

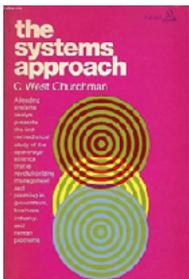
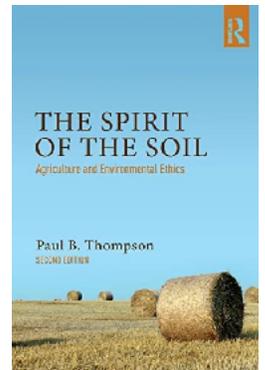
"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

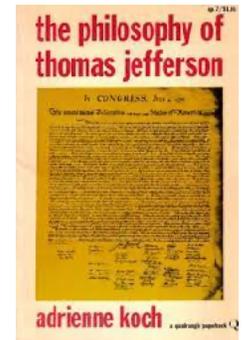
Well, the answer to this could be really long. I am prepared to work with the implicit understanding that led to the founding of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy (SAAP). The cluster of late 19th century, early 20th century philosophers that includes C.S. Peirce, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey and Jane Addams is based in North America, and they were partly concerned with problems that were predominantly American at the time. SAAP has continued to expand its pantheon by recognizing figures who struggle with the distinctively American experience of race—W.E.B. DuBois, Alain Locke, David Walker, Grace Lee Boggs. I see how the traditional SAAP focus will look strange to many people, including many philosophers who happen to be Americans. Nevertheless, it is the basic understanding I work with.



Lately, I have my own take on expanding the canon. First was C. West Churchman (1913-2004), a philosopher of science originally at the University of Pennsylvania. Churchman was a self-avowed pragmatist who emphasized the valuational dimension of science. He edited *Philosophy of Science* for a term or two, but left Penn to a series of posts in operations research, ending up in the business school at UC Berkeley. Churchman's *The Systems Approach* (1964) is currently showing 3888 citations on Scholar Google, but I find very few working philosophers who have heard of him.

Adrienne Koch (1913-1971) is another one. She won Columbia University's Woodbridge Prize in 1943, for the most distinguished work to come from Columbia's philosophy department. It was for her dissertation *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson*. Her acknowledgements thank Herbert W. Schneider, Curt Ducasse, Philip Wheelwright and Sidney Hook. But she seems to have been driven out of philosophy,

too. She became the first tenured woman in the UC Berkeley Department of History before following her spouse back east and concluding a very productive career writing on the philosophical commitments of Franklin, Madison, Hamilton and Jefferson as a professor at the University of Maryland. Again, I don't encounter many philosophers who know of her.

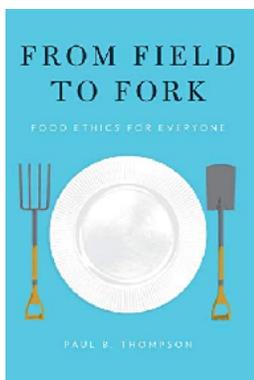


Well, I said this could get long. While Churchman and Koch had enormous influence outside academic philosophy, it's doubtful that the current trajectory for expanding the scope of the field would pick up on either of them.

I think of American philosophy as not being just for philosophy professors.

How did you become an American philosopher?

I took courses with Justus Buchler and John McDermott as a graduate student. I also shared an office and a house with James Campbell. Robert Neville was on my Ph.D. committee. All of these people shared an interest in the cluster I described in response to the first question, so I think this makes me an American philosopher by default. I came out of graduate school expressing interest in teaching courses on these figures, but I got a job at Texas A&M where I would only teach a course in American philosophy after McDermott, Larry Hickman, Bob Burch and Greg Pappas had all turned down the opportunity. This never happened. After I got to Michigan State, I was finally able to work some of the figures I mentioned above into my courses, and I have a few students who will carry on the tradition.



At Texas A&M, I was assigned to develop a course for the College of Agriculture and Life Science. That led to 20 years of work on social, ethical and philosophical issues in molecular biology of plant and animal transformation. Along the way I got interested in the philosophy of agriculture: what do we want/expect out of our agricultural system? Engagement with the philosophy of agriculture also affected my sense of what American philosophy is.

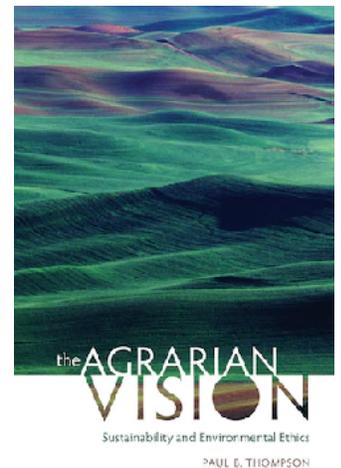
Fairly early in my career I worked with some agricultural policy specialists from economics, sociology and political science. We were thinking about the Farm Bill, a piece of legislation that has to be renewed every seven years or so. The question came up: why are farmers so special that they get a very expensive bit of government largesse to keep them in business? I wrote some pieces arguing that we see rationales expressed by Jefferson, on the one hand, and by Emerson and Thoreau, on the other. For Jefferson, owner-operators with investments in land improvements are especially fit for the role of citizen. It meant that democracy

could work in America in a way that would prove difficult in Europe. For the Transcendentalists, it was a sensibility expressed in Thoreau's dictum of "becoming native to this place." Later I came to appreciate Lincoln's vision of agriculture, as well. I continue to be a student and evangelist for this strand of thinking in the American tradition—it's what led me to Adrienne Koch.

How would you describe your current research?

Although retired from teaching and committee meetings, I continue to have an active research program. A new book, *From Silo to Spoon: Global and Local Food Ethics*, will be published by Oxford later this year. On the one hand, it takes up issues such as labeling, locavorism and the duty to offer food aid. On the other hand, this is all situated in what I think of as pragmatist metaethics, including the link between the common morality reproduced through public interactions and more progressive growth in our understanding of warranted norms. The book concludes with a discussion of the connections between agriculture and racial injustice.

As I have matured (or maybe just aged) I've found my commitments to American philosophy deepening. My interests in applied biology have led me to ask myself: in what respect were the classic American philosophers influenced by Darwin? The new book attempts to incorporate some of my answers to that question in a rather indirect fashion. I see the pragmatists developing a sophisticated form of evolutionary thinking based on ontologically distinct, but equally real, platforms that reproduce patterned structures. They include genes, of course, (something Darwin didn't know) but also group structures (species, communities), memory in several forms and communicative cognitive capacities (habits), culture and social institutions, and then finally, through education, formal structures and organizations for reproducing expertise. In contrast, the philosophy of biology's obsession with natural selection has limited its sense of what evolution involves.



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

Prior to the pandemic and now my retirement, my work involved more travel than the average philosophy professor—between 25 and 30 trips a year, and to some fairly exotic places. I don't want to go back to that; now I travel mainly to see children and grandchildren (currently in Texas and Florida), as well as to spend time on a Georgia farm that has been in my wife Diane's family for several generations. So for most of my life, when I'm not doing philosophy, I'm just in transit, and as the Lowell George song has it, I'm still willin'. (I play guitar and sing, though not particularly well.)

I also get up every morning and read for at least a couple of hours before doing anything else. Sometimes it's philosophy, but often not: Walt Whitman, Wallace Stevens, Francis Parkman Jr., Flannery O'Connor, James Baldwin and Henry Adams. I would love a better opportunity to talk about all of them. All that may be shaping my sense of American philosophy, too.

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

Josiah Royce, *Lectures on Modern Idealism*. Not only is it the most lucid exposition of Hegel's dialectic, it ends with Royce declaring, "I am a pragmatist and I am an idealist." The text explains how he thought these claims compatible. Among recent titles and certainly what everyone should be reading, Eddie Glaude's *Begin Again*.

