

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

This is a complicated question to answer! I would say that historically when people have used this term, they have done so in problematically exclusionary ways—not necessarily because of malice or because they are bad people, but first, because English treats “American” as the adjectival descriptor of people from the United States, and so “American philosophy” has tended to be understood as philosophy in a tradition developed specifically within, and perhaps characteristic of, the United States.

But obviously “American” does not have that meaning in many other languages (Italian, for example, has an adjective that literally means “United Statesian,” whereas “American” refers to anyone from the American continents) and the Americas are much bigger than the United States. Second, professional philosophers, like most people, are susceptible to a variety of biases, including prestige bias and, as James describes it, an acute difficulty in appreciating the significance of lives and values of people unlike themselves. So even within the U.S. American context, professional philosophers have managed to recognize only the works of certain types of people as philosophy, which is how I think we got to a place where some people say “American philosophy” and take it to be obvious that the referent of that term is something like “classical pragmatism.”

So all that said, I have a more inclusive view of American philosophy: I take it to be philosophical work produced in the Americas, and/or that explicitly understands itself to be drawing on or working within a philosophical tradition that originates in the Americas. Of course, the latter clause is where things get complicated, as they always do when we are describing philosophy in terms of geographical origins rather than with, say, ideological commitments or methodological approaches. It might not always be appropriate to divide philosophy in this way. For example, quite a lot of excellent work in the philosophy of language and in analytic metaphysics and epistemology is produced in the Americas, but many of the philosophers doing this work would not or do not think of themselves as doing “American philosophy,” which I think is quite reasonable.

Whether that label is appropriate or not depends on our purposes, and when we do use it, I think it's because we are attempting to flag some philosophical work's connections to specific philosophical traditions of the Americas—sometimes classical pragmatism or transcendentalism, sometimes indigenous American philosophies, sometimes philosophy done in the wake of the African diaspora and the trans-Atlantic slave trade, and so on.

There's a lot that goes into this, which is why I personally prefer to talk about "American philosophies" in the plural (which, by the way, is the title of my fall seminar!).

How did you become an American philosopher?

I started graduate school with the intention of studying Continental philosophy (there's another problematic geography term for you!), and I was particularly interested in phenomenology. I read more Heidegger than I care to admit and applied to my PhD program (Vanderbilt) with the intention of writing a dissertation on Maurice Merleau-Ponty, the French phenomenologist. I was interested in emotion and sexuality, and I valued phenomenology for its willingness to take seriously the first-person experience of consciousness as a philosophical resource.

But my first year, a few important things happened: the first was that Lou Outlaw spoke with our first-year proseminar and challenged us to think about how we would view a job candidate who had never studied any philosophical work produced by anyone from Europe or European decent—in our context, this would have been unthinkable—and said, "why in the world, then, do you think you should be able to get through graduate school without studying philosophy produced by people from or descended from Africa?" Up to that point in my philosophical education, literally no one had challenged me to think in this way, and I am forever grateful for being jolted into it.

The next semester, I took my first African American philosophy class with Kathryn Gines, which ended up changing the entire trajectory of my career. Specifically, reading Frederick Douglass, Charles Mills, and Paul C. Taylor made me rethink some of the fundamental tenets of phenomenology (why, for example, had I assumed that 'first-person experience' could be abstracted from the social or political context of the subject?) and drove me to seek out other philosophical methodologies. Around the same time, I also took a graduate seminar on Dewey's *Experience and Nature* and had just been introduced to Foucault, whose willingness to use historical context to unsettle received wisdom was a bit mind-blowing to me. I came to appreciate pragmatism as incorporating what I liked about phenomenology—taking seriously the value of human experience—while at the same time making room for social context. And the specification of that context enabled by the insights of critical philosophy of race, feminist philosophy, and the historical record continues to be indispensable for me.

How would you describe your current research?

These days I usually say that I work at the intersection of feminist philosophy, American pragmatism, and the philosophy of sport. That's an unusual combination, I realize, but it points to two things: first, at the kind of problems I am interested in trying to solve (and as a pragmatist, I think of philosophy as being about solving real problems), and second, at the general methodology I employ.

To be more specific, I am interested in sport as a social and institutional phenomenon, how it is used to make meaning, to shape subjectivities and institutions, how (as a result) it functions to reinforce patterns of oppression and inequality, and most especially, how it might be altered to change that. My most recent published piece, for example, is called "The Moral Equivalent of Football," where I use a feminist reading of James's "The Moral Equivalent of War" to argue that we ought to actively pursue the development of other sports to take the place of football in the U.S. American social context.

And my current long-term project is a pragmatic feminist critique of big-time intercollegiate athletics in the United States, which is informed both by the significant literature on the exploitation of college athletes (particularly black athletes at predominately white institutions) and by engagement with the philosophy of sport literature, which is largely concerned with defending the educational value of sport.

What do you do when you aren't doing American philosophy?

I'm from Louisiana, so I grew up with a passionate love of food, and as a result I love to cook. Additionally, like many people, I've gotten VERY involved in gardening during the pandemic. I also love watching sports, of course, and I'm delighted for the return of baseball season. Finally, I've been learning Italian for several years, and I try to keep up with that in my spare time, in the hopes that one of these days, the world will return to something like "normal" and I'll be able to go back to Italy.

What is your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

I have to confess that am constitutionally incapable of picking favorites; it is just too hard for me! (My mom claims it's because I'm a Libra, but I think it's because I'm a philosopher.) I'll say that things in American philosophy that I've read recently and really enjoyed were Elizabeth Anderson's *Private Government*, various essays by Olufemi O. Taiwo (most recently his "[Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference.](#)" but I also really liked his [review essay](#) on Tommy Curry's book that appeared in the APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience), and an essay at the Jane Addams Papers Project on women's basketball at Hull House and the role that Addams had in making women's athletics possible so many years prior to the passage of Title IX. I'm currently reading Addams's book [The Spirit of the Youth and the City Streets](#) as a consequence.

Beyond these, I am a big advocate of reading outside of philosophy. William James, as SAAP folks know, was extremely widely read and I think this made him an excellent writer; although I often disagree with James I am continually drawn to and inspired by his prose. So my view is that we should be reading all kinds of things! I recently finished Jeremias Prassl's *Humans as a Service*, which is about the gig economy and employment law, and the novels *Wolf Hall* by Hilary Mantel and *The Street* by Ann Petry, both of which were excellent.

