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 and truth. While these are core philosophical topics they can quickly become pretty abstract, mind-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,” “meaning” 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.

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 that it makes, in some sense. If 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. In this way pragmatism forces us to examine our convictions in order to determine their practical value.
For example, when we try to understand the concept of truth, pragmatists tend to focus on the practical effects of talking about truth: that is, what are we doing when we talk about truth? One consequence, for many pragmatists, is that there is no difference between scientific, mathematical, historical, ethical, political, or aesthetic truths: there's no deep difference between saying “it's true that all even integers >2 are the sum of two primes” “it's true that birds lay eggs,” “it's true that climate change is happening,” “it's true that we should do something about it,” and “it's true that democracy is the greatest social ideal.” In other words, the pragmatist is inclined to view these claims as all true, and in pretty much the same way: they can each be inquired into, investigated, studied, debated, argued over, and perhaps, eventually, agreed upon. In many quarters that's a controversial view. But pragmatists are committed to finding ways of encouraging inquiry and consensus-building and doing so, they'd argue, requires having the right theory of truth.

This also means, to take another example, that pragmatists have usually defended some kind of democratic political theory. That's not unusual: pretty much everyone defends democracy. What's unusual is that pragmatists have often defended democracy not on moral but epistemic grounds: they defend democracy not because it's good for people, or because it treats people equally, or because it's more fair and just than other forms of government, but because it's really good at getting at the truth and specifically at political truths about what is best for people. If there's merit to this idea then it points to a surprisingly close connection between our epistemic concerns—our concerns about truth, knowledge, and justification—and our political concerns about what we as a community or nation should do.

These are controversial positions. This is ironic because sometimes being “pragmatic” means being cautious and middle-of-the-road. In contrast, the implications of philosophical pragmatism could be radical indeed.

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**Texts**

Here are the books we’ll be reading. They are all available at the campus Barnes & Noble and no doubt many other places. All other course readings are downloadable from myCourses.

- John Dewey: *The Political Writings* (Hackett, 1993)
- Michael Roth: *Safe Enough Spaces* (Yale, 2019)
Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. Philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. This is a discussion-intensive course (which is why it has a low enrollment cap.) Discussion is the best way to make sure we’re covering all our bases and considering all the options. We can’t do this individually on our 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 share. 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 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 information 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.

Writing Assignments

4. There will be four short (3 page) writing assignments scattered throughout the semester. In these I’ll ask you to reflect critically on particular themes of the readings and the course. These together will count toward 50% of the final grade.

Discussion Facilitation

5. I’m asking everyone to facilitate two class discussions. Here’s what I have in mind:

A facilitation should give a brief (5 minute) overview of the day’s reading, 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. That last point is really important.

A good handout is usually a narrative or story 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 two facilitations are worth 30% of the final grade.

Democracy Project Option

6. Given the themes of the class I’m also offering everyone the option of doing a Democracy Project in place of the last two writing assignments. The idea is this: to participate in an activity that is arguably democratic and then write a critical essay of 6-7 pages where you describe the activity, draw connections to our readings, and explore how democratic theory is related to democratic practice.

There will be a stand-alone handout to describe this project in greater detail but here is one question you might explore. On the one hand, as we’ll see, Dewey argues that democracy is a “way of life” best exemplified in the everyday interactions we have with neighbors, co-workers, and fellow students. From this perspective, we can act democratically when we participate in a club, help organize an event, or work together to address a problem. On the other hand, as we’ll also see, Talisse argues that “we need to put politics in its place”: that if we view everything as a political exercise then this will probably lead to polarization, bad feelings, and a breakdown of the democratic institutions we care about. A Democracy Project could test this hypothesis by taking part in a democratic activity and seeing what happens and why. Perhaps you participate in a club: how does the club operate, what is your role, and is your participation in some sense political? What are the benefits and drawbacks of your participation? What does your participation teach you about the themes of this course, and vice versa?

I suspect a Democracy Project is a slightly higher risk but a potentially much greater reward than writing two philosophy essays. Since this is a different sort of assignment I’ll hand out more specific directions and a timeline later in the semester. In the meantime if you have any questions or ideas for this assignment please feel free to talk to me.

General Policies and Additional Information

7. Since I think philosophy in general, and American Philosophy in particular, is really wonderful and important, 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.

8. 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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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Reading/Assignment</th>
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<tr>
<td>01.13.20</td>
<td>Introductory Remarks</td>
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<td>01.15.20</td>
<td>William James: “The Present Dilemma in Philosophy”</td>
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<td>01.17.20</td>
<td>William James: “What Pragmatism Means”</td>
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<td>01.22.20</td>
<td>Elizabeth Anderson: “How to Be a Pragmatist”</td>
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<td>01.27.20</td>
<td>Richard Rorty: Achieving Our Country “The Eclipse of the Reformist Left”</td>
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<td>01.29.20</td>
<td>Richard Rorty: Achieving Our Country “A Cultural Left”</td>
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<td>01.31.20</td>
<td>Barack Obama: “A More Perfect Union” &amp; “Farewell Address”</td>
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<td>02.03.20</td>
<td>Paul Taylor: “On Post-Partisanship: The President as Pragmatist” pp. 45-57</td>
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<td>02.05.20</td>
<td>Paul Taylor: “On Post-Partisanship: The President as Pragmatist” pp. 57-78</td>
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<td>02.07.20</td>
<td>C.S. Peirce: “The Fixation of Belief”</td>
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<td>Writing Assignment #1 Due</td>
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<td>02.10.20</td>
<td>William James: “Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth”</td>
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<td>02.12.20</td>
<td>C.S. Peirce: “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”</td>
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<td>02.14.20</td>
<td>John Dewey: The Political Writings “Philosophy and Democracy”</td>
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<td>Hilary Putnam: “Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy”</td>
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<td>John Dewey: The Political Writings “Intelligence and Morals” &amp; “Morals and the Conduct of States”</td>
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<td>02.19.20</td>
<td>Cheryl Misak: “Truth and Democracy: Pragmatism and the Deliberative Virtues”</td>
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<td>02.24.20</td>
<td>Elizabeth Anderson: “The Epistemology of Democracy”</td>
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<td>02.26.20</td>
<td>William James: “The Will to Believe”</td>
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<td>02.28.20</td>
<td>Michael Roth: Safe Enough Spaces pp. 1-25</td>
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<td>03.02.20</td>
<td>Elizabeth Anderson: “Fair Opportunity in Education: A Democratic Equality Perspective”</td>
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<td>03.04.20</td>
<td>Michael Roth: Safe Enough Spaces pp. 25-51</td>
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<td>John Dewey: The Political Writings “Can Education Share in Social Reconstruction?”</td>
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| 03.06.20   | John Dewey: The Political Writings “The Democratic Conception in Education” & “How Much Freedom in New Schools?” | Writing Assignment #2 Due
03.16.20  Michael Roth: *Safe Enough Spaces* pp. 52-85
03.18.20  Michael Roth: *Safe Enough Spaces* pp. 86-105
03.20.20  Richard Rorty: “Education as Socialization and as Individualization” & “The Necessity of Inspired Reading”
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “The Need of an Industrial Education in an Industrial Democracy”

03.23.20  Michael Roth: *Safe Enough Spaces* pp. 105-125
03.25.20  John Capps: “William James and the Will to Alieve”
03.27.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 1-7
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “The Democratic State”

03.30.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 11-36
04.01.20  José Medina: “Pragmatism, Racial Injustice, and Epistemic Insurrection”
04.03.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 37-56
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “The Problem of Method”

04.06.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 56-76
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “Liberty and Social Control”
04.08.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 77-94
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “Renascent Liberalism”
04.10.20  Cheryl Misak: “A Pragmatist Account of Legitimacy and Authority”
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy”
          **Writing Assignment #3 Due**

04.13.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 95-110
          Richard Hofstadter: “The Paranoid Style in American Politics”
04.15.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 110-127
          John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “Democratic Ends Need Democratic Means for Their Realization”
04.17.20  Michelle Moody-Adams: “Democratic Conflict and the Political Morality of Compromise” (pp. 186-201, 209-215)

04.20.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 131-152
04.22.20  Robert Talisse: *Overdoing Democracy* pp. 152-174

04.27.20  John Dewey: *The Political Writings* “I Believe” & “Creative Democracy — The Task Before Us”

05.04.20  **Writing Assignment #4/Democracy Project Due**