

# PHIL2010: Knowledge and Justification

Department of Philosophy

Spring 2025



University of  
**Nottingham**

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

## 1. Module Information

Webpage for this module available through Moodle: <https://moodle.nottingham.ac.uk/>

Level: 2

Credits: 20

Module Convener: Dr. Michael Hannon

Drop in Hours: Mondays 11am-12pm & Tuesdays 11am-12pm, C03 Humanities

Email: [Michael.Hannon@nottingham.ac.uk](mailto:Michael.Hannon@nottingham.ac.uk)

*Note. I should reply to emails within 2 working days. If I am very busy, you will be sent an acknowledgement email within 2 working days informing you of when I can reply more fully.*

## 2. Module Description

### Module Outline

Aristotle declared that “All men by nature desire to know”. But we allegedly live in a post-truth world characterized by fake news, alternative facts, and scorn for expertise. These are major dangers to our way of life, and dealing with them requires epistemology. Epistemology is the study of such topics as knowledge, evidence, and justification. In this module, we'll explore issues such as: the nature and value of knowledge, the threat of skepticism, the role of testimony in acquiring knowledge, and intellectual virtues and vices. Some questions we will tackle include: What is knowledge? Why should we care about it? What is our justification for believing things? Do we know that we're not brains in vats?

### Module Objectives

1. To familiarize you with some central concepts, ideas, and arguments in epistemology.
2. To help you cultivate a critical understanding of some of the central arguments and views in contemporary epistemology, as well as to enhance your abilities to clearly and concisely explain, criticize, and defend philosophical positions.
3. To improve skills needed in almost any career, such as critical thinking, researching, writing, analyzing arguments, and problem solving. More broadly, to cultivate the capacities and desire for reflection and self-expression, for sharing ideas, and for dealing with problems to which there are no easy answers.

### 3. Structure of Teaching

A University of Nottingham credit equates to 10 hours of notional study, so this 20 credit module is designed to involve 200 hours of study (including lectures/seminars).

There will be **10 lectures** and **10 seminars**. Each week there will be a **two-hour lecture** and a **one-hour seminar**.

The lecture will be devoted to presenting more advanced material and to discussions of that material. I will expect you to **study the required lecture readings carefully in advance of each lecture**.

Seminars will be used for a mixture of activities including discussion of the seminar readings and how it connects to the lecture material, as well as preparation for writing your essay. Discussion is a crucial part of this seminar; **you should come to seminar each week armed with questions and comments of your own**.

Material supporting the module is available on Moodle.

### 4. Module Content

#### 4.1 Lecture Topics for Each Week

*Each lecture has a required reading as well as some optional readings (see '4.3 Reading List' below).*

- Lecture 1: What Is Knowledge?
- Lecture 2: Does Knowledge Matter?
- Lecture 3: Skepticism
- Lecture 4: How Much Justification to Know?
- Lecture 5: Contextualism
- Lecture 6: Assertion, Testimony, and Fake News
- Lecture 7: Disagreement
- Lecture 8: When to Psychologize
- Lecture 9: Standpoint Epistemology
- Lecture 10: Epistemic Injustice

#### 4.2 Seminars

Readings and questions for each seminar will be available on Moodle. Before the seminar you must have read, thought about, and made notes on the listed reading and **answered the set reading questions**. Below I have provided some initial questions that capture the main topic of each seminar, but an official list of set reading questions will be provided on Moodle.

### **Seminar 1: What Is Knowledge?**

What is the difference between knowing and not knowing? Is knowledge justified true belief, or something more? We will also discuss the way the module will be organized.

### **Seminar 2: Does Knowledge Matter?**

There are plausible cases of justified true beliefs that are not knowledge. Should we conclude that knowledge is not justified true belief? Or should we reject our intuitive judgments in favor of the traditional theory of knowledge? Why do we care about finding the “correct” analysis of knowledge?

### **Seminar 3: Skepticism**

Is there hardly anything, if anything at all, which we know? Does knowledge require us to be absolutely sure? If so, is there anything we are absolutely sure about?

### **Seminar 4: How Much Justification to Know?**

How much justification is required for knowledge? What sort of basis is there for fixing the level of justification needed for knowledge? Is it related to our practical interests?

### **Seminar 5: Contextualism**

Does whether you know depend on how much is at stake? Does it depend on the interests or concerns of other people? Can someone prevent you from knowing something just by mentioning the possibility of skepticism?

### **Seminar 6: Assertion, Testimony, and Fake News**

Must we assert only what we know? Or must we say only what is true or reasonably believed? Also, when is it reasonable to trust the testimony of others? In the era of fake news, is it rational to accept testimony on social media?

### **Seminar 7: Disagreement**

Should we be confident in our beliefs when reasonable people disagree with us? Can we gain insight into the rationality of our beliefs by thinking about deep disagreements with other people?

### **Seminar 8: When to Psychologize**

When is it permissible to psychologize someone else? May we ever permissibly dismiss the sincere reasons given to us by others, and instead endorse an alternative explanation of their beliefs and actions?

### **Seminar 9: Standpoint Epistemology**

Does social identity matter to epistemology? In particular, do oppressed individuals have an epistemic advantage in understanding their own oppression and that of their group? If so, does that mean people who are in positions of privilege are obligated to defer to the testimony of the marginalized?

### **Seminar 10: Epistemic Injustice**

Are some types of injustice distinctively epistemic? How does this connect with our epistemic dependence on the testimony of others? Do some injustices threaten the production and transmission of knowledge?

*Timetables: You are able to access your timetable online via*

*<http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academicsservices/timetabling/view-timetables/viewwebtimetables.aspx>*

## 4.3 Reading List

### Recommended Background Reading

- Nagel, Jennifer. 2014. *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Neta, Ram and Duncan Pritchard. 2009. *Arguing About Knowledge*. Routledge.
- Greco, John and Ernest Sosa. 1999. *The Blackwell Guide to Epistemology*. Blackwell.
- Hannon, Michael. 2019. *What's the Point of Knowledge?* Oxford University Press.

### Essential Readings

Below are the essential readings for each topic, which are available on Moodle. You are expected to have read all essential readings for both the lecture and seminar. I will also post a list of suggested (optional) readings on Moodle.

### Topic 1. What Is Knowledge?

#### Lecture

- Gettier, Edmund. 1963. 'Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?' *Analysis* 23: 121-3.
- Nagel, Jennifer. 2014. *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, Chapters 1 & 4.

#### Seminar

- Foley, Richard. 2012. *When Is True Belief Knowledge?* Princeton, Chapters 1-5.

### Topic 2. Does Knowledge Matter?

#### Lecture

- Goldman, Alvin. 1967. 'A Causal Theory of Knowing.' *Journal of Philosophy* 64: 357-372.

#### Seminar

- Kaplan, Mark. 1985. 'It's Not What You Know that Counts.' *Journal of Philosophy* 82 (7): 350-363.

### Topic 3. Skepticism

#### Lecture

- Stroud, Barry. 1984. *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*. Oxford, Chapter 1.

#### Seminar:

- Unger, Peter. 1971. 'A Defense of Skepticism.' *Philosophical Review* 90 (2): 198-219.

### Topic 4. How Much Justification to Know?

#### Lecture

- Bonjour, Laurence. 2010. 'The Myth of Knowledge.' *Philosophical Perspectives* 24: 57-83.

#### Seminar

- Hannon, Michael. 2015. 'Fallibilism and the Value of Knowledge.' *Synthese* 191 (6): 1119-1146.

## **Topic 5. Contextualism**

### **Lecture**

- DeRose, Keith. 1992. 'Contextualism and Knowledge Attributions.' *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 52 (4): 913-929.

### **Seminar**

- Lewis, David. 1996. 'Elusive Knowledge.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 74: 549-67.

## **Topic 6. Assertion, Testimony, and Fake News**

### **Lecture**

- Lackey, Jennifer. 2007. 'Norms of Assertion.' *Noûs* 41 (4): 594-626

### **Seminar**

- Rini, Regina. 2017. 'Fake News and Partisan Epistemology.' *Kennedy Institute of Ethics* 27: 43-64.

## **Topic 7. Disagreement**

### **Lecture**

- Lackey, Jennifer. 2008. 'What Should We Do When We Disagree?' In T. Szabó Gendler & J. Hawthorne (eds.), *Oxford Studies in Epistemology*. Oxford.

### **Seminar**

- Feldman, Richard. 2006. 'Reasonable Religious Disagreements. In L. Antony (ed.), *Philosophers Without Gods: Meditations on Atheism and the Secular Life*. Oxford.

## **Topic 8. When to Psychologize?**

### **Lecture**

- Flowerree, Amy. 2023. 'When to Psychologize.' *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 101: 968-982.

### **Seminar**

- Smyth, Nicholas. 2018. 'A Moral Critique of Psychological Debunking' *Journal of Social Philosophy* 53 (2): 255-272.

## **Topic 9. Standpoint Epistemology**

### **Lecture**

- Dror, Lidal. 2023. 'Is There an Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?' *Nous* 57 (3): 618-640.

### **Seminar**

- Tilton, Emily. 2024. "'That's Above My Paygrade': Woke Excuses for Ignorance.' *Philosophers' Imprint* 24 (1): 1-19.

## **Topic 10. Epistemic Injustice**

### **Lecture**

- Fricker, Miranda. 2007. *Epistemic Injustice*. Oxford, Chapters 1 and 2.

### **Seminar**

- Medina, Jose. 2011. 'The Relevance of Credibility Excess in a Proportional View of Epistemic Injustice.' *Social Epistemology* 25 (1): 15-35.

### **4.4 Some Tips**

At no stage in one's life is reading philosophy easy. In order to make your reading efficient and rewarding, you must maintain a sympathetic but critical attitude to the text. This can often be best achieved by approaching the text with a number of general questions in mind:

- What conclusion does the author wish to reach?
- Why is that conclusion interesting?
- What is the argument, and is it valid?
- Should the premises of the argument be accepted?
- If we accept the argument and conclusion, what else follows?

## **5. Assessment**

The information below is specific to this module and may not apply to other Philosophy modules you are taking.

Further information on assessment—including marking criteria, how to submit work, and information on plagiarism—is contained in the [\*Philosophy Assessment Handbook\*](#).

### **5.1 Assessment Method**

This module carries 20 credits. You will gain these credits by engaging in essential classes and completing the following components of assessment:

**One mid-semester essay** that is **2000 words** and worth **50%** of the module mark.

**One end-of-semester essay** that is **2000 words** and worth **50%** of the module mark.

Essays are submitted online via the submission inboxes on Moodle.

For information about when you are required to submit coursework or complete other components of assessment see sections 5.2 and 5.3 below.

### **5.2 Essay Questions**

Essay questions will be posted at least three weeks before the essay deadline.

Please be aware that feedback for the end of semester essay will not be as extensive as the feedback for your first coursework essay, but you are entitled to request further feedback should you need it.

### 5.3 Coursework Deadlines

This module has the following assessment components:

Component of assessment type	Included in term time submission totals	Applicable Submission deadline	Component % weighting for module mark
Mid-semester essay (2000 words)	<b>Yes</b>	At one of the 3 mid-semester deadlines*	<b>50%</b>
End of semester essay (2000 words)	<b>No</b>	At the end of semester (deadline 4)	<b>50%</b>

For *each philosophy* module that requires *two* essay submissions, students must submit their mid-semester essay at **one of three mid-semester deadlines (1-3), and the end-of-semester essay at the end-of-semester deadline.**

The **mid-semester essay** deadline for each philosophy module is calculated in the following way:

First, add up how many mid-semester essays you have for philosophy.

Second, work out how many essays you have to submit at each of the mid-semester deadlines using the following grid:

How many pieces of philosophy coursework assignments must you submit <b>in total</b> at the fixed mid-semester deadlines (1-3) this semester?	Number of assignments to submit at <b>first deadline</b>	Number of assignments to submit at <b>second deadline</b>	Number of assignments to submit at <b>third deadline</b>
1	0	1	0
2	1	0	1
3	1	1	1
4	1	1	2
5	1	2	2
6	2	2	2

Thus,

- If you have only **ONE** mid-semester essay, submit it at deadline 2.
- If you have **TWO** mid-semester essays, submit one at deadline 1, and one at deadline 3.
- If you have **THREE** mid-semester essays, hand one in on each deadline, 1, 2, 3, etc.

Important notes:

1. You can choose **which** of your essays you submit at each deadline.
2. The **dates** for the mid-semester deadlines can be found on the Moodle Philosophy Community Page. Please see also the submission inboxes in this module's Moodle page.

3. If you have any **questions** regarding submission which deadline applies to you, you are strongly encouraged to check with your module conveners and/or personal tutor if you are unsure about anything.

The **end-of-semester essay/coursework component** should be submitted at the end of semester deadline. (The dates for the end-of-semester deadlines can also be found on the Moodle Philosophy Community Page and the submission inboxes in this module's Moodle page)

#### **5.4 Feedback**

Your essay will be returned electronically via Moodle with comments attached. Please make sure you read all the comments.

Qualifying year coursework submitted by the deadline will be returned with feedback **within 20 working days of that deadline**. All other coursework submitted by the deadline will be returned with feedback within 15 working days of that deadline. (Working days exclude weekends, bank holidays and University closure days.) If, unavoidably, we cannot meet this return date, we will let you know by email.

You will get two kinds of comments on your essay: comments on the qualities of that particular essay and how it could have been improved, and suggestions for how to approach essays in future. Note that you are welcome to discuss these comments with the module convener in person in a further feedback session. To arrange this, please email your convener within two weeks of receiving the essay back.

#### **5.5 Exams**

THIS MODULE HAS NO EXAM COMPONENT.

### **6. Social Media Policy**

Please be aware that the University has a social media policy which applies to students. You can find it here: <https://www.nottingham.ac.uk/governance/documents/social-media-policy-for-students-nov15.pdf>.