

## Belief, Knowledge, and Truth

**Instructor:** Dr. Dustin Stokes  
**Section:** PHLB20H3 LEC01  
Lectures Tu 3-4/Th 2-4 Science Wing 143  
**Office:** PL103-#23 (Science Wing playing field module)  
**Office Hours:** Tues. 12-2/and by appointment  
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### Course description

*I am sitting with a philosopher in the garden; he says again and again  
“I know that that is a tree,” pointing to a tree that is near us. Someone else  
arrives and hears this, and I tell him: “This fellow is not insane. We are only  
doing philosophy.”*

~Ludwig Wittgenstein, from ‘On Certainty’

The passage from Wittgenstein quoted above evokes an array of images and conceptions regarding philosophers (some of them true, some of them not, most of them amusing). This fact alone makes it worthy of mention. But it is interesting for another reason: it intimates a cluster of traditional philosophical questions that constitute the subject matter of this course. We, like Wittgenstein’s student, see things in the world around us. Based on these sensations and others, we form beliefs and, one would hope, acquire knowledge. We also reason from existing beliefs to form new ones and again, one would hope, acquire knowledge. We *know* that we are presently sitting in a classroom, that we are surrounded by desks, chalkboards, and other human beings, that we are in a building situated in a university situated in the province of Ontario situated in the country of Canada..., that the people around us have, like us, thoughts and feelings, and so on. We also know that  $2+2=4$ , that Stephen Harper is the PM of Canada, and that mammals have backbones. These are all things we take ourselves to know. Along comes the philosopher, forcing, among others, the following questions. What is the nature of your so-called knowledge? What conditions must be in place for you to know that such-and-such is the case, that *that* is a tree for example? What kinds of evidence must you have to know something? Are there reasons to doubt that you know what you think you know? Questions like these are the sort puzzling Wittgenstein’s poor student, rendering him an apparently uncertain, confused skeptic. We too will consider these and like questions. Our hope is that at the end of the day, we can with confidence make the very same assertion: “I know that that is a tree.”

### Text

Moser, P. and vander Nat, A. (2003) *Human Knowledge: Classical and Contemporary Approaches*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Ed., Oxford University Press.

Additional readings will be made available online via the blackboard course website.

### Assignments/Requirements:

30% Short paper 1	(DUE 10/2)
30% Short paper 2	(DUE 17/3)
40% Final exam	

### Assignment/Exam dates

**Short paper 1: Tuesday 10 February** (questions assigned 3 February)

**Short paper 2: Tuesday 17 March** (questions assigned 10 March)

**Final exam: TBA**

The short papers might also be thought of as take-home exams. You will be given a short list of questions, from which you will choose and respond to one. The questions will be distributed in class, and the papers are to be submitted the following week at the start of class. Your responses should be concise and to the point, and should be somewhere in the range of 750-1250 words.

The final exam will be comprehensive and essay-style, but like the short papers, you will have choices between questions.

### **General:**

This is a writing intensive course. All of the work/examinations will be written. Your papers will be graded not only on content, but also on grammar, writing mechanics, style, etc.

All paper/exam dates are listed on this syllabus. Therefore, late work/exams are allowed only if arranged at least one week prior to the scheduled due date/exam date. Unexcused late work will be penalized accordingly.

*If you require special test-taking or note-taking accommodations, please see me.*

### **(Tentative) Reading/discussion schedule:**

*Fundamentals and history*

**Week 1** Introduction  
Jan 6/8 Plato, excerpts, p. 35-61 (t)

**Week 2** Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (t)  
Jan 13/15

**Week 3** Locke-excerpts from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (t)  
Jan 20/22 Berkeley-excerpts from *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (t)

**Week 4** Hume excerpts from *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (t)  
Jan 27/29

*Perception and basic knowledge*

**Week 5** Reid-excerpts from *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (t)  
Feb 3/5 Russell-‘Appearance, Reality, and Knowledge by Acquaintance’ (t)

**Week 6** Ayer- ‘The Argument from Illusion’ (@)  
Feb 10/12 Austin-‘The Argument from Illusion’ (@)

**Week 7** **NO CLASS-READING WEEK**  
Feb 17/19

*Skepticism and fallibility*

**Week 8** Williams, ‘Agrippa’s Trilemma’ (@)  
Feb 24/26 Moore, ‘Proof of an External world’ (t)

**Week 9** Lewis, ‘Elusive Knowledge’ (@)  
Mar 3/5

*Knowledge and epistemic justification*

**Week 10** BonJour, 'Can Empirical Knowledge Have a Foundation?' (@)  
Mar 10/12

**Week 11** Sosa, 'The Raft and the Pyramid...' (t)  
Mar 17/19

**Week 12** BonJour, 'Internalism and externalism' (@)  
Mar 24/26 Goldman, 'What is justified belief' (@)

**Week 13** Bach, 'A rationale for reliabilism' (@)  
Mar 31/Apr 2 Gettier, 'Is knowledge justified true belief?' (t)

**(t) Course text (Moser and vander Nat)**

**(@) available online via blackboard course website**

**Resources:**

All of the readings will be primary sources. Needless to say, much of this material will be challenging. You might find some of the following resources helpful.

-For good introductory books on theories of knowledge and epistemology, try Williams, M. (2001) *Problems of Knowledge*, Oxford University Press or Bonjour, L. (2002) *Epistemology*, Rowman and Littlefield.

-For resource-style texts on epistemology, try either *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology* (1999) ed. Greco, J. and Sosa, E. or *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (2002) ed. Moser, P.

-For general philosophy resources, I suggest both *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, (1999) ed. Audi, R. and *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, (1994) ed. Blackburn, S. Online, try the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy at <http://plato.stanford.edu/>