

prof. Katia Vavova ([evavova@mtholyoke.edu](mailto:evavova@mtholyoke.edu)) | office. 217B Skinner | office hours. M 1-2:30, T 1-2

**Boring description of the course.** As the study of knowledge and related concepts like justification, rationality, and evidence, epistemology is of central importance, and not just to philosophy. This course provides an introduction to epistemology through a number of problems or puzzles about skepticism, dogmatism, and humility.

**The truth about the course.** We'll think about some cool shit like, in no particular order, knowledge, evidence, disagreement, brains in vats, brainwashing, fake news, groupthink, bias, and etc. etc. It will blow your mind. You'll come out knowing more. And less.

**Learning goals.**

1. To hone your critical thinking skills. You'll do this by questioning assumptions, and analyzing, evaluating, and constructing arguments. You'll have to provide reasons and consider counterarguments for what you believe
2. To become close, careful readers of, even difficult and challenging texts. You'll practice interpreting texts and using textual evidence to support your claims and arguments.
3. To learn about major themes and ideas in epistemology, and connect them to both historical and contemporary trends and events.
4. Finally, to learn to write in clear, accessible, and persuasive prose. You'll do this by writing frequently, drafting and revising, and thinking reflectively about your own development as a writer.

**Meetings.** T/Th 2:55-4:15 in Skinner 102

**Tentative Schedule.** Please do the readings in the order in which they are listed. Readings are available on Moodle. Please print and bring hard copies to class.

Date		Due	Reading
Th 9/6	Introduction		Syllabus for this course. (Seriously. All of it. Don't skim.)
T 9/11	What is knowledge?		Nagel, Jennifer (2014) <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , Chapter 1: Introduction Gettier, Edmund (1963) "Is justified true belief knowledge?"
Th 9/13			Nagel, Jennifer (2014) <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , Chapter 4: The analysis of Knowledge Zagzebski, Linda (1994) "The Inescapability of Gettier Problems" ( <i>selections</i> )
T 9/18			BonJour, Laurence (2010) "The Myth of Knowledge" ( <i>skip sect. 4</i> )
Th 9/20			Lewis, David (1996) "Elusive Knowledge" ( <i>just pp. 549-550</i> ).
T 9/25	Skepticism		Al-Ghazali (1100) "Deliverance from Error"
Th 9/27		A1	<b>Class cancelled.</b>

Date		Due	Reading
T 10/2			Descartes, Rene. (1641) <i>Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy</i> , Meditation 1
Th 10/4			
T 10/9			<b>No class. (October Break)</b>
Th 10/11			Nagel, Jennifer (2014) <i>Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction</i> , Chapter 2: Skepticism Moore, G. E. (1939) "Proof of an External World" ( <b><i>Last 5 pages only; start on p. 144 with "It seems to me that, so far from its being true..."</i></b> )
T 10/16			Mountain Day
Th 10/18			Rinard, Susanna (ms.) "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism"
S 10/21		A2	
T 10/23	Evidence of Error		Class canceled because of rally.
Th 10/25			Rinard, Susanna (ms.) "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism"
T 10/30			Cohen, G.A. (2000) "Paradoxes of Conviction" Elga, Adam (ms) "Lucky to be Rational"
Th 11/1			
T 11/6	Disagreement		Feldman, Richard. (2005) "Reasonable Religious Disagreements" Kelly, Tom (2005) "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement" ( <b>read pp. 178-181, 185-190, and 192-193</b> )
Th 11/8			
T 11/13	Groupthink		Nguyen, C. Thi (2018) "Escape the Echo Chamber" O'Rourke-Friel, Molly (ms) "Group Belief, Deliberation, and Justification" <b>Guest: Molly O'Rourke-Friel (UMass)</b>
Th 11/15			
T 11/20	Implicit Bias		Fine, Cordelia (2010) "We think, therefore you are" from <i>Delusions of Gender</i> Saul, Jennifer (2012) "Skepticism and Implicit Bias"
W 11/21		P1	

Date		Due	Reading
Th 11/22			No class (Thanksgiving).
T 11/27			Gendler, Tamar (2012) "On the Epistemic Cost of Implicit Bias"
Th 11/29			
T 12/4	Alternative Epistemologies		Anderson, Elizabeth (1995) "Knowledge, Human Interest, and Objectivity in Feminist Epistemology" Antony, Louise (2000) "Situating Feminist Epistemology"
Th 12/6			
T 12/11			Mills, Charles (1998) "Alternative Epistemologies"
T 12/18		P2	

### Requirements.

- Daily Writing (W1-W24): 15%
- Email Assignments (A1-A3): 6% total.
  - A1: 4%, A2: 6%
- Paper 1 (P1): 25%
- Paper 2 (P2): 35%
- Final 10% goes to whichever of the two final papers you do better on.

### Weekly Writing.

- **Why.** To guide you through the reading, help you prepare for class discussion, and practice writing and arguing.
- **What.** Answer reading questions (posted on Moodle). This is a brief assignment, so be direct — answer the question(s) and cite any source. Don't include introductory material, but do clearly define any jargon either in your own words or with your own examples. Most people's (not just students'!) writing is too wordy—once you are sure you've answered the question completely and defined/explained anything technical, you should err on the side of fewer rather than more words.
  - Note.** Your target audience for all writing in this class is an intelligent tween who is unfamiliar with the material. Your writing needs to be clear to *her*, not me or to your classmates.
- **When/how.** Submit the Weekly Writing assignments by 8 pm the night before class. On a normal week, for a Tuesday/Thursday class that's Monday. If there's no class on, e.g., Tuesday, submit by Wednesday night. Type up your answers, format them, double spaced, etc. Then copy/paste them into the Moodle text box. After you've done this, double check that nothing (content, formatting) got messed up in the process.
- **Feedback.** I'll mark these pass/fail within a week. If the submission is excellent, I will note that so you can see what earns that distinction. Otherwise, my feedback here will focus on how to improve. I won't always comment on these. I will provide more feedback toward the

beginning of the semester, when you're getting the hang of things, than at the end. You are always welcome to come to my office hours to discuss an assignment—whether or not I've commented on it.

- **Credit.** These are low-stakes assignments meant to help you learn. To pass these, all you need to do is write in clear, grammatical English, answer all parts of the question, don't bullshit,<sup>1</sup> and don't get it completely wrong. In other words, put in a good-faith effort, but don't worry if you haven't completely figured out the text. I don't expect that at this stage.

Note. All writing should be standard formatting (12 pt font, 1" margins, double spaced).

### Email Assignments.

- **Why.** To practice clear, accessible writing; to learn how much your own understanding improves when you're forced to break something down and present it to someone unfamiliar with the material (remember the uninformed but intelligent tween from above).
- **What.** Write an email to a friend explaining an argument or a philosophical problem we've discussed (to be assigned). Pick a real person—a friend, family member, or roommate who has never studied philosophy. Your email should be accessible and engaging, so minimize and explain any jargon and provide clear, concrete examples or explanations. State the problem and explain it in no more than 750 words. (Most people are too verbose err on the side of fewer words, but make sure you've addressed all necessary points.)
- **When/how.** Send the email to your friend and bcc me. Don't worry about double spacing, but do make sure you cite your sources (in whatever format seems most natural in an email).
- **Feedback.** I will return these with comments within two weeks.
- **Credit.** The goal here is to get the ideas right and you to communicate them successfully to an intelligent but uninformed reader. These assignments are thus evaluated on two dimensions: clarity (writing and content) and accuracy (content). See rubric for more details.
  - Note. Like the papers, these assignments become progressively more weighty. That's good: it means that you'll be writing weightier assignments after you've had practice and honed your skills. This is how improvement gets reflected in your grade.

### Papers.

- **Why.** To put together and demonstrate all the skills and knowledge you've acquired.
- **What.** You'll present and critically analyze an argument from the readings. You'll reconstruct it, explain it, and raise \*one\* objection to \*one\* premise. You'll consider a reply and then provide a verdict. I'll provide further instructions as well as a sample essay closer to the due date.
- **When/how.** Submit papers to Moodle as PDFs.
- **Feedback.** I will return paper 1 with comments within two weeks. I don't automatically provide comments on final papers, but am happy to do so for those who want them.
- **Credit.** Papers are evaluated along three dimensions: clarity, accuracy, and critical thought. I will provide a rubric with more details.

**How to approach the readings.** Some of the readings we will look at are short, but all are tricky. Give yourself time to digest them. I recommend a three step approach. **First**, skim the article. Note where the thesis and major argument(s) are. Don't worry too much about understanding

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<sup>1</sup> I mean 'bullshit' here in its ordinary sense, but especially in as Frankfurt defines it in "On Bullshit".

while you're skimming. You're just trying to get the lay of the land. (Also, you will absorb more than you realize.) **Second**, carefully read each piece *before* we discuss it in class. Use the reading questions to help focus your attention. Again, note where the action is: mark arguments, note their premises and conclusions. Along the way, jot down questions and confusions so you can raise them during our discussion. **Third**, skim the reading again after we've discussed it. It should be much easier to understand at this point. Edit your notes: correct any misunderstandings and jot down any new thoughts you have. (These notes will come in handy for later assignments.) If you're still unclear about something, get help: talk with classmates, come by my office hours, etc.

**Participation.** Philosophy is a communal activity, and you've chosen to join our community this semester. Don't talk just for the sake of talking, but also don't wait for brilliance or insight to hit you before raising your hand. Much of doing philosophy is about asking simple, clarificatory questions. I'll expect you to do at least that much regularly. As a rule of thumb, every student should, at least, ask one question during class. (This question can be one of the ones you jotted down during your reading.) Shy? Nervous? Me too! My heart still races sometimes when I raise my hand at a professional gathering or talk. 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. We all have our challenges and strengths. All of these are skills we must work on. If you have trouble speaking in class, please see me and we will work on it together—just as we would on any other aspect of the class that you find difficult.

**Attendance.** You are expected to attend every class. That's where the action happens, and where I give away all the answers. (Seriously. You can't succeed in this class without showing up.) If you're sick and contagious or not well enough to come in, of course, stay home. When you *do* miss a class, for any reason, get in touch with your classmates, check Moodle for handouts, and make sure you get caught up. *After* you've done all that, come see me in office hours with questions and comments on the readings.

**Late policy.** Three principles guide my late policy.

1. Work should be assessed on its quality and on whether it demonstrates learning.
2. Each assignment has a purpose; that purpose can only be fulfilled within a certain timeframe.
3. Deadlines allow us to organize our time and learning and to meet our goals.

Thus, late Daily Writing assignments will not be accepted for credit. Besides writing practice, these assignments fulfill three goals: (1) for you to practice working through and understanding the readings on your own, (2) to prepare you for class discussion, and (3) for you to show me where you're struggling before we begin discussions. These goals aren't met if you don't complete the assignment on time. (If you still want the learning, I'll happily look at a late assignment. But it won't get credit.)

Late *papers* will be accepted up until the day that we discuss them together in class (this day won't be announced, and will vary, but it will typically be within a week). After that, they will not be accepted for credit. However, you'll still want to get papers in by the due date otherwise I cannot guarantee you comments. This is not about punishing you for getting in late work. It's about enabling me to schedule my time.

Getting your assignments in on time allows us to stay together as a class—to discuss assignments after everyone has finished and long before the next assignment is due (so you have time to reflect and improve). We all have so many demands on our time, and we need to be able to plan ahead. If people complete assignments late, they fall behind, cannot contribute to class discussions, and can hold us back during assignment based in class activities. Worse yet, they hurt their own learning.

Meeting deadlines is thus an opportunity to show respect: respect for yourself, your time, and your learning; respect for your classmates' time and learning; and respect for my time and my teaching. That said, I won't be offended or assume you're disrespectful if you don't manage to do that. Things happen; we can't always do what is best. First and foremost, I'm here to help. So, don't hesitate to talk to me.

**A note about 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 daily and don't miss class. If you do miss class, check with your classmates. Gather some names and emails here, for convenience:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_
4. \_\_\_\_\_

Of course, you are always welcome to email me with any questions. But please keep in mind that there are a lot more of you than there are of me and modern digital communication demands are crazy-making. To stay sane:

- I don't check my email constantly, and not at all in the evenings or on weekends.
- I respond as promptly as I can, but not always on the same day.
- I do not answer questions that are clearly answered by the syllabus or assignment instructions. (I delete those emails.) Of course, after you've carefully examined the assignment *and* checked with your classmates, you shouldn't hesitate to ask me to clarify anything. These rules are here so that I can manage my time and respond promptly to urgent questions that need to be addressed.

**Secret assignment.** Good job! You found the (a?) secret assignment! Your job, for next time, is to Google "m&m clause". Then, briefly explain what the point of this secret assignment is. Tell me also whether you found it annoying, amusing, or what, and why. Finally, ask at least one question about the syllabus or the class, and share at least one thing you are concerned or excited about. Print this out bring it to the next class. Now keep reading. There might be more surprises.

**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."<sup>2</sup> I expect you will all honor the pledge you signed. Therefore, **everything you turn in should be your own**

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<sup>2</sup> [https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student\\_handbook](https://www.mtholyoke.edu/deanofstudents/student_handbook)

**work and in your own words.** If your discussions with friends, dogs, parents, etc., were helpful, cite them. Credit all sources appropriately, even (especially) Wikipedia and anything from your Googling bounty.

**Important.** It is a requirement of this class that you take the plagiarism tutorial (please do it again even if you've already done it): <https://sites.google.com/a/mtholyoke.edu/proper-use-of-sources-mhc/home/>. Do it before our next class and email me to let me know you have completed it. It is your responsibility to understand what constitutes academic dishonesty and to avoid it. Accidental plagiarism should not be possible. If in doubt, cite, cite, cite.

**Outside sources.** You *do not* need to read any additional material beyond the assigned reading—and I don't encourage it. If you think, it might be helpful to read one or two additional articles connected to your topic—especially if you're having trouble understanding it, I am happy to give you additional reading suggestions. You may also find searching the following sources helpful: [philpapers.org](http://philpapers.org), [plato.stanford.edu](http://plato.stanford.edu), and [mtholyoke.edu/lits](http://mtholyoke.edu/lits). Do not blindly rely on what you Google, however, and remember to *always* cite your sources—whatever they are (parents, friends, dogs, Wikis,...).

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

- \* 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.<sup>3</sup>
- \* There may be a SAW mentor in this course. If there is, \*go to them\*. They are there to read drafts, help you organize your thoughts, and so forth.
- \* In order to receive reasonable accommodations for a disability, you must register with the Office of AccessAbility Services (<https://www.mtholyoke.edu/accessability>). 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 how to accommodate you.
- \* If there is anything I can do to help you learn, don't hesitate to get in touch—even if you don't have an official accommodation.

**Electronics.** Please silence all devices and store them in your bag during class. This includes laptops. The empirical evidence is pretty clear that laptops in the classroom impede learning—sometimes they impede the learning of those using them, other times they impede the learning of the rest of the class. Laptops are super useful for taking detailed, transcript-like notes, but I don't want you doing that in this class. I want you to join in the discussion, not keep a written record of everything that is said. I'll often provide handouts that summarize the main points, and you will have your print outs of and notes on the readings in front of you. This, and some extra paper is all you need. *If you believe that your learning will suffer if you do not have access to certain technology, please let me know*—whether this is because you have an official accommodation from AccessAbility Services, or because you think you learn better a certain way. Be in touch either way.

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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.mtholyoke.edu/saw/peer/center>