

The Ethics of Belief

Course Information

Instructor: Anna Brinkerhoff

- Email: anna_brinkerhoff@brown.edu
- Office Hours: TBA

Location: TBA

Time: TBA

Course Description

This course is an introduction to issues at the intersection of epistemology and ethics, and centers on the question, “What ought I believe?” It is broken into four units. The first unit is about the evaluation of beliefs: Is it always wrong to believe on insufficient evidence? What is the relationship between epistemic and moral evaluation of beliefs? If ‘ought implies can’, and if we lack voluntary control over our beliefs, is it the case that we *ought* believe in certain ways? Are we responsible for what we believe? The second unit is about the aim and rationality of belief: What is the aim of belief: truth or something else? What makes a belief rational? Does morality get a say in the rationality of belief? The third unit is on purported conflicts between epistemic considerations and other considerations: Does friendship place demands on belief that conflict with epistemic demands? Does promising require us to flout epistemic norms? The fourth unit is on moral psychology: Does moral ignorance exculpate moral blame? What contribution do moral beliefs make to the moral worth of an action?

Course Materials

All other readings will be available on the course site on Canvas.

Time Commitment

Our course will meet 24 times (for a total of 36 hours). Doing the readings and writing up summaries and reflections should take about 2.5 hours for each class, for a total of 60 hours. For each of your three papers, you should expect to spend 10 hours reading, reviewing notes, outlining, drafting and polishing your work. Each rewrite should take 10 hours. So the total number of hours spent for the course is around 160 hours.

Accessibility and Accommodation

Please inform me early in the term if you have a disability or other conditions that might require accommodations or modification of any of the course procedures. You may speak with me after class or during my office hours. For more information, please contact Student and Employee Accessibility Services at 401-863-9588 or SEAS@brown.edu.

Grade Breakdown

Attendance & Participation	10%
Expert Presentation	10%
Reading Summaries & Reflections	20%
Papers	20% each

Course Requirements

Attendance & Participation: After shopping period, I'll take attendance with a sign-in sheet. For each class meeting, it will be your responsibility to (a) sign in or (b) send me an email in advance of the class explaining why you cannot attend. For each unexcused absence over 3, your attendance grade will be lowered by 10%. This is a discussion-based course and so informed and respectful participation is expected. In addition to in-class contributions, you may earn participation credit through e-mail correspondence with me and office hour discussion.

Expert Presentation: You will each be assigned a reading from the course reading list on which you will become an expert. On the day that your reading is assigned, you are expected to come to class prepared with a 10-15-minute presentation on the reading. The presentation should include a thorough summary of the reading as well as your own reaction to it in order to jump start that day's discussion. You should have an outline handout for the class to pass out.

Reading: I'll assign regular readings, which will generally be around 20-30 pages. You will need to do each assigned reading carefully, preferably more than once. To hold you accountable for doing the readings, I'll expect you to write up a summary and a reflection – comment, question, or criticism – on each day's reading. Summaries should be short (100-200 words) and reflections can be even shorter (20-50 words). Summaries and reflections for a given day's reading must be posted on the relevant discussion board on Canvas *before* the start of class (10am). Late posts will not be accepted. You will be able to see each other's comments and reflections only after you post your own. For each missed post over 3, your reading grade will be lowered by 10%.

Papers: You will write three papers in the course. The first paper is on evaluating beliefs; the second paper is on the aim and rationality of belief; the third paper is on epistemic vs. other considerations or moral psychology. Papers should be around 1500 words, but no less than 1200 and no more than 2000. For each paper, you will choose any one of the assigned readings of the relevant unit(s) to write on. Around half of each paper should be devoted to clearly, accurately, and charitably presenting the author's argument. The other half of the paper should be devoted to your own original philosophical evaluation of that argument. You will have the opportunity to rewrite each of the first two papers. If you turn in a rewrite for a paper, the recorded grade for that paper will be the average of the grades of your original paper and your rewrite.

Course Schedule

Unit 1: Evaluating Beliefs

Is it always wrong to believe against the evidence?

Session 1 Syllabus and Crash Course on Arguments

Session 2 Clifford, "The Ethics of Belief"

Session 3 James, "The Will to Believe"

What is the relationship between epistemic evaluation and moral evaluation?

Session 4 Haack, "The Ethics of Belief Reconsidered"

If 'ought implies can', and if we lack voluntary control over our beliefs, is it the case that ought we believe in certain ways?

Session 5 Feldman, "Voluntary Belief and Epistemic Evaluation"

Are we responsible for what we believe?

Session 6 Hieronymi, "Responsibility for Believing"

Session 7 Discussion Day

Session 8 Writing Workshop

Unit 2: The Aim and Rationality of Belief

What is the aim of belief?

Session 9 David, "Truth as the Epistemic Goal"

Session 10 Elgin, "True Enough"

What makes a belief rational?

Session 11 Conee and Feldman, "Evidentialism"

Session 12 Rinard, "No Exception for Belief"

Does morality get a say in what is rational to believe?

Session 13 Basu, "The Wrongs of Racist Beliefs"

Session 14 Gardiner, "Evidentialism and Moral Encroachment"

Session 15 Discussion Day

Unit 3: Epistemic Considerations vs. Other Considerations

Does friendship place demands on belief that conflict with epistemic demands?

Session 16 Stroud, "Epistemic Partiality in Friendship"

Session 17 Arpaly and Brinkerhoff, "Why Epistemic Partiality in Overrated?"

Does promising require that we flout epistemic norms?

Session 18 Marusic, "Promising Against the Evidence"

Session 19 Brinkerhoff, "The Promising Puzzle"

Session 20 Discussion Day

Unit 4: Moral Psychology

Does moral ignorance exculpate?

Session 21 Rosen, "Culpability and Ignorance"

Session 22 Harman, "Ethics is Hard. What follows?"

What contribution does moral beliefs make to the moral worth of an action?

Session 23 Arpaly, "Moral Worth"

Session 24 Johnson King, "Accidentally Doing the Right Thing"

Session 25 Discussion Day