
What does American philosophy mean to you?

More than ever, my reservations with the term, ‘American’, expressed in my 1998 SAAP Presidential Address, have been realized. International organizations have been founded that are more comfortable with ‘pragmatist’ rather than ‘American’ titles, e.g., The Nordic Pragmatism network, The Central European Pragmatist Forum, The European Pragmatist Conferences, Women in Pragmatism International Conference, and the latest, German Pragmatist Network. As with all boundary definitions, the term, ‘American,’ is porous and messy. On the one hand, our whole past continues to shape us, even as we transform and are transformed by our ongoing encounters. We are presently living through a long-overdue reckoning with our racist, sexist, white supremacist and colonialist past. In my support of the many current emancipatory projects, it is true that there’s something ‘American’ about the way I approach philosophy, including focusing on many inspiring American thinker/activists. However, although I recognize ‘place’ as part of context, it doesn’t describe the way I do philosophy, which is as a feminist pragmatist.

How did you become an American philosopher?

My search for a meaningful way of life as a woman and for engaging in radical transformation of the world around me led to pragmatism. The civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam protests, the equal rights movement, and the ecumenical movement all influenced my formative years in philosophy. John Dewey’s philosophy, which emphasized that philosophers should solve actual problems, rather than just reflect on traditional issues, was just what I was looking for. I first encountered philosophical pragmatism in a course by John McDermott, who happened to be teaching a summer class at the University of San Francisco. He was teaching from his unpublished manuscript, *The Writings of William James*. The deeper I got into James, the more my intellectual life expanded. This might explain why my path to Dewey was through James.
How would you describe your current research?

My first two publications were on Nietzsche, especially concerning hermeneutics and phenomenology. Then I explored all facets of William James’s philosophy, hoping to resolve its contradictions and make new discoveries in a relatively recent area of research not weighed down by centuries of scholarship. I was simultaneously exploring the exciting new area of feminism in philosophy, science, and literature.

My guiding inspiration is always to ask: “so what?” What is happening today that my research could make a difference to? As I realized that pragmatism needed feminist insights and vice versa, these two areas were brought together, both through a historical recovery of women’s voices and new ways to think about and act for social justice. The discovery of Jane Addams as part of this recovery has been a revelation. Being in the American Studies Program as well as in philosophy gave me wide latitude to explore many issues outside of and from many different perspectives than are usually open to philosophers. I’m presently working on a collection of my articles on Addams and hoping to follow it with similar books on feminism and another on the pragmatists. As the song, “Turn, Turn, Turn” says, “to everything there is a season . . . a time to plant, a time to reap.” Now is the time to gather together my scattered writings and see if they still have something to say.

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

I’m still trying to live in a really living world, to quote Addams. When I was a young girl, I remember standing at our attic window and looking out on a sunset and thinking, “I will never see such a shade of blue as the sky is right now. I have to stand here and imprint it on my eyes so that I’ll never forget it.” At the same time, I knew I would inevitably forget. The blue is in the seeing. I love to work in my garden with its ever-changing kaleidoscope of colorful flowers and fruits. I also love reading, especially historical novels, and when I write, I enjoy reworking and shaping the material as a literary work of art.

I love traveling and engaging with new people. This explains why so many of my writings begin as lectures. I find the interchange with others an inspiration and a big help in working through issues. Exploring the cities and countries of my favorite authors, whether biographically or what they write about, is stimulating. Reading Mary Renault’s The Mask of Apollo, for example, while I explored the ancient shrine of Delphi was mind-blowing. So many works of art that I enjoy can only be seen in person in various museums abroad. Van Gogh’s irises, in their material, wavy, thick swaths of paint, cannot be experienced in reproductions. Pictures or videos just cannot compare to the enormity and majesty of the Pont du Gard aqueduct seen from below.
What is your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?

It’s impossible to name one. I’m attracted to the great literary philosophers because they challenge me to develop the insights they often approach obliquely. Both James and Nietzsche think through metaphors, for example. The thought stripped bare is barren.