

## American Pragmatism

Sample syllabus

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### Course description

American culture is thought to be less philosophical than Europe's. But one cannot make this judgment without qualification without first looking to the distinctive contribution to philosophy originated by Americans in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries: pragmatism.

As it turns out, there is much in this philosophic contribution which results from, if it does not contribute to American distrust of abstract philosophy. Pragmatism is skeptical of reasoning from armchair first principles. Instead it places trust in disciplines and institutions which have stood the test of time (such as science, religion, and art) and sees attempts by philosophers to "legislate" prescriptions for these fields as baseless and unmotivated by uncontroversial facts. Its skepticism about armchair philosophy is of a piece with its general rejection of the contemplation model of the mind, and its endorsement of attention to action and consequences in our lived experience.

Since pragmatists themselves do not believe that a philosophical problem can be solved without attention to its historical context, this course will examine the development of pragmatism in *its* historical context. We will begin with the roots of pragmatism in European philosophy and its descendants. Though these roots may seem to be in conflict with each other—Hume's empiricism, Hegel's rationalism, Emerson's romanticism—there are threads uniting them, threads which were picked up by the classical pragmatists (Peirce, James, and Dewey), and fashioned into what they took to be a new philosophy for a new century.

And, like good pragmatists, we will also attend to the *consequences* of pragmatism: to the cultural influence it has had on American institutions, whether in education or in politics. Whether these consequences were especially useful ones will then be discussed, by prominent critics of pragmatism.

### Texts

- Susan Haack and Robert Lane, eds., *Pragmatism: Old & New: Selected Writings* (Prometheus, 2006)
- William James, *Pragmatism* (Dover, 1995)
- John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Beacon Press, 1957)
- Course pack

### Lecture and reading schedule

#### *European roots of American pragmatism*

*The target of pragmatism: foundationalism and the quest for certainty*

- Descartes, from *Meditations* and *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*

*Early accounts of pragmatic justification*

- Hume, "Skeptical Solutions to these Doubts," from *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*
- Kant, "Opinion," from *The Critique of Pure Reason*

*Anti-foundationalism and romanticism*

- Hegel, "Sense Certainty," from *The Phenomenology of Mind*
- Emerson, from "Self-reliance" and "The American Scholar"

#### *C.S. Peirce*

*The critique of Descartes*

- Peirce, "Some Consequences of Four Incapacities"
- Peirce, "The Fixation of belief"

*The pragmatic theory of meaning*

- Peirce, “How to Make Our Ideas Clear”
- Peirce, “A Definition of Pragmatism”
- Peirce, “Deduction, Induction, and Hypothesis”

**William James**

*Psychological work*

- James, “Habit” from *Principles of Psychology*

*Theory of knowledge*

- James, “The Will to Believe”

*The pragmatic theory of meaning and truth*

- James, *Pragmatism* (entire)

*Ethical consequences*

- James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life”

**John Dewey**

*More anti-Cartesianism*

- Dewey, “Escape from Peril,” from *The Quest for Certainty*

*Systematic pragmatism*

- Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (entire)

*The pragmatic theory of truth*

- Dewey, “Truth and Consequences”

*Ethical consequences*

- Dewey, “Theory of Valuation”

*Applications to culture*

- Dewey, “Theories of knowledge” and “Aims in Education,” in *Democracy and Education*
- Dewey, “The Live Creature,” from *Art and Experience*

**Late pragmatism**

- Meade, “Mind, Self and Society” and/or “The Social Self”
- Schiller, “The Making of Truth”
- Lewis, “A Pragmatic Conception of the *a priori*”
- W.V. Quine, from “Two Dogmas of Empiricism”
- Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism”

**American challenges to American Pragmatism**

- Russell, from *History of Western Philosophy*
- Blanshard, from *The Nature of Thought*
- Dennett, “Postmodernism and Truth”
- Peikoff, “Why Must one Act on Principle?”