

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

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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 you, 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 semantics of the words we use to talk about knowledge, or is there something genuinely strange about the nature of knowledge? This course will examine two views that there is something genuinely mysterious about the nature of knowledge; 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 arguments for these two positions and assess them against standard theories in epistemology.

Readings:

Fear of Knowledge, Boghossian, Paul Oxford UP. 2006
Episteme: A Journal of Social Epistemology Volume 4, Issue 1. 2007
Knowledge and Practical Interests, Stanley, Jason. 2005
Knowledge in an Uncertain World, Fantl and McGrath. 2009
Assessment Sensitivity, MacFarlane, John. 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 (25% 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 (20% each).

Reading Schedule

Week 1, Aug. 30th: Introduction

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

Writing: Write one original blog post by Wed. Sept. 8th. Topics 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 blog post.

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

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. Contextualism Reviewed

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 and respond to at least one other. 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 and respond to at least one other. 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. Final Essay Assignments Posted.

Week 12, Nov 29th: Relative Truth and Disagreement

Reading: MacFarlane's manuscript Chapters 3, 5.

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.