

Echo Chambers, Experts, and Disagreement
PHIL 276 (O, H)
Fall 2022, Syllabus

Class Time: Tues/Thurs, 1:30 – 2:45
Classroom: F. W. Olin Hall 103¹

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You can call me Dr. O or Professor O.
My pronouns are she/her/hers.

Office Hours: Tuesdays 3:30-4:30,
Thursdays 3-4
(or by appointment)

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¹ Ursinus College respectfully acknowledges that our campus rests on Lenapehoking, the ancestral and spiritual homelands of the following five nations: Delaware Tribe of Indians, Delaware Nation, Eelūnaapèewii Lahkèewiit (Delaware Nation at Moraviantown), Stockbridge-Munsee Community, and Munsee-Delaware Nation (Ontario). Ursinus College's complete Land Acknowledgement Statement can be found [here](#).

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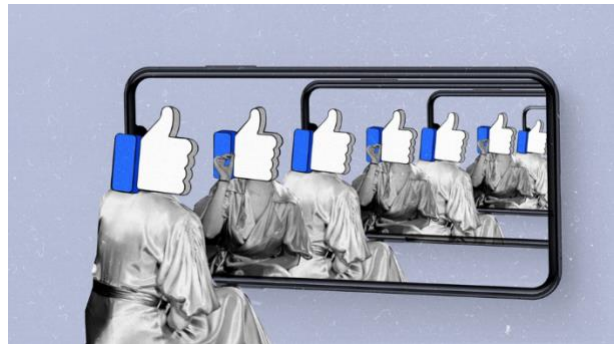
Course Description

“I know I am right, just Google it.”

“You should do your own research.”

“Trust the experts.”

“Everyone is entitled to their own opinion.”



These are likely familiar phrases. Each is making a claim about what one ought to believe, what one is justified in believing, what is rational, and how people who hold different beliefs ought to be treated. (The formal name for these are “epistemic” claims.) Arguably, investigating the nature of claims about beliefs is as important now as it have ever been. Many say we are in an unprecedented and toxic belief environment: a post-truth area of “alternative facts”, an information landscape in which seemingly inescapable echo chambers threaten our ability to access and respond rationally to evidence, a time in which extreme political and social polarization make agreement about the nature of the world be live in incredibly difficult. In this class, we will investigate this characterization of the “belief part” of our lives and engage with the following questions. Whom should we trust? What is an expert? When and why should we defer to experts? What should we believe if experts disagree? Should we

revise our beliefs if our peer disagrees with us? What is an echo chamber, and can we know if we are in one? Ought we revise our beliefs if we suspect we may be in an echo chamber? Ought we blame people for how they come to believe things? Given this set of questions, this class carries an O and H core designation.

Learning Objectives

1. Students will learn about different philosophical analyses of echo chambers, experts/expertise, testimony, and disagreement. Students will develop their ability to critique these analyses, to reflect on whether they agree or disagree, and to articulate why.
2. Students will reflect on what distinguishes a philosophical approach to these topics from a social scientific or historical approach.
3. Students will cultivate their ability to critically read difficult texts.
4. Students will become better at presenting complex ideas in writing, and dialogue with others.

Texts

All other texts will be available as PDFs or website links on Canvas.

Grading

| Assignment | Percentage of Final Grade |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| Participation | 15% |
| Pre-Discussion Response (8) | 20% |
| Conversation or Email Assignment | 15% |
| Short Paper | 20% |
| Final Paper | 30% |



If you are concerned about a grade you have received, please take the following steps: First, wait 24 hours after receiving the grade. During that time, (a) reread the rubric for the assignment and (b), read all the comments I have given the assignment carefully. Finally, come see me during office hours or send me an email to set up an appointment.

Assignments

In this section, I outline the course's assignment. Excluding the participation grade, separate, more detailed instructions will be provided for each assignment.

Participation (and some thoughts on Class Community)

We are a community of learners, collaborating on a philosophical project. Here is how I understand my role in our community: I will support and lead the community by guiding us through the topics, clarifying the readings, raising questions for discussion, and teaching analytic reasoning and communication skills. Your role as community members is (i) to be present by putting in a good faith effort to understand the assigned material, and (ii) to respectfully engage with assigned material, myself, and your peers.

This doesn't mean that I want us to work together to reach consensus on all the issues we discuss. Rather, I mean that through dialogue, we aim to make progress on the course's topics. This is possible even in the absence of consensus. Say you and your peer respectfully disagree about some issue.



Despite this disagreement, your peer can help you make progress by challenging you with an objection. In responding to the objection, your position becomes clearer and stronger. By challenging you, your peer helps you. Disagreement is not only expected, but totally normal, and in situations like the one I just described, valuable. Disagreement should not be petty, disrespectful, or rude.

There are many ways of participating in this class.

- Asking questions about the reading.
- Asking for clarification.
- Offering an argument for a particular conclusion.
- Offering an objection to an argument from the reading, or an argument discussed in class.
- Drawing distinctions between concepts/claims.
- Identifying connections between the reading and other class, a current event, etc.
- Identifying passages of the text that are confusing/unclear.
- Raising a yet-undiscussed point you think is relevant.
- Coming to office hours to continue a discussion from class.
- Coming to office hours to discuss a topic not discussed in class but related to course themes.

Pre-Discussion Response

My goal is to make sure that we have engaged, thoughtful, critical discussions of the readings during class time. This requires students coming to class having put in a good faith effort to understand the reading and having reflected on whether they agree or disagree with the author. I am assigning the Pre-Discussion Responses (PDRs) to help us achieve that goal.

PDRs must articulate two thoughtful questions/reflections.

- (1) A Clarity Question: What is something that you found confusing about the reading? What is something that you didn't understand from the reading?
- (2) A Critical Question: This question should raise an issue for the author's reasoning.

Over the course of the semester, students must submit 8 PDRs. A PDR can be submitted on any article assigned during the semester. Students may only submit one PDR per week. If a PDR covers an article assigned for a Tuesday class, it must be submitted by 4pm the Monday before. If a PDR covers an article assigned for a Thursday class, it must be submitted by 4pm the Thursday before.

This assignment will be graded pass/fail. Passing assignments will show thoughtful and thorough engagement with the reading.

Email/Conversation Assignment

The email/conversation assignment is an opportunity to practice communicating important ideas to an audience that doesn't have shared background and context.

The email/conversation assignment asks students to present a topic from our class to someone not enrolled. The student will present an argument from a reading, offer an objection to that argument, and then explain whether they agree with the original argument or find themselves moved by the objection.

Students can complete this assignment by composing an email (on which I am cc'd) or having a conversation (recording it or submitting it to me). The email/conversation assignment can be completed at any time during the semester. The article the email/conversation assignment engages with must be different from those discussed in the short and final papers.

Short Paper

Students will write a short (1,000-1,200 word), mid-semester paper. It will be due by 5pm on October 14th.

Final Paper

Students will write a longer final paper. If a student is taking the course at the 100-level, the final paper should be 2,000-2,500 words. If the student is taking the course at the 300-level, the final paper should be 2,500-3,000 words. Final papers will be due by 5pm on December 16th.

Extensions and Late Work

Deadlines exist to help us move through material, complete projects, and receive meaningful feedback. Sometimes, circumstances outside of our control make it difficult to satisfy deadlines. If you find yourself in such a circumstance and become concerned that you will not be able to make a deadline for this class, please talk to me about receiving an extension on your assignment. If you receive an extension, you will receive a new, later deadline on which the assignment can be submitted for full credit. Sickness, family emergencies, religious observances, and major projects due for other classes are all legitimate reasons to ask for an extension. Don't worry if you feel uncomfortable disclosing the reason you need an extension – if you say you need one, I trust that you have a good reason for needing one. I have never not given an extension when it was requested in advance of the deadline. Please do try to ask for extensions in advance of the deadline.

So long as students speak with me about late work, and agree to a plan for submitting the assignment, there will be no late penalty. If a student doesn't communicate with me about late work, late penalties (which will be outlined on assignment instructions) will apply.

Here is the major take-away from this section of the syllabus: if you have any concerns about meeting deadlines, come and talk to me. You may do so via email, during office hours, or during a separately scheduled appointment.

In-Class Technology Policy



Technology use is a major part of this class. Our canvas course-page is an important online space for our community, and we will often communicate outside class via the Canvas page or email. However, cell phones may not be used in the classroom.

I appreciate that students may want to use personal computers during class time to consult readings or take notes. I want to flag that there is a lot of research to suggest that the use of personal screens can negatively impact student learning. Also, we will engage in lots of discussion in this class, and so students need to be engaged with their peers rather than working independently on their computer

or tablet. Given these considerations, my view is that many students will likely benefit from having hard (rather than e-) copies of readings, refrain from using laptops and tablets, and take notes by hand. That said, I leave it to you to decide what will best help your learning.

I ask that if you do use a personal computer during class, you use it *only for class purposes* (meaning no surfing the internet, texting, online shopping, etc., during class time). If a computer/tablet is being used inappropriately (i.e., to text, internet surf, etc.), I will ask that it be put away. Inappropriate use of a personal computer can negatively impact a student's participation grade.

I reserve the right to transition to a no technology policy if we as a class are struggling to have engaged and lively discussions. If we transition to a no technology policy, accessibility accommodations that require the use of personal computers will, of course, be honored.

If you decide you would like to use a tablet or laptop, I ask that you come to me and take a "Responsible Computer Use" pledge. This involves promising me that you won't use your computer for non-course activities during class time.

Office Hours

Office hours are a time for you to come and speak with me outside of class time. We can discuss material from class, upcoming assignments, college in general, or life in general! I encourage all of you to come to office hours at least once this semester.

You do not need to make an appointment to come by my regularly scheduled office hours (which are noted at the top of this syllabus). When attending regularly scheduled office hours, you do not need to come at the time that they start. Rather you stop by anytime in the office hours window. If you attend office hours, you do not need to stay for the whole scheduled duration. Feel free to pop in with a quick five-minute question, or for a longer period of time to continue a discussion from class. Finally, if you are unable to attend regularly scheduled office hours (for example, because of scheduling conflicts), please email me to set up a separate appointment.

Communication

If you need to contact me outside of class time or office hours, please do so by email. My email is morourkefriel@ursinus.edu. Please use your Ursinus email when getting in touch. (My understanding is that this makes it less likely that the message goes to Spam). Please don't use the Canvas messaging system to contact me.

I always aim to respond to emails sent Monday-Friday within 24 hours. I try to reply to emails sent during "business hours" (9am-5pm) the same day. If you send me an email after "business hours" (after 5pm) or on the weekend, do not expect a same-day response. Please don't take this last

sentence as a kind of discouragement! Email me, get in touch! I just want to be upfront about my response times so that you can plan accordingly. For example, if you know you are going to have questions in advance of an assignment, it is best to get in touch earlier in the day.

Important Advice: Communicate early and often!! One common reaction students have to struggling in a course is to avoid speaking to the instructor. My advice is to fight against this (totally understandable) instinct. If you are worried about any aspect of this course, please come talk to me—the earlier, the better. We'll come up with a plan for moving forward together.

Accessibility and Disability

As the instructor of this course, I strive to provide an inclusive learning environment. If you experience barriers to learning in this course, do not hesitate to discuss them with me. The Office of Disability and Access also works with students who have any kind of disability, whether apparent or non-apparent, learning, emotional, physical, or cognitive, and need accommodations to increase their access to this learning environment. I encourage you to reach out to Dee Singley or Joanna Timmerman, the disability and access team, to discuss supports and accommodations you may need. The disability and access office is located in Lower Myrin, with the UCARE office. You can schedule a meeting with Disability and Access using their scheduling link: <https://disabilityandaccess.youcanbook.me/>, or by emailing them at disabilityandaccess@ursinus.edu. Students can also review accessibility and disabilities services online at <https://www.ursinus.edu/offices/disability-and-access/>.

Academic Integrity

Please, please, please don't plagiarize, or be otherwise academically dishonest. Academic dishonesty covers plagiarism, cheating, failure to cite sources, fabrication, and aiding others in these offenses. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to ask *before* turning in your assignment.

You are responsible for knowing, and abiding by, Ursinus' statement on academic honesty. [This statement can be found in the student handbook](#). Please don't hesitate to let me know if you have any questions about this statement, or academic honesty in general.

If I suspect plagiarism, I will follow the procedures outlined in the student handbook. You can access the relevant section of the student handbook at the following link: <https://www.ursinus.edu/student-life/handbook/section-ii-additional-expectations-resources/academic-honesty/>.

Basic Needs Security

If you are facing challenges affording or accessing sufficient food to eat every day or if you lack a safe and stable place to live and believe this may affect your performance in this course, please notify me if you are comfortable in doing so. This will enable me to connect you with resources with which I

am familiar. [Please also be aware of the Bear2Bear fund](#), which has been established by donors to the college and provides special grants (up to \$5000 per year) for students who have exhausted other sources of funding.

Title IX Reporting Policy: Mandated Reporters

Under College policy, and in accordance with Title IX, all faculty are considered mandated reporters. Mandated reporters must promptly report to the Title IX Coordinator when they receive information that could reasonably raise a concern that gender-based or sexual misconduct may have occurred. This includes anything related to sexual assault, sex or gender-based harassment, dating violence and or stalking.

The purpose of this disclosure is to ensure that students are made aware of their reporting options and resources for support. More on Title IX can be found [here](#).

Wellness

The Wellness Center offers counseling and medical services at no cost to students. For a full description of all services, please see the Wellness Center website for more information. All services are confidential. For urgent mental health issues, a walk-in crisis hour is available at 2-3 pm each weekday, where students in crisis can be seen immediately by a clinician. A 24/7 on-call clinician is also a part of the campus Crisis Response Team.

COVID-19

Please see Ursinus' ["Defend the Den" website](#) for the most up-to-date information on the college's COVID-19 policies. At the time of syllabus creation, masks are not required in indoor settings either by Montgomery County public health authorities, or in general by Ursinus College. Some spaces on campus may have special rules requiring masks, such as within the Wellness Center. The county or the college may potentially require indoor masking at some future time if the public health situation warrants it.

Anyone who would like to mask is encouraged to do so. I support the decision to mask and may choose to do so myself at points during the semester.

Remember: illness is a legitimate reason for an excused absence. If you feel under the weather, but decide to come to class, please wear a mask.

Tutoring and Academic Coaching

Tutoring and Academic Coaching are available through the ISS. Tutoring options exist for many classes at Ursinus, whether through individual tutoring, weekly drop-in sessions, or course specific workshops. Information on all tutoring services [can be found on the ISS website](#). Academic Coaching is a holistic academic support service, allowing student academic coaches to assist other students with time management, SMART goal setting, etc. Information on all academic coaching services [can be found on the ISS website](#). Any questions or issues should be directed to Adam Linetty in the ISS at alinetty@ursinus.edu or X3427.

Inclement Weather Policy

The college customarily holds class regardless of weather conditions. If I am unable to attend class due to dangerous driving conditions, I will send the class an email indicating whether we will have class remotely via Zoom, and post a similar message on our Canvas course page .

Student Feedback

I welcome student feedback on how the course is going. To this end, I will solicit mid-semester feedback, as well as end-of-semester feedback through the Student Perception of Teach Questionnaire (SPTQ).

Reading Calendar

| Date | Assigned Material |
|---|--|
| Week 1 <i>Introductions, What is Social Epistemology?</i> | |
| Tuesday, August 30 | Course Syllabus |
| Thursday, September 1 | Jennifer Nagel, <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , Chapter 1: "Introduction" Alvin Goldman, selection from "Epistemology and Postmodern Resistance" (Chapter 1 of <i>Knowledge in a Social World</i>) |
| Week 2 <i>Post-Truth, and The Partisan Epistemic Landscape</i> | |
| Tuesday, September 6 | Lee McIntyre, <i>Post-Truth</i> , Chapter 1: "What is Post-Truth" |
| Thursday, September 8 | Regina Rini, "Fake News and Partisan Epistemology" |
| Week 3 <i>Echo Chambers: What are they and what's wrong with them?</i> | |
| Tuesday, September 13 | Thi C. Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles Pt. 1" |
| Thursday, September 15 | Thi C. Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles Pt. 1" |
| Week 4 <i>Echo Chambers: What are they and what's wrong with them?</i> | |
| Tuesday, September 20 | Jennifer Lackey, "Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, September 22 | Jennifer Lackey, "Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology" Pt. 2 |

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| Week 5 | |
| <i>How do we escape echo chambers? Consume media across the political spectrum?</i> | |
| Tuesday, September 27 | Alex Worsnip, "The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, September 29 | Alex Worsnip, "The Obligation to Diversify One's Sources: Against Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media" Pt. 2 |
| Week 6 | |
| <i>How do we escape echo chambers? By consuming media across the political spectrum?</i> | |
| Tuesday, October 4 | Barry Lam, "Chamber of Facts" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, October 6 | Barry Lam, "Chamber of Facts" Pt. 2 |
| Week 7 | |
| <i>How do we escape echo chambers? By doing our own research?</i> | |
| Tuesday, October 11 | Neil Levy, "Do your own research!" Pt. 1 |
| Tuesday, October 13 | Neil Levy, "Do your own research!" Pt. 2 |
| Week 8 | |
| <i>How do we escape echo chambers? By deferring to experts?</i> | |
| Tuesday, October 18 | Fall Break! |
| Tuesday, October 20 | Naomi Oreskes, "Why We Should Trust Science" (TED talk) |
| Week 9 | |
| <i>How do we escape echo chambers? By deferring to experts?</i> | |
| Tuesday, October 25 | Thomas Grundmann, "Facing Epistemic Authorities" Pt. 1 |
| Tuesday, October 27 | Thomas Grundmann, "Facing Epistemic Authorities" Pt. 2 |
| Week 10 | |
| <i>Epistemic Concerns About Reliance on Experts</i> | |
| Tuesday, November 1 | Thi Nguyen, "Cognitive Islands and runaway echo chambers: problems for epistemic dependence on experts" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, November 3 | Thi Nguyen, "Cognitive Islands and runaway echo chambers: problems for epistemic dependence on experts" Pt. 2 |

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| Week 11 <i>Intro to Epistemology of Disagreement</i> | |
| Tuesday, November 8 | Email/Conversation Assignment Workshop |
| Thursday, November 10 | Matheson, "The Epistemology of Disagreement" |
| Week 12 <i>What is the rational response to public disagreement and controversy?</i> | |
| Tuesday, November 15 | David Christensen, "Disagreement and Public Controversy" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, November 17 | David Christensen, "Disagreement and Public Controversy" Pt. 2 |
| Week 13 <i>Catch Up</i> | |
| Tuesday, November 22 | Catch Up Day |
| Thursday, November 24 | Thanksgiving Break |
| Week 14 <i>What is the rational response to moral disagreement?</i> | |
| Tuesday, November 29 | Chris Ranalli, "Moral Hinges and Steadfastness" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, December 1 | Chris Ranalli, "Moral Hinges and Steadfastness" Pt. 2 |
| Week 15 <i>Post-Truth Politics and the Merriam-Webster 2022 Word of the Year!</i> | |
| Tuesday, December 6 | Natascha Rietdijk, "Post-Truth Politics and Collective Gaslighting" Pt. 1 |
| Thursday, December 8 | Natascha Rietdijk, "Post-Truth Politics and Collective Gaslighting" Pt. 2 |