



Human Error: Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives (PHIL 4303-R01)
Professor: Christopher R. Myers (cmyers18@fordham.edu)
Fordham University, Spring 2025
Keating Hall 116: Mon. & Thurs. 4:00pm-5:15pm
Office Hours (Collins Rm. 121): Mon. & Thurs. 12:45pm-1:30pm & 5:15pm-6:00pm



In this course we will study the role of *error* and *bias* in human reasoning across various areas and subject matters. We will study error, moreover, from a variety of perspectives—perspectives which are primarily centered in philosophy and psychology, but are interdisciplinary in their approach and method. We will consider questions such as: what factors lead us to commit errors and develop bias? What kinds of errors are there to make? What can human beings do to avoid errors? How fundamental is error and bias to human life?

Course description:

The aim of our course is to examine the role of *error* and *bias* in everyday human reasoning. We will study error from disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives, moreover, because human error has been studied and catalogued in many different ways.

Consider philosophy, for one. Questions about seeking truth and avoiding falsehood have been central to philosophical reflection since early Greek philosophy. Philosophers have attempted to identify successful methods for achieving knowledge and avoiding errors, and sometimes they have attempted to represent human nature as a whole in order to capture our cognitive shortcomings. Now consider psychology. Cognitive and social psychologists have developed many different descriptive accounts of human reasoning, and additionally they have attempted to study how and when human reasoning actually works. Psychologists have catalogued systematic human errors (or “cognitive biases”) and attempted to determine what these biases are and why we are subject to them.

We will look at both the methods and results of recent work on human error in philosophy and psychology. As we will see, psychologists have tended to concern themselves more so with the descriptive question of how we commit errors and demonstrate bias, while philosophers have tended to concern themselves more so with normative questions about reasoning and judgment, i.e., how we should actually reason and judge in our everyday lives. Both of these concerns are essential to our study, hence the multidisciplinary nature of the course. Yet there are some interesting discussions about error *between* philosophers

and psychologists, hence the interdisciplinary nature of the course. One point of contact between philosophers and psychologists concerns the normative implications of psychological work for human rationality. In the so-called “rationality wars”, cognitive scientists, philosophers of psychology, and psychologists have disagreed on the question of whether psychological research suggests that human beings are fundamentally irrational. We will investigate some of these disagreements near the beginning of the course. Another point of contact concerns the practical question of how we can minimize errors and make improvements. Philosophers and psychologists have developed vastly different proposals on this question, and as a result they have approached practical problems in the world very differently. We will investigate some of these disagreements toward the end of the course.

Our course will provide you with an understanding of contemporary research on human error and bias in both philosophy and psychology. You will have a chance to compare and contrast the various methods that are used by philosophers and psychologists, as well as their respective results and proposals.

Required texts:

- Ballantyne, Nathan. [*Knowing Our Limits*](#). Oxford University Press, 2019 [ISBN#: 978-0190847289]

Course requirements:

[1] Attendance/participation	10%
[2] Coursework (on Perusall)	20%
[3] Online Tool Assignments	15%
[4] Class Presentation	5%
[5] Book Reviews/Presentation	25%
[6] Final Paper Assignment	25%

[1] Attendance/participation:

I will take attendance at the beginning of each class. You are allowed two unexcused absences before I must start taking points away from your overall attendance/participation grade. I will excuse an absence for a religious holiday, a serious illness, a death in your immediate family, or your participation in a university-sponsored holiday. To get an absence excused, you must send me a formal, written explanation *before* the class in question.

Your attendance grade is also dependent on (a) your active participation during class time, and (b) your bringing all required reading materials to class (either by physical copy or computer access). Concerning class participation: our in-person class meetings will be devoted *entirely* (100%) to discussion about the assigned readings, and this means that your active participation during class time is absolutely essential. My expectation is that you will not only maintain strong attendance throughout the semester, but also contribute your thoughts during class discussions and act respectfully toward your classmates. Listen thoughtfully, keep an open mind, and contribute what you think. Philosophy is most worthwhile when it is enlivened by discussion and exchange.

[2] Coursework (on Perusall):

For all of our assigned readings this semester, you must complete an online Perusall assignment (via our course Blackboard page). Perusall allows students to collaboratively make annotations and comments on a reading. Everyone in the class is required to post at least three comments on our reading(s) in advance of every class meeting, and these comments can be posted directly onto the reading itself or in response to one of your classmates' previous comments. Your grade on these assignments will be based on completion. At the same time, I reserve the right to take off points for inaccuracy or irrelevance.

The deadline for all coursework on Perusall is 4:00pm on the day of the class in question. No late coursework will be accepted as the purpose of these assignments is to create conversation about the readings in advance of our discussions in class.

[3] Online Tool Assignments:

To explore ways to improve our everyday reasoning and judgment, we will complete a series of online tools and surveys this semester and we will discuss each of them in class immediately afterward. On our course Blackboard page you will find links to each of our assigned online tools as well as the corresponding deadlines. In advance of each deadline, complete each of the assigned online tools and then write a 1-page response (double spaced, 12 pt. font) which answers the following questions: (1) how did you perform on this online tool?; (2) what did you learn from using this tool?; and (3) how can you apply what you learned from this tool to your life? Please be specific in your answers and do not speak in generalities. After writing your response, you must post this response to the 'Discussions' section of the course Blackboard page. Simply start a new discussion, title the post with your last name and the online tool assignment number (e.g., "Myers: Module One"), type your response into the space below, and then post your response. Your grade on these assignments will be based on completion. At the same time, I reserve the right to take off points for inaccuracy or irrelevance.

[4] Class Presentation:

This semester each of you is required to do one in-class presentation. Your presentation will take place at the beginning of class, and should run for 5-10 minutes (not including discussion time afterward).

The purpose of these class presentations is to summarize our author's argument in the text and raise 2-3 discussion questions that you think deserve attention. Your presentation can be delivered via PowerPoint, Prezi, or simply the whiteboard (I have no preference). However you choose to deliver it, the majority of your presentation should consist in a summary and outline of the assigned reading (3-6 minutes), and then you should conclude with your discussion questions (1-2 minutes).

You will be graded on the accuracy of your presentation, the quality of your delivery, and your ability to answer questions from the class. Please consult our class' 'Guide for Class Presentations' handout for more detailed information and requirements. Additionally, consult our class' 'Guide for Class Presentations' handout for your presentation date (I have

assigned the presentations randomly across the semester). You may exchange the date of your assigned presentation with another student in the class, provided both parties agree and you let me know at least a week in advance.

[5] Book Reviews/Presentation:

To explore the growing landscape of commentary on human error and bias, everyone in the class will select one book from the list I have provided, write a review of this book, and then present your book and review at the end of the semester. The purpose of the assignment is to broaden your knowledge of scholarship on human error and bias, and for you to practice your skills at summary and exposition. You must sign up for a book and presentation date with me, and you are responsible for finding your own copy of the book you select.

You can find our list of possible book selections on Blackboard via our class' 'Guide for Book Reviews & Presentations' handout. I have selected these books with purpose and want to insist that you select from the list. However if there is some outside book that you believe is compatible with this list (and you would be more interested to present on it), you must discuss and confirm this selection with me. Additionally, you can find more detailed instructions for writing your review and delivering your presentation via our 'Guide for Book Reviews & Presentations' handout.

[6] Final Paper Assignment:

We will have one major writing assignment this semester: a final paper assignment. The purpose of this paper is to engage thoughtfully with our assigned readings as well as developing an informed position of your own. Corresponding with the overall flow of the course, the subject matter of the paper will involve developing a positive account of how to bring our biases into conscious awareness and how to regulate our overreaching claims to knowledge and objectivity. I will announce the prompt for this final paper assignment around the halfway point of the semester. The length of the paper will be 7-10 pages (12 font, double-spaced), however, and it will need to be written in line with the requirements laid out in the prompt.

Course policies:

Late penalty policy:

For every day (weekend days included) that an assignment is late, this assignment will be penalized. If you suspect that you will not be able to turn an assignment in on time, reach out to me *at least 24 hours in advance* and we can talk about extending the deadline. I am considerably generous about extending paper deadlines - but I will not extend deadlines *immediately before the deadline*. No late coursework on Perusall will be accepted.

Technology policy:

During class time you are permitted to use a computer, laptop, or tablet. Your use of these devices is restricted to class use, however, and I expect that you will not allow these devices to divert your attention or the attention of others away from discussion.

Remember: this course revolves around active discussion and participation. If your use of electronic devices inhibits class discussion, I reserve the right to adjust our technology policy accordingly.

Academic integrity:

All students are expected to abide by the rules of academic integrity as laid out in the Fordham Handbook. This especially includes plagiarism. Any assignment that is found to have involved plagiarism will automatically receive a failing grade. Furthermore, your professors (including me) are obliged to automatically report all cases of plagiarism to the Dean. With this in mind, it's a good idea to familiarize yourself with what qualifies as plagiarism.

The Fordham Handbook defines plagiarism as follows: "Plagiarism occurs when individuals attempt to present as their own what has come from another source. Plagiarism takes place whether such theft is accidental or deliberate." In a nutshell, plagiarism involves taking credit for someone else's work in one's own writing – intentionally or unintentionally. Plagiarism might mean copying an idea or quotation exactly as it is written elsewhere (in a book, online article, Chat GPT, a newspaper, etc.), paraphrasing an idea or quotation without properly including a citation, or using an idea that is not your own without citing the author(s) of this idea. To avoid plagiarism make sure you properly cite the sources you use. If you're unsure of whether you are properly citing something, come and ask me before you submit the assignment. Stay on the safe side.

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ChatGPT and GenerativeAI policy:

ChatGPT is capable of many things, but ChatGPT is not you. Having a bot answer questions or generate essays is not the same as working out your own thoughts. This semester our class will adhere to three guidelines concerning AI technology: (1) If you use ChatGPT/GenAI in any way, you *must* cite it—that is to say, you must cite the AI technology you used, indicate what prompt you gave it, and indicate how you revised it. (2) Uses of ChatGPT/GenAI without citation will be penalized. Submitting ChatGPT/GenAI products without citation is a violation of Fordham's academic integrity policies—specifically, it is a form of plagiarism and outsourcing. (3) ChatGPT/GenAI are tools and they are here to stay—so we will keep our channels of communication open about their advantages and the best frameworks in which to deploy them. Additionally, we will use the reading skills we develop in this class to reflect critically *on* information that ChatGPT/GenAI provide about the history of philosophy. We will do this during class time, but you might consider doing this also in your coursework paragraphs.

Students with special needs and/or disabilities:

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, all students, with or without disabilities, are entitled to equal access to the

programs and activities of Fordham University. If you believe that you have a disability that may interfere with your ability to participate in the activities, classwork, or assessment of the object of this course, you may be entitled to accommodations. Please schedule a meeting to speak with someone at the Office of Disability Services (Phone number: 718-817-0655). (Locations: Lincoln Center – Lowenstein, Room 207; Rose Hill - O’Hare Hall, Lower Level).

Further study in philosophy:

For further information on majoring or minoring in philosophy, contact the Department Associate Chair for Undergraduate Studies: Professor Christina M. Gschwandtner (gschwandtner@fordham.edu).

Reading Schedule:

[All readings that are not in our required text are available on Blackboard]

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Reading:</u>	<u>Notes:</u>
Mon. Jan. 13 th	(Introduction to Human Error)	

Philosophical perspectives on human error and bias

Thurs. Jan. 16 th	Descartes: <i>Meditations</i> , “Meditation Four” + Nietzsche: “On Truth and Lies in a Non-Moral Sense” + Russell: “Dreams and Facts”	
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Mon. Jan. 20 th	-- No class meeting --	
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Thurs. Jan. 23 rd	Rescher: “Historical Background” + Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter Two	
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Mon. Jan. 27 th	Gadamer: “The Universality of the Hermeneutical Problem”	
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Thurs. Jan. 30 th	Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter One: “Epistemology and Inquiry”	Online Tools Assignment Module One Due
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Empirical perspectives on human error and bias

Mon. Feb. 3 rd	Rysiew: “Rationality Disputes — Psychology and Epistemology”	
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<u>Date:</u>	<u>Reading:</u>	<u>Notes:</u>
Thurs. Feb. 6 th	Samuels & Stich: "Rationality and Psychology"	Online Tools Assignment Module Two Due
Mon. Feb. 10 th	Dunning: "The Trouble of Not Knowing What You Do Not Know: Psychological, Philosophical, and Societal Implications"	
Thurs. Feb. 13 th	Kornblith: "Distrusting Reason"	Online Tools Assignment Module Three Due
Tues. Feb. 18 th	D'Cruz: "Rationalization, Creativity, and Imaginative Resistance" + Ditto & Koleva: "Moral Empathy Gaps and the American Culture War"	
Thurs. Feb. 20 th	Elga: "On Overrating Oneself and Knowing It" + Taylor & Brown: "Illusion and Well-Being: A Social Psychological Perspective on Mental Health"	Online Tools Assignment Module Four Due
Mon. Feb. 24 th	Pronin: "Perception and Misperception of Bias in Human Judgment" + Cheek & Pronin: "I'm Right, You're Biased: How We Understand Ourselves and Others"	

Revisoning knowledge in the awareness of human error and bias

Thurs. Feb. 27 th	Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter Four	Online Tools Assignment Module Five Due
Mon. March 3 rd	Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter Five	
Thurs. March 6 th	Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter Seven	
Mon. March 10 th	Ballantyne: <i>Knowing Our Limits</i> , Chapter Eight	
Thurs. March 13 th	-- No class meeting --	
Mon. March 17 th	-- No class meeting --	
Thurs. March 20 th	-- No class meeting --	

<u>Date:</u>	<u>Reading:</u>	<u>Notes:</u>
Mon. March 24 th	Nisbett: <i>Mindware: Tools for Smart Thinking</i> , Chapters One-Three	
Thurs. March 27 th	Roberts & West: "Natural Epistemic Defects and Corrective Virtues"	
Mon. March 31 st	Coady: "Testimony and Intellectual Autonomy"	
Thurs. April 3 rd	Solomon: " <i>Groupthink</i> versus <i>The Wisdom of Crowds: The Social Epistemology of Deliberation and Dissent</i> "	
Mon. April 7 th	Lewandowski, Ecker, Seifert, Schwarz, & Cook: "Misinformation and Its Correction: Continued Influence and Successful Debiasing"	
Thurs. April 10 th	John, Loewenstein, & Prelec: "Measuring the Prevalence of Questionable Research Practices With Incentives for Truth Telling" + Schwartz: "The Importance of Indifference in Scientific Research"	
Mon. April 14 th	Ioannidis: "Why Most Published Research Findings False are False"	
Wed. April 16 th	(OPEN)	Book Reviews Due
Thurs. April 17 th		-- No class meeting --
Mon. April 21 st		-- No class meeting --
Thurs. April 24 th	(Book presentations)	
Mon. April 28 th	(Book presentations)	
[TBD]		— Final Paper Assignment Due —