

PHIL 320: Contemporary Pragmatism

Whitman College – Spring 2015

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Wed. 1 - 3 & Fri. 1 - 2

Course Description

In everyday life, a “pragmatist” is someone who is concerned only with figuring out what will actually work to bring about practical outcomes, rather than getting hung up on abstract theories. In philosophy, a “pragmatist” is someone who is concerned only with figuring out what will actually work to bring about practical outcomes, rather than getting hung up on abstract theories. And since many if not all of the questions and debates that have been the focus of Western philosophy don’t seem to be relevant at all for the achievement of practical outcomes, a pragmatist is inclined to reject those questions and debates as mere word-play. Simply put, the pragmatist says that since it wouldn’t *make* a difference which side of those debates we accept, there *is* no difference between them – and so we shouldn’t bother playing along.

Although one can find elements of pragmatism in a wide variety of philosophers throughout the Western tradition, pragmatism as a self-conscious approach to philosophy originated in the late 19th century in America, most famously and influentially in the work of C.S. Peirce (pronounced ‘purse’), William James, and John Dewey. It flourished through the first few decades of the 20th century, and then was largely eclipsed by the rise of logical positivism, which dominated English-language philosophy for the middle part of the century.

But pragmatism never fully went away, and when criticisms of logical positivism began to mount in the 1950s, some of the most prominent critics drew (very selectively) on elements of pragmatism. A full-blown revival began in the 1970s, primarily through the work of Richard Rorty. His 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was a watershed, putting pragmatism squarely back on the map of contemporary philosophy. Since then, Rorty developed his particular version of pragmatism more fully, while other versions have also been developed – some very different from Rorty’s, but all in one way or another trying to capture the driving spirit of pragmatism (whether or not they accept the label).

Our focus in this course will be on Rorty, covering both a wide range of topics that he has addressed as well as the span of his mature career. But, we will also take some time near the beginning to examine some of Rorty’s immediate predecessors and influences, in order to be able to identify the innovations that are truly his own – and perhaps, from that, to be able to see other directions that could have been taken from those same starting points. And then in the last part of the semester, we will take some time to examine some competing conceptions of pragmatism currently on the philosophical scene.

Throughout the semester (except for the very last day), we will work exclusively *within* a broadly pragmatist framework. That is because our core goal in this course is to come to understand the nature, impact, and appeal of pragmatism on its *own* terms. That doesn’t mean that you will have to accept the pragmatist’s framework, just that you’ll need to make sure that your challenges and counter-arguments are developed in ways that ultimately advance that core goal, and enable you and the group as a whole to continue working toward it.

Course Materials

There are no books that you need to buy for the course. Instead, the bulk of the readings will be available on the course CLEo site, posted as “Resources.” I strongly recommend that you print out the readings so that you can mark them up and have them available in class and when writing papers. If you do print them out, I strongly encourage you to print on both sides of the paper, if possible. (It’s my Earth too!)

You will also need to read George Orwell’s novel *1984* by early April. It’s up to you to decide whether to buy a copy or to borrow one from a library. Any edition will be fine.

If you are a collector of outstanding and important philosophy books, then you may wish to purchase some or all of the books from which we’re reading excerpts – they contain much more than we’ll be able to read, and are well worth owning.

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Preparation and Participation — 25% of your total grade

This course will be structured as a seminar, which relies on the active and collaborative engagement of everyone in the room. Students should not just be prepared if called on, or make a point of saying one thing each meeting, as you might in a large lower-level course. Rather, you should consider yourselves jointly responsible for how productive our class meetings are, each and every day. I’ll serve as the moderator of the discussion, and will sometimes shape the agenda – but you should also make sure to develop your *own* sense of the key passages, ideas, arguments, links, questions, and objections as you work through the readings.

In our conversations, you should address and engage with your classmates, and not just me. You should also be willing to think out loud, to raise questions that might seem basic, to offer interpretations that might seem uncertain, to propose links that might seem tenuous, to make arguments that might seem sketchy, and otherwise to take intellectual risks. This is very difficult and provocative material, and our class will only succeed to the extent that we’re willing to struggle through and with it together.

Response Papers — 50% of your total grade

As we are working through this material, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own thoughts in response. About every two weeks (as indicated on the schedule below), you will articulate and support your views on the material in a brief essay of around 1000-1200 words. There are only two requirements:

- (1) Each essay must make direct contact with at least one significant idea or passage from at least one of the readings that we discussed in class since the previous essay.
It’s fine for you to bring in earlier readings as well, but make sure that each essay is largely a response to the new material.
- (2) Each essay must be unified, defending a specific conclusion or working out the implications of a core idea. It shouldn’t simply summarize one of the readings, nor present a series of disconnected reactions. The exact topic is entirely up to you, and each essay can engage in any combination of interpretation, application, and/or evaluation of the text(s). You are welcome to use one essay to follow-up on a question or idea from a previous essay, and/or you are welcome to advance entirely different or even incompatible views. In short, you should use the essays in whatever ways you think will be most productive for you.

Your essays should be typed in Times New Roman 12-point font, with one-inch margins all around. The body of the essay should be double-spaced, with no extra spacing between paragraphs.

Essays should be submitted to your “Drop Box” on the CLEo site, in Microsoft Word format. I will then insert my feedback into the files and upload them back to your Drop Box.

Essays are due at the beginning of the day listed on the schedule – they should be waiting for me when I wake up (bright and early!). Extensions can be arranged in advance; just contact me about it as early as you can. Accommodations will be made after the fact only in cases of unforeseeable emergency.

Term Paper – 25% of your total grade

At the end of the semester, you will submit a full-length essay (about 4000 words) engaging in depth with any of the issues, views, and/or authors that particularly interests you. Again, you will be free to undertake any combination of interpretation, application, and/or evaluation. You are welcome, though not required, to build your term paper from one or more of your response papers. So, you might want to keep that in mind as you’re composing those shorter pieces throughout the semester.

Your project will need to maintain a significant foundation in the assigned readings, but will also be expected to work with material beyond them. That might include interpretation, further development, support, and/or critique of assigned readings, and/or it might include separate attempts to address issues that come out of our assigned readings. Either way, the ultimate goal will be for you to develop your *own* views, and not just to report others’; the additional material that you will work with should be used as a resource to help facilitate and deepen that process.

More details about the expectations for the term papers will be distributed later in the semester.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you’re working on the papers. So it is **permitted** (and even encouraged!) for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, to exchange notes with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other’s papers. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else’s words or specific ideas in your written work without providing a proper citation to the source. Even if it’s an accident, it’s still plagiarism! You have a responsibility to keep track of the origins of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details about the College’s policies and procedures, see the Student Handbook.

If you have *any* questions about what would or wouldn’t be plagiarism in this context, please just talk with me about it *in advance*.

Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

1. Preview of Rorty

Tue. Jan. 20 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), introduction
Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" (2004)

Thu. Jan. 22 Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality" (1994)
Rorty, "A World without Substances or Essences" (1994)

2. Some Context and Building Blocks

Tue. Jan. 27 Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 2
Hempel, "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning" (1950), excerpt

Thu. Jan. 29 Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956), §§1-7, 10-18
optional, as needed: Brandom's study-guide to EPM

Tue. Feb. 3 Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," §§28-37, 19, 38
optional, as needed: Brandom's study-guide to EPM
**** class led by Dr. Charles Pailthorp, Evergreen**

Thu. Feb. 5 Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951)
Quine, "Ontological Relativity" (1969), excerpts

** Sun. Feb. 8 – response paper due*

Tue. Feb. 10 Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" (1974)
Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986)

Thu. Feb. 12 Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974)

3. Back to Rorty, For Real This Time

Tue. Feb. 17 Rorty, "The World Well Lost" (1972)

Thu. Feb. 19 NO CLASS – Power & Privilege Symposium

** Sun. Feb. 22 – response paper due*

Tue. Feb. 24 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), ch. 3
optional, as needed: Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 5

Thu. Feb. 26 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 4 secs. 1-3

Tue. Mar. 3 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 4 secs. 4-5
Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 6

Thu. Mar. 5 Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 9 sec. 1
Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 7 sec. 1 & ch. 8 secs. 1-2

* *Sun. Mar. 8 – response paper due*

Tue. Mar. 10 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 8 secs. 3-5

Thu. Mar. 12 Rorty, “Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism” (1980)
Rorty, “Science as Solidarity” (1987)

———— **SPRING BREAK** ————— (this would be a good time to read 1984!)

Tue. Mar. 31 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), introduction & ch. 1

Thu. Apr. 2 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 4

* *Sun. Apr. 5 – response paper due*

Tue. Apr. 7 **NO CLASS** – Undergraduate Conference

Thu. Apr. 9 Orwell, 1984 (entire)

Tue. Apr. 14 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 7 sec. 1 & ch. 8

Thu. Apr. 16 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 9
Rorty, “Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality” (1993)

* *Sun. Apr. 19 – response paper due*

Tue. Apr. 21 Rorty, “Feminism and Pragmatism” (1990)
Fraser, “From Irony to Prophecy to Politics” (1990)

4. Pragmatism Beyond Rorty

Thu. Apr. 23 Elshtain, "Don't Be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyan Liberalism" (2003)

Tue. Apr. 28 Conant, "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth: Rorty versus Orwell" (2000), §§I-VI *including notes*

Thu. Apr. 30 Conant, "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth," §§VII-IX *including notes optional, if interested*; Rorty, "Response to James Conant" (2000)

** Sun. May 3 – response paper due*

Tue. May 5 Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction" (2003)

Thu. May 7 Brandom, "Reason, Expression, and the Philosophic Enterprise" (2001)
Brandom, "Why Truth Is Not Important in Philosophy" (2009)

Tue. May 12 Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism" (2009)
Sosa, "Serious Philosophy and Freedom of the Spirit" (1987)

** FRI. MAY 15 @ 4:00 – TERM PAPER DUE*