

Applied Ethics Seminar: The Philosophy and Ethics of Expertise

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[Dates and location removed]

Description and Learning Outcomes of the Seminar

When someone on Twitter makes a long thread analyzing the military situation in Ukraine, or the effects of Mercury being in retrograde on the Italian elections, or looks under the hood of your car to tell you why it's making that funny sound, it matters whether they have relevant expertise. This is complicated by the fact that, in some domains, such as macroeconomics, nutrition science, or social media influencing, it is controversial whether *there is* (currently) any expertise to be had. But even when experts can be identified, it is not obvious how a non-expert should rely on them. This is for many reasons: experts are fallible people; sometimes they disagree with one another; and sometimes they cannot give you a straightforward verdict about what to do or think.

This course examines two fundamental questions at the heart of issues about expertise: what is expertise, and how should non-experts rely on experts? We will explore natural answers to both questions – roughly, that expertise is a matter of *knowing things* that others do not; and that non-experts should simply *accept* the pronouncements of experts. We will also entertain second thoughts. Along the way, we will keep an eye on one of the most fundamental values of the Enlightenment – autonomy – and see how feasible autonomy is in a world, like ours, marked by deep and complex reliance on expertise.

This course will require students to write several short papers spelling out the philosophical material with clarity and concision. The goal is to learn how to actively read analytical texts, which is a distinctive but widely applicable skill. Students may also write two longer papers to practice applying this skill to questions they will formulate in cooperation with me. The goal there is to develop one's own thoughts in a similarly comprehensive and critical manner.

Preparation Before Each Session

This course requires frequent writing by students, which will be held to high standards. To meet those standards, you will have to:

1. Complete each and every required reading *before* the session in which it is discussed.
2. Actively participate in each and every session. *Two absences* for good reason, sent to me via email and approved in advance, will be permitted.

Readings

Watson, Jamie Carlin. *Expertise: A Philosophical Introduction* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

Available at: Dussmann ([PDF](#)), Thalia ([ePUB](#)), amazon.de ([paperback](#), limited availability)

Other required readings will be uploaded to the course Moodle.

Assessment

[Curriculum-specific details removed] Grades in this course are determined by three components:

Active Participation

First, attendance to every meeting is expected – two absences with good reason will be permitted (sent to me by email in advance and approved). In truly exceptional cases, contact me. Second, you must actively participate in each session's discussion and activities. Active Participation will be pass/fail. **You must pass this component to earn any credit for this course.**

Short Papers ('SP's)

You will be expected to write three SPs in this course. Each short paper will be a **single-spaced, single-page (A4, 2-cm margins)** paper responding to a particular reading from the schedule. These will be graded on the 1.0–5.0 scale. A handout with further information will be provided.

Note: I encourage you to submit revisions of your SPs. There is no hard limit the number of revisions you may submit, though this principle always applies: **respect your time and mine!** All revisions should be arranged with me, in advance, by email. I reserve the right to refuse on a case-by-case basis.

Midterm and Final Papers

The midterm paper will be **approximately 1800 words**, and the final paper will be **approximately 2400 words**. Each must engage with several of the readings from the schedule, and must substantively develop your own arguments. These will be graded on the 1.0–5.0 scale. Handouts for each paper will be provided.

Seminar Schedule		Assignment Due
What is Expertise?		
13.10	<i>No reading</i> – syllabus with a crash course in epistemology	
20.10	<i>No class</i> – Jared is away	
27.10	Rosati, “Some Suggestions for How to Read a Philosophical Article or Book” Watson, Chapter 3 of <i>Expertise</i>	
03.11	Watson, Chapter 4 of <i>Expertise</i>	
10.11	Watson, Chapter 5 of <i>Expertise</i>	<i>Due 14.11:</i> SP: Watson 3, 4, or 5
17.11	Watson, Chapter 6 of <i>Expertise</i>	
24.11	Watson, Chapter 7 of <i>Expertise</i>	<i>Due 28.11:</i> SP: Watson 6 or 7
What’s at Stake? One Answer: Thinking for Yourself		
01.12	Lackey, “Experts and Peer Disagreement” <i>Recommended:</i> Kant, “What is Enlightenment?”; Mill, <i>On Liberty</i> (excerpt)	
08.12	Grundmann, “Facing Epistemic Authorities”	
15.12	Fricker, “Epistemic Self-Governance and Trusting the Word of Others”	<i>Due 19.12:</i> SP: Lackey <i>or</i> Grundmann <i>or</i> Fricker
Reality Check: Experts Are People, Too		
22.12	Guerrero, “Living with Ignorance in a World of Experts”	
29.12	<i>No class</i> – Christmas holidays	
05.01	<i>No class</i> – Christmas holidays	
12.01	Rakel, “Scientists as Expert Advisors” <i>Recommended:</i> Costello, “Five Virtues of Good Philosophical Writing” <i>Recommended:</i> Millgram, “Writing Your Philosophy Paper”	<i>Due 15.01:</i> Midterm paper
Where Do We Go From Here?		
19.01	Millgram, Chapter 2 of <i>The Great Endarkenment</i>	
26.01	Nguyen, “Expertise and the Fragmentation of Intellectual Autonomy”	
02.02	<i>No reading</i> – midterm paper review session	<i>Due 03.03:</i> Final paper