Seminar in Epistemology: Fallibilism (PHIL 468)

Professor Baron Reed
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date: Spring Quarter, 2012
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office hours: T/Th 12:30-1:30

Course Description:
“We are all fallibilists nowadays,” says Michael Williams. This is almost entirely true. But, despite its near-universal acceptance, fallibilism remains poorly understood. There are significant problems that follow in its wake—e.g., the Gettier problem and the Lottery Paradox. Moreover, some philosophers claim more for knowledge than fallibilism can deliver, tying knowledge to assertion, practical rationality, and epistemic possibility. Finally, some philosophers think that the very idea of fallibilism is suspect; if the view is correct, it means “the world must do us a favor,” as John McDowell puts it. But the whole point of knowledge, one might have thought, is that it puts one in such a position that favors are not needed. In this seminar, we will investigate whether fallibilism has the resources to meet some or all of these concerns.

Required Texts:
Readings to be posted on Blackboard.

Required Work:
Work for the course will include a short paper, a presentation, a commentary on a classmate’s paper, and a final paper:

- 20% Short paper (4-5 pages)
- 20% Presentation (4-5 pages)
- 10% Comments (2 pages)
- 50% Final Paper (10 pages)

Excellent class participation may also factor into the final grade.

Course Policies:

1. Regular contributions to discussion will be expected.
2. Extensions must be requested before the due date.
3. VERY IMPORTANT: plagiarism will not be tolerated. All cases of alleged violation of academic integrity will be referred to the Assistant Dean for
Advising and Academic Integrity. Possible penalties range from failing the course to permanent exclusion from the university. For more on plagiarism, see: http://www.wcas.northwestern.edu/advising/dishon.html http://www.writing.northwestern.edu/avoiding_plagiarism.html.

Students with Disabilities:
Any student with a documented disability needing accommodations is requested to speak directly to the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (SSD) (847-467-5530) and the instructor, as early as possible in the quarter (preferably within the first two weeks of class). All discussions will remain confidential.

Blackboard:
Much of the business of this course, including access to readings on reserve, will be conducted through the Course Management System (Blackboard). You are encouraged to check it frequently, as I may post announcements there from time to time. To access Blackboard, you will need to use your NetID and password. The web address for Blackboard is: https://courses.northwestern.edu/webapps/login/.

Schedule of Readings:

Mar. 27 Gettier problem

Apr. 3 Infallibilism

Apr. 10 Lottery & preface paradoxes
(3) Richard Foley, “Beliefs, Degrees of Belief, and the Lockean Thesis,” in

Apr. 17 **Epistemic possibility and concessive knowledge attributions**

Apr. 24 **Epistemic probability**

May 1 **Action & assertion**
(2) John Hawthorne and Jason Stanley, “Knowledge and Action,” Journal of
May 8 **Epistemic agency & the goal of knowledge/belief**

May 15 **Skepticism**

May 22 **Presentations**

May 29 Reading period begins

May 29 **Presentations**

June 5 **Final papers due (12 PM)**