

Skepticism, Faith, Evidence, and Rationality

PHIL 263, Fall 2020
TuTh 1:00-2:15
Prof. Keith DeRose
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Tentative syllabus, as of 1 September 2020

Instructor's virtual Office hours (tentative: may have to be adjusted): Thursdays, 9:45-11:00
Zoom PMI: 543 169 1069

It still remains a scandal to philosophy . . . that the existence of things outside us . . . must be accepted merely on faith, and that, if anyone thinks good to doubt their existence, we are unable to counter his doubts by any satisfactory proof

-Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*

I am persuaded, that the unjust live by faith as well as the just

-Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind*

Description

A study of the rationality of everyday, scientific, philosophical, and religious beliefs, through critical readings of the works of some major early modern philosophers, Descartes, Berkeley, Hume, and Reid, together with writings of recent decades in both religious epistemology and general epistemology. Evidentialist and conservative approaches to the roles of faith and evidence in our governing of our fundamental beliefs will be investigated and compared. This course should provide a good introduction to philosophy, as discussions of what makes for a good philosophical argument, or good reasons for holding to a philosophical claim, will be central to the course. But this is not just important methodology for the discipline of philosophy, but for individuals in evaluating and governing their own beliefs or acceptances on matters of great significance

Enrollment: To enable discussion in the on-line setting, enrollment will be limited to 18. Please indicate interest in taking this course by email, by Aug. 12, to keith.derose@yale.edu, listing your year in school, major, and previous philosophy courses taken (and a brief statement of interest, if you wish). I will let interested students know if they are in the class on Aug. 17. I suspect and hope that all students who wish to can enroll, but you never know what might happen, especially in this unusual upcoming semester. Priority will be given to philosophy majors.

Reading materials and course website

Several of our readings from the early modern period are available in good and inexpensive editions of books. Those, along with *Faith and Rationality*, a book of essays on religious epistemology, will be the required books for our class. Other readings will be accessible through Yale library access, or will be available to students in the Files tab of the Canvas page for our course. Accessing materials off campus will normally require using the Yale VPN. Lecture outlines and other handouts and materials will be available on the course web page, which will be publically accessible.

Attendance and grading: Synchronous attendance (or “attendance,” I suppose, as this will be on-line) at lectures is required, though troubles with on-line access can be anticipated, and allowances will be made. All written work must be submitted, and a satisfactory job must be done on all written work, to pass the course. Supposing that attendance is not a problem and that all written work has been satisfactory, grades will be based on the following formula, though adjustments (which can be quite considerable) will be made for insightful classroom participation and for marked improvement over the course of the semester: First paper: 35%; Second Paper: 40%; Final Exam: 25%.

Important dates (all due dates are Fridays, and work is due by noon in all cases):

Oct. 2: first papers due

Nov. 23: proposals for second papers due, for those not writing on one of the possible topics distributed on Nov. 16

Dec. 4: second papers due

Dec. 18: Final exam answers due

Written Work: submitted by email attachment

First paper: A paper, 1,750-2,500 words (about 5-7 pages) in length, is due on Friday, Oct. 2, by noon. Topics for the paper will be distributed on Sept. 14.

Second paper: A paper, 2,500-3,500 words (about 7-10 pages) in length, is due Friday, December 4, by noon. Possible topics will be distributed on Nov. 16. If students wish to write this paper on a topic directly related to our course readings, but not on the list of topics, they can submit a brief (about 1 page) proposal by noon, Nov. 23, for such a paper.

Final Exam: Three short essays, of about the length of regular final exam answers, are due by Friday, Dec. 18, by noon. Questions that these essays should answer, along with instructions, will be distributed by Dec. 4.

Tentative Schedule and Topics

Descartes: Sept. 1, 3, 8, 10, 15

Main reading: *Meditations* 1-6

Secondary readings: R.M. Adams, “Sensible Qualities and the Rise of Modern Science,” pp. xii-xix of “Editor's Introduction”; and KDR, “Descartes, Epistemic Principles, Epistemic Circularity, and Scientia,” both in course Files

Berkeley: Sept. 17, 22, 24

A Treatise concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge (Principles), Part I (not Intro!), sects. 1-44, 50-59, 86-87, 135-156

Hume: Sept. 29, Oct. 1, 6, 8

Inquiry concerning Human Understanding, sects. 1-5, 7, 12

Reid: Oct. 13, 15, 20

Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense, Dedication; Chapter 1, sections 7-8; Chapter 4, section 2; Chapter 5 (all); Chapter 6, sections 6, 19 (last 4 paragraphs)-21, 24 (excl. last 12 paragraphs): Readings in Files

Huemer: Oct. 22, 27

“Compassionate Phenomenal Conservatism” link:

<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1933-1592.2007.00002.x/abstract>

Wolterstorff: Oct. 29, Nov. 3

“Introduction,” F&R, pp. 1-15 and “Can Belief in God Be Rational if it Has No Foundations?,” F&R, pp. 135-186

Plantinga: Nov. 5, 10, 12

“Reason and Belief in God,” F&R, pp. 16-93

Alston/KDR: Nov. 17, 19, Dec. 1, 3

Alston “Christian Experience and Christian Belief,” F&R, pp. 103-134: KDR, “Direct Warrant Realism” (in Files)

Academic Integrity

It is important that you familiarize yourself with Yale’s policies concerning plagiarism and that you take care to properly acknowledge the use of sources in your papers. Plagiarism may be grounds for failure of the assignment and/or the entire course. So be sure to review Yale’s Academic Integrity Policy:

<http://catalog.yale.edu/undergraduate-regulations/policies/definitions-plagiarism-cheating/>