

Philosophy 550: The Epistemology of Testimony

BASIC INFORMATION

Instructor:	Conor Mayo-Wilson
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Office Hours:	Wednesday 3:00-5:00 and by appointment
Course Website:	http://www.mayowilson.org/Testimony.htm

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Social epistemology is the study of how we learn from others, whether or not groups (rather than individuals) can acquire knowledge, and how to organize academic and research institutions so as to facilitate the spread of knowledge and true belief. Perhaps the most important questions in social epistemology, therefore, concern testimony. Although the word “testimony” has legal and religious connotations in everyday speech, philosophers typically use the word to refer to whatever might be communicated by word-of-mouth, written documents, radio broadcasts, and more. Both legal rules (e.g., concerning hearsay) and everyday expressions (e.g., “I’ll believe it when I see it”) indicate that testimony is often thought to be less reliable than other types of evidence (e.g., perception). On the other hand, an incredible amount of what we think we know is acquired secondhand including, for instance, our scientific beliefs and some of our residual beliefs from childhood about social institutions, morality, and more. In what contexts are we justified in trusting testimony? Is the type of evidence we acquire from testimony ultimately “reducible” to other forms of evidence (e.g., perception)? In the last two decades, there has been an explosion of research aiming to answer these questions and more.

This course is an accelerated introduction to the epistemology of testimony. Along the way, we will situate current debates within several broader philosophical discussions about justification (in particular, the internalism/externalism debate), the *a priori*, and the relationship between belief and action.

TEXTBOOK

All of the assigned readings are available in .pdf format on the Canvas website.

COURSE GOALS

The course has three central goals. By the end of the quarter, students should be able to

1. Clearly summarize the central positions in three different debates about the epistemology of testimony, namely, the reductionism debate, the debate about whether testimony can transmit *a priori* justification, and the role of ability in understanding knowledge,
2. Reconstruct the most frequent arguments offered on behalf of each position in the three debates,
3. Describe how these arguments are different from and similar to previous arguments offered in discussions of justification, skepticism, and the *a priori*.

REQUIREMENTS

Engaging in lively discussion and debate is essential to learning how to think philosophically. Thus, one requirement of the course is to contribute to class discussions. In order for you to participate in class, you should bring a copy of the assigned readings. You can do so by bringing a book, printing copies of the scanned readings, and/or bringing a laptop so that you can refer to a digital copy. It is well-known that students who attend class perform significantly better than students who do not.¹

Before each class period, I will ask you to write a short one to two page response paper to the assigned readings. Suggestions for types of response papers are below. The purpose of these short papers is twofold. First, as

¹[brocato_how_1989](#); [chen_class_2008](#).

participants in a graduate seminar, you are expected to have more than a surface level understanding of a text before class: you should be prepared to summarize the finer points of an argument, compare an author's position to previous readings, and critique the weaker points of a paper. Writing is one of the best ways to start that critical thinking process before class starts. Second, at the end of the quarter, you will be asked to write a longer, argumentative term paper. Undergraduate and beginning graduate students often have fairly little practice planning and outlining a longer piece of writing: many just sit down and write a ten page paper during finals week. Because many of you are expected to write a dissertation in a few years, and because some of you will write journal articles and books in the near future, you should abandon bad habits as soon as possible and begin to develop your own process of outlining and pre-writing. The short response papers, I hope, will help you to reflect upon your writing process and prepare an excellent term paper.

Once during the quarter, I will ask you to give a short presentation (~ 15 minutes) and lead class discussion. You should prepare a handout that (i) clearly summarizes at least one of the readings, and (ii) contains a list of discussion questions that you hope to address for the day. Please email everyone in the seminar a copy of the handout the evening before class.

There is a term paper due at the end of the quarter. You should submit a project description (ideally, containing a thesis and outline of an argument) one month before the end of the quarter, and I will schedule a meeting during the following week to talk to you about your proposal. You should also submit a *polished* first draft of your term paper by 5/29 at midnight. After you have submitted a project proposal. I will pair you with another student in class, who will comment on your paper during the final week of class. Commenters should prepare a handout and be prepared to speak for about ten minutes about the other student's paper. In case there are an odd number of students, one graduate student will have the lucky task of commenting on one of my papers. Suggestions for comments and presentations, in general, are below.

In sum, the course requirements are listed below:

- Weekly response papers (~ 1 – 2 pages)
- Presentation (with handout)
- Comments (with handout)
- Project Description (~ 2 – 4 pages)
- Draft of Final Paper (~ 12 – 15 pages)
- Final Paper (~ 12 – 15 pages)

RESPONSE PAPERS, PRESENTATIONS, AND COMMENTS

For philosophers, a central professional activity is to summarize, present, defend, and critique on others' work. This is a difficult task, especially if you are not an expert in the area in which you are presenting. But such lack of expertise is the norm, not the exception. I am frequently asked to review many papers that I am marginally qualified to review; I have commented on papers that are well-outside my area of experience, and recently, I was asked to suggest improvements to a book manuscript by an eminent philosopher of science who knows more than I might ever hope to learn about philosophy.

Nonetheless, you can be extremely helpful to other philosophers, even if you are not an expert in their fields. Below are some techniques for providing constructive feedback, even when you may know less than the person whose paper, book, etc. you are reviewing. In your response papers for this class, you can either summarize an assigned reading or use one of these techniques. You should utilize at least one of these techniques in your presentation and comments. I learned of these techniques from Tim O'Keefe.

- **Clarification request:** The author claims p , but there are several different ways that p might be interpreted. Explain the different interpretations of p and why they are important. If p is the author's thesis, it is obvious why the interpretation of p is important. If p is not the thesis, explain why different interpretations of p might require changes to the author's conclusion or argument.

- **Argument request:** The author claims p but does not provide an argument for it. Explain why the author should provide an argument for p . Perhaps the best defenses of p undermine the author's other assumptions or claims. Perhaps the different ways of defending p might require the author to modify the remainder of his or her arguments.
- **Assistance:** The author claims p , and you agree. However, you think there are additional reasons (which the author does not mention) that can be given in support of p .
- **Competing interpretations:** The author attributes a view to another philosopher, and you disagree with said attribution. Explain why.
- **Suggestion of parallels:** The author's thesis and/or argument reminds you of so-and-so's thesis and/or argument. Are the two really similar? Does comparing them help illuminate the thesis, or is it just misleading?

In your response papers, please do *not* try to deliver crushing objections to the papers you have read. Trying your best to defend and understand others' work is the first step to improving upon it.

MY GRADING "PHILOSOPHY"

Assigning grades is an important but extremely difficult part of my job as an instructor. Before explaining how you will be assessed, I will describe the purpose of grades in my course. Many instructors attempt to use grades to perform (at least) four functions: (i) to provide feedback to students about how much they have learned, (ii) to provide feedback to students about how well they are performing in relation to other students in the class, (iii) to give incentives to students to learn particular skills, (iv) to record students' performance for future instructors, graduate schools, potential employers.

A moment's reflection shows that grades cannot perform all of four functions simultaneously. For example, if every student in a mathematics course earns a perfect score on an exam, then by the first criterion, each student ought to receive an "A". Why? An "A" grade accurately reflects how much students have learned. On the other hand, if every student earns a perfect score, then each student's performance is "average" for the class. If an instructor assigns "average" work a "C" grade and he or she thinks that grades ought to indicate the relative performance of students (i.e. fulfill the second function), then every student in the class would earn a "C." Similar reasoning shows the other criteria also conflict with one another.

For these reasons and others, I use grades only for the first and fourth purposes, namely, to provide you (and others) with feedback about how well you have learned the skills and facts taught in the course.

GRADING

Your final grade (as a percentage) is a weighted average, which is calculated using the following weights:

- Response papers (weighted evenly) - 30%
- Presentation - 20%
- Final Paper - 30%
- Project Description - 10%
- Comments - 10%

Your final grade will be converted to a four point scale using the following equation:

$$\text{Four Point Scale} = \frac{\text{Percentage}}{10} - 5.5$$

For example, if your final percentage is 90%, then your final grade will be $3.5 = \frac{90}{10} - 5.5$.

COURSE MECHANICS All papers and reading assignments should be submitted electronically via Canvas. Please do not email me your papers and/or assignments unless you already have tried to upload them via Canvas.

Summaries are due on Wednesday evening at 10PM. These due dates are inflexible: the central purpose of the response papers is to improve class discussion. Similar remarks apply to the project proposal and first draft of your term paper. In contrast, the due date for your final draft is negotiable. I want you to do your best work, not to feel rushed.