PHIL3028: Knowledge, Ignorance, & Democracy

Department of Philosophy

Spring 2021

Disclaimer: *This module guide contains information that reflects the plans for the delivery of your module in the 2020-21 academic year. The continued situation with Covid-19 means that changes may be required at short notice in order to respond to local, national, or global developments and regulations in relation to the pandemic. Students will be informed of any such changes via the Department, School, or University as appropriate. Specific effects on the delivery of this module, and any implications for my mode of teaching and/or assessments will be conveyed to you with the minimum of delay.*

1. Module Information

Webpage for this module available through Moodle: https://moodle.nottingham.ac.uk/

Level: 3

Credits: 20

Module Convener: Dr. Michael Hannon

Drop in Hours: Thursday 4–5pm and Friday 10–11am *via MS Teams*

Email: Michael.Hannon@nottingham.ac.uk

Note. We should reply to emails within 2 working days. If we are very busy you will be sent an acknowledgement email within 2 working days informing you of when we can reply more fully. We also encourage students to post questions on the discussion forums on the module's Moodle page.

2. Module Description

Module Outline

This module explores a variety of issues at the intersection of epistemology and political philosophy. It will start by exploring the fraught relationship between politics and truth from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It will then cover a range of topics such as: political disagreement and polarization; fake news, misinformation, and propaganda; political ignorance and irrationality; epistemic virtues and vices in politics; the role of trust and expertise in a democracy; and epistemic defences of (and challenges to) democracy. Some of the central questions we will attempt to answer are: Should the existence of widespread disagreement in politics make us less confident in our own views? Are voters morally or epistemically obligated to vote responsibly? Is it rational for citizens to base their political views on group identity rather than reasoned arguments? Should we have beliefs about complex policy questions about which we are not experts? Is democracy the best form of government for getting at the truth?

Module Objectives

1. To familiarize you with some central concepts, ideas, and arguments in political epistemology.

2. To help you cultivate a critical understanding of some of the central arguments and views in contemporary political epistemology, as well as to enhance your abilities to clearly and concisely explain, criticize, and defend philosophical positions.

3. To improve skills needed in almost any career, such as critical thinking, researching, writing, analyzing arguments, and problem solving. More broadly, to cultivate the capacities and desire for reflection and self-expression, for sharing ideas, and for dealing with problems to which there are no easy answers.

3. Structure of Teaching

A University of Nottingham credit equates to 10 hours of notional study, so this 20 credit module is designed to involve 200 hours of study (including lectures/seminars).

There will be **10 lectures** and **10 seminars**. Each week (except for Reading Week) there will be an **online lecture** and a **one-hour seminar**. I will upload the pre-recorded lecture videos each week.

The lecture will be devoted to presenting more advanced material and to discussions of that material. I will expect you to study the required lecture readings carefully in advance of each lecture.

Seminars will be used for a mixture of activities including discussion of the seminar readings and how it connects to the lecture material, as well as preparation for writing your essay. Discussion is a crucial part of this seminar; you should come each week armed with questions and comments of your own. I will also provide weekly questions for each seminar.

Material supporting the module, including how the teaching will be delivered, is available on Moodle.

4. Module Content

4.1 Lecture Topics for Each Week

Each lecture has a required reading as well as some optional readings (see '4.3 Reading List' below).

Lecture 1:   Truth and Politics

Lecture 2:   Knowledge, Ignorance, and Power

Lecture 3:   The Epistemology of Democracy

Lecture 4:   Political Disagreement

Lecture 5:   Badmouthing, Populism, and Epistemic Bubbles

Lecture 6:   Political Ignorance

Lecture 7:   Irrationality and Bias

Lecture 8:   Propaganda, Bullshit, and Fake News

Lecture 9:   Hopeless Ideals and Politics for Realz

Lecture 10:   Rethinking Democracy

4.2 Seminars

Readings for each seminar are available on Moodle. Before the seminar you must have read, thought about, and come up with comments and/or questions to discuss the seminar reading.

Timetables: You are able to access your timetable online via
http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicservices/timetabling/view-timetables/viewwebtimetables.aspx

Students will be automatically allocated to seminar groups and will be placed in the group that fits best their timetable. If you experience any difficulties please contact me or the programmes team in student services: SS-Programmes-UPW@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

4.3 Reading List

Recommended Background Reading
- Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press

Essential Readings
Below are the essential readings for each topic, which are available on Moodle. You are expected to have read all essential readings for both the lecture and seminar. I will also post a list of suggested (optional) readings on Moodle.

Topic 1. Truth and Politics

Lecture
- Arendt, Hannah. 1967. Truth and Politics. *The New Yorker*

Seminar
- Estlund, David. 2007. Truth and Despotism. In *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*

Topic 2. Knowledge, Ignorance, and Power

Lecture
- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice*, Chapters 1 & 2

Seminar
- Medina, José. 2013. Active Ignorance, Epistemic Others, and Epistemic Friction. In *The Epistemology of Resistance*

Topic 3. The Epistemology of Democracy

Lecture
- Landemore, Hélène and David Estlund. 2018. The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation. In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*

Seminar:
- Peter, Fabienne. 2016. The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy. In *The Epistemic Life of Groups*

Topic 4. Political Disagreement

Lecture
- Feldman, Richard. 2007. Reasonable Religious Disagreements. In *Philosophers without Gods*.

Seminar
- de Ridder, Jeroen. 2021. Deep Disagreement and Political Polarization

Topic 5. Badmouthing, Populism, and Epistemic Bubbles

Lecture
- Hannon, Michael. 2021. Disagreement or Badmouthing? The Role of Expressive Discourse in Politics. In *Political Epistemology*

Seminar
- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2021. Epistemic Bubbles and Authoritarian Politics. In *Political Epistemology*

Topic 6. Political Ignorance

Lecture
- Somin, Ilya. 2021. Is Political Ignorance Rational? In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*

Seminar
- Brennan, Jason. 2009. Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*

Topic 7. Irrationality and Bias

Lecture
- Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*, Chapters 1 & 2

Seminar
- Huemer, Michael. 2016. Why People Are Irrational About Politics. In *Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology*

Topic 8. Propaganda, Bullshit, and Fake News

Lecture
- Cassam, Quassim. 2021. Bullshit, Post-truth, and Propaganda. In *Political Epistemology*

Seminar
- Rini, Regina. 2017. Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*

Topic 9. Hopeless Ideals and Politics for Realz

Lecture

- Estlund, David. 2014. Utopophobia. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

Seminar

- Ancell, Aaron. 2019. Political Irrationality, Utopianism, and Democratic Theory. *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*

Topic 10. Rethinking Democracy

Lecture

- Brennan, Jason. 2016. The Rule of the Knowers. In *Against Democracy*

Seminar

- Guerrero, Alexander. 2021. The Epistemic Pathologies of Elections and the Virtues of Lottocracy. In *Political Epistemology*

4.4 Some Tips

At no stage in one's life is reading philosophy easy. In order to make your reading efficient and rewarding, you must maintain a sympathetic but critical attitude to the text. This can often be best achieved by approaching the text with a number of general questions in mind:

- What conclusion does the author wish to reach?
- Why is that conclusion interesting?
- What is the argument, and is it valid?
- Should the premises of the argument be accepted?
- If we accept the argument and conclusion, what else follows?

5. Assessment

The information below is specific to this module and may not apply to other Philosophy modules you are taking.

Further information on assessment—including marking criteria, how to submit work, and information on plagiarism—is contained in the *Philosophy Assessment Handbook*.

5.1 Assessment Method

This module carries 20 credits. You will gain these credits by engaging in essential classes and completing the following components of assessment:

Two coursework essays that are approximately 2000 words each.

Each essay is worth 50% of the module mark.

Essays are submitted online via the submission inboxes on Moodle.

For information about when you are required to submit coursework or complete other components of assessment see sections 5.2 and 5.3 below.

5.2 Essay Questions

The questions for the first essay will be posted on Moodle by **February 19th, 2021.**

The questions for the second component of assessment for this module will be released no later than **19th April 2021**. Please be aware that the feedback for this component of assessment will not be as extensive as the feedback for your first assessment, but you are entitled to request further feedback 1-1 should you need it.

5.3 Coursework Deadlines

This module has the following assessment components:

Component of assessment type	Included in term time submission totals	Applicable Submission deadline	Component % weighting for module mark
Mid-semester essay (2000 words)	**Yes**	At one of the 3 mid-semester deadlines*	**50%**
End of semester essay (2000 words)	**No**	At the end of semester (deadline 4)	**50%**

1. For *each* philosophy module that requires *two* essay submissions, students must submit one of the two essays at **one of three mid-semester deadlines (1-3), and their second essay for each module at deadline 4 (end of semester).**

2. The mid-semester essay deadline for each philosophy module is calculated in the usual way (as set out in the table on page 5). That is, by counting how many essays (minus all those you will hand in at deadline 4) you have this semester **for philosophy,** and then do the following:

- If you have only one essay, submit it at deadline 2.

- If you have two essays, submit one at deadline 1, and one at deadline 3.

- If you have three essays, hand one in on each deadline, 1, 2, 3.

NB. You can choose which of your module essays to submit at each of deadlines 1, 2, 3.

Three examples.

1. Rahil, third year: studying two philosophy modules.

Rahil is taking two philosophy modules this semester – *Philosophy of Education* and *Philosophy of Criminal Law*. Each module has two essays. So they know that they have to submit an essay for *Criminal Law* **and** an essay for *Philosophy of Education* at deadline 4.

This leaves two remaining essays – one for *Criminal Law* and one for *Phil of Education*. As this leaves a total of two essays, they know that they have to submit one of those essays at deadline 1, and one

at deadline 3. Rahil decides that they will submit *Criminal Law* at deadline 1, and leave the *Phil of Ed* until deadline 3.

2. Jane, first year: one philosophy module.

Jane is taking one philosophy module this semester - *History of Philosophy*. This module has two essays. She knows then that she has two philosophy essays to submit this semester, and that one must be submitted at deadline 4. So, Jane knows that she must submit her first essay for the module at deadline 2.

3. Mohammed, second year: three philosophy modules.

Mohammed is taking three philosophy modules this semester. *Philosophy of Art*, *Social Philosophy*, and *Freedom and Obligation*. He therefore knows that he has three essays to submit at deadline 4: One for *Phil of Art*, one for *Social* and one for *Freedom*. This leaves him three essays left to submit – one for *Art*, one for *Social* and one for *Freedom*. He also knows, given that there are three essays left in total, that he must submit one essay for deadline 1, one for deadline 2 and one for deadline 3. Mohammed also knows that the order of submission is entirely up to him.

Submission grid for mid-semester essays

How many pieces of philosophy coursework assignments must you submit **in total** at the fixed mid-semester deadlines this semester?	Number of assignments to submit at **first deadline**	Number of assignments to submit at **second deadline**	Number of assignments to submit at **third deadline**
1	0	1	0
2	1	0	1
3	1	1	1
4	1	1	2
5	1	2	2
6	2	2	2

Important notes:

1. **The mid-semester deadlines (and return dates) for coursework for 2020/21 will be available through the Moodle Philosophy Community Page. Please see also the submission inboxes in this module's Moodle page.**

2. Since the organization of coursework is complex this year, it is *strongly recommended* that you check your submission requirements with your module conveners and/or personal tutor.

5.4 Feedback on your coursework

Your essay will be returned electronically via Moodle with comments attached. Please make sure you read all the comments – both the particular, in-text, comments and the general comments. Remember that there will **not** be in text comments on your second submission for each module

Essays submitted by the deadline will be returned with feedback within 15 working days of that deadline. (Working days exclude weekends, bank holidays and University holidays.) If (unavoidably) we cannot meet this return date, we will let you know by email.

You will get two kinds of comments on your essay: comments on the qualities of that particular essay and how it could have been improved, and suggestions for how to approach Philosophy essays in future. Note that you are welcome to discuss these comments with the module convener in person in a further feedback session. To arrange this, please email your convener within two weeks of receiving the essay back.

5.5 Exams

THIS MODULE HAS NO EXAM COMPONENT.

5.6 Generic Exam feedback for the last time the module ran

Please see relevant section in this module's Moodle page.

5.7 Staff Response to SET/SEM feedback for the last time the module ran

Please see relevant section in this module's Moodle page.

6. Social Media Policy

Please be aware that the University has a social media policy which applies to students. You can find it here: https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/governance/documents/social-media-policy-for-students-nov15.pdf.