

Lingnan University
Department of Philosophy

Course Title	: Social Epistemology in a Digital Age
Course Code	: PHI3373
Recommended Study Year	: Year 3 or Year 4
No. of Credits/Term	: 3
Mode of Tuition	: Sectional approach
Class Contact Hours	: 3 hours per week
Category	: Programme Elective - Philosophy of Natural and Human Sciences
Prerequisite(s)	: NIL
Co-requisite(s)	: NIL
Exclusion(s)	: CLE9035 Information, Misinformation, and the Media
Exemption Requirement(s)	: NIL

Brief Course Description

This course introduces students to contemporary philosophical debates in social epistemology with a focus on digital technologies and online environments. Central questions explored include how knowledge operates in social contexts, the nature of testimony and trust (especially in digital spaces), and how online platforms shape our epistemic practices. The course examines traditional epistemological concepts such as testimony, justification, and trust, and their transformation in social and digital contexts. It further explores epistemic challenges associated with social media, online polarization, misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic recommendation systems. Additional topics include group knowledge in online communities, epistemic injustice, and the ethics of artificial intelligence in knowledge production and dissemination.

Aims

The main aim of this course is to provide students with a comprehensive understanding of philosophical debates regarding social epistemology, with a focus on digital environments. It aims to enhance students' abilities to analyse and evaluate complex epistemic issues arising in contemporary online contexts and to develop critical skills for navigating digital information ecosystems.

Learning Outcomes

On completion of the course, students will be able to:

LO1: Explain key theoretical concepts in contemporary social epistemology (e.g. testimony, trust, disagreement, judgment aggregation).

LO2: Analyse challenges to knowledge acquisition posed by digital technologies including disinformation, misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic filtering.

LO3: Apply epistemological theories and concepts to specific contemporary scenarios.

Indicative Content

1. Introduction to Social Epistemology
2. Testimony and Knowledge Acquisition
3. Trust
4. Epistemic Justice and Injustice
5. Peer Disagreement and Rational Response
6. Expertise and Digital Environments
7. Misinformation and Disinformation Online
8. Echo Chambers and Filter Bubbles
9. AI systems and the Challenge of Deepfakes
10. Social Epistemic Systems and Institutions
11. The Epistemology of Conspiracy theories
12. Case studies

Teaching Method

The course includes interactive lectures, discussion-based analysis of assigned readings, and critical evaluations of contemporary cases (LO1-LO3). Students participate in structured debates and write short analytical responses to weekly readings. In-class tests assess students' grasp of key philosophical debates (LO1-LO3). A final paper enables students to explore a specific epistemic issue related to digital technologies in depth (LO1-LO3).

Measurement of Learning Outcomes

Class Participation (5%): Students are expected to actively participate in discussions, demonstrating their understanding of readings and lecture materials (LO1-LO3).

Four In-class Tests (20% each): Tests will be administered after weeks 4, 7, 11, and 14. Each test will include short-answer questions designed to assess students' comprehension of theoretical concepts (LO1), analysis of digital epistemic challenges (LO2), and application of theories to specific scenarios (LO3).

Final Paper (15%): Students will write an argumentative essay (1000 words) exploring one of the course's central epistemic issues in digital contexts. The essay should clearly articulate and critically evaluate relevant ethical arguments, demonstrating the student's ability to synthesize and apply course material (LO1-LO3).

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Methods		
	Class Participation (5%)	In-class Tests (20% x 4)	Final Paper (15%)
Explain key theoretical concepts in contemporary social epistemology (e.g. testimony, trust, disagreement, judgment aggregation)	☑	☑	☑
Analyse challenges to knowledge acquisition posed by digital technologies including disinformation, misinformation, deepfakes, and algorithmic filtering	☑	☑	☑
Apply epistemological theories and concepts to specific contemporary scenarios	☑	☑	☑

Assessment

1. Class participation (5%): corresponding to LO1, LO2, LO3.
2. Four In-class tests (20% each X 4): corresponding to LO1, LO2, LO3.
3. Final paper (15%): one among LO1, LO2, or LO3 at the student's discretion.

Required/Essential Readings

Goldman, A., & Whitcomb, D. (Eds.). (2011). *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Oxford University Press.

Fricker, M. (2007). *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Selected parts)

Hardwig, J. (1985). Epistemic Dependence. *Journal of Philosophy*, 82(7), 335-349.

Lackey, J. (2011). Testimony: Acquiring Knowledge from Others. In A. Goldman & D. Whitcomb (Eds.), *Social Epistemology: Essential Readings*. Oxford University Press.

Lynch, M. P. (2016). *The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data*. W.W. Norton & Company. (Selected parts)

Nguyen, C. T. (2020). Echo Chambers and Epistemic Bubbles. *Episteme*, 17(2), 141-161.

Rini, R. (2020). Deepfakes and the Epistemic Backstop. *Philosophers' Imprint*, 20, 24.

Recommended/Supplementary Readings

- Fallis, D. & Mathiesen, K. (2019). Fake news is counterfeit news. *Inquiry*, 1–20.
- Frost-Arnold, K. (2016). Social Media, Trust, and the Epistemology of Prejudice. *Social Epistemology*, 30(5–6): 513–531.
- Frost,-Arnold, K. (2021). The Epistemic Dangers of Context Collapse Online. In Jennifer Lackey, ed., *Applied Epistemology*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, S. (2021). *Foundations and Applications of Social Epistemology: Collected Essays*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Selected parts)
- O'Connor, C. & Weatherall, J. (2019). *The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread*. New Haven: Yale University Press. (Selected parts)
- Stanley, J. (2015). *How Propaganda Works*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. (Selected parts)
- Thoma, J. (2015). The Epistemic Division of Labor Revisited. *Philosophy of Science*, 82(3): 454–472.

Important Notes:

- (1) Students are expected to spend a total of 9 hours (i.e. 3 hours of class contact and 6 hours of personal study) per week to achieve the course learning outcomes.
- (2) Students shall be aware of the University regulations about dishonest practice in course work, tests and examinations, and the possible consequences as stipulated in the Regulations Governing University Examinations and Coursework. In particular, plagiarism, being a kind of dishonest practice, is “the presentation of another person’s work without proper acknowledgement of the source, including exact phrases, or summarised ideas, or even footnotes/citations, whether protected by copyright or not, as the student’s own work”. Students are required to strictly follow university regulations governing academic integrity and honesty.
- (3) Students are required to submit writing assignment(s) using Turnitin.
- (4) To enhance students’ understanding of plagiarism, a mini-course “Online Tutorial on Plagiarism Awareness” is available on <https://pla.ln.edu.hk/>.
- (5) Students must adhere to the University’s guidelines and practices when using Generative Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools. The official documents “*Guidelines for Using GAI Tools at Lingnan University*” and “*Best Practices for Ethical and Responsible Use of GAI Tools in Course Assessments*” can be found here: <https://www.ln.edu.hk/tlc/generative-artificial-intelligence/gai-guidelines-best-practices>.

Social Epistemology in a Digital Age Assessment Rubrics

Class Participation (5%) Grading Rubric

Excellent (90-100%)	Good (80-89%)	Fair (70-79%)	Pass (60-69%)	Failure (0-59%)
Attempts frequently to answer or raise questions; comments are mostly cogent and relevant.	Attempts frequently to answer or raise questions; comments are often cogent and relevant.	Attempts sometimes to answer or raise questions; comments are sometimes cogent and relevant.	Seldom attempts to answer or raise questions, but can sometimes offer relevant answers when asked.	Almost never makes cogent or relevant comment, even when asked.

In-class Test (20%) Grading Rubrics*

Excellent (90-100%)	Good (70-89%)	Fair (50-69%)	Pass (40-59%)	Failure (0-39%)
Provides compelling, original and clearly structured answers to the questions.	Provides accurate and clear answers to the questions.	Provides a largely correct answer that is not very clear or accurate.	Provides answers with some of the previously mentioned elements.	Provides no answer or answers that are entirely off the point and confused.

*=more specific details will be given in advance for each test. Differences among them will be minimal and will depend on the final content of each unit.

Final Paper (15%) Grading Rubric

	Excellent (90-100%)	Good (70-89%)	Fair (50-69%)	Pass (40-59%)	Failure (0-39%)
Knowledge of Course Material (Weight: 10%)	Demonstrated knowledge goes substantially beyond what is expected of students in this course.	Demonstrates knowledge of most important points; shows understanding of the basic philosophical positions and disagreements.	Demonstrates knowledge of most important point, and the most important points of disagreement, but with some unclarity or inaccuracy.	Some of the basic points are understood, but the student shows substantial misunderstandings.	Student's understanding deviates significantly from the positions discussed in class/Student fails to write on the assigned topic.
Argumentation and Originality (Weight: 50%)	Presents compelling arguments, shows understanding of important objections, and offers novel arguments or ideas.	Presents compelling arguments and shows understanding of important objections. Novel aspects are less compelling or absent.	Presents arguments that successfully motivate the main claims, but details are overlooked, and objections are not handled as well.	Arguments are often vague and impressionistic, or supported with dubious claims or fallacious modes of reasoning.	No discernible arguments/ No engagement with the ideas of the class.
Organization (Weight: 30%)	Ideas are clearly arranged to allow easy understanding of their relations.	As excellent, but with slightly more mistakes in arrangement of ideas.	Basic structure is good, but sometimes arrangement of ideas is confusing.	Essay seems to switch topics at points or is difficult to follow due to unclear structure.	Lack of organizational structure/ Largely incomplete.
Writing (Weight: 10%)	Clear, engaging writing, with almost no mistakes in grammar or spelling.	Occasional mistakes in grammar or spelling which do not interfere with comprehension.	Substantial mistakes that sometimes make comprehension difficult.	Significant portions cannot be accurately assessed because of problems with the writing.	The content is difficult or impossible to evaluate.