

# Philosophy 210: Epistemology

Whitman College – Fall 2004

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Mon & Wed 2:00 – 4:00

## Course Description

The word ‘**philosophy**’ derives from Greek words meaning ‘**love of wisdom**’. So philosophy attempts to determine some of the deepest truths about our existence and the reality around us. What distinguishes philosophy is not just the issues that it addresses, since some of these are also addressed by other fields (like science and religion). What is distinctive about philosophy is the way in which it attempts to answer those questions: through **reason**. Philosophers attempt to justify their views with arguments, laying out the strongest reasons in favor of their positions and responding to the strongest objections against them.

**Epistemology** is the branch of philosophy that examines the nature of knowledge and justification. We will consider questions such as:

- What is knowledge?
- How is knowledge different from mere opinion?
- Can we really know anything at all?
- What should we believe?
- How can our beliefs be justified?

We will also consider how these kinds of epistemological questions relate to questions in other areas of philosophy, such as metaphysics (what is the ultimate nature of reality?), philosophy of mind (what is the nature of the self?), and philosophy of language (what is the nature of truth and meaning?), and how all of these different branches of philosophy relate to scientific inquiry.

While epistemology has occupied philosophers for millennia, in this class we will focus primarily on current approaches and theories. This means that we will be examining some difficult and complicated texts in contemporary philosophy. Nonetheless, this course is meant as an introduction to philosophy, and does not assume any prior background (though students with more experience with philosophy should also find it rewarding). We will take the time to make sure that at least the main ideas are clear and accessible to everyone.

## Goals of the Course

1. To explore some of the primary questions and issues of epistemology.
2. To gain an understanding of some of the main contemporary approaches to those issues.
3. To develop an appreciation of the relations between epistemology and other areas of philosophy, and between philosophy and science
4. To enhance the abilities to read, think, discuss, and write clearly in a philosophical way.
5. To sharpen general interpretive and analytical skills.

## Class Format

Our class meetings will primarily focus on discussion of the readings and the larger issues related to them. As much as possible, you will have a chance to apply and evaluate the ideas that the texts present, and to develop alternatives.

However, because of the nature of the material, I will sometimes need to take time to explain certain issues or aspects of an author’s view, or to present important background or related ideas. Also, I will often take a few minutes at the end of class to set up the next reading and give you any needed pointers.

## Texts to be Used

A good dictionary. (You can't understand the readings if you don't know what the words mean!)

René Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy, trans. Donald Cress, 3<sup>rd</sup> edn. (Hackett, 1993).

John Pollock & Joseph Cruz, Contemporary Theories of Knowledge, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

Ernest Sosa & Jaegwon Kim, eds., Epistemology: An Anthology (Blackwell, 2000).

In addition, there are several readings on reserve at Penrose Library.

## High-Tech

- I will often distribute important announcements, reminders, and clarifications through e-mail. It is your responsibility to *check your account every day*.
- There is also an e-mail list-server set up for the class, which you should feel free to use. Messages sent to phil210a\_04fa@whitman.edu will be forwarded to everyone in the class.
- This syllabus and a variety of other useful and/or entertaining stuff can be found through the class website: <http://people.whitman.edu/~clearfms/epist.htm>

## Summary of Requirements and Grading

### Attendance and Participation

You are expected to be an active and productive participant in our meetings. To do this, you must carefully read (and often re-read) the assigned texts before class, and come to our meetings with questions, issues, and ideas to discuss.

The issues and material that we will be examining this semester are quite challenging, and our meetings will surely help you to gain a better understanding of them. Students who are habitually unprepared or absent (either physically or mentally) typically hand in poor work; there will be no additional penalty. On the other hand, if you demonstrate a particularly good grasp of the issues and material in our meetings, your final grade may be *raised* to reflect that.

### Papers — 2/3 of your total grade

During the course of the semester, you will write three moderate-length essays (about 5 pages each). These essays will allow you to explore the issues at some depth, and to apply and evaluate the ideas that the texts present. More detailed assignments will be available at least a week before each paper is due.

### Final Examination — 1/3 of your total grade

There will be a comprehensive take-home final examination, which you will be able to complete at your convenience during exam week. The exam questions will give you an opportunity to demonstrate that you have understood, synthesized, and reflected on the issues and views that we've examined throughout the semester. More details will be provided toward the end of the semester.

## Academic Honesty

**All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own.** Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways to prepare yourself for the papers and the exam. So it is **permitted** (and even recommended!) for you to: consult additional readings, search for material on the internet, discuss your ideas with other students, exchange notes with other students, and read and discuss drafts of each other's papers. If you do use someone else's words or specific ideas in your written work, you *must* provide a proper citation to the source.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course**, and may face more severe penalties from the College. (For more details, see the Student Handbook.)

## Tentative Schedule of Topics & Assignments

PC = Pollock & Cruz's Contemporary Theories of Knowledge

SK = Sosa & Kim's Epistemology: An Anthology

Wed. Sep. 1	introduction to the course	
Fri. Sep. 3	PC ch. 1, secs. 1-4 Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" SK pp. 58-59	
Mon. Sep. 6	Descartes, <u>Meditations</u> I	
Wed. Sep. 8	PC ch. 1, sec. 5	
Fri. Sep. 10	<b>1. Foundationalism</b> Descartes, <u>Meditations</u> II-IV	
Mon. Sep. 13	PC ch. 2, secs. 1-3	
Wed. Sep. 15	Chisholm, "The Myth of the Given," SK pp. 107-119	
Fri. Sep. 17	Chisholm (cont.)	
Mon. Sep. 20	PC ch. 2, sec. 5	
Wed. Sep. 22	BonJour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" SK pp. 261-273 ** skip sec. III **	
Fri. Sep. 24	BonJour (cont.)	
Mon. Sep. 27	<b>2. Coherentism</b> PC ch. 3, secs. 1-4	<i>first paper due</i>
** 6:30	"Vanilla Sky" ( <i>location TBA</i> )	
Wed. Sep. 29	discuss "Vanilla Sky"	
Fri. Oct. 1	Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," SK pp. 154-163	
Mon. Oct. 4	Davidson (cont.)	
Wed. Oct. 6	Haack, "Foundherentist Theory of Empirical Justification," SK pp. 226-236	
Fri. Oct. 8	Haack (cont.)	
Mon. Oct. 11	<b>NO CLASS – FALL BREAK</b>	
Wed. Oct. 13	<b>3. Externalism</b> PC ch. 4, sec. 1	
Fri. Oct. 15	Goldman, "What Is Justified Belief?" SK pp. 340-353 **skip sec. III**	<i>second paper due</i>
Mon. Oct. 18	PC ch. 4, sec. 4 Lehrer, "Externalism and Epistemology Naturalized," SK pp. 387-400	
** 6:30	"Memento" ( <i>location TBA</i> )	

Wed. Oct. 20	discuss "Memento"	
Fri. Oct. 22	PC ch. 4, sec. 5 Plantinga, "Warrant: A First Approximation," SK pp. 445-456	
Mon. Oct. 25	Plantinga (cont.)	
Wed. Oct. 27	<b>4. Social Epistemology</b> Brandom, "Knowledge and the Social Articulation of the Space of Reasons," SK pp. 424-432	
Fri. Oct. 29	Brandom (cont.)	
Mon. Nov. 1	Foley, "Egoism in Epistemology," on reserve	
Wed. Nov. 3	Hardwig, "The Role of Trust in Knowledge," on reserve and available on-line through the class website ( <a href="http://people.whitman.edu/~clearfms/epist.htm">http://people.whitman.edu/~clearfms/epist.htm</a> )	
Fri. Nov. 5	Orwell, <u>1984</u> , pp. 62-69 & 202-208, on reserve	
Mon. Nov. 8	<b>5. Epistemology and Science</b> Quine, "Epistemology Naturalized," SK pp. 292-300	
Wed. Nov. 10	Quine (cont.)	
Fri. Nov. 12	** class led by Prof. Joe Cruz (Williams College) **	
Mon. Nov. 15	Kim, "What Is 'Naturalized Epistemology'?" SK pp. 301-313	<i>third paper due</i>
Wed. Nov. 17	PC ch. 6, sec. 4	
Fri. Nov. 19	PC ch. 6, sec. 4 (cont.)	
<b>THANKSGIVING BREAK</b>		
Mon. Nov. 29	<b>6. Challenges</b> Stich, "Reflective Equilibrium, Analytic Epistemology, and the Problem of Cognitive Diversity," SK pp. 571-583	
Wed. Dec. 1	Stich (cont.)	
Fri. Dec. 3	Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," on reserve	
Mon. Dec. 6	Code (cont.)	
Wed. Dec. 8	Unger, "An Argument for Skepticism," SK pp. 42-52	
Fri. Dec. 10	semester wrap-up	