

Deciding What (and Who) to Believe

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Class meetings: Thursdays 12-2pm, 1414 Mass Ave room 320

Office Hours: Tuesdays 12-2pm, via Zoom, and Thursdays 2-3pm, Emerson Hall room 202

SEMINAR DESCRIPTION

It's hard to know what to believe these days. Information – or perhaps *mis*information – bombards us at all times, but assessing the reliability and trustworthiness of our sources is notoriously difficult. Sometimes it seems as though different groups of people inhabit different worlds, with precious little common ground on precisely the matters that they each take to be most important. These phenomena have not escaped the notice of contemporary epistemologists; that is, philosophers who are interested in investigating the nature of knowledge, rationality, and justification. In this seminar we will read recent work on what one might call “applied” epistemology, touching on a broad range of contemporary social issues that are, at their core, epistemological issues. We begin by examining two questions in traditional epistemology that have recently skyrocketed to cultural prominence: the question of how to respond to *disagreement* with people who seem just as smart and well-informed as you are, and the question of whether pointing out factors that influence your beliefs but seem to have nothing to do with their truth should have a *debunking* effect. We will then use these concepts to explore a smorgasbord of hot topics in contemporary applied epistemology; topics covered include fake news, echo chambers, distrusting scientists, motivated reasoning, “White” ignorance, implicit bias, responsibility for one’s own and others’ ignorance, and gaslighting. Throughout, we will place particular focus on distinguishing cases in which people believe badly from cases in which responsible believers are unwittingly and unfortunately led astray. The seminar will culminate in a mini-conference at which students present their own views on contemporary epistemological issues of their choosing.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this seminar, students will have developed the following knowledge and skills:

- Detailed *knowledge of some philosophical questions pertaining to current issues in applied epistemology*, of some possible answers to those questions, and of some advantages and drawbacks to these answers.
- The ability to *identify cases in which philosophical theories apply to topics in the news*, by explaining the topic and explaining what a philosopher (or several philosophers!) would say about it.
- The ability to *analyze a complex social issue*, by identifying a variety of normatively significant factors, explaining the import of each one, and comparing the various factors to draw an overall conclusion about what should be done.
- The ability to *identify the structure of arguments* – including their central premises, conclusion/s, and the ways in which the premises are supposed to provide support for the conclusion/s – and to *present focused objections to arguments*, which concentrate on either a particular premise or a particular inference in the argument’s structure and suggest reasons to be dubious about it.
- The ability to *defend a view on what should be done about a complex social issue*, by arguing for each of the view’s central tenets and then identifying and responding to potential objections to it.

SEMINAR COMPONENTS

This seminar has four components: questions about the seminar readings (20%), discussion boards (20%), philosophical papers (40%), and final presentations (20%).

- *Notes on the readings*

This is a reading-based class. We are inheriting a rich intellectual history that rewards sustained attention. You will be much better-prepared to contribute to class discussion, and you will remember the readings much better, if you take notes on the readings and identify some issues that you would like to talk about in advance of class. To that end, I ask all students to submit two questions for discussion in advance of each class. Each “question” should be a paragraph long. We will discuss some examples of good genres of question in the first class.

- *Discussion boards*

This class will be more collaborative than the average Philosophy class, in that we will actively help each other to think through complex current applied epistemological issues and to think about how philosophical theories apply to these issues. We will use the discussion boards on Canvas for this. Twice over the course of the semester, all students will post a “Philosophy in the news” discussion prompt. In the subsequent weeks, all students will discuss one another’s prompts. We will go over guidelines for prompts and comments together in class.

- *Philosophical papers*

In this class I teach paper-writing on what is known as a “mastery model”. There are five paper hand-in opportunities – i.e., days when you may submit writing that counts toward your papers grade. There are five “levels”, and you may attempt to move up 1-2 levels per hand-in day, starting with level 1. You are not required to submit writing on any given day; you can choose whatever works for you. To be graded “satisfactory”, you need only attain level 2 or above by the end of the semester, but of course I hope that many students will set their sights higher. A level 5 paper is normally about 10 pages long. I will provide a model on our Canvas site.

Level 1	Summarize a bit of theory that we have studied.
Level 2	Summarize a current social issue and explain how the bit of theory applies to the issue.
Level 3	Give a possible criticism of the theory and respond to the criticism.
Level 4	Suggest what should be done about the issue, drawing on the theory.
Level 5	Write a structured paper whose thesis is a view about what should be done about a current moral or social issue and which explains and draws on bits of philosophical theory to support this thesis.

- *Final presentations*

The seminar culminates in a mini-conference at which all of the speakers are enrolled students. (This is going to be a simulation of what real professional philosophers, like me, do when we go to academic conferences.) Students will give 15-minute presentations in which they defend a view on what should be done about a current issue in applied epistemology, drawing on the work of the philosophers we have studied to support their views. There will be snacks.

SEMINAR POLICIES AND PROCEDURES

WEBSITE

There is a Canvas site for this seminar. All documents (syllabus, assignments, readings, and documents with helpful tips) can be accessed via this site. Please check the site regularly for announcements – when I want to send a message to all students, I will do so initially by posting an announcement on the seminar website.

EMAILS

When emailing me about this class, please write “FSEM” in the subject line so that I can quickly identify your message within the daily deluge of emails. I will endeavor to reply to all your emails within 48 hours. If I do not manage to do this, it is okay to email again to remind me – but please wait 48 hours first.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You must cite any work that you draw from in your papers, both direct quotations and paraphrased ideas. You are strongly encouraged to discuss the material, including assignments, with your classmates, but all written work that you submit must be your own. If you have questions about citation, gratitude footnotes, or any other bizarre academic conventions surrounding the acknowledgement of others’ ideas and influence, just ask me.

INCOMPLETES

All work is expected to be completed and turned in on time; I have designed the seminar in such a way as to facilitate the completion of all requirements by the end of the semester. “Incomplete” work is work that could not be completed due to documented illness or another emergency occurring sometime around the end of the semester. Arrangements for taking an incomplete and its removal should be initiated by the student and agreed to by me before the end of the semester. I *strongly* discourage taking incompletes and would vastly prefer to see something that we both know is not your best work than no work at all.

ACADEMIC ACCOMMODATIONS

Harvard University values inclusive excellence and providing equal educational opportunities for all students. Our goal is to remove barriers for disabled students related to inaccessible elements of instruction or design in this seminar. If reasonable accommodations are necessary to provide access, please contact the [Disability Access Office \(DAO\)](#). Accommodations do not alter fundamental requirements of the seminar and are not retroactive. Students should request accommodations as early as possible, since they may take time to implement. Students should notify DAO at any time during the semester if adjustments to their communicated accommodation plan are needed.

COVID STUFF

Students are expected to follow Harvard’s [isolation policies](#). I will follow Harvard’s [guidance for faculty](#). If you need to isolate, we can arrange for a fellow student to either record the class for you or share their notes with you. Masking is currently optional indoors on-campus.

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

UNIT 1: BACKGROUND – RECENT ISSUES IN EPISTEMOLOGY

Class 1 (Jan 26): DISAGREEMENT

- David Christensen, “[Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News](#)” (30 pages)
- Adam Elga, “[Reflection and Disagreement](#)” (24 pages)

Class 2 (Feb 2): DEBUNKING

- Roger White, “[You Just Believe That Because...](#)” (42 pages)
- Katia Vavova, “[Irrelevant Influences on Belief](#)” (18 pages)

FEB 5: FIRST PAPER HAND-IN OPPORTUNITY

UNIT 2: BAD BELIEVERS AND UNFORTUNATE BELIEVERS

Class 3 (Feb 9): (DIS)TRUSTING SCIENTISTS

- Elizabeth Anderson, “[Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony](#)” (20 pages)
- Quassim Cassam, “[Vice Epistemology](#)” (21 pages)

Class 4 (Feb 16): FAKE NEWS

- Regina Rini, “[Fake News and Partisan Epistemology](#)” (21 pages)
- Boyd Millar, “[The Information Environment and Blameworthy Beliefs](#)” (12 pages)

FEB 19: FIRST DISCUSSION BOARD POSTS

Class 5 (Feb 23): ECHO CHAMBERS

- Thi Nguyen, “[Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles](#)” (20 pages)
- Thi Nguyen, “[Polarization or Propaganda?](#)” (18 pages)

FEB 26: SECOND PAPER HAND-IN OPPORTUNITY

NO CLASS MARCH 2 – I’M AWAY

UNIT 3: CHOOSING NOT TO KNOW

Class 6 (March 9): STANDPOINT EPISTEMOLOGY

- Elizabeth Anderson, “[Feminist Epistemology: An Interpretation and a Defense](#)” (34 pages)
- Briana Toole, “[Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology](#)” (18 pages)

NO CLASS MARCH 16 – SPRING RECESS

Class 7 (March 23): SOCIAL IGNORANCE

- Charles Mills, “[White Ignorance](#)” (27 pages)
- Lidal Dror, “[Is There An Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?](#)” (23 pages)

MARCH 26: SECOND DISCUSSION BOARD POSTS

Class 8 (March 30): IGNORANCE AND RESPONSIBILITY

- Michele Moody-Adams, “[Culture, Responsibility, and Affected Ignorance](#)” (18 pages)
- Natalia Washington and Daniel Kelly, “[Who’s Responsible For This?](#)” (25 pages)

APRIL 2: THIRD PAPER HAND-IN OPPORTUNITY

NO CLASS APRIL 6 – I’M AWAY

UNIT 4: GETTING INTO YOUR HEAD

Class 9 (April 13): GASLIGHTING

- Kate Abramson, “[Turning Up the Lights on Gaslighting](#)” (29 pages)
- Lauren Leydon-Hardy, “[Predatory Grooming and Epistemic Infringement](#)” (28 pages)

Class 10 (April 20): DANGEROUS CONCEPTS

- Sarah-Jane Leslie, “[The Original Sin of Cognition: Fear, Prejudice and Generalization](#)” (28 pages)
- Lynne Tirrell, “[Genocidal Language Games](#)” (47 pages)

APRIL 23: FOURTH PAPER HAND-IN OPPORTUNITY

DATE TBD BY STUDENT POLL: HARVARD UNDERGRADUATE APPLIED EPISTEMOLOGY CONFERENCE

POST-CONFERENCE: FIFTH PAPER HAND-IN OPPORTUNITY