

The Ethics of Belief and Ignorance

PPR 591l

Michaelmas Term 2019

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Seminar Meetings: Mondays, 9:00-11:00 AM – County Main SR1

Office and Advising Hours: B74, County South; Mondays, 1:30–3:30 PM; and by appointment

Overview:

This seminar explores the ethics of believing, denying, and seeking knowledge in an era called "post-truth." Epistemology has, from its beginnings had a normative (regulative) edge as well as its descriptive task. These norms appear to be both epistemic and ethical. The latter rise in importance with the shift to social and virtue epistemologies, with the challenges of a "post-truth" environment, and with recent work on the structure of ignorance. Of particular importance are issues related to epistemic authority and the range of epistemic agency.

Protocols:

We will wrestle with one of a set of interlocking questions each session and work toward defensible responses. (These questions are elaborated in the conspectus below). The class will operate as a seminar or workshop for philosophical research (with the exception of its first meeting). The module normally does not involve traditional lectures, but the tutor will set the topical questions, convene the group, and identify relevant readings. Each student will be responsible for making a presentation to the seminar. These presentations will address the topical questions and form the basis for seminar discussion; they also inform the final essay. An elective for postgraduate students, the seminar is a "special seminar module" for advanced undergraduates (PPR 391l).

Assessment:

The assessment for this seminar will be based on a single extended course assignment **(100%): a 5000-word essay to be submitted by 12 noon, Monday, January 13, 2020**, which must advance a thesis on a topic related to our seminar discussions. (See further information below.)

Focal Readings for the Seminar:

- DeNicola, Daniel R., *Understanding Ignorance: The Surprising Impact of What We Don't Know* (MIT Press, 2017)
- McIntyre, Lee, *Post-Truth* (MIT Press, 2018)
- Rosenfeld, Sophia, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)
- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford U. Press, 2012)

Brief Selected Bibliography on Epistemic Ethics:

- Adler, Jonathan E., *Beliefs Own Ethics* (MIT Press, 2002)
- Battaly, Heather, *The Routledge Handbook of Virtue Epistemology* (Routledge, 2018)
- Cohen, Jonathan, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford, 1992)
- Elgin, Catherine Z., *True Enough* (MIT Press, 2017)
- Fairweather, Abrol, and Carolos Montemayor, *Knowledge, Dexterity, and Attention: a Theory of Epistemic Agency* (Cambridge, 2018)
- Fricker, Miranda, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. (Oxford, 2007)
- John Greco, John Turri, et al., eds., *Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings* (MIT, 2012)
- Kidd, Ian James, José Medina, and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr., eds., *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice* (Routledge, 2019)
- Matheson, Jonathan, and Rico Vitz, eds., *The Ethics of Belief* (Oxford, 2014)
- McCormick, Miriam Schleifer, *Believing Against the Evidence* (Routledge, 2015)
- Moser, Paul K., ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford, 2019)
- Peels, Rik, *Responsible Belief* (Oxford, 2017)
- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, *On Epistemology* (Wadsworth, 2009)
- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, *Virtues of the Mind: An Inquiry into the Nature of Virtue and the Ethical Foundations of Knowledge* (Cambridge, 1996)
- Zimmerman, *Ignorance and Moral Obligation* (Oxford, 2014)

Web Resources:

A wide selection of recent scholarly articles on epistemology may be found at PhilPapers:
<http://philpapers.org/>.

In addition, please review the Web resources for philosophy recommended in the *Department's Handbook*.

Conspectus

Week 1

What Are the Central Issues of Epistemology?

Issues: Overview—the distinction between belief and knowledge—the influence of Plato's *Theaetetus*—the rise of modern epistemology—the components of the justified true belief analysis (JTB)—Gettier complications—the assumptions and limitations of the four-part analysis—recent developments in epistemology: virtue, social, feminist—regulative or normative epistemologies of belief.

Focal Reading:

- Steup, Matthias, "Epistemology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2018/entries/epistemology/> .

Supplementary Reading:

- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkhaus, *On Epistemology*. Wadsworth, 2009.

Week 2

How are We to Understand Ignorance?

Content: The traditional neglect of ignorance—ignorance as place, boundary, limit, and horizon—the relation of ignorance and innocence—the management of ignorance—the structure of ignorance—the place of ignorance in epistemology and in life.

Focal Reading:

- DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, Chapters 1-6, 9, 11, and Epilogue.

Supplementary Reading:

- Gross, Matthias, and Linsey McGoey, eds. *Routledge International Handbook of Ignorance Studies*. Routledge, 2015.
- Rescher, Nicholas. *Ignorance: (On the Wider Implications of Deficient Knowledge)*. University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009.

Week 3

What Ethical Issues Are Raised by Ignorance?

Issues: Culpable ignorance—willful ignorance—ignorance and the virtues—obligatory ignorance—unjust imposition of ignorance.

Focal Reading:

- DeNicola, *Understanding Ignorance*, Chapters 7 and 8.

Supplementary Reading:

- Code, Lorraine. "Culpable ignorance?" *Hypatia* 29.3 (2014): 670-676.
- Driver, Julia. "The virtues of ignorance." *The Journal of Philosophy* 86.7 (1989): 373-384.
- Flanagan, Owen. "Virtue and ignorance." *The Journal of Philosophy* 87.8 (1990): 420-428.
- Peels, Rik. "Tracing culpable ignorance." *Logos & Episteme* 2.4 (2011): 575-582.
- Smith, Holly. "Culpable ignorance." *The Philosophical Review* 92.4 (1983): 543-571.
- Sher, George. *Who Knew?: Responsibility without Awareness*. Oxford University Press, 2009.
- Zimmerman, Michael J. *Ignorance and Moral Obligation*. Oxford University Press, 2014.

Week 4

What is a Belief?

Issues: Analyses of "belief that *p*" —types of beliefs—aspects of belief—belief and acceptance—the acquisition of beliefs—epistemic luck—the concept of agency—voluntarism

Focal Reading:

- Schwitzgebel, Eric, "Belief," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2019 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2019/entries/belief/> .

Supplementary Reading:

- Cohen, L. Jonathan, *An Essay on Belief and Acceptance* (Oxford, 1992).

Week 5

What is the Scope of Epistemic Agency?

Issues: The concept of agency—comparing moral and epistemic agency—choosing to believe—epistemic agency and responsibility for beliefs and ignorance

Focal Reading:

- Levy, Neil, and Eric Mandelbaum. "The Powers that Bind: Doxastic Voluntarism and Epistemic Obligation," in *The Ethics of Belief*, Oxford University Press (2014): 15-32.
- Williams, Bernard. "Deciding to Believe," in *Problems of the Self*. Cambridge University Press (1973): 136-151.
- Frankish, Keith. "Deciding to Believe Again." *Mind* 116.463 (2007): 523-548.

Supplementary Reading:

- Adler, Jonathan E. *Belief's Own Ethics*. MIT Press, 2006, Chapter 2.
- McCormick, Miriam Schleifer. *Believing Against the Evidence: Agency and the Ethics of Belief*. Routledge, 2014.
- Buckareff, Andrei A. "Acceptance and Deciding to Believe." *Journal of Philosophical Research* 29 (2004): 173-190.

Week 6

Does Believing Have Its Own Ethics?

Issues: Ethics and agency—voluntarism vs. evidentialism and their philosophical advocates—the moral assessment of beliefs: process, content, purpose, context—truth as aspirational—three models: deontological, utilitarian, and virtue-based—normative believing

Focal Reading:

- Chignell, Andrew, "The Ethics of Belief," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2018/entries/ethics-belief/> .

Supplementary Reading:

- Adler, Jonathan E. *Belief's Own Ethics*. MIT Press, 2006, Chapters 1 and
- Matheson, Jonathan, and Rico Vitz, eds. *The Ethics of Belief: Individual and Social*. Oxford University Press (UK), 2014.
- Peels, Rik. *Responsible Belief: A Theory in Ethics and Epistemology*. Oxford University Press, 2016.

Week 7

What is (Proper) Epistemic Authority?

Issues: The traditional epistemic status of testimony—the role of testimony in an epistemic community—the concept of epistemic authority—justifying epistemic authority—the (proper) role of epistemic authority in an epistemic community—ambiguity toward expertise or rejection of it—epistemic trust and truth

Focal Reading:

- Zagzebski, Linda Trinkaus, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford U. Press, 2012)

Supplementary Reading:

- William W. Fortenbaugh, *Aristotle on Emotion*, 2nd ed. (1975; London: Bristol Classical Press, 2002).

Week 8

What is the Relation Between Democracy and Truth?

Issues: The ideal of democracy—democratizing epistemology—the individual and the polity as sources of truth—the relation of freedom and truth—the concept of practical wisdom—the epistemic vulnerability of democracy—democracy and expertise

Focal Reading:

- Rosenfeld, Sophia, *Democracy and Truth: A Short History* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019)

Supplementary Reading:

- Estlund, David. "Making Truth Safe for Democracy" in *The Idea of Democracy*, David Copp, ed. (1993): 71-100.
- Somin, Ilya. *Democracy and Political Ignorance: Why Smaller Government is Smarter*. Stanford University Press, 2016.

Week 9

Are We in a "Post-Truth" Era?

Issues: The concept of Post-Truth—the blame game: alleged causes and agents for the rejection of truth—is it possible to live without truth? ---the relation between post-truth and ignorance—the stubbornness of facts—science and its denial--trust and truth

Focal Reading:

- McIntyre, Lee, *Post-Truth* (MIT Press, 2018)

Supplementary Reading:

- McIntyre, Lee. *Respecting Truth: Willful Ignorance in the Internet Age*. Routledge, 2015.
- Kakutani, Michiko. *The Death of Truth: Notes on Falsehood in the Age of Trump*. Tim Duggan Books, 2018.

Week 10

Does separation of church and state sanction two different epistemologies?

Issues: The separation of sacred and secular—purposes of church/state separation—degrees of separation in law and practice—reason, sensory experience, and revelation—the epistemic tension between science and religion—reason and commitment—religion and the ethics of belief

Focal Reading:

- Locke, John, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, Kerry Walters (ed.). Broadview,
- Bishop, John. *Believing by Faith: An Essay in the Epistemology and Ethics of Religious Belief*. Oxford University Press, 2007, esp. Chapters 1-3.

Supplementary Reading:

- Wolterstorff, Nicholas. *John Locke and the Ethics of Belief*. Cambridge University Press, 1996.

The Essay

Specifications:

The essays are intended to assess your ability to conduct philosophical research and to synthesize a philosophical argument. The essay should have a clear thesis. Although the topic of the essay must relate to the issues of this module, you are free to choose the topic. You will be asked to discuss your topic in class, and it is best if you decide your topic fairly early in the term. The essays must include a bibliography of works consulted.

The essay should be targeted at **5000 words**, not including the bibliography. It should be submitted in a **standard 12-point font**. Any standard referencing system may be used, but all sources must be properly cited. Plagiarism is an unforgivable violation of academic integrity and will not be tolerated. Advice on writing essays and important aspects of departmental policies are provided below, but for fuller accounts of both, consult the Department's *Undergraduate Handbook*. You may also consult with your tutor.

You must **submit two copies** of your essay. One should be printed and posted in the essay submission box in the Department. The other should be submitted electronically via Moodle. Instructions for electronic submission can be found in the PPR *Postgraduate Handbook*. Be aware that your essay will be considered late if you do not submit both paper and electronic copy by the deadline. The deadline is 12:00 PM (noon) on Monday, January 13, 2020.

A successful essay will frame a topic knowledgably and argue for a philosophical thesis, drawing upon relevant texts that are properly referenced with citations. It will display qualities valued in philosophical writing: clarity, concision, depth, precision, soundness of explication, incisiveness of argument, and an acute sense of relevance and of implication. As a venerable don once said, it should be characterised by “an absence of twaddle.” You should write for a philosophical reader who is intelligent but is otherwise unfamiliar with the lectures and readings.

PPR Department Policies Regarding Essays

Essay Presentation

A full statement of the PPR department's policies regarding essay presentation may be found in the 2019-20 *Postgraduate Student Handbook*, pages 14-17. These include policies regarding format, referencing, submission, marking, plagiarism, and late work, and extensions.

Note that, as a rule of thumb, markers would not expect pieces of coursework to exceed a 10% bracket either above or below a coursework word length. The coursework word length includes all footnotes, but does not include the bibliography.

Sample Essay Topics:

This list is provided only to spark your thinking:

1. When is ignorance culpable?
2. What is a belief?

3. On replacing "knowledge" with "understanding" in epistemology
4. On why there is no distinctively epistemic ethics
5. The ethics of forgetting
6. The virtuous believer
7. A critique of Zagzebski on epistemic authority
8. Expertise in democracy
9. Democracy as an epistemic community
10. Epistemic injustice
11. Religion and Civic Discourse: when epistemologies clash
12. Must postmodernism entail post-truth?