

PHIL 735.001: Advanced Studies in Epistemology
[Topic: Applied Epistemology]
UNC Chapel Hill, Spring 2025

Instructor: Alex Worsnip (aworsnip@unc.edu)

Class meetings: Tuesdays, 1:00-3:30pm, Caldwell 208

Office hours: Wednesdays, 11:30am-12:30pm, Caldwell 202B; and by appointment

Course description. This seminar will be in applied epistemology, an exciting and relatively nascent subfield applying the questions and tools of epistemology to issues of pressing public concern. The seminar will introduce you to some of the most important cutting-edge work in this area. The class is organized into four sections: (1) deference and expertise; (2) the epistemology of (mis)information (including conspiracy theories, fake news, echo chambers); (3) disagreement, polarization, and partisanship; and (4) biased and prejudiced beliefs (including motivated reasoning, and the connections of prejudiced belief to moral encroachment and epistemic internalism vs. externalism).

Distribution requirement satisfaction. This course (when taken in normal, non-reduced writing format) satisfies the M&E distribution requirement for our graduate program.

Requirements/assessment.

- **Participation** (*10% of grade*). Including: attendance of all classes having done adequate preparation, and participation in discussions.
- **In-class presentation** (*10% of grade*). Beginning in the second week of class, students will take turns giving presentations. Here is the format that presentations should take:
 - Presentations should be 15-20 minutes long. We will not interrupt.
 - Presentations should not summarize/recap a whole paper (or anything close to it). Instead, your presentation should be aimed at spurring critical discussion of one or more of the assigned readings for that week, on the assumption that everyone has already read them.
 - Begin by recapping only (but, ideally, all) the aspects of the paper that are strictly necessary for setting up the points you want to raise.
 - Then, raise one to three points for discussion. These could be any of the following (not an exhaustive list):
 - An interpretative question about the author's view
 - A question about how two parts of the author's view relate to one another
 - A question or suggestion about how two different readings relate to one another
 - A (potential) criticism of the author's view
 - An identification of an assumption underlying the author's view, and a question about whether this assumption is plausible
 - 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)

- **Please use a handout for your presentation.** Please email me the file by 12 noon on the day of class, and also bring copies of the handout with you.
- Because the class is heavily enrolled, a few weeks will contain two presentations.
- I'll send a link to a sign-up sheet following our first class meeting.
- **Reading responses** (*10% of grade per response*). You will take turns writing short reading responses (~750 words each) on that day's reading. Each student will write three reading responses over the course of the semester. The reading responses should highlight and explain an aspect of that day's reading that you found interesting, and critically respond to it. Soon after the start of the semester, I will distribute a schedule for the responses. Reading responses are due at 11:59pm on the day before class via email.
- **Term paper** (*50% of grade*). You will write a term paper for the class. This paper will be on a topic of your choice. Since this is an extended piece of writing, we'll follow a multi-step process:
 - Initial meeting to discuss ideas. *To be completed by Wednesday, 4/2 at the latest.* I will meet with each of you one-on-one to discuss your ideas for a possible topic for your paper. Please come to the meeting having thought carefully about what you might like to write about. (Though this is the only required meeting, you're welcome to meet with me again at any point later on.)
 - NB: if you want to write on a topic that we're covering at the end of the semester but haven't reached yet by the date of our meeting, that is possible. If there's a forthcoming topic that catches your eye, have a look at the readings for it before our meeting.
 - One paragraph paper proposal. *Due Sunday, 4/6, 11:59pm.* You will write up a proposal for the topic of your paper, explaining the issue(s) you plan to discuss and (if you know) what you (tentatively) plan to argue. The proposal should be clear, should propose a well-defined, manageable and tractable topic, and should be clearly related to the themes of the class. I will write back to you either approving the proposal as it is or asking you to make modifications.
 - Full draft. *Due Friday, 4/18, 11:59pm.* You will write a full, complete draft of the paper. I will send you detailed comments on your draft by Sunday, 4/27 (this is the main set of comments you will receive from me on your paper).
 - Final submission. *Due Sunday 5/4, 11:59pm.* Finally, you will have an opportunity to revise the paper in light of my comments, before submitting the final version. I will send you your grade with some briefer comments by the end of that week.

Note: provided that you complete the first three steps of the paper-writing process in full and by the due dates specified above, your grade for your paper will be determined solely by the fourth step, i.e., the final submission. Thus, the other stages of the process represent a risk-free way to try out your ideas and to get feedback on them before making the final submission.

Reduced writing option. Those taking the class in reduced writing format (as distinct from *auditing*, which is different) will still be required to do a presentation and reading responses, but no final paper. To pass the class, you also need to attend regularly just like any other student, and to show evidence that you have been doing and thinking about the reading (e.g. via participation in class discussions). If you're taking the class reduced writing, you must notify me by the end of the second week of classes.

Honor code. As should go without saying in a class at this level, UNC’s honor code, available at honor.unc.edu, applies to all course assignments. Per department policy, any use of generative AI on a course assignment is prohibited, and counts as a violation of the Honor Code. Also, remember that you are not permitted to submit a final paper that substantially overlaps in content with a paper submitted for another class. Consult with me if in any doubt about how this requirement applies.

Accessibility, Equity & Resources.

- I am committed to making class fully accessible, and to providing accommodations for those who need them. If I can do anything to help make class more accessible to you, please let me know, or have [UNC Accessibility Resources & Service \(ARS\)](#) contact me on your behalf.
- I am also committed to making the class an inclusive and safe space for everyone irrespective of gender identity, race, ethnicity, social class, sexual orientation, religion, national origin, or other individual or group identity. Please let me know if I can do anything to improve; I appreciate suggestions.
- As I know from personal experience, mental health challenges during graduate school (among many other contexts) are very common. If you experience such challenges, I strongly urge you to seek help through UNC’s [Counseling and Psychological Services](#). Though I am of course not a professional, I am also more than happy to talk, offer support, and make necessary accommodations; please don’t hesitate to reach out.
- I am a Safe Zone Ally, trained and certified by the university LGBTQ center. I am available to meet during office hours or by appointment to offer support.

Readings (TENTATIVE – subject to change)

All readings will be made available on Canvas.

Note: within individual weeks, I have listed readings in the order in which I recommend reading them such that they make the most sense. The Canvas folders for each week list them in alphabetical order; I don’t recommend reading them in this order.

Part One: Expertise and Deference

Week 1 (January 14th) – Deference to Experts: Total Evidence vs. Preemption

- Jennifer Lackey, “Experts and Peer Disagreement”
- Thomas Grundmann, “Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition”

Week 2 (January 21st) – The Problem of Identifying Experts

- Alvin Goldman, “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?”
- Elizabeth Anderson, “Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Expertise”
- C. Thi Nguyen, “Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers: Problems for Epistemic Dependence on Experts”

Week 3 (January 28th) – Further Problems: Values, Trespassing

- Heather Douglas, “The Role of Values in Expert Reasoning”
- Nathan Ballantyne, “Epistemic Trespassing”
- [Optional: Alex Worsnip, “Covert Normative Judgments in Expert Testimony”]

Part 2: The Epistemology of (Mis)information

Week 4 (February 4th) – Conspiracy Theories

- David Coady, *What to Believe Now*, ch. 5
- M. Giulia Napolitano, “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation”

Week 5 (February 11th) – Fake News

- Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”
- Michel Croce & Tommaso Piazza, “Consuming Fake News: Can We Do Any Better?”
- Joshua Habgood-Coote, “Stop Talking About Fake News!”

Week 6 (February 18th) – Echo Chambers

- Jennifer Lackey, “Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology”
- Meredith Sheeks, “The Myth of the Good Epistemic Bubble”
- [Optional: C. Thi Ngyuen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”]

Part 3: Disagreement, Polarization, and Partisanship

Week 7 (February 25th) – Applied Epistemology of Disagreement

- David Christensen, “Disagreement and Public Controversy”

Week 8 (March 4th) – Polarization

- Thomas Kelly, “Disagreement, Dogmatism, and Belief Polarization”
- Emily McWilliams, “Evidentialism and Belief Polarization”
- Kevin Dorst, “Rational Polarization” (Abridged, Informal Version)

[No class March 11 – Spring Break]

Week 9 (March 18th) – Partisanship I: Ideological Sorting

- Hrishikesh Joshi, “What are the Chances You’re Right About Everything? An Epistemic Challenge for Modern Partisanship”

Week 10 (March 25th) – Partisanship II: Deference to Co-Partisans (revisited)

- Neil Levy, *Bad Beliefs*, ch. 3
- Elise Woodard, “What’s Wrong with Partisan Deference?”

Part 4: Biased and Prejudiced Beliefs

Week 11 (April 1st) – From Partisanship to Motivated Reasoning

- Daniel Williams, “The Case for Partisan Motivated Reasoning”
- Daniel Greco, “Climate Change and Cultural Cognition”

Week 12 (April 8th) – Epistemological Consequences of Motivated Reasoning

- J. Adam Carter & Robin McKenna, “Skepticism Motivated: On the Skeptical Import of Motivated Reasoning”
- Alex Worsnip, “Suspiciously Convenient Beliefs and the Pathologies of (Epistemological) Ideal Theory”

Week 13 (April 15th) – Racial Generalizations and Moral Encroachment

- Renee Jorgensen Bolinger, “The Rational Impermissibility of Accepting (Some) Racial Generalizations
- Rima Basu, “Radical Moral Encroachment: The Moral Stakes of Racist Beliefs”
- [Optional: Sarah Moss, “Moral Encroachment”]

Week 14 (April 22nd) – Bad Ideology and Epistemic Internalism vs. Externalism

- Amia Srinivasan, “Radical Externalism”
- Zoe Johnson King, “Radical Internalism”