

Epistemology

COURSE AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Course: PL3501F Epistemology
Semester: Fall 2009
Time: T 530 - 830
Place: HC-W18
Prerequisites: PL2500*
Antirequisites: none*

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*See below the policy on prerequisites.

†Subject to change, depending on the needs and interests of students.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that studies systematically the evaluative dimensions of cognition, the metaphysical basis of those evaluative dimensions, and the terms and expressions used to attribute them, where cognition includes those mental properties, states, activities, and processes involved in the attempt to accurately represent the way things are. Epistemologists study the nature and scope of knowledge, understanding, reasonable or rational belief, evidence, and intellectual performances, achievement, credit, praise, and blame. Increasingly nowadays epistemologists study the language we use to attribute epistemic properties.

This semester we'll focus on the following topics: the definition of knowledge, the Gettier problem, the regress problem, skepticism, closure, contextualism, epistemic norms for assertion, and virtue epistemology.

COURSE GOALS

There are five main goals of this course. The first three goals pertain to the specific content of the course; achieving them means that you have gained some valuable knowledge about an important area of human inquiry. The last two pertain to your development as a thinker more generally; achieving them means that you have exercised and strengthened valuable intellectual skills. By the end of this course you should:

1. Be familiar with a number of influential views on our main topics.
2. Understand how philosophers have argued for and against these views.
3. Cultivate a critical perspective on those arguments and views.
4. Hone your critical skills through the extraction and assessment of philosophical arguments.
5. Avail yourself of the opportunity to improve at formulating and communicating sophisticated ideas and arguments.

REQUIRED TEXTS

1. Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* (Blackwell, 2005). ISBN: 1405107391 [cited in the schedule as 'SS']

RECOMMENDED TEXTS

1. Jim Pryor, “[Guidelines on Reading Philosophy](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html),” <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
2. Jim Pryor, “[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html),” <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
3. Michael Huemer, “[A Guide to Writing](http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm),” <http://spot.colorado.edu/~huemer/writing.htm>
4. William Strunk, Jr., *The Elements of Style*, <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>

EVALUATION

You owe me two papers and a presentation. Each paper should be about 2000 words. They are due **October 17** and **either December 5 or 12** (depending on when you’re assigned to present), respectively. One of the papers will be based on the presentation. Late papers will be penalized **five points per day** for the first three days, after which point they will **no longer be accepted** – *no exceptions*. Note: any paper turned in after the *original* deadline might not receive comments.

1. *Paper*: Your job in the paper is to:
 - articulate a thesis, then
 - defend it with an explicit, clear, intelligent argument, whose conclusion is your thesis, then
 - state clearly and directly the motivation for each premise of your argument, then
 - raise what you consider to be the most powerful objection (or two) to your argument, and finally
 - persuasively respond to that objection (or two).

Follow that format. English usage will matter **greatly** in the evaluation of your paper. Grammatical mistakes will count heavily against a paper. Grammar counts. Clarity counts. Spelling counts. Diction counts. Focused paragraphs count. Topic sentences count.

I *won’t* assign paper topics. It’s completely your responsibility to come up with a topic. Here are some restrictions:

- The topic must derive from our course readings and class discussion.
- Your paper must engage directly with our course readings.
- Do not write on any topic or philosopher’s views we don’t cover.
- Your paper must deal with substantive philosophical issues; it must not be autobiographical or largely about the social or historical context of ideas.

Papers that offer arguments for a philosophical claim tend to be better than papers that merely try to defend some interpretation of a passage or text. (Notice I said ‘merely’. That’s because sometimes you can do exegesis *by* doing substantive philosophy, which is definitely acceptable.)

Compose your work in a standard 12-point font with 1.5-inch margins all around (please don’t use narrower margins). Save your work in native MS Word format (.doc) or Rich Text Format (.rtf). Name the file after the pattern <PL3501_lastname_firstname_paper_#>, where you replace ‘#’ with ‘1’ for the first paper, and ‘2’ for the second. (If I were to submit my first paper, the filename would be ‘PL3501_Turri_John_paper_1’.) Then visit the WebCT/OWL site for this course and upload your paper through the appropriate **turnitin**.-

com link found there ('Paper 1' for paper 1, 'Paper 2' for paper 2). Finally, attach it to an email with the subject heading 'PL 3501 Paper 1 [or 2]' and send it to me (at the email address at the top of this syllabus). I'll provide feedback electronically.

Notice that I built redundancy into the submission process. It is very rare that you are unable to upload a paper through WebCT/OWL to turnitin.com. It is very rare that you cannot successfully email an attachment to me. The probability that you are unable to both is extremely, extremely low. So **be forewarned** that the burden of proof will be very, very high to convince me that your paper was late because you couldn't transmit it to me.

2. **Presentation+paper:** You must complete all the following steps to earn credit for the assignment. Failure to complete **any** step will result in a **ZERO** for the assignment.

First, at least two days prior to your presentation, submit to me by email a detailed outline or rough draft of your presentation (hereafter 'presentation text'). The presentation should last ten to fifteen minutes, so plan accordingly. Save your work in MS Word format (.doc) or Rich Text Format (.rtf) and name the file after this pattern <PL3501_lastname_firstname_presentation>. (If I were to turn in a presentation to myself, the filename would be 'PL3501_Turri_John_presentation'.) Attach your file to an email with the subject heading 'PL 3501 presentation', and send it to me. Prudence suggests that you retain a record of the email exchange. Compose your work in a standard 12-point font, with 1.5 inch margins all around; don't include a title page; number the pages. You complete this part of the assignment if and only if you email me your presentation text at least two days before your assigned presentation time.

Second, you will deliver your presentation to the class at the assigned time and receive helpful feedback. We will listen carefully and sympathetically, and try to help you improve your paper by respectfully asking questions or making friendly suggestions. Your presentation will be a low-tech affair: handouts are fine, but no Powerpoint, slides, or other multimedia displays allowed. (I impose this restriction to encourage you to master the content, which is challenging enough, rather than engage in the sort of showmanship that often accompanies multimedia displays.) You complete this part of the assignment if and only if you deliver your presentation at the assigned time.

Third, in light of the feedback you receive during your presentation, revise your paper, turn it in to turnitin.com, and email a copy to me **within four days** of delivering your presentation. Formatting and submission instructions are explained in the '*Paper*' section above. You complete this part of the assignment if and only if you complete the paper and turn it in as instructed. Your mark for the assignment will be the same as your mark for the paper.

3. **Attendance:** Attendance at all student presentations, for the entire presentation, is mandatory. For each unexcused absence at a presentation, you will lose **five points off your paper's grade**. (Leaving early or showing up late counts as an absence.) Absence from a presentation will be treated exactly the same way as an absence from an exam. Presentation sessions are scheduled for **October 13, December 1 and December 8**.
4. **Preparation:** You must do the assigned reading for the course. I expect you to come to class having read the assigned material and formulated a basic understanding of the main theses and arguments. Come to class ready to answer these questions: What question does the author address? What is the author's thesis? How does the author argue for that thesis? What strengths and weaknesses do you detect in the author's arguments? Lacking an answer to

those questions, you should at least have intelligent questions to ask about aspects of the reading that seem important but are nevertheless puzzling. Don't expect me to discuss or explain the material if you've not properly prepared.

Breakdown: Your grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

Paper: 50%

Presentation+paper: 50%

NOTE: You must complete *all* assignments to pass the course.

PROVISIONAL COURSE SCHEDULE

I'll distribute a more detailed schedule, along with a bibliography of our readings, at our first meeting.

DATES	TOPIC	READINGS
9/15	Introduction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course syllabus • Huron University College Statement on Plagiarism, <http://www.huronuc.ca/pdf/FASSonPlagiarism.pdf> • Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy"
10/13	Student presentations	
10/17		Paper 1 due
12/1	Student presentations	
12/5		Paper 2 due for students who presented on 12/1
12/8	Student presentations	
12/12		Paper 2 due for everyone else

GENERAL POLICIES

1. *Plagiarism*

A student's assignments must be in his or her own words. Every time a student makes use of another person's words or ideas, the student must acknowledge his or her intellectual debt through the appropriate use of quotation marks and citations. Failure to do so constitutes plagiarism, a major academic offense. Simply put, plagiarism is passing off another person's work as your own. Students are required to read the Huron University College Statement on Plagiarism (<http://www.huronuc.ca/pdf/FASSonPlagiarism.pdf>). If you still have questions about plagiarism, consult your instructor, Department Chair, or Dean, and the style manuals available at the Reference Desk of the Huron University Library.

You may be required to submit any written work for analysis by commercial plagiarism-detection software. For example, I may require you to submit it to turnitin.com. (Alternat-

ively, I may submit it myself, after you've turned it in.) All work thus submitted will be included as a source document in the reference database for detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted. A licensing agreement, currently between UWO and turnitin.com, governs use of this service. Computer-marked multiple-choice tests or exams may be subject to submission for similarity review by software that detects unusual coincidences in answer patterns that may indicate cheating.

The default penalty for plagiarism is ***failure in the course***. The more advanced the course or student's standing, the more entrenched that default status becomes. It is virtually infeasible for more advanced students.

2. Scholastic Offenses

Read this: <http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholoff.pdf>.

3. Academic accommodation

When you request academic accommodation on medical grounds, your request will be granted ONLY IF you provide documentation indicating that the condition's onset, duration and severity made it unreasonable to expect you to fulfill your academic responsibilities. When you request accommodation on non-emergency non-medical grounds, you are *strongly advised* to do so *well in advance* of the relevant date.

You will be allowed to make up an examination *only if* you missed it either because of medical reasons, because of compassionate grounds involving close family, or other substantial non-medical reasons. (In the special case of final examinations, examination conflicts also warrant accommodation.) In any case, you must provide written documentation. Documentary guidelines and instructions for document submission can be found here: http://www.huronuc.ca/faculty_arts_social_science/academic_counselling/.

Huron students required to provide documentation must submit it directly to the Academic Services Center in the West Wing; non-Huron students must submit it directly to their home Dean. The appropriate authorities and I will then confer. I will try to accommodate you when scheduling a makeup exam, but you will ultimately be expected to retake the exam at the time and place I indicate.

Late assignments *will not be accepted* unless circumstances are extraordinary and you provide an excuse acceptable to me. I will find an excuse acceptable only if you present it to me *privately during my office hours*. Do not discuss such matters with me in front of other students. I may at my discretion require you to provide documentation or refer you to the academic counselor. If I require you to provide documentation for a late assignment, then if you are a Huron student, you must submit it directly to the Academic Services Center in the West Wing; if you are a non-Huron student, you must submit it directly to your home Dean. The appropriate authorities and I will then confer.

The following excuses will not suffice for missing a deadline: 'I overslept', 'I have a lot of work due in other classes around this time', 'I didn't read that in the syllabus', 'I didn't think that was a strict requirement', 'I didn't hear that announcement in class', 'I didn't see that announcement on WebCT/OWL', etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive; many other excuses will similarly fail to suffice.

What I say here about 'late assignments' applies to *all deadlines* for the course, whether specifically tied to an assignment or not.

4. Attendance

Except where explicitly noted, my default procedure is to not officially take attendance. Nev-

ertheless failure to attend class regularly will *significantly* reduce your chances of performing well in the course. I *will not* recapitulate by email points made in lecture or class discussion. I will make important announcements in class, which absent students will miss (obviously); ignorance of such announcements *will not* excuse you from completing any course requirements on time. I am not obliged to upload anything to WebCT or send electronic copies of anything. Treat class meetings as your only opportunity to receive handouts, assignments, etc. from me.

5. Reading

You are required to do the assigned reading for this course (obviously). I strongly advise you to read each assigned reading at least twice prior to class, and again once after classroom discussion. I reserve the right to administer surprise quizzes (and adjust the marking scheme accordingly) if students appear to not be doing the reading. Each such quiz will be worth between one and five percent of the final grade. Barring exceptional circumstances (which, if they occur, I will inform you of), I will administer no more than three surprise quizzes in a term.

Come to class having carefully read the assigned material, and ready to answer these questions: What question does the author address? What is the author's thesis? How does the author argue for that thesis? What strengths and weaknesses do you detect in the author's arguments? Lacking an answer to those questions, you should at least have intelligent questions to ask about aspects of the reading that seem important but are nevertheless puzzling.

6. Grading review

Although rare, serious grading mistakes sometimes occur. If you wish to discuss a mark with me, you must first, within a week of receiving your mark, provide to me a detailed and specific written account of your concerns. I *will not* discuss marking disputes in person unless I have first read your written account and judged there to be a prima facie plausible case that something is amiss. Note well: upon review, your mark may be raised *or lowered* as the case merits. Barring special circumstances I will not review a mark later than two weeks after I *first* attempt to return the assignment (which implies, for example, that if you're continually absent when I attempt to hand back marked assignments, you will forfeit your opportunity to request a review).

When inquiring about a mark, remember that the following statements are irrelevant to an assignment's merits: 'I'm applying to competitive programs, and this mark will hurt my chances', 'A mark like this will prevent me from graduating with honors', 'I will not graduate if I earn marks like this in the course', 'I am on academic probation, and marks like this will prevent me from continuing my studies here', 'I have never gotten a mark like this before', 'I showed you a draft of this and you did not tell me it would earn a mark like this', 'When you looked at a draft of this you did not make this criticism', etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive; many other considerations are similarly irrelevant. Some considerations may be irrelevant to an assignment's merits, though not absolutely irrelevant.

7. Drafts

Students sometimes ask me to provide feedback on drafts. I am often willing to do so, and the feedback almost invariably leads to improvement. However, some students labor under false assumptions about this process. Sometimes students assume that my providing feedback assures a high mark, or a satisfactory mark, or at least a passing mark. But that as-

sumption is not true. Sometimes students assume that if I do not criticize something in a draft, then I am tacitly approving of it and thus will not, or may not properly, criticize it in the final, graded draft. But that assumption also is not true. Some students assume that their merely passing along a draft will earn them a higher mark. But that assumption is also not true.

A bit of advice: if I point out some error in a draft you've asked me to review, take special care to ensure that the error does not reappear in the final draft. If such errors reappear, the final draft will be marked more harshly.

8. Usage

English usage will matter greatly in the evaluation of all written work. Grammatical mistakes will count heavily against an assignment. Grammar counts. Clarity counts. Spelling counts. Diction counts. Focused paragraphs count. Topic sentences count.

9. Communication

Students are required to check regularly their campus email accounts, as well as the WebCT/OWL site for this course. Important announcements about readings and assignments may be made via those media. Ignorance of such announcements will not excuse you from handing in any assignment on time. By far the best (and preferred) way to contact me is at the email address listed at the beginning of this syllabus. Do not leave me a voicemail, as I check my messages rarely and sporadically.

10. Email

I usually respond to email queries within a couple days. But remember: email is *emphatically not* a substitute for attending class or coming to office hours. I have no obligation to respond to emails that ask questions along the following lines: 'What did I miss in class today?', 'I missed the lecture on X—could you tell me what that was about?', 'I've forgotten about Y—could you remind me of the details?', etc. This list is illustrative, not exhaustive.

A bit of advice: ungrammatical—which would include unpunctuated—emails tend to give a bad impression, even if they do not count towards your grade.

11. Office hours

I encourage you to visit during office hours. If you are puzzled by some material we have covered, it is best to come with a well-defined question already formulated. If you missed a class, visiting office hours is the appropriate way to catch up on missed material. NOTE: DO NOT COME TO MY OFFICE WHILE YOU ARE ILL. Doing so is worse than rude, and I will not take kindly to it.

12. Counseling and support services

Huron philosophy students needing counseling about their program of study or related matters should contact Dr. David Conter. For other academic matters relating to counseling, community-based learning, career development, writing services, cross-cultural services, or international opportunities, visit the Academic Services Center in Huron's West Wing. Also see http://www.huronuc.on.ca/faculty_arts_social_science/academic_counselling/.

13. Letters of recommendation

I will write a letter of recommendation for a student *only if* she or he has taken *at least two courses* from me. I may make special exceptions for first- or second-year students, so ask me.

14. Recording devices

Lectures may be recorded *only if* permission is given *in advance*. Lectures are intellectual

property, and unauthorized use of them constitutes theft.

15. Technological devices

Students may not use technological devices (e.g., laptops, PDAs, cell phones, etc.) in the classroom for *anything* not *directly* related to the content and purpose of current classroom discussion or activity. Using such devices for any other purpose disrupts and distracts student and professor alike, and inhibits effective instruction and learning. No electronic devices are allowed during examinations, quizzes or like assessment.

16. Extra credit

There will be no extra credit assignments, so make your regular work count.

17. Internet sources

For all assigned work in this course, you may *not* cite *any* Internet resources, except for (a) those explicitly assigned, (b) those I explicitly grant special permission for *in advance* (a typical example might be a relevant journal article or book available electronically through the library), and (c) the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. (Note that this excludes Wikipedia.)

18. Students with disabilities

Accommodations for students with disabilities are typically arranged through student services. But you should feel free to approach me with any concerns you might have.

19. Late adds

Students joining this course late are responsible for completing *all* the assigned work due prior to their joining. I will not track them down to ensure they complete the work: it is entirely their responsibility.

20. Official syllabus

The official course syllabus is distributed in hard copy on the first day of class and posted on the WebCT/OWL site for this course. Any syllabus posted elsewhere (including on Huron's philosophy department website or on my personal website) is *unofficial* and students *should not* rely on it. The official takes precedence over the unofficial in *all* cases (which is why you should rely on the official).

21. Prerequisites (and antirequisites)

Senate regulations state that you are responsible for ensuring that you meet all course prerequisites. (The same applies to so-called "antirequisites," which are really just prerequisites to have *not* taken certain courses.) If you have neither met all the prerequisites nor received special written permission from your Dean to enroll, then you may be removed from the course and it will be deleted from your record. In the event that you are dropped for this reason, then the decision may not be appealed, and you will receive no adjustment to your fees. No information about prerequisites (or antirequisites) contained in this syllabus is guaranteed to be accurate; you rely on it entirely at your own risk; check the academic calendar for the latest information.