

## "I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



[Philip Kitcher](#) is John Dewey Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Columbia University and the author of nearly 20 books including [Science, Truth, and Democracy](#) (2001), [Preludes to Pragmatism: Toward a Reconstruction of Philosophy](#) (2012), and [The Main Enterprise of the World: Rethinking Education](#) (2021).

### What does American philosophy mean to you?

Mainly for me it means the pragmatist tradition, although I've gotten very interested recently in earlier figures like Emerson: so Emerson, Thoreau, the Concord group as well. I'm a big fan of Bruce Kuklick's work on the history of American philosophy.

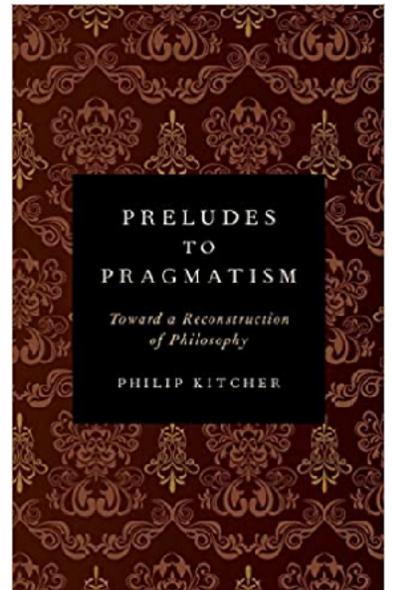
But mainly I'm interested in the pragmatists and in James and Dewey more than Peirce. And then some of the neo-pragmatists: Dick Rorty and Hilary Putnam, less Bob Brandom and Huw Price, but also Cheryl Misak and Dick Bernstein. So it means basically the pragmatist tradition though I've started to take it back to earlier figures. I think both James and Dewey were significantly influenced by the Concord group and by Emerson in particular.

I have to say I really have a soft spot for James. There are lots of things in James that I greatly like but for me Dewey is the pinnacle. I think I say in at least one place that I think Dewey was the greatest philosopher of the 20th century—and I firmly believe that.

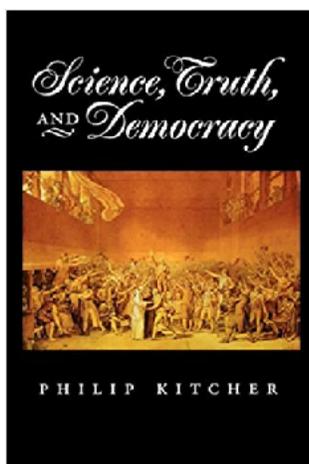
Sometimes James is too good a writer for his own philosophical good, so the problem is that his sense of style gets in the way, and he muddles and fuzzes some of his concepts because he can't bear to use the same phraseology twice. That leads to unclarity and ambiguities. But there are wonderful things in James: I think "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" is a brilliant essay; I think the "The Will to Believe" is great; I think some of the early essays are fantastic; I think the *Pragmatism* lectures are very rich; *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is extraordinary. As James gets more scholarly and scholastic I think he's less interesting.

### How did you become an American philosopher?

It's hard for me to identify as an American philosopher since I'm in danger of saying something both true and false at the same time. I actually am an American citizen, but I



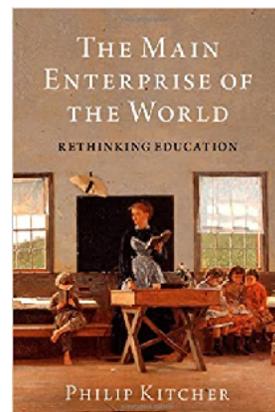
don't think many people would consider me a true American. I was born in Britain and so under one description it's a bit odd for me to say I'm an American philosopher. But I **am** a philosopher who is profoundly influenced by the American tradition. I'm also influenced by the logical empiricist tradition, particularly by people like Hempel and Reichenbach. I'm somebody for whom the American tradition is dominant, but it's also inflected by Hempel, Reichenbach, and Kuhn. Kuhn's *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* is a major work for me. I think it's interesting that Kuhn himself was influenced by the pragmatists at a time when they weren't at all fashionable. I think had Neurath lived the pragmatists and logical empiricists would have been closer. Hempel had some sympathies for Dewey. And then Ernest Nagel of course, who was Dewey's colleague, and you can see Nagel continuing the pragmatist tradition, and you also have Quine and Goodman. Later on Putnam goes back to it in I think some very interesting ways and Ruth Anna Putnam does as well.



I've told the story many times about how I got interested in Dewey. I arrived at Columbia in 1999 and Isaac Levi said to me, "Look, Sidney Morgenbesser's housebound and he'd appreciate it if you went over to visit him sometime." So I went and I enjoyed talking to Sidney so much that I would go see him every week and I would always come out walking on air. I'd written this book called *Science, Truth, and Democracy* and I gave a copy to Sidney. The next time I went he said, "you sound just like Dewey. You ever read any Dewey?" And I said "no, it's so difficult." And Sidney said, "you need to read *The Quest for Certainty*" and so I went away and read it. In Dewey I found all these thoughts that I'd struggled to reach for years. I thought, my God, there's so much in this. And then I read everything.

### How would you describe your current research?

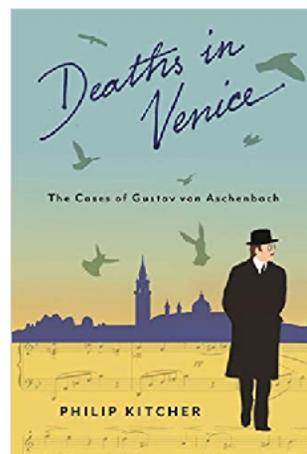
So I've recently been writing—in fact I've just published in the last year—the first two parts of what's envisaged as a trilogy on pragmatism. The first part is a book called *Moral Progress* which is distinctly Deweyan and quite short and the second is a big fat book with an Emersonian title: *The Main Enterprise of the World* (which comes from "The American Scholar"). Its subtitle is *Rethinking Education*. It began with an attempt to redo Dewey's *Democracy and Education* but it just grew enormously. The third part of the trilogy is tentatively titled *Homo Quaerens: Progress, Truth and Values*. Now my line here is that "Homo sapiens" is a complete rubbish. We're not "wise". Homo cognoscens would be more accurate, but still an over-statement. "Homo quaerens": we're the species that inquires. We try to know, we try to find things out. In my book, I focus on inquiry, trying to craft a successor discipline to epistemology, in a Deweyan spirit. It's an attempt to develop a theory of inquiry that will cover not just the sciences but also everyday inquiries of all sorts: inquiry into value and into mathematics and into religion and so on.



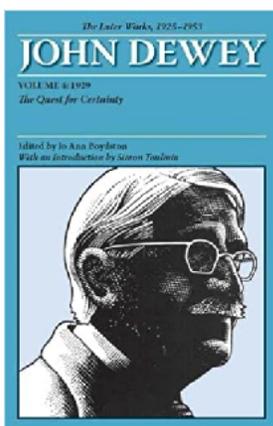
In the meantime, I have a short book coming out called *What's the Use of Philosophy?* And I'm going to do another Deweyan-inspired book called *Bringing Home the Goods*. There's this line in *Experience and Nature* where Dewey says, "as empirical fact, however, the arts, those of converse and the literary arts which are the enhanced continuations of social converse, have been the means by which goods are brought home to human perception" (LW 1:322) So, *Bringing Home the Goods* seems to me a good title for showing how works of literature bring home some really essential points. I may at some point write a short book on James. I'm having a great time just because I've got all this stuff inside my head that seems to want to come out.

### What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

Well, I do lots of things: I do still sometimes write in philosophy of science; I do other philosophical things. I love listening to music and I love delving into works of literature. Since the pandemic came, and after a 50-year hiatus, I started writing poetry again, so I write poetry from time to time. And I run and I like to walk and I like to go to concerts and I like to cook and I like to see my grandchildren. It's a pretty good life.



### What's your favorite work in American philosophy? What should we all be reading?



Well, those are two different questions. My favorite works in American philosophy are written by John Dewey and I do think that Dewey is almost impossible to read unless you read more than one of his works. I'm not sure what I would pick out as my favorite work of Dewey's: that's terribly hard to answer. I think people should read *Experience and Nature*, *The Quest for Certainty*, *Human Nature and Conduct*, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, *Democracy and Education*, *A Common Faith*, and *The Public and Its Problems*. If we read those that would be good.

*Popular Philosophy* or *Pragmatism*. Those are accessible, as single books, in a way that Dewey's books aren't. But what I want to say is this: read several of Dewey's books. If that doesn't count as an answer I'll go either for *The Will to Believe* or *Pragmatism*, and probably *Pragmatism*, but there are things in *The Will to Believe* that I think are really important for people to read, like "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life."

But if I had to recommend one book that we ought to be reading, I think it would either be James' *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in*

