

Truth, Disagreement, and Liberalism

Winter, 20??

Instructor: Gerard Rothfus

Classroom: Online

Day/Time: W: 12-1:50pm

Office Hours: M, W, F: 11-11:50am or by appointment

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Description

From religion to politics to science, deep disagreements are ubiquitous within liberal societies. For individuals and societies concerned with arriving at true beliefs about the world, such disagreements present both opportunities and obstacles. This course examines these opportunities and obstacles by examining (i) how rational individuals ought to respond in the face of such disagreements and (ii) how societies and institutions (e.g., universities) ought to deal with deep disagreements amongst their members. Topics covered include the nature and defense of liberal views on speech and academic research, the epistemology of peer disagreement, religious disagreement, the convergence theorems of Bayesian epistemology, Aumann's Agreement Theorem, formal models of epistemic diversity, and misinformation and free speech in the internet age.

Learning Objectives

This course will equip students to:

- Appreciate some of the most historically significant arguments for/against the liberal values of free speech and academic freedom.
- Reflect thoughtfully about how one ought to respond to the significant disagreements one is bound to confront amongst one's peers within a pluralistic society.
- Understand the content and significance of central results from formal epistemology regarding rational agreement/disagreement including Bayesian convergence theorems and Aumann's Agreement Theorem.

- Gain a deeper appreciation of contemporary debates surrounding the spread of misinformation and the extent and limits of freedom of speech online and elsewhere.

Course Materials

There is no required text for the course as all readings will be made available online via ILIAS.

Course Structure

This course will be organized around a weekly lecture/discussion period, where various topics regarding disagreement and liberalism will be explored and discussed in person. You are encouraged to do the suggested readings before each lecture in order to be better prepared to engage and ask questions, make suggestions in discussion, etc. Periodically, I will also release both lecture notes and short, pre-recorded videos to the ILIAS site (as well as YouTube), summarizing different ideas covered in the course. You may review these notes and videos to help with homework problems or just to get a better grip on key ideas in the course.

I will also hold office hours at various times during the week. You are encouraged to attend any of these office hours that you like! During these, I will go over questions regarding assignments and writing techniques. You are also encouraged to come for the purpose of asking any questions you may have about the course! Please feel truly free to reach out to me at any time.

Course Assignments and Grading

Your grade will be determined by (i) an in-class presentation (25%), (ii) a rough draft of a paper (25%), (iii) a final version of the paper (35%), and (iv) class attendance/participation (15%).

Presentations

During the first week of class, students will be assigned, based on their expressed interests, to different weeks of the course. Two students for each week. Your task will then be to work with the other student assigned to your week to prepare an opening 20-25 minute presentation introducing the week's topic and setting the stage for subsequent class discussion. I will assist you and your partner in preparing these presentations by scheduling a time to meet with you during office hours one week prior. I realize that in-class presentations can be a source of anxiety and worry for some, but don't sweat these presentations! My aim is

to use these as a way to foster class discussion and engagement with the course material, not to put anybody on the spot. The presentations can be casual and conversational in tone and may, for example, highlight aspects of the course readings that you didn't fully understand and would like to discuss more.

Paper

Your final paper will require you to write a philosophical essay arguing for or against a substantive thesis dealing with issues discussed in the course surrounding disagreement and liberalism. You must clear your topic and thesis statement with me at least one week before submitting your first rough draft. Your paper should be 1,500 to 2,500 words in length and will be assessed according to this general rubric: <http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/grades.html> We will discuss good philosophical writing practices and tips for handling the final paper as the course goes on.

Attendance and Participation

Participation credit can be earned by (i) attending lectures, (ii) thoughtfully participating in class discussions, and (iii) attending office hours. Students are expected to attend lectures, though two classes may be missed without penalty to a student's participation score. Students are encouraged to participate actively in course discussions by asking questions, raising objections, or presenting their own ideas. It is very natural to feel apprehensive or intimidated about speaking during class. (I often felt this way in my philosophy classes!) If you have any concerns about classroom participation, please feel free to come talk with me about it during office hours, both because this is an additional way to earn participation credit outside the classroom and because maybe we can find ways to make classroom discussion seem less formidable.

Every voice is welcome in our classroom and students should feel free to raise any questions or thoughts they may have regarding course material during our class discussions. However, every student is expected to respect the bounds of kindness and respect for their peers during these discussions. (Avoid interrupting, rude language, etc.) Conducting oneself with honesty and compassion is essential to good participation in the discussion and debate of controversial philosophical topics.

Grading

- Presentation: 25%
- Rough Draft: 25%
- Final Paper: 35%
- Participation: 15%

Grade Scale

A: 90-100	B: 80-89	C: 70-79	D: 60-69	F: < 60
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Academic Integrity

Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. The UCI Academic Integrity Policy will be followed in this course, and it is the responsibility of the student to adhere to these policies: <https://aisc.uci.edu/students/academic-integrity/index.php>. Students who have any questions or uncertainty about this policy are responsible for meeting with the instructor to discuss the policy.

Disabilities

Please notify me in advance of the need for accommodation of a University verified disability. I will gladly provide the required accommodations. If you have any questions or concerns about disability accommodations, please don't hesitate to speak with me; I am happy to help out.

Course Outline

Week:	Topic:
Oct 27	<p>Introduction</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Course syllabus review, assignment of presentation weeks, philosophical method and writing <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Finding, Clarifying, and Evaluating Arguments” by E.J. Coffman.
Nov 3	<p>Millian Liberalism</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philosophical arguments for free speech and academic freedom <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>On Liberty</i> by John Stuart Mill: Chapter 2, “Of the Liberty of Thought and Discussion”. • “Mill and Milquetoast” by David Lewis.
Nov 10	<p>Traditional Epistemology of Disagreement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Disagreement: Conciliationism vs Steadfastness <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Disagreement as Evidence: The Epistemology of Controversy” by David Christensen. • “Not Just a Truthometer: Taking Oneself Seriously (but not Too Seriously) in Cases of Peer Disagreement” by David Enoch.
Nov 17	<p>Religious Disagreement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does religious disagreement make religious faith irrational? <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Reasonable Religious Disagreements” by Richard Feldman. • “Conciliationism and Religious Disagreement” by John Pittard. • “Taking Religious Disagreement Seriously” by Jennifer Lackey.
Nov 24	<p>Political Disagreement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer Disagreement: Conciliationism vs Steadfastness <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Disagreement in Politics” by Joseph Raz. • Watch: Cornel West and Robert George on Political Disagreement, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YfKMJ99CLTM.

Week:	Topic:
Dec 1	<p>Bayesian Epistemology and Disagreement I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intro to Probability Theory and Bayes' Theorem, General Application to Disagreement <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "The Epistemology of Disagreement: Why Not Bayesianism?" by Thomas Mulligan.
Dec 8	<p>Bayesian Epistemology and Disagreement II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aumann's Agreement Theorem, its proof and epistemic (in)significance <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Agreeing to Disagree" by Robert Aumann.
Dec 15	<p>Bayesian Epistemology and Disagreement III</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bayesian convergence to the truth, its extent and limits <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bayes or Bust?</i> by John Earman, Chapter 6, "The Rationality and Objectivity of Scientific Inference".
Jan 12	<p>Epistemic Diversity I</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal Models of Epistemic Diversity <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Epistemic Landscapes and the Division of Cognitive Labor" by Weisberg and Muldoon. • "The Epistemic Division of Labor Revisited" by Johanna Thoma. • "The Epistemic Benefit of Transient Diversity" by Kevin Zollman
Jan 19	<p>Epistemic Diversity II</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hong and Page's "Diversity Trumps Ability" Result <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "Groups of Diverse Problem Solvers Can Outperform Groups of High-Ability Problem Solvers" by Hong and Page. • "Does Diversity Trump Ability?" by Abigail Thompson.

Week:	Topic:
Jan 26	<p>Misinformation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Modelling the spread of misinformation, and what to do about it in a liberal society <p>Reading:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “How to Beat Science and Influence People: Policymakers and Propaganda in Epistemic Networks” by James Weatherall, Cailin O’Connor, and Justin Bruner
Feb 2	<p>Final Paper Due</p>