

# PHIL 140.001: Knowledge and Society

UNC Chapel Hill, Fall 2022

**Instructor:** Prof. Alex Worsnip ([aworsnip@unc.edu](mailto:aworsnip@unc.edu))

**Class meetings:** Tuesdays & Thursdays, 9:30-10:45am, Peabody 2066

**Virtual office hour:** Wednesdays, 2-3pm

**In-person office hour:** Thursdays, 11am-noon

- weather permitting: outside, at a table by the Blue Ram Café (at the back of the Campus Y)
- otherwise: in my office (Caldwell Hall, 202B). I'll email if I'm moving my office hour indoors.

Meetings outside of office hours are also always available by appointment.

**Official course catalog description.** An examination of questions about knowledge, evidence, and rational belief as they arise in areas of social life such as democratic politics, the law, science, religion, and education.

**Semester-specific course description.** Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that deals with questions about knowledge, rational belief, evidence, and the like. Philosophical introductions to epistemology are often quite abstract, beginning with very general questions like ‘what is knowledge?’ or ‘what is rationality?’ and only turning to applied questions much later. This course inverts that trend by beginning with some of the areas of social human life in which questions about knowledge, rationality and evidence matter to us: areas like democratic politics, the law, science, and religion. It investigates particular “knowledge problems” that we, as 21st century citizens, face. For example: should we always defer to experts about complex policy questions, or are we justified in forming beliefs for ourselves? Can it ever be rational to believe a conspiracy theory? Should we try to break out of our “echo chambers”? Should we be worried about the ways that our upbringings and social characteristics (e.g. gender, race, class, etc) shape and bias our beliefs, and if so what should we do about it? Should the existence of widespread disagreement about politics, morality and religion make us less confident in our own views? Is it ever really “beyond reasonable doubt” that someone is guilty of a crime, and why should that be the standard that matters anyway? Through investigating these specific, applied questions, we hope to learn something about the nature of knowledge, evidence and rationality more generally.

**Prerequisites and Target Audience.** There are no prerequisites. The course is designed to be accessible to students who have never taken a philosophy class before, and is taught as such. However, those with prior philosophy classes are also welcome.

**Course Materials.** There are no required texts for purchase. All readings are either linked on the syllabus below or will be posted on Sakai.

**Course Format.** The class format will combine short introductory lectures with whole class discussions and smaller group discussions. Three class meetings are designated “skills days” where we work on philosophical skills using collaborative small-group exercises. Near the end of the semester, during the epistemology of law unit, we will devote one class meeting to a “mock trial” exercise (see

below) where students work collaboratively in teams. In addition to written assignments, there will also be a final group project.

## **Course Assignments and Assessments**

**Participation** (20% of total grade). You will receive two participation grades over the course of the semester, each worth 10% of your course grade. Your participation grade will reflect both your attendance record (including punctuality) and – since this is a discussion-oriented class – your contributions to class discussions. Your contributions to class discussions will be assessed in terms of whether you made a good-faith effort to make productive and helpful contributions. This includes contributing with at least moderate frequency, in a way is respectful, reflects having listened to others’ contributions, and reflects having done the reading and thought carefully about it. However, you will not be graded on the philosophical quality of your contributions: I want class to be a place to speak freely and try out ideas without fear of judgment. Please also bear in mind that asking questions, including clarificatory questions, can be a great way to contribute.

To help make participation easier, we’ll use the “traffic light system” described [here](#). Additionally, if you are finding participating in discussions difficult or intimidating, please get in touch with me, and we will work on strategies and/or workarounds together.

**Pop quizzes** (10% of total grade). Occasional, unannounced pop quizzes will be administered at the start of some class meetings. Quizzes are designed to check that you completed the reading and to test basic comprehension of its main points. We’ll use PollEverywhere software for the quizzes.

- Each quiz will consist of 4 multiple-choice questions. If you get 4 right, you get an A (100%). If you get 3 right, you get a B (85%). If you get 2 right, you get a C (75%). If you get 1 right, you get a D (65%). If you get 0 right, you get an F (50%). If you aren’t present, you get a 0 (unless an approved excuse for your absence).
- At the end of the semester, I will drop your lowest pop quiz from your grade.

**Short Homework Assignments (SHAs)** (35% of total grade).

- SHA #1: Summarizing a Philosophy Article.  
*Due: Thurs, 8/25, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 500 words (≈1½-2 double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.*
- SHAs #2, #3 and #4: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Article.
  - SHA#2: *Due Tues, 9/13, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2-2½ double-spaced pages). 5% of total grade.*
  - SHA #3: *Due: Tues, 10/4, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2-2½ double-spaced pages). 10% of total grade.*
  - SHA #4: *Due: Tues, 10/25, 9:15am. Grading Method: Letter grade (A-F). Length: roughly 750 words (≈ 2-2½ double-spaced pages). 10% of total grade.*
- SHA #5: Spotting Good and Bad Features of a Philosophy Paper.  
*Due: Thurs, 11/10, 9:15am. Grading Method: Pass/fail. 5% of total grade.*

**Final Paper** (25% of total grade). A longer paper – around 1500 words ( $\approx$  5 double-spaced pages) – defending a philosophical view in response to one of several distributed prompts. The paper will be assigned a letter grade (A-F), based on a grading rubric that will be made available on Sakai.

*Due: Sunday, 12/4, at 11:59pm.*

**Final (Group) Project** (10% of total grade). In place of a final exam, you will present final projects, in groups, at the scheduled exam time (*Tuesday, 12/6, 8-11am*). Your final project will discuss one of the topics we've debated in class as it relates to a recent news event of your choosing. You will be graded as a group. Further guidelines will be provided closer to the time.

## Course Schedule

### Part One: Introduction

- Tues 8/16**     **Introducing Epistemology**  
Read: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, ch. 1
- Thurs 8/18**     **The Project of Criticizing Beliefs**  
Read: Mark Rowlands, "A Right to Believe?" [[link](#)]
- Tues 8/23**     **Skills Day 1: Reading and Summarizing a Philosophy Paper**  
Read: James Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy" [[link](#)]

### Part Two: Deference, Expertise & Conspiracy Theories

- Thurs 8/25**     **Deference and Expertise I**  
*SHA #1 due*     Read: Michael Huemer, "Is Critical Thinking Epistemically Responsible?"
- Tues 8/30**     **Deference and Expertise II**  
Read: Allan Hazlett, "The Social Value of Non-Deferential Belief"
- Thurs 9/1**     **Catchup/Discussion**  
[No new reading]
- [*Tues 9/6*     *Well-Being Day – no class*]
- Thurs 9/8**     **Skills Day 2: Critically Responding to a Philosophy Paper**  
[No new reading]
- Tues 9/13**     **Conspiracy Theories I**  
*SHA #2 due*     Read: Charles Pigden, "Conspiracy Theories and the Conventional Wisdom"
- Thurs 9/15**     **Conspiracy Theories II**  
Read: M. Giulia Napolitano, "Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation"
- Tues 9/20**     **Case Study: Climate Change Skepticism**  
Read: Alex Worsnip, "The Skeptic and the Climate Change Skeptic"
- Thurs 9/22**     **Catchup/Discussion**  
[No new reading]

Part Three: Echo Chambers and Media Consumption

- Tues 9/27 Echo Chambers I**  
Read: C. Thi Nguyen, “Escape the Echo Chamber” [\[link\]](#)
- Thurs 9/29 Media Consumption Habits**  
Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources”
- Tues 10/4 Echo Chambers II**  
*SHA #3 due* Read: Jennifer Lackey, “Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology”
- Thurs 10/6 Catchup/Discussion**  
[No new reading]

Part Four: Bias, Disagreement and Partisanship

- Tues 10/11 Motivated Reasoning and Cultural Cognition: The Psychology**  
Read: Extract from Ziva Kunda, “The Case for Motivated Reasoning”; extract from Dan Kahan & Donald Braman, “Cultural Cognition & Public Policy”
- Thurs 10/13 Motivated Reasoning and Cultural Cognition: Philosophical Upshots**  
Read: Robin McKenna, “Irrelevant Cultural Influences on Belief”
- Tues 10/18 Disagreement**  
Read: David Christensen, “Disagreement and Public Controversy”
- [Thurs 10/20 Fall break – no class]*
- Tues 10/25 Partisanship**  
*SHA#4 due* Read: Hrishikesh Joshi, “What are the Chances You’re Right about Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship”

Part Five: Speech & Truth

- Thurs 10/27 Speech, Disagreement & Debate**  
Read: Extracts from J.S. Mill, *On Liberty*, ch. 2
- Tues 11/1 Speech & The Market For Ideas**  
Read: Extracts from Alvin Goldman & James Cox, “Speech, Truth and the Free Market for Ideas”
- Thurs 11/3 Speech on Campus I**  
Read: Robert Simpson & Amia Srinivasan, “No Platforming”
- Tues 11/8 Speech on Campus II**  
Read: Steve Kolowich, “State of Conflict” [\[link\]](#)
- Thurs 11/10 Skills Day 3: Writing a Philosophy Paper**  
*SHA#5 due* Read: James Pryor, “Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper” [\[link\]](#)

Part Six: The Epistemology of the Law

**Tues 11/15 Statistical Evidence I: Outside of the Law**

Read: Extract from Tamar Gendler, “On The Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias”

**Thurs 11/17 Statistical Evidence II: In the Law**

Read: Extract from Judith Jarvis Thomson, “Liability & Individualized Evidence”

**Tues 11/22 Statistical Evidence in the Law: Mock Trial Activity**

[No reading]

*[Thurs 11/24 Thanksgiving break – no class]*

**Tues 11/29 The Standard of Proof**

Read: Larry Laudan, “Is It Finally Time to Put “Proof Beyond a Reasonable Doubt” Out to Pasture?”

**Tues 12/6 Presentations of (Group) Final Projects**

8-11am [in place of Final Exam]