

# PHIL 24.805: APPLIED EPISTEMOLOGY

Spring 2023

## CONTACT INFO

Elise Woodard  
[ewoodard@mit.edu](mailto:ewoodard@mit.edu)  
**Office:** 32-D962 (inner office)

## COURSE INFO

**Class:** Wednesdays 12-2:30PM  
**Classroom:** Stata Center, 32-D831  
**Office Hours:** By appointment  
**Handouts:** <http://elisewoodard.org/applied-epistemology>

## DESCRIPTION

This course will focus on recent work in the rapidly growing areas of legal, feminist, political, and interpersonal epistemology. Topics of discussion include: statistical evidence, norms of criminal conviction, standpoint epistemology, political deference and partisanship, psychologizing, moral encroachment, and epistemic styles. Along the way, we'll discuss methodological issues surrounding theorizing about politically and morally relevant cases. In addition, we'll seek to understand how contemporary and applied issues bear on and can also help us make progress on more traditional and theoretical debates within epistemology.

## REQUIREMENTS

Students taking the course for credit must read the material, participate in class discussion, and give (at least) one in-class presentation.

### **Assignments:**

- 15% Seminar Presentation
- 15% Weekly question or reading observation
- 70% Term Paper

**Seminar Presentation** Presentation skills are arguably just as important as writing skills in philosophy. Presentations will also help you understand and engage with the material more deeply.

Your presentation should be aimed at spurring critical discussion. You should not summarize the whole paper but rather present the parts of the paper(s) that are strictly necessary for setting up the points you want to raise.

Raise a few points (~2–3) for discussion. These can be sprinkled throughout or saved until the end. These can include:<sup>1</sup>

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**Last Updated:** March 23, 2023

<sup>1</sup>List borrowed from Alex Worsnip

1. An interpretation question about the author's view
2. A question about how two parts of the author's view relate to one another.
3. A question or suggestion about how two different readings relate to one another.
4. A potential criticism of the author's view.
5. An identification of an assumption underlying the author's view, and a question about whether this assumption is plausible.
6. A remark or question about the terms of debate in which the different readings for that week are engaged (e.g., an identification of a common presupposition they all make, and a question about whether it is plausible)

Presentations should be accompanied by a two-page handout. (Handout-making skills are also important!!) Print enough copies for the class.

Please send me your preferences—ranked or unranked—by **Friday, Feb 10**. (You can just indicate week, unless you already know which paper you'd like to focus on. If not, you can tell me later.) We won't have presentations the weeks there is a visitor (Weeks 5, 6, 9, and 13).

I am happy to meet with you about the presentation or look at a handout draft. Ideally, send me the handout draft by Tuesday at 2pm.

**Questions** Plan to send me 1–2 questions or comments about the readings by the end of the day before class for 10 of the 13 weeks. I just request that you send in questions the weeks we have a visitor: 3/15, 4/12, and 5/10.

The questions can include anything from 1–6 above. They can also include clarification questions, an extension of an argument, or an interesting example.

**Term Paper** For graduate students, the default is that written work will consist of a final term paper. A draft of ~10 pages, including an outline of the remainder, must be turned in before the end-of-term faculty meeting (May 24). Please submit it by **May 22 at 5pm**. The final version is due by registration day of the Fall semester (**Sept 5, 2023**). You should plan to discuss your topic with me by mid-April. If you are an undergraduate enrolled, please submit your **full paper** by **May 22**.

However, I am open to alternative breakdowns. You should write a total of ~8–10k words for the course (excluding footnotes). E.g., if you'd prefer to write two shorter papers and/or have the opportunity to practice other writing skills, I'm happy to talk about options!

## ACCOMMODATIONS & RESOURCES

If you need any accommodations, please let me know!

Disability and Access Services: <https://studentlife.mit.edu/das>.

Mental Health Counseling:

<https://medical.mit.edu/services/mental-health-counseling>

For grad student-specific resources: the Office of Graduate Education (OGE), GradSupport provides consultation, coaching, and advocacy to graduate students on matters related to academic and life challenges. Contact GradSupport at [gradsupport@mit.edu](mailto:gradsupport@mit.edu) or at (617) 253-4860.

Several of the readings touch on difficult and sensitive issues, such as sexual assault and oppression. It will be especially crucial that we approach these topics with the requisite respect and care.

## READINGS

Readings are available here: <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/i16d40nbpo0iaom/AADYIVYHsCBK1FNux6yHXmw3a?dl=0>.

### Unit 1: Legal Epistemology

*Week 1: Feb 8*

*Proof Paradox & Belief vs. Credence*

- Buchak 2014, "[Belief, Credence, and Norms](#)"
- Thomson 1986, "[Liability and Individualized Evidence](#)"
- **Background:** Ross 2020, "[Recent Work on the Proof Paradox](#)"

*Week 2: Feb 15*

*Legal Proof, Sensitivity, and Incentives*

- Enoch, Spectre, & Fisher 2012, "[Statistical Evidence, Sensitivity, and the Legal Value of Knowledge](#)"
- Ross 2021, "[Justice in Epistemic Gaps: the 'Proof Paradox' Revisited](#)"

*Week 3: Feb 22*

*Legal Proof and Knowledge*

- Moss 2023, "[Knowledge and Legal Proof](#)"
- Lackey 2021, "[Norms of Criminal Conviction](#)"

### Unit 2: Feminist Epistemology

*Week 4: Mar 1*  
*Saki presents*

*#BelieveWomen and What We Owe to Speakers*

- Ferzan 2021, "[#BelieveWomen and the Presumption of Innocence](#)"
- **Optional:** Bolinger 2021, "[#BelieveWomen and the Ethics of Belief](#)"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Now optional due to spillover from previous week. I recommend reading pp. 131–4.

- Week 5: Mar 8  
Haslanger joins
- Standpoint Epistemology*
- Dror 2022, “Is There an Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?”
  - Haslanger 2019, “Disciplined Bodies and Ideology Critique”
  - Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings” (ch. 1 of *The Souls of Black Folk*)

- Week 6: Mar 15  
Johnson King joins
- Radical Epistemologies*
- Srinivasan 2020, “Radical Externalism”
  - Johnson King 2022, “Radical Internalism”

### Unit 3: Political Epistemology

- Week 7: Mar 22
- Political Deference and Partisanship*
- Brinkmann 2022, “In Defence of Non-Ideal Political Deference”
  - Rini 2017, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

Worksh@p at Harvard on March 24–25

- Week 8: April 5  
Anton presents
- Higher-Order Evidence and the Epistemic (Dis)Value of Partisanship*
- Joshi 2020, “What Are the Chances You’re Right About Everything?”
  - Lepoutre 2020, “Democratic Group Cognition”

- Week 9: Apr 12  
Hannon joins
- Deliberative Democracy, Empathy, & Understanding*
- Hannon 2020, “Empathetic Understanding & Deliberative Democracy”
  - Cassam 2023, “Sense-Making, Empathy, and Democracy”

### Unit 4: Epistemological Ethics and Inquiry

- Week 10: Apr 19  
Xuan presents
- Psychologizing & Doxastic Wronging*
- Flowerree forthcoming, “When to Psychologize”
  - Basu & Schroeder 2019, “Doxastic Wronging”

- Week 11: April 26
- Grit and Agency*
- Morton and Paul 2018, “Grit”
  - Dandelet 2021, “Epistemic Coercion”

- Week 12: May 3
- Paper workshops! (Saki, Xuan, Anton)

- Week 13: May 10  
Flores joins
- Epistemic Styles*
- Flores 2021, “Epistemic Styles”
  - Fraser 2020, “Epistemic FOMO”