



Hum/PI 41: Knowledge and Reality
California Institute of Technology
Fall 2017

Instructor: Boris Babic
Email: bbabic@caltech.edu
Office: B118 Dabney

Time: Th 7-9:55pm
Location: Dabney 115
Office Hours: TBD

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course will be an introduction to epistemology (the study of knowledge) and metaphysics (the nature of reality). Each meeting we explore a core idea in one of the two fields. We have four sessions in epistemology (belief, inference, perception, faith), followed by four sessions in metaphysics (time, identity, causation, consciousness).

The goal of the course is to sharpen your tools for critical analysis by engaging with some of the most interesting ideas in metaphysics and epistemology. Our focus will be on building your analytical skills – which will be a critical asset both in your future coursework and outside the university.

Each week is an adventure through a different substantive idea but as we go along we develop critical tools of analysis. I will especially emphasize probabilistic and statistical thinking as well as decision-theoretic reasoning.

MATERIALS

All assigned articles are freely available electronically through the library. No textbook is required. Should you want additional background, I recommend Feldman (2003): *Epistemology*. It is concise and accessible.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Participation (20%),
- Paper 1 topic and outline, 250 words, due in class October 19 (10%),
- Paper 1, 2000 words, due in class November 2 (30%),
- Paper 2 topic and outline, 250 words, due in class November 16 (10%),
- Paper 2, 2000 words, due in class November 30 (30%).

SCHEDULE

- 09/28 **Introduction**
No required reading.
Optional. [The Pink Guide to Philosophy](#), de Bres
[Guidelines on Writing a Philosophy Paper](#), Pryor
- 10/05 **Belief**
Required. Ramsey (1926): “Truth and Probability” (Excerpts)
Required. Kahneman and Tversky (1974): *Judgment Under Uncertainty*
Optional. Strevens (2013): *Notes on Bayesian Confirmation Theory*, Excerpts
- 10/12 **Inference**
Required. Lindley (1976): *Inference for a Bernoulli Process: A Bayesian View*
Required. Goodman (1999): *The P-Value Fallacy*
Optional. Bohannon (2015): *How I Fooled Millions to think Chocolate Helps Weight Loss*
Optional. Nuzzo (2014): *Scientific Method: Statistical Errors*
- 10/19 **Perception**
Required. Siegel (2016): “How is Wishful Seeing Like Wishful Thinking?”
Required. Morrison (2016): “Perceptual Confidence”
Required. Bostrom (2003): “Are You Living in a Computer Simulation?”
The Matrix (to be viewed independently)
- 10/26 **Faith**
Required. Buchak (2011): “Can it be Rational to Have Faith?”
Optional. Weatherson (2015): “Lecture Notes on Decision Theory”
- 11/02 **Time**
Required. Lewis (1976): “The Paradoxes of Time Travel”
Optional. Maudlin (2002): “Remarks on the Passage of Time”
Heinlein (1959): “All You Zombies”
Futurama, “Roswell That Ends Well”
- 11/09 **Identity**
Required. Williams (1975): “The Self and the Future”
Parfit (1984): *Reasons and Persons*, Chapter 10
Optional. Lewis (1976): “Survival and Identity”
Nguyen (2012): “Keeler’s Theorem”
Futurama, “The Prisoner of Benda”
- 11/16 **Causation**
Required. Lewis (1986): “Causation”
Knobe & Hitchcock (2009): “Cause & Norm”
- 11/23 **No Class**
- 11/30 **Consciousness**
Required. Nagel (1974): “What is it Like to Be a Bat?”
Churchland (1989): *A Neurocomputational Perspective*, 3.3-4, 4
Ex Machina (viewing to be arranged)

ATTENDANCE AND READING

Engaged participation is an important component of this class and I expect everyone to contribute meaningfully to class discussion. This does not mean I will reward those who speak most, however. And it does not mean you cannot do well on the participation component if you're less comfortable speaking up. Learning to articulate your thoughts in a professional, courteous and persuasive manner is a valuable skill and a goal of this course is to improve your ability to do this.

While the readings are not long, they can be very difficult. As a result, you should plan to spend a fairly significant amount of time reading and re-reading the material.

SUBMITTING ASSIGNMENTS AND LATE POLICY

All papers must be submitted in hard-copy in class on the day they are due and an electronic copy must be sent to the instructor's e-mail address.

If you anticipate needing more time on an assignment, you should contact me in advance. Otherwise, late assignments will be penalized by one-third of a letter grade for each day they are late.

STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

If you think you may need accommodation for a disability, please let me know as early as possible.

PLAGIARISM

Written work submitted for a grade in this course must be your own. You are responsible for making sure that none of your work is plagiarized. You should cite the sources you rely on, and err on the side of caution where necessary. Feel free to consult me if you are not sure of the appropriate format for quotations or references.

More information on plagiarism is available on the Hixon Writing Center's website: www.writing.caltech.edu/students/plagiarism.