
Spencer Paulson

Department of Philosophy
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Areas of Specialization

Epistemology; Philosophy of Mind; Philosophy of Cognitive Science (including Artificial Intelligence)

Areas of Competence

Moral Philosophy; Political Philosophy

Employment

October 2025-Present: Post-doctoral Fellow, University of Vienna (Knowledge in Crisis Project)

November 2024-October 2025: Post-doctoral Fellow, COGITO Research Centre, University of Glasgow

Education

Northwestern University

PhD – Philosophy – (August 2024)

Dissertation: “Epistemic Reasons & Cognitive Self-Monitoring”

Committee: Sanford C. Goldberg (chair), Jennifer Lackey, Baron Reed, Peter van Elswyk, Mona Simion (External)

University of Houston

Master of Arts – Philosophy – 2018

University of Washington

Bachelor of Arts – Philosophy (Magna Cum Laude) – 2014

Publications

- (1A) “Knowledge & Argument”
Nous (forthcoming)
<https://doi.org/10.1111/nous70048>
- (2A) “A Social Model of Cognitive Integration”
Mind & Language (2025)
<https://doi.org/10.1111/mila.12556>
- (3A) “The Burdens of Reliabilism: A Reply to Goldberg”
Analysis (2025)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s10670-024-00855-y>
- (4A) “Internalizing Rules”
Philosophy & Phenomenological Research (2024)

- <https://doi.org/10.1111/phpr.13065>
- (5A) “Epistemically Vicious Knowledge”
Erkenntnis (2024)
- (6A) “Luck and Reasons”
Episteme (2024) 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2023.14>
- (7A) “The Very Idea of Rational Irrationality”
Politics, Philosophy & Economics (2024)
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1470594X231177640>
- (8A) “Reflective Naturalism”
Synthese (2023) 203(13):1-21.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04430-w>
- (9A) “Epistemic Normativity & Epistemic Autonomy: The True-Belief Machine”
Philosophical Studies (2023)180 (8): 2415-2433.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-023-01987-7>
- (10A) “Good Reasons are Apparent to the Knowing Subject”
Synthese (2023) 202 (15): 1-18.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11229-023-04242-y>
- (11A) “First-Class and Coach-Class Knowledge”
Episteme (2023) 20(3): 736–756.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/epi.2023.5>
- (12A) “Indicative Conditionals and the Expressive Conception of Logic”
Journal of Transcendental Philosophy (2022) (Special Topics Issue: Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Brandom) 3(1): 33-48.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/jtph-2021-0042>

In Progress

- (1B) A paper on suspended judgment (under review)
- (2B) A paper on the relationship between individual and shared inquiry (under review)
- (3B) A paper on cognitive scaffolding and digital technology (under review)
- (4B) A paper on anti-luminosity arguments (under review)
- (5B) A paper on planning, question-asking, and inquiry (under review)

Book Reviews

“Julian Wuerth, ‘Kant on Action, Mind and Ethics’” (with Colin Marshall)
Kantian Review- 2015

Public Philosophy

“Digital Technology and Cognitive Scaffolding”
Open for Debate, (April 2025)

Service

Peer Review

Journals: *Episteme* (x2), *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Politics, Philosophy & Economics*, *Synthese* (x3), *Philosophical Studies*, *Philosophia*, *Ergo*, *Philosophical Quarterly*, *Philosophy & the Mind Sciences*

Conferences: Canadian Philosophical Association (x2), Northwestern/Notre Dame Epistemology Conference (x2), NU-STEP (x2)

Organizing

Conferences: Northwestern/Notre Dame Epistemology Conference (2022 and 2023)

Conferences

Presenter

Themes from the Philosophy of Robert Brandom (Marquette University) - February 2019
“Indicative Conditionals and the Expressive Conception of Logic”

Invited Guest Speaker (Stirling University)- February 2025
“Res Nervosa”

Empirical Epistemology Network (Stirling University)- May 2025
“Knowledge is the Most General State in Argumentative Equilibrium”

Digital Knowledge Conference (University of Aberdeen)-May 2025
“The Scaffold & the Gallows”

Epistemology & More (University of Nairobi)- August 2025
“Knowledge & Argument”

ZEGRa Speaker Series (University of Zürich)- December 2025
“Open by Default”

Knowledge in Crisis Mind Group Meeting (University of Graz)- January 2026
“Open by Default”

Knowledge in Crisis Knowledge Group Meeting (CEU)- March 2026
“There are Only Instrumental Reasons to Suspend”

Commentator

APA Central (New Orleans)- 2024
Isabel Herburger’s “Radical Externalism and Internalism in Social Epistemology”

Pre-APA Epistemology Conference (Northwestern University - 2022
Sarah Wright’s “Defending Autonomy as a Criterion for Epistemic Virtue”

Northwestern/ Notre Dame Epistemology Conference - 2021
Francesco Praolini’s “Uniqueness and Epistemic Obligation”

Northwestern/ Notre Dame Epistemology Conference – 2019
Evan Taylor’s “Epistemic Obligations to Know”

Teaching

Instructor of Record

University of Glasgow (Spring 2025)

Instructor for “Knowledge and Actions” (Masters Seminar); Co-taught with Adam Carter

MOOC (Massive Open Online Course) “Digital Knowledge” course co-designer;

“Knowledge First Social Epistemology” course co-designer

Loyola University (Fall 2021 and Fall 2022)

Lecturer for “Philosophy and Persons” (PHIL 130)

Teaching Assistant

Core Analytic

Theory of Knowledge (PHIL 255; Spring 2022)

Introduction to the Philosophy of Language (PHIL 253; Winter 2021)

Minds & Machines (PHIL 1334; Fall 2017; Spring 2018)

History of Philosophy

Early Modern Philosophy (PHIL 210; Spring 2020; Spring 2024)

Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason (PHIL 313; Fall 2019)

Practical Philosophy

Introduction to Ethics (PHIL 1305; Fall 2016)

Ethical Problems & Public Issues (PHIL 260; Spring 2022)

Bioethics (PHIL 269; Fall 2023)

Miscellaneous

Introduction to Philosophy (PHIL 1301; Spring 2016)

Philosophy of Religion (PHIL 266; Spring 2020)

Graduate Coursework

Epistemology and Metaphysics

Inquiry (Goldberg)

Applied Epistemology (Lackey)

Epistemic Normativity (Oliveira)

Normative Clash (Goldberg, Audited)

Independent Study: Sellars (Weisberg)

Metaphysics (Glanzberg)

Time (Loewenstein)

Ethics and Political Philosophy

Democratic Theory (Lafont)

Valuing Attitudes (K. Ebels-Duggan)

Collective Action (White)

History of Philosophy

De Anima (Freeland)

Ancient Theories of Desire (Marechal)

Plato's *Republic* (Kraut)

Kant's First *Critique* (Zuckert)

Early Modern Philosophy (Reed)

Language, Logic and Mind

Proof Theory and Model Theory (Garson)

The Modal Future (Cariani)

Language and Mind (Glanzberg)

Speech Acts (Goldberg)

Consciousness (Weisberg)

Conditionals (Loewenstein)

AI: Small Problem (Cariani)

Philosophy of Cognitive Science (Buckner)

Animal Cognition (Buckner)

Philosophy of Language (Buckner)

Hermeneutics (Lafont)

Logic Requirement (S. Ebels-Duggan)

Social Cognition (van Elswyk, Audited)

References

Sanford Goldberg: Chester D. Tripp Professor of the Humanities, Northwestern University

Contact: s-goldberg@northwestern.edu

Jennifer Lackey: Wayne and Elizabeth Jones Professor of Philosophy, Northwestern University

Contact: j-lackey@northwestern.edu

Baron Reed: Professor, Northwestern University

Contact: b-reed@northwestern.edu

Peter van Elswyk: Assistant Professor, Northwestern University

Contact: peter.vanelswyk@northwestern.edu

Mona Simion: Professor, University of Glasgow

Contact: mona.simion@glasgow.ac.uk

J. Adam Carter: Professor, University of Glasgow

Contact: adam.carter@glasgow.ac.uk

Dissertation Abstract:

I begin by asking what distinguishes thought from mere extraction of information. I argue that it is cognitive self-regulation. To be a thinking subject, it is not sufficient that information is processed within one. One must take an active role in the processing itself. I identify two core capacities necessary and jointly sufficient for cognitive self-regulation: causal inference and cognitive self-monitoring. However, these capacities can take qualitatively different forms in different creatures. Each form grounds distinct standards of epistemic evaluation. In species-typical humans, cognitive self-monitoring takes the form of interiorized argumentation. That is, one's causal models are deployed to run offline simulations of arguments a potential interlocutor might make, and these simulations are used to integrate the outputs of relatively isolated information-extraction processes. Our cognitive agency consists in this capacity. It grounds the epistemic standards applicable to us and it is what explains how reasons get their grip on us.

I argue in the first chapter that epistemic luck (and, by extension, knowledge) can only be understood in terms of reasons and we can't give a reductive account of them. Attempts to do so are either extensionally inadequate or they illicitly presuppose the epistemic vocabulary they are trying to reduce.

There is much debate about what reasons (metaphysically) are. Some people think they are facts, others think they are non-factive mental states. Both parties assume that reasons must really be something else: something we can identify without reference to reasons or reasoning. I argue against this. We don't get a grip on reasons by identifying them with something else that we understand without reference to reasoning itself. Rather, we understand the epistemic significance of other things (e.g., facts and mental states) insofar as they bear on the propriety of reasoning. In the second chapter of the dissertation, I argue that the arguments that have been put forward in support of rival positions actually support the claim that reasons are just episodes of reasoning or, as Sellars would say, "moves in the game of giving an asking for reasons".

I then go on in the third chapter to give an account of how moves in the game of giving and asking for reasons are assessed and how we internalize that form of assessment to epistemically regulate ourselves. In this chapter I discuss the implementation of this ability and the way it builds on similar capacities in non-human animals. In chapter 4 I discuss the relation between cognitive self-regulation and knowledge. I also discuss the relation between the epistemic statuses we enjoy and those of small children and non-human animals. Here I marry the traditions of defeasible reasoning and virtue epistemology. I use the account that emerges to shed light on the epistemology of inquiry. I argue that epistemology is primarily about the norms of inquiry and only derivatively about knowledge, justification, etc.

In chapter 5 I further develop the defeasible reasoning tradition to give an account of graded knowledge. In doing so I bring two long-standing debates (i.e., about perceptual Gettier cases and the possibility of knowledge inferred from false premises) to ecumenical resolutions. I end the dissertation by discussing the relation between objective normative and subjective normative reasons in Chapter 6. I argue that much of the resistance to the defeasible reasoning in recent years (as well as the attraction of rival epistemological programs) is the result of a failure of proponents of defeasible reasoning to adequately account for the relationship between subjective normative reasons of the sort that bear on epistemic justification and objective normative reasons, which bear on the Gettier problem. I argue that subjective normative reasons are reasons that are apparently objective normative to one in the subject's epistemic position. This helps shed light on why knowledge is philosophically interesting and why it matters for creatures like us.