Phil 5224G: Epistemology (Ethics of Belief)

# Course Overview

Meetings

T R 2:00 pm – 3:15 pm

Professor

Jordan MacKenzie

(Note: you can call me as Jordan, Prof. MacKenzie, or Dr. MacKenzie)

Phone

919-667-4001

Email

jmackenzie@vt.edu

Office Hours

11:30 am – 12:30 pm T and R, and by appointment

In person: MWH 239

Zoom: <https://virginiatech.zoom.us/j/4377473614>

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This course will run as a special topics seminar on the ‘ethics of belief’. We will ask questions like: does morality ever give us reasons to believe or disbelieve? Can we choose what we believe? Are people morally blameworthy for implicitly holding racist, sexist or classist beliefs? Are there ever situations where we ought to believe against evidence? In asking these questions, we’ll discuss topics like: implicit bias, fake news, conspiracy theorists, epistemic partiality, faith, self-deception, and epistemic injustice.

# Required Text

None.

All readings will be posted on Canvas.

# Background Knowledge Expectations

This course does not presuppose a background in philosophy. Key concepts will be discussed in class, and supplementary resources will be provided on an as-needed basis.

# Class Expectations and Policies

**1. Class Discussions:** Philosophy classes are only as good as the discussions that happen in them. As such, you will be expected to be active, respectful participants in class discussions. You are not required to have your cameras on for the duration of class, but it is strongly encouraged. Trust me—it will make the class go better for everyone.

**2. Accessibility**: I am committed to making this course accessible to everyone. If there is something that I can do to make this course more accessible for you, please come and speak to me. If you need disability-related accommodations, please contact VT’s Services for Students with Disabilities (<https://www.ssd.vt.edu/index.html>). Note, however, that you **do not need** to have an officially recognized or diagnosed disability to seek accommodations: you just have to come speak with me.

**3. Changes to the Syllabus**: This is a new course. As such, you should expect the syllabus to change—both as a response to student interest, and as a response to class pacing. I promise not to increase the workload associated with this class, and to give you a decent heads up about syllabi changes.

**4. COVID precautions:** Students are required to wear a mask at all times in this classroom. You are responsible for bringing your own mask. If you think that you might be at risk of having COVID (either due to symptoms or potential exposure), don’t come to class. Your absence will count as excused, and you do not need to provide me with proof of a positive test.

# Assignments—Graduate

1. **Attendance and Participation (10%):** Do the readings, show up for class regularly, and be an active, thoughtful, and respectful participant in class discussions. **Note: I understand that perfect attendance likely won’t be possible this semester. That’s alright! It’s more important that you’re an active participant when you’re in class than that you attend every class.**
2. **Comment Sheets (15%, 5% each)**: Graduate students are required to write three comment sheets on different readings throughout the term. Each comment sheet must be 2-3 double-spaced pages. You must explain the main argument (or an important sub-argument), ideally in premise-conclusion form. Then, you must raise an objection to that argument, explaining exactly how it undermines the argument. If you have space, you can consider how the author could respond.
3. **Teaching Assignment (15%):** Working in groups of 2-3, you will be responsible for teaching one class session. This assignment has the following parts: **First,** your group will set up a time to meet with me. You will prepare a lesson plan before this meeting, which we will discuss together.  **Second**, your group will teach your assigned class. You must record your teaching. I will evaluate the recording and give you pedagogical feedback. I will also provide you with a teaching letter,
4. **Long Abstract (15% total)**: you will be responsible for meeting with me to discuss potential term topics, and then writing a long abstract detailing one of those topics. You must also research conferences to which you could potentially submit this abstract/the paper that results from it.
5. **Draft Term Paper (5%)**: 3,000-5,000 words max. Based on feedback that you receive for your long abstract, you’ll then write a draft term paper. Even though this is a draft, you should take it seriously—I want full sentences, citations, and reasonable formatting.
6. **Peer Feedback Assignment (5% total).** Provide written feedback to a peer. This feedback should be substantive, and should address: structure, clarity, argument, engagement with secondary sources. You will be discussing this feedback with your peer in class.
7. **Final Term Paper (3,000-5,000 words): 35% total):** 3,000-5,000 words. Your final term paper should show appreciable growth from the draft paper. Final papers must be double spaced, nicely formatted, in Times New Roman (or equivalent) 12 point font, with proper citations.

# Grading Policies

1. **Resubmission**: I want you to succeed in this course. As such, you have the option of resubmitting any assignment in this course. If you are unhappy with a grade that you receive on an assignment, you have two weeks to rewrite it and resubmit it along with a paragraph describing how you have addressed the feedback that you received on the previous draft**.** You will not end up with a lower grade as a result of resubmission, but you may end up with the same grade. I do not provide feedback on rewrites.
2. **Anonymous Grading**:Please do not put your name on your papers—just write your student number.
3. **Late Assignments:** I will dock 5% of the assignment grade for every 24-hour period it is overdue. I am, however, **very generous about granting extensions** so long as you request them in advance of the deadline. In fact, I am willing to grant a *no questions asked* 24-hour extension on *any* assignment so long as you request it before the due date. I do not grant ‘retroactive extensions’, so make sure to ask for extensions before the assignment is due!
4. **Fake/Incorrect Submission:** In recent years, I’ve noticed an uptick in the number of students submitting blank pages, corrupted files, or the wrong documents in lieu of assignments. As of this semester, it is up to you to make sure that you’ve submitted the right file. If I receive any fake or incorrect documents, I’ll simply count the assignment as late.
5. **Citations**: Citations are required for all assignments. I don’t care what style you use, but you must include page numbers. A bibliography is not necessary unless you have more than three sources. Any paper with missing or inadequate citations will be docked 5%.
6. **Grade bumps**: I round final grades up to the nearest percent—so an 89.5% will be a 90%, but an 89.4% will not. If you are unsatisfied with your final grade, please know that I do not grant ‘grade bumps’ (beyond a half percent), and do not offer bonus assignments. If you make good use of my resubmission policy, this should not be an issue.
7. **Academic Integrity**: see official Virginia Tech policy below.

The Undergraduate Honor Code pledge that each member of the university community agrees to abide by states:

“As a Hokie, I will conduct myself with honor and integrity at all times. I will not lie, cheat, or steal, nor will I accept the actions of those who do.”

Students enrolled in this course are responsible for abiding by the Honor Code. A student who has doubts about how the Honor Code applies to any assignment is responsible for obtaining specific guidance from the course instructor before submitting the assignment for evaluation. Ignorance of the rules does not exclude any member of the University community from the requirements and expectations of the Honor Code.

Academic integrity expectations are the same for online classes as they are for in person classes. We strongly encourage all instructors to discuss the use of technology, and specifically discuss areas we know are problematic temptations for students such as Chegg, CourseHero, and GroupMe to discourage students from using them. When the semester starts is an appropriate time in addition to providing a kind reminder before exams and assignments about expectations related to these sites. Please make your students aware that we are able to effectively investigate these incidents. If you have any questions about these sites or discussing them with your students, please do not hesitate to call our office. All university policies and procedures apply in any Virginia Tech academic environment, and all students are expected to follow them.

For additional information about the Honor Code, please visit: https://www.honorsystem.vt.edu/

# Grading Scale

A grade in the ‘A’ range (90-93=A-, 94-96=A, 97-100=A+) demonstrates an impressive mastery of and insightful engagement with the course material. In written work, the A student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with precision and accuracy, develop criticisms that are original, persuasive, and well-developed. In class, the A student attends **at least 80% of classes** having completed the readings, and always or almost always makes exceptionally thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘B’ range (80-83=B-, 84-86=B, 87-89=B+) denotes competent mastery of and reasonable insight into the course material. The B student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments accurately and develop criticisms that are reasonably persuasive and well-developed. In class, the B student attends **at least 80% of classes**, typically completes the readings, and often makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘C’ range (70-73=C-, 74-76=C, 77-79=C+) denotes adequate comprehension and engagement with the course material. The C student is able to reconstruct philosophical arguments with some errors and develop criticisms that are generally relevant to the course material, if not convincing. In class, the C student attends **at least 70% of classes**, regularly does the readings, and sometimes makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

A grade in the ‘D’ range (60-63=D-, 64-66=D, 67-69) denotes a lack of comprehension of and engagement with the course material. The ‘D’ student is unable to accurately reconstruct philosophical positions or develop critiques relevant to the course material. In class, the D student struggles with attendance, shows little evidence of having completed the readings, and rarely makes thoughtful and respectful contributions to class discussions.

# Course Schedule

\*note: this schedule may be updated throughout the semester

**Part 1: Epistemological Questions**

**Unit 1: The History of the Ethics of Belief**

January 18: Introductions, no readings

January 20: Clifford, W. K. “The Ethics of Belief”, James, W. “The Will to Believe”

**Unit 2: Contemporary Evidentialism vs. Pragmatism**

January 25: Shah, N. “A New Argument for Evidentialism”

January 27: Rinard, S. “Against the New Evidentialism”

**Unit 3: Belief and Faith**

Feb 1: Buchak, L.  ‘Can It Be Rational to Have Faith?’

Feb 3: Preston Roedder, “Faith in Humanity”

**Unit 4: Pragmatic Encroachment**

Feb 8: Fantl, J. and McGrath, S.  “Evidence, Pragmatics, and Justification.”

Feb 10: Singh, K. “There is No Pragmatic Encroachment”

**Unit 5: Epistemic Peers**

Feb 15: Blanchard, J. “Unwelcome Epistemic Company”

Feb 17: Levy, N. “When is Company Unwelcome?”

**Part 2: Moral Questions**

**Unit 6: Moral Encroachment**

Feb 22: Moss, S. “Moral Encroachment”

Feb 24: Basu, R. “Can Beliefs Wrong?”

**Feb 25: Long Abstract Due**

**Unit 7: Epistemic Partiality**

Mar 1: Stroud, S. “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship”

**Unit 8: Can We Be Responsible for Beliefs?**

Mar 3: Adams, R. “Involuntary Sins”

**Part 3: Political Questions**

**Unit 9: Epistemic Injustice**

Mar 15: Fricker, M. “Epistemic Oppression and Epistemic Privilege”

Mar 17: Dotson, K. “Conceptualizing Epistemic Oppression”

**Unit 10: Standpoint Epistemology and Course Catch-Up**

Mar 22: Toole, B. “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression”

**Unit 11: Implicit Bias**

Mar 24: Levy, N. “Implicit Bias and the Ascription of Racism”

Mar 29: Yao, V. and Reis-Dennis, S. “I Love Women: An Explicit Explanation of Implicit Bias Results”

**Unit 12: Bullshit**

Mar 31: Frankfurt, H. “On Bullshit”

April 5: Cassam, Q. “Epistemic Insouciance”

**April 6: Draft Term Paper Due**

**Unit 13: Fake News and Echo Chambers**

Apr 7: Rini, R. “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

Apr 12: Nguyen, C.T. “Escape the Echo Chamber” (<https://aeon.co/essays/why-its-as-hard-to-escape-an-echo-chamber-as-it-is-to-flee-a-cult>)

**April 13: Peer Feedback Assignment Due**

**Apr 14: Peer Feedback Workshop**

Apr 19: Worsnip, A. “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources”

**Unit 14: Conspiracy Theories**

Apr 21: Cassam, Q. *Conspiracy Theories*, excerpt

**Unit 15: Empathy, Trust, Open-mindedness**

Apr 26: Nguyen, C.T. “Trust as an Unquestioning Attitude”

April 27:Bailey, O. “Empathy and Testimonial Trust”

Apr 28: Course Wrap Up

**May 8: Final Papers Due**