B. **<u>Theory of Knowledge for a Polarized Age</u>**
Sanford Goldberg, Professor, Philosophy
Tuesdays, 1:00 - 2:30 p.m. Norris University Center

This class will explore the prospects for acquiring knowledge in a highly polarized world and the challenges we face in our attempts to do so. We will examine what knowledge is, why polarization threatens it, and how the sources of the threat might be managed. The class will combine areas of philosophy (epistemology, or the theory of knowledge) and cognitive science (cognitive psychology). Above all, we will try to understand why many people think that understanding the nature of and prospects for knowledge is more important today than it has been in decades.

UNIT 1: THE BASICS

Sep. 16 Knowledge
This class session provides an introduction to the theory of knowledge: the questions that it addresses, and the concepts it employs. In this way we will be laying the groundwork for the terminology we will be using for the rest of the quarter. Key questions include: What is knowledge? How can we tell if we have it? Can we ever be certain? And are there reasons to doubt that we ever acquire it? In addressing these questions, we will be introducing some basic concepts, including *truth, judgment, belief, evidence, reasons, rationality, reliability, responsibility, fallibility,* and *degrees of confidence*.

Supplementary Reading: Jennifer Nagel, *Knowledge: A Very Short Introduction*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.)

Sep. 23 NO CLASS - Rosh Hashanah

Sep. 30 Testimony
This class session provides an introduction to one particularly important source of knowledge: other people's testimony or say-so. We explore our unavoidable intellectual dependence on others, as well as the prevalence of the knowledge which this dependence makes possible. We explore the hypothesis of *the division of intellectual labor*. And we discuss the ways in which our intellectual dependence on others enables the highest forms of human culture (art, science, philosophy), while it also exposes us to the characteristically human risk of being manipulated by others. Key questions include: what policy should we adopt towards the say-so of our fellows? Are there ways to assess what others tell us to ensure that we only accept what is true? Why are many people overly credulous on some occasions, yet overly skeptical on others?

Supplementary Reading: Joe Shieber, *Testimony: A Philosophical Introduction* (NY: Routledge, 2015.)

Oct. 7 Trust
This class session introduces students to the theoretical issues surrounding the phenomenon of trust. We contrast various disciplinary approaches to trust – economic, psychological, and philosophical. Key questions include: Is trust fundamentally an emotional phenomenon? an intellectual phenomenon? both? neither? How does trust relate to things like faith, belief, hope, or taking things for granted? Is there any sense to the idea that human beings are trusting by nature? When is it rational to trust?

Supplementary Reading: Katherine Hawley, *Trust: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.)

Oct. 14 Expertise
This class session introduces students to the theoretical issues concerning expertise. The aim will be to characterize what it is, how we recognize it, and what role(s) it can and should play in our society. Key questions include: is there such a thing as politically neutral expertise? How, if at all, can non-experts reach reasonable decisions about which experts to trust? What is the relationship between expertise and professionalization? or between expertise and certification/credentialization?

Supplementary Reading: David Caudill, *Expertise in Crisis: The Ideological Contours of Public Scientific Controversies* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2023.)

Oct. 21 Disagreement
This class session introduces students to the problem of disagreement. We will be exploring the nature and sources of disagreement, as well as the ways people respond to disagreements. Key questions include: Why do people disagree – and why are disagreements so prevalent? Is it ever rational to "agree to disagree," and if so, under what conditions? Should we expect that – at least in the long run – all matters of fact will ultimately be settled, without any leftover disagreements? How should we approach disagreements over values?

Supplementary Reading: Dan Sperber and Hugo Mercier, *The Enigma of Reason: A New Theory of Human Understanding* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019.)

(cont'd) **Theory of Knowledge for a Polarized Age**

UNIT 2: THREATS

Oct. 28 **Socio-Epistemic Dysfunctions I: Epistemic Injustice**

This class introduces students to the phenomenon of epistemic injustice – a social dysfunction that affects what we know and who we regard as knowledgeable. One form is present when individuals give less credence than is deserved to a speaker in virtue of her social identity; the other form is present when a community lacks relevant terminology to describe important aspects of human experience, where this absence of vocabulary protects powerful interests. (Consider women's experience with "unwanted flirtation" before the introduction of the term "sexual harassment.") After introducing students to these phenomena, we proceed to some key questions: how prevalent are these dysfunctions? What makes them something that we should all worry about? How can individuals respond to them? Are there social or institutional responses that are called for?

Supplementary Reading: Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.)

Nov. 4 **Socio-Epistemic Dysfunctions II: Ignorance**

Ignorance is a familiar phenomenon: each of us is ignorant of a great many things. Often this is no cause for concern: it doesn't matter much that I am ignorant of the back-up second-baseman for the 1922 Chicago Cubs, or that you don't know who played second viola for the Greensburg, PA orchestra in 1999. But some theorists have noted that our ignorance often follows certain patterns, and these patterns can reveal important aspects of our self-interest. In this class session we review work in the theory of ignorance; we discuss how an understanding of the ways in which ignorance patterns across a population can tell us a good deal about the population's values and its politics. Key questions include: What basis is there for thinking that ignorance patterns in populations? What might explain these patterns? What can we learn about our communities from these questions?

Supplementary Reading: Margaret Heffernan, *Willful Blindness: Why We Ignore the Obvious* (NY: Bloomsbury, 2012.)

Nov. 11 Socio-Epistemic Dysfunctions III: Bubbles and Echo Chambers

This class introduces students to the familiar notions of intellectual bubbles and echo chambers. We explore what they are, why they form, and how they affect our belief system. Key questions include: How can one tell if one is in an intellectual bubble or echo chamber? Are there techniques for minimizing the effect these have on our thinking? And is there such a thing as a helpful or good bubble or echo chamber – or are they problematic by nature?

Supplementary Reading: Michael Lynch, *The Internet of Us: Knowing More and Understanding Less in the Age of Big Data* (NY: Liveright, 2016.)

Nov. 18 Socio-Epistemic Dysfunctions IV: Polarization

In this concluding class we will explore the most well-known of intellectual challenges: the challenge of polarization. We will identify several different notions of polarization, go over various theories as to why we polarize in these ways, and discuss what can be done in the face of such widespread polarization. Key questions include: What is it about polarization that has made this the number one intellectual concern on many people's minds? What makes polarization a bad thing – and is it always a bad thing? What can be done by individuals to face up to the threat of polarization? Is there anything that can be done by groups or institutions?

Supplementary Reading: Ezra Klein, *Why We're Polarized* (NY: Simon and Schuster, 2021.)