

Epistemology

Philosophy, Politics, and Economics Program

Instructor: Dr. Chris Ranalli

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Course overview

This course is an introduction to epistemology which provides you with an extensive overview of contemporary debates in epistemology as well many of the applied dimensions of epistemology.

We will first learn about the core concepts of epistemology that are used in many debates, such as knowledge, truth, justification, and evidence, and some of the controversies surrounding these concepts. We will then move on to topics in epistemology, where various core concepts are applied and new concepts are introduced. The topics we will be exploring include: the value of knowledge and truth, skepticism, cognitive bias, conspiracy theory, testimony, epistemic injustice, ideology, standpoints and situated knowledge, disagreement, platforming and harmful belief, filter bubbles and echo chambers, epistemology of democracy, and epistocracy.

This course is an active learning course which involves a high-level of participation. You have lots of opportunities for self-evaluation and critical self- and peer-reflection. The overarching goal is that this will facilitate an *authentic learning experience*.

Doing Philosophy

In addition to learning about philosophy—and in this course, epistemology—you are expected to do philosophy. One of the aims of this course is that you cultivate critical skills and habits, and develop your own educated philosophical judgments. ‘Philosophy’ denotes not only an area of study but an intellectual activity, a way of understanding and approaching both abstract and tangible ‘real world’ problems. As such, you will not only learn about the problems we will discuss in this course but also critically engage with these problems (by explaining key ideas in your own words, challenging your own presuppositions and beliefs, formulating your own educated arguments and objections), thereby situating your own thoughts in an ongoing conversation in contemporary philosophy and public life.

Key information

Course code	W_JSM_210
Period	4
Credits	6.0
Language	English
Instructor	Dr. Chris Ranalli
Teaching	Lectures (2x per week) and Seminars (2x per week) with the seminar tutor. I will prepare seminar activities for the tutor to administer and facilitate.
Level	200
Location	HG-04A37 Wollstonecraft
Time	Lecture: Tues. 9:00 a.m. – 10:45 a.m. Lecture: Thur. 5:30 p.m. – 7:15 p.m. Seminar: Wed. 6:30 p.m. – 8:15 p.m. Seminar: Fri. 1:30 p.m. – 3:15 p.m.
Program	This course is part of the Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE) – Bachelor program at the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Texts

Please read the required readings before the relevant lecture. All of the readings will be made available in the *Required Readings* folder on Canvas. We will also use the following textbook to supplement the readings:

Textbook. Pritchard, Duncan (2018) *What is this thing called Knowledge?* (4th edition), Routledge.

Assessment Overview

This course is assessed in three specific assignments. The major assignment is an on-going assignment, the **Reflection Journal**, the final assessment of which counts as the final exam portion of the course (as required by the program). But it is not really an exam at all. Instead, it is portfolio which represents your total contribution to the course activities as well as your self-assessment.

Module	Assignments	Grade %
Module 1	- Completed Reflection Journal (Module 1 only) - Progress Interview	20%
Module 2	- Defend a Position Essay - Peer Review reflection activity	20%
Module 3	- Group Presentation - Group Presentation reflection activity	20%
Final	- Completed Reflection Journal (Modules 2-3) - Final Interview	40%

You will also do two other graded assignments: the **defend a position paper**, including the peer-review activity, in module 2, and a short **group project** in module 3, where you will briefly present an epistemology-oriented social problem to the class (15 mins per group: 10 min presentation, 5 minute Q&A). Once you are finished with each of these assignments, there will be Reflection Activities based on them that will go into your Reflection Journal. You can find them in the Reflection Activities folder. Please see the Reflection Journal Info sheet on Canvas for more details about doing the activities. A large portion of the course grading is done by critical self-evaluations and our dialogue on how well you are doing to meet the course goals (which you'll learn about in class, through the reflection journal, and through our interviews).

Course goals

The goals of this course are:

- To enable you to **self-reflect** on your relevant work and progress in epistemology, gauging your interests, strengths, and weaknesses (*Reflection activities; Tutorial activities*).
- To **apply** concepts, arguments, and theories from epistemology to real-world cases (*Tutorial activities; Group Project*).
- You will be able to **conceptualize** and **frame** debates in philosophy and public life using the resources of epistemology (*Group Project; tutorial activities*).
- You will learn **how to formulate, present, and defend** your own arguments and educated judgments in epistemology (*Defend a Position Essay; Peer-review activity; group discussion in tutorials*).
- You will be able to **read, interpret and critically respond** to a peer's educated judgment about your position and the arguments for your position (*Peer Review activity; Self-reflection activities*).
- To help instill certain **intellectual habits**, such as a willingness to consider seriously positions you might disagree with; to think carefully, clearly and patiently; and to be willing to engage critically with your own views as well as the views of your peers and others (*Reflection journal; course as a whole*).

The pedagogy of this course aligns with the PPE program's didactic vision:

We encourage students to connect PPE theory to practical, real-world problems, and to understand the political and social mechanisms, within which solutions to these problems can be developed and enacted. To facilitate these moves between all disciplines as well as between theory and practice, the PPE Bachelor's programme employs an active learning model that actively engages students using a wide range of pedagogical tools and didactic methods, including case studies, group discussion and projects, and community immersion.

By the end of the course, my hope is that you will have learned the following about philosophy generally:

- Philosophy can give you useful skills and it can be personally enriching.
- Philosophy is diverse.
- You have an intellectual impulse that is worth engaging and taking seriously.
- There are arguments in philosophy which adequately support their conclusions and those that do not. Many answers have been given to major questions in philosophy. You will be able to critically assess many of the answers given in epistemology as well as your own by way of careful and charitable argument.

Prerequisites

Year one PPE (Foundations) as well as university level writing and research skills. Although no prior knowledge of logic or critical thinking will be assumed, it is recommended that students familiarize themselves with basic formal logic (e.g. propositional logic and some first-order logic) and critical thinking during the course.

Helpful background information

Magnus and Ichikawa (2018) [forallx Introduction to Formal Logic](#), chapters 1-3.

[Fundamentals: Introduction to Critical Thinking | Wireless Philosophy](#)

Course modules

Module 1 Foundations of Epistemology	Topics	Key questions
Feb 4 th	Truth & Justification	What is truth? What is justified belief? What is their relationship to inquiry?
Feb 6 th	Knowledge & Skill	What is the relationship between knowledge, skill, and action?
Feb 11 th	Value of Knowledge	Why (if at all) is knowledge and truth valuable?
Feb 13 th	Radical Skepticism	What can we know? Can we know reality? How does radical skepticism relate to other types of skepticism?
Assignments: Feb 14 th 11:59 p.m.	1. Reflection journal 2. Progress interview	Submit your reflection journal up to class 4 and schedule a one-on-one review session with me, where we will discuss your work and your self-evaluation

Module 2 Social Epistemology	Topics	Key questions
Feb 18 th	Testimony	How does testimony justify? Testimonial injustice: Can refusal to take testimony be disrespectful or unjust?
Feb 20 th	Ideology	When is something unjust epistemically? How does

		ideology constrain our thinking?
Feb 25 th	Standpoint epistemology	How is knowledge related to situatedness? Does it yield greater accuracy or better evidence?
Feb 27 th	Disagreement	Do peer disagreements make belief unreasonable? How should we respond to deep disagreement?
Assignments: Feb 28 th 13.30 (before the tutorial) and peer review during the tutorial (13.30 - 15.15)	1. Defend a position paper 2. Peer-review activity	Defend a position with an argument and against an educated objection. Constructively review a peer's essay.

Module 3 Political Epistemology	Topic	Key questions
March 3 rd	Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles	What are echo chambers and information bubbles? (How) are they epistemically harmful?
March 5 th	No-platforming and harmful beliefs	Should any belief be allowed a platform for public inquiry and debate? What is the relationship (if any) between immoral and false belief; are immoral belief irrational?
March 10 th	Epistemic democracy	Is democracy good for knowledge and truth?
March 12 th	Epistocracy	Should only the competent or informed (be allowed to) vote? What determines competence? Is restricted suffrage based on epistemic reasons just?
Assignments: March 13 th 13:30 – 15.15 (Tutorial)	Group presentation (submit your slides on Canvas by 13.30 the same day. Your group evaluation form should be submitted afterwards, no later than Monday 16 th).	What epistemology-oriented challenge in society did you all identify and (i) what is your strategy for dealing with it or (ii) why do you think it arose and how should we understand it properly? Present in class.

Final Interview

<p>Final interview</p> <p>March 27th from 8:30 – 11:45.</p>	<p>What you have to do: Turn in your completed Reflection Journal (modules 2-3). You will then have a one-on-one 15 minute interview with your instructor.</p> <p>How you can prepare: I will have your completed reflection journal with me. (If you have a copy you've made, you can bring that too).</p> <p>If you are sincere and have authentically engaged with the learning activities from the course – e.g., your reflection journal tasks, your tutorial activities, your “defend a position” paper, and your group project – you will be more than ready for the interview.</p> <p>What will we do? We will spend the first half doing philosophy – e.g., thinking about your answers to some key questions in your reflection journal. I will tailor these questions to each student based on my assessment of their progress and completed reflection journal. We will spend the other half discussing your self-evaluation.</p>	<p>What to expect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - I will have reviewed your completed reflection journal already. I will tell you my initial assessment of it in the interview. This is your opportunity to speak to my initial assessment. - We will discuss some of your reflection journal work. This is an opportunity for you to expand on your ideas or arguments from your reflection journal. - We will discuss your self-evaluation. This is an opportunity for you to expand on why you situate yourself in the grade spectrum that you do.
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Detailed Schedule

Week 1	Knowledge, Truth, and Action
Class 1 Feb 4 th	<p>Knowledge & Truth</p> <p>Required readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapters 1 and 3, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. • Jennifer Nagel (2016) Gettier Cases Revisited, blog post on <i>The Brains Blog</i>. • Selections from Dorothy Grover (2013) Truth: Language-World connections, <i>Journal of Philosophy</i>, vol. 87, no. 12: 671-687. <p>Optional extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Selections from Gangesa's <i>Jewel of Reflection on the Truth</i> (trans. S. Phillips).
Class 2 Feb 6 th	<p>Knowledge & Skill</p> <p>Required readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 5 Rationality and Chapter 6 Virtues and Faculties, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. • Ernest Sosa (2015) Confucius on Knowledge, <i>Dao</i> vol. 14, Issue 3: 355-330. • Selections from Confucius The Analects. <p>Optional Extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jennifer Lackey (2009). Knowledge and Credit. <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 142 (1):27 - 42.
Week 2	Value of Knowledge and challenges to knowledge
Class 3 Feb 11 th	<p>Epistemic Value: Why care about knowledge?</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 2 The Value of Knowledge, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. • Linda Zagzebski (2003). The Search for the Source of Epistemic Good. <i>Metaphilosophy</i> 34 (1-2):12-28. <p>Optional Extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Duncan Pritchard (2014). Truth as the Fundamental Epistemic Good', <i>The Ethics of Belief: Individual and Social</i>, (eds.) J. Matheson & R. Vitz, 112-29, Oxford University Press. • Robert Nozick's (1974) The Experience Machine, in <i>Anarchy, State, and Utopia</i>. New York: Basic Books
Class 4 Feb 13 th	<p>Radical challenges to knowledge</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chapter 15 Radical Scepticism, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. • Susanna Rinard (2018). Reasoning One's Way out of Skepticism, <i>Brill Studies in Skepticism</i>. <p>Optional Extras:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quassim Cassam (2019). What are Conspiracy Theories? Robin McKenna (2019). Irrelevant Cultural Influences on Belief, <i>Journal of Applied Philosophy</i>.
Week 3	Testimony, Epistemic Injustice and Ignorance
Lecture 5 Feb 18 th	<p>Epistemology of Testimony</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chapter 8 Testimony and Memory, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. Miranda Fricker (2007) Testimonial Injustice, in <i>Epistemic Injustice: Power and Ethics of Knowing</i>. Oxford University Press. <p>Optional Extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jennifer Lackey (2010). Testimony: acquiring knowledge from others, in Alvin I. Goldman & Dennis Whitcomb (eds.), <i>Social Epistemology: Essential Readings</i>. Oxford University Press.
Lecture 6 Feb 20 th	<p>Epistemic Injustice and Ideology</p> <p>Required Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charles Mills (2017). Ideology, in Kidd, Medina & Pohlhaus (eds.) <i>Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice</i>. Nadja El Kassar (2018). What Ignorance Really Is: Examining the Foundations of Epistemology of Ignorance. <i>Social Epistemology</i>. <p>Optional Extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charles Mills (2007). White Ignorance, in Shannon Sullivan Nancy Tuana (ed.), <i>Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance</i>. State University of New York Press. pp. 11–38. Yoweri K. Museveni (2016). "The Power of Knowledge", <i>Knowledge Cultures: Comparative Western and African Epistemology</i>, Brill Slavoj Žižek: Down with ideology! Sternstunde Philosophie SRF Kultur
Week 4	Standpoints and Disagreement
Lecture 7 Feb 25 th	<p>Standpoint Epistemology</p> <p>Required Readings/Media:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Briana Toole (2019). From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression. <i>Hypatia</i> 34 (4):598-618. Examining Ethics Podcast: Identity Matters <p>Optional extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Natalie Alana Ashton & Robin McKenna (forthcoming). Situating feminist epistemology. <i>Episteme</i>:1-20. Alessandra Tanesini (2012). Feminist epistemology. In Mary Evans & Carolyn Williams (eds.), <i>Gender: The Key Concepts</i>. London, UK: pp. 81-7.
Lecture 8	<p>Epistemology of Disagreement</p> <p>Required Readings:</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Richard Feldman (2007). Reasonable Religious Disagreements, In Louise Antony (ed.), <i>Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life</i>. Oxford University Press. pp. 194-214. Jennifer Lackey (2008). A Justificationist View of Disagreement’s Epistemic Significance, In Alan Millar Adrian Haddock & Duncan Pritchard (eds.), <i>Social Epistemology</i>. Oxford University Press. pp. 145-154. <p>Optional extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Catherine Z Elgin (2010). Persistent Disagreement. In Richard Feldman & Ted A. Warfield (eds.), <i>Disagreement</i>. Oxford University Press. Katherine Dormandy (2019). The Benefits of Disagreement, <i>Open for Debate</i>:
Week 5	Political Epistemology
Lecture 9	<p>Filter bubbles and echo chambers</p> <p>Required Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Chapter 17 Politics, Duncan Pritchard (2018). <i>What is this thing called knowledge?</i> (4th edition). Routledge. C. Thi Nguyen (2018). Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles. <i>Episteme</i>:1-21.
Lecture 10	<p>Platforming and Harmful Belief</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rima Basu (2018). The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs. <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 176:2497–2515 Neil Levy (2019). No-Platforming and Higher-Order Evidence, or Anti-Anti-No-Platforming. <i>Journal of the American Philosophical Association</i> 5 (4):487-502. <p>Optional Extra:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> George Sher (2019). A Wild West of the Mind. <i>Australasian Journal of Philosophy</i>, vol. 97, issue 3, pp.483-496.
Week 6	Epistemic Democracy & Epistocracy
Lecture 11	<p>Epistemic Democracy</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lani Watson (2017). Good Democracy Needs Good Questioning. <i>Open for Debate</i>. Fabienne Peter (2016). The Epistemic Circumstances of Democracy, in the Brady and Fricker (eds.) <i>Epistemic Life of Groups: Essays in the Epistemology of Collectives</i>. Oxford University Press. <p>Optional extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helene E. Landemore (2012). Why the Many Are Smarter than the Few and Why It Matters, <i>Journal of Public Deliberation</i>, vol. 8, issue 1
Lecture 12	<p>Epistocracy</p> <p>Required Readings:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Jason Brennan (2011). The Right to a Competent Electorate, <i>Philosophical Quarterly</i> 61 (245):700-724. Anne Jeffrey (2017). Limited Epistocracy and Political Inclusion, <i>Episteme</i>:1-21.

	<p>Optional extras:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Robert Talisse (forthcoming). The trouble with Hooligans. <i>Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy</i>:1-12.
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Reading and Writing Philosophy Papers

Writing a philosophy paper can be challenging, especially if it is your first time. We will hold a short workshop in the first week on writing and reading philosophy as well as analyzing philosophical arguments (tutorial 1) in order to help you with reading, writing, and understanding philosophy. You can prepare by reading the following helpful articles on writing and reading philosophy:

[A Guide to Philosophy Writing \(Harvard University\)](#).

[A Brief Guide to Writing the Philosophy Paper \(Harvard University\)](#).

If you feel you need additional help or guidance with writing, please don't hesitate to get in contact with me or make an appointment.

There will be an example philosophy essay available on Canvas for you to refer to.

Additional Resources

When reading philosophy, you will probably run into philosophical terminology you've never encountered before. You might also be interested in exploring the ideas or arguments we discuss in the class in more depth on your own. Wikipedia isn't the most accurate place to do this. We recommend that you use the following:

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

[Oxford Bibliographies in Philosophy](#)

[1000-Word Philosophy](#)

Where to find academic papers and books in philosophy:

[Philpapers | Epistemology topic](#)

[Oxford Scholarship Online Philosophy](#)

[Routledge Handbooks Online: Philosophy](#)

[Diversity Reading List: Epistemology](#)

Class Conduct

Our classes are spaces for you to learn as well as to think philosophically and explore the course topics. I encourage you to be open-minded, reflective, critical, and challenging, whilst also being sensitive to the concerns and diversity of other students. Nobody should feel unwelcome, under-valued, uncomfortable or unsafe because of their sex, race, ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliation, age, appearance, or physical or mental ability. When expressing your ideas, please consider their implications and how they might affect your fellow classmates. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or concerns about this.

Respect for Diversity

There will be students with diverse backgrounds and perspectives in this course and it is my goal that all of my students' learning needs are addressed, and that the diversity that you all bring to this class be viewed as an essential asset, strength and benefit to your own learning. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: race, gender identity, socioeconomic status, disability, age, ethnicity, race, religion, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated, so please let me know of any ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for the other students. Some of the material we'll explore in this course could evoke strong emotions, so it's important that we are respectful

of others' emotions and that we are mindful of our own. Please let me know if something said or done in the classroom, by either myself or other students, is particularly troubling or offensive.

Students with disability

VU Amsterdam provides some facilities and support for students with disability. Please see [here](#) for those facilities and information about what kind of support is available. Please notify me of any arrangements you might need regarding the coursework or the classroom environment so that I can best accommodate your learning needs. I am committed to creating a supportive learning environment for all of my students and naturally want everyone to be able to access the course.

Tutorials

The tutorials (or seminars) are places for you to explore the topics from the lectures in greater detail and for you to work through these topics with your peers. As such, it is a chance for you all to do philosophy individually as well as collectively. It's also gives you all the opportunity to ask us more detailed questions or to work over points that weren't fully understood in the classes. For each tutorial, I will have prepared short activities for you that your seminar tutor will disseminate during the tutorial. Make sure to add your tutorial activities to your Reflection Journal when you have finished them.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. Plagiarism not only involves the direct copying of existing texts without attribution, but also occurs when you incorrectly cite or reference a text as well as if you engage in self-plagiarism. Self-plagiarism occurs when students submit work twice in fulfilment of multiple degree requirements. Electronic detection software will be used to detect plagiarism. In submitting a text, the student implicitly consents to the text being entered into the database of the detection program concerned. More information about plagiarism and its consequences can be found in the student handbook.

We will use APA citation conventions in the course:

[APA in-text citation](#)

In-text quotation:

Scanlon argues that your choice is involuntary if you are "unaware of what you are consenting to" (Scanlon 2013, pg. 9).

In-text block quotation (more than 40 words):

According to Rosa Luxemburg, the credit system helps to facilitate crises in a capitalist economy because:

It aggravates the antagonism between the mode of production and the mode of appropriation by separating production from ownership, that is, by transforming the capital employed in production into "social" capital and at the same time transforming a part of the profit, in the form of interest on capital, into a simple title of ownership (Luxemburg 2008[1900], pg. 49).

In-text summarization of ideas:

Utilitarianism doesn't imply that all 'conventionally good' actions are actually morally right, such as saving a person from drowning. In such cases, the actual consequences of the drowning matter: what if you're saving Hitler? (Smart 1938).

[APA bibliography](#)

Book:

Author, A. (Year of Publication). Book Title. Publisher City, State: Publisher.

Academic Journal:

Author, A. (Publication Year). Article title. Journal Title, Volume(Issue), pp.-pp.

Website article:

Author, A. (Year, Month Date of Publication). Article title. Retrieved from URL.

[Here's](#) a guide on APA citation of handouts and lectures from class.

Academic and Examination Regulations

The homepage for the PPE program can be found [here](#).

The PPE program has specific academic and examination regulations which can be found [here](#).

John Stuart Mill College Marking and Resit Policy:

The general guidelines on assessment and resits can be found in the John Stuart Mill College regulatory guidelines. Resits will be offered at two times throughout the year and not within 10 working days of the announcement of the final result for the initial exam.

Resits will include problem sets and exam questions of the same type as the original test. **(In this course, this means redoing the relevant elements of the Reflection Journal)**. The most recent marks will apply for the assessments included in this resit. The student is only allowed to participate in the integrated resit if they have a weighted average grade of at least 4.0 for the course as a whole.

Office Hours

My office is located on the 11th floor, Hoofdgebouw, in the [Department of Philosophy](#). Since access to the department is restricted and we have flexible office spaces, you will normally have to make an appointment with me beforehand. I'll be typically be available in the department Tuesday and Thursday 1:00 – 4:00 p.m. I will normally be available in the department Monday and Wednesday between 1:00 – 5:30 p.m. as well. I'll always stick around for a bit after each lecture in case any of you have questions or comments. You can set up an appointment with me by sending me an email at: c.b.ranalli@vu.nl. Please feel free to contact me. I'm always happy to chat about philosophy, or to answer any questions you might have about the course. 😊