PHIL 235a (section 2) Grad Seminar in Epistemology: Knowledge and Skepticism Syllabus

This course will focus on recent work about the problem of skepticism about the external world: How can we know anything about the world around us, if it’s possible that we’re just dreaming or the victims of massive sensory deception? We’ll begin with an examination of the argument(s) for skepticism and general principles relating knowledge of one proposition to knowledge of another. The next topic will be “commonsense” Moorean or dogmatist responses to skepticism. We will then turn to views according to which we have a priori justification for believing that we are not victims of massive sensory deception. Finally, we will consider whether our ordinary beliefs about the world do better than skeptical scenarios in providing explanations of various kinds, and whether “inference to the best explanation” might help in dealing with the skeptical challenge.

I. Skeptical Arguments (Weeks 1-5)
Byrne, “How Hard are the Skeptical Paradoxes?”
Dretske, “Epistemic Operators”, “The Case Against Closure” and “Reply to Hawthorne”
Hawthorne, “The Case for Closure”
Schechter, “Rational Self-Doubt and the Failure of Closure”
Vogel, “Skeptical Arguments”, “Are There Counterexamples to the Closure Principle”, and “E & ¬H”
Williamson, “Knowledge and Skepticism”

II. Moorean & Apriori Approaches (Weeks 5-8)
Moore, “Proof of an External World”
Pryor, “The Skeptic and the Dogmatist”
Silins, “Basic Justification and the Moorean Response to the Skeptic”
Vogel, “Internalist Responses to Skepticism”
White, “Problems for Dogmatism”
Wright, “The Perils of Dogmatism” and “(Anti-) Sceptics Simple and Subtle: G.E. Moore and John McDowell”

III. Inference to the Best Explanation (Weeks 9-15)
Beebe, “The Abductivist Reply to Skepticism”
Bonjour, The Structure of Empirical Knowledge (excerpts)
Chalmers, “The Matrix as Metaphysics”
Lipton, “Inference to the Best Explanation”
Sober, “Reichenbach’s Cube”
Woodward, “Explanation”

Written work will be a short paper (around 4 pages) due at mid-term and a long paper (15-20 pages) due at the end of the semester. Students will also submit a one page prospectus for their final papers by the last day of class.