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# PHIL 240: Introduction to Epistemology (Knowledge & Reality I)

**Lectures:** Tuesday, Thursday, 9:30–11, Spring 2018  
BUCH A103

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## Overview:

This is an introduction to *epistemology*—the branch of philosophy having to do with questions about knowledge and justified belief. PHIL 240 and PHIL 340 together comprise an introduction to the philosophical study of knowledge (epistemology, 240) and reality (metaphysics, 340). No prior philosophical experience will be assumed.

## Course Texts:

The required text for this course is Jennifer Nagel's *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. We will read most of this book; all students should purchase it. It is only \$11.95 at the UBC bookstore. Two additional optional texts at the bookstore are Elizabeth Fricker's *Epistemic Injustice* and David Coady's *What to Believe Now*. We will read selections from both books near the end of the term; they will be available online, but some students may prefer to buy the books themselves. Other required readings will be made available online via Connect.

## Topics (list subject to change):

- Distinguishing *epistemology* from *metaphysics*—the difference between what is *true* and what is *known* or *justifiably believed*. We'll consider how the idea of *objective truth* is consistent with a kind of *epistemic modesty*, and how we should respond to worries about our abilities to get at the facts.
- Can we know anything if we might be wrong about it? Mightn't we be wrong about pretty much anything? Does this mean we can't know much of anything at all? Worse, does it mean we can't have any justified beliefs at all? How can we identify firm epistemic foundations?
- Sometimes it's natural to say we 'know' lots of things. (Do you know in what year you were born?) Other times it's natural to say we 'know' very little. (Do you know whether you're the victim of an elaborate deception?)

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Contextualism is the idea that the language we use to talk about knowledge—in particular, the word ‘knows’—is *context-sensitive*; it shifts about in distinctive ways. We’ll articulate and consider this linguistic idea, considering arguments for and against it, and consider its epistemic implications.

- Can we know things that go beyond what we’ve seen for ourselves? How can we generalize beyond our experiences? We will distinguish *psychological* questions about belief from *normative epistemic* ones. We’ll also connect epistemic questions to practical, moral, and political ones, and work on getting clear on *circular reasoning* and why (and when?) it is bad.
- How much (if anything) can we learn from *pure thought*, as opposed to our experience of the external world? Can we use logic and other forms of ‘pure reason’ to rebut skepticism and come to substantive conclusions? We’ll consider this question in general terms, and focus specifically on Descartes’s attempt to justify perception by proving the existence of God.
- Must we always be able to tell whether our beliefs are justified *from the inside*? Can we make sense of the idea that one might know, or justifiably believe, even though one doesn’t know that one does? This week we’ll examine an influential *externalist* approach to justification and consider its implications.
- To be ignorant of something is to not know it. But should it be explained as a *mere* lack, or should we think of ignorance as a state or a force of its own—one that might reinforce and perpetuate itself? How do broader social factors like race and ideology impact our receptivity to facts?
- Whether we know or not, or whether to believe or not, are *binary* questions about belief. But there are also important epistemic questions in situations where all-or-nothing belief isn’t the issue; how should we reason about *uncertain* things, for example, when dealing with probabilities? We’ll examine a powerful mathematical tool for reasoning with uncertainty, and make note of widespread probabilistic errors.
- What is the relationship between *believing* something and having a certain *level of confidence* in it? How do credences and probabilities connect to beliefs and knowledge?
- Much of what we know, we do not know first-hand; we rely on others via their *testimony*. How (if at all) can testimony give us knowledge? Is testimonial justification *reducible* to non-testimonial justification, or are there distinctively testimonial ways to have justified beliefs or knowledge? How, epistemically speaking, should we identify and react to experts on particular subject matters?
- In responding to testimony, we make an assessment of speakers’ credibility: is this someone whose word we should be accepting? The ‘pure’ epistemic questions—whether we make these assessments correctly or incorrectly, or rationally or irrationally—interact in a complex way with moral and social questions about how we respond to members of different demographic groups. For example, many people (whether conscious of it or not) take the

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testimony of men, or of white people, more seriously than that of women or people of colour. This section considers the relationship between these moral and epistemic issues.

- This week we continue with Fricker, considering a second form of epistemic injustice. Hermeneutical injustice has to do with epistemic challenges faced by and about people with marginalized perspectives, owing to a lack in our social epistemic resources.
- What is a conspiracy theory? Intuitively, there is something irresponsible about accepting conspiracy theories. Is there good reason to reject conspiracy theories as such?

**Expectations:**

High academic standards are expected at UBC in general and in this course in particular. Students are expected to attend all lectures, and to read all the relevant readings. (Some students will find they get the most out of reading if they read before the corresponding lecture; others will get the most value out of letting the lecture introduce the material, then reading afterward. Doing both is highly encouraged!)

**Assessment:**

Details TBD. There will be at least one short-answer exam, and a number of written assignments. The exam will assess superficial comprehension of the course material; written assignments will develop philosophical analysis skills. There will be an in-class participation component as well. All grading details are TBD as of now (June 2017); students can email me for an updated syllabus later in the summer or fall.