

Phil 97: Social Epistemology

Instructor: David Thorstad

1. About this course

This is a writing intensive course. The course is designed to hone your ability to think, read, write, and talk about philosophy. We'll read (slowly!) a few key readings, with writing or presentation assignments given each week. Emphasis will be placed on the writing process itself and on the distinctive elements of philosophical communication.

To sharpen your philosophical abilities you'll need to have something to think, read, write and talk about. This course will focus on social epistemology, an approach to the study of belief, inquiry, and knowledge in social context. If all goes well, by the end of the course you'll be able to:

- I Write clear, focused, and insightful philosophical prose.
- II Follow a structured writing process incorporating drafting, peer and instructor feedback, and revision.
- III Communicate philosophical information in expository and argumentative settings.
- IV Situate, develop and examine philosophical ideas in social context.
- V Integrate methods and results from the social sciences into philosophical theorizing.

2. Course structure

2.1. Writing assignments

- I **Response papers:** 1-2 pgs, double spaced. Word limit firm. Will address bite-sized, assigned topics related to readings. [**Advice:** No wasted words]
- II **Regular papers:** You'll write three papers. Each will consist of a (full, polished) draft and a *substantial* revision. Word limits are firm. (My promise: drafts returned 2 days after submission, i.e. end of day Friday).
 - i **Paper 1:** 4 pages, double spaced. On Unit I.
 - ii **Paper 2:** 4 pages, double spaced (draft); revision up to 6 pages, double spaced. On Unit II.
 - iii **Final paper:** 8 pages, double spaced. Topics covering all units, emphasizing Unit III.

2.2. Presentations

Twice during the course you'll be assigned a group presentation. You'll present a target article to the class, who will not be familiar with the material contained within. You'll help them to understand the content and philosophical importance of the article, then lead critical discussion. Presentations will occupy the normal class period.

2.3. Instructor availability

I ask a lot from you, so I try to be fairly available to help you in return. Office hours TBD (let's schedule these now). Meetings by request if office hours don't work.

2.4. Attendance

This is a small, intensive and discussion-centered course. Both you and your classmates will get the most out of the class if you are present for every course meeting. I don't grade on attendance, but I do expect you to attend all course meetings unless exceptional events arise. If you can't make it, please send me an email before the class meeting. I'll follow up by email if I haven't heard from you.

3. Course policies

3.1. Grading

I **Writing Assignments:** 70%. Please anonymize submissions.

- i **Response papers:** 15%.
- ii **Paper 1:** 15% (5% draft, 10% revision).
- iii **Paper 2:** 15% (5% draft, 10% revision).
- iv **Final paper:** 25% (10% draft, 15% revision).

II **Presentations:** 30%.

- i **Presentation 1:** 15%.
- ii **Presentation 2:** 15%.

Graded individually, with emphasis on contributions to group performance.

III **Grade drop:** The point of this course is to allow you to make mistakes. You'll be able to drop one grade of your choosing (i.e. one response paper, one paper draft or revision, or one presentation). The final paper revision may not be dropped. Remaining grades will scale proportionally to fill the nearest category.

- i **Example: Dropping Paper 1 draft:** Revision counts for entirety of Paper 1 grade (15% of total).
- ii **Example: Dropping Presentation 2:** Presentation 1 counts for entirety of presentation grade (30% of total).

3.2. Late assignments

Ordinarily I do not accept late assignments. Exceptions can be made in special circumstances, but in general you should hand in whatever portion of an assignment you have completed.

3.3. Laptops

Research suggests that laptop use may hamper your (and other students') learning during class. See the powerpoint "Laptops.pptx" on the Canvas site for details.

On this basis we'll adopt the following policy. Laptops and e-readers are not permitted during course meetings except for use during presentations, on the first day (to check Canvas site), or in case of special educational needs. Please print readings and bring them to class.

3.4. Accessibility

If you require any special arrangements, please don't hesitate to reach out. By university policy, requests for accommodation should be made through Accessibility Services.

4. Resources

I **Departmental writing fellow:** This is a philosophy PhD student who is paid to help you with your writing. I cannot stress how lucky you are to have this resource available and strongly recommend that you use it. This year's writing fellow is Noel Dominguez. His website is

<https://projects.iq.harvard.edu/phil-dwf>.

II **Guides to philosophical writing:** Long and medium-length guides by Elijah Chudnoff and short guide by Jim Pryor linked on website. Highly recommended.

III **Harvard college writing center:** Worth a visit, but when possible see the departmental writing fellow for philosophy-specific writing help.

<https://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu/>

IV **Me!** Don't be shy about reaching out for help of any kind.

V **Departmental colloquia:** Highly recommended for a glimpse at what philosophy is like in the wild. Many Fridays, 3-5PM (Emerson 305). Schedule here.

<https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/calendar/upcoming>

5. Norms for discussion

It's helpful to think of philosophical discussions as a special type of conversation. After all, that's what they are. You already know how to have a good conversation, so most of these remarks will be reminders of things you already know.

As in any conversation, norms of politeness and respect are paramount. Share the floor. Listen attentively and charitably when others are speaking, and be open to changing your mind. Give credit where credit is due. Be kind and generous. This does not mean that you cannot disagree with one another. Philosophers argue all the time! But as in any conversation, please do so with politeness and respect.

Now philosophical conversations are a special type of conversation. Philosophy is a mutual enterprise of working together, through argument, to discover the truth. I urge you to view philosophical conversations as a cooperative enterprise. And this is an enterprise to which you can contribute with a number of moves. For example, you might

- i Make an argument.
- ii Raise an objection.
- iii State or outline a position.
- iv Ask for clarification.
- v Ask for evidence.
- vi Support another student's point.
- vii Pose a constructive challenge to a point already made.
- viii Summarize, synthesize, or draw connections between points already raised.
- ix Point out a hidden assumption or premise.
- x Draw connections to previous discussions or readings.

And so on. Don't forget about the moves towards the bottom of the list; they're essential to making progress in discussion together.

At the same time, please bear in mind that philosophy essentially involves argument. There is nothing wrong with providing arguments in support of your position. In fact, that is precisely what we're training you to do. Just bear in mind that arguments take place in the context of a conversation, with real people, fixed norms of engagement, and sometimes more at stake than a point of abstruse metaphysics.

6. Schedule

Readings are listed on the day when they will be discussed.

6.1. (Unit 1) Individual epistemology in social context: disagreement

September 5: Course introduction

Reading: None

Writing: Response paper 1 assigned.

September 12: A steadfast view of disagreement

Reading: Thomas Kelly, “The epistemic significance of disagreement.” Jim Prior, “Guidelines on writing a philosophy paper.”

Writing: Response paper 1 due. Response paper 2 assigned.

September 19: Conciliationism

Reading: David Christensen, “Epistemology of disagreement: the good news.”

Writing: Response paper 2 due. Response paper 3 assigned.

September 26: A third way?

Reading: Jennifer Lackey, “A justificationist view of disagreement’s epistemic significance.”

Writing: Response paper 3 due. First paper assignment distributed.

October 3: An application: disagreement in philosophy

Reading: Bryan Frances, “Philosophical renegades.”

Writing: First paper draft due. Revision due next week.

6.2. (Unit 2) Group agents: the possibility, nature and justification of group belief

October 10: The possibility of group agency

Reading: Christian List and Philip Pettit, *Group agency* (selections).

Writing: First paper revision due.

Presentation: First presentation assignment distributed. Due next week.

October 17: Metaphysics of group belief: the commitment model

Reading: Students will be split into two groups. One will read Margaret Gilbert’s “Modelling collective belief.” The second will read Raimo Tuomela’s “Group beliefs.”

Writing: Response paper 4 assigned.

Presentation: Presentation 1 today.

October 24: Metaphysics of group belief: the distributed model

Reading: Alexander Bird, “When is there a group that knows? Distributed cognition, scientific knowledge, and the social epistemic subject.” Selections from Edwin Hutchins, “How a cockpit remembers its speeds.”

Writing: Response paper 4 due. Second paper assignment distributed.

October 31: Justification of group belief

Reading: Alvin Goldman, “Social process reliabilism: solving justification problems in collective epistemology.”

Writing: Second paper draft due. Revision due next week.

6.3. (Unit 3) Systems-oriented social epistemology: epistemology of democracy

November 7: Disagreement and democracy

Reading: David Christensen, “Disagreement and public controversy.” Excerpts from Mill’s *On liberty*.

Writing: Second paper revision due.

Presentation: Presentation 2 assignment distributed.

November 14: Epistemic democracy, wisdom of crowds and the value of diversity

Reading: Students will be split into three groups. One will read Christian List and Robert Goodin’s “Epistemic democracy: generalizing the Condorcet jury theorem.” The second will read selections from James Surowiecki’s *The wisdom of crowds*. The third will read Lu Hong and Scott Page’s “Groups of diverse problem solvers can outperform groups of high-ability problem solvers.”

Presentation: Presentation 2 due today.

Writing: Final paper assignment distributed. Prepare final paper outlines.

November 21

No class. Thanksgiving break.

November 28: Groupthink and the argumentative theory of reasoning

Reading: Hugo Mercier and Hélène Landemore, “Reasoning is for arguing: understanding the success and failures of deliberation.” Excerpts from Cass Sunstein and Reid Hastle’s *Wiser: getting beyond groupthink to make groups smarter*.

Writing: Meet with instructor this week to discuss final paper outlines.

December 5: Epistemic justice

Reading: Elizabeth Anderson, “Epistemic justice as a virtue of social institutions.” Excerpts from Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic injustice*.

Writing: Final paper draft due.

December 18th: Final paper deadline (no class)

Writing: Final paper revision due.