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**What does American philosophy mean to you?**

This is a really difficult question. I usually give two different answers depending on the context. The first is to say that American philosophers share a certain set of philosophical assumptions: they’re pluralists, fallibilists, anti-foundationalists, and anti-representationalists. These features do cover whole swaths of American philosophical thought, and they’re helpful for thinking about pragmatism in particular, which is what most people think American philosophy is. But appealing to these philosophical commitments doesn’t really go very far toward explaining why we exclude from the category people like Derrida or Foucault. And it also doesn’t help us understand why we include (or want to include) people like Santayana, Cooper, Cavell, or Du Bois.

The other answer, which I tend to think is a better one, is that American philosophers are philosophers in the business of offering a vision of America: its people, its principles, its ideals. In this way, the Americanness of American philosophy is, I think, bound to a distinctive impulse toward national self-creation. American philosophers, in other words, are those who take America, the concept, the country, the people, as their object of conceptual and critical inquiry. I do realize that what I’m saying here might have some bizarre consequences: Tocqueville might be an American philosopher but Peirce and Quine might not be (not because they aren’t great philosophers who happen to be American, but because they’re simply interested in a different set of questions). It might not be right, but it is the best answer I have.
How did you become an American philosopher?

I was introduced to William James and the pragmatic tradition by two incredible teachers and philosophers as an undergraduate and then a master’s student at McMaster University in Canada: Barry Allen and Gary B. Madison. I was also tremendously fortunate to be included in a reading group run by Colin Koopman and David Rondel, who were working on their PhDs at the time. We read James’ Pragmatism lectures and a bit of Rorty. I have to confess that at the time I wasn’t particularly interested in or really prepared to grapple with anything distinctively American about what I was reading. My real interests were in phenomenology and 19th century European thought. I read James (and to some extent still do) as a kind of existentialist and phenomenologist.

I didn’t really become interested in the Americanness of it all until I found myself in America, at the New School for Social Research. It wasn’t until I was trying to find my way through the subway system, the complexities of my gentrifying Brooklyn neighborhood, and the 2008 election, that it even occurred to me that there was something deeply philosophical that could hold such a strange group of people as James, Du Bois, Melville, Dewey, Emerson, Cooper, and Santayana together. Since then, I’ve become a lot more comfortable with and curious about those features of American philosophy that I used to dismiss as mere expressions of American arrogance.

I should also mention the influence of my PhD advisor, Richard J. Bernstein. He passed away this past summer and was a giant in the field. We didn’t share much in common in our readings of American philosophy, but he was great at pushing me to clarify my own commitments and encouraging my occasionally eccentric readings of the tradition. He also succeeded where many had failed: he convinced me to take Rorty seriously.

How would you describe your current research?

I just finished a book, The Varieties of Experience, which is focused on the role of experience in James’ thought, particularly in his psychological and moral writings. I try to get a grip on what James was doing with the term “experience,” and how we might understand this today, in a philosophical climate that is much more suspicious about the value of experience. Working through this problem it became more and more clear that James was working with a unique and profound understanding of the goal of psychological and
philosophical inquiry. I think that we can learn a lot from him. It will be out with Harvard University Press this Spring.

I’ve also been working on a few smaller projects. Michael Bacon and I recently co-authored a piece, “Rorty's Political Philosophy,” for The Cambridge Companion to Rorty. I had never co-authored anything before, and the experience was wonderful. I’m also working on an essay, “Hope in Pragmatism,” that will be a part of the forthcoming Oxford Compendium of Hope and an essay on the relationship between irony and hope in Rorty’s work.

Over the past few years, I’ve been piecing together a book on hope as a philosophical and social concept. I don’t envision this as a work that is strictly focused on American philosophy, but American philosophy will certainly figure prominently. It was my engagements with Emerson, James, Du Bois, Ellison, and Rorty that got me thinking about how we understand and value hope.

I guess you could say I’m generally interested in fuzzy but overbearing concepts.

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

I’m a crazy dog lady. I spend a lot of time volunteering with dogs at my local animal shelter, Cincinnati Animal Care, and learning from the fantastic crew that runs this chaotic open-intake, no-kill county shelter. A few days a week I go in to help with behavioral assessments of the newly arrived dogs and group play time (there’s something truly sublime about watching a bunch of shelter dogs run around and play together). I also get the dogs out on walks, work on training, or just hang out. My wife and I also foster dogs to help get them ready for adoption. I grew up with dogs and have always been a dog lover. But it really wasn’t until I moved to Cincinnati and had the space to adopt and foster that I was really able to get up close and personal with the crisis with stray, neglected, and abused animals in the United States. It’s bleak, and very American. I encourage all people with patience for dog antics to volunteer or foster. Shelters are drowning right now.

I also find dog behavior to be really interesting, and I love to listen to knowledgeable people talk about dogs and their relationships to us. I like to half-heartedly joke that dogs are basically what most psychologists thought human beings were in the early twentieth century. And, Jamesian that I am, I find this fascinating. Maybe one day I will write something about it.
We also live with three highly distinguished pit bull mixes: Henry Adams, Tillie Olsen, and our long-term foster Huck Finn. They were all, at one time or another, residents of our local shelters, but they can hold their own among the best of America’s philosophers. And they keep me on my toes.

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

If pressed, I’d have to say James’ *Principles of Psychology*. It’s such an undervalued and remarkable text. Barely anyone reads it in its entirety, but it’s well worth the effort.

We should all be reading Montaigne. I’m not convinced that it gets better than that. Well, maybe Melville.