

PHIL 240: Feminist Epistemology

King 101, Tu/Th 1:30-2:45

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Office: King 120A

Office Hours: Wednesdays 2-4 (or on Zoom by request); other times by appointment

Course Prerequisite: One previous philosophy course (or instructor consent)

What this course is about

Epistemology, one of the major subfields of philosophy, deals with questions of knowledge and belief—how can I know when I know things? how can I tell whether my beliefs are justified? Several decades ago, feminist epistemologists (among others, especially philosophers of race) began to focus on how the answers to these questions are affected by identity, power, and oppression. Two of the issues they investigate are 1) *epistemic injustice* (who is, or is not, seen as capable of possessing knowledge) and 2) *standpoint epistemology* (how we gain certain types of knowledge, and whether some of us are able to possess knowledge others can't).

In this course, we'll discuss these issues. We'll begin by considering the complexities of epistemic injustice—what are the varieties of epistemic injustice, where does it exist in actual situations of knowledge (if it does it all), and how should we respond to it? Next, we'll move on to standpoint epistemology—what are the components of this theory of knowledge, what are the criteria for possessing a particular standpoint, and under what conditions can (or can't) we acquire knowledge about the world? By the end of the semester, you will be equipped with a better understanding of yourself as a knower and about how to relate to other knowers.

By the end of this course, you will be able to

- Define epistemic injustice and standpoint epistemology
- Analyze different views of epistemic injustice and standpoint epistemology
- Connect issues of feminist epistemology to traditional philosophical ideas about knowledge, to theories of power, identity, and oppression, and to your own understanding of yourself as a knower
- Understand your and others' positions as knowers
- Argue, in discussion and in writing, for the best interpretation of these concepts and their application in your own life

Course policies

What you'll need to have

- The readings. Complete each day's assigned reading before coming to class, and bring your **hard copy** of the reading with you to class. We will be using two books and some other readings:
 - The books are *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction* (Jennifer Nagel, Oxford University Press 2014, ISBN 978-0-19-966126-8) and *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Miranda Fricker, Oxford University Press 2007, ISBN 978-0-19-957052-2). The books are available to rent or buy at the Bookstore and elsewhere, and you must get each as a hard copy (not an e-book).

- The rest of the readings you will need are available in a packet; pick this packet up during business hours at my office during the first week of the semester.
- If you are having difficulty getting your own copy of the book (for any reason, including cost), please let me know as soon as possible, so I can make sure you have the resources you need to be successful in this class.
- Access to Blackboard:
 - It's where I will post the most current version of the syllabus.
 - It's where you'll turn your final project in.
 - It's also where you can find links to the materials we will be using in class—handouts, assignment instructions, Zoom for remote office hours, and so on.
 - I encourage you to send me videos, articles, and anything else you come across that's relevant to our course, and I may post them to Blackboard so other students can see them too.

What you'll need to do

Assignments and assessment

By the end of the course, you will understand and be able to explain the concepts about epistemology we've discussed, apply these concepts to your own situation as a knower, and argue for your own view of how we should understand and use these concepts. Your midterm and final projects pull these three goals together, and the assignments along the way prepare you to complete these two projects.

- **Four short papers:** These papers will require you to explain the concepts we've discussed, apply them to your own situation as a knower, and assess the arguments in support of or against these concepts. These papers will vary in length up to about 3 pages; they will be due in hard copy at the start of class on September 27, October 13, November 15, and December 1.
- **Midterm project:** In your first cumulative project, you will provide a portrait of yourself as a knower and your relationship to epistemic (in)justice. This project will be up to 5 pages long and will partly be based on revisions of the first two short papers; it will be due in hard copy at the start of class on November 3.
- **Final project:** Your final project is to develop a comprehensive portrait of yourself as a knower, your relationship to epistemic (in)justice, and your assessment of standpoint epistemology. This project will be up to 12 pages long and will partly be based on revisions of your short papers and midterm project; it will be due on Blackboard by 11 am on Sunday, December 18. *Note:* By default, I don't post grades or feedback for your final assignment or your final participation grade; after the semester is over, I'm happy to provide any or all of these on request.
- All assignments will be graded anonymously; you should put your T number, *not* your name, on them and bring them, printed and stapled, to class. Before you submit any assignments, you must sign and return the Honor Pledge.
- As you have seen, the assignments for this course build on each other. For that reason, **it is critically important that you keep all notes, assignments, and feedback until you turn in your final project.**
- **Extension policy for written work:** It is also critically important that you turn in your assignments on time, since you will need to have completed some assignments in order to complete others. Assignments must be turned in at the time and date they are due. I am happy to consider requests for extensions if you ask me before the assignment is due. I generally

approve extensions due to unforeseeable events (for example, a family or medical emergency) that significantly affect your ability to complete assignments on time; I generally do not approve extensions due to foreseeable events (for example, work in other courses or extracurricular activities). If you turn in an assignment late, and you have not made prior arrangements with me, I will deduct three percent of your grade on an assignment if that assignment is turned in late on the day it's due and three percent for each day after that (so, for example, an assignment that would have gotten 100% if it were turned in on time on Tuesday would get 91% if turned in on Thursday).

- In this course, **your writing is a public act**. I will occasionally use anonymized and (sometimes) edited versions of your work in class and in future courses in order to generate discussion, share viewpoints, ask questions, and so on.

Participation

Philosophy is a collaborative, discussion-based discipline. Your writing and thinking will benefit from considering others' views, reactions to readings, and experiences; your classmates and I will benefit from hearing your take.

- I want you to come to class and participate, but it's more important for you to stay safe and healthy. **Do not come to class if you feel even a little bit sick!** Please follow ObieSafe rules whenever you're in this course.
- That said, this class is discussion-based, and it's important to attend whenever you're able to and to participate when you attend. Your first **two absences** are free: you can miss those classes for any reason, and you don't have to let me know what that reason is. If you're absent more than twice, I'll apply the same policy as for late work. If you miss class because of an unforeseeable event, and you communicate with me about that absence, I will generally excuse that absence; absences due to foreseeable events, or absences you don't communicate with me about in a timely way, will generally not be excused. **Absences because you're sick never count against you**, as long as you communicate with me in a timely way. You count as absent if you are not present when I take attendance, even if you show up later in the class period; you also count as absent if you leave early without checking in with me. You'll lose two percentage points from your participation grade for each unexcused absence (beyond your first two). If, at any point in the semester, you believe you are in a situation for which I should make an exception to this policy, please talk with me outside of class.
- In order to receive the highest participation grade you can, come ready to make active, serious, charitable contributions to class discussion. To make sure our discussion is productive and includes a wide variety of voices, I may sometimes call on students at random. If you have to miss class, I will count active, serious, charitable visits to my office hours toward your participation grade. To help guide your participation, I will give you an evaluation at midsemester (separate from your midterm grade) of how you've done so far. When I grade participation, here's what I'm looking for:
 - *A range*: Your comments demonstrate that you've done the reading, you actively and positively participate in all group activities, you ask questions or offer comments multiple times every class session (on average), you listen to and respond to others, and/or you come to office hours at least a couple of times. You are never a distraction.
 - *B range*: Your comments demonstrate that you've usually done the reading, you participate in most group activities, you ask questions or offer comments sporadically, and/or you generally listen and respond to others. You are never a distraction.

- *C range:* Your comments demonstrate a lack of familiarity with the reading, you do not participate very actively in class (or else are a distraction), you talk over others, and/or you never come to office hours.
- *D or F range:* You either do not participate or are consistently a distraction in class, and you never come to office hours or communicate with me via email.
- Because philosophy is done best when it's done collaboratively, my goal is to create a space where productive conversations can happen. Research on classrooms and workplaces consistently supports the conclusion that, for most people, technology is a barrier to these productive conversations. (Ask me if you're curious about this research!) For that reason, **electronic devices (laptops, tablets, phones, etc.) are generally not allowed in class.** I will ask you to put these devices in your bag at the beginning of class and leave them there until the end of class. There are, however, exceptions to this rule. **If you need an electronic device in order to be successful in this course (because of a disability, a life situation, or some other reason), please speak with me during the first two weeks of the course.** If I give you permission to use technology, it's your responsibility to work to minimize your distractions to other students (a good way to do this is to sit in the back or to the side of the classroom, so that your screen will not be visible to others).

Here's how the work in this course contributes to your final grade:

- **Short paper 1:** 5%
- **Short paper 2:** 8%
- **Midterm project:** 15%
- **Short paper 3:** 9%
- **Short paper 4:** 13%
- **Final project:** 35%
- **Participation:** 15%

The grade scale is:

	A: 93-100%	A-: 90-92%
B+: 87-89%	B: 83-86%	B-: 80-82%
C+: 77-79%	C: 73-76%	C-: 70-72%
D+: 67-69%	D: 60-63%	D-: 60-62%
F: below 60%		

What I'll need to do

My responsibilities in this course include:

- Making sure our discussions are productive. If at any point you're not feeling that our discussions are respectful and charitable, please come talk to me.
- Grading your work quickly and fairly. I will return all graded work no later than two weeks from the day you turn it in.
- Communicating with you over email.
 - My responsibility is to email you whenever there are time-sensitive announcements about this course; your responsibility is to check your Oberlin email (including your spam folder) every day.
 - I use Blackboard when I need to send announcements to the entire class. Replies to emails I send through Blackboard do not go to me, and I have no way to see them. **If you need to contact me over email, please make sure you're emailing my email address, aberg@oberlin.edu.**

- Our emails to each other in this course are professional documents, and it is my and your responsibility to write them professionally. For tips on how to write a professional email, check the email rubric posted to Blackboard. I will respond to your email no later than 5 pm on the next business day; in the rare case I do not, please feel free to follow up with me after that.
- Holding office hours, which you can use to talk to me about course content, what you've missed if you have to miss class, and so on. (This semester, office hours will be in person by default, but I'm also happy to meet over Zoom—just let me know ahead of time.) I'm happy to discuss questions about assignments and to provide feedback on your work before you turn it in; if you want me to read a complete draft of an assignment, send it to me at least one week before it's due.

Some ways to succeed in this course

- I am committed to making sure that you can succeed in this course, regardless of whether you have a disability (visible or invisible). If you have a disability that may impact your work in this class and for which you may require accommodations, please see me and the Office for Disability and Access so that we may arrange appropriate accommodations. If you have questions, or if you need an accommodation of another type (athletic, religious, etc.), please let me know as soon as possible.
- **Every student is expected to adhere to the honor code.** This means in very general terms that you only submit work that is yours. More specifically, it means that you will not plagiarize; that is, you will not appropriate the work or ideas of someone else—whether written or not—without acknowledgement, using the conventionally agreed-on scholarly practices for quoting and citation, and that you will not cheat, fabricate, collaborate on a project that is meant to be done individually, or submit the same work for multiple classes or assignments without the prior approval of all instructors involved. While you are allowed and encouraged to ask for advice and help from the instructor, librarians, or official writing tutors, you are, in the end, to submit work produced by you. Some assignments may be collaborative in nature; those will be clearly identified as such. Everyone in the campus community is required to report all suspected violations of the honor code to the student honors committee. Following college-wide policy, you will sign a statement at the beginning of the semester to certify that you will adhere to the honor code. For more information, see the Academic Integrity section of the Dean of Students website (<https://www.oberlin.edu/dean-of-students/student-conduct/academic-integrity>).
- I encourage you to use the Writing Center (<https://www.oberlin.edu/arts-and-sciences/resources-and-support/wap>); appointments available at <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1dGrwegnHC1Q0dkfxF228cdBB6zOviTLtjuOn91OIURA/edit>) as you work on your assignments in this course.
- You are welcome and encouraged to come to my office hours or make an appointment with me whenever you want to talk about the course material, your assignments, or any other philosophy-related concerns you have.

Schedule of readings and assignments

Complete each day's assigned reading *before* coming to class. Readings by Nagel and Fricker are in the two books assigned for this course; all others are in the packet, which you should pick up at my office (King 120A) as soon as you can. This schedule is provisional, and you are

responsible for learning about any changes we make to it; you can always find the most current syllabus on Blackboard.

Date	Topic	Reading	Assignments
Thursday 9/1	What are we doing in this course?	None	
Tuesday 9/6	Introduction to epistemology, part 1	Nagel, chs. 1 and 4	
Thursday 9/8	What is epistemic injustice?	Fricker, ch. 1	
Tuesday 9/13	What is epistemic injustice?	Fricker, section 2.3 (optional: sections 2.1 and 2.2)	
Thursday 9/15	How does epistemic injustice work?	Koetzee, selections from "Epistemic Justice and Education" AND Tsosie, "Indigenous Peoples, Anthropology, and the Legacy of Epistemic Injustice"	Short paper 1 assigned
Tuesday 9/20	How does epistemic injustice work?	Case, "Political Conviction and Epistemic Injustice"	
Thursday 9/22	What is hermeneutical injustice?	Fricker, sections 7.1 and 7.2	
Tuesday 9/27	What is hermeneutical injustice?	Dotson, "A Cautionary Tale: On Limiting Epistemic Oppression"	Short paper 1 due
Thursday 9/29	What is epistemic justice?	Fricker, sections 4.1 and 7.4 (optional: section 4.2)	
Tuesday 10/4	What is epistemic justice?	Medina, selection from <i>The Epistemology of Resistance</i>	Short paper 2 assigned
Thursday 10/6	What is epistemic justice?	Berenstain, "Epistemic Exploitation"	
Tuesday 10/11	What is epistemic justice?	Emerick, "Love and Resistance"	
Thursday 10/13	What is epistemic justice?	Anderson, "Epistemic Justice as a Virtue of Social Institutions"	Short paper 2 due; midterm project assigned
NO CLASS TUESDAY 10/18 – THURSDAY 10/20: FALL BREAK			
Tuesday 10/25	Introduction to epistemology, part 2	Nagel, chs. 6 and 7	
Thursday 10/27	What is standpoint epistemology?	Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk" AND Toole, selection from "Recent Work in Standpoint Epistemology"	
Tuesday 11/1	What is situated knowledge?	Collins, "The Social Construction of Black Feminist Thought"	
Thursday 11/3	What is situated knowledge?	McWeeny, "Varieties of Consciousness under Oppression"	Midterm project due; short paper 3 assigned

Tuesday 11/8	What is the achievement thesis?	Ruth, “A Serious Look at Consciousness-Raising”	
Thursday 11/10	What is the achievement thesis?	Táíwò, “Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference”	
Tuesday 11/15	What is epistemic privilege?	Harding, “‘Strong Objectivity’ and Socially Situated Knowledge”	Short paper 3 due
Thursday 11/17	What is epistemic privilege?	Nanda, “Modern Science as the Standpoint of the Oppressed”	Short paper 4 assigned
Tuesday 11/22	What is epistemic privilege?	Collins, “Learning from the Outsider Within: The Sociological Significance of Black Feminist Thought”	Final project assigned
NO CLASS THURSDAY 11/24: THANKSGIVING			
Tuesday 11/29	What is epistemic privilege?	Bar On, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege”	
Thursday 12/1	How should we use standpoint epistemology?	Kukla, “Objectivity and Perspective in Empirical Knowledge” ¹	Short paper 4 due
Tuesday 12/6	How should we use standpoint epistemology?	Heikes, “The Bias Paradox”	
Thursday 12/8	How can we combine epistemic justice and standpoint epistemology?	Toole, “From Standpoint Epistemology to Epistemic Oppression”	
Tuesday 12/13	Conclusion	None	
Sunday 12/18			Final project due on Blackboard 11 am

¹ While this paper was written under the name “Rebecca Kukla,” the author’s name is now Quill Kukla.