Course Description

Social Epistemology is a new branch of epistemology. Like epistemology in general, it deals with questions of knowledge, warrant for belief, evidence, and other questions on the “cognitive” or “intellectual” side of life. What is special to social epistemology, as the label implies, are the social aspects of knowledge acquisition. Arguably, the vast majority of what one knows arrives by transmission from other people’s speech. Various questions therefore arise: When do people undertake to transmit their beliefs (or their purported beliefs) to others? When such speech or testimony occurs, should hearers trust its contents? What social practices, technologies, and institutions influence the practices of communication or “spreading the word”? We commonly assume that some people have more expertise (on selected subjects) than do others, and we trust experts or authorities more than others. But how can you tell who is really an expert, and is therefore more trustworthy? More generally, when should people defer to the opinions of others and when should they instead stick to their own prior opinions? In our highly technological age, what modes of social interaction, collaboration, and authority-designation can optimize the quest for knowledge in society? What forms of collaboration and communication should be encouraged or discouraged? Are contemporary products of mass collaboration (e.g., Wikipedia) the best solutions to our most pressing needs for knowledge? Science is a highly social enterprise, in which individual scientists serve as peer reviewers of one another, award prizes for exemplary work, and influence one another by their findings and theoretical conclusions. Does the social structure of science enhance or threaten its prospects for intellectual success? How? These are among the questions – both theoretical and applied – that will be addressed.

Prerequisites for the Course

Students who have taken a prior course in epistemology will be especially well-prepared for this course. However, the first few weeks of the course will cover “background” treatments of traditional ideas in (individual) epistemology. So a prior course in epistemology is not essential. Prior courses in almost any areas in philosophy – the more, the better – would also be helpful.

Writing Requirements and Grades

Course requirements include a mid-term exam, a final exam, and a substantial term paper (about 15 pages in length). Course grades will be based primarily on this written work, together with class attendance and participation.
Readings (Tentative).

Main text (not available until February): Goldman & Whitcomb, eds., Social Epistemology: Essential Readings.
All other readings will be posted on the course sakai site.

Topics and Reading Assignments (by Date)

I. BACKGROUND MATERIAL

Jan. 20: What is Social Epistemology?
No assigned reading

Jan. 24: Individual Epistemology – The Structure of Justification
Goldman: Chap. 1 of (draft) introductory text

Jan. 27: Individual Epistemology – Evidentialism, Reliabilism, Internalism, Externalism
Goldman: Chap. 2 of (draft) introductory text

II. DEBUNKING TRADITIONAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Latour & Woolgar: pp. 27-33, 40-41, 105-112, 174-183
Goldman: Knowledge in a Social World, pp. 3-17

Feb. 3: Relativism about Rationality

Feb. 10: Relativism and Objectivism in Epistemology
Goldman: “Epistemic Relativism and Reasonable Disagreement”

III. VARIETIES OF (NON-DEBUNKING) SOCIAL EPISTEMOLOGY

Feb. 17: Three Types of Social Epistemology
Goldman: “A Guide to Social Epistemology” (Anthology)

IV. TESTIMONY AND EXPERTISE

Feb. 21, 24: Approaches to Testimonial Justification and Knowledge
Lackey: “Testimony: Acquiring Knowledge from Others” (Anthology)

Feb. 28: Drawing Inferences from the Absence of Communication
Goldberg: “If That Were True I Would Have Heard It by Now” (Anthology)
March 3: Reasonable Reliance on Experts
   Goldman: “Experts: Which Ones Should You Trust?” (Anthology)

March 7: Mid-Term Exam

V. PEER DISAGREEMENT

March 10, 14: The Problem of Peer Disagreement
   Feldman: “Reasonable Religious Disagreement” (Anthology)

March 17: The Equal Weight View
   Elga: “Reflection and Disagreement” (Anthology)

March 21: The Total Evidence View
   Kelly: “Peer Disagreement and Higher Order Evidence” (Anthology)

VI. GROUP BELIEF AND JUDGEMENT AGGREGATION

March 17, 21: Problems of Rational Collective Belief
   List: Group Knowledge and Group Rationality (Anthology)

March 24: Collective Belief States
   Pettit: “Groups with Minds of Their Own” (Anthology)

VII. SYSTEMS DESIGN

March 28: Reliability of Trial Systems
   Laudan: “Thinking about Error in the Law” (Anthology)

March 31, April 4: The Trustworthiness of Wikipedia
   Fallis: “Wikipistemology” (Anthology)
   Sanger: “The Fate of Expertise after Wikipedia” (Episteme 6.1: 52-73)

April 7: The Technology and Economics of Communication
   Goldman: Knowledge in a Social World, chap. 6 (sakai site)

April 14: Traditional Media versus the Blogosphere
   Goldman: “The Social Epistemology of Blogging”
   Anonymous: “The New Political Blogosphere” (?)

April 18: Diversity versus Deliberation
   Sunstein: “Deliberating Groups versus Prediction Markets” (Anthology)

April 21, 25: Computer Simulations of Social Epistemology
Zollman: “The Communication Structure of Epistemic Communities” (Anthology)
Weisberg & Muldoon: “Epistemic Landscapes and the Division of Cognitive Labor”

April 28: Democracy and Feminist Epistemology
  Anderson: “The Epistemology of Democracy” (sakai site)

May 2: REVIEW SESSION
  No New Reading Assignment