

**Philosophy 550/Seminar in Epistemology (Rutgers)
Philosophy 539/Theory of Knowledge (Princeton)**

Spring 2022
Wednesdays, 4:30-6:30 (begins 1/26)

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Overview. In the first half of the seminar, we will explore a number of philosophical questions about the nature of *bias* and our practices of attributing it. We will be especially concerned with the connections between bias and some of the central topics of epistemology, including the following: knowledge, rationality, reliability, epistemic norms, introspection, skepticism, disagreement, and the underdetermination of theory by evidence. (But prior knowledge of these topics won't be presupposed.) The primary reading for these sessions will be drawn from TK's forthcoming book, *Bias: A Philosophical Study* (OUP 2022), although the primary focus will be on the issues themselves, some of which are listed under the specific sessions below.

In the second half of the seminar, we will mainly take up chapters of Mark Schroeder's just published book *Reasons First* (OUP 2021) and also some work in progress on closely related issues.

Some mechanics: The first six meetings of the semester will take place at Princeton (main philosophy seminar room, Marx Hall 201), and the second six will take place at Rutgers (main philosophy seminar room, 106 Somerset Street, 5th floor). Both TK and ES plan to attend all twelve sessions in person (pandemic related circumstances permitting), and we encourage those who feel comfortable doing that to do so as well, although virtual attendance and full participation will also be possible and very welcome!

- There will be two special parts of the course participation in which is invited but optional. One is a special session or two devoted to discussion of student reports of up to 2500 words. Participation in such sessions should prove helpful for feedback on ideas towards a final paper. The second optional seminar session will be an epistemology conference at the end, where epistemologists from elsewhere will present papers. This brief conference will take place right before the Rutgers Epistemology conference, to which everyone in the course is also invited.
- **If you plan to attend the seminar or are even potentially interested in doing so, please shoot a quick e-mail to that effect to Tom Kelly at the address listed above.** Among other things, this will enable him to make sure that anyone who is interested has access to the readings for the first couple of sessions. Details about a course website, etc. TBA, but for now here is a zoom link which we expect to use, for those who plan to participate virtually: <https://princeton.zoom.us/j/98346328927>

Schedule (subject to change at the discretion of the instructors)

Part 1: Bias and the Theory of Knowledge (@ Princeton, Marx Hall Room 201)

1. Norms, Rationality, and the Perspectival Character of Bias Attributions (January 26th)

- Some issues: What is it to be biased, in the pejorative sense? What is the relationship between bias and rationality? Might rationality sometimes *require* us to be biased? Might morality? Accusations of bias are frequently disputed. How should we understand such disputes? Why do accusations of bias so frequently inspire not only denials but also *countercharges* of bias, to the effect that it is actually the original accuser who is biased, and it is this which explains why they mistakenly attribute bias in the first place?
- Reading: *Bias*, Chapter 3.

2. Introspection and the Bias Blind Spot (February 2nd)

- Some issues: Why are we so quick to attribute bias to other people, and so slow to attribute it to ourselves? How do the psychologists who have documented this “bias blind spot” explain it, and what are the strengths and weaknesses of their preferred explanations? The characteristic biases of introspection, and its unreliability as a way of detecting one’s own biases. Is the unreliability of introspection as a way of detecting bias a contingent fact, or a necessary one?
- Reading: *Bias*, Chapter 4.

3. Norms of Objectivity (February 9th).

- Objectivity as an intellectual ideal and its characteristic norms. How should we understand the venerable Socratic norm, “Follow the argument wherever it leads!”?
- Reading: *Bias*, Chapter 6.

4. Bias and Knowledge (February 16th)

- Some issues: How is bias related to *knowledge*? In what ways does bias exclude or threaten knowledge? Is a person's being biased about some question incompatible with their knowing the truth about it? Can biased beliefs be knowledge? Although biases are often taken to threaten knowledge, it's also true that some of the most interesting science and philosophy of recent decades is naturally interpreted as suggesting that biases are actually essential to acquiring knowledge, and to successfully finding our way around the world. Is this true? If so, what is the significance of that fact?
- Reading: *Bias*, §7.4, §7.5, Chapter 8.

5. Skepticism, Reliability, and Philosophical Methodology (February 23rd).

- Some questions: Are we biased against skepticism, and in favor of common sense? If so, what follows? What are the implications of "biased knowing" for philosophical methodology, and for the norms that we should follow when doing philosophy itself? What is the relationship between (being free from) bias and being *reliable*? What is the philosophical significance of the fact that biased people might be highly reliable when their biases dovetail with their environment in the right ways?
- Reading: *Bias*, Chapter 9.

6. Bias and the Epistemology of Disagreement (March 2nd)

- The late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia firmly believed, and argued at length, that legal access to abortion is not a constitutionally protected right, given a correct understanding of the U.S. Constitution and what it requires. Many people who thought otherwise didn't treat this as a reason to doubt their own contrary opinion, in part because they suspected that, whatever Scalia's other credentials to pronounce on the issue, he was not unbiased about it. More generally, we frequently attribute bias to others in contexts in which doing so makes it easier to retain our own convictions in the face of what would otherwise be formidable disagreement. What philosophical issues are raised by this common practice?
- Reading: *Bias*, Chapter 10.

March 9th and March 16th: No Class, Princeton and Rutgers Spring Breaks

Part 2: Reasons First (@ Rutgers, 106 Somerset Street, 5th floor seminar room)

The readings listed below are chapters of Mark Schroeder's recently published book, *Reasons First* (Oxford University Press, 2021). (In addition, in at least some of the following sessions, ES will present a contrasting view in the second half of the session.)

- 7. March 23rd.** Chapter 1. (Also: Sosa, "The Independence of Philosophy," work in progress, to be made available.)
- 8. March 30th.** Chapter 3. (Also: Sosa, "Perception and Common Sense," work in progress, to be made available.)
- 9. April 6th.** Chapters 4 and 5.
- 10. April 13th.** Chapter 6.
- 11. April 20th.** Chapter 7.
- 12. April 27th.** Chapters 8 and 9.