

Diversifying Syllabi 2015 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter

Article/Essay Title: Chapter 1 (“Epistemic Value and What We Care About”) of *On Epistemology*

Author: Linda Zagzebsky

Readability: Easy*/Moderate/Difficult

Thesis: This chapter provides a general introduction to epistemology, but with a beautiful twist: it focuses on the relationship between knowing and caring. In short, Zagzebsky argues that, when we care about something, we want to know as much as we can about it, and to know these things “conscientiously.”

Key Definitions:

- **Epistemology** is the philosophical study of knowing and other desirable ways of believing and attempting to find the truth.
- **Epistemology** is the study of right or good ways to cognitively grasp reality.
- **Solipsism** is the view that we are locked inside our own minds.
- A **conscientiously held belief** is a belief that is governed by a concern for truth. Conscientiousness is something that comes in degrees, and the more we care about something, the more conscientious we must be.
- **Evidentialism** is the view that conscientious believing is a matter of basing one’s belief on evidence.
- The **basic rule of assertion** is that we speak with a conscientious regard for the truth.
- **Bullshit** is speech that does not show a proper concern for the truth

Brief Summary:

I. Introduction

In general, epistemology addresses the following questions:

- What is knowledge (certainty, understanding, etc.)?
- Is it attainable?
- How do we get it?

- Why is it good?

A rough philosophical consensus has developed on the following features of knowledge:

- Knowing is a relation between a conscious subject and an object, where the object (but possibly not the immediate object) is some portion of reality.
- The relation is cognitive. That is to say, the subject thinks, not just senses or feels the object. More specifically,
- Knowing includes believing.
- The object of knowledge is a proposition.
- The object of knowledge is a true proposition.
- Knowing is a good state.

Thus, to know is to believe a true proposition in a good way.

Throughout history, philosophers have focused on different values of knowledge, and these differences are illustrative of the types of questions and worries that these philosophers addressed. Values of knowledge include:

- Understanding
- Certainty
- Justification
- Explanation

II. Epistemic Demands and What We Care About

Caring imposes a demand for conscientious belief on us in two ways:

- First, there is a demand to be conscientious in whatever beliefs we have in that domain.
- Second, there is a demand to acquire conscientious beliefs in the domain.

Furthermore, the logic of caring requires that we live in a community of epistemic trust, so that:

- We may take others' claims to knowledge seriously.
- And others will take our claims to knowledge seriously.

III. Morality and Epistemic Demands

If morality's importance to us is not optional, it follows that conscientious belief in the domain of morality is not optional either. Morality puts a demand on us to be epistemically conscientious in beliefs relevant to morality and moral decision-making.

Two principles govern conscientious belief:

- **Principle of Caution:** each and every belief we have should be formed and maintained with an eye to the likelihood that, given the other beliefs we have, this one is likely to be true.

- **Principle of Risk:** we should take chances on getting the truth that we want. We cannot succeed if we do not try. We risk the failure of falsehood, but we also get the chance of success.

It follows that we commit ourselves to following epistemic norms by being human. Morality, our social roles, and the many things we personally care about all put epistemic demands on us that apply to almost everything we believe as well as many things we do not believe but should believe. The issues discussed in this book are not merely of academic interest, but apply to the way we all should conduct our lives.

IV. Bullshit

Since we depend upon each other for information as well as much else that we need to live a worthwhile life, we want to be good informants, and we want others to be good informants to us. So there are norms governing what we say to each other as well as what we believe.

Bullshit is speech that does not show a proper concern for the truth, and it's a big problem.

We should care about bullshit. The problem is not only that we don't like faking. Since we commit ourselves to care about truth if we care about anything, bullshit goes directly against the things we care about.

Bullshit is connected with hypocrisy in a number of interesting ways.

V. Skepticism and What We Care About

Philosophers probably care more about skepticism than the average person, and that is one of the reasons skepticism is much more threatening to philosophers than to other people. It is not the awareness of the possibility of the skeptical scenario itself that is the problem, but caring about the way the world would be if the possibility obtained. Skepticism is hard to understand without this link to what we care about.

That being said, skepticism poses a threat to conscientious belief. (Chapter 2 goes on to address skepticism)

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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Possible Applications:

Intro to Epistemology

Intro to Philosophy

Philosophy of language – use as grounding for concerns about expressing true propositions

Connect to epistemic injustice (Fricker; Dotson)

Complementary Texts/Resources:

- Jennifer Nagel’s online videos on Gettier problems

- Connect bullshit section to “On Bullshit” by Frankfurt. (1) Read Zagzebsky and follow up with Frankfurt the next day; compare and contrast, or (2) start with “On Bullshit” as a day 1 framing device for an epistemology course – get students into it and only *then* go back and situate within broader context.

- Jessica Berry’s work on Nietzsche and ancient Greek skepticism

- Miranda Fricker’s work on epistemic injustice

- Kristie Dotson’s work on epistemic oppression

Possible Class Activities:

- Give students a real world task about knowledge. Connect to issues students are likely to be more familiar with, such as climate change, and discuss the role of knowledge for this issue – what do you need to know, what are the limits, what are the pitfalls?

- What are the limitations to what we can care about based on what we believe? Further develop the topics Zagzebsky brings up, such as the Cassandra for example.

- Internet quizzes – are you a real [90s kid, Ninja Turtle fan, etc]?? To be an [X], you need to know certain things – what does it mean to have the proper knowledge in order to be described as caring about something?

- Reading comprehension quizzes – at beginning of class and end of class to see what students are picking up on with their first read and then showing them how much is packed into the text. Use this as a teaching tool to help students develop productive reading habits.

- Have students present on the different sections and answer classmates’ questions about their section. This is an interactive way to get a robust grasp on the text as a whole.

What traditional texts might this text replace?

All of them!