

Knowledge and Reality



Winter 2025

Section AB1

Wednesdays 2:30 am–5:20 pm, A 312

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The University of the Fraser Valley is located on the unceded territory of the Stó:lō peoples. We gratefully acknowledge our ability to live and work on the traditional territory.

PHIL 120: Knowledge and Reality

Course Description

This course is an introduction to metaphysics and epistemology, two core branches of philosophy that tackle some of life's biggest and trickiest questions about the fundamental nature of reality and the grounds of knowledge. Where did the universe come from? Does only the physical realm exist? What makes a true belief rationally justified? What are the limits of human understanding? Each week, we will take a specific problem, topic, or debate as a point of departure to examine highly influential philosophical views from the past and the present on knowledge, reality, and matters connected therewith. Our journey starts in Ancient Greece, spans the Middle Ages through the Scientific Revolution, and comes to a close in the contemporary world. While the focus of this course is a history of great ideas from the Western tradition, at key junctures we will put the latter into dialogue with non-Western traditions. We will cover a wide range of topics including but not limited to the following: the appearance/reality distinction; Platonism vs. nominalism; bundle and substance theory; the divine attributes; skepticism about the external world; epistemic foundationalism; the metaphysics of agency; nihilism; and essentialism vs. anti-essentialism.

Learning Outcomes

Upon successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

- Describe central metaphysical concepts (e.g., the doctrine of flux, hylomorphism, and determinism).
- Describe central epistemological concepts (e.g., warrant, the *a posteriori*/*a priori* distinction, and the problem of induction).
- Assess competing metaphysical and epistemological theories (e.g., idealism vs. materialism, realism vs. anti-realism, and the eternal universe theory vs. creationism).
- Provide close readings of important philosophical arguments.
- Apply key philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments in conversation and writing.

Texts

All required readings will be made available free of charge on Blackboard.

Background Reading

If you are seeking supplementary texts to help you navigate the world of philosophy, there are many excellent resources available. Both the [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) and the [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#) are free and reputable. Another valuable resource is the [Very Short Introductions](#) book series published by Oxford University Press. All three are written by experts for a general audience, making them ideal for students. They are a great place to get your bearings in the discipline.

Requirements and Grading	Holistic Assessment	10%	
	Midterm Exam	25%	February 12
	In-Class Essay	30%	March 19
	Final Exam	35%	<i>See the university exam schedule</i>

Holistic Assessment

Holistic assessment will be determined not only by regular attendance and contributions to class discussions and activities but also by preparedness, improvement in academic performance throughout the semester, and eagerness to acquire course-specific knowledge and skills.


Exams


The midterm and final exams will consist of short-answer questions on the philosophical concepts, theories, and arguments studied throughout the term. The final exam is non-cumulative.

In-Class Essay

The in-class essay will be of a historical and expository nature. You will contextualize and summarize the formal argument from one of our readings. The topic(s) will be distributed in advance.

Course Schedule

Unit	Date	Topic
1	Jan. 8	An Initiation into Metaphysics and Epistemology
2	Jan. 15	From <i>Mythos</i> to <i>Logos</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hesiod, <i>Theogony</i>, excerpts Thales, <i>Fragments</i>, excerpts Heraclitus, <i>Fragments</i>, excerpts
3	Jan. 22	The Problem of Universals <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plato, <i>The Republic</i>, Book 1, 327a-331d, Book 6, 506d-511e, and Book 7, 514a-519a Antisthenes, <i>Fragments</i>, excerpts
4	Jan. 29	Substance and the Four Causes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aristotle, <i>Categories</i>, <i>Physics</i>, and <i>Metaphysics</i>, excerpts
5	Feb. 5	The Nature of God <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boethius, <i>The Consolation of Philosophy</i>, Book V, excerpt Avicenna, <i>On the Nature of God</i>, excerpt Anselm, <i>Monologion</i>, Chapter 6 Aquinas, <i>Summa Theologica</i>, I, q. 2 "The Existence of God," arts. 3, and q. 25 "The Power of God," a. 3 Julian of Norwich, <i>The Revelations of Divine Love</i>, The Short Text, excerpt
	Feb. 12	Midterm Exam
	Feb. 19	Reading Week
6	Feb. 26	Ancient and Modern Skepticism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Zhuangzi, "The Butterfly Dream" Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>, Meditation 1
7	Mar. 5	Rationalism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Descartes, <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>, Meditations 2, 3, and 5

8	Mar. 12	Empiricism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hume, <i>An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding</i>, Sections II-V
	Mar. 19	In-Class Essay
9	Mar. 26	Free Will and Determinism <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Holbach, <i>The System of Nature</i>, Vol. 1, Chapters 11 and 12 Mill, <i>A System of Logic</i>, Book 6, Chapter 2
10	Apr. 2	The Meaning of Life (Asynchronous Online Class) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nietzsche, <i>Thus Spoke Zarathustra</i>, Prologue and The Speeches of Zarathustra, excerpts
11	Apr. 9	Human Nature <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Sartre, <i>Existentialism is a Humanism</i>, excerpt Beauvoir, <i>The Second Sex</i>, Introduction

Course Procedures and Policies

Professionalism

I require that students maintain a professional attitude. This entails doing all readings before each session, paying attention during lectures, participating in class discussions with meaningful interventions, completing in-class activities, arriving on time, not leaving early, and being respectful to the instructor and one's peers.

Email Communication

The subject line should include the course number and the nature of the inquiry. I do my best to respond within 2 weekdays. Please refrain from resending your email or asking about its status before this timeframe has passed. If it has passed without a reply, feel free to reach out with a friendly reminder. Should it be an urgent matter, indicate so in the subject line. That way, I can prioritize getting back to you as soon as possible. Kindly note that UFV's Instructional Responsibilities Policy 46 states that "Instructors are not expected to respond to student emails on weekends or statutory holidays."

AI Use

Students are strictly prohibited from using generative AI for any requirements. In alignment with UFV's Student Academic Misconduct Policy 70, it "shall be an offense knowingly to [...] submit academic work for assessment that was purchased or acquired from another source." This includes work created by generative AI tools.

Missed Requirements

Should you miss an exam or the in-class essay, please contact me within 24 hours, if possible. If you are excused (for medical reasons, bereavement, etc., as determined on a case-by-case basis), you must reschedule through [Assessment Services](#).

Rewrites

While I admire the dedication to academic success students show when they request a rewrite, I do not permit rewrites of exams or essays. It is inequitable to offer some students and not others the opportunity to improve their grades. I encourage you to make use of my office hours throughout the term for any specific questions or concerns you may have regarding course material, learning outcomes, and requirements. For your information, the [Academic Success Centre](#) and the [Library](#) also offer personalized

support in the form of [tutoring](#) and [consultation](#), [writing support tools](#), and [Citation Style Guides](#) to aid you in your studies. By taking advantage of all the resources available to you, you will be prepared for each requirement by its scheduled time.

Grade Grubbing

Grade grubbing is when a student requests, threatens, or pleads for a grade increase for no legitimate academic reason. Instances include asking or begging for a grade bump, seeking preferential treatment, disputing grades on subjective rather than objective criteria, and seeking to complete requirements long after they were scheduled or due. The course syllabus clearly articulates students' responsibilities in demonstrating learning outcomes through the listed requirements and policies regarding missed requirements. Furthermore, the grading scheme and rubrics will be made available on Blackboard. There will be no grade changes that are not rightfully earned.



"One might love both, but it is nevertheless a sacred duty to prefer the truth to one's friends."

— Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1096a