

**Philosophy 310**  
**Pragmatism and Relativism**  
**Mon. 3:10pm-6:10pm**  
**Rockefeller Hall 301**  
**Fall 2010 Syllabus and Reading Schedule**

Barry Lam  
[balam@vassar.edu](mailto:balam@vassar.edu)  
Office: Rockefeller Hall 401A  
OH: Thurs. 11:30-1:30pm  
and by appointment.  
Office Phone: 437-5528

There is an essential tension in the way we think and speak about knowledge. On the one hand, we think that knowledge is a matter of appropriately responding to the evidence that the world gives us, no matter who or where you are, or what you're interested in knowing. On the other hand, we speak as though the standards people have to meet to count as knowing something changes depending on circumstances or subject matter. Are these differences simply a matter of the way we use words to talk about knowledge, or is there something genuinely strange about the nature of knowledge? This course will examine two views advocating that knowledge is genuinely shifty; according to the Pragmatist, the standards people have to meet to count as knowing changes depending on the person's practical interest and concerns. According to the Relativist, the standards people have to meet to count as knowing changes according to who happens to be judging them at any moment in time. We will examine the merits of these positions in great detail in this course.

**Readings:**

*Fear of Knowledge*, by Paul Boghossian, Oxford UP 2006  
*Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology* Volume 4, Issue 1. 2007  
*Knowledge and Practical Interests*, by Jason Stanley, Oxford UP 2005  
*Knowledge in an Uncertain World*, by Jeremy Fantl and Matthew McGrath. Oxford UP 2009  
*Assessment Sensitivity* (manuscript), by John MacFarlane. 2010 on Moodle.  
Additional articles on Moodle.

**Requirements:** The goal of this seminar is to facilitate in-depth learning of philosophical positions through active argumentation. Therefore, most of your grade will be earned through participation. You will be writing and responding to blog posts arising from the readings for the course (10%). The blog posts will lead to two moderated in-class debates (20% each). For these debates, you will be assigned to one of two teams who will defend a series of positions articulated by the instructor. Finally, you will be writing two essays, 8-10 pages each, one due mid-term, the other due at the end of term (25% each).

### Reading Schedule

Week 1, Aug. 30th: Knowledge, Meaning, and Metaphysics

Reading: No reading, but lots of work for the next meeting.

Writing: Write one blog post on Boghossian by Wed. Sept. 8th. Suggested topics to be posted on Moodle.

Week 2, Sept. 13th: Boghossian on Metaphysical Constructivism and Epistemic Relativism

Reading: Chapters 1-5 of *Fear of Knowledge*

Writing: Respond to at least one classmate's post by the beginning of class.

Week 3, Sept. 20th: Boghossian's Rejection of Relativism

Reading: Chapters 6-9 of *Fear of Knowledge*, Neta's "In Defense of Epistemic Relativism", and Rosen's "Reflections on Chapter 6 of *Fear of Knowledge*" in *Episteme*.

Week 4, Sept. 27th: Absolutism and Objectivism Defended

Reading: Boghossian's "Reply to Rosen and Neta" in *Episteme*. White's "Epistemic Subjectivism" in *Episteme*.

Writing: One blog post. Suggested topics will be posted on Moodle.

Essay Assignment: Your first essay assignment will be posted and due in two weeks.

Week 5, Oct. 4th: Moderated In-Class Debate.

Reading: Review all of the readings you have done to this point to prepare for the debate.

Week 6, Oct. 11th: The Critique of Contextualism

Reading: Introduction and Chapters 1-4 of *Knowledge and Practical Interests*.

First Essay due.

Week 7, Oct. 25th: Pragmatic Encroachment and Interest-Relativism

Reading: Chapters 5, 6 of *Knowledge and Practical Interests*. Chapters 1, 2 of *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*. Schiffer's "Interest-Relative Invariantism" and Neta's "Anti-Intellectualism and the Knowledge-Action Principle" on Moodle.

Writing: Write one blog post by the beginning of class. Respond to at least one post by the beginning of class next week. Topics posted on Moodle.

Week 8, Nov. 1: Pragmatism and Normativity

Reading: Chapters 3, 4 and 7 of *Knowledge in an Uncertain World*

Week 9, Nov. 8th: Critiques of Pragmatic Encroachment

Reading: Brown's "Subject-Sensitive Invariantism and the Knowledge Norm for Practical Reasoning", Nagel's "Knowledge Ascriptions and the Psychological Consequences of Changing Stakes", Neta and Phelan's "Evidence that Stakes Don't Matter for Evidence", Lam's "Reasoning about Knowledge." All on Moodle.

Writing Assignment: Write one blog post by the beginning of class, and respond to at least one other by beginning of class next week. Suggested topics will be posted on Moodle.

Week 10, Nov. 15th: Moderated In-Class Debate

Week 11, Nov. 22nd: Relativity from a Semantic Point of View

Reading: MacFarlane's manuscript Chapters 1 and 2.

Week 12, Nov 29th: Relative Truth and Disagreement

Reading: MacFarlane's manuscript Chapters 3, 5.

Final Essay Assignment Posted.

Week 13, Dec. 6th: Applications of Relative Truth

Reading: MacFarlane's manuscript Chapter 6. MacFarlane's "Relativism and Knowledge Attributions" on Moodle.

Final Essays Due December 13th.

*Academic accommodations are available for students with disabilities who are registered with the Office of Disability and Support Services. Students in need of disability accommodations should schedule an appointment with me early in the semester to discuss any accommodations for this course which have been approved by the Office of Disability and Support Services, as indicated in your DSS accommodation letter.*