

# Truth, Truthiness, and Alternative Facts

University of Utah  
PHIL 3012: Topics in Metaphysics and Epistemology  
MWF 11:50 am – 12:40pm  
Room 106 Social & Behavioral Sciences Building  
Spring 2018 Syllabus

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## **Instructor:**

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**Office Hours:** Monday & Wednesdays from 2-3pm or by appointment.

## **Required Readings:**

All required reading will be available on Canvas

## **Recommended Readings:**

Orwell (1949) *1984*  
Michael Lynch (2004) *True to Life: Why the Truth Matters*  
All other recommended reading will be available on Canvas

**Course Description:** The Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year for 2016 was ‘post-truth’—an adjective “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” Cited as the principle examples of this phenomenon in Oxford Dictionary’s decision, the “Brexit” referendum and the 2016 United States Presidential Election underscore the gravity this general lack of regard for whether publicly expressed and affirmed statements conform to the facts—for whether such statements are true. These are not isolated incidents, but rather part of a larger long escalating shift in the public’s attitude toward the truth. Nearly a decade before ‘post-truth’ politics, Stephen Colbert coined the term ‘truthiness’ to capture the phenomenon of “believing something that feels true, even if it isn’t supported by fact.” How we assess this phenomenon depends on what we think about the value of truth. While this course will not directly address contemporary political issues and current affairs, this phenomenon does highlight the importance of the philosophical questions around which this course is centered: What is truth? What is the value of truth? Whether we have a duty to believe the truth? In the first part of the course, we will consider what we mean by the word ‘true’. Emphasis will be placed on theories of truth which attempt to account for the value of truth (or its lack of value). Next, we will consider whether and in what manner the truth is valuable. Finally, we will consider whether we have any special

duties to speak and believe the truth as either doxastic, social, or political agents. In addressing these questions, the class will attempt to get to the truth of the matter of whether truth matters.

[Warning: It might be the case that “you can’t handle the truth!”]

### **Course Objectives:**

By the end of the course, each student will:

- Be able to formulate arguments for and against theories of truth, the value of truth, and our (epistemic, moral, and political) duties to believe and speak the truth.
- Be able to evaluate arguments for a theory of truth, the value of truth, and our (epistemic, moral, and political) duties to believe and speak the truth.
- Improve ability to construct and write cogent, effective, and clear philosophical arguments.
- Improve ability to read, comprehend, and critically engage with philosophical texts.

### **Points / Grade Breakdown:**

1. Attendance Quizzes = 50 points (10%)
2. Participation = 50 points (10%)
3. Three ‘Socratic Questions’ Assignments= 60 points (12%)
  - Each ‘Socratic Questions’ Assignment = 20 points
4. Two ‘In the Fake News’ Assignments = 40 point (8%)
  - Each ‘In the News’ Assignment = 20 points
5. Two Short Papers = 100 points (20%)
  - Each Paper = 50 points (10%)
6. Final Paper = 100 points (20%)
7. Comprehensive Final Exam = 100 points (20%)

Total = 500 points

### **Assignments:**

#### **1. Attendance Quizzes:**

Each lecture will either begin or end with a quiz on the assigned reading for that class. The quiz will consist of either a single multiple choice or short answer question. Each quiz will be worth 2 points. Classes where there is no assigned reading—i.e., those marked ‘Discussion’ on the course schedule (below)—will be dedicated to discussion of previously assigned readings. There will be *no* quiz for these classes, but active attendance will weigh heavily in students’ participation grades (see below). Thus, in order to get a 100% for attendance students must successfully answer 25 attendance quizzes. Note that there are several more lectures than attendance quizzes. This is to allow some slack to miss class or a question from time to time in case life gets a little too crazy (e.g. sick, family emergency, etc).

## 2. Participation:

Another 10% (50 points) of students' grades will be based on class participation. This grade will be holistic which means that it does not consist of atomic components that are individually scored to constitute an overall grade. I will be taking notes on involvement in daily class discussions. I will be particularly keen on students' participation in small group discussions and during 'Discussion' classes (see class schedule below). Note that attendance is a prerequisite for participation. You are not able to participate if you do not show up to class.

## 3. 'Socratic Questions' Assignments:

Asking questions is an essential part of philosophy: Socrates claimed that he was only wise person because only he knew that he did not know anything, whereas Descartes began his search for knowledge by questioning his understanding of everything he believed. Similarly, students will actively seek out the limits of their knowledge and understanding through 'Socratic Questions' assignments. For these assignments, students will ask a question regarding what they do not understand about one of the readings. I will collect these questions and distribute them so as to be answered by a fellow student. Once answered, I will return the answered questions back to the original students—having moderated so as to check for accuracy. Students will then decide whether their question was sufficiently answered. This will require students to explain—in writing—what was left unanswered and how they could rewrite the question so that the question could be more sufficiently answered. If the student decides the question is sufficiently answered, they will need to consider how they would respond to this with a follow up question. Each assignment will be worth 20 points (4% of each student's overall grade). This exercise will be done three times throughout the semester for a sum of 12% of each student's overall grade (60 points).

## 4. 'In the Fake News' Assignments:

Students will be required to complete two 'In the Fake News' assignments. These assignments require students to find a recent news article, podcast, or social media post which *appears* to be fake news. Students must write a short summary of the article and then argue whether the truth matters in that case. To do this, students must explain why they think (or do not think) the truth matters in that case by using *one* of the views regarding the value of truth which we will have discussed in the class. Note that the assignment **does not** require deciding whether the article in question truthfully reports the facts or is in fact fake news. The assignment only requires deciding whether the truth matters in that case. Prior to the assignment, students will be assigned to groups of four to five in size and will be assigned a group specific discussion board on canvas. Students will post their 'In the Fake News' assignment to their group's specific discussion board. After the assignment has been submitted to the discussion board, students will be required to engage in a group discussion. This requires students to comment on each of their group members' 'In the Fake News' assignment by either responding directly to the initial post or responding to a group member's comment on the initial post as well as responding to the comments made regarding their initial post. Each 'In the Fake News' assignment is worth 20 (4% of each student's overall grade): the "discussion" component is worth 10 points while the "written" component is worth 10 points. Further details regarding requirements for this assignment will be provided on Canvas under 'Assignments'.

## 5. Two Short Papers

Students will only be required to submit two short papers. These short papers are argumentative essays in which students will form and defend their own positions regarding a specific problem pertaining to

either (a) a theory of truth or (b) the value of truth. This requires students to formulate a clear and specific thesis to be defended, provide an argument in support of their thesis, and respond to an objection to their argument. These papers should be 1250-1500 words (approximately 4-5 double spaced pages) and each paper is worth 50 points (or 10% of each student's overall grade). The first short paper is **due by Midnight on Friday February 16<sup>th</sup>** and the second short paper is **due by Midnight on Friday March 16<sup>th</sup>**. Further details regarding topics and requirements for this assignment will be provided on Canvas under 'Assignments'.

## 6. Final Paper

Students will also be required to submit a final paper. This paper, like the two shorter papers, is an argumentative essay in which students will form and defend their own position regarding a specific problem pertaining to either (a) a theory of truth, (b) the value of truth, or (c) our duties to speak and believe the truth. Students will formulate a clear and specific thesis to be defended, provide an argument in support of their thesis, and respond to an objection to their argument. The paper topic is up to each student's choice. This paper should be 2000-2500 words (approximately 7-9 double spaced pages) and is worth 100 points (or 20% of each student's overall grade). It is **due Monday May 2<sup>nd</sup> by Midnight**. As part of this assignment students must bring an outline of their final paper to the **Writing Workshop on April 6<sup>th</sup>**. These outlines should include a paragraph explaining their paper topic, a thesis statement, and an outline of their main argument. Failure to attend the writing workshop with a final paper outline will result in a 10 point deduction from the student's grade on the final paper. Further details regarding requirements for this assignment will be provided on Canvas under 'Assignments'.

## 7. Comprehensive Final Exam

There will be a comprehensive final exam which will be worth 100 points (or 20% of each student's overall grade). The final exam will be **Thursday April 26<sup>th</sup> from 10:30am – 12:30pm** in our regular classroom. The comprehensive exam will consist of short answer questions meant to evaluate students' understanding of the central concepts and positions of discussed in this course.

### Grading Scale:

A+	97 – 100	B+	87 – 89.9	C+	77 – 79.9	D+	67 – 69.9	E	59.9 and below
A	94 – 96.9	B	84 – 86.9	C	74 – 76.9	D	64 – 66.9		
A-	90 – 93.9	B-	80 – 83.9	C-	70 – 73.9	D-	60 – 63.9		

### ADA Accommodation:

The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services and activities for people with disabilities. If you will need accommodations in this class, reasonable prior notice needs to be given to the Center for Disability Services, 162 Union Building, 581-5020 (V/TDD). CDS will work with you and the instructor to make arrangements for accommodations.

### Content Accommodation Policy:

“Students are expected to take courses that will challenge them intellectually and personally. Students must understand and be able to articulate the ideas and theories that are important to the discourse within and among academic disciplines. Personal disagreement with these ideas and theories or their implications is not sufficient grounds for requesting an accommodation. Accommodations requested

on such grounds will not be granted. It is the student's obligation to determine, before the last day to drop courses without penalty, when course requirements conflict with the student's sincerely-held core beliefs. If there is such a conflict, the student should consider dropping the class.” (from the student handbook).

There is no content accommodation in this class.

### **Plagiarism:**

Plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct may result in a failing grade for the entire course, and the case may be transferred to the University's Academic Misconduct Committee for further judgment. According to the Student code, "'Plagiarism' means the intentional unacknowledged use or incorporation of any other person's work in, or as a basis for, one's own work offered for academic consideration or credit for public presentation. Plagiarism includes, but is not limited to, representing as one's own, without attribution, any individual's words, phrasing, sequence of ideas, information or any other mode or content of expression" (Student Code, p. 3). If you have further questions about what constitutes plagiarism or academic misconduct, ask the instructor and consult the University Code.

NOTE: Wikipedia, if cited, will result in reduced marks; if found unquoted, as with all other sources, will result in a zero mark.

### **Student Code:**

“All students are expected to maintain professional behavior in the classroom setting, according to the Student Code, spelled out in the Student Handbook. Students have specific rights in the classroom as detailed in Article III of the Code. The Code also specifies proscribed conduct (Article XI) that involves cheating on tests, plagiarism, and/or collusion, as well as fraud, theft, etc. Students should read the Code carefully and know they are responsible for the content. According to Faculty Rules and Regulations, it is the faculty responsibility to enforce responsible classroom behaviors, and I will do so, beginning with verbal warnings and progressing to dismissal from class and a failing grade. Students have the right to appeal such action to the Student Behavior Committee.” (from the student handbook)

### **Late Work Policy:**

Late work will be accepted up until **Midnight on Monday May 2<sup>nd</sup>**. Monday May 2<sup>nd</sup> is a hard deadline: *no work will be accepted after it*. There is no set late penalty, but rather late work will be graded harder in proportion to how late the work is submitted. Yet one should expect to lose about 1% per day it is late, but the policy allows exceptionally good papers to avoid any penalties (the idea being that you used your extra time to produce a better paper).

If you are having difficulty with an assignment or keeping up with the course materials, please contact me as soon as possible. Additionally, if you have a personal crisis (e.g., you, your spouse, your child are in the hospital or imprisoned), let me know so that we can figure out a way around it. The earlier you contact me, the more options I have for helping you be successful in this course.

## Course Schedule:

### *Philosophy, Truth, and Value*

1/8: Introduction

### *What is Truth?*

1/10: Bertrand Russell – ‘Truth and Falsehood’

1/12: J. L Austin – ‘Truth’

1/15: **No Class - Presidents’ Day**

1/17: Blanshard – ‘Coherence as Theory of Truth’

1/19: Putnam – *Reason, Truth, and History* (Selections)

1/22: James – ‘Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth’

1/24: Dummett – ‘Truth’

1/26: Discussion

1/29: Ramsey – ‘Facts and Propositions’ & Horwich – *Truth* (selections)

1/31: Nietzsche ‘TBD’

2/2: Discussion: Kurosawa – *Rashomon*

**\*First Socratic Question Due by Noon 2/2**

### *What is the Value of the Truth?*

2/5: Heal – ‘The Disinterested Search for Truth’

2/7: Diamond – ‘Truth: Defender, Debunkers, and Despisers’

2/9: Discussion

2/12: Engel – *What’s the Use of Truth?* (selections)

2/14: Rorty – *What’s the Use of Truth?* (selections)

2/16: Discussion

**\*Short Paper 1 Due by Midnight 2/16**

2/19: **No Class – Martin Luther King Jr. Day**

2/21: Sosa – ‘For the Love of Truth?’

2/23: Kornblith – ‘Epistemic Normativity’

2/26: David – ‘Truth as the Primary Goal’

2/28: Maitzen – ‘Our Errant Epistemic Aim’

3/2: Discussion

**\*Second Socratic Question Due by Noon 3/2**

**\*First ‘In the Fake News’ Assignment Due by Noon 3/2**

### *What Duties Do We Have to Speak and Believe the Truth?*

3/5: Frankfurt - *On Bullshit*

3/7: Velleman – ‘On the Aim of Belief’

3/9: Discussion  
3/12: Williams – *Truth and Truthfulness* (selections)  
3/14: Williams – *Truth and Truthfulness* (selections)  
3/16: Discussion  
    **\*Short Paper 2 Due by Midnight 3/16**  
3/19-3/23: ***No Class – Spring Break***  
3/26: Rawls – *Political Liberalism* (Selections)  
3/28: Raz – ‘Facing Diversity: The Case of Epistemic Abstinence’  
3/30: Estlund – ‘The Insularity of the Reasonable’  
4/2: Cohen – ‘Truth and Public Reason’  
4/4: Discussion  
4/6: ***Writing Workshop***  
    **\*Third Socratic Question Due by Noon 4/6**  
    **\*Second ‘In the Fake News’ Assignment Due by Noon 4/6**  
4/9: Mill - *On Liberty* (Selections)  
4/11: TBD  
4/13: Discussion: CNN’s *Free Press: What’s at Stake*  
4/16: Stanley - *How Propaganda Works* (selections)  
4/18: Stanley - *How Propaganda Works* (selections)  
4/20: Discussion: Stanley ‘Beyond Bullshit’  
4/23: Orwell – ‘Politics and the English Language’  
  
***Final Paper Due by Midnight May 2<sup>nd</sup>***  
***Final Exam on Thursday, April 26<sup>th</sup> from 10:30am to 12:30pm***

\*Though it is not expected that the course will change after this syllabus is posted, extenuating circumstances do occur. Changes made to the course will occur at the instructor's discretion.