

Introduction to Epistemology

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Fridays 3:30-6:15PM, MaClean 112,

Why should I want to study epistemology?

You care about *knowledge*, don't you? Even if knowledge is hard to define, we all have a sense that it's both desirable and important. It's also a topic that introduces a lot of interesting philosophical questions:

- Questions about the *nature* of knowledge (example: 'Does knowledge require certainty?')
- Questions about the *extent* of knowledge (example: 'Do we actually have knowledge in the sciences?')
- Questions about the *normativity* of knowledge (example: 'Do we owe it to people to recognize them as knowers?')

This class is about knowledge ('epistemology' = theory of knowledge). You'll benefit from this class by learning how to make distinctions, come up with and evaluate arguments, and critically think about this philosophical topic. You'll also be able to talk about some notable people and ideas from philosophy that you'll learn about in the readings and the lecture. On that note...

What's the approach to learning in this class?

In class, you'll be able to learn through:

- Lecture
- Discussion
- Hands-on activities

Outside of class, you'll be able to learn through:

- Reading
- Online surveys
- Weekly (short) writing assignments (always due on Wednesdays!)
- A mid-term essay
- A final recorded presentation

The *content* for the course comes through lectures and assigned readings. The lectures will help you consolidate the readings from each week. The readings for each week are organized around a "driving question." While I use slides to lecture on the driving question each week, the slides mostly exist to remind me what I'll be explaining *without* slides.

All that said, a lot of the learning will come through *application* of the content—through group discussion, online participation (again think surveys), and in writing and presenting your own ideas.

What will I need for this class?

You would need this book:

- McCain, K (2021). *Epistemology: 50 puzzles, paradoxes, and thought experiments*. Routledge.

All other readings will be available on Canvas.

What about attendance?

If you stick with this class, you'll have at your disposal two free absences—no questions asked. But, otherwise, I reserve the right to dock points if you don't notify me ahead of time about the reason for why you might be absent. Some reasons are good, some reasons aren't so good. A medical emergency, for example, is a reason that makes sense. If you're in doubt about whether your reason makes sense, just ask. Also, if you've made it to this point in your reading of the syllabus, stop what you're doing, get your laptop or phone out, and send me a picture a Dinosaur via email (let's see if you read this far!).

Wait, what were the assignments?

There are three main assignments in this class:

- Reading Assessments
- Midterm Essay
- A recorded presentation

Reading assessments. Every Wednesday, by 11:59 PM, there will be a reading assessment due. To complete it, you have to pick **one** of the readings that's due for the following class session (so, you'll complete a reading assessment by Wednesday for one of the readings assigned for the Friday class that meets two days later). Each reading assessment has four questions (I'll say more about this).

Notice what this means: officially, you are accountable to only *one* of the readings each week. So, again, officially, you're only required to read one of the readings for that week. You can pick any one you'd like. I want this to be a "choose your own adventure" sort of affair (of course, it can only help and give you more context the more material you read).

Midterm essay. I'll say more about the requirements when the time comes. But it's a 900 word essay.

Recorded presentation. This assignment requires that you record a presentation (think recording your voice over power point slides). The point of this assignment is to encourage you to apply the materials learned to a topic that interests you (subject to my approval; you'll have more instructions for this assignment weeks in advance of the due date).

How am I graded?

This will be the official grade distribution:

- Participation and Attendance: 10%
- Reading assessments: 30%
- Midterm essay: 30%
- Recorded presentation: 30%

At the SAIC, you're ultimately graded on a credit/no credit basis. So, you might be asking, what gives with the percentages?

Here's the deal. You will receive credit for this class *if*: You complete every assignment and have an overall grade of at least 80%.

Is there anything else I need to know?

Two more things.

On plagiarism. While it's not something I expect to happen, I take the possibility seriously. Honesty is essential in creating an environment of trust in the workplace, and you should see this class as an opportunity to train for how you will conduct yourself "on the job," so to speak. Please be mindful of the SAIC's standards: <https://www.saic.edu/libraries-special-collections/john-m-flaxman-library/visiting-borrowing/academic-integrity>

When in doubt, *always* ask. If you have any concerns or questions regarding how to avoid plagiarism, I will be happy to be a resource to you.

On accommodations. Students who require special accommodations should consult the university's disability and learning resource center: <https://www.saic.edu/life-at-saic/wellness-center/disability>

I hope you enjoy what the course has to offer!

Reading Schedule

(Note that the chili pepper means the reading is on the more difficult side)

February 2nd:

Driving Question: What is knowledge?

- Plato, "Dialogue with Theaetetus" (Canvas)
- McCain, Part 1: General Background: the traditional account of knowledge
- McCain, Part 1: Promotions and Traveling Friends: the Gettier Problem

February 9th

Driving Question: Does knowledge require certainty?

- McCain, Part 5: Lottery Paradox
- Russell, "Knowledge, Error, and Probable Opinion" (Canvas)
- Descartes, 1st and 2nd Meditations in *Meditations on First Philosophy* (Canvas)
- Climenhaga, "A Cumulative Case Argument for Infallibilism" (Canvas) 🌶️

February 16th

Driving Question: Does knowledge require certainty?

- McCain, Part 5: Preface Paradox
- Reed, "Fallibilism" 🌶️
- Beddor, "New Work for Certainty" (Canvas; you only need to read 1-2.2)
- **Supplemental but not an official reading option:** Lauffer, "Infallibilism, Closure, and Skepticism" (Canvas)

February 23rd

Driving Question: What's the nature of epistemic justification?

- McCain, Part 3: General Background: The Nature of Justification
- Aristotle, "A Refutation of the Error into which Some have Fallen Concerning Science and Demonstration" (Canvas)
- Smithies, "Why Justification Matters" (Canvas) 🌶️
- Smithies, "Can Foundationalism Solve the Regress Problem?" (Canvas) 🌶️

March 1st

Driving Question: Do we know anything?

- McCain, Part 2: General Background: Skepticism
- McCain, Part 2: Descartes' Demon
- McCain, Part 2: Descartes' Dream
- Huemer, "Three Skeptical Arguments" (Canvas)

March 8th

Driving Question: Do we know anything?

- McCain, Part 3: The Unfortunate Twin
- Moore, "Proof of an External World" (Canvas)
- Huemer, "Serious Theories and Skeptical Theories: Why You are Probably not a Brain in a Vat" (Canvas) 🍷
- Rinard, "Reasoning One's Way out of Skepticism" (Canvas) 🍷

March 15th

Spring Break!

March 22nd

Driving Question: Do we have knowledge in the sciences?

- Hume, Selection from "An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding" (Canvas)
- Salmon, "The Problem of Induction" (Canvas)
- McCain, Part 5: A Gruesome Riddle
- McCain, Part 5: Raven's Paradox
- Goldberg, "What Epistemologists of Testimony Should Learn from Philosopher's of Science" (Canvas) 🍷

March 29th

Driving Question: Do we have knowledge about morality?

- McGrath, "Moral Knowledge by Perception" (Canvas)
- Huemer, "Revisionary Intuitionism" (Canvas)

April 5th

Driving Question: Is knowledge even what we're aiming for?

- Hawthorne, Rothschild, and Spectre, "Belief is Weak" (Canvas)
- van Elswyk and Willard-Kyle, "Hedging and the Norm of Belief" (Canvas)
- **Supplemental but not an official reading option:** Lauffer, "A Defense of the Knowledge Norm of Belief (sort of)" (Canvas)

April 12th

Driving Question: Do we have to know what we say?

- Lackey, "Norms of Assertion" (Canvas)
- Benton, "Knowledge is the Norm of Assertion" (Canvas)
- Mandelkern and Dorst, "Assertion is Weak" (Canvas) 🍷
- van Elswyk and Benton, "Assertion Remains Strong" (Canvas) 🍷

April 19th

Driving Question: What's the social significance of knowledge?

- McCain, Part 4: General Background: Social Epistemology
- McCain, Part 4: He Can't Possibly Know
- McCain, Part 4: What's Harassment?
- Fricker, "Epistemic Justice and a Role for Virtue in the Politics of Knowing" (Canvas)

April 26th – May 10th

TBD!