200-05 Philosophical Perspectives: American Philosophy

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"(Our Constitution] ... is an experiment, as all life is an experiment"
Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

"All life is an experiment. The more experiments you make, the better"
Ralph Waldo Emerson

This course belongs to the core requirement devoted to philosophical perspectives. A “perspective” is a particular point of view or specific way of looking at things. It might even suggest a physical location where one stands and from which one views everything else. If we change our physical location, for example in this classroom, everything else that was previously familiar will appear new and different. In this sense, philosophy provides one perspectival point of view on human experience that is unlike the scientific or artistic perspective. Similarly, the uniqueness of American cultural history is another perspective in this sense. Our inquiries and discussions this semester will attempt to define what the elements are that make up the peculiar American approach to the problems of philosophy. It is often said that America’s unique contribution to the history of Western thought is a school of philosophical thinking known as “Pragmatism”. Given that fact, our course will be a detailed examination of American Pragmatism through the works from America’s greatest philosophical minds of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Beyond their ideas themselves, we shall examine the manner in which the uniqueness of the American experience – geographical, historical and cultural – has aided them in configuring many traditional problems of Western philosophical thought. What is more, we shall examine how American thinkers use philosophical ideas as a means for engaging the unique challenges that face the nation as well; problems such as imperialism, race and economic inequality.

There will be several components to our work together this semester. The first will focus on the nature of modern scientific philosophy as articulated in the revolutionary thought of Rene Descartes. Much of modern European thought begins here, whether in terms of defining the main problems with which philosophy must deal, or in terms of the specific solutions that are on offer. American philosophy is very much in conversation with this European tradition, both in a positive as well as negative way. The Descartes material will give us a starting point from which to appreciate the uniqueness of the American point of view in philosophy. The second, and indeed the main part of our class time will examine classical American philosophy as articulated in the tradition of American pragmatism. Louis Menand’s excellent and highly readable *The Metaphysical Club* will be our guiding background text as we read and discuss selected primary works by Charles Peirce (1838-1914) and then focus on William James (1842-1910), former as the originator, the latter the most influential public voice of the philosophy of American pragmatism. The
third and final part of the course will concern our Friday class meetings. These will be discussion-based class meetings built on the model of the Oxford Tutorial. A wide range of collateral readings will be assigned, each providing important detailed material on the central concerns of the class. The format for these Tutorial Fridays together with the readings and group assignments appear below under REQUIREMENTS.

Learning Outcomes for Phil 200

In this course, you will further pursue fundamental human questions about topics such as knowledge, morals, and politics by investigating how great philosophers have addressed these questions. You will have the chance to read, discuss, and critique classic works of philosophy. In this way, you will be invited into a long tradition of reflection on the meaning of our shared humanity, of the world, and of our relation to it. This course is part of the Xavier Core Curriculum, which aims to develop people of learning and reflection, integrity and achievement, in solidarity for and with others. The course addresses the following core learning objective at the intermediate level:

1a: Students recognize and cogently discuss significant questions in the humanities, arts, and the natural and social sciences.

2a: Students find, evaluate, and logically convey information and ideas in written and oral presentations.

5b: Students examine the interconnections between humans and the natural environment.

BOOKS & READINGS -- The following readings are required for the course. The articles are available through CANVAS under FILES and are the books are available in the Bookstore.

Books

René Descartes, The Discourse on Method (Hackett)
Louis Menand, The Metaphysical Club (Farrar, Straus, Giroux)
William James, Pragmatism (Hackett)
William James, The Will to Believe & Other Essays (Dover)

Essays on Canvas under “FILES”

George Cotkin, “The Imperial Imperative"
John Dewey, “The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy"
Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar"
William James, “Remarks on Spencer's Definition of Mind as Correspondence"
William James, “Habit”
William James, “The Energies of Men"
Edward Madden, “Chauncey Wright: Forgotten American Philosopher”
Frederick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

REQUIREMENTS - Your final grade in this course will be determined by a number of factors, including the quality of your oral work at the Tutorial Friday Sessions, your four Summary Essays, your Oral Final Exam, and on the quality and frequency of your contributions to class discussion in both the history and philosophy parts of Block. These assignments are described in detail as follows:
At Oxford these classes are called “tutorials”, at Cambridge, they are referred to as “supervisions”. The Tutorial has been a standard feature of British university education for many years. First of all, the name “tutorial” does not signify anything remedial or corrective of academic deficiency as it does in the United States. Far from it! In the UK system, it designates an intensively collaborative educational framework characterized by low student-to-teacher ratios (usually ranging from 1:1 to 4:1). The specific structure of the tutorial may vary widely. The standard model involved weekly or biweekly meetings between the faculty member and the students. Students are typically required to prepare a short essay on a specific theme that is either chosen or assigned. Students generally read aloud or summarize their work, after which the tutor and/or fellow students offer comment and critique. The Oxford tutorial is a highly respected educational model that has been praised for the degree of student initiative involved. Skills at critical analysis, oral presentation and creative thinking are fostered in situations where professors and students work in close collaboration. Here is a link to a YouTube video of a Tutorial that might give you an idea of how it works:


We will modify this basic model for our course. Our Tutorials will occur during our class meeting on Friday of each week. Your Tutorial will take the following format: The group responsible for presenting the essay will prepare a one page summary of the points raised by the essay that the group wishes to discuss in front of the class. The group will sit in the middle of the room with me. They will begin by reading their one page summary aloud after which the group will engage in conversation with me about the points raised in that summary. This conversation will last from 20-30 minutes, during which time no one but the group presenting will be allowed to participate. The remainder of the class will take notes on what is said, and after the 20-30 period will be required to enter the conversation. **PLEASE NOTE: EVERYONE IS EXPECTED TO COME TO THESE FRIDAY TUTORIALS HAVING READ THE ESSAY THAT HAS BEEN ASSIGNED TO THE GROUP WHO ARE PRESENTING.** Every effort will be made to integrate the content of these Friday discussions into the material under discussion in the course as a whole.

**TUTORIAL FRIDAY – DATES, TOPICS & GROUPS**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Presenting Group</th>
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| Sept 16| Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History"  
  *Christopher Barker, Jeffrey Bauer, Olivia Baumoel*  
  *Ralph Waldo Emerson, “The American Scholar”  
  *Eli Bedel, Thomas Bell, Anthony Bishop* |
  *Katharine Chadwick, Eric Coglianese, Darian Cummings* |
| Sept 30| Edward Madden, “Chauncey Wright: Forgotten American Philosopher”  
  *Samantha Dewey, Quinn Douglas, Emilie Eros* |
  *Megan Forsthoefel, Paul Fritschner, Mary Green* |
| Oct 21 | William James, “Remarks on Spencer’s Definition of Mind as Correspondence”  
  *Patrick Gronvall, Stephanie Hagedorn, Athena Harmata* |
Amanda Henderson, Ashlyn Kammer, Michael Kosla

Nov 4  William James, “Habit” (On Canvas under FILES)  
Jacob Manchester, Charles Morrow, Michael Murray

William James, “The Energies of Men” (On Canvas under FILES)  
Logan Rogers, Allison Sajnaj, Taylor Schnebelt

Aryana Smith, Elizabeth Spurr, Michael Sudo

Nov 18  George Cotkin, “The Imperial Imperative” (On Canvas under FILES)  
Kimberly Swanson, Wabi Tela, Stephan Wenkel

Dec 2  John Smith, “The Spirit of American Philosophy: Retrospect & Prospect” (On Canvas under FILES)  
Jenna Wilkes, Tiffany Williams

(2) THE THREE SHORT ESSAYS  
There will be three short essays required during the course of the semester. The papers are meant to be no more than three to five pages (double spaced) in length and should aim at a critical discussion of the material covered in the topics.

ESSAY ONE: Due Monday, September 19

The distinction and subsequent relationship between mind and body is a central element of Descartes’ thinking. Using his discussion of this issue as it appears in Part Five of the Discourse on Method, write an essay that does the following: (1) describe Descartes’ position on mind and body, (2) sketch what you believe to be the implications for knowledge, and (3) state your evaluation of his view.

ESSAY TWO: Due Monday, October 17

Using the following passage from Charles Peirce, describe the following: (1) what is the main criticism that Peirce is leveling against Descartes, and (2) how does Peirce’s account of inquiry (i.e., doubt and belief) avoid the mistakes that Descartes makes?

“We cannot begin with complete doubt. We must begin with all of the prejudices which we actually have when we enter upon the study of philosophy. These prejudices are not to be dispelled by a maxim, for they are things which it does not occur to us can be questioned. Hence, this initial skepticism will be a mere self deception, and not real doubt; and no one who follows the Cartesian method will ever be satisfied until he has formally recovered all those beliefs which in form he has given up. … A person may, it is true, in the course of his studies, find reason to doubt what he began by believing; but in that case he doubts because he has a positive reason for it, and not on account of the Cartesian maxim. Let us not pretend to doubt in philosophy what we do not doubt in our hearts.”

From C.S. Peirce, “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities”, (1868)
ESSAY THREE: Due Monday, November 14

In similar fashion to what you wrote on the first essay dealing with Descartes, write an essay that describes James’ model of consciousness (what used to be called “mind”) and include the following: (1) its debt to Darwin’s ideas, and (2) the implications that this model of consciousness has for how James understands the role of knowledge in human experience.

PHILOSOPHY DEPARTMENT GRADING STANDARDS: The standards for grading in the Department of Philosophy are articulated below. You would do well to consult them prior to writing your papers.

A = Exceptional  
B = Good  
C = Satisfactory  
D = Minimum Passing  
F = Failure

“The Philosophy Department further agrees that these letter grades signify the following level of accomplishment by students when given for discursive, written work:

A = work that not merely fully and accurately reproduces class discussion, the main thread in an argument or the main philosophical significance of a text under discussion, but which, having considered arguments and counter-arguments, goes beyond these and indicates a contribution of the student herself or himself, giving evidence of an individual and hence deeper understanding of the material in question.

B = work that shows a more or less complete and exact understanding of the issues, texts, and/or arguments as explained in class, clearly and logically formulated without going beyond such explanations.

C = work that shows basic understanding of the material but with errors, omissions and confusions of either a formal or material nature.

D = work that shows a minimal acquaintance with the material or serious logical and conceptual flaws in formulating responses to the question raised, the argument at issue, or to the philosophical text under discussion.

F = work that shows inadequate acquaintance with texts, issues, or ideas with little or no valid logical argumentation; or, the work is a plagiarism. Cases of plagiarism, which involve the use of published or others’ written work without giving credit, must be given F.

Using a paper that is substantially identical to one used by the student in another class is considered academic dishonesty and penalties for submitting such a paper will be the same as those for plagiarism. The department does not mandate grade distributions or curves. The final goal of all of our grading must be fairness to all students and the encouragement of the highest level of achievement possible in each student.”

Approved: April 15, 2002; Revised: March 20, 2006

(3) THE FINAL EXAM – There will be a final examination scheduled during exam week. Details of the precise nature of this project will be distributed. The exam date & time is as follows:

Wednesday December 14 12:00 -1:50

(4) CLASS PARTICIPATION & CLASSROOM ETIQUETTE – Our class together is a collaborative endeavor. Its success depends upon each of us contributing our best efforts to the group on a daily basis. Outside of class, this means your careful reading and preparation of the materials to be discussed in the next day’s class. To make the most of the brief time that we are in the classroom with one another, it is best to have the assigned readings with you in hard copy, as we will work from them during the class hour. In-class behaviors such as internet surfing, text messaging or body language of
disrespect (i.e., falling asleep, heads on desk, irrelevant private conversations, etc.) are unacceptable. **YOU MUST MAKE SURE THAT YOUR CELL PHONES ARE OFF DURING CLASS TIME!!!**  PLEASE NOTE: In order to earn the highest grade in this class, you must be a regular and active contributor to class discussion.

Attendance & Academic Honesty -- Repeated absence without legitimate excuse communicated to the professor, or any transgression of academic integrity constitutes ground for failure in the course. On the latter point, the official university policy is in effect:

The pursuit of truth demands high standards of personal honesty. Academic and professional life requires a trust based upon integrity of the written and spoken word. Accordingly, violations of certain standards of ethical behavior will not be tolerated at Xavier University. These include theft, cheating, plagiarism, unauthorized assistance in assignments and tests, unauthorized copying of computer software, the falsification of results and material submitted in reports or admission and registration documents, and the falsification of any academic record including letters of recommendation. All work submitted for academic evaluation must be the student’s own. Certainly, the activities of other scholars will influence all students. However, the direct and unattributed use of another’s efforts is prohibited as is the use of any work untruthfully submitted as one’s own. Penalties for violations of this policy may include one or more of the following: a zero for that assignment or test, an “F” in the course, and expulsion from the University. The dean of the college in which the student is enrolled is to be informed in writing of all such incidents, though the teacher has full authority to assign the grade for the assignment, test, or course. If disputes of interpretation arise, the student, faculty member, and chair should attempt to resolve the difficulty. If this is unsatisfactory, the dean will rule in the matter. As a final appeal, the academic vice president will call a committee of tenured faculty for the purpose of making a final determination.

Office -- My office is located on the second floor of Hinkle Hall, room 210. You can reach me there by phone or you can leave a voice mail message for me at 745-3629. I am in the office every day with mornings to early afternoon being the best times, and you are certainly encouraged to drop by whenever you wish, regardless of official office hours.

Official office hours are:

- Monday, Wednesday & Friday, 2:00-3:00
- Tuesday & Thursday, 9:00 – 12:00
- And by appointment

colella@xavier.edu

Schedule of Topics & Readings

**Week of August 22nd**

This first week will introduce the course. Although our primary focus lies with American philosophy, modern scientific philosophy begins in Europe with the Scientific Revolution. After some background, we shall examine Descartes’ attempt to establish modern experimental science on a firm philosophical foundation. **NOTE – please read Part Six of the Discourse first!**

Reading: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Part Six & Part One
We will start with an examination of Descartes’ stated goals in his philosophy and Galileo’s overthrow of the Aristotelian–Ptolemaic world-view. We will make an effort to identify the main features that characterize Modernity and we shall contrast it with the features that were essential to the Classical Mind. We shall devote these classes to a careful study of Descartes’ *Discourse on Method* with the emphasis falling upon his philosophical foundation necessary for grounding modern science and technology.

Reading: Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, Parts One – Six

**Monday, September 5th – LABOR DAY – NO CLASSES**

**Week of September 12th**

The 19th century American context for philosophy revolves around the defining event of the history of the United States, namely, the Civil War. We shall uncover the role of philosophical ideas in the lived experience of human beings, especially in the lives of perceptive and reflective persons, in the formative experience of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr.

Reading: Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, Part One (all), pp. 3-69

**Week of September 19th**


Peirce, *The Fixation of Belief* (On Canvas under FILES)

**Week of September 26th**


Peirce, *How To Make Our Ideas Clear* (On Canvas under FILES)

**Week of October 3rd**

Reading: Menand, James, *The Metaphysical Club*, Part Two (all), pp. 73-148

James, *The Will to Believe*, “Reflex Action & Theism”

**Thursday, October 6th & Friday, October 7th – FALL HOLIDAY – NO CLASSES**

**Week of October 17th**

Reading: James, *The Will to Believe*, “The Sentiment of Rationality”

*The Will to Believe*, “The Will to Believe”

**Week of October 24th**

Reading: James, *The Will to Believe*, “Is Life Worth Living?”

*The Will to Believe*, “The Moral Philosopher & the Moral Life”

**Week of October 31st**

Reading: James, *The Will to Believe*, “Great Men & their Environment”

*The Will to Believe*, “The Importance of Individuals”

**Week of November 7th**

Reading: Menand, James, *The Metaphysical Club*, Part Five, “Pragmatisms” (Sections 3-7), pp. 347-375

*Pragmatism*, The Present Dilemma in Philosophy
Week of November 14th

Reading: James, *Pragmatism, What Pragmatism Means*
*Pragmatism, Some Metaphysical Problems Pragmatically Considered*

Week of November 21st

Reading: James, *Pragmatism, Pragmatism’s Conception of Truth*
*Pragmatism, Pragmatism and Common Sense*

Wednesday, November 23rd Through Sunday, November 27
THANKSGIVING BREAK – NO CLASSES

Week of November 28th

Reading: James, *Pragmatism, Pragmatism and Religion*
“The Types of Philosophical Thinking” (On Canvas under FILES)

Week of December 5th

Reading: Menand, *The Metaphysical Club,* Part Five, “Pluralisms”

**FINAL EXAMINATION:** Wednesday December 14, 12:00 -1:50