

Phil 3141
American Pragmatism, Past and Present
Section MW11 Registration Code 55141
Spring 2018

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Course Description: In this course, we will study the history of philosophical pragmatism in the United States. Our emphasis will be on understanding, first, various pragmatist conceptions of knowledge and truth. We will then study the role that knowledge, truth, and inquiry play in democratic life.

"Pragmatism" refers to a philosophical tradition that emerged in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with the work of Charles Sanders Peirce and William James.

Its central, post-Darwinian view is that our ideas are responses (or adaptations) to the challenges and risks that our experience presents to us. Accordingly, ideas are instruments for the survival and growth of intelligent beings—as individuals and grouped in communities—in natural and social environments. Just like experimental hypotheses, ideas are to be tested, assessed, and revised experientially. The pragmatists developed distinctive theories of knowledge and truth on this basis.

Such theories—further developed by John Dewey and George Herbert Mead among others—involved a critique of modern philosophical dualisms such as reason/will, intellect/sense, theory/practice, belief/action, fact/value, and individual/community.

Dewey, in particular, investigated the implications of pragmatist philosophy for democracy - for an ideal of democratic life. Sidney Hook, Hilary Putnam, Richard Rorty, Cornel West, Susan Haack, and Cheryl Misak have followed this line of inquiry.

We will study important essays by all of these figures. By the end of the semester, students will have their own understanding of the role that knowledge and truth play (or fail to play) in democratic life.