

Social Epistemology (Philosophy 413)

Fall 2021

Meeting Days, Times, Places:

In-person meetings:

W 7pm-8:20pm

Hardenbergh Hall Room B6

Our other session each week will be asynchronous online.

There will be a module of asynchronous online work each week, which will open up on Monday around noon and close Sunday midnight.

We'll also have an optional synchronous online discussion section, which we'll schedule after our first in-person meeting.

Course Canvas site:

Instructor:

Professor Andy Egan, Department of Philosophy

Office: 106 Somerset St, 5th Floor, Room 522

Email: andyegan@rutgers.edu

Virtual office hours scheduling through Calendly:

<https://calendly.com/andyegan-1/office-hours-virtual>

Technology Requirements:

We'll be using Canvas for basically everything. You should make sure that:

- You've got access to the course Canvas site
- The email that you've got associated with your Canvas account is one you check regularly – that's where important class announcements about assignments, due dates, etc. will go.

We'll be using Perusall for a bunch of our reading assignments. (We'll be accessing it through Canvas, assuming we don't have any IT disasters.) More on this when we meet, and in announcements during term.

Course Description:

One respect in which epistemology – the study of knowledge – is social is that a lot of our knowledge is the result of social processes. So too are a lot of our opinions that fall short of being knowledge, either because they're false or because they're inadequately justified (or because they fail to satisfy whatever that elusive extra condition is). Most obviously, we get a lot – really, really a lot – of our beliefs (and therefore of our knowledge) from *testimony*. Very, very many of our beliefs are formed on the basis of reading things, hearing things, asking people questions about things, doing google searches for things, etc. Some of those beliefs –

hopefully a large proportion of them - count as knowledge. One question we'll look at is: how do people gain knowledge from testimony? How does rational belief formation on the basis of testimony work?

Another respect in which epistemology is social is that a lot of the infrastructure that supports our knowledge is social: Scientific research, for example, is a collective, social endeavor. We'll also look at questions here, about what kinds of social arrangements make for effective production and dissemination of knowledge.

This will lead us to some questions about *epistemic injustice* – different kinds of social arrangements might advantage and disadvantage particular people or groups in distinctively epistemic ways. A person or group might, for example, have their testimonial credibility unjustly discounted, or unjustly inflated.

Finally, we'll look at questions around the nature and origin of political polarization, echo chambers, and the fragmentation of epistemic communities, in which different groups within a society diverge radically in their beliefs in both politically and epistemically troubling ways.

Learning Goals:

My main goals for this class are for you to come out with:

- (a) Some subject-matter knowledge about problems, questions, and arguments that have appeared in philosophical work on social epistemology
- (b) A sense of, and ability to engage with, the distinctive sorts of problems, questions, and phenomena that social epistemology studies, and the ways in which they're relevant to broader social, scientific, and political phenomena.
- (c) More practice, and more developed skills, in engaging carefully and constructively with sophisticated philosophical arguments and positions.

Along the way I think we are going to cover all the bases of the official departmental learning goals for the RU philosophy department:

- (1) develop in students the critical skills necessary for evaluating ideas and arguments
- (2) develop the ability to construct coherent arguments in support of one's views
- (3) develop the ability to present accurately and fairly views that differ from one's own
- (4) develop the ability to write clearly and in an organized manner.

We are going to do a bunch of all of these first four, and you'll get feedback on a bunch of this kind of work.

- (5) To develop a grasp of philosophical issues in a range of intellectual domains
We're going to do this in the domain of social epistemology.

(6) to develop an appreciation of fundamental questions concerning reality, knowledge, and value, and the analytical resources necessary to engage these questions.

We're going to do some of the knowledge part of this.

(7) to develop an understanding of historical and contemporary attempts to answer these questions

More the contemporary side, but a non-zero amount of history too.

(8) to develop a competence in formal reasoning techniques.

We're going to do some formal epistemology and probability, which is for sure formal reasoning and also quite broadly applicable.

(9) to provide a broad-based foundation for graduate study in philosophy and for professional disciplines such as law, medicine, business, and government

We'll do our bit toward this.

Course Requirements & Grading

Weekly reading responses in Perusall: 30%

Short writing assignments during the term: 50%

Final paper: 20%

This semester, things are going to continue to be weird

This is going to be a weird semester. This isn't the way I'm used to teaching, and it's probably not the way you're used to learning. It's also going to be the fourth weird semester in a row, which means both that we're probably all getting more used to it by now, and also that we're all facing some accumulated pandemic fatigue. So we should expect that this semester will be disrupted by the COVID pandemic in its own special, distinctive way.

The fact that it's a weird semester in which we're all working in unfamiliar territory and all likely to be dealing with lives that are complicated in a bunch of ways calls for some distinctive actions from each of us to help make things work as well as possible.

On my end, I've got three commitments that I hereby make to you:

- 1) Flexibility: I will do my best to update my teaching strategies to fit the situation. I've thought a bunch about how to run this course effectively in a hybrid format, and I've tried to build it in a way that'll be successful in that format. But there's no substitute for experience, and for hearing from students about what's working and what's not. So I'm also committed to adjusting and repairing on the fly over the course of the term, as you all let me know what's working well and what could work better.
- 2) Communication: I'm going to really focus on communication this term, because I think it's going to be important. That means both being super clear and timely about my outgoing communications to you about what you're expected to be

doing when, due dates, grading criteria, etc., and also being very open to and available for incoming communications from you about what's clear and what's hard to understand, what's working administratively and pedagogically and what isn't, and about anything that's happening for you that requires particular accommodation.

- 3) Accommodation: Everybody has a lot happening right now, and a lot of us are dealing with difficulties and obstacles that make this an especially hard time to stay on top of our work and get things done as well, and as efficiently, as we'd like. (I, for example, have a couple of nine year olds at home, both of whom have had their own distinctive struggles and needs as their lives and routines have been shaken up by stupid COVID, in ways that impose demands on me that are sometimes challenging to reconcile with the demands of teaching, research, and administration.) I'm committed to doing whatever I can to be accommodating about whatever it is that's happening for you, so that this semester can go as well as can be expected given everything that's going on. So if there's some difficulty, obstacle, etc. that's getting in the way of your engagement with this course, please let me know, and let me know what kind of accommodation would be helpful. I'll do what I can. There are going to be some constraints, because we're working as part of a university that has rules and policies and stuff, but I'll work with you to try and figure out solutions wherever possible.

On your end, I have two requests:

- 1) Communicate. If something about the course is really working for you, let me know about that so I make sure to keep doing that. If something about the course isn't working for you, let me know about that too, so I can look for ways to change things up. If something comes up and you need some accommodation about something, let me know and we'll see what we can do.
- 2) Stay engaged. Do the reading etc. when it's assigned, participate in the discussions, ask questions, come to synchronous office hours/discussions once in a while if that's logistically possible for you. All the stuff I've been reading about education lately suggests that this is super important for having a successful experience with courses generally, and all the more so as the courses move toward being more on line and less in person. So I'm going to try and provide a bunch of structure that promotes regular engagement, and I ask you to do your best to stay engaged regularly during the term.

Attendance:

Short version: This is a hybrid course, which meets in person once a week. But (because pandemic) there's no attendance requirement, and no part of your grade will be determined by attendance.

Longer version with explanation and nuance: Normally, I have an attendance requirement and there's a chunk of everybody's grade that's determined by

constructive participation in in-class discussion. This term I'm not going to do either of those things, because I don't want to push people toward coming to class when it's not a good idea for them to do so. So I'm not going to take attendance, and no part of your grade will be attendance or discussion based. If you feel sick, don't come to class, and take care of yourself: get tested, get treatment, etc. as appropriate.

If you can foresee that you're going to miss the in-person classes a lot, please let me know. You may want to consider finding a totally online course to switch into. But if that's not a good option, contact me and I'll work with you on figuring out ways to make the course work given whatever your constraints are.

That said, my guiding vision for the course is as a hybrid, where we're in person talking through philosophical issues once a week, with a blackboard and stuff. One thing I've learned over the last year and a half is that I'm pretty good at teaching philosophy that way – better than I am at teaching it over zoom and with recorded lectures and stuff. So other things equal, it's a good idea to come to class, because I think that's going to maximize how much you get from the course. But I totally recognize that other things might not be equal in some people's cases, and if that's you, I'm committed to working with you to figure out how to get as much from the course as possible.

Masks:

University boilerplate: In order to protect the health and well-being of all members of the University community, masks must be worn by all persons on campus when in the presence of others (within six feet) and in buildings in non-private enclosed settings (e.g., common workspaces, workstations, meeting rooms, classrooms, etc.). Masks must be worn (and worn properly – covering the nose and mouth) during class meetings; any student not properly wearing a mask will be asked to leave.

My own commentary: For real. You have to wear a mask. So do I. It's going to be super annoying but we're going to do it in order to protect our own and each others' health. I've got kids at home who are too young to be vaccinated and I don't want to bring the most recent exciting COVID mutation back to them. I'm sure others in the class have got relevantly similar situations. If you're not wearing a mask (and wearing it properly) in class I'll remind you. (If I forget, or mine slips out of position or something during class, please remind me too!) People who continue to not wear a mask properly will be asked to leave, and I'll report the incident to Student Conduct. For all of our sakes, I'm not going to mess around about this, and it's not negotiable.

If for whatever reason this isn't tolerable for you, you shouldn't come to class. In that case see the attendance policy above – talk to me and we can work out a way for you to complete the course without attending the in-person meetings.

Academic integrity and plagiarism

Short version: Don't cheat. Don't plagiarize. It cheapens and diminishes everybody's academic experience, and it's a violation of the trust that's important for successful learning and teaching. You're also very likely to be caught, and the penalties can be extremely severe, including suspension or expulsion from the university.

Longer version: The university's policy on Academic Integrity is available at <http://nbacademicintegrity.rutgers.edu/home/academic-integrity-policy/>. I encourage you to familiarize yourself with this document, both for this class and for your other classes and future work.

Judgments about plagiarism and academic integrity can be subtle. If you have any questions, please feel free to ask for guidance from me. (Really! I am very happy to talk about this stuff, and I will be happy that you asked.)

Schedule

Note - This is not written in stone. It's not even written in pen. It's very much subject to revision as we move through the semester and it becomes clear what people are interested in, what's generating a lot of discussion, what needs more explanation and exploration and what doesn't, etc. So there is a less than 1% chance that we'll wind up doing exactly this, in exactly this order.

Week 1:

- In person meeting 9/1: Pascal's wager. (Practical reasons to believe, and social influences on belief)
 - Susanna Rinard wiphi: Pascal's Wager
- Remote component: Problems of traditional epistemology, really really fast.
 - Watch WiPhi epistemology video series
 - (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Epistemology)

Week 2:

- Remote component: Ethics of Belief
 - Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"
 - James, "The Will to Believe"
 - Tom Donaldson wiphi: the will to believe
- In person meeting 9/8: Problems of traditional epistemology
 - Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Epistemology

Week 3:

- Remote component: Ethics of belief
 - Susanna Rinard on practical reasons to believe
- In-person meeting 9/15: Ethics of belief (and status of testimony-based belief)
 - (SEP, "The Ethics of Belief")

Week 4:

- Remote component: Starting in on testimony
 - Miranda Fricker, "Telling and Trusting..."
 - Jennifer Lackey, "Testimony: Acquiring Knowledge from Others"
 - (CAJ Coady, *Testimony: A Philosophical Study*)
- In-person meeting 9/22: Social Epistemology, overview
 - Goldman, intro to social epistemology

Week 5:

- Remote component: Testimony and reliance on experts
 - Hardwig, "Epistemic Dependence"
 - Goldman, "Experts: Which ones should you trust?"
- In person meeting 9/29: Testimony
 - SEP, "Epistemological Problems of Testimony"

Week 6:

- Remote component: Peer disagreement
 - Feldman, "Reasonable Religious Disagreement"
 - Elga, "Reflection and Disagreement"
- In person meeting 10/6: Testimony and Reliance on Experts
 - Guerrero, "Living with Ignorance in a World of Experts"

Week 7:

- Remote component: More peer disagreement
 - Kelly, "Peer Disagreement and Higher-Order Evidence"
 - Christensen, "Higher-Order Evidence"
- In person meeting 10/13: Epistemic communities
 - Goldberg, "If that were true, I would have heard it by now"
 - Thi Nguyen, "Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles"

Week 8:

- Remote component: Scientific communities
 - Kitcher, "The Division of Cognitive Labor"
 - Strevens, "The Role of the Priority Rule in Science"
- In person meeting 10/20: Social reasons for belief and belief-like attitudes
 - Fleisher, "Rational Endorsement"
 - Kahan, "Misconceptions, Misinformation, and the Logic of Identity-Protective Cognition"

Week 9:

- Remote component: Bayesian formal epistemology
 - Titelbaum, selections
- In person meeting 10/27: Bayesian formal epistemology

- Lewis, “Why Conditionalize?”

Week 10:

- Remote (asynchronous) component:
 - More Titelbaum
 - Resnik, *Choices*, selections
- REMOTE synchronous meeting 11/3 (professor out of town): More Bayesian stuff
 - Christensen, *Putting Logic in its Place*, Ch2

Week 11:

- Remote component: Bayesian models and distortions
 - Kahnemann, Nobel lecture
 - Mandelbaum on the psychological immune system
 - (Quilty-Dunn on avoiding thinking about terrible things)
- In person meeting 11/10: Bayesian testimony
 - Goldman, *Knowledge in a Social World*, ch4

Week 12:

- Remote component: Network simulations of misinformation and polarization
 - A bunch of Cailin O’Connor stuff
- In person meeting 11/17: Breakdowns of testimony
 - Re-read Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”
 - Ezra Klein and David French on polarization

Week 13:

- Remote component: Epistemic injustice
 - Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*, Ch1-2
- NO IN PERSON MEETING – THANKSGIVING

Week 14:

- Remote component: SLACK
 - Whatever we need to catch up on or something new we’ve gotten interested in
- In person meeting 12/1: Epistemic injustice
 - McKinnon, “Epistemic Injustice”
 - Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* ch4-5

Week 15:

- Remote component: SLACK
- In person meeting 12/8: SLACK