

Phil 1430: Philosophy and the Internet

Bowdoin College, Philosophy Department

Fall 2021

Tuesdays and Thursdays from 1:15 PM to 2:40 PM

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Office Hours:

- In-person: Tuesdays and Thursdays from 3 PM to 4 PM.
- Zoom: By request.

Course Description

In this course, we will examine some of the societal forces that promote both good and bad epistemic behavior. In the process of doing this, we will work together to try to be better epistemic agents ourselves. Some of the questions we will ask are: What is bullshit? How should we combat fake news? How could you know if a conspiracy theory is actually true? What makes a source trustworthy? Which kinds of sources should we expose ourselves to?

Who Can Take This Course?

This course is aimed at students with no previous background in philosophy. The topics covered will be of interest to any person who uses social media (or the internet more generally). To get a nuanced philosophical understanding of these topics, we will spend much of our time developing basic skills needed to appreciate philosophy papers.

Course Goals

This course has two broad aims:

1. To provide students with key philosophical concepts (e.g., knowledge, evidence and rationality) that they can apply to think more critically and systematically about the way they and others form beliefs about a variety of topics in their daily (online) lives.
2. To foster a community of listeners that are ready to engage in open-minded criticism of their own arguments and those of others.

Key Learning Objectives:

At the end of the course:

1. Students will be able to identify both the main conclusion and the supporting premises of that conclusion in philosophy papers.
2. Students will be able to assess how well philosophical contributions capture the phenomena they describe.
3. Students will be able to draw connections between the readings and their personal knowledge and experiences.
4. Students will be able to create philosophical content apt for an everyday audience (e.g. Wikipedia pages).

Reading Topics and Readings:

Introduction(s) (to our course and to Philosophy)

09/02/2021: Introduction to the class (the syllabus, expectations).

No readings assigned!

09/07/2021: Introduction to philosophical reading and introducing epistemology

Read: James Pryor, "Guidelines on Reading Philosophy"

<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>

Read: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*, ch. 1

Bullshit

09/09/2021

Read: Harry Frankfurt, "On Bullshit"

09/14/2021

Read: Hans Maes and Katerin Schaubroeck, "Different Kinds and Aspects of Bullshit" in *Bullshit and Philosophy*

09/16/2021

Read: Kenneth A. Taylor, "Bullshit and the Foibles of the Human Mind, or what the Masters of the Dark Arts Know" in *Bullshit and Philosophy*

09/21/2021

Read: Heather Douglas, "Bullshit at the Interface of Science and Policy: Global Warming, Toxic Substances, and Other Pesky Problems" in *Bullshit and Philosophy*

Writing philosophy summaries

09/23/2021 How to write a philosophy summary

Read: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/philosophy/> (fragments)

Fake News

09/28/2021

Read: Regina Rini, “Fake News and Partisan Epistemology”

09/30/2021

Read: Chris Blake-Turner, “Fake news, relevant alternatives, and the degradation of our epistemic environment”

Conspiracy Theories

10/05/2021

Read: M. Dentith, “Conspiracy theories on the basis of the evidence”

10/07/2021

Read: Susan Feldman, “Counterfact Conspiracy Theories.”

10/12/2021 Fall Vacation

No class – No readings assigned!

10/14/2021

Read: Katherine Hawley, “Conspiracy theories, impostor syndrome, and distrust”

Trustworthiness

10/19/2021

Read: Karen Frost-Arnold, “Trustworthiness and truth: the epistemic pitfalls of internet accountability”

10/21/2021

Read: Nicola Mößner, “Trusting the Media? TV News as a Source of Knowledge”

10/26/2021

Read: P.D. Magnus, “On Trusting Wikipedia”

10/28/2021

Read: Deborah Tollefsen, “WIKIPEDIA and the Epistemology of Testimony”

11/02/2021

Team Wikipedia Project Prep Day

Resources: TBD

11/04/2021 Team Wikipedia Project Prep Day

Resources: TBD

Echo Chambers, Epistemic Bubbles, and Polarization

11/09/2021

Read: C. Thi Nguyen, “Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles”

11/11/2021

Read: Yuval Avnur, “What’s Wrong with the Online Echo Chamber: A Motivated Reasoning Account”

11/16/2021 Talk with librarian Sue O’Dell

11/18/2021 Read: Alex Worsnip, “The Obligation to Diversify One’s Sources: Against Epistemic Partisanship in the Consumption of News Media”

Irrelevant Influences on Belief

11/23/2021 Read: G.A. Cohen, “Paradoxes of Conviction” in If You’re an Egalitarian, How Come You’re So Rich?

11/25/2021 Thanksgiving vacation
No class – No readings assigned!

11/30/2021

Read: Katia Vavova, “Irrelevant Influences”

12/02/2021

TBD

End of the class

12/07/2021

Catching up session

12/09/2021

Final Roundup. No reading assigned!

Course Resources:

All the readings and guidance materials will be available through Blackboard.

Grade Distribution

Quizzes (10%)

Summary and Analysis Papers (30%)

Final exam (20%)

Special preparation to participate (15%)

General participation (15%)

Team Wikipedia Project (10%)

Course Requirements

Individual Requirements

- **Quizzes (5):** There will be 5 quizzes given over the course of the semester, one at the end of almost each unit (except Irrelevant Influences on Belief). Each quiz will center on an important aspect of the readings we have covered during that unit. Each quiz is a tool to prepare you for one section of the final exam.
- **Summary and Analysis Papers (3):**
You will be expected to write 3 short summary and analysis papers in the form of letters to others. Each of these letters will focus on a different reading that you will choose and depending on your choice you will have a specific deadline to submit your paper. Papers should be about 3 pages in length (double-spaced, 12 point font, 1 inch margins).

In each of the 3 letters/papers you will:

1. Write a letter to a designated recipient where you will summarize your assigned article, explicitly stating the thesis the author is defending and including a brief reconstruction of its defense.

And

2. In the first of them you will describe to the recipient an aspect of the summarized paper that relates to something you have experienced yourself, or recognized in your social relations; something you see in pop culture; or something in film/TV/music/news (as a whole) or a particular film/TV show/piece of music/news article.
3. In the second, you will explain to the recipient why the summarized paper (or part of it) is good or important.
4. In the third one, you will draw a connection between the paper you are summarizing and another paper we have read and explain to the recipient of your letter-paper what is interesting about this connection.

The goal of this assignment is to help you (a) develop a good sense of the structure of a philosophy paper, so that you can identify the main conclusion of a paper and the most important premises that support it in one or two pages (I will talk about these issues more during the first week of our class). This exercise will (b) help you appreciate how philosophy can be relevant in your life and in the world. Finally, (c) it will foster a habit of translating academic jargon into everyday language, so that you are ready to talk about all these interesting topics with people outside the classroom.

For additional details, please look at the relevant instructions in the 'Guidance' folder on Blackboard.

- **Final Exam:**
The final exam has two parts:

1. A set of questions about some of the main aspects of the readings we will have studied (these questions will be similar, but not identical, to the ones you will be answering in the Quizzes).
2. An “essay” part, where I will ask you to summarize the main arguments of three papers and to do a creative task with them (something similar to what you will have done in your Summary and Analysis papers).

Date and time: December 16th, 1:30 PM - 4:30 PM.

Note that it is a requirement to take this exam at this designated time and date which has been posted on the [Registrar's website](#).

Team Requirements

At the end of the first week of classes (on September 3rd), I will randomly divide you into 3 to 5 teams.

- **Special Preparation to Participate (2):** At least twice in the course each of you will need to read some of the materials of the course more carefully and be ready to lead discussion during the days when we will be studying your assigned reading. You will be in charge of coming up with a couple of discussion questions (3 to 5 questions) that you think it will be fun to discuss with your team, and you will be in charge of moderating your team discussion on that day.

On September 17th, I will send you an email with the name of 2-4 articles you will need to pay special attention to for this activity (the precise number of articles you will be responsible for will depend on the number of students in the course).

The goal of this assignment is for you to have an active role in our classroom. I believe each of you has something important to say and contribute; this assignment is *our* opportunity to hear you.

For additional details, please look at the relevant instructions in the ‘Guidance’ folder on Blackboard.

- **General Participation:**
For each assigned reading, you and your team will have to engage in discussion. Each session, one of you will be in charge of leading the discussion; that person will present some initial discussion questions, and each of you should answer that question and/or engage with other answers at least once during the discussion period. You are free to keep engaging in the discussion after your initial contribution, but you need to make sure that you make room for each person’s contribution.

By that week’s Saturday, each of you will need to publicly share one point that you enjoyed in your discussion from Tuesday, and one point from Thursday. The first week of classes we

will together decide the platform we will use for this purpose (Google Docs, Padlet, or Slack). This is a very informal writing exercise. I want you to spend no more than 5 minutes per response.

The goal of this assignment is to allow you to think more deeply about the readings each day so that you can assess how well the readings capture the phenomena they describe. Also, this assignment is designed to help you draw connections between the philosophical content of our class and your personal life. Finally, this assignment is an instrument to foster our community and help us become better listeners that are ready to engage in open-minded criticism of our own arguments and those of others.

For additional details, please look at the relevant instructions in the ‘Guidance’ folder on Blackboard.

- **Team Wikipedia Project:**

You and your team will create and submit a Wikipedia sandbox (and we might even release it to the world!) of an article we talked about during class.

On October 28th, I will assign each team an article.

The goal of this assignment is for you to apply your knowledge of the structure of philosophy papers and, with your team, create a summary of a paper that is apt for a Wikipedia section (we will talk more about this during the semester).

General Grading Guidance:

Some assignments (the Quizzes and some sections of the Final Exam) will be graded in relation to the accuracy of their content. In these cases, higher grades will be assigned to more accurate responses.

For the Summary and Analysis Papers (and some sections of the Final Exam), higher grades will be given to those papers that show attention to detail when highlighting the central points (conclusion and premises) of a given piece, in addition to the quality of the writing (how easy it is to follow and how coherent it is).

Participation is one of the most important components in this class, and it is divided in General Participation and Special Preparation to Participate.

General participation will be graded broadly speaking in the following way: For the discussion of each reading, you can get up to 3 points if your participation in the discussion is satisfactory. That will usually mean that you have done three things: (1) you have come to class and engaged in discussion with your team, (2) you have posted your comments within the time limits specified above in the section General Participation, and (3) you explained why the point you are sharing was important. You will lose one point each time you fail to satisfy either (1), (2) or (3), that is if you do not come to class, if you are late posting your thoughts online, or if you engage superficially with the assignment by only saying things like “I really enjoyed what Karime said” without saying why it was important.

Note: Even if you do not come to class, you can participate in the General Participation activity of that day. However, you could only obtain up to 2 points, and you would need to introduce one point of the reading that you enjoyed (not a point about the discussion).

For additional details, please look at the relevant instructions in the 'Guidance' folder on Blackboard.

Grade Ranges:

A-range (90-93 = A-, 94-100 = A)

B-range (80-83 = B-, 84-86 = B, 87-89 = B+)

C-range (70-73 = C-, 74-76 = C, 77-79 = C+)

D-range (60-66 = D, 67-69 = D+)

Course Policies:

- On the first day of class, we will together decide the norms of conduct that we will follow in our class.
- You can access the materials (readings and guidance materials) when it is convenient for you, but in order to get credit for each assignment you must submit/complete it by the deadline.

HOWEVER, I understand that this semester might be more challenging than usual, and because of that I have the following policies about late work:

For Summary and Analysis Papers:

Short 2-day extensions:

If you need a short (up to 2-days) extension for these assignments, you just need to email me a day before they are due, and I will grant you the extension (no questions asked).

If you just submit the assignment up to 2 days late, without having emailed me beforehand, then you will receive a penalization of half a letter grade on the final grade of your summary.

Longer extensions:

If you realize that you will not be able to finish **one** of your summary and analysis papers even with a 2-day extension, then you should email me at least a day before it's due, and I will grant you a longer extension (no questions asked).

Only in very special circumstances can I grant you a longer extension more than once.

For Quizzes:

I will grant short 2-day extensions (with same specifications as for the Summary and Analysis papers).

Longer extensions will be granted only in special circumstances.

For Team Wikipedia Project

I will grant short 2-day extensions (with same specifications as for the Summary and Analysis papers).

Longer extensions will be granted only in special circumstances.

For Special Preparation to Participate:

The deadlines for these assignments are crucial for the discussion of the readings during the week. If the person in charge of leading discussion does not have the questions on time, there will be no discussion whatsoever! So, for these assignments, there are no short extensions. *However*, you can ask one of your teammates in advance if they would change dates with you. If they accept, and you both notify me by the day before, I am perfectly ok with this type of arrangement.

For General Participation:

There are no extensions for general participation. **HOWEVER**, you will have two free passes throughout the semester if anything comes up and you cannot make your general participation for that day.

Final Exam:

The final exam must be taken on the date and time specified by the [Bowdoin Final Exam Assignments](#), and is given in compliance with Bowdoin final exam regulations.

Important Dates to Remember:

Quizzes

Tuesday, September 21st, 2021,

Thursday, September 30th, 2021,

Thursday, October 14th, 2021,

Thursday, October 28th, 2021,

Thursday, November 18th, 2021,

Team Assignment Day

You will be randomly assigned to your team Friday, September 3rd, 2021

Summary and Analysis Papers

There will be 6 different deadlines (around the end of each unit) for you to submit your papers.

For additional details, please look at the relevant instructions in the 'Guidance' folder on Blackboard.

Special Participation

You will receive your assigned date on Friday, September 17th, 2021

General Participation

I will randomly divide you into 3 to 5 teams of equal number of people each on Friday, September 3rd

Final Exam

The final exam will take place on Thursday, December 16th from 1:30 PM to 4:30 PM.

Important Information

Accommodations

Bowdoin College is committed to ensuring access to learning opportunities for all students. Students seeking accommodations based on disabilities must register with the [Student Accessibility Office](#). Please discuss any special needs or accommodations with me at the beginning of the semester or as soon as you become aware of your needs; I am eager to work with you to ensure that your approved accommodations are appropriately implemented. If you have questions about requesting accommodations or concerns about approved accommodations, please contact Lesley Levy (llevy@bowdoin.edu), director of student accessibility.

The Academic Honor Code:

Students are expected to abide by Bowdoin's [Academic Honor Code](#) at all times. You are responsible for getting familiar with the terms of the Academic Honor Code. I am responsible of answering any questions you might have about it. So, make sure to visit the embedded link above and come to office hours to talk with me about any question you might have. In the meantime, let me give you some examples of common Academic Honor code violations in a class like ours:

- Submitting work for this class that has previously been submitted for another class.
- Include as a part of a summary textual phrasing from the relevant reading (i.e., copying word by word or almost word by word the author's words without quotation marks).
- Submitting as discussion questions the exact same question that you found on the internet about the topic (without quoting, or indicating that you took it from somewhere else).
- Copying the work of another student and submitting it as one's own.
- Working with other students and submitting almost identical assignments.

Baldwin Center for Learning and Teaching

This center has amazing resources to help you succeed in this class (and in any other class). Make sure to check it out!

<https://www.bowdoin.edu/baldwin-center/for-students/academic-coaching/student-resources/index.html>

Counseling and Wellness Services

These days, more than usual, can be challenging for our mental health. Bowdoin's Counseling and Wellness Services is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services. Go to their website: <https://www.bowdoin.edu/counseling/> to learn more.

Syllabus Changes:

I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus, including project due dates and exam dates, when unforeseen circumstances occur. These changes will be announced in person and via email as early as possible so that students can adjust their schedules accordingly.

Covid-19 Contingencies

We do not know what Covid-related contingencies we will need to face during this semester. I will inform you of any change of plans due to any of these contingencies over email. Please read your emails carefully.

The only thing that I want all of us to agree to is that if any of us (me included) has any covid-symptoms, we must not come to class. In the event that you experience any mild symptoms but feel well enough to virtually partake in the class, please use zoom for emergencies. I will let you take the class through zoom. You can find the zoom invitation in our 'Guidance' folder on Blackboard. If you do not feel well enough to virtually partake in class, that is ok! Just let me know. If you are unable to complete an assignment or come to class due to illness I will be committed to working with you to make up the missed work. The well-being of each of us is the most important thing. We need to take care of each other.