

Course Syllabus - The Social Dimensions of Knowledge

Instructor: T.Y. Branch, branch@philos.uni-hannover.de

Time and Location: Fridays, 14:15 - 15:45, weekly (starting 11.04.25) in Room 302, Lange Laube 32

Course Description: The acquisition and creation of knowledge is a social endeavour. To develop and refine knowledge, individuals rely on information shared by others and provide information to others. But how individuals come to know, for example, by deciding whom to trust, and how they assess information, is a complex process integral to knowing. Further, how communities come to establish knowledge with a high degree of agreement (i.e. consensus) in different contexts, is also complicated, especially with respect to scientific knowledge. This course will examine the social dimensions of knowledge creation and distribution by discussing social indicators of trustworthiness (e.g. reputation), types of expertise, how knowing works on individual and group-levels, and consider broader institutional structures for authenticating and communicating knowledge.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this course, students will be able to:

- Recognize structural and conceptual differences in epistemic sources
- Understand mechanisms for sharing knowledge
- Analyze knowledge networks
- Critique the authority of epistemic agents

Required Texts and Materials

This course has no required textbook. Readings will be made available online.

Course Policies

This course will use the STUD.IP online learning platform of Leibniz University Hannover for communication, hosting course materials and facilitating discussions. It is the students' responsibility to ensure that they have access to this material and check it regularly. The instructor will only use official university email accounts to communicate with students. Please use 'branch@philos.uni-hannover.de' to contact the instructor with the course code in the subject of the email. It is the students' responsibility to ensure that the proper email notification system is set up to receive notifications.

Schedule

There are six major themes related to the social dimensions of knowing to be explored in this course. Each week, a reading on one of these themes will be assigned. See schedule below (subject to change):

Week	Date	Due	Topics	Reading of the Week
1	11.04.2025		Introduction	None
2	25.04.2025	Assignment 1	Justice I	Vayena, E., & Tasioulas, J. (2015). "We the Scientists": A human right to citizen science. <i>Philosophy & Technology</i> , 28, 479-485.
3	02.05.2025		Trust in Experts I	Hardwig, J. (1991). "The role of trust in knowledge." <i>The Journal of Philosophy</i> , 88(12), 693-708.
4	09.05.2025		Scientific Testimony I	Gerken, M. (2022). "Public Scientific Testimony II: Science Reporting." <i>Scientific Testimony: Its roles in science and society</i> . Oxford University Press.
5	16.05.2025		Science Communication I	John, S. (2018). "Epistemic trust and the ethics of science communication: Against transparency, openness, sincerity and honesty". <i>Social Epistemology</i> , 32(2), 75-87.
6	23.05.2025		Epistemic Vigilance I	Sperber, D., Clément, F., Heintz, C., Mascaro, O., Mercier, H., Origi, G., & Wilson, D. (2010). "Epistemic vigilance". <i>Mind & language</i> , 25(4), 359-393.
7	30.05.2025		Artificial Intelligence I	Alvarado, R. (2023). "AI as an Epistemic Technology". <i>Science and Engineering Ethics</i> , 29(5), 32.
8	06.06.2025		Artificial Intelligence II	Ferrario, A., Facchini, A., & Termine, A. (2024). "Experts or authorities? The strange case of the presumed epistemic superiority of artificial intelligence systems". <i>Minds and Machines</i> , 34(3), 30.
9	20.06.2025	Assignment 2	Justice II	Fragoso, K. P. (2022). "Telling a story in a deliberation: addressing epistemic injustice and the exclusion of indigenous groups in public decision-making". <i>Journal of Global Ethics</i> , 18(3), 368-385.
10	27.06.2025		Trust in Experts II	Irzik, G. and Kurtulmus, F. (2019). "What Is Epistemic Public Trust in Science?" <i>The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science</i> , 70(4), 1145-1166.
11	04.07.2025		Science Communication II	Karakas, A., & Tuboly, A. T. (2024). "Materializing values". <i>Synthese</i> , 204(1), 5.
12	11.07.2025	Assignment 3	Science Communication III	Branch (In Progress) "Openness but not Transparency: Attitudes and Accountability for Science Communication".
13	18.07.2025	Assignment 4	Scientific Testimony II	Nguyen, C. T. (2020). "Echo chambers and epistemic bubbles". <i>Episteme</i> , 17(2), 141-161.

Studienleistungen - Coursework

- *Assignment 1.* Students will come up with four examples of knowledge sharing in society and write 500 words outlining descriptive and normative features of the cases (approx. 125 words per example). They will upload their 500 word summary to the 'Assignment 1: Sharing in Society' folder found under Files on STUD.IP and select one example to post on the Forum under 'Assignment 1: Sharing in Society' on STUD. IP. The document upload and posting are due by 23:59 on 25.04.2025.
- *Assignment 2.* Students will select one example (not necessarily from assignment 1) and connect it in 3-5 sentences to a point of interest in the readings thus far. Students will then post their example and explanation on the STUD.IP Forum by 23:59 on 20.06.2025.
- *Assignment 3.* Students will write a first draft of their final essay (2500 words including references) to share anonymously with one of their peers for review. The rough draft should include an introduction, argument and concluding reflections. The draft should be uploaded (without any identifiers, name, student number etc.) to the 'Assignment 3: First Draft' folder under Files on STUD.IP by 23:59 on 11.07.2025. For guidance on how to write an essay outline as a starting point, see below.
- *Assignment 4.* Students will practice their editing skills by anonymously reviewing the rough draft of one of their peers' final essays (also anonymous). The review should be a total of 500 words comprised of what they take the author's argument to be (approx. 250 words) and constructive criticism for how the paper could be improved (approx. 250 words). The assignment is due the last day of class 23:59, 21.07.2025 and should be uploaded to the 'Assignment 4: Peer Review' folder under Files. For insight on how to review an essay, use the evaluation criteria provided for how to write an essay outline below. Authors will receive the commentary on their papers shortly afterwards to incorporate the suggestions into their final essays before submission.

Prüfungsleistungen - Assessment

- *Final Essay* Students will prepare a final essay (4000 words) on the course material based on their first draft and suggestions from their peers. While students are not obligated to address any or all of the suggestions of their peers, students must include 5 sentences explaining what they did or did not include, and why.

How to Write an Essay Outline

An outline is the skeleton of your paper containing the thesis, supporting arguments, objections, and replies to show how the paper will be structured. Outlining saves time by helping to write a more robust paper in fewer drafts. By forcing the author to identify central points, clarify what they want to say from the outset, identify gaps in an argument and reserve space to answer each part of the prompt, it helps to ensure that the main argument remains the focus of the paper.¹

Steps to producing an Essay Outline

1. Understand the prompt (consult readings and notes).
2. Brainstorm about the prompt.
3. Choose a clear position to defend in reference to the prompt; you need not be certain of it—clarity matters more than confidence.
4. Identify weaknesses in your position and likely objections.
5. Select and flesh out the strongest argument for your position (consider diagramming).
6. Pick and sketch responses to objections.
7. Assemble these elements into the template below.

Standard Philosophy Essay Outline Format

1. Introduction

- State the question or prompt.
- Briefly note why the question matters (optional).
- State thesis (i.e. the position the paper will defend).
- Provide a short roadmap summarizing the argument.

2. Main argument

- Present each reason for the thesis as a separate bullet.
- Defend any non-obvious premises.
- Note: Define important technical terms when first used.

3. Objections and replies

- State a significant objection (authors' or an attributed one).
- Offer response(s).
- Note: For classroom assignments and papers, one well-developed objection and reply is often sufficient.

4. Conclusion

- Restate your position.
- Briefly summarize the argumentative route taken.

¹From Carolina Flores' quick guide.

With an outline already complete, writing the actual essay should be just a matter of filling in the details. The material covered in class should be sufficient to write the essay, but additional material can be sourced as needed—just be certain to cite appropriately.

For additional tips for effective philosophical writing see:

- Connie Rosati, “Some suggestions on how to approach reading a philosophy article or book”
- Jim Pryor’s Writing Guidelines: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>
- Yablo’s Writing Methods: <http://www.mit.edu/~yablo/writing.html>
- Harvard Philosophy Department Guide: https://philosophy.fas.harvard.edu/files/phildept/files/brief_guide_to_writing_philosophy_paper.pdf

Evaluation for Philosophy Essay

Criterion	Description	Score (0-3)
1. Thesis Clarity	The essay presents a clear and concise thesis statement that establishes the main argument.	_____
2. Argument Structure	Each argument is well-structured and logically coherent, with distinct premises supporting the conclusion.	_____
3. Use of Evidence	Strong use of textual evidence and examples effectively supports claims and illustrates key points.	_____
4. Engages Counterarguments	The paper identifies and thoughtfully addresses objections or counterarguments to the thesis.	_____
5. Clarity and Style	Writing is clear and accessible, with appropriate vocabulary and well-organized paragraphs.	_____
6. Technical Accuracy	Accurate interpretation of philosophical concepts and proper use of technical terms are evident.	_____
7. Critical Evaluation	The paper demonstrates original thought through critical engagement and evaluation of arguments.	_____
8. Conclusion	The conclusion effectively summarizes the paper's main points and reinforces the thesis.	_____
9. Citations and References	Proper citation of sources and adherence to the recommended formatting style throughout the paper.	_____
10. Overall Impression	The paper offers a compelling exploration of the philosophical topic that reflects deep understanding and insight.	_____

5-30 = Excellent (fully follows instructions)

18-24 = Good (minor omissions)

10-17 = Weak (multiple gaps)

0-9 = Incomplete (major omissions)

For criteria with a score between 0 and 1, suggest specific solutions (e.g., “add definitions for X,” “move premise Y so it is indented under reason Z”).