

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



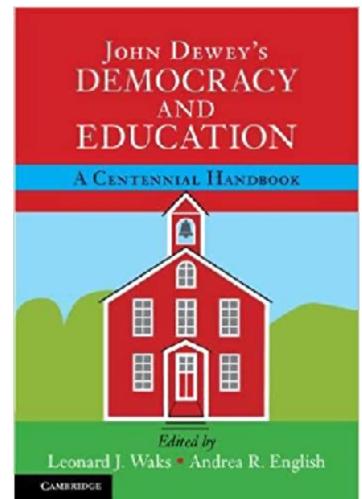
Leonard Waks earned his Ph. D. in philosophy from the University of Wisconsin. He taught philosophy at Purdue and Stanford, and education at Temple, retiring in 2005. From 2018 to 2021 he was Distinguished Professor of Educational Studies at Hangzhou Normal University in China. He is past-president of the John Dewey Society and was the founding editor of [Dewey Studies](#). In addition to numerous articles, he is the author of [Education 2.0](#) (Routledge, 2014), [The Evolution and Evaluation of Massive Online Courses](#) (Palgrave, 2017), and editor (with Andrea English) of [John Dewey's Democracy and Education: A Centennial Handbook](#) (Cambridge, 2017).

What does American philosophy mean to you?

I see American philosophy as the development of the philosophical tradition on American soil. This project has porous boundaries and is continuous with broader cultural factors that enrich our public philosophy: our sense of our highest distinct cultural values. Emerson's "The American Scholar" address is its manifesto. I would also include the standard items on the American philosophy syllabus plus, at the periphery, Emerson's *Essays*, Thoreau's *Walden*, Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, Lincoln's Gettysburg and Second Inaugural Addresses, Emma Lazarus' "New Colossus," Jane Addams' *Forty Years at Hull-House*, Dewey's "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us," Woody Guthrie's "This Land is Your Land," and Richard Rorty's *Achieving Our Country*—all wrapped up with Frederick Douglass, John Muir, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jane Jacobs, Paul Goodman, Martin Luther King Jr., Rachel Carson, James Baldwin, and Aldo Leopold.

Given today's acute awareness of our national flaws—slavery and Jim Crow, the internment of Japanese citizens, the atomic bomb, today's flirtation with fascism—some will say that the very idea of an American public philosophy is a dangerous delusion. I don't think so. Our national sins and tragedies spawn new visions of the common good and new ameliorative projects which, like Jane Addams' Hull House, also contribute to our public philosophy.

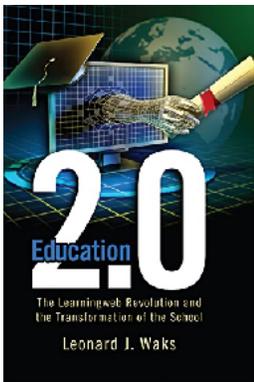
When I think American, I mean the United States. Place matters. I was raised in a specific place—Brooklyn—with distinct landmarks: Ebinger's bakery, Barricini chocolates, Cookies restaurants at the BMT subway stations, Sheepshead Bay, Coney Island, the Brooklyn Dodgers (Jackie Robinson and Sandy Koufax), Woody Allen, and Carole King. When we moved to the suburbs, I could have been anywhere—or nowhere. No philosophy can grow in that poor soil.



I applaud recent efforts to expand the idea of “American” to include our American neighbors. Our cultural history is tied to theirs. But we are distinct, and so must also be our public philosophies. Pluralists are receptive to many voices, but that implies recognition of their particularities. If professional efforts as philosophers are to have cultural force, they will have to reflect the distinct soils out of which they grow.

How did you become an American philosopher?

The only talent I exhibited growing up was irritating people. In my teens I discovered that philosophers like Russell and Sartre also irritated people so I decided to become a philosopher. I thought this was like being a poet: you had to get a day job to pay the bills. But at university I learned to my surprise that philosophy teachers were philosophers.



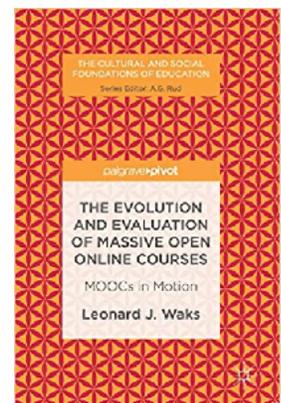
My first undergraduate philosophy teachers included Marcus Singer, Eugene Kaelin, Fred Dretske and Gerald MacCallum. Kaelin became my model philosopher and teacher. But the department was dominated by analytic philosophers, and when Kaelin left, that was all there was. My writing still bears traces of my training in that mode.

Beyond my official philosophy classes I read a lot of James, Dewey, Royce, Bosanquet, C.I. Lewis, Collingwood, Wittgenstein and Quine. I devoured the essays in Antony Flew’s two volume Logic and Language series as well as those in the (now neglected) two volume *Contemporary American Philosophy: Personal Statements* (1930) edited by George Adams and William Pepperell Montague. Looking for a way to combine these

traditions, I turned to Morton White’s *Toward Reunion in Philosophy* but was disappointed as it neglected much of what John E. Smith called the “spirit” of American philosophy.

New educational visions and projects were brewing when I entered university in 1960. Paul Goodman’s *Growing Up Absurd* and A.S. Neill’s *Summerhill* both appeared that year, as did Israel Scheffler’s *The Language of Education*, which established philosophy of education as a sub-discipline of analytic philosophy. I adopted “education and society” as my research territory.

My first job, at Purdue, combined social philosophy and American philosophy. Part of my teaching load was in American Studies. I had similar teaching responsibilities at Stanford. At that time I was an American, a philosopher, and a teacher of American philosophy and American Studies. But it was only in the 1980s that I realized that I was an American philosopher.



In the 1970s I moved from philosophy departments to schools of education, a pragmatist move that got me closer to the action. Dewey’s work in Chicago was an inspiration, and other pragmatist philosophers—notably Boyd Bode, whose work I regarded as a model—

had made the same shift. I see my work in teacher training and curriculum development as a form of applied American philosophy, much in the spirit of Dewey's "The Way Out of Educational Confusion."

How would you describe your current research?

In 2018 I accepted a distinguished professorship in China and since then I have been interacting with pragmatist philosophers including Roger Ames and Chen Yajun (director of The Dewey Center at Fudan University). I have been experimenting with bringing insights from Chinese philosophy into American philosophical projects. One recent paper "Democratic Self-Cultivation" draws on Confucian ideas to enhance the Deweyan vision of democratic education. Another draws on Zhuangzi to augment Hubert Dreyfus's account of technical expertise.

My work during the COVID pandemic has focused on Dewey's educational work at Chicago from 1896 to 1900. My last two papers examine his theory of art and aesthetic education and his account of children's play during that period.

I am thinking through a comprehensive book on Dewey's philosophy of education. Much has been written about that, but some important works have been neglected. I am also toying with some ideas on God and religion. The topics would be similar to those in ***A Common Faith***, but I have a different take on many of them.

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

In making my to-do list, my philosophical work always comes first, and I typically devote four hours a day to it. I recently wrote a philosophical article in the form of a short story and I have also been writing short fiction. I draw portraits and have taken some online drawing courses. In the evening I may play a few songs from the American songbook on the piano.

My wife and I live in a beautiful region of Portugal and we enjoy walking in the countryside.

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

My favorite work in American philosophy is probably Dewey's *The School and Society*. That book lays out the territory I have worked within and I keep returning to it. As I worked with Andrea English on *John Dewey's Democracy and Education: A Centennial Handbook* I practically memorized *Democracy and Education*. If I had to pick a few things that I wish everyone would read, they would be Emerson's "American Scholar" and Dewey's "Creative Democracy: The Task Before Us." These set an agenda for our work.

We should be reading more of each other's work and building on it. We should also learn how to publish in reviews and journals of opinion: *The New Yorker*, *The New York Review of Books*, *The Nation*, *The Atlantic*, *Dissent*, though this is a daunting task. Dewey published some 200 articles in such periodicals. This is a kind of "public philosophy," and if we professional philosophers do not do it then how can we contribute to "the public philosophy" in the sense indicated at the beginning?

