

Acquisition of Knowledge: IDH 2010
University of South Florida, Fall 2007

Common Syllabus for
Section 009 M/W 11:00 AM-12:15 PM, SOC 258
Section 021 M/W 12:30-1:45 PM, FAO 248

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Course Narrative:

The acquisition of knowledge is something we constantly “do,” in the formal setting of the classroom and, more broadly, in our daily lives. Indeed, critical thinking skills should be continuously developed during one’s lifetime, as we are relentlessly exposed to new information, be it related to our career pursuits or the myriad of activities and interests that collectively define who we are. Critical thinking, logic, knowledge validation, etc., are not just the concerns of science; it should be the concern of those seeking to make informed rational decisions in many areas of human endeavor, within an environment where knowledge may often be uncertain and information suspect. Popular culture has coined phrases such as “spin doctoring”, “junk science”, and “propaganda warfare”. Where it might be argued that one’s opinion cannot be totally controlled, the facts upon which one bases his or her opinion can certainly be controlled. Advertisers, marketers, politicians, and often the media are constantly trying to persuade us to adopt their views, beliefs, and values. Opposing attorneys attempt to persuade juries to adopt one of two conclusions that may be 180 degrees different, supposedly based on an “objective” analysis of the same body of facts. One must be rigorously watchful and sometimes suspicious, since the persuader may not be driven by honorable motives or a desire to arrive at truth. Even science, often viewed with unquestioning awe, is not immune from manipulation or even error; sometimes the best of scientists simply get it wrong! Knowledge may grow with the passage of time, but no one said it had to be a smooth road.

Thus it may be advantageous to develop an attitude of robust skepticism where one is constantly vigilant regarding the validity and reliability of knowledge that is presented at the moment. In effect, we should seek to become “critical learners”. Rather than simply accepting “facts” on the basis of authority, or because of intellectual laziness, inertia, patriotic fervor, social pragmatism, or personal faith, we should strive to develop skills that allow us to critically and rationally determine for ourselves what knowledge is credible and the extent of such credibility. Such procedure is not just the idealistic pursuit of academics, seemingly detached from daily realities; critical thinking skills must be sought after and valued by all, for such skills have intrinsic value in all aspects of our daily (“real”) lives, individually and collectively. Intellectual conformism, uncritical acceptance of borrowed truths, and its citizens’ indifference to manipulation threaten a free society.

Epistemology is the field of philosophy that addresses the essence of knowledge, how it is acquired, where its limits may be, and how (if at all) it is validated. This includes basic questions such as:

- What is truth? Is there even such a thing as truth? How would we even recognize “truth”?
- Is truth simply a societal consensus, or are there “absolute truths”, possibly timeless, independent of our current awareness?
- What is knowledge? How is knowledge validated? How does knowledge grow?
- What role do the human senses (vision, hearing, etc.) play in our acquisition of knowledge? Are the senses to be trusted?
- Can we obtain knowledge through pure rational processes only?
- Is it all just “belief”? If so, how can we justify our beliefs?
- Is the so-called “scientific method” the only legitimate way to acquire and validate knowledge?

These questions have been debated since ancient times, with reflection and inquiry continuing up to the present. The Western epistemological tradition began in classical Greece, reaching its climax with **Plato** (427-347 B.C.E.), and his pupil **Aristotle** (384-322 B.C.E.) It was continued by the great minds of medieval scholasticism, most importantly **St. Thomas Aquinas** (1225 ? – 1274), to be lifted to a new level with the great debates of the 17th and 18th centuries between two schools of thought, described historically as “empiricism” and “rationalism”. **Empiricists** felt that we are born with blank minds and proceed to acquire knowledge during our lifetimes through sensory experiences. Embracing the almost exact opposite, **rationalists** felt that we, in fact, are born with knowledge, and that knowledge is developed through rational processes only; the senses are simply not to be trusted. More contemporary philosophers and scientists talk about pragmatic justifications, the role of language, uncertainty and randomness, sociological and psychological influences, and even entertain the notion that mathematics and physics are simply communication devices (pure human creations) that have no relationship to real things. New developments in neuroscience add to the mix. Indeed, where one might argue that a lack of consensus regarding philosophical issues related to knowledge acquisition is profoundly problematic, others might argue that these are exciting times when competitive viewpoints coexist.

The core readings for this class are intended to expose you to some of the classic arguments regarding the acquisition of knowledge. Plato’s *The Republic* introduces his Theory of Forms that has had a tremendous influence on Western intellectual history. **Plato’s Allegory of the Cave** is particularly instructive, perhaps arguing in contemporary terms for us to “peek behind the curtain” as we strive to move from the Realm of Belief to the Realm of Knowledge. **René Descartes’ Meditations on First Philosophy** presents the foundations of rationalism, with its insistence that knowledge comes from rational processes exclusively. Descartes’ Method of Doubt allows us to arrive at so-called foundational or indubitable truths. Descartes writes a rather abstract prose that might be difficult for some readers to follow. Recognize that he did so on purpose, as a means of avoiding censorship from watchful (and mostly uneducated) Catholic clergy. **David Hume’s An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding** is much easier reading and outlines the basics of empiricism: knowledge comes from sensory-based experience. Most readers will probably find empiricism to be more in sync with contemporary scientific method. In effect, we have to see, hear, taste, smell, and feel it for ourselves before knowledge acquisition is possible. Hume, ultimately a skeptic, also presents arguments against the process of induction, arguing that induction per se is more a matter of habit rather than a scientific or logical law. Fortunately for us, the physics of today is the same physics of yesterday, which in turn will be the same physics of tomorrow. To Hume, this is what makes the process of induction “work”.

Collectively, these writings serve as a strong foundation for further readings and the exploration of more contemporary philosophies and viewpoints from the 19th century to present times. While it is our desire for you to thoroughly understand the fundamentals of each of these philosopher's viewpoints, it is also important that you develop your reading skills, learning how to read critically from original sources while you extract the basic arguments and supporting evidence. Thus we want you to read the complete texts, rather than just selected passages. It is our fervent hope that for you this reading experience is the beginning of a lifelong quest to continuously develop your critical thinking skills. The door will be opened ... we trust you will enter and explore.

William E. Lee
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 USF Dept of Chemical Engineering.

Required Texts*:

- Plato, *Five Dialogues* (Hackett, 2002) ISBN: 0872206335 \$7
- Rene Descartes, *Mediations, Objections and Replies* (Hackett, 2006)
 ISBN: 0872207986 \$9
- David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, 2nd ed. (Hackett, 1993)
 ISBN: 0872202291 \$6
- Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, 2nd (Hackett, 2001)
 ISBN: 0872205932 \$8
- Bertrand Russell, *Problems of Philosophy* (Oxford, 1998) ISBN: 019511552 \$12

*There will be some additional readings available on my website, <http://brommage.freeshell.org>. These will denoted on the schedule with '[E]'

Course Schedule:

All dates and content scheduled are tentative and subject to change by the Instructor!

DATE	ASSIGNMENT	TOPIC
27 Aug:	Intro	Why are we here?
29 Aug:	Plato, Euthyphro	Is Knowledge Good?
3 Sept:	Labor Day: No Class!	--
5 Sept:	Plato, Meno	Knowing <i>a priori</i>
10 Sept:	Plato, Phaedo	Knowledge & Universals
12 Sept:	Plato, Republic VI and VII [E]	Divided Line, Cave
17 Sept:	Plato, Apology	The Examined Life
19 Sept:	Academic Success Presentation	--

24 Sept:	Descartes, Meditations I and II	Certainty & Doubt
26 Sept:	Descartes, Meditations III and IV	Knowledge & Error
1 Oct:	Descartes, Meditations V and VI	The Exterior World
3 Oct:	Locke (selection) [E]	Innate Knowledge?
8 Oct:	Enquiry 1-4	Skeptical Doubts
10 Oct:	Enquiry 5-7	Skeptical Conclusion
15 Oct:	Enquiry 8-9	The Physical World
17 Oct:	Enquiry 10-11	Practical Belief
22 Oct:	Enquiry, 12 and End matter	Philosophy & Empiricism
24 Oct:	TBA	--
29 Oct:	Kant, Preface and Part I	Mathematics
31 Oct:	Kant, Part II	Natural Science
5 Nov:	Kant, Part III	Metaphysics
7 Nov	Kant, Appendices	Critique of Pure Reason
12 Nov:	Veteran's Day (observed): No Class!	Reality & the Material
14 Nov:	Russell, Intro and I-III	Idealism & Realism
19 Nov:	Russell, IV-V	Knowing <i>a priori</i> (again)
21 Nov:	Russell, VI – VIII	--
26 Nov:	Russell, IX-X	Universals
28 Nov:	Russell, XI-XIII	Truth and Error
3 Dec:	Russell, XIV-XV	Philosophy & Knowledge
5 Dec:	Wrap-up	What does it all mean?
Final Exam:	TBA	--

Note on the Indeterminacy of Time: Rarely is there enough time in the semester to cover everything an ideal course should cover. Some of the later assignments may look daunting, but chances are good that some sections may need to be cut based on lack of time. I reserve the right to change the schedule at any time to correspond to the pace of the class.

Course Evaluation:

The main point of evaluation for this course will be five short argumentative response papers (3-5 pages in length) each due *one week following* the completion of each of the books. The one lowest grade on the response papers will be “dropped” when calculating your final grade. They will be graded on your demonstrated knowledge of the content, style, grammar and spelling, and your overall argument. Please note that two copies of the paper are always required: one hard copy in class, the other uploaded to Blackboard (<http://my.usf.edu>) under “Assignments.” Your grade will be reduced for failing to deliver both copies by the due date. *Late papers will be graded down one letter grade per day late.* Other specific requirements will be distributed when the first paper is assigned.

The final exam will be held at the end of the semester in accordance with the University's scheduled final exam time. Anyone who cannot take the final exam must make arrangements to make it up at least one week prior to the scheduled exam date. Failure to do so will result in a grade of "F" for the exam.

The following weighting will be used to calculate your grade:

Response Papers (4 x 15%)	60%
Final Exam	20%
Attendance and Participation	20%

Note on Academic Dishonesty:

Plagiarism is the ultimate mortal sin of academia. Please, cite properly and document accordingly anything that may appear in your written work for this class. If you are unclear about how to properly document a paper, simply ask me. But err on the side of caution: clear-cut cases of plagiarism (deemed so by myself) will result in the possibility of up to and including a “FF” for this class, and possible dismissal from the Honors College and/or the University,. Don't try me, I will catch you. All submissions for this class will be cleared through electronic methods to detect plagiarism.

If you are unsure of what plagiarism constitutes, I highly recommend you view the tutorial at the following link: <http://www.cte.usf.edu/plagiarism/index.html>. Ignorance of the law, as they say, is no excuse.

The University of South Florida has an account with an automated plagiarism detection service which allows instructors to submit student assignments to be checked for plagiarism. I reserve the right to 1) request that assignments be submitted to me as electronic files and 2) electronically submit assignments to Blackboard (<http://my.usf.edu>). Assignments are compared automatically with a huge database of journal articles, web articles, and previously submitted papers. The instructor receives a report showing exactly how a student's paper was plagiarized.

For more information on Academic Dishonesty, consult the 2007/8 USF Undergraduate Catalog, pp. 45-6 or <http://www.ugs.usf.edu/catalogs/0708/adadap.htm>

Expectations, Suggestions and Mandates for an efficient class:

1. Please arrive to class on time and expect to stay the entire duration of the class. If this is an impossibility, please make every attempt to notify me in advance of tardiness or absence.
2. Especially true in philosophy more than most other subjects, diligence is important. Some of the reading will be difficult, since these are some of the most profound texts in the history of the world. The difficulty of the subject is indirectly proportional to the amount of work put into the course. Expect to have up to ten hours a week of reading and thinking in order to get an "A" for the course. Additionally, for these reasons, attendance is of vital importance.
3. Please come to class prepared (i.e., any reading assigned read, any questions concerning readings or lectures prepared, etc.)
4. Please be respectful of each other in the class. There will be times when students disagree about a topic discussed in class. This is a didactic process, not a combative one.
5. Due to the great excess of material and limited time in which we must over ground, please do not create a disruption for those people who are attempting to learn. Disruptions include blurting out answers, name calling, chiding each other, snoring, etc. Laughing at the Instructor's jokes is obviously exempted from this policy. In addition, personal audio devices (except those in use to record lectures) and loud crunching snack foods are prohibited from the classroom. PLEASE TURN OFF your cellphones in class!
6. Please feel free to make mistakes. We all will from time to time, even your omniscient instructor.
7. Please feel free to make use of my office hours. Waiting until the last moment in the semester to catch up is not advisable. I am excellent at fixing small problems, but horrendous at fixing large ones. The only difference between small and large problems is time.
8. Have fun! The material is only as dry as you make it out to be. Sharpening one's mind can be an exhilarating process.