

Philosophy 308

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AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

Skidmore College
Fall 2007
Monday & Wednesday
2:30-4:20pm

Professor William Lewis
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Ladd 216, x5402,
Office Hours: Monday 9-12am

Course Description

In his 1837 address, "The American Scholar", Ralph Waldo Emerson passionately argues that American thought should abandon its reliance on European philosophy and that it should reflect the American experience in its diversity, originality, and totality. Following Emerson, many other American Philosophers have taken up his challenge and have tried to construct a philosophy that both improves upon European models and reflects America's uniqueness. Necessarily, improving upon European models has meant not only engaging in a critique of the dominant strains of Modern European philosophy, rationalism and empiricism, but also in the formulation of a new method or approach to philosophy that solves some of their problems. Starting with Emerson and continuing with C. S. Peirce, William James and John Dewey, this course will examine a history of such attempts, their methods, and their conclusions. Special focus will be given to issues of metaphysics, logic, mind, and epistemology. As a group and as individuals, we will also critically examine contemporary thinkers whose work builds upon pragmatic insights and applies them to contemporary problems in philosophy, to other disciplines, and to life.

Illustration: Child's first encounter with the candle flame *left* and second encounter *right* which entails an active avoidance of being burned (William James, *Principles of Psychology*. New York: Holt, 1890).

Required Texts

Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*

Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*

Stuhr, John J. (editor). *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*

Course Packet [cp]

Optional Text

Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club*

Class Format and Expectations

Run as an advanced seminar, this course demands much student participation and independent research. It is imperative that you be prepared each day to discuss the assigned readings and to present your research. The class will consist of discussions that aim at: (a) gaining an understanding of the text at hand; and (b) applying the issues, ideas and concepts that the texts raise to problems and issues both contemporary and historical. To this end, most class meetings will be divided into two halves. In the first and longer half we will focus narrowly on understanding the text itself. After a short break, we will engage in a critical discussion of the text and will look to its possible applications.

For each class meeting, it is expected that you will arrive having formulated an informal response to the reading(s) to be discussed that day. These responses should contain a brief summary of the author(s) points (noting key passages, concepts, moments, etc.) and should then extend to the formulation of original questions or comments. These can be questions regarding your own understanding of the text (such as: “For William James, does belief equal truth?”). Alternately, these comments can be critical of the text, supportive of its argument, or (best) can link texts together, apply their insights, or relate them to other philosophers/philosophies. Each day, I will call on seminar participants to relate their responses to the class. This does not mean that you need to come to class with a response paper to read each day (though some days I may ask for this type of thing). However, a few paragraphs or—at the very least—some clear and detailed notes outlining your response will be necessary. It is expected that these responses will provide a basis for the three short reflection papers that you will write on Peirce, James, and Dewey and that, in turn, significant parts of these short papers will be folded into your term paper.

Many of the ideas and texts that we are dealing with in this class are hard to understand on our own. Because of this and because this class is discussion based and discussions need participants, attendance is mandatory and you are expected to take part in all class discussions. This aspect of your performance will be reflected in a portion of your grade that reflects its overall importance to the class and that includes the informal presentation of your “responses” to each text. This grade is based upon both the quality and quantity of your participation. **If, for some reason, you cannot attend class, let me know of this in advance by phone or email.**

Assignments, Value, and Policies

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|---|---|
| •Class Participation | (20%, includes small assignments) |
| •Short papers on Peirce, James, and Dewey | (10% each, 30% combined) |
| •Term Paper on Contemporary Pragmatism | (40%, includes preliminary assignments) |
| •In-Class Presentation | (10%, includes preliminary sketch) |

To pass the class, all assignments (including preliminary assignments) must be completed in the order assigned. No late assignments will be accepted without express permission of the instructor obtained at least 24 hours before the assignment's due date. Violations of the Skidmore College Honor Code will result in an "F" for a class grade as well as all penalties imposed by the Honor Council.

Note

I strongly encourage you to see me at any time if you are having problems with the readings, with understanding the class discussions, or if you just wish to further discuss issues raised in the class. I am willing to spend time with you in person to help you get as much out of the course as you desire.

Schedule

(unless noted, all readings are in *Pragmatism and Contemporary American Philosophy*)

Week 1 (September 2-8)

Wed Introduction

Week 2 (September 9-15)

Mon Emerson, *The American Scholar*

Wed Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* 1 thru 4 [use personal copy or e-text]

Week 3 (September 16-22)

Mon Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [pc]

Wed Stuhr, "Introduction to *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy*"
Emerson, "Experience"

••Secondary Literature Survey Assigned••

Week 4 (September 23-29)

Mon Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief"
Colapietro, "Introduction to Charles Sanders Peirce"
(optional: Menand: 151-200)

Wed Peirce: "How to Make Our Ideas Clear"
Hookway, "Truth and the Aims of Inquiry" [cp]

••Secondary Literature Survey Due••

Week 5 (September 30-October 6)

Mon Peirce, "What Pragmatism Is", "The Doctrine of Necessity Examined"

Wed Peirce, "Letters to Lady Welby"
"Logic as Semiotic: the Theory of Signs" [cp]
(optional: Short, T. L. "Life among the Legisigns") [cp]
(optional: The Principles of Phenomenology) [cp]

••Focussed Literature Survey Assigned••

Week 6 (October 7-13)

Mon Peirce, "The Approach to Metaphysics" [cp],
"The Architecture of Theories" [cp]
"Synechism, Fallibilism, and Evolution" [cp]
(optional: "Peirce" in Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy) [cp]

Wed Peirce, "A Neglected Argument for the Reality of God"

••Short Peirce Paper Assigned••

Week 7 (October 14-20)

Mon Mcdermott, "Introduction" to William James"
 James, "The Types of Philosophic Thinking"
 (optional: Menand, "Pragmatism" 73-95)

Wed James, "The Stream of Thought"

••Short Peirce Paper Due••

Week 8 (October 21-27)

Mon James, "A World of Pure Experience"
 Hester & Talisse, chapter 2, *On James* [pc]
 (optional: John E. Smith "The Reconstruction of Experience in P, J, & D") [pc]

Wed William James, "What Pragmatism Means"
 Hester & Talisse, chapter 3, *On James* [pc]

••Focussed Literature Survey Due••

••Project Proposal Assigned••

Week 9 (October 28-November 3)

Mon William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth" [pc]
 "The Function of Cognition" [pc]
 "The Tigers in India" [pc]

Wed William James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life"

••Short James Paper Assigned••

Week 10 (November 4-10)

Mon John Stuhr, "Introduction" to John Dewey
 John Dewey, "The Postulate of Immediate Empiricism"
 "Experience and Philosophic Method"
 (optional: Menand, 284-333)

Wed Screening: *John Dewey: His Life and Work* (2000)

Week 11 (November 11-17)

Mon John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, "Changing Conceptions of Philosophy"
 & "Some Historical Factors in Philosophical Reconstruction"
 (optional: "The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy")

••Short James Paper Due••

Wed John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*,
 "The Scientific Factor In Reconstruction of Philosophy"
 "Changed Conceptions of Experience and Reason"

Week 12 (November 18-24)

Mon John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*
 “Changed Conceptions of the Ideal and the Real”
 “The Significance of Logical Reconstruction”
••Project Proposal Due••

Wed **THANKSGIVING, NO CLASS**

Week 13 (November 25-December 1)

Mon John Dewey,
 "Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions"
 "Reconstruction as Affecting Social Philosophy"

Wed John Dewey, "Search for The Great Community"
••Short Dewey Paper Assigned••

Week 14 (December 2-8)

Mon Presentations

Wed Presentations

••Short Dewey Paper Due••

Week 15 (December 9-15)

Mon Presentations

Wed Presentations

Week 16 (December 16-22)

••Final Paper Due, date TBA••