Several years ago in graduate school, I was a teaching assistant for a course titled, “Great Philosophers,” which at many universities really means, “Favorite Philosophers of the Professor.” But professors will usually make a case for why their favorites should be considered “great.” In this particular course, we read the work of Ruth Millikan, who wrote a lot of interesting things about language and biology and what it means for a word to ‘stand for’ for something in the world. I hadn’t heard of Millikan before the class, but found her work fascinating. One day, I brought up her inclusion in the course to a fellow graduate student, who responded incredulously, “But she’s not a “Great” philosopher.” I asked him why he thought that, thinking that he was familiar with her work and found it lacking. “I mean, she’s clearly not.” He said. “Have you read her work?” I asked. “No, I don’t need to,” he replied. “If she were a Great Philosopher, I would have heard of her by now.” He was utterly confident in this statement.

I think my fellow graduate student should not have been nearly so confident in that statement, but in this talk, I want to discuss what his statement says about the world of academic philosophy, and his trust in it. To do this, I’ll examine the idea of “epistemic trust”—trust that the information you receive from others is accurate and reliable. Everyone needs to extend epistemic trust to many different people and institutions in order to live in a society. Imagine what your day would be like if you did not trust any of the information around you: bus schedules, the textbooks for your courses, your favorite source of news, etc. Think about how much trust you extend to the university that perhaps you study or work at: trust in the information given to you by professors, by fellow classmates, by the college website, etc. When do you choose to trust or not trust a source? What makes a source of information trustworthy or reliable? In this talk, I’ll analyze what happens when someone calls into question a whole system of knowledge that we have grown to trust, and why it may be so hard for us to take those challenges seriously.