Social Epistemology

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Course Description

Many have complained that 20-21st century epistemology in the analytic tradition has fixated on issues that are of little broader relevance. This course focuses on recent attempts to rectify this. These developments fall under the label ‘social epistemology’. We will look at four areas in social epistemology. The first area is the epistemology of testimony. Most of our beliefs are based on what others have told us. Take, for instance, our scientific beliefs. While we consider ourselves aware of developments in modern science, most of us lack the expertise to properly evaluate or even understand much scientific work. In this part of the course we look at questions like: Are we entitled to just believe what we are told by experts? How should we figure out who the experts are? Can groups testify?

The second area is the epistemology of disagreement. Even experts disagree sometimes; for instance, take debates about politics, religion and science. Given the ubiquity of expert disagreement, perhaps we should be less confident in our views about controversial topics than we in fact are. In this part of the course we look at questions like: Should disagreement affect our confidence in general? What about in particular cases, like the case of religious disagreement?

The third area is the epistemology of ignorance. Is ignorance just a ‘lack of knowledge’, or is it at least sometimes wilful and cultivated on behalf of the powerful? What kinds of ignorance are there?

The fourth area is epistemic (as opposed to social and political) oppression. Is epistemic oppression distinct from, or does it reduce to, these other more familiar forms of oppression? Why might arrogance be a form of epistemic oppression? What is the distinctively epistemic harm in being silenced?

Teaching Methods

Each seminar will be based on a text, which will be read in advance. The seminar will begin with a short presentation by a small group of students. If necessary, I will provide some broader
context for our discussion. Otherwise, the remaining time will be used to discuss the substantive philosophical issues raised by the text.

**Assessment**

This course will use four methods of assessment, each of which will count towards the final grade:

1. Participation in a short presentation (max. 15 minutes): 10%.
2. Weekly ‘short answers’: 10%.
3. A short essay (max. 10 pages, with 1.5 spacing): 30%.
4. A longer essay (15-20 pages, with 1.5 spacing): 50%.

The presentation will not be assessed; participation is sufficient to get full marks for this component. You will meet with me before the presentation to discuss any questions and issues you might have. You must provide a (short) handout. I will print copies of your handout if you send it to me at least 24 hours before class. If you don’t do this, you need to print copies yourself. The idea behind the presentations is to provide us with a starting point for class discussion and you with an opportunity to practice your presentation skills in a non-judgemental environment.

Each week you will write a short (max. half a page) answer to one of the questions on the “reading summary” for the text. Please write the question you are answering at the top of the page, and your answer beneath it. You should try to send these to me via e-mail beforehand, but you can also give them to me in class, or send them to me after. If you give me a handwritten version, please make sure your handwriting is legible! These will be assessed, but the only possible marks are ‘pass’ or ‘fail’. I will give a ‘pass’ mark to any serious attempt to answer the question. But please bear in mind that you are supposed to answer one of the questions given. Please also bear in mind that I will notice if you just copy and paste sentences from the reading summaries!

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1 The presentation itself will not be assessed; participation is sufficient to get full marks for this component.
The short essay is due on 19\textsuperscript{th} December. This essay should focus on a \textit{particular text} or \textit{argument} we have discussed in class. You should provide a summary of the text/argument, and then discuss one or two criticisms of it. The aim of this exercise is to improve your \textit{analytical skills} and give you practice in writing philosophy. I will provide extensive and constructive feedback on these essays, with the aim of improving your writing style as well as the content of your essay.

The longer essay is due on 21\textsuperscript{st} February. The longer essay can be based on material from your short essay, but it must develop on that material, incorporating any feedback you received. You are free to write your longer essay on any topic you wish, but I will provide a list of sample questions.

The essays will be marked on the usual scale (“1” to “5”). A good essay (i.e. one that gets a “2”) will give an accurate summary of the relevant material (e.g. a paper, an argument, a view) and contain some focused critical discussion. The difference between a good essay and an excellent essay (i.e. one that gets a “1”) is the quality of the critical discussion. You need to develop your criticisms in detail, and consider lines of response to them.

If you want to write your “Bachelorarbeit” for this course I would be very happy to supervise you. Please speak to me as early as possible. While I am willing to take personal circumstances into account, plan on the date of submission for your bachelor thesis being 28\textsuperscript{th} February.

To pass the course, it is necessary to satisfy all four components (i.e. submit all the work and participate in a presentation) and achieve 50\% or more overall.

\textbf{Late Submission Policy}

I will be relatively relaxed about submissions that are \textbf{less than 24 hours} late. If you have a choice between staying up to submit something after midnight and getting up early to finish a final edit, just go to bed. After 24 hours, the following penalties apply:

- Less than 1 week late: Deduction of one mark (i.e. a “1” becomes a “2”).
- Less than 2 weeks late: Deduction of two marks (i.e. a “1” becomes a “3”).
- Unless there are special circumstances, I will not mark work submitted more than 2 weeks after the deadline.
If you anticipate trouble meeting a deadline, please let me know as soon as possible. If you need an extension on a piece of work and have a valid reason (e.g. illness is a valid reason) please let me know as soon as is possible. I trust you not to take advantage of this; there is no need to go to the hassle of obtaining a doctor’s note.

**Attendance**

Attendance of the seminars is obligatory and I will keep a register. If you know in advance that you will have to miss a seminar, just let me know. So long as it is just a one-off, there is no need to tell me why you need to miss the seminar. If there is a longer-term problem, please get in touch and we can work out a solution. I am aware that some of you will occasionally have clashing commitments. So long as you let me know about this, and are willing to make up work you missed (e.g. submitting ‘short answers’ for the seminars you miss), this is not a problem.

**Plagiarism**

The policy on plagiarism is simple: don’t do it. Always put quotations in quotation marks. Always provide references when you are making points you take from others. As a simple rule of thumb, if you are in doubt about whether to provide a reference, just provide a reference.

Some students are unsure which referencing system to use in their essays. I am happy for you to use any referencing system you want, so long as you find a way to provide the required information.

**Preparing for the Seminar**

Before the seminar you should:

- **Read the text.**
- **Read the accompanying “reading summary”**. While the summaries are written on the assumption you have read the text, you may find them helpful to look at while you read, as I have tried to provide explanations of complicated views or arguments.
- **Write a “short answer”** to one of the questions on the “reading summary” and send it to me.
- **Think about (or even write down) questions you have, or topics you would like to discuss in the seminar.**
Course Schedule
All readings are available on Moodle. I have provided a “reading summary” for each text, which will also be put on Moodle.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Week 1</th>
<th>Introduction</th>
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<td>Optional Reading: Alvin Goldman and Thomas Blanchard, ‘Social Epistemology’.</td>
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**Part 1: The Epistemology of Testimony**

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<td>Week 3</td>
<td>Elizabeth Fricker (2004), ‘Against Gullibility’.</td>
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<td>Week 4</td>
<td>Alvin Goldman (2001), ‘Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?’</td>
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<td>Week 5</td>
<td>Deborah Tollefsen (2007). ‘Group Testimony’.</td>
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**Part 2: The Epistemology of Disagreement**

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<td>Week 7</td>
<td>Joshua Di Paolo and Robert Simpson (forth.). ‘Indoctrination Anxiety and the Etiology of Belief’</td>
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**Part 3: Epistemology of Ignorance**

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<tr>
<td>Week 9</td>
<td>Linda Martín Alcoff (2007), ‘Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types’</td>
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**Part 4: Epistemic Oppression**

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<td>Week 11</td>
<td>Miranda Fricker (1999), ‘Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege’</td>
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<td>Week 12</td>
<td>Kristie Dotson (2014). ‘Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression’.</td>
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**References**


