

# **Truth in the Trump Era (Phil 191)**

Fall 2017

T-Th: 11:10-12:30

DGH 236

Instructor: Brandon Hogan

Office: 222 Locke Hall

Office Hours: M: 12-2p, W: 2:10-4p , or by appointment

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## **Course Description**

“Quid est veritas?” —John 18:38

Jesus claims to be the bearer of truth. Pilate responds with a simple question: “What is truth?” Answering Pilate’s question is particularly important considering the current president’s attacks on truth and admiration for “alternative facts.”

Moreover, some seek to undermine evolutionary theory and deny climate change by dismissing science is a source of truth. Still others deny moral truth, or hold that moral truth is relative. Surprisingly, some philosophers have claimed that there isn’t anything interesting to say about truth, that “true” is just a tool we use to get things done.

Even if we determine that truth exists and that we know how to find it, we must further determine what role truth should play in our political discourse and in our lives. This semester, we will think carefully about truth and hopefully develop a few practical answers to our guiding questions.

## **Course Requirements and Grading**

Student grades will be determined as follows:

70%: Three, five-page papers

30%: Class participation

The class participation score will be determined by student participation in weekly, in-class group discussions. To earn credit for participation, each group must submit a one-page summary of the discussion at the beginning of the class meeting following the discussion (usually a

Tuesday). One group member will write the summary and the other members should sign as participants.

**Statement on Americans with Disabilities Procedures:**

Howard University is committed to providing an educational environment that is accessible to all students. In accordance with this policy, students in need of accommodations due to a disability should contact the Office of the Dean for Special Services for verification and determination of reasonable accommodations as soon as possible after admission to the University or at the beginning of each semester. The Dean of the Office of Special Student Services can be reached at (202) 238-2420.

**Plagiarism and cheating:**

Plagiarism and other forms of academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Evidence of dishonesty will be pursued, and confirmation will result in an "F" for the course. Students are responsible for knowing which actions constitute plagiarism. Please refer to the Howard University Student Handbook, p.114.

**Texts:**

Chase Wrenn, *Truth* (Polity, 2014)

Paul Boghossian, *Fear of Knowledge: Against Relativism and Constructivism* (Clarendon Press, 2007)

Both texts are available in the Howard Bookstore  
Other readings will be posted on Blackboard

**Course Schedule:**

(Note that I may alter the reading schedule.)

Week 1: The Challenge

Reading: Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense," Andrew Calcutt, "The Truth About Post-Truth Politics," Touré, "The Liar-in-Chief and the Dangers of Post-Truth Politics"

Week 2: What is Truth?

Reading: Wrenn, Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 3: Correspondence Theory

Reading: Wrenn, Chapter 5.

### First paper topics distributed

Week 4: Coherence Theory

Reading: Donald Davidson, "A Coherence Theory of Truth and Knowledge," Wrenn, pp. 56-62.

Week 5: Pragmatism and Truth

Reading: William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," Robert Brandom, "Insights and Blindspots of Reliabilism," Wrenn, pp. 62-64.

### First paper due

Week 6: Truth and Ordinary Language

Reading: Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (selections), J.L. Austin, "Truth."

Week 7: Constructivism

Reading: Sally Haslanger, "Social Construction: The 'Debunking' Project," and "The Sex/Gender Distinction and the Social Construction of Reality"

Week 8: Moral Truth

Reading: Sharon Street, "Does Anything Really Matter or Did We Just Evolve to Think So?" J.L. Mackie, "The Subjectivity of Values," Mary Midgley, "Trying Out One's New Sword."

### Second paper topics distributed

Week 9: *Fear of Knowledge*

Chapters 1-3

Week 10: *Fear of Knowledge*

Chapters 4-5

### Second paper due

Week 11: *Fear of Knowledge*

Chapters 6-7

Week 12: *Fear of Knowledge*

Chapters 8-9

Week 13: Lying

Reading: Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (selections) and “On the Supposed Right to Lie Because of Philanthropic Concerns”

Final paper topics distributed

Week 14: Truth and Democracy

Reading: Michael P. Lynch “Democracy as a Space of Reasons,” Bernard Yack, “Democracy and the Love of Truth”

Week 15: Truth and Democracy

Reading: Joshua Cohen “Truth and Public Reason,” David Estlund, “The Truth in Political Liberation”

Final paper due at the end of the exam period