

PHIL318I: Epistemology of Disagreement

University of Maryland, College Park

Spring 2020

Logistics

Meeting time & place	Instructor	Contact	Office & office hours	Prerequisites	Website
Online	Aleks Knoks, MA, MSc	aknoks@umd.edu	Online, by appointment	None	ELMS ¹

Course description

We know that we are fallible, or prone to making mistakes when reasoning about complicated issues. Disagreement would seem to be one of the ways in which we can get evidence of our own error: Suppose that you have carefully thought about some complex question and formed a well-reasoned opinion on it. Suppose, further, that, much to your surprise, you discover that a friend whose intellectual abilities you respect or a professor you revere holds the opposite opinion. The discover of this disagreement may make you less confident of your take on the question. But should it? Does disagreement really provide evidence of one's error? Is it epistemically significant, or only irritating? Questions like these drive the philosophical debate about the epistemic significance of disagreement.

This course is a thorough introduction to this debate. Its direct goals are to provide you with a comprehensive overview of the key ideas, positions, and arguments in the debate, as well as to familiarize you with the most important conceptual tools of contemporary epistemology. The more far-reaching goals of the course are to help you improve your skills in reading, understanding, and analyzing complex (philosophical) texts, as well as to develop your skills in philosophical writing.

The course will consist of three parts. The first part (7 weeks) will introduce the debate about the epistemic significance of disagreement. The second part (6 weeks) will focus on domain-specific disagreements—likely including disagreements involving religious belief and political disagreements—and applications of the ideas from the debate. Finally, the (curtailed) third part will delve into one important general question about the structure of epistemic normativity that's very important for the debate.

Course goals and learning outcomes

Students will:

- develop skills in reading, understanding, and analyzing philosophical texts;
- sharpen skills in philosophical thinking and writing;
- improve discussion skills;
- gain a comprehensive overview of the key ideas, positions, and arguments in the philosophical debate about the epistemic significance of disagreement;
- acquire familiarity with some of the most important conceptual tools of contemporary epistemology.

Course texts

All required readings for the course will be made available on the course website, under *Files*. Students should be prepared to read and seriously engage with at least one research article / book chapter per week.

In the first part of the course, we will study Jonathan Matheson's monograph *The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement* (2015, Palgrave Macmillan). The reading for the second part of the course will be selected with

¹<https://umd.instructure.com/courses/1279733>

the first 3–4 weeks of the semester. There will be a poll, aiming to determine the topics that the students taking this class are most interested in. I will select the reading on the basis of the results of the poll. In the third part of the course, we will read a selection of research articles.

Grading policy

- **Study guides (30%):** Almost all of the reading assignments will come with a study guide. Study guides will ask you to answer specific questions on the reading. This has four aims: (1) encourage you to do the reading before the video lecture on it becomes available; (2) provide a source of easy credit; most importantly, (3) help you understand the text; and (4) let me see if you have understood the text. The questions on the study guide will appear in the same order as they do in the text, so you should do the study guide while you are reading. As the course progresses, the questions of the study guides may become less specific: You’ll still need to demonstrate understanding of the text, but you won’t be provided as much guidance.

There will be 11 study guides. You need to do 8 for full credit (30 points), and you can do two more for extra credit. It’s crucial that you do your own work. Identical answers will receive a zero. Late study guides will not be accepted, except in highly extenuating circumstances.

- **Forum participation (15%):** Discussion is very important for philosophy, and this class is no exception, even though it’s taught online. Part of your grade is determined by how actively you participate in the discussion forum of the class. How can you participate? Well, occasionally you’ll be required to respond to prompt questions. What’s more, you can (and should) ask questions about the readings and the video lectures, as well as answer the questions of your peers.

- **Term paper (10% + 20%):** You’re required to write a research paper in the range of 2000–3000 words. I’ll provide you with a list of sample paper topics. This assignment will help you develop philosophical writing skills. The paper is due May 10 at 11:59pm. But you’ll have to submit a draft version on April 19. This is to encourage you to start working on the paper in timely manner and give me a chance to provide you with some feedback.

Assessment	Points
Study guides	30
Forum	15
Term paper	
(1) Draft	10
(3) Final version	20
Final assignment	25

Papers submitted after May 10 will be penalized at a rate of one grade-increment per day (e.g., B to B-). **Late** drafts will not be accepted for credit.

- **Final assignment (25%):** The default option here is a comprehensive take-home exam. The details, including the format, will be announced in due time. The final assignment will be due May 17 at 11.59pm.

Your grade will be the weighed average of all the above grade components. The grading scale in this course is as follows—the official grade description can be found here:

	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
Final	98–	94–	90–	88–	84–	80–	78–	74–	70–	68–	64–	60–	<60
%	100	97.9	93.9	89.9	87.9	83.9	79.9	77.9	73.9	69.9	67.9	63.9	

For purposes of converting letter grades into numerical ones, the following conversion will be used:

	A+	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	C	C-	D+	D	D-	F
%	98	95	92	88	85	82	78	75	72	68	65	62	55

I am happy to discuss your grades with you, and if I have made a mistake I’ll correct it. Formal grade disputes must be submitted in writing and within 1 week of receiving the grade. You should be aware of the University of Maryland’s policy on *arbitrary and capricious grading* and understand the process of appealing a final grade.

Accommodation

Students who require special accommodations should inform me at the beginning of the course, and must provide the appropriate documentation from the DSS office (see <http://www.counseling.umd.edu/DSS/>).

Course procedures and policies

Consult the following webpage for the official procedures and policies for this course:

www.ugst.umd.edu/courserelatedpolicies.html

Tentative course schedule

	Week	Theme of the lecture & forum discussion	Readings	Assignment
1	1/27–2/2	Introduction and logistics	Syllabus, (Christensen 2009)	SG-01
2	2/3–2/9	Debate from a bird’s-eye view	(Matheson 2015, Ch. 1)	SG-02
3	2/10–2/16	Core concepts, relativism	(Matheson 2015, Ch. 2)	SG-03
4	2/17–2/23	Peerhood, idealized disagreements	(Matheson 2015, Ch. 3)	SG-04
5	2/24–3/1	Steadfast views	(Matheson 2015, Ch. 4–5.1)	SG-05
6	3/2–3/8	Conciliatory views I	(Matheson 2015, Ch. 5.2–6)	SG-06
7	3/9–3/15	Conciliatory views II, everyday disagreements	(Goldman 2001)	SG-07
8	3/16–3/22	Spring break	No reading	
9	3/23–3/29	COVID-19 week	No reading	
10	3/30–4/5	Expertise I: The novice/expert problem	(Talbot 2016), (Coady 2006)	SG-08
11	4/6–4/12	Expertise II: the Bayesian approach, the question of numbers	(McGrath 2008)	SG-09
12	4/13–4/19	Moral disagreement I	(Vavova 2014) / (Wedgwood 2010)	Draft
13	4/20–4/26	Moral disagreement II	(Carlson 2018) / (Hallsson 2019)	SG-10
14	4/27–5/3	Disagreement in politics I	(Hallsson 2019) / (Enoch 2017)	SG-11
15	5/4–5/10	Disagreement in politics II	(Schoenfield 2014)	Paper
16	5/11–5/17	Religious belief, permissivism	No reading	Final

Study guides (SGs) are due by the Sunday of the week at 11:59pm (EST).

Paper draft is due April 19 at 11:59pm (EST), and its final version is due May 10 at 11:59pm (EST).

The final assignment is due May 17 at 11:59pm (EST). Students will get access to it at least a week before it is due.

Changes to the syllabus

This syllabus is subject to change. Students will be notified in advance of important changes that could affect, for instance, grading.

Copyright notice

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References

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- Goldman, A. (2001). Experts: Which ones should you trust? *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 63, 85–109.
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- McGrath, S. (2008). Moral disagreement and moral expertise. *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*, 3.
- Schoenfield, M. (2014). Permission to believe: Why permissivism is true and what it tells us about irrelevant influences on belief. *Noûs*, 48(2), 193–218.
- Talbott, W. (2016). Bayesian epistemology. In E. N. Zalta (Ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, winter 2016 edition.
- Vavova, K. (2014). Moral disagreement and moral skepticism. *Philosophical Perspectives*, 28, 302–33.
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