

# ***Epistemology: Investigation, Experimentation and Value***

## **I. Course Information**

*Instructor:* Max Hayward ([mh3173@columbia.edu](mailto:mh3173@columbia.edu))

*Office Hours:* TBD

*Class Meeting Time and Place:* Wednesday, 6.10-8.00pm, 716 Philosophy

*Website:* [www.courseworks.columbia.edu](http://www.courseworks.columbia.edu)

## **II. Course Description**

The rise of the natural sciences in the early modern period was both impressive, and problematic, for philosophy. Whereas the rationalist philosophers held out hope that scientific investigation could eventually be subsumed within a philosophical epistemology based on the power of reason, without appeal to experience, the empiricists focused on the distinctively *experimental* aspects of science. However, despite the evident success of experimental science, this grounded a new problem. How could experimental investigation truly give rise to knowledge - what philosophical explanation could be offered? Hume, perhaps the most sincere advocate of experimentalism in philosophy, found that two vital aspects of experimentalism - causation and induction - could not find a sure foundation in philosophy. His own response was to abandon the search for philosophical foundations to explain how we draw knowledge from experience - inductive and causal inference are simply human nature. However, Hume's answer has often been seen as unsatisfactory or schematic. Descendants of the empiricist tradition followed Hume's lead in abandoning the search for foundations, but attempted to give a clearer account of the legitimacy of experimental methodology, focusing on the interplay of belief and doubt, and developing the concept of probability. This response, while promising, led to two critical issues for experimentalism. First, this ungrounded epistemology led to morally questionable blitheness about the truth. Secondly, the progress of investigation without foundations required at least the assumption that investigation has goals - but what goals are appropriate for epistemology? The task of articulating experimental epistemology thus leads inexorably to questions of value. A second aspect of the empiricist reaction to natural science was an attempt to import experimental methods into traditionally non-empirical philosophical domains, including the theory of value and ethics. Thus, the task of articulating an experimentalist view of ethics is both necessary to answer the evaluative challenges to experimental epistemology itself, and as a test of the general applicability of this model to domains outside the natural science. While the experimentalist tradition leaves a plausible legacy in ethics, two further epistemological questions face any experimental investigation, whether into natural or moral subjects. The first is how to respond to disagreement. The second is how to explain the reliance on testimony - inescapable in a tradition of investigation which denies that each man has access to the truth through the exercise of his own reason.

## **III. Requirements**

### Readings:

It is essential to do the readings prior to the class for which they are assigned. Doing so will be essential for successful completion of the assignments and participation in class. The readings cover several complex and highly influential works; thus, although the reading assignment is not heavy in terms of pages, careful study and re-reading of the text is indispensable.

### Response Papers:

In order to provide training in the skills of careful analytical reading, students are required to write 5 one-page response papers to readings from the course syllabus. The papers should focus on the

structure of the argument presented in the text (or a part of the text) identifying the conclusion, premisses, and major inferential moves made by the author. Students are encouraged to read critically, locating moments where premisses are suppressed or potentially faulty inferences presented, and to explain the argumentative merits of various interpretations where the argument is unclear. At least 3 response papers are due before mid-term, and ideally students will continue to prepare brief critical outlines for all readings in order to prepare for class discussion. Responses must be submitted before the class for which the reading is assigned. The response papers count for 25% of the grade.

Papers:

Students will write two papers, one 4-page paper to be completed during the first half of the semester, and one 6-8 page paper, to be submitted within one week of the end of class. These will focus on responding to one or more of the texts from the course syllabus, offering a critical analysis and either offering objections or proposals for strengthening or extending the line of argument. Although not required for a high grade, there is an opportunity for students to use their final paper to develop and present their own ideas and original arguments, and they will receive credit for doing so where these are not obviously wrong. The first paper will count for 25%, and the final paper for 35% of the grade.

Class Participation:

In-class participation will count for 15% of the grade. Students who find it difficult to participate in classroom discussion are urged to approach the instructor in person in order to discuss strategies to overcome obstacles to involvement: the style of philosophical debate can often be intense, and this should not be a barrier to any student who is interested in the material. Students will have the opportunity, although this is not compulsory, to offer a short presentation in class as a way of boosting their participation score.

Late and missing assignments:

Assignments should be turned in the day they are due, unless other arrangements have been made. Late assignments will be marked down 1/3 of a letter grade for every day that they are overdue.

Attendance & Lateness:

In general, attendance is mandatory, especially given the intensity of a seminar course. However, you can miss one class without penalty. Further absences will only be permitted after discussion with the instructor: students are urged to make problems known as far as possible in advance. If you exceed, without permission, the one allowed absence, you will be penalized 1/3 of a letter on your final grade for each subsequent missed class. Three late arrivals count as one absence.

Plagiarism:

Plagiarism is a serious academic offense. Here is a short list from the Columbia University Handbook (140-1) of some of the forms plagiarism can take:

- Submitting essays or portions of essays written by other people as one's own
- Failing to acknowledge, through proper footnotes and bibliographies, the sources of ideas essentially not one's own
- Failing to indicate, through proper use of quotations and footnotes, paraphrases of ideas or verbatim expressions not one's own, including materials in the Web
- Submitting work written for one course to a second course without specific permission of the faculty member to do so

-Collaborating on an assignment or examination without specific permission of the faculty member to do so.

Required Reading:

Readings will be placed on reserve or made available online via *Courseworks*. Students are strongly encouraged, although not required, to purchase some of the classic texts used in the course, however, these will all be made available in PDF form as well.

**IV: Course Schedule:**

**Introduction**

The idea of an experimental philosophy

1: Francis Bacon - *Novum Organum*, (preface)

David Hume - *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Introduction

2: Francis Bacon - *Novum Organum*, (excerpts)

John Dewey - *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, “Some Historical Factors”

**The Problem of Experimentation**

Causation

3: George Berkeley, (short excerpts)

David Hume - *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section 7

- *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, iii, sections 1,2, 14

Induction and Reason

4: John Locke (short excerpts)

David Hume - *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section 4

John Stuart Mill - *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, Book 3 Chapter 3

**Ways Forward**

Custom, belief and doubt

5: David Hume - *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Sections 5 & 6

Charles Sanders Peirce - “The Fixation of Belief”

Probability and Decisions

6: Frank Ramsey - “Truth and Probability”

**From Epistemology to Ethics**

The Ethics of Belief

7: William Clifford - “The Ethics of Belief”

William James - “The Will to Believe”

Epistemic Values

8: Richard Rudner - “The Scientist qua Scientist Makes Value Judgments”,

Isaac Levi - “Must the Scientist Make Value Judgments?”

## **Experimentalism in Moral Epistemology**

### Sentiment and Society

- 9: David Hume - *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Chapters 1-3  
- *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 2, iii, section 3  
- *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, Chapter 9 & Appendix
- 10: Adam Smith - *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part 1, Section 1  
Part 1, Section 3 Chapters 2&3  
- *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, Part 2 Section 1 Chapters 4&5  
Part 3 Chapter 1

### Experiments in Living

- 11: John Stuart Mill - *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 4  
- *On Liberty*, Chapter 3

### Convergence and Change

- 12: William James - "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"  
John Dewey - "Valuation and Experimental Knowledge"

## **Outstanding Questions for Moral and Natural Experimentalists**

### Testimony

- 13: David Hume - *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, Section 10  
Miranda Fricker - *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* Chapter 1

### Disagreement

- 14: JL Mackie - "The argument from relativity" in *Ethics: Inventing Right and wrong*  
Thomas Kelly - "The Epistemic Significance of Disagreement"  
Adam Elga - "Reflection and Disagreement"