

Skepticism

PHIL 306
Spring 2019

MWF 9-9:50am
James Blair Hall 201

Syllabus

Instructor

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Office Hours: WF 12pm-1:30pm
(and by appointment)
James Blair Hall, room 124

What Is This Class About?

Are you living in a computer simulation right now? Is it reasonable to believe that you aren't? What sort of evidence might count in favor of such a belief? In this course, we'll confront challenges to the basic pre-supposition that knowledge about the external world is possible. The first two units will survey the history of modern skepticism, from Descartes's method of doubt to Bostrom's simulation argument, along with several of the various attempts to avoid commitment to skepticism. In the final unit we'll look at a few additional skeptical worries; for instance, that tables don't exist, and that we die every time we fall asleep.

This is a course in *epistemology*, the study of knowledge – what it is, and when and how we acquire it. More broadly, this is also a course in *philosophy*, the study of the world, and our place within it. Our broader goal will be to make you a better reasoner; i.e., ultimately, I hope to help you to (i) be able to think more carefully and critically, (ii) be able to supply *reasons* for your beliefs, and (iii) acquire the necessary tools to investigate philosophical issues on your own.

Assigned Readings

There is no textbook for this course. Assigned readings will be provided as pdf files, accessible under "Assigned Readings" on our course website, here:*

<https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/phil306/phil306.html>

* Exception: Readings from Michael Huemer's *Skepticism and the Veil of Perception* (abbreviated *SVP*; see weeks 6, 7, & 9) will be available on [Blackboard](#).

Course Requirements

1. *Exams (35%)*. You will take a mid-term exam (15%) and a final exam (20%).
2. *Papers (35%)*. You will write two papers. The first (15%) will be a short diagnostic paper, 900-1200 words (i.e., 3 - 4 pages), and the second (20%) will be a longer paper, 1500-2100 words in length (i.e., 5 - 7 pages). *More info: TBA.*
3. *Informal Writings (10%)*. You will write 11 informal reading response papers of 250-350 words each (~1 page). Your lowest score will be dropped; i.e., your 10 best scores will constitute your informal writing assignment grade (1% each). *More info: TBA.*
4. *Quizzes (10%)*. You will take a total of 11 short reading quizzes. Your lowest quiz score will be dropped; i.e., your 10 best scores will constitute your quiz grade (1% each).
6. *Participation (10%)*. A portion of your grade will depend on your ability to come to class (on time and prepared), participate in class discussion, and refrain from being disruptive, falling asleep, sending text messages, or surfing the internet.

Course Policies

Frequently Asked Questions

Answers to frequently asked questions can be found here: <https://rintintin.colorado.edu/~vancecd/faq.pdf>
Two notes: (1) You are responsible for reading the FAQ by the end of the first week of class. (2) Please consult both this syllabus and the FAQ before consulting me with any general questions.

Academic Integrity

All students of the College of William & Mary are responsible for knowing and adhering to the academic integrity honor code policy of this institution. Violations of this policy include: cheating, plagiarism, aid of academic dishonesty, fabrication, lying, and stealing. More information about the honor code can be found at: https://www.wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/communityvalues/studenthandbook/honor_system/

NOTE: *Students who are found to be in violation of the honor code will be subject to both academic sanctions from the faculty member (i.e., you will automatically receive an F for the course) as well as non-academic sanctions (which include reporting to the Honor Council, academic probation, suspension, or expulsion).*

Student Conduct

Students and faculty each have a responsibility for maintaining an appropriate learning environment. Those who fail to adhere to the code of conduct may be subject to discipline. More information at: wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentconduct/studenthandbook/student_code_of_conduct/index.php

Disability & Accessibility Services

If you qualify for accommodations because of a disability or any issue affecting accessibility, please submit to me a letter from Student Accessibility Services in a timely manner so that your needs may be addressed. More information can be found in the Campus Center (room 109), 757-221-2510, or at: wm.edu/offices/deanofstudents/services/studentaccessibilityservices/.

Religious Observances

Campus policy regarding religious observances requires that faculty make every effort to reasonably and fairly deal with all students who, because of religious obligations, have conflicts with scheduled exams, assignments, or required attendance. Please let me know by the end of the drop/add period about any such conflicts, so that we can resolve them. More information at: wm.edu/about/administration/provost/forfacstaff/holidays/religiousguidelines/index.php.

Discrimination and Harassment

The College of William & Mary policies on Discrimination and Sexual Harassment apply to all students, staff, and faculty. Any student, staff, or faculty member who believes s/he has been the subject of sexual harassment and/or discrimination based upon race, sex, gender, national origin, sexual orientation, religious belief, political belief, disability, veteran status, age, or any other category protected by the Commonwealth or by federal law should contact the Office of Compliance and Equity on the first floor of James Blair Hall. More information about discrimination and harassment can be found at: wm.edu/offices/compliance/policies/student_discim_policies/index.php

Course Schedule

Below is a schedule of the topics that we will cover, along with list of the reading(s) which you should complete before each class meeting. Please note the dates for **exams days** and **papers due dates** in bold.

UNIT ONE		The Rise of Skepticism	
Week 1		Francis Bacon (1620) & Galileo Galilei (1623)	
Wed 1/16	Corpuscularianism	• Galileo, "Corpuscularianism"	
Fri 1/18	The New Science	• Bacon, "The New Science"	
Week 2		Rene Descartes (1641)	
Wed 1/23	Descartes – The Method of Doubt	• Descartes, "First Meditation"	
Fri 1/25	Descartes – I Think, Therefore I Am	• Descartes, "Second Meditation"	
Week 3		John Locke (1690) & George Berkeley (1710)	
Mon 1/28	Locke – Ideas, Perception, and Primary vs. Secondary Qualities	• Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (excerpt)	
Wed 1/30	Locke – Against Skepticism	• Locke, "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding" (excerpt)	
Fri 2/1	Berkeley – Idealism	• Berkeley, "Of The Principles of Human Knowledge" (excerpt)	
Week 4		David Hume (1748) & Thomas Reid (1764)	
Mon 2/4	Hume – The Problem of Induction	• Hume, "An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding" (excerpt)	
Wed 2/6	Hume – Skepticism	• Hume, "Inquiry" and "Treatise on Human Nature" (excerpts)	
Fri 2/8	Reid – Direct Realism	• Reid, "Inquiry into the Human Mind" (excerpt)	
Week 5		Immanuel Kant (1781) & Plato (380 BC)	
Mon 2/11	Kant – Transcendental Idealism	• Ellis, "Kant's Transcendental Idealism" • Kant, "Critique of Pure Reason" (excerpt)	
Wed 2/13	Plato – The Allegory of the Cave	• Plato, "The Allegory of the Cave" • Dupré, "Plato's Cave"	
Fri 2/15	Review: Unit One Exam	No readings	
UNIT TWO		Contemporary Skepticism	
Week 6		Contemporary Skepticism	
Mon 2/18	UNIT ONE EXAM	No readings	
Wed 2/20	Global Skepticism	• Huemer, SVP ch. II: Intro & §§1-2 (pgs. 7-13) • Huemer, SVP ch. III: §1 (pgs. 27-31)	
Fri 2/22	The Brain in a Vat	• Huemer, SVP ch. I (pgs. 1-4) • Huemer, SVP ch. II: §§3-6 (pgs. 13-22) • Nagel, <i>What Does it All Mean?</i> (excerpt)	
Week 7		Responses to Skepticism, part 1	
Mon 2/25	The G.E. Moore Shift	• Moore, "Proof of an External World" • Optional: Moore, "Hume's Theory Examined" • Huemer, SVP ch. III: §§2-4 (pgs. 31-47)	
Wed 2/27	Inference to the Best Explanation	• Beebe, "The Abductivist Reply to Skepticism" (read to the end of §4)	
Fri 3/1	The Gettier Problem DUE: PAPER 1	• Gettier, "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?" • Goldman, "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge" (excerpt)	
Spring Break			
3/2 – 3/10	Spring Break	No readings	

Week 8		Responses to Skepticism, part 2	
Mon 3/11	Contrastivism	• Baumann, "Epistemic Contrastivism"	
Wed 3/13	Semantic Externalism	• Putnam, "Brains in a Vat"	
Fri 3/15	Why It Doesn't Matter	• Chalmers, "The Matrix as Metaphysics" (excerpt)	
Week 9		Contemporary Realism	
Mon 3/18	Direct Realism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optional: Huemer, <i>SVP</i> ch. IV: §§3-4 (pgs. 57-79) • Huemer, <i>SVP</i> ch. IV: §§5-6 (pgs. 79-85) • Huemer, <i>SVP</i> ch. VI (pgs. 119-141) 	
Wed 3/20	Foundationalism	• Huemer, <i>SVP</i> ch. V (pgs. 93-115)	
Fri 3/22	You Are Not a Brain in a Vat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Huemer, <i>SVP</i> ch. VIII: §3 (pgs. 183-184 only) • Huemer, "Direct Realism and the Brain-in-a-Vat Argument" (excerpt) 	
Week 10		Further Issues, part 1	
Mon 3/25	The Simulation Argument	• Bostrom, "Why the Probability that You are Living in a Matrix is Quite High"	
Wed 3/27	Self-Defeat	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rinard, "Reasoning one's Way out of Skepticism" • Elgin, "Skepticism Aside" 	
Fri 3/29	The New Problem of Induction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Carroll, "What the Tortoise Said to Achilles" • Goodman, "The New Riddle of Induction" 	
Week 11		Further Issues, part 2	
Mon 4/1	The Paradox of the Ravens	No readings	
Wed 4/3	Peer Disagreement	• Christensen, "Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy" (read to end of §2)	
Fri 4/5	Peer Agreement: Epistemic Bubbles & Echo Chambers	• Listen: Nguyen, "Escape the Echo Chamber"	
UNIT THREE		Applied Skepticism (Or, Challenges to Some Widely Held Beliefs)	
Week 12		Evolution & Moral Skepticism	
		Or, all things are permissible	
Mon 4/8	Moral Skepticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values" • Huemer, <i>Ethical Intuitionism</i> (various excerpts) 	
Wed 4/10	Evolutionary Debunking of Morality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vavova, "Evolutionary Debunking of Moral Realism" • Huemer, "Evolution and Ethics" • Watch: Huemer, "The Progress of Liberalism" 	
Fri 4/12	Evolutionary Debunking of Naturalism	• Plantinga, "An Evolutionary Argument Against Naturalism"	
Week 13		Composition & Identity	
		Or, tables don't exist, and you die when you sleep	
Mon 4/15	Material Identity DUE: PAPER 2	• Dupré, "The Ship of Theseus"	
Wed 4/17	Material Composition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ney, "The Special Composition Question" • Optional: Van Inwagen, "When Are Objects Parts?" 	
Fri 4/19	Personal Identity	• Perry, "Dialogue on Personal Identity & Immortality"	
Week 14		The Good Life	
		Or, does skepticism make my life better or worse?	
Mon 4/22	Split-Brain Cases	• Parfit, "Divided Minds & the Nature of Persons"	
Wed 4/24	Ataraxia (ἀταραξία)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listen: Adamson, "Beyond Belief: Pyrrho and Skepticism" (here) • Sextus Empiricus, Saint Augustine, Hume, & Reid (various excerpts) 	
Fri 4/26	Review: Final Exam	No readings	
Thu 5/2	FINAL EXAM: 9am – noon	No readings	