

Shepherd University

Psychology: Division of Business and Social Science
COURSE SYLLABUS: Spring 2011

Course Section: PSYC 399A
Special Topics: Navigating the Marketplace of Ideas
Day/Time: Wednesday, 6:30PM to 9:10PM
Location: White Hall 226
Instructor: Barnet Feingold, PhD

Office Hours: By appointment (preferably immediately before or after class)
540-535-9025 (H) between 10AM and 7PM
E-mail: bfeingold@shepherd.edu

Text: None. Readings will be made available on-line.

“The trouble with most folks ain't so much their ignorance as knowing so many things that ain't so.”
– Josh Billings (1818-1885 CE)

“The gods did not reveal, from the beginning, all things to us; but in the course of time, through seeking, men [and women] find that which is the better. But as for certain truth, no man has known it, nor will he know it . . . And even if by chance he were to utter the final truth, he himself would not know he had uttered it . . .” – Xenophanes (570-475 BCE)

General Course Description

This course is intended to help you

- understand what a belief is;
- understand how beliefs work;
- recognize common belief-relevant flaws in the ways people think, feel, interact, and remember;
- increase your ability to evaluate and compare beliefs objectively;
- identify perspectives that aid discussion of contentious issues.

These skills have become more important as the marketplace of ideas has expanded, inundating us with confusing data and conflicting opinions, obscuring the difference between the trivial and the essential, presenting a bewildering array of choices. How we handle this flood of information shapes our worldviews, controls our relationships with ourselves and others, determines our goals and the strategies we employ to achieve them, and, for better or worse, affects our families, our communities, our nation and our world.

Objectives and Student Outcomes

Students completing this course will

- be able to explain the logical and psychological structure of belief;
- identify and avoid logical fallacies and biases that inhibit identification of misleading beliefs;
- be familiar with social norms that inhibit critical examination and frank discussion of beliefs;
- develop standards for evaluating beliefs;

- recognize three characteristics (ambiguity, viewpoint, and fundamental aspiration) that affect the utility of beliefs;
- hone skill in using a procedure that facilitates objective comparison and productive discussion of beliefs.

Caveats

This course is designed to develop your capacity to impartially assess and compare beliefs. While you will be free to choose the beliefs you focus on and discuss, you'll get more out of this course if you use it to help you examine beliefs that make a difference in your life.

However, it is also important that you remember the following:

- It is your responsibility to critically examine only those beliefs you're open to changing your mind about.
- Your classmates are not required to maintain confidentiality. Things you say in class may be repeated outside of class.
- While we will explore emotions, we will do so only for the purpose of managing their impact on objectivity and clarity of thought.

Teaching philosophy and examinations

This course is designed to teach you a set of skills that can help you utilize and communicate about beliefs more effectively. Grading is intended to reflect the degree to which you have mastered these skills.

I believe that the more widely the skills taught in this class are shared, the better your lives (and the world at large) will be. As such, I hope that everyone in this class achieves the kind of mastery that merits an "A." I'll do my best to create opportunities for you to progress toward that kind of mastery. It is your job to be engaged, thoughtful, disciplined, emotionally aware, and intellectually honest; and to help me help you. I am always open to feedback about how I can be a more effective teacher.

As the quotations near the top of this syllabus suggest, much of this class will be devoted to identifying errors and oversights in the received view of belief. It is up to you to become aware of those errors and oversights, to reflect on them, to examine their implications, and to consider alternative views. In short, you are in this class to increase your understanding of belief, not to demonstrate that your understanding is already perfect.

As such, you shouldn't feel obligated to quickly grasp the concepts we'll be exploring. As you'll discover, most of us are taught to treat beliefs in ways that conflict with the approaches I'll be suggesting. Most of us are also taught to resist seeing the flaws in what we believe, and to resist examining the implications of our views of beliefs. Further, most of us are taught to respond to challenges to our beliefs – and, more broadly, to our approaches to assessing and comparing beliefs – with anger and hostility. We have a demanding and thought-provoking road ahead of us.

Grading on a "curve" makes students competitive because they receive higher grades if others do poorly. That's why I employ absolute grading. Others' success will do nothing to diminish yours. Further,

your efforts to bring out the best in your classmates and your openness to allowing them to bring out the best in you will contribute positively to your grade.

Course Grade

A total of 100 points can be earned in this course. There will be no exams. Class participation (that is, engagement, thoughtfulness, openness and sincerity – not eloquence) will count for 20% of your grade; essays and journals will each count for 40%. You'll receive regular feedback about your performance in all areas. Those who earn between 90 and 100 points will receive an "A." Those who earn 80-89 points will receive a "B." Those who earn 70-79 points will receive a "C." "D" may be earned with 60-69 points. Those earning less than 60 points will receive an "F."

Your grades will reflect your understanding of the concepts taught in this course and the quality of your thought: your logic – not your conclusions. Your opinions about issues that fall outside the strict purview of this course will not affect your grade. In fact, if my opinions about such matters are evident – either in my instruction or grading – I've failed to live up to my own standards.

Attendance

Since lectures and discussions are essential to achieving the goals of this once-weekly class, even a single absence is likely to have a major impact on what you learn. Only one unexcused absence is permitted. Each additional unexcused absence will result in subtraction of 5% (one-half a letter grade) from the grade you would otherwise have earned for the term.

Absences will be considered "excused" only if agreed to by the instructor prior to the class or explained by a signed note from a physician who treated the problem that caused the absence. Contact me in advance if something other than a medical problem is likely to cause an unavoidable absence.

Tardiness

Students are expected to arrive in class on time. Each late arrival in excess of two will be considered half an absence, resulting in subtraction of 2.5% (1/4 letter grade) from your final grade. Since this is a lengthy class, you will be given adequate time for breaks. However, you will be expected to return from those breaks on time. A late return from break will be treated as a tardy arrival. Since the length of cellular phone conversations can be difficult to control, I suggest turning cellular phones off prior to class and keeping them off until after class has ended.

Readings

All readings will be available on-line as PDFs. You are expected to read carefully, to think about what you read, and to briefly summarize, in your journal, your understanding of the reading assignment and its relevance to the issues the class addresses. You are also expected to be prepared to discuss your thoughts and feelings about the assignment in class (e.g., what you agree and/or disagree with, what you're not sure you understand, thoughts the readings provoked, implications of the reading for beliefs you've been thinking about, etc.). Specific journal assignments are listed for each class. Readings will be excerpted from the following sources:

- Aronson, C. T. (2007). *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Books.
- Balkin, J. M. (1998). *Cultural Software*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Byrne, R. (2006). *The Secret*. New York: Atria Books.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2009). *Bright-sided*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.
- Feingold, B. D. (1995). The spirit and its discontents: A perspective on violence and evil. Paper presented at the 103rd Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association. New York, NY .
- Feingold, B. D. (1977). Superstition as a Strategic Research Site for the Investigation of Belief. Doctoral Dissertation: The Pennsylvania State University.
- Helminiak, D. A. (2008). *Spirituality for Our Global Community*. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Kahneman, D. and Tversky, A. (1974). Judgment under Uncertainty: Heuristics and Biases. *Science*, 185 (4157), 1124-1131.
- Lynch, A. (1996). *Thought Contagion*. Basic Books: New York.
- Mahoney, M. J. (1976). *The Scientist as Subject*. Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing Company.
- Popper, K. R. (1963). *Conjectures and Refutations*. New York: Basic Books.

Essays and Journals

Essay and journal assignments will be distributed near the end of each class.

Essays address issues discussed in class or previously discussed material. Essays are expected to fully address significant issues. Essays need not be any particular length. You should not feel obligated to “pad” your work or feel pressured to shorten it. (When Lincoln was asked, "How long do you think a man's legs should be?" he replied, "Long enough to reach the ground." Your essays should be long enough to clearly express your ideas.)

You need not strive for polished writing. However, you should strive to express yourself clearly enough to demonstrate that you’ve thought carefully about the issues at hand. Your essays are also expected to be sufficiently well-written to allow a naïve reader to grasp your meaning and to avoid misunderstandings. (As you’ll see, ambiguity is the source of much mischief.)

While I won’t be a stickler about spelling or grammar, such errors will affect your grade if they create confusion. Develop the habit of using your word processing program’s spelling and grammar checker. It won’t identify every problem, but it will help. Proofread your essays after you’ve used the spelling and grammar checker and ask at least one other person to read your final draft.

Essays are to be typed, double-spaced, and formatted in 12-point type. Your lowest two grades will be dropped, but you must complete all essays. **Essays should be sent as e-mail attachments to**

bfeingol@shepherd.edu no later than 11:59 P.M. on the Saturday following each class. Five points (one-half letter grade) will be deducted for each day the essay is late. References, if required, should be in APA format. Points will be taken off for omission of needed references or errors in reference format. For more information on what does and does not require references, see the section on cheating, plagiarism, and academic integrity below.

Your journals are intended to help you prepare for your next class, and must be submitted (electronically or as a typed hard copy) by the beginning of the relevant class. Ten points (one full letter grade) will be deducted for each day the journal is late. In many cases, reflecting on the issues raised in the journal is likely to affect the quality of your class participation and the quality of your essay, so take your journal seriously.

I've written detailed instructions to help you benefit from writing some of your weekly journals. Often, you can respond to each instruction with one or two sentences. Journals need not be written to formal standards. However, a naïve reader should be able to understand what you've written.

Cheating, plagiarism, and academic integrity

The University Catalogue states,

Cheating in all its forms, including plagiarism and cheating on visual work, is considered an academic matter to be controlled and acted upon by the individual faculty member.

Students guilty of academic dishonesty on examinations in any course shall receive, as a minimum penalty, a grade of F in that course. Such action shall be taken by the instructor, with written notification to the appropriate University administrators. Repeated offenses shall subject the student to suspension or dismissal from the University. Students involved in facilitating academic dishonesty among others, such as the unauthorized dissemination of examination materials, will be subject to disciplinary action beyond that called for by their own cheating in the course.

While you are encouraged to form study groups and to discuss the issues raised in this class with both fellow students and others, it is essential that you avoid plagiarism by giving appropriate credit to those who contribute to your views.

Plagiarism is the use of someone else's writing or ideas without appropriate credit (characteristically, through the use of a standard reference format). You are expected to acknowledge your sources even if you paraphrase their ideas. Those who fail to observe these guidelines will be dropped from the class with a grade of F. (Further information on plagiarism may be found on page 73-86 of Kate L. Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, 6th ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Students are expected to abide by the Shepherd University Academic Standards described in the Shepherd University Student Handbook.

Email

In the interest of protecting your confidentiality, I will only acknowledge email if it is sent from your Shepherd email address, and will send responses only to Shepherd addresses.

Tentative Class Schedule

CLASS/DATE	TOPIC	ASSIGNED READING	ESSAYS (DUE BY 11:59 PM)
CLASS #1 1/12/11	AN ORIENTATION TO APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY AND AN INTRODUCTION TO THE COMPLEXITIES OF BELIEF	NONE	ESSAY #1 DUE 1/15
CLASS #2 1/19/11	WHAT MAKES A BAD BELIEF BAD?	EHRENREICH, 2009, PP. 45-73; LYNCH, 1996, PP. 1-16	ESSAY #2 DUE 1/22
CLASS #3 1/26/11	OVERCOMING BARRIERS TO TREATING BELIEFS AS CONCEPTUAL TOOLS	POPPER, 1963, PP. 33-59	NONE
CLASS #4 2/2/11	THE NATURE OF THE HUMAN SPIRIT, AUTHENTICITY, AND THE CHARACTERISTICS OF BELIEFS THAT SATISFY SPIRIT'S NEEDS	HELMINIAK, 2008, PP. 41-73	ESSAY #3 DUE 2/5
CLASS #5 2/9/11	NOETIC RELATIONSHIPS, HABERMAS'S RULES OF DISCOURSE, AND SOME CONJECTURES ON THE PSYCHOLOGY OF EVIL	FEINGOLD, 1995; A BRIEF SUMMARY OF HABERMAS'S <i>RULES OF DISCOURSE</i>	ESSAY #4 DUE 2/12
CLASS #6 2/16/11	THE "OTHER" DIMENSION OF MIND: PSYCHE AS THE COMPLEMENT OF SPIRIT; PSYCHIC NEEDS AS THE ANTITHESIS OF SPIRITUAL NEEDS	HELMINIAK, 2008, PP. 121-137	ESSAY #5 DUE 2/19
CLASS #7 2/23/11	TRUTH, SUPERSTITION, AND TRANSFORMATION	FEINGOLD, 1977, PP. 38-94	NONE
CLASS #8 3/2/11	WHAT'S SO WRONG ABOUT BEING RIGHT?	TAVRIS AND ARONSON, 2007, PP. 1-97	ESSAY #6 DUE 3/5
CLASS #9 3/9/11	QUANTIFYING AMBIGUITY: PERSPECTIVES AND IMPLICATIONS	KAHNEMAN AND TVERSKY, 1974; BALKIN, 1998, PP. 188-215	ESSAY #7 DUE 3/12
CLASS #10 3/23/11	AMBIGUITY, COGNITIVE DISSONANCE, AND THE COSTS OF COMMITMENT	MAHONEY, 1976, PP. 195-220	ESSAY #8 DUE 3/26
CLASS #11 3/30/11	ON HIERARCHIES OF BELIEF AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF VIEWPOINT	NONE	ESSAY #9 DUE 4/2
CLASS #12 4/6/11	ON THE TOPSY-TURVY LOGIC OF BELIEFS THAT FULFILL THE NEEDS OF OUR PSYCHES	HELMINIAK, 2008, PP. 121-137	ESSAY #10 DUE 4/9
CLASS #13 4/13/11	ASSESSING THE BADNESS OF BELIEFS	NONE	ESSAY #11 DUE 4/16
CLASS #1 4/20/11	APPLYING WHAT YOU'VE LEARNED	NONE	ESSAY #12 DUE 4/23
CLASS #15 4/27/11	USING YOUR SKILLS TO DISCUSS BELIEFS	NONE	ESSAY #13 (FOR DOUBLE EXTRA CREDIT) DUE 5/4