

5AANA009 Epistemology II 2014 to 2015

Credit value: 15

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Assessment

Summative assessment: 1 x 2hr examination

Formative assessment: 2 x 1,500-word essays

Teaching pattern

One one-hour weekly lecture (Tuesday 17.00, Strand K2.31) and one one-hour weekly seminar (place and time TBA).

Pre-requisites

None

Module description (2014-2015)

Epistemology II studies some central issues in contemporary theory of knowledge, concentrating on problems of epistemic justification. We discuss foundationalist and coherentist conceptions of epistemic justification, naturalized epistemology and the possibility of a priori justification, externalist conceptions of justification and the closure problem, the value of knowledge, and the epistemic significance of disagreement.

Module aims

1. To impart a deeper grasp of the parts of contemporary epistemology most relevant to contemporary philosophy in general.
2. To encourage and enable reflection on the relation between philosophical and other kinds of inquiry.

Syllabus with Readings

Core readings are given here. Further readings for particular topics will be given separately. Most, perhaps all of the reading can be found free of charge on line, but I give print sources here.

Three anthologies will be mentioned often. They are:

Ernest Sosa, Jaegwon Kim, Matthew McGrath, Jeremy Fantl eds, *Epistemology: an Anthology*, 2nd edition (Oxford: Blackwell 2008)

(‘Sosa and Kim’).

Matthias Steup and Ernest Sosa, eds, *Contemporary Debates in Epistemology* 1st edition (Oxford: Blackwell 2005)

(‘Steup and Sosa’—there is now a second edition, which I have not seen, but the readings I mention appear to be in both.)

Paul K. Moser, ed, *The Oxford Handbook of Epistemology* (Oxford: OUP 2002)

(‘Moser’).

You will also want to make frequent use of the relevant parts of the excellent *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, free on line. BUT: be warned that examiners are becoming increasingly familiar with essays and exam answers that show no evidence of any reading beyond the *Stanford*. Expect a very dim view to be taken of this.

Lecture 1: Foundations and epistemic principles

Foundationalism is committed to *basic empirical beliefs*. And Foundationalism is also committed to *epistemic principles*, which link up basic and non-basic beliefs (as in ‘If

it looks red, then all other things being equal it is reasonable to believe that it is red'.) Both commitments are problematic.

Reading:

Above all, read

Roderick Chisholm, 'The myth of the Given', in Sosa and Kim.

Sosa and Kim also contains two important discussions of Chisholm by Wilfred Sellars:

'Does empirical knowledge have a foundation?'

'Epistemic principles'

Sosa and Kim also contains a somewhat more accessible attack on foundationalism by Sellars' student Laurence Bonjour:

'Can empirical knowledge have a foundation?'

Lecture 2: Justification as coherence

The traditional alternative to the foundationalist view of epistemic justification is coherentism. (With one exception, the most influential epistemologists of the last fifty years were all coherentists—think of Quine, Goodman, Sellars. The exception is Chisholm.) But what is coherence, and how can it provide epistemic justification?

Reading:

For this topic, I recommend Eric Olson's article in the *Stanford*:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/justep-coherence/#TraAccCoh>

Don't worry *too* much about the technicalities. Then you should read

Donald Davidson, 'A coherence theory of truth and knowledge' (in Sosa and Kim).

I also recommend an instructive and very accessible debate in Steup and Sosa:

Catherine Elgin and James van Cleve, 'Can beliefs be justified by coherence alone?'

Pay close attention to van Cleve. For Quine's version of coherentism, which is important for understanding his attack on the a priori, see

W.V.O. Quine and Joseph Ullian: *The Web of Belief* (New York: Random House 1970).

Lecture 3: Quine and the a priori

Quine thinks that there is no such thing as a priori justification. He also thinks that epistemology should be naturalized. We discuss these claims, and the relation between them.

Reading

Above all, read

W.V.O. Quine, 'Two dogmas of empiricism'.

For a print copy, you'll need his collection of essays entitled *From a Logical Point of View*.

Much of 'Two dogmas' is concerned with the semantic category of the analytic, rather than the epistemic category of the a priori. Consequently, distinctively Quinean theses in semantic theory dominate the bulk of the essay. If you struggle with this, don't worry about it: pay close attention to the last three or so pages, where the epistemic topic of *belief revision* becomes prominent.

Some of the implications of the Quinean rejection of the a priori are brought out in

Quine, 'Epistemology naturalized' (in Sosa and Kim).

For an excellent discussion, see

Jaegwon Kim, 'Naturalized epistemology' (in Sosa and Kim).

Finally, I strongly recommend

Hilary Putnam, 'There is at least one a priori truth' (in Sosa and Kim).

Lecture 4: more on the a priori

Reading

Laurence Bonjour, 'In defense of the a priori', and Michael Devitt, 'There is no a priori', with each authors' reply to the other, in Steup and Sosa.

Lecture 5: Internalist versus externalist conceptions of justification

What is it to *have* a justification (or warrant, entitlement, whatever)?

Reading:

There are three helpful and very accessible contributions in Sosa and Kim:

Laurence Bonjour, 'Externalist theories of justification'

Alvin Goldman, 'Internalism exposed'

Richard Fumerton, 'Externalism and scepticism'

But if at all possible, read

Laurence Bonjour and Ernest Sosa, *Epistemic Justification* (Oxford: Blackwell 2003)

Lecture 6: Closure

Very early in the development of externalist theories of justification, many people simultaneously and independently came to think that externalism had an astonishing consequence: you could know that P, and know that Q follows from P, and still not know that Q. Is that really possible?

Reading:

It is still eminently worth reading

Robert Nozick, *Philosophical Explanations* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP 1981), part 2 'Epistemology'.

Try to read the original, rather than the extracts reprinted in many anthologies, which tend to omit the extensive footnotes.

Then read the excellent

Jonathan Vogel, 'Are there counterexamples to the closure principle?'

in Sosa and Kim.

Lecture 7: Foundations, coherence, virtue

Foundationalism and coherentism turn out to have something interesting in common, and that interesting thing may be false.

Reading:

Just one thing to read for this week:

Ernest Sosa, 'The raft and the pyramid'

in Sosa and Kim.

Lecture 8: The value of knowledge

'I don't just *think* it: I *know* it.' People say things like that all the time. It seems that we attach some value to *knowing* over and above merely being right. Why?

Reading:

The literature makes heavy use of a distinction between intrinsic and non-intrinsic ('instrumental') value. This distinction is more obscure than it might seem. I recommend Michael Zimmerman's article in the Stanford:

<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/value-intrinsic-extrinsic/>

After that, read

Jonathan Kvanvig, 'Why should enquiring minds want to know?'

Ernest Sosa, 'The place of truth in epistemology'

Both articles are in Sosa and Kim.

Lecture 9: Dogmatism and disagreement

We philosophers are always ready to change our minds, right? Even our most firmly held convictions are always answerable to reasons. Isn't that a vital part of our self-image?

Reading:

For the bad news from the psychology department, and how to think about it, read

Thomas Kelly, 'Peer disagreement and higher-order evidence', in *Disagreement*, eds. Richard Feldman and Ted A. Warfield (Oxford: OUP 2010)

You should be able to get this from Oxford Scholarship on Line, and the library has a copy. The whole collection is interesting, and often disturbing.

Lecture 10: Scepticism

This is a large topic. But our concern has been with the relations between broadly 'externalist' epistemologies and scepticism.

Reading:

Our main concern is in the relations between the externalist perspective on epistemic justification and philosophical scepticism. So read

Richard Fumerton, 'Externalism and scepticism', in Sosa and Kim

Then read

Barry Stroud, 'The problem of the external world'

G. E. Moore, 'Proof of an external world'

Both are in Sosa and Kim.