PHIL 106: Theories of Knowledge

Syllabus

Winter 2008: MWF 11:50-1:05, Upjohn Library 307
Instructor: Prof. Ashley McDowell
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Office hours: MWF 1:15-2:15, Tues 2:00-3:00, and by appointment

Texts: Jay F. Rosenberg, Three Conversations about Knowing
Articles made available electronically
Coursepack

Note on Moodle: this course website will include useful information – go to 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.
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. 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 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.

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 works well for many people). 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.
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

Quizzes on terminology and concepts: 25%

In approximately weeks 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10, we’ll have brief in-class quizzes on the terminology and concepts that have come up since the last quiz. I recommend you keep a special section of your notes to work on terms and concepts that come up as we go along. I’ll give you more information about this as we go, and will point out terms and concepts that are being used as “terms of art” or that are being defined in important ways.

Reflections essays: 25%

In approximately weeks 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9, you’ll turn in reflections essays on the material we’ve been covering. I’ll provide a series of questions to focus you and launch your reflection. You should attempt to address the issues I raise, but your entry may or may not directly answer every question. The entry should not be a series of my questions and your answers, but should be a synthesized response.

Your personal experiences are a crucial part of your reflections, but these experiences must be subject to your analysis and should make comparisons and connections to our readings. Be ready to devote meaningful time to writing these essays. I do not expect polished papers, with things like thesis statements and conclusions. Rather, I’m looking for good quality, thorough reflections that include consideration of deeper implications as well as appropriate and effective references to the readings. I’m also looking for genuine engagement and effort to make connections – think about whether your writing reveals the risks that lead to striking insights.[1]

Final paper: 30%

You will turn in a 10-12 page paper during exam week. This paper will be an argument, using the course material, about what each of two characters or people chosen by you ought to do, epistemically, or what’s involved in their believing well or poorly. You will choose your two figures at the beginning of Week 2, in consultation with me, and keep a journal or notes applying the readings to your cases as we move through the quarter. On specific, announced days, I’ll have you check in with me or your classmates on the progress of this project.

Participation and demonstrated preparedness: 20%

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 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 paper project.

Again, if you want to know how you’re doing on this, or want to talk about how to do this well, get in touch with me.

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.

Late assignments and missed quizzes for which you do not have a strong, documented excuse will be assessed a penalty of at least 10% reduction in grade, or more if significantly late. Let me know right away if you’re turning something in late or missing class, and we’ll work out the details.

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.

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 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.
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. Readings must be brought physically to class.

**WEEK ONE**
W               read and do “The Philosophical Health Check”
F               Rosenberg, *The First Conversation*

**WEEK TWO**
M               Rosenberg, *The Second Conversation*
W               Rosenberg, *The Third Conversation*
F               Descartes, from *Meditations on the First Philosophy*

**WEEK THREE**
W               Williams, “Skepticism”
F               Williams continued; Pollock & Cruz, “Skeptical Problems”

**WEEK FOUR**
M               Moore, “Proof of an External World” and “Hume’s Theory Examined;” Pryor, “What’s Wrong with Moore’s Argument?”
W               BonJour, “The Concept of Epistemic Justification”
F               Foley, “Skepticism and Rationality”

**WEEK FIVE**
M               Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification”
W               Heil, “Doxastic Agency”
F               Church, “Taking It to Heart”

**WEEK SIX**
M               Feldman, “The Ethics of Belief”
W               Feldman contd
F               Christensen, “Rationality and Deontology”

**WEEK SEVEN**
M               Elgin, “True Enough”
W               Bach, “A Rationale for Reliabilism”
F               Sosa, “Skepticism and the Internal/External Divide”

**WEEK EIGHT**
M               Goldman, “Internalism Exposed”
W               Feldman & Conee, “Internalism Defended”
F               Bergmann, “Deontology and Defeat”

**WEEK NINE**
M               Goldman, “Strong and Weak Justification”
W               Stevenson, “First-person Justification”
F               NO CLASS

**WEEK TEN**
M               Kornblith, “Distrusting Reason”
W               Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Rational?”
F               McDowell, “Epistemological Expertise”

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[1] This assignment type is indebted to work I have seen by Ameila Katanski, Kim Cummings, and Bruce Mills.

[2] I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Vaughn Maatman.