

Skepticism

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Course Topic

Could it be that, for all you know, all your beliefs and memories are illusory – that your consciousness sprang into existence moments ago, and will cease to exist just as quickly? The skeptic answers ‘yes’ and concludes from this that we cannot know that there is an external world, or that other minded beings exist. This course will explore arguments for skepticism, responses to skepticism, and the possibility (and consequences) of taking skepticism seriously as a philosophical position.

Course Activities

Your task every week will be to read the set readings, watch the weekly lecture, and engage in class discussion utilizing the discussion forums (specific instructions for discussions will be uploaded on Canvas). The lectures are sometimes a little long - in these cases, it is fine (and recommended) to watch them in more than one sitting. Each week there will also be a number of ‘suggested readings’. These are readings that will be useful for you to read if you wish to delve deeper into the topic (especially if you choose to write your essay on the topic). There is no expectation that you read the suggested readings.

Assessment

The primary assessment for this course will be an essay. For undergraduates, the word limit will be 4000 words, for graduate students the word limit will be 5000 words. The assessment deadline will be 2024-01-14. Discussion forum posts will not be formally assessed. However, you will need to complete the discussion forum tasks on at least 5 of the 8 weeks in order to receive a passing grade.¹

¹ Please note that the language for this course is English. The teaching will be conducted in English, and your essays and discussion forum posts should be written in English.

Schedule

Note: This schedule is preliminary and subject to change.

Week 1: Introduction - Skepticism, Mooreanism, and Ambitious vs Modest Approaches

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Kelly – Moorean Facts and Belief Revision: Can the Skeptic Win?
 - ii. Rinard – Why Philosophy Can Overturn Common Sense.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. G.E. Moore - Proof of an External World.
 - ii. Pryor – The Skeptic and the Dogmatist.
 - iii. Descartes Meditations
 - iv. Al-Ghazali – Deliverance from Error).

Week 2: Unger’s Case for Skepticism

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Unger – A Defense of Skepticism.
 - ii. Lewis – Elusive Knowledge.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Unger - Ch 1-3 of ‘Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism’.

Week 3: Skeptical Isolationism

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Unger - “Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism” Ch 5 & 6.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Williamson - Knowing and Asserting (strongly recommended).
 - ii. Unger- “Ignorance: A Case for Skepticism” Ch 4.
 - iii. Hyman - How Knowledge Works.
 - iv. Hawthorne and Stanley - Knowledge and Action.

Week 4: Moderate Skepticism

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Saul - Skepticism & Implicit Bias
 - ii. Pasnau: Bias & Interpersonal Skepticism
 - iii. Carter & McKenna: Skepticism Motivated – On the Skeptical Import of Motivated Reasoning

Week 5: The Simulation Hypothesis

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Bostrom - Are We Living In A Computer Simulation?
 - ii. Chalmers - The Matrix as Metaphysics.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Chalmers - Structuralism as a Solution to Skepticism.
 - ii. Chalmers - Reality+.
 - iii. Putnam - Reason, Truth and History Ch 1.
 - iv. Helton - Structuralism, Solipsism, and The Threat from External World Skepticism.

Week 6: Epistemic Angst

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Pritchard – Skepticism, Epistemic Luck, and Epistemic Angst.
 - ii. Hirsch – Diabolical Mysticism, Death, and Skepticism.
 - iii. Risberg – Meta-Skepticism.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Hirsch – Radical Skepticism and the Shadow of Doubt.
 - ii. Blanchard – Moral Realism and Philosophical Angst.

Week 7: Skepticism & Practical Concerns

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Hannon – Skepticism: Impractical Therefore Implausible.
 - ii. Rinard - Pragmatic Skepticism.
 - iii. Schwitzgebel – 1% Skepticism.
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Rinard - Believing for Practical Reasons.
 - ii. Rinard - Equal Treatment for Belief.
 - iii. Rinard: Eliminating Epistemic Rationality.
 - iv. Pasnau - Snatching Hope from the Jaws of Epistemic Defeat.

Week 8: Can the Skeptic be Defeated?

- (a) Required Reading:
- i. Vogel – The Refutation of Skepticism.
 - ii. Rinard – Reasoning One’s Way out of Skepticism
- (b) Optional/Suggested Reading:
- i. Rinard – External World Skepticism and Inference to the Best Explanation.
 - ii. Hughes – Epistemic Dilemmas: A Guide (or any of his many other papers on epistemic dilemmas).
 - iii. Hughes – Epistemology Without Guidance.