

## *PHILOSOPHY 251 (A01): KNOWLEDGE, CERTAINTY AND SKEPTICISM*

### **Class times**

Monday & Thursday, 1:00-2:20, ELL (Elliott Building) 061

### **Professor**

Patrick Rysiew

Office Hours: Thursday 11:30-12:20, Friday 1:00-2:20, or by appointment; Clearihue B321

E-mail: [rysiew@uvic.ca](mailto:rysiew@uvic.ca)

Phone: 721-7520 (my office), 721-7512 (Philosophy Dept.)

### **Texts**

- (1) \_\_\_\_\_, Moser and vander Nat, eds., 3<sup>rd</sup> edition; Oxford, 2003; ISBN 0-19-514966-1.
- (2) Several additional readings will be made available via the course's web page (CourseSpaces). Students are responsible for acquiring copies of these.

### **Course Description**

We think we have knowledge of a real, objective, material world – we think we know such things as that humans are mammals, that water is wet, that Bo Horvat plays for the Canucks, that the earth revolves around the sun, etc. But what, exactly, does such ‘knowledge’ consist in? What, if anything, do each of the cases of knowledge just mentioned have in common? If we lack a clear understanding of what knowledge is, can we be sure that we know what we think we know? Sceptics claim that we don’t have any, or much, knowledge at all. Other philosophers insist that while we do have knowledge, this isn’t – -- knowledge of a material world that exists independently of our thoughts. In the first part of the course, we will look at some central historical writings centering on the problem of our knowledge of the external world. In addition to giving us some historical grounding, this will introduce some key concepts and issues (knowledge, justification, scepticism, doubt, certainty, etc.). In the second part of the course, we will turn to more recent attempts to give a systematic theory of just what these notions – centrally, knowledge and justification – involve, and to respond to sceptical challenges to our everyday belief in an independently-existing material world.

## Evaluation

Students' grades will be based on:

two short essays, worth 25% and 30% respectively

a final exam: 35%

several short in-class quizzes (T/F, multiple-choice, fill-in-the-blank, short answer, etc.), based on the readings, and possibly some short take-home assignments; the quizzes will not, as a rule, be announced ahead of time: 10%

The short papers might also be thought of as take-home exams. You will be given questions calling for short, essay-style responses. You will have some choice in which you answer. Your response should be concise, well-structured, and to the point; it must be between 800 and 1000 words in total length. The short essays will be discussed more in class when the first topics are distributed.

Beyond the student's having adequately addressed the topic question(s) on which he/she writes, evaluation of the short essays and any essay question(s) appearing on the exam will be based on: evidence of comprehension of the materials and issues addressed; evidence of original and critical thought with regard to that material; the extent to which the student stakes out a position and provides good reasons and arguments for it; the extent to which the student communicates his/her ideas clearly (using complete and grammatical sentences, correct terms, a clear essay structure, and so on). For the short essays,

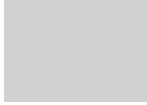
Any materials used for the short essays (i.e., any course readings) must be properly cited in the standard way.

Without exception, late papers unaccompanied by a legitimate documented excuse will be penalized at the rate of 5% per day or portion thereof, starting as soon as the due date and time have passed. Should an emergency arise, let the instructor know – ahead of time, if possible. An unexcused absence without a documented excuse on the day of a quiz will result in a score of zero.

The standard University grading scheme will be used. Here is an excerpt from it (the full version is here: <https://web.uvic.ca/calendar2018-05/undergrad/info/regulations/grading.html>):

Passing Grades	Grade Point Value	Percentage	Description
A+	9	90 – 100	An A+, A, or A- is earned by work which is technically superior, shows mastery of the subject matter, and in the
A	8	85 – 89	
A-	7	80 – 84	

			activities. A B+ represents a more complex understanding and/or application of the course material. Normally achieved by the largest number of students.
C+	3	65 – 69	A C+ or C is earned by work that indicates an adequate comprehension of the course material and the skills needed to work with the course material and that indicates the student has met the basic requirements for completing assigned work and/or participating in class activities.
C	2	60 – 64	



**Week 4 (Jan. 27, 30): Berkeley's empiricism (and his idealism)**

Berkeley, excerpts from

(HK)

*\*1<sup>st</sup> essay topics distributed Thursday, Jan. 30<sup>th</sup>*

**Week 5 (Feb. 3, 6): Hume's 'scepticism'**

Hume, excerpts from the

(HK)

***PERCEPTION AND BASIC KNOWLEDGE***

**Week 6 (Feb. 10, 13)**

Ayer, "The Argument from Illusion" (C)

Reid, excerpts from

(HK)

*\*1<sup>st</sup> essay due at the start of class Monday, Feb. 10<sup>th</sup>*

***\*\*Feb. 17-21: No classes – Reading break\*\****

***SCEPTICISM AND COMMON SENSE***

**Week 7 (Feb. 24, 27):**

Moore, "Proof of an External World" (HK)

