

# PHL\*\*\*\*: Introduction to Epistemology

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**Office hours:** \*\*\*\*\*

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**Classroom:** \*\*\*\*

**Class time:** \*\*\*\*

**Section times:** \*\*\*\*

**Course Website:** \*\*\*\*

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

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This course introduces students to some of the central questions and debates in epistemology from both historical and contemporary perspectives. We begin with two influential historical sources that will help frame and motivate some of the other questions studied in the course. First, we'll read Plato's *Meno*, a dialogue that asks us to consider how learning is even possible, and what the value of knowledge is. Second, we'll read Descartes' *Meditations*, which asks us to confront skeptical questions like the following: how can you be certain of anything given that you can't rule out the possibility that you're sleeping? We'll then spend some time on questions about the nature of knowledge, including: Is knowledge definable in terms of other notions like belief, causation, or reliability? Is it 'all in the head' (as *internalists* claim) or is it partly determined by how the world is (as *externalists* hold)? Do we acquire it by building up from some privileged set of mental states (as *foundationalists* claim) or instead by putting together a well-connected web of beliefs (as *coherentists* hold)? Does the fact that you know depend on the context you find yourself in (as *contextualists* claim) or is there a single property unaffected by context (as *invariantists* hold)? In the last part of the course we'll test the differing answers to these questions by considering some more specific topics, including debates about the nature of testimonial knowledge (can you acquire knowledge just on the basis of someone's say-so?), questions about the relationship between epistemology and justice (is withholding trust sometimes unjust, and are there some unjust forms of (collective) forgetting that are particularly unjust?), religious belief (is religious faith rational?), and conspiracy theories (are conspiracy theorists epistemically irrational?).

## INTENDED AUDIENCE AND PREREQUISITES

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This is an introductory course, and no previous acquaintance with philosophy will be assumed. It aims to introduce students to central questions in epistemology, and to give them tools to pursue the questions studied in the course in more depth by themselves. The amount of reading is left intentionally low, to give students the opportunity to practice slow, careful, and critical reading. In addition, some sections of the course will be devoted to train students in basic critical vocabulary for the analysis of arguments, and give them tools to write critical papers in a clear, precise, and organized manner.

## ASSIGNMENTS AND GRADING

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Assignment	Final grade %
3 short response-papers on readings (pass/fail)	15% (5% each)
First paper (3-page critical summary)	15%
Second paper (5-page critical essay)	20%
Third paper (7-page critical essay)	30%
Attendance and participation (including activities)	20%

*Late penalty:* 3% of the assignment grade will be deducted for each day of lateness. Extensions for health-related reasons may be provided at the instructor's discretion, and should be requested as early as possible.

## TEXTS

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Although copies of Plato's *Meno*, and of Descartes's *Meditations* can be found online, students are encouraged to purchase a copy of each text. The rest of the readings will be available through the course's website: \*\*\*.

## READINGS

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### Week 1: Introduction and Meno 1

1.1 Begin reading Plato's *Meno*.

### *Puzzles and Skepticism*

### Week 2: Meno 2

2.1. Finish Plato's *Meno*.

### Week 3: Scepticism 1

3.1. René Descartes, *Meditations* 1 and 2.

### Week 4: Scepticism 2

4.1. G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World".  
4.2. Hilary Putnam, "Brains in a Vat".

### *The nature of knowledge*

### Week 5: Gettier Problems and Causal Theories

5.1 Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?".  
5.2 Linda Zagzevski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems".  
5.3 Alvin Goldman, "A Causal Theory of Knowing".

### Week 6: Modal Theories

*\*First papers due.*

6.1. Robert Nozick, selections from *Philosophical Explorations*.  
6.2. Alvin Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge" (selections).

**Week 7: Foundationalism vs. Coherentism**

7.1. James Van Cleve, "Foundationalism, Epistemic Principles, and the Cartesian Circle".

7.2. Ernest Sosa, "The Raft and the Pyramid".

**Week 8: Internalism vs. Externalism**

8.1. Laurence Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge".

8.2. Alvin Goldman, "Internalism Exposed".

**Week 9: Contextualism**

9.1. Gail Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure".

9.4. Keith DeRose "Solving the Skeptical Problem".

***Applications***

**Week 10: Testimony and Trust 1**

*\*Second papers due.*

10.1. David Hume, "On Miracles".

10.2. C.A.J. Coady, "Testimony and Observation".

**Week 11: Testimony and Trust 2**

11.1. Elizabeth Fricker, "Against Gullibility".

11.2. Jennifer Lackey, "Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission".

**Week 12: Knowledge and Justice**

12.1. Miranda Fricker, "Rational Authority and Social Power: Towards a Truly Social Epistemology".

12.2. Charles Mills, "White Ignorance".

**Week 13: Religious belief**

13.1. W.K. Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief".

13.2. Alvin Plantinga, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?".

13.3. G.E.M. Anscombe, "Faith".

**Week 14: Conspiracy theories**

*\*Third papers due on \*\*\*\*\*.*

14.1 Brian L. Keely, "Of Conspiracy Theories".

14.2. Lee Basham, "Malevolent Global Conspiracies".

