

Topics in Analytic Philosophy: Social and Political Epistemology Syllabus

Carolina Flores

Class Hours: Monday and Thursday, 9-11am

Classroom: C136.A on Monday, C248.B on Thursday

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Required Texts

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

Course Description

In this class, we will explore issues raised by the fact that our epistemic agency is deeply socially and politically embedded: Who should we trust? Do social factors inevitably affect what we know? How can we be epistemically good when the world is epistemically bad? How does social identity affect what we know? Can we have a true democracy in the face of our ignorance and reasoning difficulties? How do technology and propaganda affect our ability to know? One practical overarching goal is to collectively come to a clearer understanding of (a) how our social and political environment can exploit our cognitive vulnerabilities in ways that lead us astray, and (b) how we can design epistemically better social structures and political institutions.

The class will be discussion-based, and with a focus on topics of direct real-world relevance.

Course Goals

In this course, you will:

- Acquire **knowledge of central debates** about the scope of the social in epistemology in recent decades, as well as specific debates about central topics in social and political epistemology.
- Develop a **clear grasp of the concepts and theories** social and political epistemologists have developed to help us understand and respond to social and political epistemic pathologies;
- Develop the ability to **apply** concepts and theories social and political epistemologists have developed to critically assess the broad socio-political context and your conduct and interactions.

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 in your writing.
- 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 the social world.

Schedule of Topics and Readings

The schedule is provisional. Additional reading materials can be provided by request.

Date	Topic	Readings
Unit 1. Deeply Social Epistemology		
Feb 9	Introduction	Syllabus
Feb 12	Epistemology crash course	Watch Wi-Phi videos on epistemology
Feb 19	Is knowledge “neutral”?	Quill Kukla, “Situated Knowledge, Purity, and Moral Panic”
Feb 23	How autonomous can we be in acquiring knowledge?	John Hardwig, “Epistemic Dependence”
Feb 26		Annette Baier, “Trust and Anti-Trust”
March 2	How can we be epistemically good in a non-ideal world?	Amia Srinivasan, “Radical Externalism”
March 5		Zoe Johnson King, “Radical Internalism”
Unit 2. The Social Dynamics of Knowledge		
March 9	In what ways are our knowledge-producing practices unjust?	Miranda Fricker, <i>Epistemic Injustice</i> , chapters 1 and 7
March 12		
March 16	What is ignorance and how is it sustained?	Charles Mills, “White Ignorance”
March 19		+ Field visit to the ethnology museum on March 19 (with graded written reflection)
March 23	Do the marginalized know best?	Alison Wylie, “Why Standpoint Matters”
March 26		Lidal Dror, “Is There an Epistemic Advantage to Being Oppressed?” Olufemi Taiwo, “Being-in-the-Room Privilege”
Unit 3. Knowledge and Politics		
April 6	Are we too stupid, lazy, and ignorant to live in a functioning democracy?	Larry Achen and Christopher Bartels, <i>Democracy for Realists</i> , chapters 2 and 5

Date	Topic	Readings
April 9	<u>NOTE: NO CLASS APRIL 13; ROOM A201-Anfiteatro III on April 6</u>	Maxime Lepoutre, “Democratic Group Cognition”
April 16		Alex Guerrero, “The Epistemic Pathology of Elections and the Epistemic Promise of Lottocracy”
April 20	How does misinformation work and what threat does it pose?	Caillin O’Connor and James Weatherall, <i>The Misinformation Age: How False Beliefs Spread</i> , chapter 3
April 23		Daniel Williams, “The Marketplace of Rationalizations”
April 27	What is the role of truth in politics?	Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics”
April 30		Harry Frankfurt, “On Bullshit” + Guidelines on writing philosophy
May 4	NO CLASS	
May 7	How should we use generative AI if we care about knowledge? ON ZOOM	Shannon Vallor, <i>The AI Mirror</i> , chapter 4
May 11		Workshop on guidelines for using generative AI (with graded written reflection)
May 14	What are echo chambers and should we worry about them?	Thi Nguyen, “Epistemic Bubbles and Echo Chambers”
		Jennifer Lackey, “Echo Chambers, Fake News, and Social Epistemology” (backgrounded)
May 18	Outline workshop	None
May 21	Structured time to work on paper	None
May 25	Active course review	
May 28	Draft workshop	None
June 7	Final papers due	

Course Requirements

In percentages:

Task	Due date	Points
Attendance and participation (via exit tickets; can miss 3 without penalty)	End of each class	25%
Two in-class writing exercises	March 19 and May 11	15% (7.5% each)
Final paper		60% of total grade, split as follows:
Topic Proposals	May 7, 11:59 pm	2.5%
Outline	May 16, 11:59 pm	7.5%
Paper Draft	May 26, 11:59pm	12.5%
Response to feedback	June 7, 11:59pm	5%
Final paper	June 7, 11:59pm	32.5%

Instructions for assignments and rubrics

Attendance and Participation

Attending every class is mandatory, though you can miss 3 classes without penalty. There is no need to notify me in advance before you miss class. Any additional absences require official justification (e.g. a doctor's note).

I expect you to do the reading for the week by the class on Monday. In general, on Mondays we will focus on collectively understanding the material in those readings. Thursdays will assume solid knowledge and understanding of those readings and will be used for activities that aim to have you think about and debate the topic of the week, apply what we learned, and develop key philosophical skills.

This course will be a collaborative investigation of the social and political dimensions of our epistemic agency. This means that the class depends on your active participation and appropriate preparation. You must pay attention in class, be engaged, and ask questions and make points that advance our collective understanding. And you must carefully do the assigned reading before every class and come prepared with questions (which can be clarificatory or substantive), objections, and alternative views.

Attendance will be taken via short (1-3 sentence) written reflections at the end of each class, based on a prompt I will give you. These will be graded based on completion.

Two in-class writing exercises

On March 19 (pending confirmation), we will have a field trip to the National Ethnology Museum to the exhibition “Deconstructing Colonialism, Decolonizing the Imaginary”. Based on that visit, you will have 30 minutes to produce a written reflection employing relevant key course concepts.

On May 14, we will collectively arrive at guidelines for generative AI use for the final paper. You will be graded on your participation in this process and on the quality of the final result that we collectively arrive at (how thorough and clearly stated these guidelines are).

The final paper

Papers should be submitted as .pdfs. The paper should be a reasoned defense of a view, addressing some of the topics discussed in the class. The goal is for you to write a ~2000-word essay which engages closely with 1-2 of the course readings, on a topic of your own crafting.

The final paper will include **multiple stages** and **in-class workshops**. All work be submitted via Moodle, by the deadline, in a standard font, size 12, double-spaced. With those specifications, the outline should be 1-2 pages. The paper draft should be 1500-2500 words, and the final paper 1700-2300 words. The response to feedback should be 1-2 pages.

You can request one penalty-free 24-hour extension. Being late (up to 24 hours) on additional assignments will dock 10% from that assignment. **No assignments will be accepted 24 hours after the corresponding deadline.**

I will give you feedback on intermediary materials. You will also participate in two in-class workshops, one where you will give each other structured feedback on outlines, the other on drafts.

Rubric for the potential topics

You have to hand in 2 (optionally: 3) potential topics to me, which I will give you feedback on. These will be graded incomplete (0); poor effort (3 points); and complete (5 points):

- 100% (5 points): poses 2 questions, explains why those questions are interesting to you, and notes what readings you would engage with.
- 80% (3 points): only proposes one question or proposes two questions but without the required explanation.
- 0% (0): not handed in by the hard deadline of May 8.

Rubric for the outline and paper draft

The outline and paper draft are meant to be exploratory, revealing of real effort and thinking, but by no means perfect. This is reflected in the rubric. Below is roughly what each grade range (out of 20) means.

17.5-20: The selected question is (at least close to) appropriate: relevant to the course, interesting, and not overly ambitious. The outline/draft fully answers the question. It includes a sketch of what could be turned into a strong argument, though at this stage there might be imprecisions and gaps. It considers an objection. It is clear enough that it can be easily understood. More importantly, it shows independent and creative thinking, going beyond what we discussed in class, as well as making a serious attempt to grapple with some of the key relevant concepts and ideas we have covered in the course.

15.5-17.4: The question is appropriate and mostly answered, showing some independent thinking, but it is missing crucial parts of the argumentative structure or does not consider an objection.

12.5-15.4: It does not show independent thinking, merely providing a rote summary of points made in class, despite fully answering an appropriate question. OR: Despite fully answering an appropriate question, it fails to engage with key concepts and ideas covered in the course, with the analysis staying at a superficial level. OR: the question asked is faulty (not relevant, not interesting, or too ambitious), in a way that irredeemably compromises the quality of the work.

9.5-12.4: Although the paper discusses a topic relevant to the class, it shows significant confusion throughout, such that I expect you to need to start from scratch.

Below 9.5: Scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions, or plagiarized work, including work that appears to be entirely AI-generated.

Rubric for the Final Paper

Below is roughly what various grade ranges mean for the final paper.

17.5-20: Provides a strong argument, with a clearly stated, relevant thesis, a transparent argument structure, and compelling premises. Considers objections and makes a persuasive effort to address them. Writes clearly, in plain language, and uses terminology in a precise manner. Shows insight by going beyond views or objections discussed in class.

15.5-17.4: Provides a solid argument, with a clear thesis, mostly transparent argument structure, and relevant premises, though the argument may have some gaps or fail to go beyond views discussed in class. Displays understanding of the topic by considering other views, though perhaps without articulating points independently or while showing confusion about some non-central interpretative point. Writes mostly in a clear manner, though there might be inaccuracies that compromise the points made.

12.5-15.4: Makes an attempt at providing an argument for a relevant thesis, though the thesis may be stated only obliquely or the argument may contain significant gaps. Does not show detailed understanding of views discussed in class, although these are discussed. The writing contains significant inaccuracies and the structure of the paper might be muddled, but the overall argumentative structure can still be followed with some effort.

9.5-12.4: Although the paper discusses a topic relevant to the class, it fails to provide an argument for a thesis and does not engage in any meaningful way with readings or discussions in class. The writing contains sizable inaccuracies and the paper is poorly structured.

Below 9.5: Scarce evidence of effort or understanding along all dimensions, or plagiarized work, including work that appears to be entirely AI-generated.

Rubric for the response to feedback

Jointly with the final paper, you will be requested to submit a summary of how you implemented feedback (coming from either the outline workshop, the paper draft workshop, or from me). This will be graded out of 5 as follows, with grades ending in 0.5 for fine-tuning:

- **5 points:** clearly and specifically notes at least 3 pieces of feedback received, as well as summarizing how they are addressed and in what ways addressing them improved the paper.
- **4 points:** does the same as above, but only for 2 pieces of feedback. Or: notes 3 pieces of feedback, but for one of them precisely one of how it is addressed or how doing so improved the paper is not clear.
- **3 points:** Notes 2 or 3 pieces of feedback, but only for one of them is it clear how it is addressed and how doing so improved the paper.
- **2 points:** only considers one piece of feedback, but does it well. Or: considers 2 or 3 pieces of feedback, but why those were chosen and how they were addressed is not clear for any of them.
- **1 point:** only considers one piece of feedback, and there are issues there.
- **0 points:** unintelligible and unrelated.

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.

If you need to be absent for religious observances, let me know in advance and your absence will be excused. If you need special accommodations because of a learning disability or any other reason, please get in touch so that we can make a plan.

In the classroom, no technology use is allowed except if you're instructed to use a device for a classroom activity. Please bring a notebook to take notes and do activities by hand. (See [this](#) for evidence against using technology in the classroom.) If you need a reasonable accommodation to this policy (e.g. you've got a wrist problem that means you can't take notes by hand), come talk to me.

As for **use of generative AI tools**: we will collectively settle on guidelines for acceptable use for the final paper on May 14.