

## **PHI 3500: Theory of Knowledge** **Course Syllabus**

Instructor: Dr. Mark Satta

Email: mark.satta@wayne.edu

Office Hours: Tuesday 2-4pm and by appointment

Class Location: Online (Asynchronous)

Term: Fall 2020

Class Dates: Sept. 1 – Dec. 14

### **Course Description:**

This course is an introduction to theory of knowledge. Theory of knowledge, also called epistemology, is the branch of philosophy that deals with what knowledge is and how we can know things. Key concepts examined in theory of knowledge include truth, belief, reasons, evidence, and justification. In this course we will address questions like:

- What is knowledge, and why is it valuable?
- What is truth, and why is it valuable?
- Do we really know anything?
- What does it mean to know something anyway?
- Which of our beliefs are justified and how can we tell?
- When should we trust someone else's testimony?
- What makes someone an expert?
- How does our identity shape what we know?
- Should we modify our beliefs because other people disagree with us?
- Can we know things about religion and morality?
- How should we address misinformation on the internet?

### **Learning Outcomes:**

During the semester you will probably encounter some view that you like and others that you do not like. My goal is *not* to convince you to adopt any particular view. Rather my goals are that by the end of the course you will be able to do the following:

- Demonstrate a basic understanding of some of the key issues and debates in epistemology.
- Evaluate the quality and basis of your own beliefs through productive self-reflection.
- Differentiate assessments regarding the truth of a claim versus assessments regarding the epistemic foundation for a claim. (Don't worry if that doesn't make sense yet. We'll work on making sense of it together!)
- Apply critical thinking skills to assess arguments and to epistemic claims.
- Express your own positions on issues in epistemology using clear, accessible prose.
- Identify way in which epistemology impacts our daily lives.
- Examine issues in epistemology from multiple perspectives.

**Required Texts:** Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, Oxford University Press, 2014, ISBN: 9780199661268.

All other readings for this course will be provided on the course webpage. See the "Weekly Module" heading in this syllabus for more detail.

**Grading:**

Weekly Short Answer Quizzes	60% (15 quizzes at 4% each)
Final Paper Rough Draft	10%
Final Paper	30%

**Grading Scale:**

- A if  $\geq 93\%$
- A- if between  $90\% \leq$  and  $< 93\%$
- B+ if between  $87\% \leq$  and  $< 90\%$
- B if between  $83\% \leq$  and  $< 87\%$
- B- if between  $80\% \leq$  and  $< 83\%$
- C+ if between  $77\% \leq$  and  $< 80\%$
- C if between  $73\% \leq$  and  $< 77\%$
- C- if between  $70\% \leq$  and  $< 73\%$
- D+ if between  $67\% \leq$  and  $< 70\%$
- D if between  $63\% \leq$  and  $< 67\%$
- D- if between  $60\% \leq$  and  $< 63\%$
- F if  $< 60\%$ : F

**Weekly Module:** Prior to the start of each week, I will post a new module on Canvas that contains all the content for that week. (For example, at the start of the third week of the term I will add a module called “Week 3” that will include all content assigned in the third week of the term.) A complete assignment schedule is also listed at the end of this syllabus.

**Weekly Checklists:** Among the things included in the weekly modules will be a document called the “Weekly Checklist.” The Weekly Checklist lists any and all readings or other assignments due that week. If you do everything on the checklist, you will be doing everything that’s required of you. I would recommend referring to the checklists often to make sure that you are not missing anything. (If it would be helpful feel free to print out the checklists each week and cross off assignments as you go.)

**Weekly Quizzes:** Each week, you will be assigned a quiz. The quiz will typically have 3 or 4 questions that can each be sufficiently responded to with one or two substantial paragraphs. The goal of the quizzes is to test your understanding of the week’s material. Weekly quizzes will be made available in Canvas at the start of the week in which they are assigned (on that Monday by 5pm). The quizzes will remain open until the end of the day the following Sunday (i.e. 11:59pm on the Sunday occurring six days after the quiz is made available). There will be a total of 15 quizzes assigned during the semester, which constitute 60% of your final grade.

Each quiz will be worth a total of 4 points. Quizzes will be scored as follows:

- 1 point = student submitted the quiz and wrote something in response to at least one of the questions.
- 2 points = student gave a good faith effort to respond to the questions but showed little understanding.
- 3 points = student gave a good faith effort to respond to the questions and showed basic understanding.
- 4 points = student gave a good faith effort to respond to the questions and showed clear understanding.

**Final Paper:** You will be assigned to write a final paper that is between 1,500-3,500 words long. This will be a persuasive paper in which you argue for a particular thesis relating to one of the topics covered in this course. During Week 7 of the course, I will provide you with additional information on my expectations for the paper. I will also provide advice on how to select a paper topic and how to find

sources for your research for this paper. A draft of your paper will be due at the end of Week 12 of the course. I will provide you with feedback on the paper by the end of Week 13. Your final paper will be due by **Friday, December 18 at 5pm.**

**Extra Credit:** I will provide opportunities to obtain extra credit. Here is one opportunity you have right now: Read the whole syllabus and then send me an email letting me know you've read the whole syllabus. For this you will receive a 1-point increase on your final grade. Feel free to include a meme or picture you enjoy when you send your email letting me know you've read the whole syllabus. More information about additional extra credit opportunities will be given later on in the semester.

**Optional Zoom Discussion Sessions:** Every other week, I will host an open discussion session via Zoom. During that time, students are welcome to log in and ask me questions about the course material. You may attend with video on or off. You can ask questions vocally or you can type questions into the chat function. These sessions will function as a time for you to talk with and learn from both me and each other. Times for Zoom discussion will be announced well in advance of each session. These Zoom sessions are all voluntary. You will not be penalized in any way if you choose not to attend Zoom discussion sessions.

**Office Hours:** I will be available for weekly office hours via Zoom. Students can sign up for a Zoom office hours appointment using the Canvas calendar for this course. For students who cannot meet during my regularly scheduled office hours, please email me and I am happy to arrange another time to meet over Zoom.

**Plagiarism & Cheating:** Plagiarism, cheating, or any other form of academic dishonesty is unacceptable. Students should familiarize themselves with the Student Code of Conduct available here: <http://doso.wayne.edu/student-conduct/index.html>.

In the event that it is discovered that you have violated the code, you will, at a minimum, fail the assignment connected to the code violation. I also reserve the right to fail you for the course or to seek other penalties if they are appropriate. If at any point during the semester you find yourself unsure whether something would count as plagiarism or a violation of the Student Code of Conduct, please ask me. I'm more than happy to provide you with additional feedback and information.

**Disability Accommodation:** Wayne State University is committed to providing a welcoming and supportive environment for individuals with disabilities. I share this commitment. Wayne State University offers a variety of accommodations and services for students with documented disabilities. If you have a documented disability that requires academic adjustments, you should email me by the end of the first week of class to ensure we have time to make proper arrangements. More details about Wayne State's disability accommodations can be found here: <https://studentdisability.wayne.edu/accommodations>.

**Religious Observances:** Wayne State is also committed to providing a welcoming and supportive environment for individuals of all faiths. I share this commitment too. It is University policy to respect the faith and religious obligations of its students. Because of the extraordinary variety of religious affiliations of the Wayne State student body, our academic calendar does not make provisions for religious holidays. Thus, students with classes or examinations that conflict with their religious observances are expected to notify their instructors well in advance so that mutually agreeable alternatives may be worked out. Please notify me at least two weeks in advance of such needs (the

obvious exception being observances within the first two weeks of class).

**Nondiscrimination Policy:** Wayne State University is committed to a policy of non-discrimination and equal opportunity in all of its operations. I share this commitment as well. This policy embraces all persons regardless of race, color, sex (including gender identity), national origin, religion, age, sexual orientation, familial status, marital status, height, weight, disability, or veteran status. Wayne State also expressly forbids sexual harassment and retaliation against an individual for filing a complaint of discrimination or harassment. Please let me or another faculty/staff member know if you are experiencing harassment. More details about Wayne State's nondiscrimination policy can be found here: [https://oeo.wayne.edu/pdf/affrm\\_actn\\_policy.pdf](https://oeo.wayne.edu/pdf/affrm_actn_policy.pdf).

**Campus Emergency:** In the unexpected occurrence of a major campus emergency, I reserve the right to alter course requirements, deadlines, and grading percentages in response to emergency circumstances. If such changes are made, I will do my best to make changes that are fair to all students. To the extent feasible, I will solicit input from students before making any changes.

**Reading Schedule:** What follows is a list of the topics we will cover and the week in which we will cover them. It also lists the materials assigned each week. All readings will be posted on Canvas under the module corresponding to the week in which they are assigned. Due dates for all major assignments are also listed. I reserve the right to make alterations to this list if need be (although I don't anticipate doing so). Any alterations to this list will be clearly indicated on the course website.

**Week 1: What is theory of knowledge/epistemology?** (Aug 31 – Sept 6)

- Chapter 1 of *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Introduction), by Jennifer Nagel
- "Systems of Belief," Philosophy Bites Podcast with Jonathan Glover

**Week 2: Why do truth and knowledge matter?** (Sept 7 – Sept 13)

- "Truisms about Truth," by Michael P. Lynch
- "Epistemic Value and What We Care About," by Linda Zagzebski

**Week 3: The Nature of Knowledge and Types of Justification** (Sept 14 – Sept 20)

- Chapter 4 of *Knowledge* (Analysis of Knowledge), by Jennifer Nagel
- Chapter 5 of *Knowledge* (Internalism & Externalism), by Jennifer Nagel

**Week 4: Skepticism: Part I** (Sept 21 – Sept 27)

- Excerpt from *Deliverance from Error* (paragraphs 6-17), by Al-Ghazali
- *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Meditations 1 & 2), by Rene Descartes

**Week 5: Skepticism: Part II** (Oct 5 – Oct 11)

- "The Simulation Argument," Philosophy Bites Podcast with Nick Bostrom
- Chapter 2 of *Knowledge* (Scepticism), by Jennifer Nagel

**Week 6: Skepticism: Part III** (Sept 28 – Oct 4)

- Chapter 7 of *Knowledge* (Shifting Standards?), by Jennifer Nagel
- "Reasoning One's Way Out of Skepticism," by Susanna Rinard

**Week 7: Ethics of Belief** (Oct 12 – Oct 18)

- “The Ethics of Belief,” by W. K. Clifford
- “The Will to Believe,” by William James

**Week 8: Testimony** (Oct 19 – Oct 25)

- Chapter 6 of *Knowledge* (Testimony), by Jennifer Nagel
- “The Vegetable Lamb of Tartary,” by Cailin O’Connor and James Owen Weatherall
- “Epistemic Injustice,” by Huzeýfe Demirtas from 1,000 Word Philosophy

**Week 9: Expertise** (Oct 26 – Nov 1)

- “Expertise,” by Jamie Watson from 1,000 Word Philosophy
- “Democracy, Public Policy, and Lay Assessments of Scientific Testimony” (Parts I and II), by Elizabeth Anderson
- “We Are All Confident Idiots,” by David Dunning

**Week 10: Standpoint Epistemology** (Nov 2 – 8)

- Sections 1-3 of “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” by Briana Toole
- **Final Paper Thesis Statement due by 11:59PM on Nov 8**  
*\*\*\*only one reading so you have more time to work on your thesis statement and to VOTE\*\*\**

**Week 11: Epistemic Injustice** (Nov 9 – 15)

- Sections 4-5 of “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression,” by Briana Toole
- “Tracking Epistemic Violence, Tracking Practices of Silencing,” by Kristie Dotson

**Week 12: Disagreement** (Nov 16 – 22)

- “Disagreement as Evidence,” by David Christensen
- “Which Experts Should You Listen to During the Pandemic?” Nathan Ballantyne and David Dunning
- **Final Paper Rough Draft due by 11:59PM on Nov 22**

**Week 13: Conspiracy Theories** (Nov 23 – Nov 29)

- “Conspiracy Theories,” Philosophy Bites Podcast with Quassim Cassam
- “Is Conspiracy Theorizing Irrational?” by Neil Levy

**Week 14: Religious and Moral Beliefs** (Nov 30 – Dec 6)

- “Moral Testimony,” by Annaleigh Curtis from 1,000 Word Philosophy
- “Religion and Knowledge,” interview of Keith DeRose conducted by Gary Gutting

**Week 15: Theory of Knowledge, the Internet, and Epistemic Virtue** (Dec 7 – Dec 13)

- “Escape the Echo Chamber,” C. Thi Nguyen
- “Skepticism, Tribalism, and Humble Persistence,” by Jason Baehr
- **Final paper due by Friday, December 18 at 5PM EST.**