

Truth, Truthiness, and Alternative Facts (PHIL 3012)

Summer 2020 (Online)

Department of Philosophy, University of Utah
Carolyn Tanner Irish Humanities Building (CTIHB), 4th Floor

Instructor Information:

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Office hours are online.

I will send out a poll early in the semester to set up a time for open discussions that you all can drop in on.

Course Description:

What is the truth? What is the value of truth? These vexing questions are long-standing issues in the Western philosophical tradition. However, despite their lengthy pedigree, the concerns surrounding “the truth” have recently received popular attention due to the current political climate. This has led commentators to ask if we live in a “post-truth” era and, famously, for Stephen Colbert to coin the term “truthiness.” With more and more information distributed and consumed online, these conceptual concerns are relevant on a day-by-day basis to nearly everyone. To help gain traction on these issues, this class will survey classical discussions of truth, epistemic issues with experts, disinformation online, and then look at several contemporary cases.

Expected Learning Outcomes:

By the end of this course students should be able to:

1. Describe and analyze several different theories of truth in the Western canon.
2. Articulate the value of truth.
3. Explain expertise and its relevance to truth.
4. Discuss disinformation, echo chambers, and other modern epistemic issues.
5. Apply lessons in class to real world cases.

Required Readings:

All required readings will be available through Canvas. There is no textbook for this class.

Online Etiquette:

This is an online class, which means that the majority of communications will take place via email. Therefore, I ask that you follow these guidelines when reaching out to me:

1. Only use the Canvas page or your University email to contact me. Emails sent from personal emails (e.g., @gmail.com) will be ignored.
2. Ensure that your emails are respectful. You may say “Hey Derek” or “Hi!” as introductions, but please be professional. I will extend to you the same courtesy.
3. Clearly indicate what you are emailing about. I am more than happy to help, but it saves us both time when the issue is clearly articulated from the get-go.
4. Sign your email. Sometimes, it is unclear via Canvas or the University email system who is writing, and I want to make sure I can solve your concerns quickly.
5. I will try to respond to all emails within 24 hours during the work week and within work hours. I do not respond to emails after 5pm on a weeknight or emails over the

weekend. Please keep this in mind if you have urgent questions. If I do not respond during the work week within 24 hours, please send me a polite reminder.

Grading:

Deadlines

I recognize that this is a difficult time and I want to work with you to succeed in this class. However, assignment deadlines are strict. If you are unable to complete an assignment on time, please contact me beforehand. Reasonable accommodations may be made at my discretion on a case-by-case basis. The earlier you contact me, the better.

Grading Scale

→ A	100-94%
→ A-	93-90%
→ B+	89-87%
→ B	86-83%
→ B-	82-80%
→ C+	79-77%
→ C	76-73%
→ C-	72-70%
→ D+	69-67%
→ D	66-63%
→ D-	62-60%
→ E	59-0%

Assignments:

Quizzes (20%)

There are short weekly quizzes. These are structured to ensure that you are tracking the main ideas each week and are not meant to be onerous. Format will change week to week. These will be due each Friday.

Discussion Board (20%)

This assignment consists of two parts: an initial post and then *at least* one subsequent post responding to another student in a thoughtful manner. Please distribute your answers such that every post has a response on a week by week basis. These posts are graded as Pass/Fail, where I determine whether or not you are contributing to class discussion or not. Keep in mind that initial questions/comments are due earlier in the week (Wednesday) and follow ups are due later (Friday). Good discussion board posts are 1-2 paragraphs for an initial post and around 1 paragraph for subsequent follow ups.

The discussion board requires you to interact with your fellow classmates. Therefore, I request that you are kind and charitable in your discussions. If you have any questions or concerns about this, please feel free to contact me.

Short Papers (30%)

You are required to write two short papers for this class. I will provide several prompts that you can write about. Alternatively, you can propose an idea to me and I will happily consider it. Papers should be around 1200-1500 words, or about 4-5 double-spaced pages. Papers will be graded on the depth and detail of your analysis and your use of class

material. You must make explicit reference to class material to have a successful paper. You must have ***at least two*** class resources (e.g., articles) for each short paper assignment you turn in.

Please keep in mind that I am happy to read drafts or outlines of papers and encourage you to share works in progress with me. I will provide additional guidelines and information on how to write a successful paper on Canvas, too.

Final Exam (30%)

There will be a comprehensive final exam that consists of short essay questions. You may use notes and readings on this assignment. The final allows you to demonstrate mastery of course material and the ability to explore readings and arguments in sophisticated ways.

Extra Credit

You may receive up to an extra 5% added to your grade by completing an additional short paper. Other extra credit options may become available as the semester progresses, too.

CLASS READING SCHEDULE:

NOTE: Readings may change with reasonable notice. It is your responsibility to stay on top of readings, lectures, and assignments as they are posted to Canvas. Please contact me if you have any questions.

❑ Module 1: Truth and its Value

- ❑ Week 1: Akutagawa - *In a Bamboo Grove*
- ❑ Week 2: Russell - *Truth and Falsehood*; Austin - *Truth*
- ❑ Week 3: Alcock - *The Case for Coherence*; James - *Pragmatism's Conception of Truth*
- ❑ Week 4: Heal - *The Disinterested Search for Truth*

❑ Module 2: Experts and Expertise

- ❑ Week 5: Goldman - *Experts: Which Ones Should you Trust?*; Hardwig - *Epistemic Dependence*
- ❑ Week 6: Christensen - *Disagreement as Evidence*; Lackey - *Disagreements and Belief Dependence*

❑ Module 3: Disinformation, Misinformation, and Echo Chambers

- ❑ Week 7: Foucault - *Truth and Power*; Orwell - *Politics and the English Language*
- ❑ Week 8: Fallis - *What is Disinformation?*; Frankfurt - *On Bullshit*
- ❑ Week 9: Nguyen - *Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles*
- ❑ Week 10: MacKenzie & Bhatt - *Opposing the Power of Lies, Bullshit, and Fake News*

❑ Module 4: Case Studies

- ❑ Week 11: Jack - *Lexicon of Lies*; Bradshaw & Howard - *Troops, Trolls, and Troublemakers*
- ❑ Week 12: Antivax, Neonazis, and COVID-19 - *Readings TBD*

University Policies:

Diversity and Inclusivity Statement

It is my intent that students from all diverse backgrounds and perspectives be well served by this course, that students' learning needs be addressed both in and out of class, and that the diversity that students bring to this class be viewed as a resource, strength and benefit. It is my intent to present materials and activities that are respectful of diversity: gender, sexuality, disability, age, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, race, and culture. Your suggestions are encouraged and appreciated. Please let me know ways to improve the effectiveness of the course for you personally or for other students or student groups. In addition, if any of our class meetings conflict with your religious events, please let me know so that I can make arrangements for you.

Cheating and Plagiarism

Any student caught cheating or plagiarizing on an assignment will receive zero credit for that assignment, and the student's actions will be reported to the Dean. Students are responsible for knowing and understanding the University's Code of Conduct as it pertains to plagiarism: <http://www.admin.utah.edu/ppmanual/8/8-10.html>. When you draw upon any source (a lecture, an article, a book, a website, etc.), you must cite that source whether you are quoting from it directly or only paraphrasing it. You may draw on someone else's idea(s), but you may not characterize someone else's idea(s) as your own.

Disability and Access

The University of Utah seeks to provide equal access to its programs, services, and activities for people with disabilities. If you need accommodations in the class, reasonable prior notice must be given to the Center for Disability & Access (CDA) at 162 Olpin Union Building, 801-581-5020 (V/TDD). The CDA will work with you and the instructors to make arrangements for accommodations. All written information in this course can be made available in an alternative format with prior notification to the CDA.

The Americans with Disabilities Act

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 the 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. All written information in this course can be made available in an alternative format with prior notification to the Center for Disability Services.

Addressing Sexual Misconduct/Title IX

Title IX makes it clear that violence and harassment based on sex and gender (which includes sexual orientation and gender identity/expression) is a civil rights offense subject to the same kinds of accountability and the same kinds of support applied to offenses against other protected categories such as race, national origin, color, religion, age, status as a person with a disability, veteran's status or genetic information. If you or someone you know has been harassed or assaulted, you are encouraged to report it to the Title IX Coordinator in the Office of Equal Opportunity and Affirmative Action, 135 Park Building, 801- 581-8365, or the Office of the Dean of Students, 270 Union Building, 801-581-7066.

For support and confidential consultation, contact the Center for Student Wellness, 426 SSB, 801-581-7776. To report to the police, contact the Department of Public Safety, 801-585- 2677 (COPS).

Wellness Statement

Personal concerns such as stress, anxiety, relationship difficulties, depression, cross-cultural differences, etc., can interfere with a student's ability to succeed and thrive at the University of Utah. For helpful resources contact the Center for Student Wellness at www.wellness.utah.edu or 801-581-7776.

Names/Pronouns

Class rosters are provided to the instructor with the student's legal name as well as "Preferred first name" (if previously entered by you in the Student Profile section of your CIS account, which managed can be managed at any time). While CIS refers to this as merely a preference, I will honor you by referring to you with the name and pronoun that feels best for you in class or on assignments. Please advise me of any name or pronoun changes so I can help create a learning environment in which you, your name, and your pronoun are respected. If you need any assistance or support, please reach out to the LGBT Resource Center. https://lgbt.utah.edu/campus/faculty_resources.php

Campus Safety

The University of Utah values the safety of all campus community members. To report suspicious activity, call campus police at 801-585-COPS (801-585-2677). You will receive important emergency alerts and safety messages regarding campus safety via text message. For more information regarding safety and to view available training resources, including helpful videos, visit safeu.utah.edu.

Veterans Center

If you are a student veteran, the U of Utah has a Veterans Support Center located in Room 161 in the Olpin Union Building. Hours: M-F 8-5pm. Please visit their website for more information about what support they offer, a list of ongoing events and links to outside resources: <http://veteranscenter.utah.edu/>. Please also let me know if you need any additional support in this class for any reason.

English Language Learners

If you are an English language learner, please be aware of several resources on campus that will support you with your language and writing development. These resources include: the Writing Center (<http://writingcenter.utah.edu/>); the Writing Program (<http://writingprogram.utah.edu/>); the English Language Institute (<http://continue.utah.edu/eli/>).