

Theory of Knowledge
PHIL 42003/52003
Spring 2024

Professor: Thomas D. Senior

Office: 306 Old Main

Office Hours: 12:00pm – 1:30pm Tuesday and 11am – 12:30pm Wednesday. and by appointment

Email: senor@uark.edu

Textbooks:

Required:

Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study* Oxford, 2022)

Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits* (Oxford, 2019)

Optional:

Ernest Sosa, Jaegwon Kim, Jeremy Fantl, and Matthew McGrath, eds., *Epistemology: An Anthology* (Second Edition) (Blackwell, 2008) (Sosa)

For the first couple months (or so) of the semester we will mostly do readings from the Sosa, et.al., textbook.

In the second part of the course, we will read two single-authored monographs. While the readings in the first part of the semester center on more abstract issues (What is knowledge? What is justified belief? Is skepticism true?), these two books are more practically focused. In his book, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*, Thomas Kelly explores a topic that currently hot in both philosophy and psychology. A quick way to undermine the opinion of someone with whom you disagree is to assert that they only believe what they do because they are “biased.” But what, precisely, is bias? Is it avoidable? Might there be virtuous biases? Not only are there non-vicious biases, Kelly argues, but some biases are *required* by morality and rationality.

Nathan Ballantyne’s *Knowing Our Limits* explores the epistemology of controversial issues. We often have firm opinions on fiercely debated matters. Why is this so and is it rational to hold an opinion that you know lots of smart, informed people disagree with? Ballantyne incorporates insights from contemporary cognitive science in exploring the limits of what we can be said to truly *know* and how we can best reason objectively.

Course Content and Objectives:

Some of this has already been revealed. But here’s a little more. Pretty much as soon as philosophy began, questions about what humans can really know began to appear. There have always been skeptics – that is, people who claim no one knows anything. But to make an argument for skepticism, you need to be able to explain what knowledge *is* (i.e., what the necessary and sufficient conditions for knowing are) and then argue plausibly that humans are incapable of achieving it. This means that fundamental to the question of whether humans

have knowledge is the question of the nature of knowledge. Questions about skepticism and the nature of knowledge will be our first focus.

According to many epistemologists, epistemic justification is an important component of knowledge. We all think that some beliefs are reasonable or well founded, and others aren't. For example, if Jack believes that the COVID vaccine causes death because he saw a meme on Facebook that said so, Jack isn't justified in his belief. He should know better. On the other hand, if he thinks that his wife will be home from work around 6pm because that's nearly always the case, we think he is justified. But what is the nature of this justification? And what relationship do beliefs have to bear to each other to provide justification. This is our second focus.

The objective of this course is two-fold: (1) you'll learn something about the state of contemporary epistemology – which issues are important and what some of the more compelling theories are; and (2) you'll become better equipped to recognize legitimate sources of information and become more aware of natural cognitive limitations and biases that can lead to false beliefs.

Exams/Writing Assignments:

Four equally weighted in-class exams (on February 15, March 12, and April 11, and May 7 (at 12:45pm- 2:45pm). Please bring a blue or green book to each test.

If class attendance becomes too low, I will begin giving quizzes on the readings; in that case, each exam will be worth 22% of your total grade and the quizzes will count for 12%.

Inclement Weather Policy:

In the event of ice or snow or any other kind of significant inclement weather, the UA might cancel classes. If the weather is bad but the University remains open, I'll send you an email and put up a Blackboard announcement to let you know if we will have class. Because I live in Bentonville, there is a real chance that if the roads are icy or snow covered, I'll cancel class. So do check your email or Blackboard if the weather gets dicey.

A **Very** Reading Class Schedule:

January 23: Descartes and Skepticism

Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Meditations I & II

January 25: John Locke's Epistemology

John Locke, Selections from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

January 30: Locke continued.

February 1: Phenomenalism/Idealism

George Berkeley, *Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonous* (selections).

February 6: Common Sense Responses to Skepticism

Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (selections) and G.E. Moore, "Proof of an External World" and "Certainty (Sosa).

February 8: Knowledge and the Gettier Problem

Edmund Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" and Gilbert Harman, *"Thought, Selections"* (Sosa)

February 13: Gettier and Epistemic Closure
 Linda Zagzebski, "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems" (Sosa)
 Gail Stine, "Skepticism, Relevant Alternatives, and Deductive Closure" (Sosa)

February 15: **First Exam**

February 20: The Epistemology of Disagreement
 Richard Feldman, "Epistemological Puzzles About Disagreement"

February 22: Foundationalism and its Critics
 Laurence Bonjour, "Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?" (Sosa)

February 27:: Foundationalism Defended
 William P. Alston, "What's Wrong with Immediate Knowledge?" and "Two Types of Foundationalism"

February 29: Coherentism
 Laurence Bonjour, "The Elements of Coherence"

March 5: Evidentialism
 Richard Feldman & Earl Conee, "Evidentialism" (Sosa)

March 7: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapters 1 and 2.

March 12: **Second Exam**

March 14: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapters 3 and 4.

March 19 and 21: Spring Break

March 26: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapter 5 and 6.

March 28: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapters 7 and 8

April 2: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapters 9 and 10

April 4: Thomas Kelly, *Bias: A Philosophical Study*
 Chapter 11

April 9: Reliabilism and its Critics
 Alvin I. Goldman, "What is Justified Belief?" (Sosa) and Laurence Bonjour, "Externalist Theories of Empirical Knowledge" (Sosa)

April 11: **Third Exam**

April 16: Proper Functionalism
 Alvin Plantinga, "Warrant: A First Approximation" (Sosa)

April 18: Internalism
 Alvin I. Goldman, "Internalism Exposed" (Sosa) and Richard Feldman & Earl Conee, "Internalism Defended" (Sosa)

April 23: Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits*

April 25: Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits*

April 30: Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits*

May 2: Nathan Ballantyne, *Knowing Our Limits*