

Philosophy 350: Epistemology: Disagreement and Doubt

Mount Holyoke College

Spring 2014

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About the course. We are fallible creatures, prone to making all sorts of mistakes. How should we accommodate evidence of our own epistemic imperfection? Should such evidence lead us to doubt ourselves and our beliefs? Or are we rationally permitted to dismiss it? One way in which we might get evidence of our own error is through disagreement. The discovery that someone you respect disagrees with you can make you lose confidence in, or altogether abandon, your belief in the disputed proposition—but should it? Does disagreement provide evidence of error? Is it epistemically significant, or simply unpleasant? We will approach these questions by looking at current work on the epistemology of disagreement. This will lead us to more general considerations about evidence and rationality that are central to both recent and traditional debates in epistemology.

Meetings. Wednesdays at 1:15-4:05 in **Skinner 210**

Readings. There is no textbook for this class. Readings are available on the course website.

Requirements.

- Presentations: 10%
- Reading Responses: 20%
- First Paper: 30%
- Second Paper: 40%

Presentations. In preparation for each paper, you will present for 5 minutes on a topic of your choosing. Presentations will be followed by a brief discussion with questions and suggestions from the class. Prepare a handout, no longer than one page, with a bibliography, which answers the following questions.

1. What central question do you aim to answer?
2. What greater debate does this question fit into?
3. Relatedly, what are some possible answers?

Reading responses. Answer the following questions for four of the assigned readings. Submit answers *before* the day on which the reading is discussed.

1. What is the thesis? (*One sentence answer.*)
2. What is the argument for the thesis? (*List the premises and intermediate and final conclusions. Show the reasoning—i.e., what follows from what.*)
3. What do you think of the argument? (*No more than 250 words. Pick a premise to consider or present a counterexample.*)

N.B. It is wise to complete the reading responses early in the semester. Your workload will be more even and you will be more closely acquainted with the readings when the time comes to write your essays.

Papers. The first paper should be 1500 words long. The second paper should be 3000 words long. For the second paper, you may chose to expand your shorter paper or to write on a new topic. There will be a paper exchange after you submit each paper and you will have the opportunity to rewrite it in light of peer comments.

Schedule.

Day	Date			Reading
1	W 1/22	Introduction		<i>Suggested background reading for the semester:</i> Feldman & Warfield, Disagreement Introduction Harman, G. "Positive vs. Negative Undermining" Christensen, Disagreement as evidence
2	W 1/29	Steadfast No, disagreement doesn't matter, epistemically.		Kelly, T. [2005] "The epistemic significance of disagreement" in J. Hawthorne and T. Gendler (eds.), Oxford studies in epistemology, vol. 1. Oxford University Press.
3	W 2/5	Yes, yes it does.		Christensen, D. [2007] "Epistemology of Disagreement: The Good News" in <i>Philosophical Review</i> 116: 187-217.
4	W 2/12	Some problems for Steadfasters		Elga, A. [2007] "Reflection and Disagreement" in <i>Nous</i> , 41(3): 478-502.
5	W 2/19	Problems for Conciliationists		Schoenfield, M. [ms.] "A Dilemma for Conciliationism" Kelly, T. [2010] "Peer disagreement and higher order evidence" in R. Feldman and F. Warfield (eds.), <i>Disagreement</i> , Oxford University Press, <i>selections</i> .
6	W 2/26	Steadfasters vs. Conciliationists	Catch up & presentations.	No new readings.
7	W 3/5	Ethical Intuitions and Disagreement	Harman Talk @ 4:30 attendance required	Harman, E. [ms.] "Is it Reasonable to 'Rely on Intuitions' in Ethics?"
W 3/5 Paper 1 due @ start of class.				
8	W 3/12	Formal Epistemology 101: Bayesianism	Chris Meacham visit	TBD
W 3/20 Spring Break				
9	W 3/26	Background issue 1: The case against permissivism		White, R. [2005] "Epistemic Permissiveness" in <i>Philosophical Perspectives</i> , Vol. 19, 445-459. Optional: Meacham, [ms.] "Subjective and Objective Bayesianism" (selections)
10	W 4/2	Background issue 1: The case against the case against Permissivism		Schoenfield, M. "Permission to Believe: Why Permissivism Is True and What It Tells Us About Irrelevant Influences on Belief" Elga, A. [ms.] "Lucky to be rational"

Day	Date			Reading
11	W 4/9	Permissivism continued.	Catch up & presentations.	No new readings.
12	W 4/16	Higher-Order Evidence more generally	Sophie Horowitz visit.	Horowitz, S. [ms.] "Against Epistemic Akrasia"
13	W 4/23	Higher-Order Evidence continued.		Christensen, D. [2010] "Higher-Order Evidence"
W 4/23 Paper 2 due @ start of class.				

Late Policy. Papers will be penalized by **one letter grade** for every day late. Of course, things happen. Hence: **THE GET OUT OF JAIL FREE POLICY.** You get two get out of jail free cards. They aren't real cards, but you really can use them. Each is good for a five-day extension (from the original due date). The only constraints are: (1) you must submit the card on or before the assignment due date, (2) you can only use one per assignment, and (3) extensions cannot go past the end of the exam period. *To use a card:* log into Moodle. Find the assignment you'd like to use the card on. Open it as if you're going to submit it. Write "JAILCARD" in the submission box. That's it!

Participation. Philosophy is a communal activity. Much of it is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. You are expected to do the assigned readings before class, and actively participate in class discussion. (Notice, it follows from this that attendance is required.) I realize that participation is more difficult for some of us than others. But writing papers, understanding the readings—these too are more difficult for some of us than others. Class will consist largely of discussion, and everyone is expected to participate. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together.

Writing. A major goal of this class is to improve your writing skills. Chances are that you haven't done writing this precise, careful, and concise before—at least not at the level at which we will do it. (At the same time, you will see, it is a much more natural and intuitive way of writing than what you may have been taught in the past.) I hope you will emerge as stronger writers capable of producing clear and convincing prose. Like any skill, this one requires practice and patience. Acquiring it will be difficult: you will have to do much writing and rewriting. I am committed to helping you get there because I know that the ability to think critically and express your ideas in clear, crisp prose will serve you everywhere you go.

As for **my expectations**, David Foster Wallace said it best in his own syllabus:

If you want to improve your academic writing and are willing to put extra time and effort into it, I am a good teacher to have. But if you're used to whipping off papers the night before they're due, running them quickly through the computer's Spellchecker, handing them in full of high-school errors and sentences that make no sense, and having the professor accept them "because the ideas are good" or something, please be informed that

I draw no distinction between the quality of one's ideas and the quality of those ideas' verbal expression, and that I will not accept sloppy, rough-draftish, or semiliterate college writing. Again, I am absolutely not kidding. If you won't or can't devote significant time and attention to your written work, I urge you to drop... and save us both a lot of grief.¹

I too am absolutely not kidding. I will not accept sloppy work. On that note...

Presentation and Formatting. Presenting your assignments in a professional manner is important. It demonstrates respect for yourself and for your audience. Don't waste your reader's time with easy to fix mistakes, like typos, and don't distract them with crazy fonts or weird formatting. Please use the following guidelines.

- *Word count* at end of paper (exclude bibliography, etc. when calculating).
- *Double space* (except block quotes which should be single spaced and indented).
- *Standard margins* (1 inch), font size (12pt), style (Times New Roman), etc.
- *Cite sources* in a clear, consistent way. MLA, Chicago Style, I don't care. Just be consistent.²
- *Electronic copies* should be in **PDF** format and named as follows:
assignment_MMDDYY.pdf for example: *paper01_022814.pdf*
 - Why PDFs? PDFs are more professional than docs and allow you to control how your work looks to your audience. If you don't know how to convert a document into PDF format, figure it out: ask Google, the help desk, or your email buddies. I am not tech support.
 - *Important:* I use Moodle's blind-grading option. **Do not put your name anywhere in or on your assignment** as it will compromise anonymity.

Communication. Important announcements and assignments will be communicated to you via email or in class. It is your responsibility to make sure you are up to date with the latest news. So check your email often and don't miss class. If you do, check with your email buddies: three people in the class whose emails you've acquired for this purpose. Write their names and contact information here:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

Of course, you are always welcome to email me. But please keep in mind:

- I do not check my email after business hours (this includes weekends).
- I respond promptly, but not always on the same day.
- I do not answer questions that are clearly answered by the syllabus or assignment instructions. I just delete those emails. If you're not hearing back from me, that may be a hint to double check the relevant materials. That said, after you've carefully examined the assignment *and* checked with your email buddies, you shouldn't hesitate to ask me to clarify anything.

¹ <http://alasophia.blogspot.com/2008/09/david-foster-wallaces-syllabus.html>

² E.g., http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html.

Office hours. If you have class during my office hours, let me know and we'll work out an alternative time to meet. Otherwise, just show up. If I am in with someone or my door is close, knock and let me know you've arrived. No need to email me to make an appointment.

Attendance. Most of the action happens in class—it is where I give away all the answers. Seriously. So, you won't want to skip class. If you must miss class, contact your email buddies, check Moodle for handouts, and make sure you get caught up.

Gadgets. Turn them off or leave them at home. Laptops, phones, the lot of them.

Readings. Most of the readings we will look at are short, but quite tricky. Give yourself time to digest them. I recommend a two step approach: first, skim, and then carefully read each piece before we discuss it in class. Jot down questions and confusions and raise them in lecture. (Note: if you're worried about speaking up in class, having a prewritten question on hand can help.) Second, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. If you're still unclear about something, get help: ask your email buddies, come by my office hours, etc.

Academic Honesty. Upon entering Mount Holyoke College, you each signed a pledge to uphold the honor code. It is your responsibility “to read *A Guide to the Uses and Acknowledgment of Sources* and the Student Handbook, which define the standards adopted by the College; to observe the established procedures in preparing assignments and writing papers and examinations, and to submit as [your] own only that work that [you have] originated.”³ I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, everything you turn in will be *your own work* and *in your own words*. If your discussions of class topics with your friends, dogs, parents, etc., are helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and your Googling bounty.

Important. It is a requirement of this class that you take the plagiarism tutorial: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/lits/ris/Plagiarism/>. I will trust you have completed it. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to avoid it. Accidental plagiarism is still plagiarism. If in doubt, cite, cite, cite. In short, do not plagiarize. I *will* fail you.

Submitting. All assignments should be submitted on Moodle. Advice: don't wait until five minutes before the due time. I won't accommodate Moodle-messed-up excuses. It's your responsibility to get your assignment in on time. Occasionally, I will also ask you to submit a hard copy of the assignment as well. In those instances, your assignment is late until it has been submitted in both ways.

Feedback. Grades are non-negotiable, but I'm always happy to talk about how you did on your assignment. If you ever find yourself confused about the feedback you receive on your assignments, come see me as soon as possible. Feedback on assignments will be submitted to Moodle. Comments will be in comment box. Whatever small points I note, I will aim to also show you three ways in which your work could improve. Keep those in mind when you prepare

³ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

your next assignment. Also, note that Moodle doesn't automatically notify you when assignments are graded, so keep an eye out.

Assistance. Besides myself, there are many resources to help you succeed in this class.

* In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, illness, or etc., you must register with the **Office of AccessAbility Services**. This office will provide a letter describing the appropriate accommodations. Once you have this letter, set up an appointment with me and we will discuss it.⁴

* You should go to the **SAW center** for help on your assignments. Well-trained peers are there to look over your drafts, help you plan your arguments, etc. There are drop-in hours, and you may go as many times as you want. This is a great resource. Use it.⁵

* There may be a **SAW mentor** in this course. If there is, *go to her*. She is there to read drafts, help you organize your thoughts, talk about the material, and so forth.

Grading. Your paper will be evaluated along three dimensions of roughly equal weight:

1. The clarity and soundness of the *argument* for your *thesis*.
2. Your demonstrated understanding of readings and material covered in class.
3. Your insight and creativity in engaging the issues.

Here is what the Mount Holyoke College student handbook says about grades. "As a general guide to instructors, the faculty has agreed to the following equivalencies to letter grades:

A = excellent B = good C = satisfactory D = minimally passing F = failing."⁶

Consider B. 'B' means 'good'. The obvious question is: what does 'good' mean? I take 'good' to mean good. Therefore, if you do a good job on a paper, you will get a B. This means you have done a good job, and should be happy. 'A' means 'excellent'. This does not mean you have to write a publishable paper or be God's gift to philosophy to get an A. It does mean that you have to demonstrate some real understanding and aptitude for doing philosophy. (More on this below.)

Still, do not assume that merely completing the assignment without making any mistakes suffices for an A. (More on this in a moment.) Also, do not panic if your first paper receives a low grade. Track record data suggests that you will get the worst grade you have ever received on the first assignment in this class. N.B. This paragraph applies for you even if you have taken a philosophy class before. Again, inductive evidence suggests that it applies to you even if you don't think it applies to you. Fewer than 10% of students are able to write above the B- level. Don't let this discourage you. Writing is hard, but it is a skill you can learn. People who make a serious effort often write B+ or A- papers by the end of term.

A final note on grading. Students are often puzzled by the grading standards for papers. Some ask, "If I answered the question competently without making any significant errors, why didn't I get an A?" Here is a guideline for how papers in this course are graded. (N.B.: these are the

⁴ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability>

⁵ <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/saw/peer/center>

⁶ https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook

standards for papers before assigning late penalties.) Make sure you've studied these closely before asking about your grade.

B is the baseline grade for good, competent, but not exceptional work; a solid paper, with some notable mistakes or obscurities, but no serious misunderstandings. At the very least, a B paper does the following:

- addresses all parts of the paper topic
- offers consistent, coherent arguments for a clearly articulated position that makes sense
- considers a significant objection to that position
- replies to that objection
- makes relevant use of course readings and lectures, displaying a grasp of their content
- is generally well-written and well-organized
- does not contain significant misunderstandings

Papers deserving a grade higher than a B meet all these criteria, but do something more.

B+ This is a well-written paper with nothing terribly wrong. It meets all the criteria for a B paper, but also shows more promise or originality. It may do this by working out ordinary ideas to a greater depth than usual, or develop relevant arguments that demonstrate real mastery of the course readings without merely replicating them. Alternatively, a B+ paper might present an unusually apt analogy that illuminates a previously obscure aspect of the problem; a clever counterexample to a seemingly persuasive claim; a sharp distinction that does real philosophical work; a subtle point drawn from a close reading of a text; a compelling illustration or application of a principle, and so forth. A B+ paper receives the beginnings of distinction, but its ideas need further development: it doesn't stand out like or operate at as advanced a level as an A- paper.

A or A- These grades are reserved for outstanding work that operates at an advanced level. A paper that just gives a straightforward or obvious response to some philosophical or interpretative problem would not merit an A or A-, even if it is clear. An A or A- paper does something extra—but not at the cost of a clear treatment of the problem. If there are any significant problems with the writing or the organization of the paper, then it won't merit even an A-: this is because good clear writing and organization are not separable from good thinking. An A or A- paper thus meets all the criteria for a B+ paper, but does something more. For example:

- working out the original, striking, or powerful idea, argument, or illustration/application fully and deeply, demonstrating a firm grasp of the underlying concepts, principles, facts, and argumentative strategy
- offering an unusually comprehensive survey of possible moves by both sides, and clearly and systematically evaluating them, to come to a closely reasoned conclusion. The survey is systematic, not scattershot: it develops the alternatives logically and to substantial depth.
- offering an unusually sophisticated, close and systematic reading of a text, paying attention to tensions and contradictions in the author's work, alternative interpretations of passages (offering persuasive arguments for preferring one interpretation to another), or interpretations that bring out philosophically significant points, especially if they offer fresh, unconventional readings

Papers deserving a grade lower than a B fail to meet the criteria and demonstrate carelessness or confusion.

B- This paper contains significant errors, omissions or misunderstandings, but still, there is an effort. The author has some understanding of the problem and of the relevant texts. She does offer some argument. A paper with no argument won't merit a B-. Some ways such a paper might go wrong include:

- the writing is distractingly unclear
- organization is poor: important points aren't logically ordered or signposted
- there are straightforward mistakes and misunderstandings about what the problem is, or about what other philosophers say
- the problem is presented clearly but not really addressed
- doesn't answer one part of the paper topic
- misunderstands a substantial philosophical point or confuses distinct positions
- doesn't articulate a consistent position
- doesn't consider objections to one's position
- wastes space on issues not pertinent to the paper topic
- offers a confused, sloppy, superficial, or erroneous interpretation of course readings or other cited texts

C+ There are more serious problems. Either the writing is really hard to get through; or the paper has no discernible structure; or the author doesn't understand the text or the positions she is discussing; or the paper doesn't really attempt to offer any argument.

Papers with more problems will earn grades of **C or below**. Papers that plagiarize or don't make a serious effort will not pass.

Do keep in mind: a low, even failing, grade on the first assignment is not cause for immediate concern. It's cause for reflection, learning, and working harder. A failure to improve over the course of the assignments is cause for concern. Even if you submit an A paper, I will expect you to do better on your next assignment. If you aren't improving, wherever you start from, neither of us is doing our jobs well.