

Phil 318: History of American Philosophy
Instructor: TBA

Catalogue Description

An introduction to the history of American philosophy with an emphasis on American pragmatism and its intellectual precursors, especially in Native- and African-American thought. Key themes include the relationship between the individual and community, pluralism and democracy, economic and social freedom, and pragmatic conceptions of truth and meaning. Attention is also paid to the contemporary landscape of American political philosophy, with an emphasis on how diverse philosophies of resistance and social critique have shaped American institutions and ideals. (Meets Title 5 requirement in American History, Institutions and Ideals.)

Course Description

The term “American Philosophy” generally refers to the distinctively American philosophical tradition of American pragmatism, which was developed in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by Charles Sanders Peirce, John Dewey, and William James. So conceived, American philosophy emerged out of and in close engagement with political, economic, and cultural struggles in the wake of the Civil War. While this centering of classical pragmatism in the history of American philosophy helps situate that tradition alongside early 20th century debates about American identity and democratic community, it also obscures where key pragmatic themes—pluralism, individuality, community, growth, experience—are rooted in and so must be understood in conversation with the history of Native- and African-American social thought. Taking into account this broader historical and intellectual landscape, this course introduces students to the history of American philosophy. Particular emphasis is placed on philosophers who have engaged in their writings with the formation of and/or critical resistance to American political, cultural, and economic institutions, with key themes including Westward expansionism and the legacy of settler colonialism; the abolition of chattel slavery and the history of racial oppression; the pursuit of suffrage for women, racial and ethnic minorities; and struggles for civil rights, labor rights, and political and economic freedom in the 19th- and 20th- centuries. Against this background, the course, finally, assesses the current landscape of American philosophy, including the relationship between “neo-pragmatism” and contemporary radical social and political thought. Figures may include Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Dewey, Anna Julia Cooper, William James, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Rorty, and Cornel West.

Course Objectives

Students will:

1. Develop a critical understanding of the history of American philosophy, especially its roots in Native- and African-American thought.
2. Critically interrogate American ideas of democracy, resistance, pluralism, and community.

3. Develop a critical understanding of the impact of American philosophy on American institutions and ideals.
4. Read and understand significant texts in American pragmatism.
5. Assess the landscape of contemporary political philosophy in the United States in light of diverse traditions of American philosophy.
6. Examine events in American history through the lens of social critique.

Student Learning Outcomes:

I. Philosophy Program SLOs

Students will:

SLO 1: Develop a critical understanding of the work of central thinkers in the Western philosophical tradition.

SLO 2: Read and comprehend philosophical texts.

SLO 4: Defend their own philosophical positions and arguments.

SLO 5: Write well-organized philosophical essays in which they clearly articulate philosophical positions and arguments.

II. Title V SLOs

Students will:

SLO 1: Describe and analyze the histories of the United States and California over significant time periods.

SLO 3: Compare United States and California political institutions and practices.

SLO 4: Describe and examine the histories and development of political institutions as related to diverse peoples in the United States and California.

III. Writing Intensive SLOs:

Students will:

SLO 1: Develop and clearly define their ideas through writing.

SLO 2: Ethically integrate sources of various kinds into their writing.

SLO 3: Compose texts through drafting, revising, and completing a finished product.

SLO 4: Express themselves through their writing by posing questions, making original claims, and coherently structuring complex ideas.

SLO 5: Revise their writing for greater cogency and clarity.

SLO 6: Utilize adopted communication modes and documentation styles of specific disciplines (MLA, APA, Chicago, CBE, etc) where appropriate.

Required Texts:

Louis Menand (ed.) *Pragmatism: A Reader*
Anna Julia Cooper, *A Voice from the South*
John Dewey, *Individualism Old and New*
W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*
W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater*

Recommended Texts:

Erin McKenna and Scott L. Pratt (eds.), *American Philosophy from Wounded Knee to the Present*
Leonard Harris, Scott L. Pratt, and Anne S. Waters (eds.) *American Philosophies: An Anthology*

Course Outline

Introduction: What Is American about American Philosophy?
Unit 1: Philosophies of Resistance and Precursors to American Pragmatism
Unit 2: Experience in American Transcendental Thought: Writings from the Eastern and Western United States
Unit 3: American Pragmatism
 a. The (re)Birth of Classical Pragmatism: James Reads Peirce in California
 b. Pragmatism, Truth, and Belief
 c. Individual and Community
Unit 4: Contemporary American Philosophy: Neo-Pragmatism and Radical Politics
 a. Neo-Pragmatism
 b. Radical Thought in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Course Policies and Grading

Your grade for this course will be based on your class attendance and participation as well as 3 papers, assessed as follows:

Attendance and participation:	10%
Paper 1 [draft and revision]:	25%
Paper 2 [draft and revision]:	30%
Paper 3 [draft and revision]:	35%

Each paper must be a minimum of 1,000–1,500 words. These papers will ask you to critically engage with course readings. Essay prompts will be distributed during the semester. All written work must be typed, and handed in on time. All written assignments

must be handed in via the course Canvas site. Please note that I do not accept work submitted via e-mail.

Your final attendance grade for the course will be calculated according to the following scale:

A	(100)	0 absences
A	(95)	1-2 absences
B+	(88)	3 absences
B	(85)	4 absences
C	(75)	5 absences
D	(65)	6 absences
F	(0)	7 absences

More than 7 absences may result in failure of the course

Please note that, for purposes of your attendance grade, I do *not* distinguish excused from unexcused absences, except in extraordinary circumstances. If documentable circumstances will cause you miss class for an extended period of time, you should see me well in advance to discuss possible solutions.

Note that this course uses a +/- grading scheme according to the following scale:

A: 94-100	B+: 87-89	C+: 77-79	D+: 67-69	F: 0-59
A-: 90-93	B: 83-86	C: 73-76	D: 63-66	
	B-: 80-82	C-: 70-72	D-: 60-62	

Schedule of Classes:

Week 1

Introduction: What Is American about American Philosophy?

- Introduces key themes of American philosophy while critically assessing the idea of “America” and “American” as cultural, historical, political, and geographic terms. Emphasis is paid here to the ideas of the “wilderness” and “Westward expansion,” juxtaposing Colonial and indigenous attitudes about “identity.”

Readings:

Felix S. Cohen, “Americanizing the White Man”

John Lysaker, “Essaying America”

Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”

Scott Pratt, “The Colonial Attitude,” from *Native Pragmatism*

Weeks 2–5

- I. Pluralism and Resistance in 19th-Century American Thought

- Introduces themes of pluralism and resistance through 19th century social and political writing, situating these writings in the context of significant 19th century political institutions: readings and discussion center the abolition of chattel slavery and efforts to expand the Franchise; radical reconstruction and the establishment of Jim Crow; the emergence of anti-lynching campaigns; and struggles for Native American political autonomy.

Readings:

Simon Pokagon, "The Red Man's Rebuke"

Anna Julia Cooper, excerpts from *A Voice from the South*

Frederick Douglass, "What to a Slave is the Fourth of July"

Ida B. Wells, "On Lynching"

Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience"

* First Paper Draft Due week 3; revision due week 5

Week 6

II. The Centrality of Experience: Writings from the Eastern and Western United States

- Introduces the concept of experience and highlights the emergence of key themes central to American pragmatism in the American transcendentalists, emphasizing the comparison of transcendentalism in the Eastern (Emerson) and Western (Muir) United States.

Reading:

Ralph Waldo Emerson, "On Experience"

John Muir, excerpts from *The Mountains of California* and *My First Summer in the Sierra*

Weeks 7–13

III. American Pragmatism

- Survey of American pragmatism, with attention both to so-called 'classical' pragmatism and to pragmatic themes in late 19th- and early 20th-century social and political thought. This section begins with James' revival of Peirce in the so-called California Address, and introduces key pragmatic themes, including the pragmatic theory of truth, the willfulness of belief, and cultural and intellectual pluralism. Readings and discussions center how pragmatism and pragmatic social thought shaped American institutions and informed American conceptions of democracy, equality, and representation.

III.1 The (re)Birth of Classical Pragmatism: James Reads Peirce in California

Readings:

C.S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (in Menand)
William James, "California Union Address"
Charles Sanders Peirce, "A Definition of Pragmatism" (in Menand)

III.2 Pragmatism, Truth and Belief

Readings:

C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (in Menand)
Dewey, excerpts from *Escape from Peril*
William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" and "The Will to Believe" (in Menand)
William James, "On a Certain Blindness in Human Beings"
Anna Julia Cooper, "The Gain of a Belief"

III.3 Pragmatism, Individual, and Community

Readings:

Jane Addams, "A Function of the Social Settlement" (in Menand)
W.E.B. Du Bois, "Of Our Spiritual Strivings" and "On the Passing of the First Born," from *The Souls of Black Folk*
W.E.B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," "Of the Ruling of Men," "The Damnation of Women," "Of Beauty and Death" in *Darkwater*
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, excerpts from *Women and Economics*

John Dewey, excerpts from *Individualism Old and New*
Mark Parker Follett, excerpts from *The New State*

Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting Pot"
Alain Le Roy Locke, "Pluralism and Intellectual Democracy" and "The Ethics of Culture"

* Second Paper Draft Due week 9; revision due week 11

Weeks 14–16

IV. Contemporary American Philosophy: Neo-Pragmatism and Radical Politics

- Surveys the contemporary landscape of American thought, tracing the legacy of pragmatism in neo-pragmatic and prophetic pragmatic thinkers, as well as in radical social and political philosophy. Special attention is paid to political philosophies with specific roots in or connections to California, including the Black Panthers and The United Farm Workers.

IV.1 Neo-Pragmatism

Readings:

Richard Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism"

Richard Rorty, "Irony," and "Solidarity," from *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*
Cornel West, excerpts from *Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times* (pt. 1)
Cornel West, "Prophetic Pragmatism" (in Menand)

IV.2 Radical Thought in the 20th and 21st Centuries

Readings:

Angela Davis, excerpts from *Freedom is a Constant Struggle*

Malcolm X, excerpts from *Malcolm X Speaks*

Vine Deloria, "The Red and the Black," from *Custer Died for your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*

Cesar Chavez, excerpts from *An Organizer's Tale*

* Final Paper Draft Due week 13; revision due week 16

Selected Bibliography

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