

Problems of Knowledge and Reality (PHI 113A)

Wake Forest University, Spring 2021;
Mon/Wed; 9:30- 10:45am,
Synchronous Online

Professor: Jonathan Dixon (aka Prof. or Dr. Dixon)

Office Hours: By appointment.

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Course Description:

This course concerns various challenges to our knowledge of reality. There are four units in this course and each of them pursue a different way of challenging our knowledge of the world. 1. What is knowledge and can we acquire it? 2. Do we have knowledge of the external world? 3. Does science give us knowledge of the world? And, 4. Is rational disagreement possible? The aim of this class is to promote student's overall critical thinking skills by having them grapple with some of the deepest philosophical questions/issues regarding our (supposed) knowledge or reality.

Materials:

There are no required textbooks for the course. All material will be posted in the form of PDFs in Canvas.

Grading:

1. Attendance/Participation = 10%
2. Reading Questions (5 – each worth 6%) = 30%
3. Short papers (2 – each worth 20%) = 40%
4. Exams (2 – each worth 20%) = 40%

Note: The percentages above add up to 120%. This is because you can drop either your lowest short paper or drop your lowest exam grade from your final grade percentage.

Attendance and Participation: Attendance and participation on class days is an important aspect of your grade and of the course. I will take attendance every day.

Students learn better when they ask questions and actively participate, and everyone enjoys the class more when there is discussion. Though quality is better than quantity, speak up if you have a question to ask or a comment to add! You must appear at any point for any amount of time during any live class meeting a minimum number of 8 times out of the 16-week semester. One's grade on this portion of the course will be determined largely by whether and how many times one attended and participated in a live class meeting over the course of the term.

Reading Questions: For nearly every assigned reading for this course, I will provide some reading questions (maximum 6 questions per reading) that are designed to help students who are new to philosophy better comprehend our course readings and, consequently, help promote better class

Percentage	Letter Grade
93-100	A
90-92	A-
87-89	B+
83-86	B
80-82	B-
77-79	C+
73-76	C
70-72	C-
67-69	D+
63-66	D
60-62	D-
59 and below	F

discussions. Specifically, these questions are designed to help students focus on what is important in the assigned readings for understand an author’s central argument(s).

Each reading question assignment will determine the number of the reading questions that students should complete per assignment for full-credit (up to 6). In total, you are required to complete at least 5 of these reading question assignments throughout the course. However, you must complete at least 1 of these assignments per Unit of this class, i.e., you cannot do all of these reading question assignments back-to-back, they must be spread out through the semester. However, students may submit as many reading question assignments, throughout each Unit of this course, as they want to earn the grades they desire on these assignments. Reading question assignments are due any time before the start of class on that day that we cover the article for which the reading questions correspond. Late reading assignments will not be accepted.

It is the student’s responsibility to keep track of the number and frequency of reading question assignments that they complete. **No resources outside of material for the course** may be used for your answers to the reading assignments. Quote class texts sparingly, but if you do quote be sure to always give page number citations. An example of a good reading question assignment will be provided on Canvas.

These assignments will be grades on a 6-point scale.

Grade	Evaluation
6	Thoroughly addresses all the required reading questions, clearly written, correct understanding and well-reasoned explanation of the reading and its purpose. Demonstrates a great understanding of the material.
5	Almost thoroughly addresses all the required reading questions, clearly written, correct understanding and good understanding of the reading and its purpose. Demonstrates a good understanding of the material.
4	Addresses only some of the required reading questions or more explanation is needed, less clearly written, correct understanding of the reading and its purpose. Demonstrates an adequate understanding of the material
3	Does not address all the required reading questions, not clearly written throughout, misunderstanding of details of the reading. Demonstrates an inadequate understanding of the material.
2	Does not address many of the required reading questions, many spelling or grammatical errors that make reading the paper difficult, misunderstands the reading. Demonstrates little understanding of the material.
1 - 0	Does not address most if any of the required reading questions, many spelling or grammatical errors that make reading the paper difficult, basic misunderstandings prevalent. Or not turned in on time to Turnitin.com.

Short papers: Two 3–4-page papers will be assigned. Papers must be typed (Times New Roman, 12-point font, double spaced, with 1” margins on all sides). Topics will be given at least a week before the papers are due and a discussion of how to write a philosophy paper will be given. Any paper received after the day it is due will be reduced by TWO letter grades for each day that it is overdue. Thus, if an A quality paper is due on Monday but received any time on Tuesday, it will

be marked a B+. All short papers should be turned in to Turnitin.com via Canvas on the day that it is due before class starts.

Exams: Each exam will consist only of True/False, Multiple Choice and Short Answer Questions. Books and notes may NOT be used during either exam. In cases of illness, university sponsored club or athletic events out of town, or genuine emergencies, you may make a request, prior to the regularly scheduled exam, for a makeup exam. Requests received during or after the exam time will not usually be considered. Both exams will be “in class” – i.e. student’s will come to class online as they normally would and take the test “in person” with their *cameras on* for the duration of the class. Student’s will have the entire class period to take them exams.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this course students should be able to:

- Identify and analyze arguments for and against philosophical views;
- Construct original philosophical arguments;
- Identify implicit assumptions and defend/criticize them;
- Identify problems and counterexamples to philosophical theories;
- Understand basic philosophical arguments and positions regarding topics covered

Honor Code

In this course, you will be held to the standards of the Wake Forest Honor Code, a code that you pledged to honor when you signed your application for admission to the institution. If you are unfamiliar with the details of this code and how it is administered, you should consult the [Honor System Handbook](#). This handbook outlines the University’s expectations for the integrity of your academic work, the procedures for resolving alleged violations of those expectations, and the rights and responsibilities of students and faculty members throughout the process.

I will not tolerate any type of plagiarism in this course (including patchwriting), and I reserve the right to use Turnitin.com to check your writing. All in-class exams are independent and closed-book, and all sources in your papers must be cited fully. Any case of suspected (intentional or unintentional) plagiarism will be submitted to the University Honor Court.

Accommodations

Wake Forest University provides reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities. If you are in need of an accommodation, you are encouraged to contact me privately as early in the term as possible. Retroactive accommodations will not be provided. Students requiring accommodations must also consult the Learning Assistance Center & Disability Services (118 Reynolda Hall, 336-758-5929, lac.wfu.edu).

Metal Health

Students experiencing psychological/emotional distress may avail themselves of support through the University Counseling Center Monday-Friday, 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM in Reynolda 117 (336.758.5273 or counselingcenter.wfu.edu). Crisis support is also available after-hours by calling

336.758.5273 and pressing 1 to speak to a crisis counselor. Support outside of the University Counseling Center may also include the Chaplain's Office (336.758.5210 or chaplain.wfu.edu) and the Student Health Service (336.758.5218 or shs.wfu.edu).

Title IX Information

Wake Forest is committed to fostering a safe, productive learning environment. University policies prohibit gender discrimination, sexual assault, sexual harassment, dating violence, and stalking. We understand that sexual misconduct can undermine students' academic success. We encourage students who have experienced some form of sexual misconduct to talk to someone about their experience, so they can get the support they need. The University Safe Office provides confidential support and assistance with academic accommodation requests via a 24-hour crisis line (336-758-5285). You may find information about the Safe Office on the [website](#). Alleged sexual misconduct can be reported to the Title IX Office (a non-confidential resource) by emailing titleixcoordinator@wfu.edu or calling 336-758-7258. The Student Sexual Misconduct Policy may be reviewed by visiting the Title IX [website](#). Alleged criminal conduct may also be reported to law enforcement by calling University Police at 336-758-5911 or by submitting a [silent witness report](#).

Recording of Class Sessions. All or some in-person and synchronous classes may be recorded. Student images and voices may be captured in these recordings. Recordings will be available for viewing only by students enrolled in the class via Canvas or an alternative platform. The recordings are not available for download. *No other recording, including by students, is permitted.*

Recording Tails in our Synchronous Classes. Synchronous class recordings may include events that happen before class officially begins or after it officially ends. Students should take care to not discuss any confidential matters during these periods of time.

Access to Recordings. Students may access the class recordings made available to them solely for the purpose of participating in the course. The recordings may not be used by any person other than a student enrolled in the course or for any purpose other than to participate in the course. Students are prohibited from downloading or distributing any portion of the recordings for any purpose. Students should understand that technical problems or human error may prevent successful recording.

Copyright Notice. Students are advised that Wake Forest University faculty members hold the copyright in their course materials. The University and the faculty have legal rights in class recordings.

The Office of the Dean of the College expects the following COVID-19 statement to be on Fall 2020 syllabi for any classes taught in person (face to face or blended): Each of us shares responsibility for the health and safety of all in a learning space. Maintaining a consistent six feet of distance; wearing a face covering; limiting our gathering sizes; and isolating or quarantining when ill or exposed to someone with the virus are Wake Forest University directives and policies we all must follow. Students are encouraged to visit the Our Way Forward website

(ourwayforward.wfu.edu) to stay informed about the latest guidance and review the [Public Health Emergency Addendum to the Student Code of Conduct](#).

Specifically, in this room, we will mitigate the risks of virus transfer and take care of our community by abiding by the following safety directives:

- maintain six feet of distance at all times when feasible.
- wear a face covering for the entirety of class. This face covering should cover your mouth and your nose. A face shield without a face covering is not an acceptable substitute for a face covering.
- stay out of class when sick or after being exposed to someone who is sick.

In this class, any student who does not follow these requirements will be asked once to follow the safety directives. I will offer you a mask or ask you to find one. If you do not comply, I will ask you to leave the class for that day. I will also refer the matter to the COVID-19 compliance reporting system. Possible disciplinary actions may follow as described in the Wake Forest University Undergraduate Student Conduct Code Public Health Emergency Addendum.

Reading Schedule

All course readings and reading question assignments (and short papers) should be completed and turned into Turnitin.com via Canvas before you come to class on that date.

Week 1: Introduction

Wed, Jan 27: [First Day of class postponed till Feb 1st]

UNIT 1: What is Knowledge and Can We Acquire It?

Week 2: Introduction; Defining Knowledge and Intro to the Paradox of Inquiry

Mon, Feb 1: Introduction & Syllabus, No reading.

Wed, Feb 3: Plato – *Meno* Dialogue (First half, pp 58-71)

Week 3: Plato’s Solution and Aristotle’s Solution to the Paradox of Inquiry

Mon, Feb 8: Plato – *Meno* Dialogue (second half, pp.72 - end)

Wed, Feb 10: Bronstein – “Meno’s Paradox in the *Posterior Analytics*” (only read the parts marked in the margins), & Aristotle – Selections from the *Posterior Analytics*

Week 4: Classic Definition of Knowledge and Gettier Cases

Mon, Feb 15: Chisholm – “The Problem of the Criterion”

Wed, Feb 17: Plato – Selections from *Theaetetus*; &, Gettier - “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?” [Study Guide for First Exam Given]

Week 5: Exam Week

Mon, Feb 22: [Review for First Exam]

Wed, Feb 24: [**First Exam**] – “In Class”

UNIT 2: Do We Have Knowledge of the External World?

Week 6: The Problem of the External World and Defending our knowledge of the External World – Part 1

Mon, Mar 1: Descartes – *Meditations on First Philosophy* - Meditation 1 and 2
Wed, Mar 3: Vogel – “Cartesian Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation”

Week 7: Defending our Knowledge of the External World – Part 2

Mon, Mar 8: Chalmers – “The Matrix as Metaphysics”

Wed, Mar 10: Moore – “Proof of the External World”; Moore – “Certainty”

Week 8: Defending our Knowledge of the External World – Part 3

Mon, Mar 15: Rinard – “Reasoning One’s Way Out of Skepticism” [Paper Topics Given]

Wed, Mar 17: No reading - [How to write a Philosophy paper]

UNIT 3: Does Science Give Us Knowledge of the World?

Week 9: The Problem of Induction

Mon, Mar 22: Hume – “Induction”; Salmon – Selections from *The Problem of Induction* (pp. 429-432) [**First Paper Due**]

Wed, Mar 24: Salmon – Selections from *The Problem of Induction* (pp. 433-466)

Week 10: The Pessimistic Meta-Induction

Mon, Mar 29: Laudan - “A Confutation of Convergent Realism”

Wed, Mar 31: Lewis – “Why the Pessimistic Induction is a Fallacy”

Week 11: Break

Mon, Apr 5: - **Class Cancelled**

Wed, Apr 7 – **No Class**

Week 12: Underdetermination of Scientific Theories by Data

Mon, Apr 12: Turnbull – “Underdetermination in Science: What is it and why we should care”
[Paper Topics Given]

Wed, Apr 14: Kukla – “Does Every Theory Have Empirically Equivalent Rivals?”

UNIT 4: Is Rational Disagreement Possible?

Week 13: Intro Problem of Disagreements and Defending Conciliationism or

Mon, Apr 19: Feldman – “Epistemological Puzzles about Disagreement” [**Second Paper Due**]

Wed, Apr 21: Elga – “How to Disagree About How to Disagree”

Week 14: Defending Steadfast Views of Disagreement and Intermediate Views on Disagreement

Mon, Apr 26: Kelly – “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”

Wed, Apr 28: Lackey - “What Should We Do When We Disagree?”

Week 15: Questioning Intermediate Views on Disagreement

Mon, May 3: Vavova – “Confidence, Evidence, and Disagreement”

Wed, May 5: [Review for Final Exam]

[**Final Exam – Friday May 14th – 9am**] – “In class”