, becoming a participant, assessor and defender rather than a passive regurgitator. Ultimately, I’ll expect you to participate in philosophical debates and decision-making processes. You will be able to evaluate others’ positions and arguments, assess their strengths, and select a reasoned response, whether that involves formulating an original position, reaching compromise, or reaching a deeper understanding. You will be able to distinguish different legitimate stances on the topics we’ll cover, compare and contrast the arguments and principles underlying them, and be prepared to defend your choice of the most reasonable positions and views.

**Course Requirements and Grading Scheme**

**Portfolio: 90%**

For this class, you’ll be completing frequent small assignments all along the way, which you’ll revise (if you like) and gather into a final portfolio due on Wednesday of exam week. Each assignment will have a specific point value, for a total of 90 points. The schedule of assignments is below; details about specific assignments will be given in class and/or electronically. Two of the assignments are not due until the portfolio is turned in, but they are ones you should be working on throughout the quarter.

**Assignment responsibilities:**

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 three days late, no questions asked, as long as you let me know you’re taking your freebie. Be mindful not to use it lightly.

**I will allow rewrites of all assignments** to be turned in with your final portfolio. The grade on a rewritten assignment will improve by one grade at the very most, and rewriting will not remove late penalties. Rewrites are to be substantive – not just correction of superficial problems like spelling and grammar. You must turn in the original assignment along with the rewrite, and indicate on the rewritten assignment – with highlighting, a different color text, or notes – what has changed.
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.

**ASSIGNMENTS:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WEEK</th>
<th>DAY</th>
<th>POINTS</th>
<th>ASSIGNMENT</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>½ page reflection essay on one of the problems, issues, or positions in Rosenberg's “First Conversation”</td>
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<td>Wed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>½ page reflection essay on one of the problems, issues, or positions in Rosenberg’s “Second Conversation”</td>
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<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1 page synopsis of one of the problems, issues, or positions in Rosenberg’s “Third Conversation,” and 1 page reflection essay on that problem, issue, or position</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 pages: illustrate the problem of skepticism with a film example</td>
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<td>4</td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2-3 pages: compare/contrast the arguments for skepticism</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-2 page synopsis of Foley article from Monday</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 pages: illustrate the responses to skepticism with a film example</td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Pro/con chart laying out the authors' reasons for and against internalism and externalism</td>
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<td>7</td>
<td>Mon or Wed (your choice)</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Bring in 2 questions on the reading</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Examples of your own devising to illustrate Alston's concepts of justification, with a page or two of reflection</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2 pages: using a film as your example, illustrate 3 of the following: foundationalism, coherentism, reliabilism, foundherentism</td>
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<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 pages: reflection essay on memory</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Mon</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1-2 pages: synopsis of Hume</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Answer reading questions</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fri</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3 pages: reflection essay on testimony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exam week</td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Project on Rosenberg’s Three Conversations about Knowing: chart, marginalia photocopy, essay, or whatever format you come up with in consultation with me.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Exam week</td>
<td>Wed</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Examples of epistemologically relevant concepts from your outside life, labelled and briefly explained (must be examples illustrating several different concepts, such as skepticism, pragmatism, reliabilism, coherence, foundations, memory issues, testimony issues, etc.)</td>
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Participation and conduct (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. The rules for classroom civility and discourse (see below) will help make this an inviting place to contribute your voice.

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.

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. See below for more information.

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.

Rules of civility and discourse:

In this course, you will be expected to behave like what I’m sure you are – a civil person interested in entering into an atmosphere that is maintained to be courteous and respectful. Just so that my expectations are clear, let me express some specific guidelines. In order to create a smooth and harmonious learning community,

- take care not to disrupt class; please
  - wait until class is over to pack up
  - turn off cell phones
  - do not look at any material other than class material
  - stay awake during class
  - arrive on time
    - if you must arrive late, please take a seat quietly near the door, and see me after class to record your lateness, so I do not record you absent.

- to allow everyone to stay focused on the class lecture or discussion,
  - only one person at a time in the class should be speaking. Side conversations are distracting for surrounding students and for me.

- to ensure the best possible environment for discussion, please
  - no “hogging the floor”
  - no blaming or shaming
  - no personal attacks
  - always respect the confidentiality of the classroom
  - keep your contributions aimed at our common goals: discovery, progress, and learning, not winning, making the “other side” look bad, or getting attention.
    - If you violate one of these discussion rules, I will likely point it out to you in class or afterwards.
    - If you think someone else is violating one of these discussion rules, I encourage you to raise the issue (without blaming, shaming, or personal attack!)
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 read the essay on the Moodle site called “Plagiarism and How to Avoid It.” 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.2

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.

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 margin notes, or outlining – whatever helps you focus and understand.

2 I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Prof. Vaughn Maatman
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, electronically and in hard copy. All reserve readings must be printed out and brought physically to class.

WEEK ONE
W Introduction to Class and Epistemology
   Overview of epistemological issues
F Rosenberg, The First Conversation

WEEK TWO
M Rosenberg, The Second Conversation
W Rosenberg, The Third Conversation
F Wrapup of Rosenberg

Skepticism

WEEK THREE
W Huemer Ch. 9 intro; and
   Descartes, from Meditations on the First Philosophy (in Huemer)
F Nagel, from The View from Nowhere (on reserve)

WEEK FOUR
M Hume, from An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (on reserve)
W Chisholm, “The Problem of the Criterion” (in Huemer)
F Moore, “Proof of an External World” and “Hume’s Theory Examined” (in Huemer)

Responses to Skepticism

WEEK FIVE
M Foley, “Skepticism and Rationality” (on reserve)
W Pollock & Cruz, “Skeptical Problems” (on reserve)
F Wrapup of skepticism and responses

The Nature of Justification

WEEK SIX
M BonJour, “Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge” (on reserve)
W Bach, “A Rationale for Reliabilism” (on reserve)
F Sosa, “Skepticism and the Internal/External Divide” (on reserve)

WEEK SEVEN
M Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” Sections I – IV (on reserve)
W Alston, “Concepts of Epistemic Justification,” Sections V – VII (on reserve)
F BonJour, “The Structure of Empirical Knowledge” (in Huemer)

WEEK EIGHT
M Audi, “The Foundationalism-Coherentism Controversy” (on reserve)
W Haack, “A Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification” (in Huemer)
F McDowell, “Sense Distinctions in Epistemic Justification” (on reserve)

Memory

WEEK NINE
M Huemer Ch. 2 intro; and
   BonJour, “The Problem of Memory” (on reserve)
W Russell, “Memory” (in Huemer); and
   Malcolm, “A Definition of Factual Memory” (in Huemer)
F Huemer Ch. 4 intro; and
   BonJour, “The Problem of Testimony” (on reserve)

Testimony

WEEK TEN
M Hume, “Of Miracles” (in Huemer)
W Reid, from Inquiry into the Human Mind (in Huemer); and
   Coady, “Testimony and Observation” (in Huemer)