Critical Thinking and Methods of Inquiry
LDSP 250, Section 2

Spring 2012

Course Syllabus

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COURSE DESCRIPTION
One characteristic feature of humans is our liability to hold mistaken beliefs. Unfortunately for us, it often turns out that we just have things wrong—sometimes badly wrong. We can think that we know things when in fact we do not. This problem is particularly acute for leaders. Leaders often face problems for which answers are not obvious. Accordingly, we might say that they can find themselves at the “epistemic margins” of social, political, and professional life. For example, they are frequently innovators and, so, must rely upon knowledge bases that are even more limited than are the knowledge bases upon which we rely in our everyday dealings in the world. This feature of leadership is important: leaders must sometimes take greater chances and face greater risks than do most individuals—both self-regarding and other-regarding chances and risks. In many ways, then, this is a course in self-leadership. How can we be expected to lead others in the right direction, we might ask, if we are misleading ourselves?

First, humans face a myriad of familiar defects of reasoning. In this course, we will begin with a humanities-based approach to how our reasoning goes awry. Most of the major defects of reasoning identified by philosophers can be put under the headings of “questionable premises” or “invalidity.” We sometimes reason from unfounded beliefs, and our beliefs often fail to support the conclusions that we want to draw from them. The goal in the first part of the course is to learn to notice these defects in the reasoning of others and, ultimately, to avoid them in our own reasoning.

Recognition of these problems, especially those at the level of argumentative premises, should lead us to consider the conditions under which we can said know things more generally. Can we have objective knowledge about anything at all, or is all knowledge socially constructed? Are different ways of understanding the world equally valid? Are “the facts” always relative to some personal or social context? In the second substantial portion of this course, we will consider some of our most fundamental beliefs about the world to address these basic epistemological questions.
In the third section of the course, we will consider a social scientific approach to thinking. Social scientists, especially in the discipline of psychology, challenge our capacities to make good judgments and decisions. Even when reason is functioning normally, it turns out that we are the victims of systematic biases. We will take up these biases and learn how to avoid them and, perhaps, use them to our advantage.

As both a leader and a student of leadership, you will be presented with information from a variety of sources and in areas in which you have no expertise. Leaders need skills for making judgments about arguments and about the information on which these arguments rest. Students of leadership need to know how to assess the strengths and limitations of the different disciplinary approaches and methodologies that come to bear on a multidisciplinary education.

There is reason to think, however, that good leadership requires more than just care in the acquisition and maintenance of our beliefs. If good leadership turns on influencing others—on always being ready to justify oneself by means of an appeal to rational persuasion—then you will also need to be able to give cogent arguments for your beliefs. You must be able to make a convincing argument that you are right and that others should accept (and, thus, act on) the beliefs that you have. If the social scientists are right, we also need a sophisticated understanding of how people actually think. This course aims to provide the necessary means for developing these fundamental leadership competencies. In the end, its success will depend in large part on your willingness to engage yourself fully in readings, assignments, discussions, and class exercises. I will regularly call on people and give unannounced quizzes to promote this kind of engagement. Please note also that class will begin and end on time.

COURSE OBJECTIVES

- The student should learn to identify formal and informal fallacies in the reasoning of others and how to avoid these fallacies in his own thought and in its written and verbal communication.

- The student should have a sophisticated view of the nature and limits of knowledge.

- The student should become aware of fundamental biases in judgment and decision making and arrive at considered conclusions about their implications for our understanding of leadership.

- The student should be able to apply her critical thinking skills in the study and exercise of leadership.
REQUIRED TEXTS


REQUIREMENTS AND GRADING
Your final grade will be determined as follows:

1. Periodic Quizzes—20%
2. Editorial Outline—10%
3. Midterm Examination—15%
4. Outline of Argumentative Analysis—10%
5. Argumentative Analysis—20%
6. Final Examination—25%

Note: The Jepson School supports the provisions of the Honor System as sanctioned by the School of Arts and Sciences. Every piece of written work must have the honor pledge and the student’s signature on it. The pledge is: “I pledge that I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance during the completion of this work.” Work submitted without the honor pledge will be considered incomplete and, thus, may be subject to the late penalty (see below).

A WORD ON DEADLINES AND SCHEDULED EXAMS
The instructor takes class, deadlines, and scheduled exams very seriously. In fairness to your classmates, any difficulties that arise should be brought to my attention as soon as possible before the deadline or scheduled exam. No late work will be accepted, unless accompanied by a completed and approved request form. The form can be found attached to this syllabus. It does not apply to periodic quizzes, except in the case of sanctioned university activities. Please note that computer problems never constitute an acceptable excuse.

SCHEDULE (Subject to Change as the Course Progresses)

T Jan 10       Course Introduction
R Jan 12       Cavender and Kahane, Chapter 1
T Jan 17    Cavender and Kahane, Chapter 2
R Jan 19    Cavender and Kahane, Chapters 2-3
T Jan 24    Cavender and Kahane, Chapter 3
R Jan 26    Cavender and Kahane, Chapters 3-4
M Jan 30    Editorial Outline due by 5:00 p.m. (Jepson Hall, Room 125)
T Jan 31    Cavender and Kahane, Chapter 4
R Feb 2     Cavender and Kahane, Chapters 4-5
T Feb 7     Cavender and Kahane, Chapter 5
R Feb 9     TBA
T Feb 14    Midterm Examination
R Feb 16    Boghossian, Chapters 1-2
T Feb 21    Boghossian, Chapters 3-4
R Feb 23    Boghossian, Chapters 5-6
M Feb 27    Outline of Argumentative Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. (Jepson Hall, Room 125)
T Feb 28    Boghossian, Chapter 7
R Mar 1     Boghossian, Chapters 8-9

Spring Break

T Mar 13    Kahneman, Part I
R Mar 15    Kahneman, Part I
T Mar 20    Kahneman, Part I-II
R Mar 22    Kahneman, Part II
T Mar 27    Kahneman, Part II
R Mar 29    Kahneman, Part III
M Apr 2     Argumentative Analysis due by 5:00 p.m. (Jepson Hall, Room 125)
T Apr 3     Kahneman, Part III
R Apr 5   Kahneman, Part IV
T Apr 10  Kahneman, Part IV
R Apr 12  Kahneman, Part IV
T Apr 17  Kahneman, Part V
R Apr 19  Review
T Apr 24  Final Examination—in class from 2:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.
REQUEST FOR EXTENSION/MAKE-UP

1. Today’s Date:

2. Original Assignment Date:

3. Reason for Extension/Make-up:

4. Proposed Due Date/Make-up Date:

5. Instructor Signature:

6. Your Signature:

Submit this form with the completed assignment (e.g., paper, make-up exam, etc.). This form will not be accepted if incomplete (e.g., if #5 is blank).

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