

## PHIL4040 – Contemporary Philosophy: Varieties of Skepticism

**Instructor:** Benjamin Winokur

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**Office hours / location:** by appointment // Ross South 414d

**Class time / location:** Wednesdays, 2:30-5:30PM, Ross South 421

Philosophers are frequently *skeptics* about various phenomena. Skeptics target various phenomena and argue that we lack, or might lack, sufficiently good reasons to believe in their existence and/or our epistemic access to them. This course offers a survey of various skeptical positions in major debates within contemporary epistemology. We move from analyses of skeptical views concerning knowledge generally, to skepticism about knowledge of the external world, knowledge of other minds, and knowledge of our own minds. As a change of pace, we turn to skeptical views about normative facts such as moral truths. Finally, we conclude with an exploration of skepticism about testimony in the so-called ‘fake news era’. Throughout the seminar, special attention is paid to the question of the skeptic’s place in philosophy: can we really be expected to believe the conclusions of skeptical arguments, or are skeptical arguments just puzzles created by philosophers with too much time on their hands?

### Learning Objectives

By the end of the course, the student should be able to:

- 1) Understand and engage with contemporary skeptical arguments in philosophy
- 2) Compose arguments for or against contemporary skeptical arguments in philosophy

### Assignments

#### *In-Class / Appointment Participation & Attendance—(10%)*

You must make a concerted effort to participate in class discussions frequently throughout the seminar. Participation can take a variety of forms, both critical and not, so long as you are actively engaged with your peers, myself, and course materials. Meeting by appointment counts toward participation. Your grade is evaluated based on participation quality and frequency.

#### *Online Participation—(10%):*

You will be asked to participate in weekly Moodle discussions, where you must produce comments or ask questions regarding the readings prior to class. These will be addressed in class discussion / online. *Each week, discussion questions and comments must be posted no later than three hours prior to class.* You must participate in at least 7 moodle discussions. This portion of the grade is evaluated holistically: factors such as post frequency, quality, punctuality, and civility are all considered.

*Two Short Essays / One Long Essay—(45%)*

You have two options for submitting essay work toward your final grade. On the first option, you will write two short essays near the middle and end of the semester. The first short essay length will be between 1500-1800 words (excluding bibliography); it is worth 20% of your final grade. The second short essay length will be between 1800-2100 words (excluding bibliography); it is worth 25% of your final grade. Possible topics will be suggested for both essays, though you must speak with me in advance if you desire to write on a different topic.

On the second option, you will write one long essay to be submitted near the end of the course. The long essay will be between 3500-4200 words (excluding bibliography) and will be worth 45% of your final grade. Again, possible suggestions for the long essay will be suggested, though you must speak with me in advance if you desire to write on a different topic.

*Essay Proposal(s)—(5%)*

If you elect to write two short essays, you must provide me with a 300-word proposal for each essay. Each Proposal must include (A) a thesis statement, and (B) a brief description of a central argument you are critiquing / defending. Each proposal is due one week before the corresponding paper is due. Each proposal is worth 2.5% of your final grade.

If you elect to write one long essay, you must submit a 600-word proposal which includes (A) a thesis statement, and (B) a brief description of a central argument you are critiquing / defending. This proposal is due two weeks before the essay is due. It is worth 5% of your final grade.

*Reflection Pieces—(10%):*

Twice throughout the term, you must submit to me a 300-600 word reflection piece on a course reading. Your reflection can offer a criticism of the reading, or you can ask questions relating to possible further research on a relevant theme. So long as the contents of your reflections are philosophical and go beyond mere exegesis, the particulars are for you to decide. Each reflection is worth 5% of your final grade.

You can submit a reflection piece in one of two ways: the first way is to submit it to me at the *beginning* of the seminar where the reading you have reflected on is being discussed. If you do this, I grade the assignment with the understanding that your thoughts have been developed without the benefit of class discussion. Alternatively, you can submit the piece to me any time before the *subsequent* seminar begins. If you submit this way, I grade your piece with the understanding that you have had additional time / intellectual resources with which to write it.

*In-Class Quizzes—(20%):*

Five times throughout the term, you will be given ten minutes to answer one or two short questions related to that day's readings. Quizzes are aimed at testing content comprehension. Four of your five best quiz grades will each be worth up to 5% of your final grade.

***NOTE:** you must satisfactorily complete assignments of each type in order to pass this course—you cannot pass, for instance, if you accumulate 50 grade points by completing only course papers and online comments, or by merely participating and writing quizzes.*

## Seminar Schedule

\*\*\*All course readings will be available via Moodle unless otherwise indicated\*\*\*

**September 5<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 1:** Introduction

**\*Suggested Readings\*:** §1 of “Skepticism” Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) entry by Peter Klein; “Characterizing Skepticism’s Import” by Jill Rusin

**September 12<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 2:** Knowledge Skepticism

**Readings:** “Contemporary Responses to Agrippa’s Trilemma” by Peter Klein; “The Pyrrhonian Problematic” by Markus Lammenranta

**September 19<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 3:** External World Skepticism (1)

**Readings:** “Meditations” I-II by René Descartes ([public domain](#)); Chapters 1&2 of “The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism” by Barry Stroud ([available as an e-book through the York library website](#))

**September 26<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 4:** External World Skepticism (2)

**Readings:** “Skepticism and Realism” by John Heil; “Wittgenstein on Knowledge and Certainty” by Danièle Moyal-Sharrock

**October 3<sup>rd</sup>**

**Seminar 5:** External World Skepticism (3)

**Readings:** “Brains in a Vat” by Hilary Putnam; “Epistemology Externalized” by Donald Davidson

**October 10<sup>th</sup>**

**Reading week (no class!):** \*\*\*FIRST SHORT ESSAY PROPOSAL DUE\*\*\*

**October 17<sup>th</sup>**

\*\*\*FIRST SHORT ESSAY DUE\*\*\*

**Seminar 6:** Other Minds Skepticism (1)

**Readings:** “Other Minds” SEP entry by Alec Hyslop, §1 & §3.1; “The Analogical Inference to Other Minds” by Alec Hyslop & Frank Jackson; “The Scientific Inference to Other Minds” by Robert Pargetter

**October 24<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 7:** Other Minds Skepticism (2)

**Readings:** “Perception and Other Minds” by Fred Dretske; “Testimony and Other Minds” by Anil Gomes

**October 31<sup>st</sup>**

**Seminar 8:** Self-Knowledge Skepticism (1)

**Readings:** “Self-Knowledge” SEP entry by Brie Gertler, §1-§2.2; “Self-Knowledge” chapter 4 §4.1-4.3.1, chapter 5 §5.1-5.4

**November 7<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 9:** Self-Knowledge Skepticism (2)

**Readings:** “First Person Authority” by Donald Davidson; “Self-Knowledge and Commitments” by Annalisa Coliva

**November 14<sup>th</sup>**

**Seminar 11:** Normative Skepticism (1)

**Readings:** Chapter 1 (abridged) of “Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong” by John Mackie

**November 21<sup>st</sup>**

**Seminar 11:** Normative Skepticism (2)

**Readings:** “Pain for the Moral Error Theory? A New Companions in Guilt Argument” by Guy Fletcher;  
“Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism” by Katia Vavova

**November 28<sup>th</sup>**

**LAST CLASS: \*\*\*SECOND SHORT ESSAY PROPOSAL & LONG ESSAY PROPOSAL DUE \*\*\***

**Seminar 12:** Skepticism about Testimony in the Digital Age

**Readings:** “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles” by C. Thi. Nguyen; “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”  
by Regina Rini

**December 5<sup>th</sup>**

**\*\*\*SECOND SHORT ESSAY DUE\*\*\***

**December 12<sup>th</sup>**

**\*\*\*LONG ESSAY DUE\*\*\***

## **Lateness and Extension Policy**

All late assignments will receive a penalty of 5% per day unless an extension has been granted or you produce exculpatory documentation (such as medical documentation or other information of sufficient personal significance). If you require an extension on a deadline for any assignment, your request must be made *at least 3 days* before it is due.

## **Academic Integrity**

All students must be aware of and comply with York University's academic integrity policy: <https://www.library.yorku.ca/web/research-learn/academic-integrity>

### **Here are some additional comments about academic integrity in PHIL 4040:**

- 1) Plagiarism refers to any case where an author takes material from a source without citing it. Even if you *accidentally* fail to cite a source, doing so counts as plagiarism. Likewise, if you *accidentally* send me a plagiarized paper, no exceptions will be made.
- 2) *Self-plagiarism is plagiarism*. If you have past work of your own that you wish to use while completing an assignment, speak with me first.
- 3) Footnotes, endnotes, and in-text citations are all legitimate ways of citing a source. Whenever possible, please provide page numbers for the cited passage(s).
- 4) Please also include bibliographies at the end of your essays. You may use any humanities-specific format as long as you use only one per assignment.
- 5) In general, acceptable *primary research sources* are scholarly works from academic journals, books, and anthologies. Student essays that do not engage sufficiently with primary sources *will* be downgraded accordingly on relevant assignments.
- 6) Sparknotes is not a scholarly source and should not be consulted in your research. Relatedly, Wikipedia and Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP) entries, while generally high quality, are considered *secondary sources* that do not excuse you from also consulting primary sources in your research.
- 7) Alongside Wikipedia and SEP, there are other legitimate secondary sources that you may consult for your course work, such as uploaded presentation slides from authors whose work has since been published in scholarly venues, or whose reputation as a published author legitimates (to some extent) their unpublished work. Please consult me if you are unsure about the integrity of any such source.
- 8) I will never adjust grades upwards just because you ask nicely.

## **Email / Appointment Policies**

**E-mails may take me up to 24 hours to respond to.** If I do not respond within 24 hours, please send me another e-mail. Please include the course code PHIL4040 in the subject line of all emails. Please note your name at the beginning of the body of all e-mails.

**Please book appointments at least 2 days in advance** to meet by appointment. Meeting by appointment is the best way for you to have your philosophical inquiries answered in detail.

## **Moodle**

All students enrolled in this course are automatically added to a Moodle page (<https://moodle.yorku.ca>). All announcements related to the course will be posted there. It is imperative that you check Moodle often. To login, use your York ID and password.

## **Useful Resources**

Students with disabilities or other issues are strongly encouraged to discuss their issues with me and/or to use the services provided by York University's counseling and disability services:

- 1) York's Learning Disability Services: <http://lds.info.yorku.ca>
- 2) York's Personal Counselling Services: <http://pcs.info.yorku.ca>
- 3) York's Crisis Intervention Services: <http://pcs.info.yorku.ca/in-case-of-crisis/>

For additional help:

- 1) On Writing Philosophy: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- 2) On Reading Philosophy: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

## **Inclusivity and Participation Policies:**

In seminar, you are expected to act courteously toward your peers. This, I hope, is obvious, but it is worth stressing some particulars:

- 1) You are expected to pay attention to people when they speak. It is my view that using electronics while others are talking clearly indicates disinterest and disrespect. I reserve the right to ban electronic interfaces from use in class if students become serially distracted by their presence. Exceptions may be made for students who have *demonstrable need* of said devices for educational purposes, but note that there is ample research to suggest that the use of electronics in class actively harms yours and others learning *even when used for educational purposes* (see the following link):

[https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vmQ548UJ0WnoSwkfREU3iR-m2Co1xTWzGkhcv6bFbY8/edit#slide=id.g23ec572590\\_0\\_9](https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1vmQ548UJ0WnoSwkfREU3iR-m2Co1xTWzGkhcv6bFbY8/edit#slide=id.g23ec572590_0_9)

- 2) If you enter into conflict with me or another student, I ask that you bring it to my attention before allowing things to escalate. I encourage you not to worry about accusing me of problematic behaviour. I am unwaveringly committed to reevaluating my behaviour if, for any reason, a student is made uncomfortable by it. Nobody is perfect. Let us try to learn from each other.