2013

290-20 Theory of Knowledge

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Ancient and modern philosophers will help us reflect on some fundamental questions about knowledge. What does it mean to know something? How does perception contribute to knowledge? What is science? What is education? Is there any absolute, objective truth? What is the value of knowledge? We will not settle these questions, but you will become more aware of them and will explore, criticize, and defend some possible answers. In this way, you may become more thoughtful and articulate.

Required texts

Plato, *Theaetetus* (Hackett)
René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy* (Hackett)
Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (Vintage)

*Other editions of these texts are not acceptable.*

Course requirements

8 reading questions: 25%
Essay: 25%
Final exam: 25%
Class participation: 25%

The 8 reading questions are your initial reflections on and inquiries about the reading assignments. Before each class meeting, except May 13 and May 17, you should type or carefully handwrite a question about the reading assigned for that day. A good question will include some analysis of the text, will show significant thought about the text, and will be written carefully in correct English. It will probably require about half a page (there is no upper limit). You will not be graded down for misunderstanding the text, as long as your question shows that you read attentively. I will collect questions each day and return them with a tentative grade, but the final grade on the questions will be determined at the end of the course. Each time you are not ready with a question at the beginning of class, your grade on the reading questions will go down by up to one letter grade. You may consult secondary sources if you wish as you write your questions, but your questions must show that you read the assigned book yourself, and you must properly cite any secondary sources you use (see “Plagiarism,” next page).

The essay (4+ pages) will defend your view on an issue in Plato’s *Theaetetus*.

The final exam will consist of multiple-choice questions and two essay questions about the readings. You may consult the assigned books and your notes during the exam, but may not use electronic devices.

The class participation grade will reflect the quality of your effort and your contributions to the class, based on your participation in discussions and in-class work, any extra writing you may do, and your communication with me outside class (office, e-mail, phone).
Policies

Plagiarism is work that uses someone else’s words or ideas, even if they are rephrased, without giving credit to the source (such as a Web site, book, article, or another student’s writing). Whenever your work uses sources other than the assigned texts, it must cite them in footnotes or by some other standard method. To learn more, visit http://xavier.edu/library/xututor/plagiarism. Any plagiarism will result in an F for the course, and your dean will be notified of the incident.

Absence policy: You may miss up to two days of the course with a legitimate excuse; further absences may lead to an F for the course, because our time is so limited. In order to compensate for an absence, you must write at least two pages carefully summarizing the text assigned for the day you missed; you must also write a reading question if one was due that day. We may need to meet outside class to review the material. If you do not compensate for an absence, you will fail the course.

Late essays will be penalized by one letter grade for each day they are late. Late reading questions will not be accepted unless you were absent with a legitimate excuse.

Good English policy: I reserve the right to reject work that has extensive flaws in spelling or grammar. Such work must be corrected before it receives a grade.

Laptops, phones, and other electronic devices may not be used in class without permission.

All course requirements must be completed in order to pass the course.

Calculating your grade

I give each element a letter grade, then convert it to a number on a 4-point scale (like the scale for your GPA), with pluses and minuses counting as 0.33 point. I multiply this number by the percentage the element is worth, and add all the results to get your raw grade. This raw grade is rounded to the nearest letter grade to yield the course grade.

For example:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>Weight (30%)</th>
<th>Result</th>
</tr>
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<tr>
<td>Reading questions</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.00</td>
<td>0.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Essay</td>
<td>C+</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>0.5825</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final exam</td>
<td>C–</td>
<td>1.67</td>
<td>0.4175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>A–</td>
<td>3.67</td>
<td>0.9175</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Raw grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2.6675</strong></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Course grade</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>B–</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Complete the readings and writing assignments in advance for every class meeting.

Week 1

May 6  Mon  What is knowledge?  
*Theaetetus* through 148d (pp. 1-10)  
Socrates as midwife; is knowledge perception?  
*Theaetetus* 148e-155c (pp. 10-19)  
A relativistic theory of reality:  
*Theaetetus* 155d-160e (pp. 19-26)  
**Reading question #1 due.** (See page 1 of this syllabus.)

May 7  Tu  Objections to relativism:  
*Theaetetus* 161a-168c (pp. 26-36)  
Relativism and the philosophical life:  
*Theaetetus* 168d-179b (pp. 36-50)  
Implications of Heracliteanism:  
*Theaetetus* 179c-184a (pp. 50-56)  
**Reading question #2 due.**

May 8  Wed  Knowledge is not perception:  
*Theaetetus* 184b-186e (pp. 56-60)  
How is false judgment possible?  
*Theaetetus* 187a-191b (pp. 60-67)  
Memory as a wax block:  
*Theaetetus* 191c-196c (pp. 67-73)  
**Reading question #3 due.**  
*Handout in class: essay assignment*

May 9  Th  Memory as an aviary; knowledge is not true judgment:  
*Theaetetus* 196d-201c (pp. 73-80)  
Is knowledge true judgment with an account?  
Finish *Theaetetus* (pp. 80-93)  
**Reading question #4 due.**

May 10  Fri  The search for certainty:  
*Discourse on Method*, Part 1 (pp. 1-6)  
Descartes’ method and morals:  
*Discourse on Method*, Parts 2 and 3 (pp. 6-18)  
**Reading question #5 due.**
Week 2

May 13  Mon  **Essay due today.** No reading question due.
Radical skepticism:
Descartes, Meditation One (pp. 59-63)
I think, therefore I am: Meditation Two (pp. 63-69)
Descartes’ metaphysics:
*Discourse on Method*, Part 4 (pp. 18-22)

May 14  Tu  Descartes’ physics:
*Discourse on Method*, Part 5 (pp. 23-33, focus on 23-25 and 31-33)
The promise of science and technology:
*Discourse on Method*, Part 6 (pp. 33-44)
**Reading question #6 due.**

May 15  Wed  Nietzsche on science, life, and illusion:
*The Gay Science*, sections 1 (pp. 73-76), 2, 11, 12, 54
**Reading question #7 due.**

May 16  Th  Nietzsche on appearance, art, and truth:
*The Gay Science*, sections 57, 58, 107, 109, 110
**Reading question #8 due.**

May 17  Fri  Nietzsche on knowledge, infinity, and God:
*The Gay Science*, sections 123, 124, 125
No reading question due.
Review session and course evaluations
**Final exam**