

PHIL3028: Knowledge, Ignorance, & Democracy

Department of Philosophy

Autumn 2024



University of
Nottingham

UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

1. Module Information

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

Level: 3

Credits: 20

Module Convener: Dr. Michael Hannon

Drop in Hours: Thursdays 11am-12pm and Fridays 3-4pm, Humanities C03

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2. Module Description

Module Outline

This module explores a variety of issues at the intersection of epistemology and political philosophy. It will start by exploring the fraught relationship between politics and truth from both historical and contemporary perspectives. It will then cover a range of topics such as: political disagreement and polarization; fake news, misinformation, and propaganda; political ignorance and irrationality; epistemic virtues and vices in politics; the role of trust and expertise in a democracy; and epistemic defenses of (and challenges to) democracy. Some of the central questions we will attempt to answer are: Should the existence of widespread disagreement in politics make us less confident in our own views? Are voters morally or epistemically obligated to vote responsibly? Is it rational for citizens to base their political views on group identity rather than reasoned arguments? Should we have beliefs about complex policy questions about which we are not experts? Is democracy the best form of government for getting at the truth?

Module Objectives

1. To familiarize you with some central concepts, ideas, and arguments in political epistemology.
2. To help you cultivate a critical understanding of some of the central arguments and views in contemporary political 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

Each lecture has one required reading (see 4.3 below) and several optional readings (on Moodle).

- Lecture 1: Truth and Politics
- Lecture 2: The Epistemology of Democracy
- Lecture 3: Democracy, Empathy, and Understanding
- Lecture 4: Political Disagreement
- Lecture 5: Badmouthing, Belief, and Partisanship
- Lecture 6: Voter Ignorance
- Lecture 7: Irrationality and Bias
- Lecture 8: Democracy, Social Media, and Fake News
- Lecture 9: Utopias and Utopophobia
- Lecture 10: Epistocracy

4.2 Seminars

Readings for each seminar are available on Moodle. Before the seminar you must have read, thought about, and come up with comments and/or questions to discuss the seminar reading.

Timetables: You are able to access your timetable online via <http://www.nottingham.ac.uk/academic/services/timetabling/view-timetables/viewwebtimetables.aspx>

Students will be automatically allocated to seminar groups and will be placed in the group that best fits their timetable. If you experience any difficulties, please contact the Programmes Team in student services: SS-Programmes-Arts@exmail.nottingham.ac.uk

4.3 Reading List

Optional Background Readings

- Estlund, David. 2008. *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework*
- Landemore, Hélène. 2013. *Democratic Reason*
- Somin, Ilya. 2016. *Democracy and Political Ignorance*
- Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*. Princeton University Press
- Hannon, Michael & de Ridder, Jeroen. 2021. *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*
- Edenberg, Elizabeth & Hannon, Michael. 2021. *Political Epistemology*

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 for each week on Moodle.

Topic 1. Truth and Politics

Lecture

- Hannon, Michael and Elise Woodard. Politics and Truth. In *Political Epistemology: An Introduction*

Seminar

- Arendt, Hannah. 1967. Truth and Politics. *The New Yorker*

Topic 2. The Epistemology of Democracy

Lecture

- Anderson, Elizabeth. 2006. The Epistemology of Democracy. *Episteme*

Seminar:

- Landemore, Hélène and David Estlund. 2018. The Epistemic Value of Democratic Deliberation. In *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy*

Topic 3. Democracy, Empathy, and Understanding

Lecture

- Hannon, Michael. 2020. Empathetic Understanding & Deliberative Democracy. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*

Seminar

- Cassam, Quassim. 2023. Sensemaking, Empathy, and Democracy. In *The Epistemology of Democracy*

Topic 4. Political Disagreement

Lecture

- Feldman, Richard. 2007. Reasonable Religious Disagreements. In *Philosophers without Gods*

Seminar

- de Ridder, Jeroen. 2021. Deep Disagreement and Political Polarization. In *Political Epistemology*

Topic 5. Badmouthing, Belief, and Partisanship

Lecture

- Hannon, Michael. 2021. Disagreement or Badmouthing? The Role of Expressive Discourse in Politics. In *Political Epistemology*

Seminar

- Williams, Dan. 2020. Socially Adaptive Belief. *Mind & Language*

Topic 6. Voter Ignorance

Lecture

- Somin, Ilya. 2021. Is Political Ignorance Rational? In *The Routledge Handbook of Political Epistemology*

Seminar

- Brennan, Jason. 2009. Polluting the Polls: When Citizens Should Not Vote. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*

Topic 7. Irrationality and Bias

Lecture

- Brennan, Jason. 2016. *Against Democracy*, Chapters 1 & 2

Seminar

- Huemer, Michael. 2016. Why People Are Irrational About Politics. In *Philosophy, Politics, and Economics: An Anthology*

Topic 8. Democracy, Social Media, and Fake News

Lecture

- Rini, Regina. 2021. Weaponized Skepticism. In *Political Epistemology*

Seminar

- Rini, Regina. 2017. Fake News and Partisan Epistemology. *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal*

Topic 9. Utopias and Utopophobia

Lecture

- Estlund, David. 2014. Utopophobia. *Philosophy and Public Affairs*

Seminar

- Ancell, Aaron. 2019. Political Irrationality, Utopianism, and Democratic Theory. *Politics, Philosophy, and Economics*

Topic 10. Epistocracy

Lecture

- Brennan, Jason. 2016. The Rule of the Knowers. In *Against Democracy*

Seminar

- Harwood, Robin, 1998. More Votes for PhDs. *Journal of Social Philosophy*

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 modules you are taking.

Further information on assessment—including marking criteria, how to submit work, and information on plagiarism—is contained in the School of Humanities [UG 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 **2500 words** and worth **50%** of the module mark.

One end-of-semester essay that is **2500 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 deadlines.

Please be aware that the feedback for the End of Semester assessment will not be as extensive as the feedback for your first assessment. However, you are entitled to request further feedback one-to-one 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 (2500 words)	Yes	At one of the 3 mid-semester deadlines*	50%
End of semester essay (2500 words)	No	At the end of semester (deadline 4)	50%

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 in total at the fixed mid-semester deadlines (1-3) this semester?	Number of assignments to submit at first deadline	Number of assignments to submit at second deadline	Number of assignments to submit at third deadline
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>.