

## "I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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### What does American philosophy mean to you?

Since the term "American" signifies continents, "American philosophy" signifies more than "United States philosophy." I take it to refer to philosophy related to life in the Western Hemisphere, and in contrast especially to Europe.

I do not see a particular need to assert that American philosophy is strongly tied to pragmatism. In fact, I have come to see that term "pragmatism" as problematic, since in almost all popular usage it means either an unscrupulous power play on the world, or some kind of compromise that favors non-populist centrist politics. I know that many philosophy terms have common usages that differ or even work against the word in its philosophical sense—"idealism" and "metaphysics," for example—but I am having difficulty motivating myself for the battle of meanings. I have been drawn to the term "pluralism," or better, "radical pluralism" to describe the philosophy in this part of the globe. If it wasn't so occult-sounding, I'd suggest "transcendental pluralism" which can refer to the problem of "the one and the many" that William James, perhaps presciently, said was the fundamental problem of philosophy. But then we would still begin to run into troubles with the common usages of the word. Perhaps I'll be able to retire at that point.

### How did you become an American philosopher?

Since an early age I have had a personal antipathy for nationalism, patriotism, and any types of large, political allegiance, especially as this relates to the United States. My early interests were in existentialism and philosophy of religion, and it does puzzle me a bit why I became interested in American philosophy to begin with. After a world religions course at

a community college piqued my interest in philosophy, I enrolled at Eastern Michigan University. The counselor had recommended I take just 4 courses, but I was a somewhat older student, and thought I was ready for more, so I picked up the phone—it was the beginning of touch-tone registration back in the early 1990s—and I added the first philosophy class I could find. This happened to be American Philosophy, and was taught by a great professor for whom this was not in her area of specialization. There was something of a radical and environmentalist take to the class, but I remember being especially drawn to Emerson and Thoreau.

However, in John Stuhr's anthology of American philosophy, which had come out recently, I encountered John McDermott's introduction to William James, in which he presented James' famous vastation experience, that is, an experience in which the famous philosopher had what today is called a panic attack. This experience matched what I myself had experience soon after graduating from high school. I think to this day I relate more to that part of James—the fragmented and yet also mystical part—than the scientific, pragmatist part of James. I went on, again somewhat accidentally, to study American philosophy at the University of Toledo, taking James Campbell's course my first semester and writing a paper that turned into a masters' thesis. When I went to Purdue University for Ph.D. studies and took graduate courses with Charlene Haddock Seigfried, my tendencies were further solidified.

### **How would you describe your current research?**

I am following up on *The Demons of William James* with another book called *The Genius of Emerson: Creativity, Divinity, and the Weirdness of Religious Innovation*. Whereas *Demons* focused mostly on the internal side of weird religious belief, *The Genius of Emerson* is focused on the external side, the way that individuals' claims of divinity can lead to the creation of new religious movements. I give a charitable philosophical assessment of interesting figures in the history of cult religions, including Harlem's Father Divine, a black religious leader known for hosting large, free feasts and claiming to be God, as well as Guatemala's San Maximon, a Mayan-Catholic hybrid saint known for drinking liquor and smoking cigarettes.

At this moment, I am interested in just about anything that originates south of the U.S. border. Since I started learning Spanish 6 years ago, I have had some difficulty in getting interested in reading scholarship, or anything for that matter, written in English. I am guessing that this will pass.

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

I often say that I have had three ambitions in life: being an athlete, being a musician, being a philosopher. My early interest in being a famous baseball player ended when I become aware that that kind of competitiveness was not in my nature. I retain my interest in exercise though, and will walk or bike at least four times a week. The second interest, that of being a famous rock musician, has never really gone away. Before I decided to major in philosophy, I was in a metal band that played in the Detroit area. I still think of the creativity of music as an essential part of who I am, and is something that was neglected, even with good reason, to pursue a career in teaching and writing philosophy. So at this time, I write music and record it for TikTok, and am not sure how long I will hold this interest. When I am not doing music-related activities—guitar, charango, keyboards, bongos—I am reading, writing, and speaking in Spanish as much as possible. My morning routine is to drink *yerba mate* and read Spanish *en voz alta* to develop these skills. I watch Mexican television just about every night. My wife and I plan a trip to a Latin American country every year. So far I have visited Colombia and Mexico, and have a trip planned to Guatemala to explore the phenomenon of San Maximon, a pluralistic saint of both Mayan and Catholic origins.

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

Sometime soon after I graduated high school, I discovered that I had somehow managed to have an anthology of Ralph Waldo Emerson's works taken from the shelf of my English teacher's classroom. This was probably just an oversight, but it is significant that this would be the book that, consciously or subconsciously, I took from the classroom. I did not like high school, and I was always one of those students of whom it was said that they would be great if they only lived up to their potential. I had little interest in philosophy, but finding that book, reading it later, and reflecting on the essay "Self-Reliance" in particular indicates to me that it was influential. I think it's my favorite thing to read in American Philosophy. Second place would be listening to Cornel West. Every speech is a work of art and a work of American philosophy. In third place are essays by Jane Addams, Henry David Thoreau, and William James.

I think that what everyone should be reading, as well as using in their classes if they are a professor, is *The Philosophies of America Reader: From the Popul Vuh to the Present*, by Kim Diaz and Mathew Foust. Graduate classes in American philosophy should, again in my opinion, be using *American Philosophy from Wounded Knee to the Present*, by Erin McKenna and Scott Pratt. Each of these is a new framing of American philosophy that represents, respectively, the pluralism and the insurgent politics at the heart of American philosophy.

