1. **Name of Course:** Knowledge and Reality

2. **Lecturer:** Tim Crane  
   **Teaching Assistant:** Leo Townsend

3. **Credits:** 3

4. **Semester:** Fall 2021

5. **Status:** Mandatory first year course for BA students taking PPE and CPS

6. **Office Hours:** Prof Crane, Wednesday 11.00-13.00; Thursday 9.30-11.30  
   Dr Townsend: TBC

7. **Brief introduction to the course**

   This course provides an introduction to one of the central themes of Western philosophy: the nature of reality and our knowledge of it. There are two parts to this theme. The first is knowledge: what can we know about the world? Can we know anything at all? What is truth? Is truth, or knowledge, relative to your perspective or culture? Are claims to knowledge simply assertions of political power? The second is reality: what is the real nature of the world? Do we have free will? What is a person? What is time? This course will address these questions and others, based around readings from classic and contemporary texts. It provides a basis for students further study in philosophy, and will also be a useful starting point for philosophical questions that arise in CPS.

8. **Learning outcomes**

   At the completion of their work for this course, students will:
   (i) have an understanding of some of the central questions and theories in metaphysics (the theory of reality);
   (ii) have an understanding of some of the central questions and theories in epistemology (the theory of knowledge);
   (iii) have an understanding of how some of these ideas arose in Western philosophy.

9. **Detailed description of the course**

   (i) **Teaching structure**
   There are three one-hour classes each week: one lecture on Tuesday at 11.50; and two seminars on Tuesdays at 13.50 and Thursdays at 11.50. *Note exceptions below.*

   Attendance is compulsory at the seminars and the lecture, and a record of attendance will be kept. Students who need to be absent from lectures or seminars must inform Prof Crane or the TA in advance or immediately afterwards. Two or more unexplained absences will result in a reduction of one entire grade (e.g. from A to B+, or from B to B- etc.).

   **Lecture:** The Tuesday lecture will introduce the week’s topic.

   **Seminar:** To enable discussions in the seminars, the whole class will be divided into two groups, group A and group B. Each group will meet twice a week. The seminar group leader will alternate each week between Prof Crane and the TA: on one week, group A will be taken by Prof Crane, and group B by the TA, and in the next week, group B will be taken by Prof Crane and group A by the TA.
The Tuesday seminar will start with questions arising out of the lecture. The Thursday seminar will start with a presentation by a student who has done the week’s exercise.

Exceptions:
(i) In week 1, the lecture will be on a video to watched by students in their own time. There will be no Tuesday Seminar in week 1. The Thursday meeting in week 1 will be for all students, and will involve an explanation of the structure of the course.

(ii) In week 6, there will be no lecture or seminar on Tuesday, because of the Austrian national holiday on 26 October. The lecture will be held on Thursday for all students, and there will be no seminar or exercises in that week.

(ii) Week by week breakdown
Each week deals with one topic, with one compulsory reading per week.

WEEK 1 [Video to be watched in students’ own time]
**What is philosophy? What is this course about?**
This class will provide a brief overview of the tradition of Western philosophy which forms the context for this course, explaining concepts like metaphysics, epistemology, ethics etc. Some of this background may be familiar to some students, but not all of it will be familiar to all.

No assigned reading.

WEEK 2: September 28
**Appearance and reality**
The distinction between knowledge and reality is that between what we know about the world, and the world itself. What can we say, in the most general terms, about what the world is like? And what can we say, in the most general terms, about what knowledge is? What is the significance of the fact that sometimes things seem other than how they are?

Reading: Thomas Nagel, *What does it all Mean?* chapter 2

WEEK 3: October 5
**Knowledge and truth**
What is knowledge? What does it mean for someone to know something? What is the difference between knowing something and merely believing it (or thinking it is true)? Does knowing something imply that it is true, or can you know what is not true?

Reading: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: a Very Short Introduction* chapter 1

WEEK 4: October 12
**Knowledge and certainty**
Knowledge requires truth, and belief, but what else does it require? That is, to know something is to believe it, and for that belief to be true, but these two conditions are not sufficient (i.e. enough) for knowledge. What extra condition is required? Traditionally this extra condition is called ‘justification’ — but what is justification?

Reading: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: a Very Short Introduction* chapter 4

WEEK 5: 19 October
**Scepticism**
Suppose we are right about what knowledge requires; it does not follow that anyone knows anything at all. Some traditional arguments, going back to Greek and Roman
philosophy, suggest that we should not be confident that we know anything at all. This view is known as scepticism. Varieties of scepticism will be considered: about the external world, about induction, and about other minds, to be continued in week 6.

Reading: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: a Very Short Introduction* chapter 2

**WEEK 6: October 28 [NB THURSDAY! NO CLASS ON 26 OCTOBER]**

**Other minds**
Do we ever know what someone is thinking? Do we even really know whether others have minds at all? What is our basis of our confidence that others are thinking, or feeling things, and is it justified? We will apply what we have learned about knowledge to the case of knowledge of minds.

Reading: Thomas Nagel, *What does it all Mean?* ch.3

**WEEK 7: November 2**

**Truth**
We have talked about knowledge implying truth, but what is truth, anyway? Does the idea of truth that is independent of all context ('absolute' truth) really make sense? Is there really such a thing as absolute truth? Or is truth always relative to your perspective or culture or point of view?

Reading: Simon Blackburn: *Truth: a Guide for the Perplexed*, chapter 2 (pp.25-44)

**WEEK 8: November 9**

**Idealism and realism**
Is the world we experience just a product of our minds? Or do things exist independently of our minds? How might this difference show in our experience of the world, and would it matter to us?

Reading: David Chalmers, ‘The Matrix as Metaphysics’ (selection), in Susanna Siegel, Tamar Gendler and Steven Kahn (eds.) *Philosophy: an Introduction*

**WEEK 9: November 16**

**Science and ideology**
Does science have a special authority to tell us about the world? Is scientific knowledge no different from an ideology? If science is a social construct, then why should it have any specific authority over us, any more than any other social construct? Isn’t science just the opinions of the powerful?

Reading: Paul Feyerabend: ‘How to protect society from science’ in Nigel Warburton (ed.) *Philosophy: the Basic Readings*

**WEEK 10: November 23**

**Personal identity**
Each of us thinks we are the same person from day to day — but if this is true, then what makes it true? Is it because our bodies remain the same, or because we are psychologically the same? If the first answer is right, then what about the constant changes in our bodies? But if the second is right, then what about the changes in our minds or our personalities?

Reading: Daniel C. Dennett: ‘Where am I?’ (selection) in N. Warburton (ed.) *Philosophy: the Basic Readings*

**WEEK 11: November 30**
Free Will
Do we have free will? That is, are we really free to choose one action as opposed to another? Or is everything determined by our character, our history, our genetic makeup, or even by physical events which occurred before we were born? Could we really come to believe that we are not free?

Reading: Simon Blackburn: *Think* chapter 3

WEEK 12: December 7
Time travel
How does our ordinary conception of time compare to what science has shown about the reality of time? Does time ‘flow’ from the past, into the present, and then into the future? Or is time more like space, which allows no objective distinction between ‘here’ and ‘there’? If so, then is time travel a genuine possibility?


10. Course assignments and deadlines
(i) Every student must complete two short (maximum 400 word) exercises during the term. Each one is based on the reading for a particular week, and will require students to answer one or two short questions.

These questions will form the basis of the Thursday seminar discussions, so it is essential that students do the reading before the seminar (and ideally, before the lecture).

All exercises will be assigned to students at the beginning of term. A different group of students will be required to complete the exercise each week, with approximately ten students doing an exercise each week. Exercises must be submitted on the e-learning (moodle) site.

**Deadlines for these exercises will therefore vary, depending on which group you are in.** Students can expect a gap of about three weeks or so between their two exercises. However, if a student wishes to change the week of their assigned exercise they can request this from the TA.

(ii) There will be a take-home exam, in which students have answer three questions which they choose from a list of seven or eight, which will be given to them at the end of term. Answers to each question must be no more than 500 words long. **The deadline for this exam is the first day of the Winter term, 10 January 2022.**

11. Assessment structure
The two short exercises together constitute 50% of the overall grade. The exam takes up the remaining 50%.

If a student does not submit one of their required short exercises, then their overall mark is reduced by 25%.

12. Grading criteria
A an exceptional answer, showing a real understanding of the issue and evidence of real clarity of thought
A- an excellent answer, showing a very good understanding of the question being asked
B+  a very good answer, which gets the main point of the question and the issue behind it, even if it contains some small errors
B    a good answer in parts, which shows some understanding of the question but contains some errors or irrelevant material
B-   an answer which contains some correct material as well as material which is incorrect or confused, but is trying to answer the question seriously
C+   an answer which contains a lot of confusion or error but nonetheless shows some attempt to answer the question
F    an inadequate answer which reveals no serious attempt to engage with the topic or to answer the question, and no real knowledge of the subject

Tim Crane  August 23 2021