PHIL 106: Theories of Knowledge
Winter 2009

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 11:00-12:00
and by appointment (except Thursdays)
Texts: Articles on made available electronically and/or Coursepack
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 charge 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?

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**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.

**Moodle posts: 35%**

I will expect about 4-5 contributions on Moodle from each of you a week. There can be weeks where you do fewer and others where you do more, but you should be doing at least some posting each week. At least a couple will be posts to forums visited by the other students in the class. The remainder can be either forum posts or in a “journal” type format that only I will see and evaluate.

You should be participating regularly in Moodle forums – this is hard to quantify, just like discussion in class. As a guess, I’d say three or so substantive posts a week (starting a thread or responding to others’ posts). Short posts, perhaps simply saying what you like about someone else’s post, or asking for clarification from someone, would be on top of your substantive post – but would count toward overall quality of Moodle participation, especially since they show that you’re looking at the forums regularly.

The general expectation for your Moodle and class 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.

**Final creative project and presentation: 30%**

You will design and execute a creative project, due 10th week, and present it to the class during our regular meeting times that week. The project should be something that illustrates your grasp and application of the material. This could be something artistic, something you organize as an event, a play or dialogue, fiction, or various other things – you'll need to check in with me for advice and approval. Unless it's contained in your project, you'll need to provide a short explanation of what you were trying to convey, show, or accomplish, and how you think your project did that (maybe a page or so). The project should in some way tie together various ideas, views, issues, or readings, and I'd like it to tie the course material to something in contemporary issues.

I'll post some examples of creative projects former students have done.

**Participation and demonstrated preparedness: 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 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 creative 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.

**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.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.

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, and readings must be brought physically to class. Readings marked “Moodle only” aren’t in the coursepack, and must be printed out.

**WEEK ONE**
W Pryor, “Theory of Knowledge,” part 1
F Pryor, part 2, and “Philosophical Health Check”

**WEEK TWO**
M Stroud, “The Problem of the External World” (Moodle only) and handout on “Stages of Intellectual Development”
W Pollock & Cruz, “Skeptical Problems”
F Moore, "Proof of an External World;" and Pryor, “What’s Wrong with Moore’s Argument?”

**WEEK THREE**
W BonJour, “The Concept of Epistemic Justification”

¹ I owe some of the phrasing in this statement to Vaughn Maatman
F        MLK teach-in – readings TBA

**WEEK FOUR**
M        Foley, “Skepticism and Rationality”
W        Alston, “The Deontological Conception of Epistemic Justification”
F        Heil, “Doxastic Agency”

**WEEK FIVE**
M        Church, “Taking It to Heart”
W        Feldman and Ccnee, “Evidentialism” (Moodle only)
F        Christensen, “Rationality and Deontology”

**WEEK SIX**
M        Bach, “A Rationale for Reliabilism”
W        Zagzebski, selections from “Virtues of the Mind” (Moodle only)
F        Greco, “Virtues and Vices of Virtue Epistemology” (Moodle only)

**WEEK SEVEN**
M        Riggs, “The Value Turn in Epistemology” (Moodle only)
W        Foley, “Justified Belief as Responsible Belief” (Moodle only)
F        NO CLASS

**WEEK EIGHT**
M        Wolterstorff, “Obligation, Entitlement, and Rationality” (Moodle only)
          Foley’s response to Wolterstorff, and Wolterstorff’s response (Moodle only)
W        Goldman, “Strong and Weak Justification”
F        Stevenson, “First Person Epistemology”

**WEEK NINE**
M        Leite, “On Justifying and Being Justified” (Moodle only)
W        Kornblith, “Distrusting Reason”
F        Huemer, “Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Rational?”

**WEEK TEN**
Creative project presentations