Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge

Department Website: https://sifk.uchicago.edu/

Executive Director

• Macol Stewart Cerda

The Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge (SIFK) opened in the fall of 2015 at the University of Chicago as a focal point for scholars to ask, What do we know?

In the current era, this question is more confusing than ever, and answers are hard to come by. We face unreliable news, non-replicable scientific experiments, masses of data, groupthink, cultural relativism, confusion about values, entrenched beliefs, and more.

In such an environment, we seek new methods for asking about the world. At the Stevanovich Institute on the Formation of Knowledge, we aim to understand how factors like history, politics, culture and religion can shape knowledge — year in and year out, over decades, over centuries. We believe that to understand a phenomenon, one must approach from a number of different fields, and with sensitivity to context. As no area of knowledge arises in a vacuum, we underplay the division of knowledge into departments within the university, offering KNOW classes that bring together perspectives from a number of fields.

Join us for a KNOW class as we try to find new answers to some of the largest and most perennial questions, all bearing on what it means to be human in the 21st century. We offer undergraduates and graduate students team-taught classes that challenge conventional wisdom across the board.

KNOW courses are cross-listed with a variety of departments, so students can enroll in them as a major course with their department's course number or as an elective with the KNOW course number. For graduate students, we offer a number of cross-listed seminars as well as an annual core sequence in topics in the formation of knowledge (KNOW 401, 402, 403). These seminars are open to all graduate students regardless of field of study.

For up-to-date course listings, visit sifk.uchicago.edu/courses.

Departmental Contacts

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KNOW Courses

KNOW 30926. Wonder, Wonders, and Knowing. 100 Units.
In wonder is the beginning of philosophy," wrote Aristotle; Descartes also thought that those deficient in wonder were also deficient in knowledge. But the relationship between wonder and inquiry has always been an ambivalent one: too much wonder stupefies rather than stimulates investigation, according to Descartes; Aristotle explicitly excluded wonders as objects of inquiry from natural philosophy. Since the sixteenth century, scientists and scholars have both cultivated and repudiated the passion of wonder; ON the one hand, marvels (or even just anomalies) threaten to subvert the human and natural orders; on the other, the wonder they ignite fuels inquiry into their causes. Wonder is also a passion tinged with the numinous, and miracles have long stood for the inexplicable in religious contexts. This seminar will explore the long, vexed relationship between wonder, knowledge, and belief in the history of philosophy, science, and religion.
Instructor(s): Lorraine Daston Terms Offered: Spring. Course to be taught Spring 2020
Prerequisite(s): Reading knowledge of at least one language besides English, some background in intellectual history. Consent is required for both grads and undergrads. This course will be taught the first five weeks of the quarter.
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 30936, PHIL 30926, HIST 35318, SCTH 30926, HIST 25318

KNOW 31401. Philosophy of History: Narrative & Explanation. 100 Units.
This lecture-discussion course will focus on the nature of historical explanation and the role of narrative in providing an understanding of historical events. Among the authors discussed are Edward Gibbon, Immanuel Kant, R. G. Collingwood, Leopold von Ranke, Lord Acton, Fernand Braudel, Carl Gustav Hempel, Arthur Danto, and Hayden White. (III)
Instructor(s): R. Richards Terms Offered: Winter
Equivalent Course(s): HIST 25110, PHIL 30506, CHSS 35110, HIST 35110, HIPS 25110, PHIL 20506
KNOW 34112. Screening India: Bollywood and Beyond. 100 Units.
Cinema is, unarguably, the medium most apposite for thinking through the complexities of democratic politics, especially so in a place like India. While Indian cinema has recently gained international currency through the song and dance ensembles of Bollywood, there remains much more to be said about that body of films. Moreover, Bollywood is a small (though very important) part of Indian cinema. Through a close analysis of a wide range of films in Hindi, Bengali, Kannada, and Urdu, this course will ask if Indian cinema can be thought of as a form of knowledge of the twentieth century.
Instructor(s): R. Majumdar Terms Offered: Spring
Equivalent Course(s): GNSE 34112, CMST 24112, HIST 36808, CMST 34112, SALC 20511, HIST 26808, GNSE 24112, KNOW 24112, SALC 30511

KNOW 35000. Winckelmann: Enlightenment Art Historian and Philosopher. 100 Units.
We approach the first great modern art historian through reading his classic early and mature writings and through the art and criticism of his time (and at the end, our own). Reading-intensive, with a field trip to the Art Institute.
Instructor(s): Andrei Pop Terms Offered: Autumn
Prerequisite(s): German reading competence helpful, but NOT required.
Equivalent Course(s): ARTH 35115, GRMN 35015, ARTH 25115, GRMN 25015, CLAS 35014, SCTH 35000

KNOW 37016. Comparative Metahistory. 100 Units.
The seminar will focus on classical, medieval, and modern historiography from China, India, and Tibet seeking answers to three general questions: (1) How are senses of historical time created in Asian historiographies by means of rhetorical figures of repetition, parallelism, dramatic enactment, frame stories, and interweaving storyline? (2) How are historical persons and events given meaning through use of poetic devices, such as comparison, simile, and metaphor? And (3) how do Asian histories impose themselves as realistic accounts of the past by means of authoritative devices using citation of temporal-spatial facts, quotation of authority, and/or reliance on established historical genres? The methods employed to answer these questions are here adapted from pre-modern Asian knowledge systems of literary theory, poetics, dramaturgy, and epistemology, and thus permit looking at other knowledge formations from within the discourse of the traditions themselves.
Instructor(s): Haun Saussy (University of Chicago) & Ulrich Timme Krugh (Adam Mickiewicz University, Poland) Terms Offered: Autumn
Equivalent Course(s): EALC 27016, CMLT 27016, EALC 37016, KNOW 27016

KNOW 40104. Battle in the Mind Fields. 100 Units.
Course Description TBA
Instructor(s): John Goldsmith Terms Offered: Autumn
Equivalent Course(s): LING 26550, LING 36555

KNOW 40205. Ecological Thinking. 100 Units.
What is the environment, anyway? Is it a collection of resources? An entity in need of protection? An autonomous state of being? In this course, we will engage with writers and thinkers who have grappled with what it means to think ecologically. We will examine how environmental concerns have reached across borders to shape law, culture, and theories of knowledge on a global scale. Course themes will include environmental justice, the energy humanities, postcolonial environmentalisms, ecocriticism, ecofeminism, queer ecologies, and critical life studies. Readings will include works by Rachel Carson, William Cronon, Lawrence Buell, Helena Maria Viramontes, Christopher Stone, Rob Nixon, Tamara Giles-Vernick, Timothy Morton, and others.
Instructor(s): Nicolette I. Bruner Terms Offered: Winter
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 40205

KNOW 40206. Assaulting the Paradigm: Franz Boas and His Contemporaries. 100 Units.
How do ideas succeed? What challenges do those who voice new ideas face as they try to gain adherents, and how do they rise to influence against the odds? This course examines how the unexpected, the unconventional, and the radically original can dethrone accepted truths. We will investigate this question through a case study of the anthropologist Franz Boas and his contemporaries, who assaulted the paradigm of race at the turn of the twentieth century. In addition to reading Boas, we will study the works of John Dewey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Sigmund Freud, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Margaret Mead, and Thorstein Veblen. By tracing the mutual influence between Boas and thinkers in fields from psychology to philosophy, we can examine how knowledge is contested and propagated—including the challenges those who frame ideas face as they break away from the pack, the role of social networks in the success of concepts that go “against the grain” of conventional wisdom, and the special agency of multidisciplinary collaboration in the periods of ferment produced when authority is tested and new ideas are demanded.
Instructor(s): Isaiah Lorado Wilner Terms Offered: Winter
Equivalent Course(s): ANTH 44810, CHSS 40206
KNOW 40207. Human Rights and Humanitarianism in the Modern World. 100 Units.

The related concepts of human rights and humanitarianism form the basis of contemporary ethical and political thought. Acting in the name of “humanity” is seen as unequivocally noble, and very few of us would ever claim to be anti-humanitarian or anti-human rights. Yet the moral consensus surrounding these terms obscures a contested and often disturbing history. Rather than uncritically accepting a triumphalist story of the progressive victory of human rights and humanitarianism, this course will explore how these concepts were constructed over time, paying special attention to how they were used in practice, what kind of rhetorical work they accomplished, and whose interests they served. The course will consider the origins of modern concepts of humanity, rights, citizenship, and social responsibility during the enlightenment and trace how they developed over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. We will study the role of human rights and humanitarianism in the transformative events and processes of modern history, including the rise of nation-states, the trans-Atlantic slave trade and its abolition, imperial expansion and decolonization, the world wars, and twentieth-century genocides. Students will leave the course with an understanding of how human rights and humanitarianism can be applied to their own research interests.

Instructor(s): Yan Slobodkin Terms Offered: Winter
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 40207

KNOW 40208. Man and/as Machine. 100 Units.

Recently, Amazon employees fighting for better working conditions united under the slogan "We are not robots!" Recalling Karl Capek’s R.U.R., which coined the word robot (from the Czech word for slave), the slogan suggests the importance of the machine as an object and a concept in relation to which human identity has been - and continues to be - defined. Throughout the history of human thought, the machine has existed as both something that we are like (for example, Descartes comparing the brain to a machine) but also as an opposite to humanity (as in the aforementioned slogan). This course will trace this tension between the machine as an 'Other' and as a metaphor for our human self from the early modern period to the present. Beginning with theoretical and philosophical writing on the importance of oppositions and binaries to human identity and language, it will trace the history of the idea of the machine as it relates to the human in texts by Rene Descartes, La Mettrie, Emile Zola, Karl Capek, Alan Turing, and Donna Haraway, among others. In addition to confronting the complexity and ambiguity of a concept that ubiquitously shapes our lives today, students in this course will also wrestle with broader humanistic questions regarding the nature of the Self, the boundaries between self and other, and the relationship between human identity and technology.

Instructor(s): Anastasia Klimchynskaya Terms Offered: Winter
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 40208

KNOW 40304. Between Nature and Artifice: The Formation of Scientific Knowledge. 100 Units.

This course critically examines concepts of "nature" and "artifice" in the formation of scientific knowledge, from the Babylonians to the Romantics, and the ways that this history has been written and problematized by both canonical and less canonical works in the history of science from the twentieth century to the present. Our course is guided by three overarching questions, approached with historical texts and historiography, that correspond to three modules of investigation: 1) Nature, 2) Artifice, and 3) Liminal: Neither Natural nor Artificial. 

Instructor(s): Margaret Carlyle, Eduardo Escobar, Jennifer P. Daly Terms Offered: Spring
Note(s): This course fulfills part of the KNOW Core Seminar requirement to be eligible to apply for the SIFK Dissertation Research Fellowship. Ph.D. students must register with the KNOW 40304 course number in order for this course to meet the requirement.
Equivalent Course(s): HIPS 40304, GNSE 40304, CRES 40304, HIST 34920, CHSS 40304

KNOW 40307. Seeing and Knowing. 100 Units.

The concept of visuality attends to the ways in which things become seeable, knowable, and governable. Scholars who study optical instruments, architecture, cinema, and media have done much to show us how visual technologies change our ways of seeing. Others in the history of science study how practices of observation transform our understanding of nature-and ourselves. This comparative course analyzes regimes of visuality in different cultural and historical contexts. After a short introduction on the philosophy of visual experience and psychology of visual perception, we will investigate a series of configurations of seeing and knowing. These sites range from the history of disability to contemporary climate science, and students will be asked to contribute visual topics from their own research or disciplines for collective exploration in our seminar. Through comparative study, we will work to develop new categories or relationships for linking perception and knowledge.

Instructor(s): Alex Campolo Terms Offered: Spring
KNOW 40308. Political Theologies of Slavery and Freedom in the Atlantic World. 100 Units.
This seminar examines the interdisciplinary form of knowledge known as "political theology" in the context of Atlantic slavery. The course will trace two major developments. First, we will explore how Christian metaphysics facilitated colonialism and slavery, focusing on the emergence of race as a theological (rather than a biological) concept and on the self-fulfilling providentialism that structured fantasies of Euro-Christian world dominance. Second, we will explore how indigenous and African cosmologies and Christianities informed enslaved resistance and abolitionism. Our readings will range from works of political theology (Augustine, Calvin, Hobbes) to early American writings (Las Casas, Ligon, Jefferson) to Black Atlantic anti-slavery texts (Wheatley, Walker, Turner). We'll consider the explorer George Best's rewriting of the biblical Curse of Ham, Francis Bacon's claim that Europe's superior technology evidenced its Chosen status, and the ideology of "hereditary heathenism" that forestalled early efforts to convert slaves to Christianity. Likewise, we'll consider the role of obeah in the Haitian Revolution, the competing attitudes toward Christian slave revolt found in fiction by Douglass and Stowe, and the continued contestation of what W. E. B. Du Bois called "the new religion of whiteness." Secondary authors may include Charles Taylor, Talal Asad, Max Weber, Colin Kidd, Rebecca Goetz, Jared Hickman, Katharine Gerbner, Jorge Cañizares-Esguerra, and J. Cameron Carter
Instructor(s): Alex Mazzaferro Terms Offered: Spring
Equivalent Course(s): SCTH 40308

KNOW 40309. Miracles, Marvels, and Mystics: Unknowing in Medieval England. 100 Units.
In this seminar we will explore how premodern literary texts imagined experiences of 'unknowing': narrating scenes of astonishment, misapprehension, and disbelief. Our primary readings will draw on a rich tradition of vernacular writing in medieval England. We will read across that tradition's genres, as writers experimented with ways to represent the wondrous, the occluded, the incomprehensible, and the horrific in a variety of forms, among them spectacular miracle plays, prose exercises in mystical negation, and the poetry of dreamworlds and alchemical secrecy.
Instructor(s): Joe Stadolnik Terms Offered: Spring
Equivalent Course(s): ENGL 40309

KNOW 44600. Zion and Zaphon: Biblical Texts from Seventh Century Judah (Chavel) 100 Units.
Students will examine biblical texts on the premise they respond to the astonishing turn of events in the eighth century bce, in which Assyria dissolved the Israelian kingdom and nearly destroyed the Judean, with: theoretical orientation from history and historiography, memory studies, and literary theory; survey of ancient written and image-based sources; archaeological evidence.
Instructor(s): Simeon Chavel Terms Offered: Autumn
Equivalent Course(s): BIBL 44600

KNOW 53003. Explanation. 100 Units.
This course surveys recent work on explanation across philosophical disciplines. Beginning with classic accounts of scientific explanation we will proceed to consider recent work on mechanical explanation, mathematical explanation, causal explanation (particularly in the physical and social sciences), the relation between explanation and understanding, and metaphysical explanation (particularly the idea of explanation as ground). (II)
Instructor(s): T. Pashby Terms Offered: Spring
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 53003, PHIL 53003

KNOW 55100. The Development of Whitehead's Philosophy of Nature. 100 Units.
Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy has seen a resurgence of academic interest in recent years via a line of influence passing through Deleuze and Latour. Meanwhile, Whitehead's Process and Reality (1929) has gained a reputation, not undeserved, as possibly the most challenging English language text in the philosophical canon: it is seldom read in a department of philosophy. This is a pity, since the striking originality and creative potential of the philosophy contained within is unmatched. This course offers an opportunity for a gradual approach to understanding the "philosophy of organism" of Process and Reality by first taking in the foothills of earlier and less obtuse Whitehead texts Concept of Nature and Science and the Modern World. We will supplement these readings with newly discovered notes from Whitehead's Harvard lectures (published just last year). These documents reveal Whitehead in meditative mood, thinking through in real time his philosophical concerns. With their help, this course will explore the striking continuity of his earlier natural philosophy with the mature philosophy of Process and Reality and so provide a more gentle ascent to the heady realms of "actual entities", "concrescence" and "conceptual feelings" described therein. (II)
Instructor(s): T. Pashby Terms Offered: Autumn
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 55100, PHIL 55100
KNOW 57000. -/+: Molding, Casting, and the Shaping of Knowledge. 100 Units.
Of all technologies of reproduction and resemblance, those of molding and casting are perhaps the most intimate. An object, a sculpture, a creature, a person is slathered in plaster (or some other form-hugging material), and the resulting "negative" image is rendered into a "positive" replica. This course explores the various historically and culturally contingent meanings that have been attached to these technical procedures-despite their ostensibly "styleless" or "anachronistic" character-from the ancient world to the present day. Used in practices ranging from funerary rituals to fine art, natural history to medicine, anthropology to forensics, molding and casting constitute forms of knowledge production that capture at once the real and the enduring, the ephemeral and fleeting, and the authentic and affective. Featuring a diverse set of readings by authors such as Pliny the Elder, Charles Sanders Peirce, Walter Benjamin, Oswald Spengler, Gilbert Simondon, and others, the colloquium will address theoretical and methodological questions pertaining to concepts of materiality, indexicality, tactility, scalability, and seriality. Besides plaster, the objects of our analysis will comprise a diverse range of media including but not limited to wax, metal, photography and film, synthetic polymers, and digital media.
Instructor(s): P. Crowley and M. Rossi Terms Offered: Spring
Equivalent Course(s): CHSS 57000, ANTH 54835, ARTH 47300, HIST 57000
Font Notice

This document should contain certain fonts with restrictive licenses. For this draft, substitutions were made using less legally restrictive fonts. Specifically:

- Times was used instead of Trajan.
- Times was used instead of Palatino.

The editor may contact Leepfrog for a draft with the correct fonts in place.