
PHIL 4110: THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE MISINFORMATION

COURSE DESCRIPTION

We have all become increasingly aware of claims about misinformation. Whatever we take misinformation to be, one natural reaction to it is that we should just stand on our own two feet. We should become, in other words, epistemically self-sufficient: only believing and endorsing claims that we can double-check on our own.

While this is tempting, the strategy seems implausible. Reliance on others' expertise and testimony seems inescapable. But is it possible to trust the testimony of others without falling prey to misinformation? What would be required for us to create an environment where such trust could be taken for granted? Would we want to live in that environment?

This course will introduce you to issues in epistemology, with a focus on issues around testimony, social epistemology, and misinformation.

Note: Though there are no pre-requisites for this class, it is recommended that you have taken at least one philosophy course *before* taking this one, especially a course on epistemology, science, or politics like PHIL 3050 (Political Philosophy), 3115 (Philosophy of Science), or 3127 (Science, Technology, and Human Values).

TEXTS

All texts will be made available through Canvas and Perusall. This includes *Bad Beliefs* by Neil Levy, which is available as an open access book.

Optional texts that complement this course include:

Cailin O'Connor and James O. Weatherall. *The Misinformation Age*. Yale University Press.

Quassim Cassam. *Vices of the Mind*. Oxford University Press.

Sven Bernecker, Amy K Flowertree, and Thomas Grundmann (eds.). *The Epistemology of Fake News*. Oxford University Press.

Hugo Mercier. *Not Born Yesterday*. Princeton University Press.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- L1.** To gain knowledge and facility in select topics of epistemology, especially social epistemology, using this knowledge to describe, analyze, and explain current epistemological realities and identify possible avenues for change.
- L2.** To develop skills of argument analysis: learning to identify arguments, concepts, and distinctions in both scholarly and non-scholarly texts. Such skills are evident in useful and insightful comments and questions made both online and in-class.
- L3.** To foster skills of critical writing that engages with philosophical ideas. Such skills are demonstrated in writing that critically evaluates principles, concepts, and distinctions, and which employs reasons and inferences to support its claims and arguments.

- L4.** To develop verbal communication skills that support critical discussion by providing substantive contributions both online and in-class, by "stepping-forward and stepping-back" in classroom discussions, and by effectively guiding the class through readings.

COURSE FORMAT

The class will be discussion based. Each session will be devoted to reconstructing the argument and reasoning of the assigned readings, analyzing the principles invoked, and connecting these issues to real-world phenomena.

COURSE SCHEDULE

Week	Date	Topic	Readings
1	1.8	Introduction to the course syllabus overview	[Video Podcast] Misinformation. The LSE Forum for Philosophy.
	1.10	Overview of core themes: autonomy, equality, reliance on others	Zagzebski "Epistemic Authority" Ch. 1 ("The Rejection of Epistemic Authority") <i>Recommended:</i> Coady "The Fake News about Fake News"
2	1.15	DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR. DAY	
	1.17	One should trust others	Fricker "Second-Hand Knowledge" <i>Recommended:</i> Lackey "Testimonial Knowledge and Transmission" Zagzebski "Epistemic Authority" Ch. 3 ("Epistemic Trust in Others")
3	1.22	One should not be gullible	Van der Linden "FoolProof: Introduction" Williams "The Fake News About Fake News" <i>Recommended:</i> Goldberg "Fake News and Epistemic Rot; or, Why We Are All in This Together" Play the Bad News game online (link)
	1.24		Fricker "Against Gullibility"
4	1.29	One must defer to experts	Hardwig "Epistemic Dependence" <i>Recommended:</i> Grundmann "Facing Epistemic Authorities: Where Democratic Ideals and Critical Thinking Mislead Cognition"
	1.31		Zagzebski "Epistemic Authority" Ch. 5 ("Trust and Epistemic Authority")
5	2.5	One must choose which experts	Goldman "Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?"
	2.7		Jäger "Epistemic Authority"
6	2.12		Pamuk "The Paradox of Scientific Advice"

	2.14	One can't <i>just</i> trust the experts	Yee "Information Deprivation and Democratic Engagement" <i>Recommended:</i> Altay et al. "A survey of expert views on misinformation"
7	2.19	One can't trust one's community	Nguyen "Polarization or Propaganda" Furman "Epistemic Bunkers"
	2.21		Cassam "Conspiracy Theories"
8	2.26	One can't trust the environment	Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch. 1
	2.28		Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch.2
9	3.4		Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch.3
	3.6		Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch.4
10	3.11		Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch.5
	3.13	One must regulate the epistemic environment	Levy "Bad Beliefs" Ch. 6 + Conclusion
11	3.18	SPRING BREAK	
	3.20		
12	3.25	One must regulate the epistemic environment	Williams "Marketplace of Rationalizations"
	3.27		Fallis "What is Disinformation"
13	4.1	One must regulate speech	Frankfurt "On Bullshit"
	4.3		Langton "Blocking as Counter-Speech" Austin "How to Do Things with Words"
14	4.8	One must regulate what we see	Munton "Perceptual Skill and Social Structure"
	4.10		Daisy Dixon "Lies in Art"
15	4.15		Regina Rini "Deepfakes and Epistemic Backstops"
	4.17	One must be epistemically self-sufficient?	Andrew Buzzell and Regina Rini "Doing your own research and other impossible acts of epistemic superheroism"
15.5	4.22	Final instructional days	

ASSESSMENT

Assignment	% of total grade	Assessment	Grade Scale
Essay 1	25	Essay Rubric	A: 90–100
Essay 2	25	Essay Rubric	B: 80–89.5
Readings	26	Complete Incomplete	C: 70–79.5
Participation	14	As below	D: 60–69.5
Reflective Assignment	10	Excellent (10) Sufficient (7) Incomplete (0)	F: 0–59.5

Essays (L2, L3):

Over the term you will write two essays. The first will respond to an argument discussed in topics during the first half of the course (Weeks 1–7), the second will respond to an argument discussed in topics during the second half of the course (Weeks 8–15). I encourage you to consider which argument you'll be addressing and to schedule a meeting with me to talk over your ideas.

Essays will be evaluated using the essay rubric ([link](#))

Reading Assignments (L1, L2):

The readings for the course will be access through the third-party Perusall platform. You must use this platform to complete the readings. Perusall is both a community space—you'll be leaving comments which can be seen by your peers—and a means for me to track your engagement with the reading.

Some warnings and guidance: you *must* be connected to the internet while you access the Perusall platform. Moreover, Perusall does not perform well on phones or tablets, and struggles with having multiple sessions open. I encourage you to complete these readings using a laptop or desktop computer in an area with a strong internet connection. If this presents a problem, do get in touch.

Your completion grade for each reading is determined by three metrics: (1) completing the reading, (2) time spent engaging with the reading, and (3) the comments that you leave. For each reading, you are required to make at least **three** substantive comments.

Note: just leaving comments will not be sufficient to get the grade for each sessions reading. You need to read the reading too.

I encourage you to use the platform as a place to express your uncertainties, questions, and confusions. I read through these comments and often contribute to discussions in preparation for each session.

Perusall employs AI to evaluate your comments. Sometimes it doesn't do a good job, however, determining what is a good comment. Examples of what I take to be substantive comments include those that: (a) outline the argument of the section/paragraph and relates it to the goals of the paper; (b) point to a technical concept or distinction, and provides some clarification of what it means in context; (c) raise a question about an argument, concept, distinction, or piece of evidence and articulates why this question is important (for instance, if you are confused about what something means, explain what you are confused about); (d) provide a useful explanation of a difficult stretch of text; (e) relate concepts, topics, or themes to other elements of the course in an interesting and illuminating way; or (f) connect the reading to outside sources or materials in a useful and illuminating way.

You must complete the reading **two hours before class**—after this point, the system will continue to track your activity, but it will not count towards your grade.

Class Participation:

Class participation is not just merely attending class. It is expected that you will have completed the reading for the day's session and have come to class ready to discuss it.

Your class participation grade reflects your engagement with these readings, your contributions to class discussions and activities, and your commitment to fostering a positive and respectful learning environment. It will be evaluated according to the participation rubric ([link](#))

To anchor your expectations: if you merely show up but don't participate in classroom discussions, you'll receive a "D" (8.5/14).

Reflective Assignments (L1–L4):

By the end of week 15.5 (that is, by May 7th, at 11:59PM), you must complete a short reflective exercise. This will ask you to consider your own performance over the course, your progress on the learning objectives, and the content of the course—particularly, how, if at all, you will be applying the lessons of this course your everyday life, and what, if anything, you think the course missed out on discussing.

THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS

Attendance and Missed Classes:

Showing up is required and expected. Though there is no penalty for missing a single session—there are repercussions for missing multiple classes. If you miss **5 or more classes**, the highest grade you can achieve is a "B", 7 or more a "C", and 9 or more a "D".

You can think of this another way. You have 4 "freebies"—4 absences to use to go to career fairs, grad school appointments, or if you're just not feeling the reading for that week.

Only serious circumstances of serious medical illness, bereavement, or other emergencies will be "excused" absences.

CIOS Incentive:

If 75% of the class completes the CIOS survey, then I will forgive **one** incomplete reading. If 85% of the class completes the CIOS survey, I will forgive **two** incomplete readings.

Pass/Fail Students:

For those who take the class **pass/fail**: to receive a grade of "satisfactory," you must receive a grade of 70% or higher, and you must complete all readings and the two essays.

Academic Integrity and Collaboration:

Honesty and transparency are important features of good scholarship. On the flip side, plagiarism and cheating are serious academic offenses with serious consequences. If you are discovered engaging in either behavior in this course, you will earn a failing grade on the assignment in question, and further disciplinary action may be taken.

Your work should be crafted and written on your own. You may talk with others about your ideas—you may even use the ideas discussed in class seminars—but these ideas must be made your own. That means working by yourself to develop your own ideas, providing your own reasons, and explaining things in your own words.

In this class, the use of chat GPT or any other AI text-generating software will be seen as a violation of academic integrity. The class will use Turnitin to check for both plagiarism and AI-generated text.

You are required to cite all sources you use in your submitted work. This includes both direct quotations and cases where you use someone else's ideas. "Sources" include papers, journals, conversations, anything found on the internet, and so on. Basically, if the thought did not originate with you, you should provide an in-text citation and a reference list. For a clear description of what counts as plagiarism, cheating, and/or the use of unauthorized sources, please see the Student Code of Conduct: <http://www.catalog.gatech.edu/rules/19>.

If you have questions about my integration of the university's honor code into this course, please do not hesitate to ask: my aim is to foster an environment where you can learn and grow, while ensuring that the work we all do is honest and fair.

For more information about Georgia Tech's standards with respect to academic integrity, you can also check out the following link: <http://honor.gatech.edu/>

Accommodations for Students:

If you wish to request an accommodation due to a documented disability, please inform me and contact Disability Services as soon as possible. They can be reached at dsinfo@gatech.edu or 404-894-2563 (voice)/ 404-894-1664 (TDD).

I encourage you to discuss with me what you need to succeed—if you need direction, assistance or accommodation, please get in touch with me as soon as possible. I also encourage you to make use of the academic and pastoral resources at <https://success.gatech.edu>

Extensions, Late Assignments:

Time management is important. If you need an extension, please ask *before* the due date. Depending on the circumstances, I am usually open to short extensions (24–48 hours). If you require a longer extension than this, you must schedule a meeting with me to go over the material you have completed, your ideas, and a to establish a concrete schedule for completion. Unless an extension has been granted in advance, assignments will incur a penalty of 2 points (that is, 2% of your overall grade) for each day they are late.

Student-Faculty Expectations:

I believe that mutual respect is at the heart of the student-teacher relationship. In general, this is characterized by respectful language and imagery, punctuality and care for others' time, clear and thorough communication, access to resources, and an openness to dialogue and debate. I am committed to such mutual respect and encourage everyone in the class to work towards the best possible learning environment so that all can meet their highest ambitions. Please explore Tech's policies on for more information: <https://catalog.gatech.edu/rules/22/>

As part of my commitment to mutual respect, I encourage and value students from diverse backgrounds and perspectives. I see such diversity is a resource, strength, and benefit and will endeavor to present materials and activities in class that respect and support this diversity, including (but not limited to): gender identity, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, nationality, religion, and culture.

I encourage and appreciate suggestions for ways that the classroom can better support learning, inclusion, and the effectiveness of the course for you personally, or for other students or student groups.

Student Use of Mobile Devices in the Classroom:

Unless by prior arrangement—for instance, your computer has died—I do not allow mobile phones. Keep them in your bags and on silent.

While you may take notes on your laptop, I request that you turn the sound off so that you do not disrupt other students' learning.