

PHILOSOPHY 601: PROBABILISTIC KNOWLEDGE

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seminar hours: Fridays 12:00–2:30 in 1164 Angell Hall

office hours: Fridays 2:30–4:30 in 2232 Angell Hall, and any time by appointment

**DESCRIPTION** In this seminar, we will work through the book manuscript *Probabilistic Knowledge*, in which I defend a unified probabilistic account of the contents of assertion, belief, and knowledge. The short version: in addition to full beliefs, you have probabilistic beliefs, such as your .7 credence that Jones smokes, or your belief that Jones is twice as likely to smoke as Smith. Half of the book defends a claim in the philosophy of language, namely that the probabilistic contents of these sorts of beliefs can be the contents of assertion. The other half defends a claim in epistemology, namely that they can be the contents of knowledge.

Defending these two claims will take us on a wild romp through a number of fundamental issues of interest in contemporary analytic philosophy, including the relation between full belief and certainty, the correct analog of truth for partial belief, whether perceptual experiences have representational content, how we can get knowledge from statistical inference, what is morally and epistemically wrong with racial profiling, modal accounts of anti-luck conditions on knowledge, the semantics of indicative conditionals, whether knowledge is subject to pragmatic encroachment, how we should respond to peer disagreement, more general reflection principles governing the impact of higher-order evidence, the correct analysis of reasonable doubt and other legal standards of proof, whether transformative experience presents a genuine challenge to standard decision theory, and how to develop Bayesian principles in the context of Fregean theories of attitude contents.

**GRADING** The assignments for this seminar are modular, designed with the intention that you work on them throughout the semester and finish the seminar with no outstanding assignments. The components of your seminar grade are as follows:

Problem set questions: 60%

Weekly assignments submitted for ten seminar meetings: 20%

Presentation at one seminar meeting: 20%

The majority of your research in this seminar will involve answering problem set questions. These questions fall into three categories: substantial questions, literature questions, and practice questions. The large majority of the problem set questions are substantial questions, many of which could serve as the basis of an original research paper. In short, there are many engaging ideas that I have had to set aside for the purposes of the book manuscript, and the substantial problem set questions are designed to help you explore these fruitful extensions, applications, and challenges for the theories that we will be discussing. Literature questions involve finding natural

language examples of interesting behavior or examples of philosophical theories defended in extant literature. Practice questions are straightforward questions intended to facilitate your comprehension of technical material.

In order to get a perfect problem set grade for the semester, you must submit problem set answers whose total worth is at least sixty points. Answers to substantial questions are worth six points each, and answers to practice questions and literature questions are worth three points each. By contrast with *Phil 413: Formal Methods*, problem sets for this seminar contain a wide range of optional questions which you may select from over the course of the semester. There are over three hundred points available on the problem set attached to this syllabus, for instance. Problem set work may be completed by groups, with the restriction that *each* submitted group answer must genuinely result from the *joint efforts of all group members*.

For each week in which you are not presenting in the seminar, you must email me a weekly seminar assignment by midnight on the preceding Thursday. The typical weekly assignment should consist of either a clarificatory question or a critical objection about the reading to be discussed. These assignments will be assessed according to whether they reflect a long and serious effort to engage with the assigned reading.

If you are presenting at a seminar meeting, you must email me a detailed handout for your presentation by midnight on the preceding Thursday. Your seminar presentation grade will be divided into four parts, each of which is worth 5% of your overall grade: the philosophical merits of the content on your handout, the clarity with which that content is presented on your handout, the effective management of your time during your seminar presentation, and the quality of the discussion generated by your presentation.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about your work for this seminar. In addition to answering clarificatory questions about problem sets, I am happy to help with rough drafts of seminar handouts and weekly assignments.

## READINGS

A draft of the book manuscript has been posted on the CTools page for this class, available at <http://ctools.umich.edu>. For a majority of the semester, we will read one chapter of the book each week. In addition to the manuscript, I have posted a number of supplementary readings for seminar participants who would appreciate more background on the topics we will be discussing. These supplementary readings are listed alongside the relevant book chapters in the schedule section of this syllabus.

SCHEDULE

- 9/11 seminar rescheduled due to Princeton-Michigan workshop on normativity
- 9/25 introductory seminar meeting in Tanner Library
- 9/25 Chapter 1: A Unified Theory of Content  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Reddy 1974: "The Conduit Metaphor: A Case of Frame Conflict. . ."  
 Stalnaker 1978: "Assertion"  
 Egan, Hawthorne, and Weatherson 2005: "Epistemic Modals in Context"  
 Korsgaard 1996: *Sources of Normativity*, §4.2
- 10/2 Chapter 2: Epistemic Modals  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Lasersohn 1999: "Pragmatic Halos"  
 Yalcin 2007: "Epistemic Modals"  
 Swanson 2008: "Modality in Language"  
 Wedgwood 2012: "Outright Belief"
- 10/9 Chapter 3: Indicative Conditionals  
**seminar guest: Alan Hájek**  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Gibbard 1981: "Two Recent Theories of Conditionals"  
 Kolodny and MacFarlane 2012: "Ifs and Oughts"  
 Hájek 2012: "The Fall of 'Adams' Thesis'?"
- 10/16 seminar rescheduled due to research travel
- 10/23 Chapter 4: The Case For Probabilistic Knowledge  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Jeffrey 1968: "Probable Knowledge"  
 van Fraassen 1981: "A Problem for Relative Information Minimizers. . ."  
 Siegel 2012: Chapter 2 of *The Contents of Visual Experience*  
 Morrison 2015: "Perceptual Confidence"
- 10/30 Chapter 5: Factivity  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Gibbard 2003: Chapter 11 of *Thinking How to Live*  
 MacFarlane 2014: Section 7.3 of *Assessment Sensitivity: Relative Truth. . .*
- 11/6 Chapter 6: Skepticism  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Goldman 1976: "Discrimination and Perceptual Knowledge"  
 Lewis 1996: "Elusive Knowledge"  
 Yalcin 2012: "A Counterexample to Modus Tollens"

- 11/13 Chapter 7: Intensionality  
**seminar guest: Robbie Williams**  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Dreier 2004: "Meta-Ethics and the Problem of Creeping Minimalism"  
 Swanson 2010: "On Scope Relations between Quantifiers. . ."  
 Chalmers 2011: "Frege's Puzzle and the Objects of Credence"  
 Yalcin 2015: "Epistemic Modality *De Re*"
- 11/20 Chapter 8: Knowledge and Belief  
**seminar guest: Andy Egan**  
*supplementary readings:*  
 White 2006: "Problems for Dogmatism"  
 Elga 2008: "Lucky to Be Rational"  
 Christensen 2010: "Rational Reflection"  
 Elga 2013: "The Puzzle of the Unmarked Clock and the New Rational. . ."
- 12/4 Chapter 9: Knowledge and Action<sup>1</sup>  
*supplementary readings:*  
 Schiffer 2007: "Interest-Relative Invariantism"  
 Hawthorne and Stanley 2008: "Knowledge and Action"  
 Weatherson 2010: "Knowledge, Bets, and Interests"  
 Enoch et. al. 2012: "Statistical Evidence, Sensitivity, and the Legal Value. . ."  
 Paul 2014: *Transformative Experience*, chapter 2
- 12/11 final seminar meeting on topic(s) to be determined during the semester

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<sup>1</sup>Although it is our usual department practice to refrain from teaching seminars in the final two weeks of the fall semester, these meeting dates work out well for students enrolled in Phil 601.