

AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

SPRING SEMESTER 2022-2023

ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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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 practical, 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 often defend democracy not on moral but on 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 radically challenge some of our basic intuitions.

Texts

Here are the books we'll be reading. You shouldn't have trouble buying, ordering, or downloading these wherever books are sold. All other course readings are downloadable from myCourses or from the embedded hyperlinks.

John Dewey: *The Political Writings* (Hackett, 1993)

Philip Kitcher: *Moral Progress* (Oxford, 2021)

Robert Talisse: *Sustaining Democracy* (Oxford, 2021)

Expectations

Discussion-Oriented

1. I believe philosophy is a group activity that depends on conversation and discussion. We can't tell if we're covering all our bases if we're not checking in with each other. For this reason my classes are normally discussion-intensive, which means they have a lower enrollment cap.* In order for this class to function well I need to be confident that everyone's doing the reading: no free-riding, please. I don't expect everyone (or, in some cases, anyone, myself included) to understand 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 come up with a couple questions or interesting points to share. I expect regular attendance (though please don't come to class if you're feeling unwell!). I will do everything I can so that everyone feels comfortable participating in our conversations.

2. I may also periodically assign short take-home or in-class writing assignments: these will be factored into the attendance and participation grade. I normally only resort to these when I lose confidence that we're doing the reading, or when overall attendance is suffering. So please do the reading and come to class.

Attendance and participation are worth 20% of your final 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. That way 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. They're not hard to find.

Writing Assignments

4. There will be four short (4 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. All together these will count toward 50% of your 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.

* Capps, J. 2018. The case for discussion-intensive pedagogy. APA Newsletter on Teaching Philosophy 17(2): 5-11. <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.apaonline.org/resource/collection/808CBF9D-D8E6-44A7-AE13-41A70645A525/TeachingV17n2.pdf>

Please bring a one page handout (or, better, e-mail it to me and I'll bring copies). 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 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 how the author builds their 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 8-10 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. For someone like Dewey, when democracy doesn't work the cure is more democracy. On the other hand, as we'll also see, Talisse argues that democratic engagement may actually make things worse, and that sustaining democratic institutions may require *less* participation. A Democracy Project could test these different points of view. Perhaps you participate in a club: how does the club operate, what is your role, does the club function democratically and, if it does, how do democratic procedures help the club succeed (if they do)? What does your participation teach you about the themes of this course, and vice versa?

General Policies and Additional Information

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.

7. I think philosophy in general and American Philosophy in particular is really wonderful and important. That means 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. We can also make arrangements to meet over Zoom as well

8. Similarly, 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. myCourses sometimes calculates grades in strange and disturbing ways, and I can provide more useful information.

Readings and Assignments

	01.18.23	Introductory Remarks
	01.20.23	William James: "The Present Dilemma in Philosophy" Cheryl Misak & Robert Talisse: " Pragmatism Endures "
	01.23.23	William James: "What Pragmatism Means"
	01.25.23	Cornel West: Interview with Astra Taylor ; Interview with Sean Illing ; Interview with Vinson Cunningham
History of Pragmatism	01.27.23	William James: "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth"
	01.30.23	C.S. Peirce: "The Fixation of Belief"
	02.01.23	C.S. Peirce: "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"
	02.03.23	Richard Rorty: "Looking Backwards from the Year 2096"; "The Unpatriotic Academy"
	02.06.23	Elizabeth Anderson: "How to Be a Pragmatist"
	02.08.23	William James: "The Will to Believe"
	02.10.23	John Capps: "William James and the Will to Believe" Writing Assignment #1 Due
	02.13.23	John Dewey: "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy" + <i>The Political Writings</i> "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy"
	02.15.23	John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "Philosophy and Democracy" + "The Ethics of Democracy"

	02.17.23	Hilary Putnam: "The Uniqueness of Pragmatism"
	02.20.23	Hilary Putnam: "Beyond the Fact-Value Dichotomy"
	02.22.23	John Capps: "A Common-Sense Pragmatic Theory of Truth"
	02.24.23	Michael Brown: "Critical Organic Catalyst, Prophetic Pragmatist, and Public Intellectual"
	02.27.23	Cheryl Misak: "Truth and Democracy: Pragmatism and the Deliberative Virtues"
Pragmatism and Politics	03.01.23	Elizabeth Anderson: "The Epistemology of Democracy"
	03.03.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 1-19
	03.06.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 20-41 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "Morals and the Conduct of States"
	03.08.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 42-67 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "Democratic Ends Need Democratic Methods for Their Realization"
	03.10.23	Writing Assignment #2 Due
		Spring Break
	03.20.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 68-84 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "The Democratic State"
	03.22.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 84-104 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "The Problem of Method"
	03.24.23	Michelle Chun: "Beyond Technocracy and Political Theology: John Dewey and the Authority of Truth"
	03.27.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 105-121 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "The Basic Values and Loyalties of Democracy"
	03.29.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 121-141
	03.31.23	Robert Talisse: <i>Sustaining Democracy</i> , pp. 142-151 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "Renascent Liberalism"
Pragmatism and Ethics	04.03.23	Cheryl Misak: "A Pragmatist Account of Legitimacy and Authority"
	04.05.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 13-28 John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "Intelligence and Morals"
	04.07.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 28-49
	04.10.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 49-72
	04.12.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 73-92
	04.14.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 92-100 Amia Srinivasan: "The Limits of Conversation" (<i>Moral Progress</i> , pp. 103-110)
		Writing Assignment #3 Due

	04.17.23	Rahel Jaeggi: "Progress as the Dynamics of Crisis" (in <i>Moral Progress</i> , pp. 119-136)
Applying Pragmatism	04.19.23	Philip Kitcher: <i>Moral Progress</i> pp. 139-149, 157-168
	04.21.23	Charles Sabel and David G. Victor: " <u>How to Fix the Climate</u> " Alyssa Battistoni: " <u>We Need Political—Not Technological—Innovation</u> " David Wallace-Wells: " <u>Why the Paris Agreement Matters</u> "
	04.24.23	Elizabeth Anderson: "The Future of Racial Integration"
	04.26.23	Gregory Fernando Pappas: "Empirical Approaches to Problems of Injustice: Elizabeth Anderson and the Pragmatists"
	04.28.23	John Capps: "What We Talk About When We Talk About Truth: Dewey, Wittgenstein, and the Pragmatic Test"
	05.01.23	John Dewey: <i>The Political Writings</i> "I Believe," "Creative Democracy — The Task Before Us" & "John Dewey Responds"
	05.08.23	Writing Assignment #4/Democracy Project Due
