

Fall 2012  
TTh 11-12:15  
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Hours: by appointment

**American Philosophy**  
(Philosophy 2314, Section 001)

**Course Description**

Philosophy occupies a curious position in American intellectual life. Unlike in Europe, where the study of philosophy has traditionally been held in high regard, Americans either avoid many of the issues considered perennial in the history of philosophy or adopt other means of dealing with them. This has resulted in an eclectic mix of cultural traditions, religious practices, and contemporary pop ideologies. In the United States, the term “philosophy” might refer to the analytic tradition of Britain, the Continental influences existentialism or postmodernism, holistic views imported from the East, or apologies for Western Christianity. Unlike more conventional approaches, which aim to establish which philosophy is the correct one, American philosophies aim more and more at establishing ways of talking that are successful for various purposes.

As a result, a large part of American Philosophy involves what Cornel West has called an “evasion of philosophy,” an avoidance of the traditional problems of metaphysics and epistemology. The most distinguishing feature of American Philosophy is its attempt to move away from claims about truth, in favor of talk about what works, and why it works. Its most prominent figures – Peirce, James, Dewey, and Rorty – comprise a “school” of thought known as Pragmatism, and represent a shift away from thinking about thought as correspondence to reality and toward thinking of it as simply a way of coping with the contingencies of our environment.

For that reason, this course will focus on what distinguishes American Philosophy from its (primarily) European heritage, so that we will be mostly concerned with the American pragmatist movement of the last century or so. Beginning with the early pragmatists and moving on to more recent (and even contemporary) “neo-pragmatists,” we will attempt to identify what it is about pragmatism that makes it “American,” as well as what implications it might have for traditional Philosophy. Ultimately, we will be trying to understand the relation between “philosophies” and “we, the people” who use them, as well as why the discipline of Philosophy occupies such a curious position in contemporary American life. Our emphasis will be on the pragmatic nature of American thought, on its most celebrated contributors, as well as its lesser-known roots in materialism and evolutionary theory.

**Learning Objectives**

By the end of the course, the student will have a better understanding not only of the American philosophical tradition, but of how that tradition differs from the bulk of Western Philosophy. In particular, students will be able to 1) identify key figures in the history of American Pragmatism, 2) define key concepts in both the history of Philosophy and in the debates between pragmatists and more traditional thinkers, 3) have a clear sense of the applicability of these issues to contemporary concerns, and 4) be better able to assess the strengths and weaknesses of the arguments used to support or refute the claims involved.

**Course Requirements**

Students will be expected to keep up on the daily reading assignments, to have read the material prior to class, and to bring a short list of the most important points and relevant questions to class with them to begin each discussion.

There will be two essay examinations – a midterm and a final – on topics in the readings as well as those discussed in class.

Each student will be required to write a term paper of not less than 3,000 words. The topic of the term paper is of each student's choice (subject to the teacher's approval), but must concern some issue in American Philosophy. The style of the paper – e.g. MLA – is also up to the student, but the paper should be typed, double-spaced, with footnotes or endnotes and a works cited or bibliography page. The paper is due on or before the last day of class, and will not be accepted late. And students are encouraged to submit early drafts for feedback.

Each student will also be required to introduce one of the philosophers and/or readings to the class. The presentation should last 10-15 minutes, and address those ideas most relevant to the particular writer or reading.

In addition, students will be encouraged to pay close attention to current news issues (both to determine the relevance of ethical and political problems to American Philosophy, and to generate a variety of possible paper topics).

### **Attendance**

Regular attendance is also required, and will count toward the final grade. Missing more than two weeks of class will result in the loss of one letter grade (e.g. A + 5 days of absence = B). *And use of objects external to the course – e.g. cell phones, calculators, texts from other courses – equals an absence.*

### **Grading**

Each of the tests will count for 25% of the overall grade, and the term paper 40%. The remaining 10% will be based on the in-class presentation and attendance.

### **Required Texts**

Louis Menand, Pragmatism – A Reader, Vintage Books, 1997.

Richard Rorty, Philosophy and Social Hope, Penguin Books, 1999.

### **Also Recommended:**

John J. Stuhr (ed.), Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.), Oxford University Press, 2000.

Cornel West, The American Evasion of Philosophy, University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

Louis Menand, The Metaphysical Club, Farrar, Straus, & Giroux, 2001.

Hugo Bedau's Thinking and Writing About Philosophy and Zachary Seech's Writing Philosophy Papers (both of which are available at the library reserve desk).

### **Academic Integrity:**

Academic integrity is fundamental to the process of learning and to evaluating academic performance. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated. Academic dishonesty includes, but is not limited to, the following: cheating plagiarism, tampering with academic records and

examinations, falsifying identity, and being an accessory to acts of academic dishonesty. Refer to the UNO Judicial Code for further information. The Code is available online: [http://www.uno.edu/~stlf/Policy%20Manual/judicial\\_code\\_pt2.htm](http://www.uno.edu/~stlf/Policy%20Manual/judicial_code_pt2.htm)

**Disability Accomodations:**

UNO is committed to providing for the needs of students who have disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Students who qualify for services will receive academic modifications to register with the Office of Disability Services (University Center 260) and follow its procedures for obtaining assistance.

**Tentative Reading Schedule**

August	21	Introduction
	23	Ralph Waldo Emerson - <i>The American Scholar</i>
	28	Ralph Waldo Emerson – <i>Nature &amp; Self-Reliance</i>
	30	Cornel West – <i>Prophetic Pragmatism</i>
September	4	<i>An Introduction to Pragmatism</i>
	6	Charles Sanders Peirce - <i>The Fixation of Belief</i>
	11	Charles Sanders Peirce - <i>How to Make Our Ideas Clear</i>
	13	William James – <i>What Pragmatism Means</i>
	18	William James – <i>Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth</i>
	20	“
	25	William James – <i>The Will to Believe</i>
	27	“
October	2	William James – <i>Habit (Principles of Psychology)</i>
	4	“
	9	<i>Reading Day</i>
	11	<i>Mid-semester Break</i>
	16	<i>Midterm</i>
	18	Charles Darwin – Conclusion of <i>Origin of Species</i>
	23	John Dewey – <i>The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy</i>
	25	John Dewey – <i>Ethics of Democracy, Theories of Knowledge</i>
	30	John Dewey – <i>Experience, Nature, &amp; Art &amp; I Believe</i>
November	1*	John Dewey – <i>The Seat of Intellectual Authority</i>

	6	John Dewey – <i>Need for a Recovery of Philosophy</i>
	8	Richard Rorty – <i>Pragmatism &amp; Philosophy</i>
	13	Richard Rorty – <i>Philosophy as a Kind of Writing</i>
	15	Richard Rorty – <i>Philosophy as Cultural Politics</i>
	20	Richard Rorty – <i>Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism</i>
	22	Thanksgiving
	27	Richard Rorty – <i>Philosophy &amp; Social Hope</i>
	29	Review/Term Papers Due
December	6	Final (12:30 pm)
	*	Last Day to Drop or Resign from the University (November 5)