

Phil 2435: Responsibility and Rational Belief

Bowdoin College, Philosophy Department

Spring 2022

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

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Office Hours:

- In-person: Tuesday and Thursdays from 3:00 PM to 4:00 PM.
- Bookings

Course Description

In this course we will explore philosophical questions about (ir)rational beliefs (e.g., Epistemic bias, Conspiracy Theories, Polarization, Persuasion, etc.), and we will try to figure out what responsibilities we have as epistemic agents in our society.

To get a nuanced philosophical understanding of these topics, we will spend much of our time developing basic skills needed to appreciate philosophy papers and to become better philosophy writers.

Who Can Take This Course?

This course is aimed at students with no previous background in philosophy, but who are eager to challenge their preconceptions of what it takes to be rational and the types of responsibilities we have in our society. Any student who takes this course should also be willing to foster her abilities to fully understand the arguments of others (and her own) before opposing them or supporting them. Finally, any student who takes this course should be interested in fostering a community of learners with the other members of the class.

Course Goals

This course has two broad aims:

1. To provide students with key philosophical concepts (e.g., knowledge, evidence, rationality, and responsibility) 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 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. a podcast episode).

Course Resources

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

Reading Topics and Readings

1. Tuesday, January 25th: **Introduction to the class (the syllabus, expectations).**
 - No readings assigned.
 - Please, answer the beginning of class questionnaire before class.
2. Thursday, January 27th: **(Very brief) Introduction to Epistemology**
 - Read: Pryor, James.
“Guidelines on Reading Philosophy.”
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/reading.html>
 - Read: Nagel, Jennifer. *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. (Selected chapters).

-Read: The *Epistemology* entry of the SEP. (Selected fragments).
<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/epistemology/#VariCognSucc>

3. Tuesday, February 1st: **Epistemic Responsibility and Epistemic Bias**

- Read: Clifford, W.K. “The Ethics of Belief.”

4. Thursday, February 3rd

-Read: Rettler, Lindsay & Rettler, Bradley. “Epistemic Duty and Implicit Bias.”

5. Tuesday, February 8th

-Read: Gendler, Tamar. “On the Epistemic Costs of Implicit Bias.”

6. Thursday, February 10th: **Moral encroachment and Doxastic Partiality**

-Read: Basu, Rima. “Radical Moral Encroachment: The Moral Stakes of Racist Beliefs.”

7. Tuesday, February 15th

-Read: Stroud, Sarah. “Epistemic Partiality in Friendship.”

8. Thursday, February 17th

- Read: Hawley, Katherine. “Partiality and Prejudice in Trusting.”

9. Tuesday, February 22nd

-Read: Gardiner, Georgi. “Against the New Ethics of Belief: The Morass of Moral Encroachment and Doxastic Partiality.”

10. Thursday, February 24th: **Epistemic Injustice**

-Read: Fricker, Miranda. “Epistemic Injustice.” (Selected chapters)

11. Tuesday, March 1st

-Read: Fricker, Miranda. “Epistemic Injustice.” (Selected chapters)

12. Thursday, March 3rd

-Read: Berenstain, Nora. “Epistemic Exploitation.”

13. Tuesday, March 8th

Read: Emmalon Davis, “Typecasts, Tokens, and Spokespersons: A case for Credibility Excess as Testimonial Injustice”.

14. Thursday, March 10th

Catching up session

Tuesday, March 15th Spring Break

Thursday, March 17th Spring Break

Tuesday, March 22nd Spring Break

Thursday, March 24th Spring Break

15. Tuesday, March 29th : **Welcome Back!**

-No reading assigned!

16. Thursday, March 31st : **Conspiracy theories**

-Read: Cassam, Quassim. *Conspiracy Theories*. Ch. 1

17. Tuesday, April 5th

-Read: Napolitano, M. Giulia “Conspiracy Theories and Evidential Self-Insulation.”

18. Thursday, April 7th

-Read: Pigden, Charles R. “Are Conspiracy Theorists Epistemically Vicious?”

19. Tuesday, April 12th

- Read: Dentith, M. R. X. “Debunking Conspiracy Theories.”

20. Thursday, April 14th

-Read: Hawley, Katherine. “Conspiracy Theories, Impostor Syndrome, and Distrust.”

21. Tuesday, April 19th

-Mental Health Day

22. Thursday, April 21st: **Planning your Podcast episode (and end of the CT. unit)**

-No Reading Assigned

23. Tuesday, April 26th: **Polarization**

-Listen: Hi-Phi Nation. S2, Episode 10: Chamber of Facts

<https://radiopublic.com/hiphi-nation-WdQ1O7/ep/s1!c85e6>

24. Thursday, April 28th

- Listen: The Philosopher & The News. Elizabeth Anderson & Talking to the Other Side

<https://newsphilosopher.buzzsprout.com/1577503/7732372>

25. Tuesday, May 3rd **Working on your podcast**

-I will be in the classroom to offer advice and you can come work there if you want to

26. Thursday, May 5th

-I will be in the classroom to offer advice and you can come work there if you want to

27. Tuesday, May 10th

-Final Session. No Readings assigned!

Course Requirements

Individual Requirements

- **Perusall (2/3 of the readings):** You should do the readings for the class using the app Perusall. For each paper, you will underline the main goal of the paper (and paraphrase it in your own words) and underline at least one reason that supports that goal (and explain how you think it supports it). If you have questions about the reading, you should write them next to the relevant paragraph. You should also help others by answering questions they post if you know the answer.
- Note: I understand that sometimes it would be virtually impossible for you to do the reading before class (life happens!). Hence, in total you just need to make sure to read and annotate at least 2/3 of the assigned readings using the app (i.e., 16 of the assigned readings). This requirement will help you achieve our learning objective (1).
- **Summary and Analysis Letters (2):** You will be expected to write 2 short summary and analysis letters. 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 letter. Letters should be about 3 pages in length.

In each of the 2 letters you will:

1. Come talk to me about your letter before you write it.
2. Write a letter to a designated recipient where you will summarize your chosen article, explicitly state the thesis the author is defending, and include a brief reconstruction of its defense. You will also draw some connections between the article and phenomena in the world. I will let you know more about these connections when the time comes.
3. Submit a first draft of your letter to one of your peers.

4. Revise your paper in light of the feedback you will have received from your peer.
5. Submit the final version of your letter to me.

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. This exercise will (b) help you appreciate how philosophy can be relevant in your life and in the world. Also, this assignment will (d) help you critically engage with the reading we are discussing. Finally, (e) 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.

This requirement will help you achieve our learning objectives (1), (2), (3) and (4).

Team Requirements

At the end of the first week of classes (on January 28th), I will randomly divide you into 3 teams.

- **Special Preparation to Participate (2-4):** 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 writing 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 February 8th, 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.

This requirement will help you achieve our learning objectives (3) and (4).

This requirement will help you achieve our course goal (2).

- **General Participation:**
 1. For each assigned reading, you and your team will have to engage in discussion. Each session, one of you will present some initial discussion questions, and each of you should answer one of those questions and/or engage with others' 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.

2. By the end of each class, each of you will need to publicly share in a google doc one point that someone else in your group shared and you found interesting, fascinating, or thought provoking. (You will have until Saturday night to post your responses if you forget to do it right after class.)

The goal of this assignment is 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. Also, this assignment is designed to help you draw connections between the philosophical content of our class and your personal life.

This requirement will help you achieve our learning objectives (3) and (4).

This requirement will help you achieve our course goal (2).

- **Podcast (final project):**

As a final project you and your team will record a podcast about one of the topics we covered during the semester. The general structure of the project is the following:

0. You and your teams will talk to me about your podcast idea before you record it.
1. Write a first outline of the podcast.
2. Submit your first outline of your podcast to get feedback from another team.
3. Revise your outline in light of the feedback you receive from your peers.
4. Submit your recorded podcast to me.

The goal of this assignment is to (a) help you appreciate how philosophy can be relevant in your life and in the world. (b) You will have a chance to discuss any potential shortcomings of a paper we read. And (c) it will give you an opportunity to have a philosophical conversation in a fun setting.

This requirement will help you achieve our learning objectives (2), (3) and (4).

- **Providing Feedback to Peers**

Four times during the semester you will provide feedback to some of your peers. Three times, you will provide feedback on the first draft of your peer's letters, and once (with your team) you will provide feedback to the first outline of the podcast idea of another team. I will give you detailed guidance on how to do this.

The goal of this assignment is to (a) to help you develop your writing skill by critically engaging with others' pieces of writing, (b) to help us appreciate that our work can be improved when we worked with others.

This requirement will help you achieve our learning objective (4).

This requirement will help you achieve our course goal (2).

General Grading Guidance

This semester I will be fully embracing Laura Gibbs' grading approach called: *all-feedback-no-grades* (Gibbs, 2020, p. 92).

You might be thinking: "What?" Let me briefly explain what this will be all about.

Instead of focusing on what to do in order to get an A (we all have worried about it at some point, let's be honest!), in this class, I want us all to be focusing on how to get better at using philosophical tools and our voices to achieve our course goals and learning objectives.

The method *all-feedback-no-grades* has four components:

-Individual Feedback: For each of the writing pieces you submit, you will receive feedback on how to improve your work for the next assignment. You will not receive a grade from me nor from your peers.

-Culture of Feedback: Giving and receiving helpful feedback is a skill that we will develop in this class. I will teach you all how to give feedback to your peers' written work, and you will get better at providing feedback too. Additionally, you will also discern how and when to incorporate the feedback you receive from your peers and from me.

-Blackboard Declarations: For each of the assignments you complete, you will record your work on Blackboard using a 'declaration' quiz. A declaration quiz is just a quiz with true-false questions containing a checklist of the requirements for that assignment. When you click true as your answer for all the questions, you will get full points for your work and that will go into the gradebook.

-A-B-C-D letter grades: At the end of the semester, the total points in the gradebook that you earn and record will turn your overall score into a letter grade for the course.

As you can see, the system is easy enough for us to follow and it will empower you to treat each assignment as an opportunity to learn and improve without the fear of making a mistake that would affect your final grade. Notice that you are still required to do all the work in order to get a good grade, but with this approach there would be no surprises or broken hearts if you do not get the grade you want.

Each assignment I have designed for you belongs to different categories, and each of those categories have different weights on your final grade:

- 10% Perusal**
- 20% Special Preparation to Participate**
- 20% Summary and Analysis Letters**
- 10% General Participation**
- 20% Podcast (final project)**
- 20% Providing Feedback to Peers**

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 decide together 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 Letters:

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

If you realize that you will not be able to finish **one** of your summary and analysis letters 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). You will need to find a new date that also works for your peer and then submit your work by that new deadline.

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

For the Podcast:

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

Longer extensions will be granted only in special circumstances.

Providing Feedback to Peers:

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

Longer extensions will be granted only in special circumstances.

For Perusal:

I will grant short 2-day extensions (with similar 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.

In special circumstances (e.g. if you get sick or have to self-isolate), you can send your questions to your team and someone else will lead discussion.

For General Participation:

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

Longer extensions will be granted only in special circumstances.

Additionally, you will have two free passes throughout the semester if anything comes up and you cannot make your general participation for that day.

Important Information

Accommodations

- As you will soon learn, I really like meeting with my students to discuss assignments and to provide feedback on their work. But I want you to know that I am also very happy to meet with you to have informal conversations about topics that do not necessarily relate to our class. Please, come to my office hours, or book an appointment using the Bookings link at the beginning of the syllabus. If those times do not work, email me to set up an appointment at a more convenient time.

- I am committed to making the class a safe and collegial learning environment for everyone irrespective of ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexuality or other individual or group identity. It should go without saying that personal attacks or discriminatory treatment of others will not be tolerated under any circumstances.

- I am also 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.

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 at <https://www.bowdoin.edu/counseling/> to learn more.

Additionally, if you are struggling with mental health issues (e.g., if you feel too overwhelmed, if you are dealing with depression or with some side effect of medications to deal with depression or anxiety) you should feel free to talk to me about your particular situation. Sometimes, each of us needs special accommodations while they take care of themselves, and I will support you on that.

Syllabus Changes:

Every class I have taught is different. This means that what works for some does not necessarily work for others. As the semester goes by, and with the help of your feedback, I might need to make some changes on the initial plan for the semester. Hence, I reserve the right to make changes to this syllabus, including assignment due dates. I will announce these changes during class and via email as early as possible so that students can adjust their schedules and expectations 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 participate 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 participate 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.

Baldwin Center for Learning and Teaching

This center has amazing resources to help you succeed in this class (and in any other class).

They have cool quick advice on many different topics that I would have loved to have when I started college. For example, you can learn how to create a weekly schedule, how to focus your attention on class, how to take better notes, how to reduce procrastination, among many more useful tips and tools.

They also offer you group and individual support with different programs like [Academic Peer Mentoring](#), [Academic Coaching](#), [Wicked Smart Groups](#), [Academic Communication for Multilingual Speakers](#), among many others.

Make sure to check it out!

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

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.