

# PHIL 224: Theory of Knowledge

## Spring 2018

M/W 3–4:22 PM • Coleman 020

<http://moodle.bucknell.edu/course/view.php?id=28476>

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office hours: Tuesdays 1–3 PM (or by appointment)

**Course Content** Philosophers have been struggling to get clear on the concept of *knowledge* for millennia. What does knowledge require of us? Why is it distinctively valuable? (*Is it?*) What are its proper sources? How can we be said to know something if we can't rule out the possibility of error in any given case? This course will focus on recent philosophical developments in Epistemology — especially the social context of knowledge and the significance of an individual's intellectual character as a responsible believer. These theories arguably have a timely relevance: we will apply them to such topics as propaganda, “fake news”, rumor, hearsay, conspiracy theories, denialism, and the general suspicion of expertise.

**Learning Goals** By studying these questions, you should gain a deep understanding of contemporary philosophical theorizing about knowledge and understanding, particularly as these theories might be brought to bear on issues of real world concern. Other important goals of the course include developing your skill in critical analysis and argumentation and in clear, precise writing.

**Readings** Greco and Turri (eds) *Virtue Epistemology: Contemporary Readings*;  
Baehr, *The Inquiring Mind*;  
PDF articles provided on Moodle.

**Evaluation** Your final grade will be based the various weighted components described below. Note what the different letter grades represent: according to the Course Catalog (<http://www.bucknell.edu/catalog.xml>), an 'A' rewards 'Superior achievement', a 'B' means 'High pass', a 'C' means 'Pass', a 'D' means 'Low pass', and an 'F' stands for 'Failing work'.

**Preparation & Professionalism (20%).** Class meetings will be run as seminars. You set the tone with your interest and engagement. Merely showing up and looking attentive will not secure high marks on this component of your grade. Rather, I expect you to be an engaged and informed participant on a regular basis. Break the ice. Ask questions. Try out ideas/arguments. Talk through your confusion/puzzlement. Engage each other (not just me). As long as your contributions to class meetings are informed by the readings, “getting something wrong” will not hurt your grade — indeed, it may end up helping it (see in particular “Failure” below).

Some of the reading we do will be demanding. You will be confused and frustrated at times. That's okay! Part of my goal is to help you become a more adept reader and thinker and struggle is part of that. But I will ask you to be diligent about this and read everything carefully. Saving the reading for the last minute will not work. You'll probably even need to read some pieces a few times, looking up unfamiliar terms along the way, to get to the level of preparedness I am expecting. Remember: your highlighter is not a magical brain–paper interface device. Read actively! Take notes; mark up your books/papers; write down questions or objections or passages that confused you; keep a journal. In short: critically engage with the reading and come to class ready to share the fruits of your labors. If I suspect that preparation is lagging, I reserve the right to impose short reading quizzes that will be counted for/against your Weekly Assignment average (see below).

**Weekly Assignments (20%).** You will generally be doing a short (300–500 word) writing assignment once a week, prior to a class meeting of your choosing, in response to a range of prompts/questions I post for each meeting. This need not be polished writing, but I will ask you to strive for clarity and precision in your answers while also engaging specifically with the assigned text. Weekly assignments will be graded on a simple numerical basis, where 0=“not done/needs work”, 1=“Getting There”, 2=“Good; Meets my Expectations”, 3=“Exceeds My Expectations”. At the end of the term, I will drop your worst three assignments, average the rest, and curve things so that an average of 2.0 lands on a B/B+.

**Paper Talks (10%).** Twice during the term, you will be assigned to frame/guide our discussion of a given reading by presenting for about five minutes on some of the key aspects of the argument or debate (or perhaps some background stemming from background research). These presentations should interface specifically with the text and be designed to kick off an interesting discussion which you will help guide. Only your better paper talk will count toward your final grade.

**Research Essay(s) (45%)** You have the option of writing one long essay (3,000–5,000 words, excluding bibliography) or two shorter essays (2,000–2,500 words) on topics of your choosing, subject to my approval. If you select the two-essay option, your first essay must be submitted by March 19th, your second by May 4th. If you select the one-essay option, you'll just be subject to the final deadline. *Don't think of these deadlines as suggestions of when you should turn your essay(s) in;* I am happy to accept and mark them earlier. Essays in either option should (a) be philosophical in tenor and style — meaning, among other things, that they will be centered around a careful argument for a precise and interesting thesis — and (b) have a research component, meaning that they will interact with several high-quality sources (in a non-trivial way) that were not assigned by me. You will have ample opportunity to hone these — you may of course conference with me about your ideas as many times as you wish and I will provide full comments and a completed rubric for drafts — so my expectations for these essays will be high. If you initially select the two-essay option, you may switch to the one-essay option (up to the 5/4 deadline), possibly incorporating a revised version of your first essay into the longer one. You may not pull the reverse switch, however. If you miss the deadline for the first essay, you're committed to the longer one.

**Failure! (5%).** It's an under-appreciated fact that one of the most powerful forms of learning stems from failing and learning from that experience; thus in this course, you will be rewarded for “failing well” and reflecting fruitfully on your failure(s) in a “failure journal”. Meta-cognition at its finest!

- Office Hours** You are invited and encouraged to supplement your in-class learning by visiting me in my regular office hours (see above) or at some other time that suits us both. You don't need an appointment to come to office hours — just drop by. You may also contact me via Skype (my username can be found on our Moodle page); if you see me online, you may assume that I'm happy to chat. You may need to request that I add you as a contact (I will) — this cuts down on spam calls for me.
- Professionalism & Attendance** We have a limited time to spend with one other. Respect this time (and each other) by coming prepared, on time, equipped with relevant books and materials in hand (including printouts of PDF articles, pencil and paper for notes), and ready to give us your full attention for the duration of the class. Do not distract yourself (or others, or *me*) with electronic marvels such as smartphones, iWatches, laptops, beepers, ham radios, &c. Do not wander out of class to use the bathroom unless you *really need to* (and *try not to get in a situation where you really need to*). Do not doze off, work on other homework, engage in side-conversations, or otherwise be disruptive and annoying. In general, think of your involvement with the course as analogous to expectations you'd face in most professional settings.
- Late Work** My policy on late work is that weekly assignments are not generally accepted late (unless we've made some prior arrangement) and that essays will be penalized by  $\frac{1}{3}$  of a grade (e.g., a B+ to a B) per 24-hour period they are late.
- Sources & Academic Honesty** I expect you to abide by Bucknell's Honor Code ([www.bucknell.edu/AcademicResponsibility](http://www.bucknell.edu/AcademicResponsibility)). In particular, unless otherwise instructed, your formal written work must correctly and completely cite all materials used, including primary sources, textbooks, websites, and other material from the internet you consult, quote, or paraphrase. (Weekly Assignments need not provide full citations, but any quotations or references should be cited in such a way that I can find the original easily.) Failure to do so is a cardinal academic sin which is taken very seriously here and can result in your suspension or expulsion if committed. It is my practice to refer *all* students who commit any form of academic dishonesty to the University Board of Review <[www.bucknell.edu/x1337.xml](http://www.bucknell.edu/x1337.xml)>.
- Reasonable Accommodations** Any student who may need an accommodation based on the impact of a disability should contact Heather Fowler, Director of the Office of Accessibility Resources at 570-577-1188 or [hf007@bucknell.edu](mailto:hf007@bucknell.edu) who will help coordinate reasonable accommodations for those students with documented disabilities. See also <<http://bucknell.edu/Accessibility>>.