

Phil 121 Epistemology Syllabus

Carolina Flores

Class Hours: T-Th 9:50-11:25 am

Classroom: Oakes 106

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Office Hours: T 12:00-13:00; other times by appointment

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Required Texts

All readings, handouts, assignments, and announcements will be posted on Canvas.

Course Description

The environments we navigate can exploit our cognitive vulnerabilities to inculcate in us distorted views of reality. This course is about such epistemically hostile environments, what they are like, how they function on us, and how we can evade their threats and build better ecologies. The course will have two main strands. First, we will focus on how our trust can be exploited and on various pathologies of trust, ranging from failure to trust science when we should to failures to trust marginalized knowers. Second, we will discuss how our agency can be hijacked by misinformation, propaganda, and social and material pressure to attend and think in ways that lead us astray. Throughout, we will be critically reflecting on what it takes to be rational in a hostile world, how much we should value autonomy, how much hope there is for individual action in oppressive structures, and how social, political, and ethical factors matter to knowledge.

Course Goals

In this course, you will:

- Come to grasp central concepts and distinctions in the theory of knowledge.
- Acquire knowledge of central debates and theories at the cutting edge of social and applied epistemology.
- Become more aware of your own epistemic and social values and commitments, and learn to navigate epistemic environments in ways that better reflect them.
- Develop the ability to analyze your epistemic environment and risks in those environments, and to speak intelligently and persuasively about those to others.
- Develop the ability to imagine and argue for better epistemic structures.

In pursuing these course-specific goals, you will also acquire the following general skills:

- To engage in close and charitable readings of sophisticated arguments.
- To criticize views by giving focused objections to them and anticipating replies.
- To communicate complex ideas effectively and concisely.
- To engage in respectful, reasoned, and passionate debate with peers about complex topics that lack clear answers, and to use such debate as a tool for understanding.

Schedule of Topics and Readings (*subject to change*)

Date	Topic	Readings
Jan 9	Intro. Hostile epistemology and situated knowledge.	No reading.
Jan 11		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Thi Nguyen, Hostile epistemology.
Jan 16		NO CLASS ON JAN 16.
Jan 18		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Quill Kukla, Situated knowledge, purity, and moral panic. (Class on zoom)
Jan 23	Trust, experts, and vaccines.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Alex Guerrero, Living with ignorance in a world of experts.
Jan 25		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Maya Goldenberg, Vaccine Hesitancy, chapter 6. DEADLINE: CHOICE OF TOPIC DUE.
Jan 30	Partisanship.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Regina Rini, Fake news and partisan epistemology.
Feb 1		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hrishikesh Joshi, What are the chances you are right about everything?
Feb 6	Epistemic injustice.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Kristie Dotson, Tracking epistemic violence, tracking practices of silencing.
Feb 8		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Miranda Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i>, chapter 7.
Feb 13	White ignorance and standpoint	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Charles Mills, White ignorance.
Feb 15		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Patricia Hill Collins, <i>Black Feminist Thought</i>, chapter 11. VISIT TO THE INSTITUTE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES. DEADLINE: ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY DUE.
Feb 20	Propaganda and ideology.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Cailin O’Connor and James Weatherall, <i>The Misinformation Age</i>, chapter 3.
Feb 22		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Amia Srinivasan, Radical externalism. DEADLINE: LIST OF 5 POTENTIAL INTERVENTIONS DUE.
Feb 27	Online risks.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jessie Munton, Answering machines: How to epistemically evaluate a search engine.
Feb 29		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Regina Rini, Deepfakes and the epistemic backstop.
March 5	Environments that change us.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Sophie Dandelet, Epistemic coercion.
March 7		<ul style="list-style-type: none">Jennifer Morton, Resisting pessimism traps: The limits of believing in oneself.
March 12	Interventions!	No reading. Presentation of final projects.
March 14		
March 22	EXECUTIVE SUMMARIES DUE	

Course Requirements

- **Attendance and participation** (10%)
- **Hypothesis annotations**, due the day before class at 5pm (15%)
- **Weekly forum posts**, due each Wednesday at 5 pm (25%)
- **Final project: design an intervention**; stages and deadlines below (50%)

Attendance and Participation

Attendance is mandatory, with one unexplained absence without penalty. Please notify me in advance if you expect to miss class additional times. Come prepared: do the reading in advance, pay attention, engage with your peers, ask (clarificatory or substantive) questions, and contribute to our collective understanding.

Annotations

By 5pm the day before class (i.e., by Monday at 5pm and Wednesday at 5pm), you must annotate the reading for that class on Hypothesis (lined on Canvas). Hypothesis lets you view others' annotations, upvote your favorites, and comment on others' annotations. Annotations can include: questions on points you don't understand; defining an unfamiliar term in the text after googling; paraphrasing a point the author makes; noting agreement or disagreement and explaining why; giving a short relevant example; responding to your peers' comments.

This will be graded for completion; you can miss one annotation without penalty.

Weekly posts

Each week, I will post a question to the forum. These questions will invite you to apply the week's material to a real-world context, or invite you to reflect on how the content helps you understand aspects of your own experience. Answers should be around 300 words, address each part of the question posed, and be properly structured; treat these as mini-essays. You must post an answer to the forum by Wednesday at 5 pm. You can miss one post without penalty.

The final project

This will be a group project, with 3 members per group. Using the tools of the class, you will identify an instance of epistemic pathology discussed in class: for example, you might focus on addressing anti-science beliefs among certain progressive young people, the silencing of racial minorities in the criminal justice system, or the way in which Google searches obscure sources outside the Global North. You will then propose an intervention to address this pathology. This could consist in a training workshop, an online communications campaign, an app, or an alternative way to design discussion spaces or political decision-making procedures—or in something much more creative than any of these.

This will include the following steps:

- **Jan 25:** Choice of topic and minimal reading list (5%)
- **Feb 15:** 3/4-page annotated bibliography on (I) relevant evidence for the existence of this problem and its contours, (II) interventions that have been attempted, (III) anything else relevant to designing an intervention for this problem (10%)
- **Feb 22:** List of 5 potential interventions, including at least 2 wild ones (5%)
- **March 12 & 14:** In-class pitch of the intervention (15%)
- **March 22:** 2,000-word executive summary of the intervention. This should include identifying the problem, a brief overview of the existing research and interventions, and a description of the proposed intervention, its intended goals, audience, scope, and potential risks (15%)

You can split the work among the 3 group members as you collectively see fit. Except in dire circumstances, all group members will receive the same grade.

A note on ChatGPT and other AI tools

Using ChatGPT to write for you is plagiarism and a waste of your time as a participant in this course, and therefore not allowed in this class.

However, I allow reasonable uses of AI as an aid in research and writing. For example, you may use ChatGPT to help you rephrase or streamline your writing; to get ideas for additional arguments or counter-arguments to a view you are exploring; to clarify your understanding of concepts and theories discussed in the class.

If you use it as an aid in writing, please write a brief explanation at the end of your paper of how and where you used ChatGPT. For gathering information, I advise caution, as ChatGPT has been known to produce non-existent sources or invalid arguments. If using ChatGPT to check your understanding or research sources, always double check.

Other Expectations

I expect you to be familiar with and to abide by the university's policy on academic and intellectual integrity. Violations of this policy include cheating, fabrication, plagiarism, denying others access to information or material, and facilitating violations of academic integrity.

I also expect all participants to observe basic norms of civility and respect. This means stating your own views directly and substantively: focusing on reasons, assumptions, and consequences rather than on who is offering them, or how. And it means engaging other's views in the same terms. No topic or claim is too obvious or controversial to be discussed; but claims and opinions have a place in the discussion only when they are presented in a respectful, collegial, and constructive way.

Accommodations

If you need to be absent for religious observances, let me know in advance. I will excuse without penalty students who are absent from class because of religious observance and allow the make-up of work missed because of such absence.

UC Santa Cruz is committed to creating an academic environment that supports its diverse student body. If you are a student with a disability who requires accommodations to achieve equal access in this course, please submit your [Academic Access Letter](#) from the Disability Resource Center (DRC) to me privately during my office hours or by appointment, as soon as possible in the academic quarter, preferably within 1 week. I also encourage you to discuss with me ways we can ensure your full participation in this course. I encourage all students who may benefit to learn about the DRC and the UCSC accommodation process. You can visit the DRC website at drc.ucsc.edu. You can make an appointment and meet in-person with a DRC staff member. The phone number is [831-459-2089](tel:831-459-2089), or email drc@ucsc.edu.