

# Forms of Philosophical Skepticism

## \*\*\*Syllabus\*\*\*

### Course Description

The aim of the course will be to consider some of the most influential treatments of skepticism in the post-war analytic philosophical tradition—in relation both to the broader history of philosophy and to current tendencies in contemporary analytic philosophy. The first part of the course will begin by distinguishing two broad varieties of skepticism—Cartesian and Kantian—and their evolution over the past two centuries, and will go on to isolate and explore some of the most significant variants of each of these varieties in recent analytic philosophy. The second part of the course will involve a close look at recent influential analytic treatments of skepticism, with a special eye to how they relate to these two varieties. We will carefully read and critically evaluate writings on skepticism by the following authors, among others: A. J. Ayer, J. L. Austin, Stanley Cavell, Thompson Clarke, Saul Kripke, C. I. Lewis, John McDowell, H. H. Price, Hilary Putnam, Wilfrid Sellars, Barry Stroud, Michael Williams, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. This will be a lecture course designed for both advanced undergraduate and graduate students. Undergraduates who enroll in the course should have some prior exposure to Descartes and Kant and some prior background in analytic philosophy.

### Instructor

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### Teaching Assistant

Claire Kirwin  
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## Texts

All of the following books have been ordered through the Seminary Co-op and are all required texts for the course:

1. Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*
2. Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*
3. John McDowell, *Mind and World*
4. Barry Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*

Some of the readings assigned for the course are in one of the four texts above. All of the other readings will be made available through the Chalk site of the course.

## Chalk Site

There is a Chalk website for this course ([chalk.uchicago.edu](http://chalk.uchicago.edu)). All readings listed on the syllabus not available in one of the books ordered for the course are to be found on this site. In addition, a great many readings not mentioned on the syllabus are also to be found on this site. The latter generally pertain to topics discussed in passing in lecture and are made available for students who wish to pursue them further, perhaps in a final paper for the course. (If you ever encounter any problem obtaining an assigned reading for the course, you should immediately contact the professor or your TA by e-mail and let him or her know about the problem.)

## Structure of the Course and Related Issues

**Lectures:** There will be lectures on Mondays, Wednesdays and some Fridays during all but the second and ninth weeks of the quarter. These will take place from noon to 1:20pm in Harper 130. For more precise information, see the schedule of meetings below. All lectures will be recorded and posted on the chalk site. If you miss a lecture, you will be expected to listen to it before attending the following lecture.

**Undergraduates:** This course is open only to undergraduates with the appropriate background in philosophy. Undergraduates who have not been admitted to the course because of the enrollment cap but who would like to take the course for credit should attend the first week of the course. There is a strong likelihood that we will be able to admit you by the second week of the quarter.

**Graduate Students:** This course is open to all graduate students in Philosophy. Graduate students from other departments are welcome to audit or enroll in the course for credit on the condition that they have some prior familiarity with both epistemological skepticism and analytic philosophy.

**Policy on Auditors:** Anyone with a serious interest in the topic is welcome to audit the course.

**Announcements:** Announcements (modifications to the syllabus, etc.) will periodically be posted to the Chalk site. Students are expected to keep abreast of these.

**Course Participation:** All students involved in the course are expected to attend class regularly and be conversant with the required readings.

**Undergraduate Discussion Sections:** There will be two undergraduate discussion sections for the course, taught by Claire Kirwin. Every undergraduate enrolled for credit must be assigned to and regularly attend one of these sections. These sections will meet every week of the quarter from first to tenth week. Weekly attendance of sections is mandatory for undergraduates enrolled in the course. The time schedules and locations of these sections are: Friday, 1:30-2:20 in Harper 125; and Friday, 2:30-3:20 in Harper 125.

**Graduate Discussion Section:** There will be a graduate discussion section for the course. It will be led by Professor Conant. It will meet on Thursdays, from 1:30 to 2:50pm. The graduate section will begin meeting during the third week of the quarter. It will not meet during ninth week, but will meet 11th week at the usual lecture-time of Wednesday at noon rather than its usual Thursday time. It is open to all PhD and MA students either enrolled in or auditing the course. Attendance of the graduate section is an optional component of the course even for graduate students enrolled for credit.

**Undergraduate Course Requirements:** There are three required elements for the course: (1) mandatory attendance and participation in discussion sections, (2) a short midterm paper (6-8 pages) due by Monday, May 12th at 11:59pm, at the beginning of week 7; (3) a longer paper (12-15 pages) due by Friday, June 13th at 11:59pm, at the end of week 11. Special deadlines will be arranged for graduating seniors. All undergraduate papers are to be delivered to Claire Kirwin in electronic form.

**Undergraduate Grade Breakdown:** 15% for participation in discussion section; 35% for the short midterm paper, and 50% for the long final paper. To pass the course you must receive a passing grade in every required component of the course: A failing grade in any one of the three required components of the course will result in a failing grade for the course as a whole.

**Graduate Course Requirements:** Graduate students taking the course for credit are expected to write a term paper at the end of the quarter, due by Friday, June 13th at 11:59pm, at the end of week 11. Papers are to be submitted via email to Prof. Conant in electronic form. The final paper is the only official requirement for graduate students enrolled in the course. It may be on any topic of your choice pertaining to themes covered in the lecture. Graduate student papers (both M. A. and Ph.D.) should be between 15 and 30 pages.

**Policy on Extensions for Graduate Student Papers:** Graduate students may hand in their final papers after the official due date and still receive credit for the course, only if they have secured permission from the professor to do so. Any student granted an extension should also be aware of the following: such papers will not be graded immediately upon receipt. The later the paper, the less promptly it will be graded.

# Schedule of Meetings, Topics and Readings

## **First Meeting (Monday, March 31st): Organizational and introductory meeting**

Introduction: Overview of the topics and themes to be covered in the course  
Explanation of the approach to be taken to the assigned materials  
Overview of the syllabus  
No assigned reading for the first meeting.

## **Second Meeting (Wednesday, April 2nd): Introduction to Cartesian Skepticism**

### Required reading:

1. Descartes, *First Meditation*
2. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts I & II

### Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, “Skepticism and the Possibility of Knowledge”
2. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Chs. 1.1 & 1.2

**\*\*\* NO LECTURES OR GRADUATE SECTIONS DURING THE SECOND WEEK OF THE QUARTER; UNDERGRADUATE SECTIONS WILL MEET DURING THE SECOND WEEK OF THE QUARTER**

## **Third Meeting (Monday, April. 14): The Structure of Cartesian Skepticism**

### Required reading:

1. Price, *Perception*, Ch. 1
2. Ayer, *The Foundations of Empirical Knowledge*, Ch. 1

### Required re-reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part II

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 1
2. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Chs. 2.5 & 2.6

**Fourth Meeting (Wednesday, April 16): Cartesian Skeptical Examples**

Required reading:

1. Austin, "Other Minds"
2. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Chs. 3 & 4

Recommended Reading:

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Chs. 1 & 2
2. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 2

**Fifth Meeting (Monday, April 21): Clarke on Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. Clarke, "The Legacy of Skepticism"

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, "Doubts about the Legacy of Skepticism"
2. Hamawaki, "In Search of the Plain and the Philosophical: Skepticism, Self-Knowledge, and Transcendental Illusion"
3. Clarke, "Seeing Surfaces"

**Sixth Meeting (Wednesday, April 23rd): Further Features of Cartesian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Chs. 6 & 8
2. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Part VI

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, "Reasonable Claims"
2. Stroud, *The Significance of Philosophical Skepticism*, Ch. 7
3. Williams, *Unnatural Doubts*, Ch. 4

**Seventh Meeting (Monday, April 28th): Introduction to Disjunctivism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, "Criteria, Defeasibility, and Knowledge"
2. Cook, "Human Beings"

Recommended Reading:

1. McDowell, "Singular Thought and the Extent of Inner Space"
2. Lockhart, "Motivating Disjunctivism"

**Eighth Meeting (Wednesday, April 30th): The Interface Conception**

Required reading:

1. Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses*, Lectures 1 & 2
2. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Lectures 1-5

Recommended Reading:

1. Hilary Putnam, *Sense, Nonsense, and the Senses*, Lecture 3
2. Austin, *Sense and Sensibilia*, Lectures 6-11

**Ninth Meeting (Monday, May 5th): Introduction to Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Parts III, IV, & V

Recommended Reading:

1. Stroud, “Transcendental Arguments”
2. Hamawaki, “Cartesian Skepticism, Kantian Skepticism and Transcendental Arguments”

**Tenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 7th): Introduction to Lewis’s Version of Kantianism**

Required reading:

1. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Ch. 2
2. Lewis, “Reply to Firth”

Recommended Reading:

1. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Chs. 1 & 3
2. Firth, “Lewis on the Given”

**Eleventh Meeting (Friday, May 9th): The Structure of Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lectures 1-2
2. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Parts I - III

Recommended Reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lecture 3, Afterword, Parts 1 & 2
2. Sellars, “Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind”, Part IV

**Twelfth Meeting (Monday, May 12th): Varieties and Features of Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Lectures 4-6
2. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part VII

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Afterword, Parts 3 & 4

**Thirteenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 14th): The Relation between Cartesian & Kantian Skepticism**

Required reading:

1. McDowell, *Mind and World*, Introduction
2. Sellars, *Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind*, Parts V, VI, & VIII

Recommended reading:

1. McDowell, “Conceptual Capacities in Perception”
2. McDowell, “Avoiding the Myth of the Given”
3. Travis, “The Silence of the Senses”

**Fourteenth Meeting (Friday, May 16th): Cartesian and Kantian Philosophical Vocabulary**

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part VIII

Required re-reading:

1. Price, *Perception*, Ch. 1
2. C. I. Lewis, *Mind and the World Order*, Ch. 2

**Fifteenth Meeting (Monday, May 19th): Putnam vs. McDowell?**

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts IX & X

Recommended reading:

1. Putnam, "McDowell's Mind and McDowell's World"
2. McDowell, "Reply to Putnam"
3. McDowell, "Putnam on Mind and Meaning"

**Sixteenth Meeting (Wednesday, May 21st): Kantian Skepticism about Rules and Meaning**

Required reading:

1. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Chs. 1 & 2
2. McDowell, "Meaning and Intentionality in Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy"

Recommended reading:

1. Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language*, Ch. 3
2. McDowell, "Wittgenstein on Following a Rule"
3. Finkelstein, "Wittgenstein on Rules and Platonism"

**\*\*\* NO LECTURES OR GRADUATE SECTIONS DURING THE NINTH WEEK OF THE QUARTER; UNDERGRADUATE SECTIONS WILL MEET DURING THE NINTH WEEK OF THE QUARTER**

**Seventeenth Meeting (Monday, June 2nd; Claire's Birthday): Cavell vs. Kripke?**

Required reading:

1. Cavell, "The Argument of the Ordinary"
2. Conant, "Two Varieties of Skepticism", Part XI

Recommended reading:

1. Cavell, "What is the Scandal of Skepticism?"

**Eighteenth Meeting** (Wednesday, June 4th): **McDowell vs. Cavell?**

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Parts XII & XIII
2. Hamawaki, “Cavell, Skepticism and the Idea of Philosophical Criticism”
3. Gustafsson, “Perfect Pitch and Austinian Examples”

Recommended reading:

1. Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, Part IV
2. MacArthur, “McDowell, Skepticism, and ‘The Veil of Perception’”
3. Kern, “Understanding Skepticism”

**Nineteenth Meeting** (Friday, June 6th): **Skepticism, Mind, and Nature**

Required reading:

1. Boyle, “Tack-On Theories of Rationality”

Recommended reading:

1. Boyle, “Essentially Rational Animals”

**Twentieth Meeting** (Monday, June 9th): **Final Discussion**

Required reading:

1. Conant, “Two Varieties of Skepticism”, Part XIV