

PHIL 246: Skepticism (v1.5)

Spring 2023 / TuTh 11:30–1:00 (Hall 201)

Instructor: Chuck Goldhaber

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Office Hours: Thursdays, 2:00–4:00pm

Office: Gest 204

Course Description

Can we know anything at all? Has everything you've ever experienced been an elaborate dream? This course approaches these questions in three phases.

The first three-week phase introduces the notion of knowledge and motivates a powerful kind of skepticism: skepticism about the external world. This is the view that we cannot know even the most basic facts about how things are in the world around us.

Over the next nine weeks we will explore and evaluate eight attempts to respond to skepticism about the external world. The responses are grouped into three kinds: *Outward-looking responses* appeal to connections between the outside world and our use of language or belief-forming tendencies. The hope is that the connection is robust enough to show that skepticism is false, or misguided, or no threat. *Cavalier responses* attempt to sidestep skepticism. They do this by insisting we can know how things are by just perceiving them, without needing to first answer the skeptic's challenge. Finally, *transcendental responses* attempt to build a bridge from thought to the world. Such a bridge would show that skepticism conflicts with or is ruled out by the preconditions on our thinking in the ways that we do.

The final two-week phase reflects on the value of skepticism. We will look to Ancient Greek and Taoist traditions to consider what a skeptical life could look like, and what advantage it could bring. And we will close by considering what the point of thinking about skepticism at all is.

Course Goals

By the end of the term, you will be able to . . .

- read and understand technical, contemporary philosophical writing.
- succinctly reconstruct and critically evaluate abstract arguments.
- thoughtfully engage with differing perspectives verbally and in writing.
- think clearly about knowledge and the main obstacles to it.

Required Texts

- *Skepticism: A Contemporary Reader* (ed. Keith DeRose, Ted Warfield). 1999. Oxford: Oxford University Press. ISBN: 0195118278. (Referred to below as [SACR])
- All other texts will be available on Moodle. (Referred to below as [M])

Course Requirements	% of course grade
– Up to 70 pages per week of dense philosophical reading	
– Regular participation in discussions	10%
– Meditation exercise (450–900 words)	10%
– Two 3–4 page (900–1200 words) papers	each 25%
– One final problem set	30%

Readings

In the schedule below, readings are listed underneath the dates by which they must be read. All readings are dense and tough, and some involve a lot technical language. So make sure you budget enough time to read the reading carefully, and several times.

Always bring the week’s required reading to class. You can find a reserve copy of the textbook at the library.

Participation

Regular verbal participation in group discussions is crucial for developing philosophical reasoning skills, which are very closely related to conversational and debate skills. If you are feeling shy in class, come to office hours, and let’s start talking there. Consistent and thoughtful class participation will boost borderline final grades.

Meditation Exercise

Early in the term there will be a short writing exercise (450–900 words) asking you to reflect on the things you believe and your grounds for them. You will be asked to report on your experience in narrative form, loosely using Descartes *Meditations* as a model. It will be assigned on 1/23 and is due Monday, 1/30 at 11:30am, via email.

Papers

You must write two papers (3–4 pages, 900–1200 words). The papers should be submitted as hard copies, and are due 3/14 and 4/13 at the start of class. Each paper must address one of several provided topics concerning the course texts, unless you get my approval for your own topic at least a week before the deadline. Provided topics will be distributed 2/16 and 3/30.

All papers must be clear, concise, rigorous, and well argued. They must use quotes and citations when presenting the philosophers’ views or arguments. Each paper must evaluate these views and arguments through use of objections and replies. You can’t just explain what the philosophers you’re writing about think. Your job is to use course readings as a springboard for articulating your own views, and to argue for them convincingly.

Problem Set

A problem set will be assigned in the last week of class and should be submitted *via email* (seniors by 5/6, 5pm, non-seniors by 5/12, noon). According to university policy, *absolutely NO late problem sets can be accepted*. The problem set will include approximately 10 short answer questions drawing on material from across the whole course. There will also be a choice of several essay questions focusing on material from the last four weeks. You must write two short essays (450–600 words).

Writing Resources

I am happy to discuss paper ideas and drafts in Office Hours. I encourage you to take advantage of the Writing Center. Info: <https://www.haverford.edu/writing-center>. You can easily make an appointment with a writing consultant online.

Late Policy

Late work will drop 1/3 of a letter grade per each 24 hours late (e.g., A– to B+). Due to university policies, I cannot accept late problem sets. Plan ahead and start early!

Academic Stressors, Resources on Campus, and Learning Differences

I am committed to partnering with you on your academic and intellectual journey. I also recognize that your ability to thrive academically can be impacted by your personal well-being and that stressors may impact you over the course of the semester. If the stressors are academic, I welcome the opportunity to discuss and address those stressors with you in order to find solutions together. If you are experiencing challenges or questions related to emotional health, finances, physical health, relationships, learning strategies or differences, or other potential stressors, I hope you will consider reaching out to the many resources available on campus. These resources include CAPS (free and unlimited counseling is available), the Office of Academic Resources, Health Services, Professional Health Advocate, Religious and Spiritual Life, the Office of Multicultural Affairs, the GRASE Center, and the Dean's Office. Additional information can be found at <https://www.haverford.edu/deans-office-student-life/offices-resources>.

Additionally, Haverford College is committed to creating a learning environment that meets the needs of its diverse student body and providing equal access to students with a disability. If you have (or think you have) a learning difference or disability—including mental health, medical, or physical impairment—please contact the Office of Access and Disability Services (ADS) at hc-ads@haverford.edu. The Director will confidentially discuss the process to establish reasonable accommodations. It is never too late to request accommodations—our bodies and circumstances are continuously changing.

Students who have already been approved to receive academic accommodations and want to use their accommodations in this course should share their accommodation

letter and make arrangements to meet with me as soon as possible to discuss how their accommodations will be implemented in this course. Please note that accommodations are not retroactive and require advance notice in order to successfully implement.

If, at any point in the semester, a disability or personal circumstances affect your learning in this course or if there are ways in which the overall structure of the course and general classroom interactions could be adapted to facilitate full participation, please do not hesitate to reach out to me.

It is a state law in Pennsylvania that individuals must be given advance notice that they may be recorded. Therefore, any student who has a disability-related need to audio record this class must first be approved for this accommodation from the Director of Access and Disability Services and then must speak to me. Other class members need to be aware that this class may be recorded.

Prohibitions

Cell phones must be silenced and put away during class. I prefer that no laptops be used in the classroom, but understand that there may be good reasons for making exceptions. Please reach out to me, if you would like to use a laptop.

No eating is allowed in the classroom. Drinks are OK, when allowed by the College's current COVID-19 policies.

Academic Integrity

Any form of cheating, including plagiarism, will be reported to the Honor Council. You are responsible for knowing what counts as plagiarism or cheating. Please consult the Honor Code's webpage: <https://honorcouncil.haverford.edu/the-code/>.

To ensure a safe and constructive learning environment for all, please join me in the commitment to respect everyone's identities and rights, regardless of differences.

Schedule

Assignment deadlines

Part I: Motivating skepticism

Weeks 1–2 – Doubt and certainty

- *Tues, 1/17*: Introduction, no reading
- *Thurs, 1/19*: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Letter of Dedication, First Meditation [M]
- *Tues, 1/23*: Descartes, *Meditations*, Second Meditation, Synopsis, Objections and Replies [M], Jorge Borges, “The Circular Ruins” [M], Meditation exercise assigned
- *Thurs, 1/25*: Jason Stanley, “Knowledge and Certainty” (2018) [M: just pp. 35–41]

Week 3 – Skepticism about the external world

- *Mon, 1/30*: ****Meditation exercise due at 11:30am**** via email.
- *Tues, 1/31*: Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism* (1984), Ch. 1 [M]
- *Thurs, 2/2*: Reread Stroud.

Part II: Outward-looking responses

Week 4 – Contextualist responses:

The standards for the use of ‘know’ vary by context.

- *****Early make-up class, Thurs, 2/2, 7:30–10:00pm*****: David Lewis, “Elusive Knowledge” (1996) [SACR, pp. 220–39]

****No class on Tuesday, 2/7 or Thursday, 2/9****

Week 5 – The response from semantic externalism:

‘I’m a brain in a vat’ must be false or meaningless.

- *Tues, 2/14*: Hilary Putnam, “Brains in a Vat” (1981) [SACR, pp. 27–42]
- *Thurs, 2/16*: Anthony Brueckner, “Semantic Answers to Skepticism” (1992) [SACR, pp. 43–60], Paper 1 assigned

Week 6–7 – The response from epistemic externalism:

The reliability of our belief-forming tendencies can justify our beliefs.

- *Tues, 2/21*: Christopher Hill (1996), “Process Reliabilism and Cartesian Scepticism” [M]

****No class on Thursday, 2/23****

- *Tues, 2/28*: Barry Stroud, “Scepticism, ‘Externalism’, and the Goal of Epistemology” (1994) [SACR, pp. 292–304]
- *Thurs, 3/2*: In-class discussion, no reading.

****Spring Break****

Part III: Cavalier responses

Week 8 – Moore’s response:

I can trust my senses more than premises in skeptical arguments.

- Tues, 3/14: G.E. Moore, “Proof of an External World” (1939), [M]
- **Paper 1 due at start of class**
- Thurs, 3/16: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty* (1951), §§1–65 [M]

Week 9 – The dogmatic response:

On a good theory of perception, we can often know things just by perceiving them.

- Tues, 3/21: James Pryor, “The Skeptic and the Dogmatist” (2000) [M: just pp. 517–532]
- Thurs, 3/23: Reread Pryor pp. 517–532, and then read the rest, pp. 532–541.

Week 10 – The disjunctivist response:

“We can misperceive” doesn’t imply “We can’t know things just by perceiving them.”

- Tues, 3/28: John McDowell, “Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge” [M]
- Thurs, 3/30: Crispin Wright, “(Anti-)Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G.E. Moore and John McDowell” (2002) [M] Paper 2 assigned

Part IV: Transcendental responses

Week 11 – Transcendental responses:

The way we think about the world presupposes its being a certain way.

- Tues, 4/4: P.F. Strawson, *Individuals* (1959), Introduction and Ch. 1 (just §§1–2; §3 is optional) [M]
- Thurs, 4/6: Barry Stroud, “Transcendental arguments” (1968) [M]

Week 12 – ‘Modest’ transcendental responses:

The way we think about the world makes skepticism incoherent or unattainable.

- Tues, 4/11: Charles Goldhaber, “Transcendental Cures for Skepticism” (ms) [M]
- Note: Office Hours this week moved to Tues, 4/11, 2:00–4:00pm!
- Thurs, 4/13: In-class discussion, no reading. **Paper 2 due at start of class**

Part V: The practice of skepticism

Week 13 – Can we be skeptics?

- *Tues, 4/18*: Sextus Empiricus, *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* (late 2nd century CE), I.1–13, 15–16, 34; II.1, 3–4; III.32 [M]
- *Thurs, 4/20*: Zhuangzi (approx. 3rd century BCE), Inner Ch. 2 [M]

Week 14 – Should we be skeptics?

- *Tues, 4/25*: Paul Frost et al, “Scientific Certainty Survival Kit” (2022) [M] and Daniel Greco, “Climate Change and Cultural Cognition” (2021) [M], **Problem sets assigned**
- *Thurs, 4/27*: Susanna Rinard, “Pragmatic Skepticism” (2022) [M].

*** Senior problem sets due by 5/6, 5pm via email ***

*** Non-senior problem sets due by 5/12, noon via email ***