

# Believe It or Not!

University of Utah  
PHIL 3300: Theories of Knowledge  
MWF 11:50 am – 12:40pm  
Room 4020 Carolyn & Kem Gardner Commons  
Fall 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

## **Course Description:**

In October 1919, Robert Ripley issued us a challenge to “Believe It or Not!” The imperative is the title of Ripley’s series of periodicals in which he recounted facts and events which were so strange and unusual that most people doubted the reported claims. Although it has been nearly a hundred years, Ripley’s challenge is as alive and formidable as it has ever been. The internet has made it excessively easy to distribute and access enormous amounts of (mis)information. With the ease of access that comes from unfiltered information, the burden of evaluating and discriminating between reported facts and events has fallen upon the public to an unprecedented degree. Our challenge is that we must figure out how to navigate a world of information which contains politicized journalism, expert testimony, fake news, scientific explanations, and alternative facts.

Traditional courses on epistemology focus on problems regarding whether and when our reasons for belief are sufficient such that our beliefs can be dignified with the honorific label of ‘knowledge’. This course will look at a more fundamental epistemic question: how can we know whether a consideration is a reason for believing some claim or proposition at all? The question of whether some consideration is a reason for belief precedes the question of whether our beliefs, given our reasons, constitute knowledge. To address this question, we will consider whether only the evidence is reason for belief, what makes a fact (good) evidence of a claim, and when we should believe what others tell us. The course will finish by investigating the structural issues concerning the flow of information via the internet and social media and the implications this has for whether these are good sources of information. That is, in this course we will consider upon what grounds we should believe a particular claim or not.

## **Course Objectives:**

By the end of the course, each student will:

- Be able to formulate arguments for and against reasons for belief, theories of evidence, the nature of testimony.
- Be able to evaluate arguments for reasons for belief, theories of evidence, the nature of testimony.
- 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. Participation = 50 points (10%)
2. Key Concepts = 75 points (15%)
  - Individual Assignment = 25 points (5%)
  - Group Assignment = 50 points (10%)
3. Three ‘Socratic Questions’ Assignments = 75 points (15%)
  - Each ‘Socratic Questions’ Assignment = 25 points (5%)
4. ‘Believe It or Not!’ Assignment = 50 point (10%)
5. Papers = 150 points (30%)
  - Short Paper = 50 points (10%)
  - Final Paper = 100 points (20%)
6. Comprehensive Final Exam = 100 points (20%)

Total = 500 points

## **Assignments:**

### **1. Participation:**

Starting the second week of the semester, 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 1 point. 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. Although there will be *no* quiz for these classes, students will have an attendance assignment. In place of reading material, students will be required to complete a short writing assignment prior to class. These assignments will be made available on canvas. Completion of these assignments are worth 3 points each. Note that there are more participation points available than necessary in order to get 100%. This is meant 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). Note that attendance is a prerequisite for participation. You are not able to participate if you do not show up to class.

## 2. Key Concepts:

Throughout the course students will encounter a multitude of important concepts and distinctions. These will feature as the objects of two assignments: an individual assignment and a group assignment.

The individual assignment is worth 25 points (or 5% of each student's overall grade). Mimicking the manner in which the mobile app 'Snapchat' enables users to send short videos to friends and family, each student will create a short video for their classmates focused on an assigned concepts or distinction. This requires the student to explain the concept or distinction in a concise and accessible manner. These videos will subsequently be posted to the course Canvas page as a resource for students. The due date for this assignment will depend upon which concept or distinction the student has been assigned—a schedule will be made available via the course Canvas page.

The group assignment is worth 50 points (or 10% of each student's overall grade). Working in small groups, students will be required to construct a visualization of an assigned set of concepts and distinctions. Such visualizations could be a concept map, a comic, a series of memes, or visual notes. In addition to the visualization, students will be required to submit, in writing, a brief description of their visualization, explaining how these concepts and distinctions are organized through their chosen medium. These visualizations will subsequently be posted to the course Canvas page as an additional resource for students.

## 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. These assignments will have two components: First, students will post their questions to a discussion board on the course Canvas page. This component is worth 15 points. Second, each student will then answer a classmate's question (I will be moderating for accuracy). This component will be worth 10 points. In total, each assignment will be worth 25 points (or 5% of each student's overall grade). This exercise will be done three times throughout the semester for a sum of 15% of each student's overall grade (75 points).

## 4. 'Believe It or Not!' Assignment:

Facebook, social media, and internet message boards as well as websites like infowars.com present and reproduce fake news and misinformation. In order to emphasize the real world implications of our epistemic theories, students will be required to complete a 'Believe It or Not!' assignment. For this assignment, students will have to find a case from social media or the internet—e.g., an article or podcast from a non-mainstream news outlet, blog, or their social media stream—and analyze and assess it by applying the arguments, positions, and principles discussed in the course. This assignment will have two components: First, students will post their analyses to a discussion board on Canvas. Second, in assigned groups, students will then comment on and discuss **each** of their group members' analyses and assessments of these articles and podcasts. This requires considering the merits and demerits of analyzing and assessing the article or assertion through the application of that particular position, principle, or argument. Group members will conclude their comments by discharging Ripley's imperative—deciding whether they believe it or not. This assignment is worth 50 point (10%

of each student's overall grade): the "discussion" component is worth 25 points while the "written" component is worth 25 points. Further details regarding requirements for this assignment, including grading rubric, will be provided on Canvas under 'Assignments'.

## 5. Papers

Students will be required to submit two papers: a short paper and a longer, final paper. Both papers are argumentative essays in which students will form and defend their own positions regarding a specific problem discussed in this course. 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. The short paper should be 1250-1500 words (approximately 4-5 double spaced pages) and is worth 50 points (or 10% of each student's overall grade). It is **due by Midnight on Friday November 2<sup>nd</sup>**. The final 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 Friday December 14<sup>th</sup> by Midnight**. As part of the final paper assignment students must bring an outline of their final paper to the **Writing Workshops on December 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<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 these assignments, including grading rubric, will be provided on Canvas under 'Assignments'.

## 6. 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 December 13<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 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 Friday December 14<sup>th</sup>**. Friday December 14<sup>th</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:

### *Introduction*

8/20: Introduction

8/22: Hume – ‘On Miracles’ (*Enquiry* Section X)

8/24: Descartes – ‘Fourth Meditation’ & Clifford – ‘The Ethics of Belief’

### *Reasons for Belief: Evidentialism*

8/27: Shah – ‘A New Argument for Evidentialism’

8/29: Nolfi – ‘Why Only Evidential Considerations Can Justify Belief’

8/31: Discussion

### *What is Evidence?*

9/3: **No Class – Labor Day**

9/5: Hempel – ‘Studies in the Logic of Confirmation’

9/7: Sober – ‘The ABCs of Bayesianism’ (*Evidence & Evolution* Chapter 1 Sections 1.2)

9/10: Sober – ‘Likelihoods’ (*Evidence & Evolution* Chapter 1 Sections 1.3)

9/12: Mayo – ‘Severe Testing as a Guide for Inductive Reasoning’

9/14: Discussion

### *The Limits of Evidentialism: Alternative Hypotheses, Underdetermination, & Conspiracy Theories*

9/17: Duhem – *The Aim and Structure of Physical Theory* (Selections)

9/19: Keeley – ‘Of Conspiracy Theories’

9/21: Discussion

**\*First Socratic Question Due by Noon 9/17**

**\* Response to First Socratic Questions Due by Midnight 9/21**

### *Reasons for Belief: Pragmatism, Faith, & Upbringing*

9/24: James – ‘The Will to Believe’

9/26: Rinard – ‘Against the New Evidentialist’

9/28: Discussion

10/1: Buchak – ‘Can It be Rational to have Faith?’

10/3: Schoenfield – ‘Permission to Believe’

10/5: Discussion

***Fall Break – No Class:*** 10/8 - 10/12

*Testimony: Believing What Other People Tell Us*

10/15: Coady – ‘Testimony & Observation’

10/17: Lackey – ‘The Nature of Testimony’

10/19: Discussion

**\*Second Socratic Question Due by Noon 10/15**

**\* Response to Second Socratic Question Due by Midnight 10/19**

10/22: Fricker – ‘Against Gullibility’

10/24: Moran – ‘Getting Told and Being Believed’

10/26: Discussion

*A Case Study: The Salem Witch Trial*

10/29: Pavlac – *Witch Hunts in the Western World (Selections)*

10/31: Godbeer – *The Salem Witch Hunt (Selections)*

11/2: Discussion

**\*Short Paper Due by Midnight 11/2**

*Testimony: The Authority of Expert Testimony*

11/5: Hardwig – ‘Epistemic Dependence’

11/7: Goldman – ‘Experts: Which One’s Should You Trust?’

11/9: Discussion

11/12: Lackey – ‘Expert Disagreement and Belief Dependence: Why Numbers Matter’

11/14: Nguyen – ‘Cognitive Islands and Runaway Echo Chambers’

11/16: Discussion

**\*‘Believe It or Not!’ Assignment Due by Noon 11/12**

**\*Responses to ‘Believe It or Not! Assignment Due by Midnight 11/16**

*The Internet: Disinformation & Echo Chambers*

11/19: Fetzer, – ‘Disinformation: The Use of False Information’

11/21: Fallis – ‘What is Disinformation’

11/23: ***No Class – Thanksgiving Break***

11/26: Nguyen – ‘Escape the Echo Chamber’

11/28: Sunstein - *#Republic* (selections)

11/30: Discussion

**\*Third Socratic Question Due by Noon 11/26**

**\*Responses to Third Socratic Question Due by Midnight 11/30**

*Writing Workshop*

12/3: *Writing Workshop*

12/5: *Writing Workshop*

**\*Key Concept Group Project Due by Noon 12/3**

***Final Paper Due by Midnight Friday, December 14<sup>th</sup>***

***Final Exam on Thursday, December 13<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.