

## American Philosophy

Rochester Institute of Technology  
Fall Semester 2015

Dr. John Capps  
Office Hours: MWF 12:00-1:00  
or by appointment

Office: LBR 1309  
Telephone: 475-2464  
E-mail: john.capps@rit.edu

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### Course Description

This course covers the history of philosophy in America with a special focus on the development of philosophical *pragmatism*. Pragmatism is a unique, and perhaps uniquely American, way of approaching philosophical questions.

Pragmatism originated in the United States both as a response to, and as an extension of, prevailing forms of European philosophy. Like the United States itself, pragmatism was intended to be experimental, commonsensical, egalitarian, and future-oriented. Pragmatism was also supposed to focus on real-life problems: the 19th century pragmatists wanted a philosophy that could deal with a range of practical issues that arise in science, politics, religion, education, psychology, the arts, etc.

More recently, however, pragmatism has been associated with very specific approaches to meaning, reference, and truth. While these are core philosophical topics they can quickly become pretty abstract, numbingly detail-oriented, and apparently distant from any practical concerns. We'll spend some time working through these topics because the devil is in the details though, to mix metaphors, we also don't want to miss the forest for the trees. My view is that while it's extremely important to clarify what we mean by "truth," "reference" and other theoretical terms, we also want to figure out their practical implications. So, in the end, we need to judge our theories by their practical effects. That's pragmatism.

Here's an example: some theories of truth imply that ethical or aesthetic statements ("lying is wrong," "your photography is atrocious") are neither true nor false. If they are neither true nor false, the thinking might go, then there's no point in arguing about ethics or aesthetics, and that might then lead us to skepticism or relativism, and that might have practical consequences for how we deal with bad acts or bad art, and for whether we can even say that something *is* a bad act or bad art. Granted we shouldn't judge a theory entirely by its practical consequences—the truth is sometimes impractical—but practical considerations

certainly deserve some attention and may even make us modify our theories accordingly.

In general and despite some pretty significant differences among them, pragmatic philosophers agree that the meaning and value of an idea must be measured by the difference, in some sense, that it makes. The meaning of something is the difference that it makes and if something—an idea or a concept or an institution—doesn't make a difference then we should probably get rid of it. Pragmatism forces us to examine our convictions in order to determine their practical value. But then we'll do the same thing to pragmatism itself, considering its implications—if any—on a wide range of issues, including ethics, religion, political theory, and epistemology.

Finally, we will also study pragmatism as an expression of a uniquely American spirit. While the idea of "American Exceptionalism" has attracted a lot of well-deserved criticism, the original pragmatists did think that the United States was unique in its devotion to science, technology, freedom, and democracy. Pragmatism tries to justify these commitments and, in doing so, chart a new philosophical path forward.

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## Texts

Available at the Barnes & Noble @ RIT Bookstore:

1. Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* (Routledge, 2000)\*
2. Cheryl Misak, ed., *The New Pragmatists* (Oxford, 2007)
3. Robert Talisse and Scott Aikin, eds., *The Pragmatism Reader* (Princeton, 2011)

\*I have put a photocopy of this book (thin and rather expensive) on reserve at Wallace Library. You can borrow it from the circulation desk.

All other readings are in a photocopied course packet outside my office door.

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## Information and Expectations

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. Discussion is the only way to make sure we're covering all our bases and considering all the options. There is no way to do this entirely on your own. In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's done the reading; no free-riders. I *don't* expect everyone to have understood the reading; that's what class and our discussions are for. But I do expect everyone to make a good faith effort to do the reading, get at least some idea of what it's about, and have a couple questions or interesting thoughts to raise. I expect regular attendance. I will do everything I can so that everyone can participate in our discussions. Attendance and participation are worth 20% of the final grade.
2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments; these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade.
3. This class will be run as a seminar which means, among other things, that I'll try to keep the lecturing to a minimum. This is so we can work out our own thoughts and exercise some degree of self-control over the topics we discuss. Every once in a while I'll probably lecture because a) I can't help myself or b) there's some crucial background that I want everyone to have or c) you demand that I do it. But I want to limit my lecturing so we can all participate and not just spectate. If you'd be more comfortable with a more lecture-oriented course I'll be happy to recommend some.
4. **I am asking everyone to bring a typed question to the class meetings marked with an "\*" on the attached schedule of readings.** This question may be a specific request for clarification or reflect a more critical engagement with the reading. In any case, it should a) be specific, perhaps by referring to a particular passage in the reading, and b) reflect some real thought about the issues raised by the day's reading. Your question should reflect your sense of the most important issue that needs clarification or discussion. A few sentences are usually enough. I will collect these in class: I do not accept late questions and you must be present to hand in your question. The typed questions are 20% of the final grade.
5. I'm asking everyone to **facilitate** one class discussion. Here's what I have in mind:  
  
A facilitation should give a brief overview of the day's reading (<5 minutes), provide any helpful background information that may add to our understanding of the reading, and help coordinate discussion. The emphasis is on helping frame and lead the discussion. You want to be pretty familiar with the day's reading and be able to ask good, insightful questions about it; it is not expected, however, that you have all the answers.

**Please bring a one page handout.** The handout should tell a story about the day's reading: the main points, its arc, how the reading takes us from Point A to Point B. It should also list some issues for discussion. I'll provide examples of handouts early in the semester when, by default, I'll be facilitating discussion. I'll also pass around a sign-up sheet early in the semester.

A good facilitation doesn't just summarize the day's reading. Instead, it extracts the essential issues, the points that are especially interesting or problematic, and the themes that are worth discussing. It doesn't attempt to be absolutely comprehensive and it doesn't miss the forest for the trees.

A good handout is usually a narrative of some kind. It isn't, usually, a list of loosely connected bullet points. In your handout you want to describe a certain kind of trajectory and that means showing connections and showing how the author builds an argument.

I've also noticed that good facilitators usually don't read their handout but rather talk through the main ideas. The handout is not a script.

The facilitation is worth 15% of the final grade.

6. I'm also asking everyone to give a **brief biographical presentation** on one of our authors or a related figure. The dates for these are on the syllabus; I'll distribute a sign-up sheet so you can choose a particular philosopher and date.

Again, this presentation should be no more than 5 minutes long. While it should obviously say something about a person's philosophical views, I think it can also be very helpful to know something about who they were as real, live, human beings: e.g., how or whether they engaged with current events, their academic training, or how their biography affected their philosophy, and vice versa. Not surprisingly, many of our authors had interesting lives. Several trained as scientists; one defended Leon Trotsky against Stalinism; one directed an art gallery and another worked in military intelligence; one was a Rhodes Scholar and one serves as a federal judge.

The idea here is to put these philosophers into an intellectual and historic context so that we can better understand their motivations and starting points. Please go beyond what we can all easily find on Wikipedia. There are lots of resources out there, including the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, various biographical sources or even, in a couple cases, sending someone an e-mail.

Here, too, I'm asking you to condense your information into a **one-page handout**. Obviously, you will have to be selective in what you choose to include, but you should attempt to convey, in a succinct fashion, what is interesting, significant, surprising, or important about your philosopher.

This presentation will also be worth 15% of the final grade.

7. There will be a **final project** due December 16. This final project can take a number of different forms. Normal term papers are, of course, one option—but this project could also take an entirely different shape: an infographic, say, explaining Quine's argument against the analytic/synthetic distinction, or an animation explaining the difference between Peirce, James, and Dewey. I'll

provide more guidelines as we near the end of the semester, but you can certainly begin thinking about this project early on.

In order to make sure everyone is on a good track I'll be requesting a proposal in the 12th week. The proposal is worth 5% of the final grade. while the final project is worth 25%.

8. I think philosophy is really wonderful and important, so I'm always happy to talk about the course. Feel free to drop by my office hours or speak to me after class. I've found it's usually a lot more efficient to talk in person than over e-mail.
9. Feel free to ask if you have a question about where you stand grade-wise. While I expect you can keep track of this, too, I'm happy to give you an up-to-date calculation.

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## Readings & Assignments

Please note: a particular day's reading should be done *before* class.

Readings marked "CP" are in the photocopied course packet.

Readings marked "P" are from *The Pragmatism Reader*.

Readings marked "NP" are from *The New Pragmatists*.

8.24	Introductory Remarks
8.26	Introductory Remarks
8.28	William James, "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" (CP)
8.31	William James, "What Pragmatism Means" (CP)*
9.2	Thomas Paine, "The Age of Reason" (CP) Presentation on Thomas Paine
9.4	C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief" (P)
9.7	Labor Day: No Class
9.9	C.S. Peirce, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"(P)* Presentation on C.S. Peirce
9.11	William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" (P)
9.14	William James, "The Will to Believe" (P) Presentation on William James
9.16	John Dewey, <i>A Common Faith</i> : "Religion versus the Religious" (CP) Presentation on John Dewey
9.18	John Dewey, <i>A Common Faith</i> : "The Human Abode of the Religious Function" (CP)*

- 9.21 John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (P, 109-121)  
Presentation on Jane Addams
- 9.23 John Dewey, "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy" (P, 121-140)
- 9.25 John Dewey, "Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us" (P)\*  
Presentation on W.E.B. DuBois
- 9.28 C.I. Lewis, "A Pragmatic Conception of the A Priori" (P)  
Presentation on C.I. Lewis
- 9.30 Nelson Goodman, "Words, Works, Worlds" (P)  
Presentation on Nelson Goodman
- 10.2 W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (P, 202-210)
- 10.5 W.V.O. Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (P, 210-220)\*  
Presentation on W.V.O. Quine
- 10.7 W.V.O. Quine, "On What There Is" (P)
- 10.9 Wilfrid Sellars, "Language as Thought and Communication" (P, 265-275)
- 10.12 Columbus Day: No Class
- 10.13 Wilfrid Sellars, "Language as Thought and Communication" (P, 275-285)  
Presentation on Wilfrid Sellars
- 10.14 Hilary Putnam, "Meaning and Reference"(P)  
Presentation on Hilary Putnam
- 10.16 Hilary Putnam, "A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy" (P)
- 10.19 Richard Rorty, "The World Well Lost" (P)  
Presentation on Richard Rorty
- 10.21 Richard Rorty, "Solidarity or Objectivity?"(P)\*
- 10.23 Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy" (P)
- 10.26 Cornel West, "Dispensing with Metaphysics in Religious Thought" (P)  
Presentation on Cornel West
- 10.28 Richard Posner, "Pragmatic Adjudication" (P)  
Presentation on Richard Posner
- 10.30 Robert Brandom, "From Truth to Semantics: A Path Through *Making it Explicit*" (P)  
Presentation on Robert Brandom
- 11.2 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* Introduction  
Presentation on Cheryl Misak
- 11.4 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 9-29  
Presentation on Jürgen Habermas
- 11.6 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 29-47
- 11.9 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 48-64\*  
Presentation on Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.
- 11.11 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 64-83
- 11.13 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 84-101

- 11.16 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 102-117  
**Final Project Proposal Due**
- 11.18 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 117-136\*
- 11.20 Cheryl Misak, *Truth, Politics, Morality* pp. 136-156
- 11.23 Huw Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction" (P, 451-459)  
 Presentation on Huw Price
- 11.25-11.27 No Class: Thanksgiving
- 11.30 Huw Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction" (P, 459-470)
- 12.2 Danielle MacBeth, "Pragmatism and Objective Truth" (NP)\*
- 12.4 Jeffrey Stout, "On Our Interest in Getting Things Right: Pragmatism  
 without Narcissism" (NP)  
 Presentation on Barack Obama as pragmatist
- 12.7 David Macarthur and Huw Price, "Pragmatism, Quasi-Realism and The  
 Global Challenge" (NP)
- 12.9 David Bakhurst: "Pragmatism and Ethical Particularism" (NP)
- 12.11 Arthur Fine, "Relativism, Pragmatism, and the Practice of Science" (NP)\*
- 12.16 Final Project Due 12:00 Noon
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