

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

### Content of this course

In this course we will engage with some debates over questions in the epistemology of ethics:

- Are there special reasons to be skeptical about the possibility of moral knowledge?
- Can one acquire knowledge of morality by being told what it is, as opposed to figuring it out for oneself?
- Can one *just see* what the moral truths are?
- What hold do our current moral concepts have on us?

These are very much “current debates”: with the exception of a provocative book by Nietzsche, everything we’ll read was written in the last couple of decades.

We will read collaboratively using Perusall, an online collaborative reading platform. (I’m pretty excited about using this, as it serves a function that I have long thought would be super useful to students.) All the course’s readings will be there, and you will be required each week to make substantial contributions to the collaborative reading there *and* on that basis to write a 200-word “reaction” to each week’s reading. (There is information about how to use Perusall on the “How to” page, linked above.)

### Work

- Contribute each week (including the first!) to collaborative reading on Perusall;
- Write 11 short (< 200 words) reaction pieces (due noon each Thursday, starting January 21);
- Join our Teams discussions;
- Write one 3,000-word final essay (due April 27)

### Weekly routine

- On weekend: start to read the following week’s text, and contribute to collaborative reading on Perusall;
- by Tuesday at 10:00 am: complete your annotations on Perusall;

- think about whether you want to write an essay about something in that week’s reading—if so, start working on it;
- by Thursday at noon: submit your reaction piece for that week’s reading;
- Tuesday and Thursday class times (2:30–3:50 pm): discussion on Teams

## Class meeting times

There will not be lectures. During our scheduled meeting times I will be on Teams for discussion. You are expected to contribute to the discussion, although no part of the course is graded on this. The discussions are for your benefit. One big part of them will be discussing things that the Perusall group reading, or the reaction pieces, have indicated are challenging or discussion-worthy. Another big part will be students pitching ideas about papers: great way to workshop things, because I will be glad to suggest ways of developing your point. (On the Tuesday meetings, you can pitch ideas about reaction pieces.)

## Textbook

There is no textbook for this course. All the readings are in Perusall, but the PDFs are also available [here](#).

## Grading

In this table, the *points* are points towards the overall course grade out of 100. But your *score* on each item may be out of a different number. E.g. each reaction piece is worth 4 *points* each but may be scored out of a different number.

<i>Item</i>	<i>Value</i>
Weekly contributions to collaborative reading	12 × 3 points = 36 points
Reaction pieces	11 × 4 points = 44 points
3,000-word (max) essay	20 points

## Learning outcomes

In this course students will develop the abilities to:

- Prepare a piece of philosophical writing in which an argument is articulated clearly and a stance on that topic is supported by appropriate and well thought-through reasons.
- Understand, explain and assess responses to the contemporary controversies examined.
- Argue successfully for one’s own view and be able to identify and critically evaluate patterns of argumentative reasoning in the work of others.

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)   [Schedule](#)   [How to](#)   [Contact](#)   [Scores](#)   [Policies](#)   [Submit reaction piece](#)   [Resources](#)

Please consult the latest version of this web page, since the schedule may be revised as the course proceeds.

<i>Week</i>	<i>Topic</i>	<i>Reading (in Perusall)</i>
Jan 12, 14	Debunking moral claims	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Tristram McPherson, pp. 1–36 of <i>Epistemology and Methodology in Ethics</i>. Cambridge University Press, 2020.</li></ul>
Jan 19, 21		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Sharon Street, “A Darwinian dilemma for realist theories of value.” <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 127 (2006): 109-66.</li></ul>
Jan 26, 28		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• David Copp, “Darwinian skepticism about moral realism.” <i>Philosophical Issues</i> 18 (2008): 186-206.</li><li>• Sharon Street, “Reply to Copp: naturalism, normativity, and the varieties of realism worth worrying about.” <i>Philosophical Issues</i> 18 (2008): 207-28.</li></ul>
Feb 2, 4		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Guy Kahane, “Evolutionary debunking arguments.” <i>Noûs</i> 45 (2011): 103-25.</li><li>• Katia Vavova, “Debunking evolutionary debunking.” In <i>Oxford Studies in Metaethics</i>, volume 9 (2014), pp. 76-101. Oxford University Press.</li></ul>
Feb 9, 11	Moral perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• pp. 36–42 of the McPherson book</li><li>• Robert Cowan, “Conceptual intuitionism.” <i>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</i> 91 (2015): 164-93.</li><li>• Pekka Väyrynen, “Doubts about moral perception.” In <i>Evaluative Perception</i>, ed. Anna Bergqvist &amp; Robert Cowan (2018): 109-28. Oxford University Press.</li></ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• pp. 43–46 of the McPherson book</li><li>• Frank Jackson and Philip Pettit, “Moral functionalism and</li></ul>

Feb 23, 25	Conceptual truths in ethics	<p>moral motivation.” <i>Philosophical Quarterly</i> 45 (1995): 20-40.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Terence Cuneo and Russ Shafer-Landau, “The moral fixed points.” <i>Philosophical Studies</i> 171 (2014): 399-443.</li> </ul>
March 2, 4	Moral testimony	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pp. 46–48 of the McPherson book</li> <li>• Robert Hopkins, “What is wrong with moral testimony?” <i>Philosophy and Phenomenological Research</i> 74 (2007): 611-34.</li> </ul>
March 9, 11		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Alison Hills, “Moral testimony and moral epistemology.” <i>Ethics</i> 120 (2009): 94-127.</li> </ul>
March 16, 18		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sarah McGrath, “Skepticism about moral expertise as a puzzle for moral realism.” <i>Journal of Philosophy</i> 108 (2011): 111-37</li> </ul>
March 23, 25	Moral concepts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Friedrich Nietzsche, <i>The Genealogy of Morals</i> (1887)</li> </ul>
Mar 30, Apr 1		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• pp. 48–52 of the McPherson book</li> <li>• Sally Haslanger, “Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be?” <i>Noûs</i> 34 (2000): 31-55.</li> <li>• Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett, “A guided tour of conceptual engineering and conceptual ethics.” In <i>Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics</i>, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett (2020): 1-26. Oxford University Press.</li> </ul>
April 6, 8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Esa Díaz-León, “Descriptive vs ameliorative projects: the role of normative considerations.” In <i>Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics</i>, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett (2020): 170-86. Oxford University Press.</li> <li>• Derek Ball, “Revisionary analysis without meaning change (or, could women be analytically oppressed?)” In <i>Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics</i>, ed. Alexis Burgess, Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett (2020): 35-58. Oxford University Press.</li> </ul>

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

## Contents

- [What Perusall is](#)
- [Signing up to Perusall](#)
- [Writing an essay](#)

## What Perusall is

Perusall helps you master readings faster, understand the material better, and get more out of your classes. To achieve this goal, you will be collaboratively annotating the readings with others in your class. The help you'll get and provide your classmates (even if you don't know anyone personally) will get you past confusions quickly and will make the process more fun. While you read, you'll receive rapid answers to your questions, help others resolve their questions (which also helps you learn), and advise the instructor how to make class time most productive. You can start a new annotation thread in Perusall by highlighting text, asking a question, or posting a comment; you can also add a reply or comment to an existing thread. Each thread is like a chat with one or more members of your class, and it happens in real time. Your **goals** in annotating each reading assignment are *to stimulate discussion by posting good questions or comments and to help others by answering their questions*.

Research shows that by annotating thoughtfully, you'll learn more and get better grades, so here's what "annotating thoughtfully" means: Effective annotations *deeply engage points in the readings, stimulate discussion, offer informative questions or comments, and help others by addressing their questions or confusions*. To help you connect with classmates, you can "mention" a classmate in a comment or question to have them notified by email (they'll also see a notification immediately if online), and you'll also be notified when your classmates respond to your questions. Here's a [diagram explaining differences in quality of Perusall annotations](#).

The annotations that count are the ones that you submit **before 10:00 am each Tuesday**. The point of this deadline is to make sure that you have carefully done the reading *before* our discussion.

3 = demonstrates exceptionally thoughtful and thorough reading of the entire assignment

2 = demonstrates thoughtful and thorough reading of the entire assignment

1 = demonstrates superficial reading of the entire assignment OR thoughtful reading of only part of the assignment

0 = demonstrates superficial reading of only part of the assignment

### **How many annotations do I need to enter?**

When we look at your annotations we want them to reflect the effort you put in your study of the text. It is unlikely that that effort will be reflected by just a few thoughtful annotations per assignment. On the other extreme, 30 per assignment is probably too many, unless a number of them are superficial or short comments or questions (which is fine, because it is OK to engage in chat with your peers). Somewhere in between these two extremes is about right and, thoughtful questions or comments that stimulate discussion or thoughtful and helpful answers to other students' questions will earn you a higher score for the assignment. Note, also, that to lay the foundation for understanding the in-class activities, you must familiarize yourself with each assignment *in its entirety*. Failing to annotate the entire assignment will result in a lower score.

### **What about accessibility?**

Perusall has many [accessibility features](#) that will be of interest. In addition, you may download all the PDFs used in this course from [this page](#).

## **Signing up for Perusall**

- Have your University of Guelph ID number handy, because you'll be asked to give it during signup.
- Go to [perusall.com](https://perusall.com), click Login, and then either log in using your Facebook, Twitter, or Google account, or create an account using your email address and password.
- Select "I am a student" and enter the course code MCCULLAGH-PKQFB

## **How to write an essay**

(to come)

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

### Mark McCullagh, Associate Professor

*Mail:* Department of Philosophy, University of Guelph, Guelph ON N1G 2W1

*Email:* [mmcculla@uoguelph.ca](mailto:mmcculla@uoguelph.ca)

*Web:* [www.markmccullagh.ca](http://www.markmccullagh.ca)

*Drop-in discussion availability:* during scheduled class times (Tuesdays and Thursdays, 2:30–3:50 pm)

If you want to meet one on one, please message me on Teams and we can set up a time for that.

This file was last modified: January 03 2021 09:05:51 EST.

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

## Email Communication

As per university regulations, all students are required to check their email account regularly: email is the official route of communication between the University and its students.

In this course we will communicate as much as possible on Teams, so the previous paragraph applies also to postings in the Announcements channel.

## When You Cannot Meet a Course Requirement

When you find yourself unable to meet an in-course requirement because of illness or compassionate reasons please advise the professor either by email or in Teams. The grounds for Academic Consideration are [detailed in the Undergraduate Calendar](#)

## Drop Date

Students will have until the last day of classes to drop courses without academic penalty. The deadline to drop two-semester courses will be the last day of classes in the second semester. This applies to all students (undergraduate, graduate and diploma) except for Doctor of Veterinary Medicine and Associate Diploma in Veterinary Technology (conventional and alternative delivery) students. The regulations and procedures for course registration are [given in the Undergraduate Calendar](#).

## Copies of Out-of-class Assignments

Keep paper and/or other reliable back-up copies of all out-of-class assignments: you may be asked to resubmit work at any time.

## Accessibility



The University promotes the full participation of students who experience disabilities in their academic programs. To that end, the provision of academic accommodation is a shared responsibility between the University and the student.

When accommodations are needed, the student is required to first register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS). Documentation to substantiate the existence of a disability is required; however, interim accommodations may be possible while that process is underway. Accommodations are available for both permanent and temporary disabilities. It should be noted that common illnesses such as a cold or the flu do not constitute a disability.

Further information can be found on the [SAS website](#).

## **Academic Integrity**

The University of Guelph is committed to upholding the highest standards of academic integrity, and it is the responsibility of all members of the University community—faculty, staff, and students—to be aware of what constitutes academic misconduct and to do as much as possible to prevent academic offences from occurring. University of Guelph students have the responsibility of abiding by the University’s policy on academic misconduct regardless of their location of study; faculty, staff, and students have the responsibility of supporting an environment that encourages academic integrity. Students need to remain aware that instructors have access to and the right to use electronic and other means of detection.

Please note: Whether or not a student intended to commit academic misconduct is not relevant for a finding of guilt. Hurried or careless submission of assignments does not excuse students from responsibility for verifying the academic integrity of their work before submitting it. Students who are in any doubt as to whether an action on their part could be construed as an academic offence should consult with a faculty member or faculty advisor. [Undergraduate Calendar - Academic Misconduct](#)

## **Recording of Materials**

Presentations that are made in relation to course work—including lectures—cannot be recorded or copied without the permission of the presenter, whether the instructor, a student, or guest lecturer. Material recorded with permission is restricted to use for that course unless further permission is granted.

## **Resources**

The Academic Calendars are the source of information about the University of Guelph’s procedures, policies, and regulations that apply to undergraduate, graduate, and diploma programs. [Academic Calendars](#)

# Disclaimer

Please note that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic may necessitate a revision of the format of course offerings and academic schedules. Any such changes will be announced via CourseLink and/or class email. All University-wide decisions will be posted on the [COVID-19 website](#) and circulated by email.

# Illness

The University will not normally require verification of illness (doctor's notes) for fall 2020 or winter 2021 semester courses. However, requests for Academic Consideration may still require medical documentation as appropriate.

This file was last modified: October 01 2020 13:32:20 EDT.

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

## R4 reaction piece

Due: February 11 at noon

### The submission process

- Write your reaction piece on your computer *and save it there* in addition to submitting it using this form.
- If you click “Submit” and you don’t get a page saying “The following submission was entered” or “The following submission was updated,” then *your reaction piece has not yet been submitted*. Try again until you get a page showing one of those messages.
- You can re-submit at any time before the deadline; the new version will replace the previous one in the database.
- That means that you can easily test whether your piece is within the word limit—just submit it, and if it needs trimming, revise it and submit it again.

### Formatting tips

In the large box, enter your text—copy and paste from whatever word processor you use.

- Don’t put in any title, header, name etc.
- If you want italics, flank text with asterisks, *\*like so\**.
- If you want a break between paragraphs, leave an empty line between them.

### Submission form

Your Guelph student ID (7 digits)

Your code name in this course

Your reaction piece: (exit textbox for word count) — ? words

Submit this essay

Reset

This file was last modified: February 04 2021 19:18:52 EST.

# Current Debates in Epistemology

## PHIL 4360, Winter 2021

[Home](#)

[Schedule](#)

[How to](#)

[Contact](#)

[Scores](#)

[Policies](#)

[Submit  
reaction  
piece](#)

[Resources](#)

## Our readings

I put together a [page with links to the PDFs of all of our readings](#).

## Advice on philosophical class-going, reading, and writing

[The Pink Guide to taking philosophy classes](#)

Written by [Helena de Bres](#), a philosophy professor at Wellesley College.

[Guidelines on writing a philosophy paper](#)

Written by [Jim Pryor](#), a philosophy professor at NYU.

## Reference works

[Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

First-rate in quality, although the coverage is incomplete—it's a work in progress.

[Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy](#)

A complete, very good encyclopedia. Basically it's the book version plus updates.

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