

SYLLABUS FOR PHIL 470: THEORY OF KNOWLEDGE

Spring, 2010

Instructor: James Van Cleve
Office: MHP 112
Hours: Monday, 3:30-4:30
Friday, 12:00 to 1:00

Epistemology (or the theory of knowledge) is the branch of philosophy that deals with the following questions among others:

What is knowledge? How is the concept of knowledge related to such other concepts as belief, truth, evidence, justification, experience, probability, certainty, causation, coherence, and convention?

Of what, if anything, can we be absolutely certain? What arguments can be given to counter the philosophical skeptic who says knowledge is an illusion?

Does all knowledge rest upon a foundation of beliefs that are self-evident (or in some other way privileged)? Or is our system of knowledge a structure without foundations in which everything helps to support everything else?

What special problems are involved in our knowledge of our own states of mind, the minds of others, our physical environment, the past, the future, and the unobservable?

Are some things true and others false, period, or are things true or false only relative to a given individual, society? Are there principles of logic and criteria of reasonableness that hold universally? Are the familiar objects and properties we take for granted parts of an independently existing world, or are they social constructs?

In this course we will address all five clusters of questions.

Required Books (available at the USC Bookstore)

Plato, *Theaetetus*

Bertrand Russell, *Theory of Knowledge*

John Hawthorne, *Knowledge and Lotteries*

Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism*,

Matthias Steup, *An Introduction to Contemporary Epistemology*

Topics and Readings

Unit 1: Plato's theory of knowledge

Theaetetus, all

Unit 2: Footnotes to Plato: contemporary analyses of knowledge

Steup, chapters 1 and 2

Dretske, "Conclusive Reasons" (to be made available on-line)

Unit 3: Russell's theory of knowledge

Russell, all

Unit 4: Foundationalism versus coherentism

Steup, chapters 5-7

Unit 5: The skeptic's challenge

Descartes, Meditations 1-3

Article by JVC (available on J-STOR)

Steup, chapter 10

Hawthorne, all

Unit 6: Relativism and constructivism

Boghossian, all

Written Work

The written work for the course will consist of (i) several one-to-two page discussion notes on assigned questions, (ii) three five-to-seven page papers on course-related topics of your choosing, due approximately February 17, March 26, and April 28, and (iii) a comprehensive final exam, scheduled for May 5 and possibly including a take-home component. Weighting: short papers and class participation, 20% total; longer papers, 20% each; final exam, 20%.

Academic Integrity

It is unacceptable to use the words or ideas of someone else without proper acknowledgment. For guidelines, see the Trojan Integrity Guide at <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/forms/tio.pdf> and the Undergraduate Guide for Avoiding Plagiarism at <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/SJACS/forms/tig.pdf>.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability entitling you to any special accommodation, please let me know at the beginning of the semester.

Other Policies

(1) You cannot pass the course without regular good-faith engagement, which includes reasonable attendance and timely completion of course assignments. (2) Discussion notes will not be accepted late, because we will often be discussing their topic on the day they are due. (3) Papers will be accepted late, but with a penalty of one notch (e.g., A- goes to B+) for each day late. (3) You may not request to take the final exam at another time.

Schedule of Classes and Readings for January 11-31

I will hand out a schedule like this at the beginning of each unit.

Date	Topic	Assignment and other information
1/11	Overview of course and essentials of logic	
1/13 and 1/15	Plato I	<i>Theaetetus</i> through 186e (about 60 pages) An EXERCISE is due on 1/15.
1/18	MLK Day, no class	
1/20	Plato II	Rest of the <i>Theaetetus</i> (about 30 pages)
1/22	Philosophical methodology	Steup, ch. 2
1/25 and 1/27	The analysis of knowledge and the Gettier problem	Steup, ch. 1
1/29	Conclusive reasons	Dretske, "Conclusive Reasons"
2/1	Knowing that you know	An EXERCISE is due this day.