

THEORIES OF KNOWLEDGE

SPRING SEMESTER 2021-2022

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

Dr. John Capps
john.capps@rit.edu
johncapps.net
475-2464

Office Hours:
MWF 11:00-12:00
LBR 1309
Or contact via e-mail to arrange a Zoom meeting

Course Description

Epistemology, or the theory of knowledge, examines a range of questions about the nature of knowledge, justification, and truth. This includes how and when we have knowledge, how our beliefs are justified, what we mean by the concept of truth, and which of our beliefs can qualify as being either true or false. While these questions have a long history, here we'll be focusing on more recent developments: for the most part, work published since 2010. Out with the old!

This course is partly about what can go wrong when we try to talk about knowledge and truth, how these concepts can be misunderstood, misused and twisted, and how confusions about knowledge and truth can lead to bad ideas, bad decision-making, and bad behavior. But it's not all negative since we're also interested in how things can go *right*: how we can confidently know the things we want and need to know, and how we can defend our claims against skeptics and relativists and other philosophical good-for-nothings.

We're going to focus here on four topics in particular: the issues of "post-truth," skepticism, epistemic injustice, and moral knowledge. Each of these presents a challenge to having beliefs that are true and knowledge that is dependable and well-supported. "Post-truth" is about denying the existence of truth and facts (e.g., endorsing "alternative facts")—which poses an obvious danger to our democratic way of life. Skepticism is the view that knowledge is impossible, perhaps because we can never be certain, or perhaps because we might all be brains-in-vats or whatnot. Epistemic injustice refers to how some people don't get the credit they deserve or are put at a disadvantage in understanding their own experiences. That's not good. And the issue of moral knowledge is whether we can know moral truths in the same way that we can know facts about the physical world.

These topics are both theoretical *and* practical. On the one hand, these are philosophical puzzles that are fun to think about. On the other hand, they have implications for how we live our lives. It matters on a practical level if someone lies or misleads us, or if we lack the concepts to understand what's going on around us, or if we can't really know anything, or if we can't know what we should do. It matters that we take a hard look at these problems so we can better understand what makes them problems and to see what to do about them. In this course we're familiarizing ourselves with the epistemic terrain so that if someone ever casts doubt on the existence of truth, or questions our expertise or dismisses our point of view, or sets an unusually high standard for having knowledge, then we'll understand what's going on, what's gone wrong, how we can respond, and how to keep from getting misled.

Finally, we're going to read *books*. I think there's value in going deep and working through a book-length argument. Maybe it builds character. Maybe it's a protest against an informational ecosystem that encourages superficiality, short attention spans and glibness. Some of what we read will be fairly high-level *as it should be*. I believe that a distinctive feature of being human is our ability to think things through: we care about giving reasons, we care about making ourselves understood, and we care about not just getting things right, but getting them right for the right reasons. Another distinctive feature is that we are social creatures: we do all this together, we benefit from everyone's perspective, and we work together both to clarify our thoughts and to get a better understanding of the things that matter. And that's exactly what we'll do here.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading. You can find them at Barnes & Noble and no doubt many other places. Articles and all other readings all posted on myCourses.

Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice*

Hilary Kornblith: *Scientific Epistemology: An Introduction*

Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge**

Lee McIntyre: *Post-Truth*

*I've posted parts of this book on myCourses.

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. I believe philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. We can't tell if we're covering all our bases if we're not checking in with others. For this reason my classes are normally discussion-intensive, which means they have a lower enrollment cap.¹ In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's doing the reading: no free-riding, please. I don't expect everyone (or, in some cases, anyone, myself included) to understand the reading: that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and come up with a couple questions or interesting points to share. I expect regular attendance (though please don't come to class if you're feeling unwell!). I will do everything I can so that everyone can feel comfortable participating in our discussions.

2. I *may* also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments: these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade. I normally only resort to these when I lose confidence that we're doing the reading, or when overall attendance is suffering. So please do the reading and come to class.

Attendance and participation are worth 20% of your final grade.

3. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background information that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd be more comfortable with a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some. They're not hard to find.

Writing Assignments

4. There will be four short (4 page) writing assignments scattered throughout the semester. In these I'll ask you to reflect critically on particular themes of the readings and the course. All together these will count toward 50% of your final grade.

1. Capps, J. 2018. The case for discussion-intensive pedagogy. APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 17(2): 5-11.
<https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/808CBF9D-D8E6-44A7-AE13-41A70645A525/TeachingV17n2.pdf>

Discussion Facilitation

5. I'm asking everyone to facilitate two class discussions. Here's what I have in mind:

A facilitation should give a brief (<5 minute) overview of the day's reading, provide any helpful background information that may add to our understanding of the reading, and help coordinate discussion. The emphasis is on helping frame and lead the discussion. You want to be pretty familiar with the day's reading and be able to ask good, insightful questions about it; it is not expected, however, that you have all the answers.

Please bring a one page handout (or, better, e-mail it to me and I'll bring copies). The handout should tell a story about the day's reading: the main points, its arc, how the reading takes us from Point A to Point B. It should also list some issues for discussion. I'll provide examples of handouts early in the semester when, by default, I'll be facilitating discussion. I'll also pass around a sign-up sheet early in the semester.

A good facilitation does not just summarize the day's reading. Instead, it extracts the essential issues, the points that are especially interesting or problematic, and the themes that are worth discussing. It doesn't attempt to be absolutely comprehensive and it doesn't miss the forest for the trees. That last point is really important.

A good handout is usually a narrative or story of some kind. It isn't, usually, a list of loosely connected bullet points. In your handout you want to describe a certain kind of trajectory and that means showing connections and how the author builds an argument.

I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout is not a script.

The two facilitations are worth 30% of your final grade.

General Policies and Additional Information

6. I think philosophy in general and epistemology in particular is really wonderful and important. That means I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail. We can also make arrangements to meet over Zoom as well.

7. Similarly, feel free to ask if you have any questions about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation. myCourses sometimes calculates grades in strange and disturbing ways, and I can provide more useful information.

Readings and Assignments

01.10.22	Overview and Introductory Remarks
01.12.22	Lee McIntyre: <i>Post-Truth</i> 1-34
01.14.22	Lee McIntyre: <i>Post-Truth</i> 17-62
01.17.22	No class: Martin Luther King, Jr. Day
01.19.22	Lee McIntyre: <i>Post-Truth</i> 63-87
01.21.22	Lee McIntyre: <i>Post-Truth</i> 89-122
01.24.22	Lee McIntyre: <i>Post-Truth</i> 123-172
01.26.22	Paul Horwich: "What is Truth?" John Capps: "Truth and the Goldilocks Principle"
01.28.22	John Capps: "A Common-Sense Pragmatic Theory of Truth"
01.31.22	Descartes: <i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i> Meditations 1-2 Writing Assignment #1 Due
02.02.22	Edmund Gettier: "Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?"
02.04.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 1-22
02.07.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 23-39
02.09.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 40-79
02.11.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 80-106
02.14.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 107-128
02.16.22	Hilary Kornblith: <i>Scientific Epistemology</i> 129-149
02.18.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 1-17
02.21.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 17-41
02.23.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 41-59 Writing Assignment #2 Due
02.25.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 60-81
02.28.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 81-108
03.02.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 109-128
03.04.22	Miranda Fricker: <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> 129-146

SPRING BREAK

- 03.14.22 Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 147-161
03.16.22 Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice* 161-177
03.18.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 1-20, 192-193
- 03.21.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 20-42, 192-195
03.23.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 42-58, 192-195
Writing Assignment #3 Due
- 03.25.22 Sherrilyn Roush: "Closure on Skepticism" 243-249
- 03.28.22 Sherrilyn Roush: "Closure on Skepticism" 249-256
03.30.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 59-78, 195-196
04.01.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 78-105, 195-197
- 04.04.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 106-127, 197-199
04.06.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 127-150, 197-199
04.08.22 Schwitzgebel and Moore: "Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World" 564-574
- 04.11.22 Schwitzgebel and Moore: "Experimental Evidence for the Existence of an External World" 574-582
- 04.13.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 150-161, 198-200
04.15.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 161-178, 198-200
- 04.18.22 Sarah McGrath: *Moral Knowledge* 178-191, 198-200
04.20.22 L.A. Paul: "What You Can't Expect When You're Expecting"
04.22.22 John Capps: "Even Worse Than it Seems: Transformative Experience and the Selection Problem"
- 04.25.22 Wrap-up and Final Remarks
- 05.02.22 **Writing Assignment #4 Due**
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