

Epistemology

Period 4, 2023

Instructor

Dr. Chris Ranalli
[Academic website](#)

Email

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Location

VU main building, 4th floor
John Stuart Mill College
Tuesday: Tocqueville room
Thursday: Rawls room

General Information

Description

This course is an introduction to epistemology. It provides a firm foundation in epistemology and focuses on its applied and social-political dimensions, including questions like: Can beliefs wrong others? Is ‘no-platforming’ permissible? How knowledgeable should voters be? Is it irrational to believe conspiracy theories? What, if anything, is wrong with filter-bubbles and echo chambers? Does ideology render beliefs irrational? Are there ‘standpoints’ which give certain groups epistemic advantages?

We will first learn about the core concepts of epistemology that are used in many debates—knowledge, truth, justification, evidence, and some of the controversies surrounding these concepts. We will then explore social-political topics in epistemology, where various core concepts are applied, and new concepts and controversies are introduced.

Expectations and Goals

This course is an active learning course. 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.

- To facilitate **self-reflection** on your work and progress in epistemology (Reflection Journal)
- To **apply** concepts, arguments, and theories from epistemology to real-world cases (Seminar activities and Tiny Ted Talk).
- To **conceptualize** and **frame** debates in public life using the resources of epistemology (Seminar activities; Tiny Ted Talk; Reflection Journal)
- To **formulate, present, and defend** your own arguments and educated judgments in epistemology (Defend a Position Essay).
- To **read, interpret and critically respond** to a peer’s educated judgment about your position and the arguments for your position (Peer Review; Reflection Journal).

- Foster certain **habits or ways of thinking**, 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; Peer Review; Seminar activities).

Course Materials

Texts

Required: Journal articles or videos (links on canvas). Each reading should be completed prior to class.

Optional: *What is this Thing call Knowledge?* Duncan Pritchard, volume 3 (Routledge) Also available on canvas.

Assessment Overview

This course is assessed in three specific assignments: Tiny Ted Talk; Defend a Position paper with Peer Review; the third the completed Reflection Journal, a portfolio of entries which represents your reflection activities and self-evaluation.

	Assignments	Grade %
Weeks 1-6 (ongoing)	(1) TedTalk (Give a short and creative ‘TedTalk’ on a case-study, concept, or argument derived from the course content)	10%
Week 4 (mid-term)	(2) Defend-a-Position Paper (Includes Peer Reflection)	40%
Week 6-7 (final)	(3) Reflection Journal (Including meeting with instructor)	50%

Course Schedule

Class	Topic	Reading	Exercises
1a. Tues. Feb. 7	Truth and Belief: Are we entitled to our opinions?	Goldberg, Sandy (2019). On Being Entitled to One's Opinion. <i>Open for Debate</i> . Sartwell, Crispin (2022) Truth is Real. <i>Aeon Magazine</i> .	Journal exercise 1
1b. Thurs. Feb. 9	Epistemic justification: What makes a belief justified?	Fratantonio, Giada (forthcoming) Evidentialism Internalism and Evidential Externalism. In <i>The Routledge Handbook for The Philosophy of Evidence</i> , (eds.) Maria Lasonen-Aarnio and Clayton Littlejohn. Routledge	

Class	Topic	Reading	Exercises
		Srinivasan, Amia (2020). Radical Externalism. <i>Philosophical Review</i> 129 (3):395-431	
2a. Tues. Feb. 14	Skepticism: are our beliefs ever justified or knowledgeable and does it really matter?	Worsnip, Alex (2021). The Skeptic and the Climate Change Skeptic. In Michael Hannon & Jeroen de Ridder (eds.), <i>The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology</i> . Routledge.	Journal exercise 2
2b. Thurs. Feb. 16	Are conspiracy theory beliefs irrational?	Dentith, M. R. X. (2019). Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence. <i>Synthese</i> 196 (6):2243-2261.	Journal exercise 3
3a. Tues. Feb. 21	Echo chambers: Why are they epistemically problematic?	Nguyen, C. Thi (2020). Echo chambers and Epistemic bubbles. <i>Episteme</i> 17 (2):141-161.	Journal exercise 4
3b. Thurs. Feb. 23	“You just believe that because...” Are we responsible for what we believe?	Vavova, Katia (2018). Irrelevant Influences. <i>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</i> :134-152.	
4a. Tues. Feb 28	Why think for yourself? Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy	Matheson, Jon (2022) Why Think for Yourself? <i>Episteme</i> : 1-19 Fricker, Elizabeth (2006). Testimony and Epistemic Autonomy. In Jennifer Lackey & Ernest Sosa (eds.), <i>The Epistemology of Testimony</i> . Oxford University Press. pp. 225-253.	Journal exercise 5
4b. Thurs. Mar. 2	Epistemic Injustice: How can we be more epistemically just?	Fricker, Miranda (2007). Chapter 1: Testimonial Injustice, in <i>Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing</i> . Oxford University Press.	<u>Peer Review:</u> - Bring “Defend A Position Paper” to class for peer review
5a. Tues. Mar. 7	Can beliefs wrong? Harming others with bad beliefs and Moral encroachment	Basu, Rima (2019). The Wrongs of Racist beliefs. <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 176 (9):2497-2515 Enoch, David & Spectre, Levi (forthcoming). There is No such thing as Doxastic wrongdoing. <i>Philosophical Perspectives</i>	Journal exercise 6

Class	Topic	Reading	Exercises
5b. Thurs. Mar. 9	Disagreement: Can we rationally retain convictions in areas of controversy?	Feldman, Richard (2006). 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.	
6a. Tues. Mar. 14	Standpoint Epistemology: Do socially disadvantaged groups have epistemic advantages?	Toole, Briana (2022). Demarginalizing Standpoint Epistemology. <i>Episteme</i> 19 (1):47-65. Dror, Lidal (2022). Is there an epistemic advantage to being oppressed? <i>Noûs</i> .	Journal exercise 7
6b. Thurs. Mar. 16	Can we transform knowledge? Conceptual engineering and ameliorative goals in epistemology	Mills, Charles W. (2018). Alternative Epistemologies. In <i>Blackness Visible: Essays on Philosophy and Race</i> . Cornell University Press. pp. 21-40. Haslanger, Sally (1999). What knowledge is and what it ought to be: Feminist values and normative epistemology. <i>Philosophical Perspectives</i> 13:459-480.	
End of lectures			Self-evaluation

Assignments Schedule

Date	Subject
Ongoing: (weeks 2-6)	Tiny Ted Talk (Must be uploaded on canvas. Each student should watch or listen)
Thursday 2nd March	Defend-A-Position paper (Includes final version with "Peer Review reflection sheet" attached) Due Thursday; bring to the Friday seminar to do the peer review.
Sunday 19th March	Reflection Journal (Includes all journal entries, the formative evaluation, and your self-evaluation) Individual meetings are to be scheduled between 21 st - 24 th March, in-person. If afterwards on Zoom. A sign-up sheet will be available on canvas. Missing the meeting is the same as a no-show on a final exam.

Information about the 3 Graded Assignments:

(1) Tiny Ted Talk [10%]

The Tiny Ted Talk is a short version of a Ted Talk, where you deep dive into a concept or argument from the class (or something related), or analyze a case-study given what you learned. It should be fun and insightful for you and your classmates. We can't cover everything interesting or important in epistemology in this class. So, this is where you fill-the-gap! The goal is to pick something you genuinely want to know more about—a concept, a premise in an argument, an objection, a related concept only mentioned but not explored, an application or case-study, and so forth. The thought is that, by doing research on your topic, and relaying what you've learned to the class (making it interesting and accessible to them) you'll thereby gain a deeper understanding yourself.

(2) Defend-a-Position [40%]

The 'Defend a Position' paper is one where you focus exclusively on arguing for and defending a controversial thesis in epistemology. It's a short task—no more than 1,200 words. The goal is to argue for a narrow thesis, one defensible in such an essay (e.g., “the pragmatic argument for the value of truth fails because a key premise is false”) and then defend it from one serious objection (e.g., “one might argue that my view is unjustified unless This is because But I reply that”), making use of a very short bibliography. You will then swap your paper with a peer in your class who will then read and evaluate your paper for the quality of the defense, clarity, rigor, etc., and you will do the same for their paper.

(3) Reflection Journal [50%]

The reflection journal is a portfolio that you hand in towards the end of the course. (The first four entries will also be evaluated. I'll give a formative evaluation and we can meet to discuss it, whether in person, Zoom, or through audio feedback). The reflection journal stands-in where a final exam would be. (In turn, there is no final exam). What is the reflection journal for? It's for understanding how what we learn about in epistemology bears on your own thinking, how you apply certain ideas, and it gives you opportunity to be explorative; to extend your knowledge and understanding.

The reflection journal has 7 entries. Each one must be fully completed only by you. In some cases, you can work with others in groups (in the seminar, for example), but the written entries themselves must be done by you, as they reflect your thinking. This is what makes it a 'journal'. It is fundamentally yours and no one else's—it reflects your thinking and your critical self-evaluation.

The reflection journal is not graded in the standard way. There are often no 'correct answers', but rather answers that do better or worse in demonstrating your ability to philosophically engage with the questions seriously. Bullshit answers are easily deciphered. Last minute answers are obviously uninspiring. This comes through in what you write and, where it doesn't come out clearly, in what you say about them to me later in the individual interview. I'll ask you questions about your entries, questions that only the author (you) could know the answers to (and this is why getting someone else (A ghostwriter) or something else (ChatGPT3) to do it for you is a colossal waste of time and effort, not to mention an affront to your own intellect).

Since the reflection is also an exercise in personal, philosophical development vis-à-vis epistemology, the grade is determined primarily by (1) completion; (2) self-evaluation; and in turn (3) demonstrated evidence of journal entries which draw on your knowledge and understanding gained in the course—this is something we thereby broach in the interview. (The interview is not a test. It's a discussion about your entries).

Conduct

Our classes are spaces for you to learn as well as to think philosophically and explore the course topics without feeling personally criticized. 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, social class, sexual orientation, gender, religious affiliation, nationality, 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.

Please come to me with any question you may have pertaining to the course or your experience of it. You can ask me before or after class, and also by email at c.b.ranalli2@vu.nl. You can always let me anonymously as well.

Students that are disabled or neurodivergent

The university provides some facilities and support for students with disability. Please see [here](https://vu.nl/en/student/studying-with-a-disability) (<https://vu.nl/en/student/studying-with-a-disability>).

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.

Plagiarism

Plagiarism of any kind will not be tolerated. This includes not only the direct copying of existing texts without proper attribution, but also the use of AI programs like ChatGPT in the preparation of assignments, unless explicitly instructed by the teacher for research or exercise purposes. Additionally, plagiarism can occur through improper citation and referencing, as well as self-plagiarism, which is when a student submits the same work to fulfill multiple degree requirements. Electronic detection software will be used to detect plagiarism. By submitting a text, the student implies consent for the text to be entered into the database of the detection program. For more information on plagiarism and its consequences, refer to John Stuart Mill College's regulatory guidelines.