

# HUL 841: Philosophy of Science

## IInd Semester, 2016-17

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### Course description

In science as in ordinary life we often take ourselves to know various things: that water freezes, that you have a certain “given name,” that there is an even prime, or that human beings are mammals. One task of traditional epistemology has been to make sense of these claims to knowledge. What kinds of things can be known? What does it take to really *know* something, rather than, e.g., believe it irrationally?

The focus of this course is on different ways in which claims to knowledge can be challenged or undermined. Can we know anything at all? I believe that I have a beard because I can see myself in the mirror; it is this perceptual experience which justifies my claim to *know* that I have a beard. But such perceptual experiences have been mistaken in the past – in particular, I have had what seemed to be perceptual experiences in dreams which turn out to be false when I wake up. But how can I tell *just now* whether I am dreaming or not? This ‘sceptical’ challenge was raised in particularly pointed fashion by Descartes, and will be the focus of the second part of the course.

After examining traditional philosophical scepticism of the Cartesian variety, we will proceed to consider more contemporary challenges to knowledge claims, which proceed from a claimed tension between particular first-order beliefs and second-order facts about ourselves as cognitive agents. One such tension arises in the realm of morality. Our moral beliefs are the result of a contingent evolutionary process: some philosophers have concluded that we should not take them seriously, for the fact that a belief is fitness-enhancing is not a guarantee that it is true. In the third part of the course, we will assess the force of such “debunking” arguments on the basis of claims about the causal origins of our beliefs.

In the fourth and fifth parts of the course, we will cover recent work on the epistemological significance of disagreement, and on the doctrine of “irrelevant influences.”

## Pre-requisites and expectations

There are no pre-requisites except enthusiasm, but be warned that this is a demanding, reading-intensive course. Since we will be carrying on a sustained conversation from one class to the next, I expect full attendance.

For students unfamiliar with philosophical reading and writing, I encourage you to consult Jim Pryor's invaluable advice: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/index.html>. Another electronic resource well worth consulting is the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>.

## Administrative matters

Readings will be available from SCOOPS and on Piazza. Please note that I do not permit the use of electronic devices in class, so you must bring hardcopies.

Piazza site: The class website is [piazza.com/iit\\_delhi/spring2017/hul841](http://piazza.com/iit_delhi/spring2017/hul841), access code hul841.

Office hours: TBA and by appointment (MS 620).

Contact details: [burra@hss.iitd.ac.in](mailto:burra@hss.iitd.ac.in)

## Evaluation

Pass-marks: 30%

Auditors: 75% attendance and 40% each on exams as well as assignments

10%: Minor I

10%: Minor II

20%: Major

20%: Mid-term assignment

30%: Final assignment

10%: Class presentations

## Schedule of topics and readings

This is an illustrative reading list: we will adapt it as we go along.

### Weeks 1-2: basic epistemological notions

- Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*, chapters one-three
- Jim Pryor, “What’s So Bad about Living in the Matrix?” (excerpt)

### Weeks 3-5: traditional scepticism

- Richard Feldman, *Epistemology*, chapters six-seven
- Blumenfeld & Blumenfeld, “Can I Know That I Am Not Dreaming?”
- Barry Stroud, “The Problem of the External World” in *The Significance of Philosophical Scepticism*

### Weeks 6-8: evolutionary debunking arguments

- Jonathan Haidt, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment”
- Sharon Street, “A Darwinian Dilemma for Realist Theories of Value”
- Joshua Greene, “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul”
- Guy Kahane, “Evolutionary Debunking Arguments”

### Weeks 9-11: epistemic disagreement

- Thomas Kelly, “The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement”
- Gideon Rosen, “Nominalism, Naturalism, Epistemic Relativism”
- David Christensen, “Epistemology of Disagreement: the Good News”

### Weeks 12-14: irrelevant influences

Readings TBA