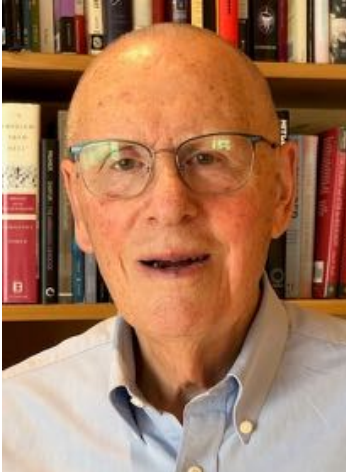


"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



[John K. Roth](#) is Edward J. Sexton Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at Claremont McKenna College. He is the author and editor of over 50 books in American philosophy, ethics, and Holocaust studies from [The Moral Philosophy of William James](#) (1969) to [The Oxford Handbook of Holocaust Studies](#) (2012) and [The Failures of Ethics](#) (2015). In 1988 he was named U. S. National Professor of the Year by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE).

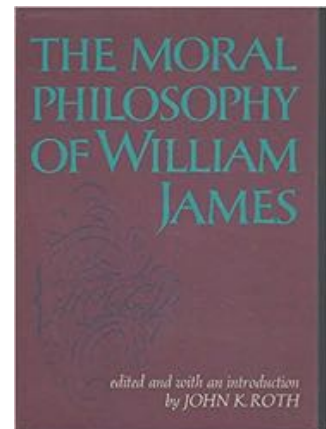
What does American philosophy mean to you?

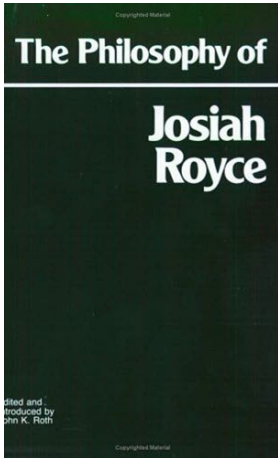
American philosophy is a provincial concept. Philosophy—inquiry governed by questions about knowledge and truth, right and wrong—justly contests bonding with national or cultural identities. But the American philosopher Josiah Royce rightly wrote about “wise provincialism.” It appreciates that philosophers inhabit particular times and places. They reflect their social, political, and spiritual contexts, sometimes transcending them but never completely.

Too much variety makes defining the essence of American philosophy a fool’s errand. But philosophers in the United States, including its colonial past, have recurrently advanced five evolving and open-ended outlooks that deserve ongoing exploration and defense. Each has ethical significance. All are crucial for sustaining democracy.

Note first what William James called **meliorism**, the affirmation that in human affairs moral progress is neither assured nor impossible. Decisions and actions—“a lot of ifs,” in James’s words—tip how things go. Meliorism implies **process** and **pluralism**. Change pervades experience; uncertainty keeps existence moving. Things hang together but only when and to the extent that they do. James said such pluralism signifies “a universe unfinished, with doors and windows open to possibilities uncontrollable in advance.” Far from ensuring life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, that’s a precarious place, especially when erroneous judgments and corrupted calculations abound.

Process and pluralism call for **fallibilism** and **democratic community**. The permanent possibility of error warns people to emphasize self-corrective empirical inquiry and requires respect for evidence lest deception and deceit prevail. Fallibilism obliges





building and sustaining democratic community. Honoring diversity and human rights, such community expands opportunities to learn from one another and to practice politics that respects justice and the rule of law that upholds it.

American philosophy accents these fundamental themes and propositions. It advances the hopes and dreams embedded in them. Practiced well, American philosophy also evaluates these outlooks: Are they valid, right, and good? What if they aren't? Focusing its recurrent outlooks, pursuing critical and constructive inquiry about them—that's what American philosophy means to me.

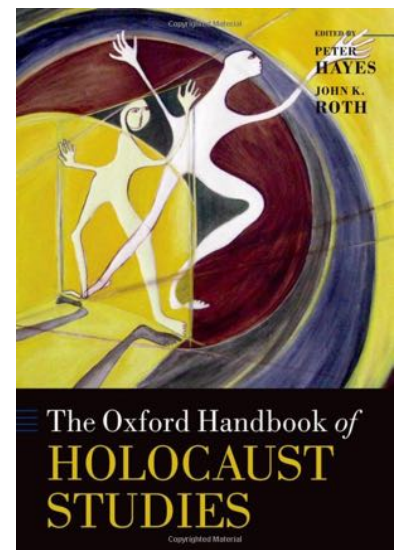
How did you become an American philosopher?

In 1940, I was born in the USA. For me, becoming a philosopher meant becoming an American philosopher not only because of my birthright nationality but also because I grew to care deeply about what happens in my country and how it behaves on the world stage.

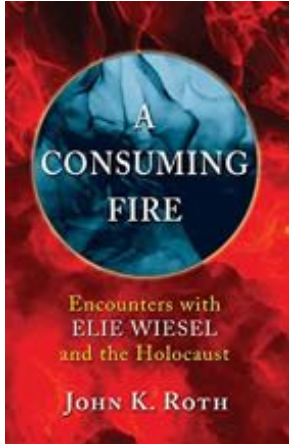
My undergraduate philosophy major at Pomona College included study of John Dewey and C.I. Lewis but with little emphasis that they belonged to an American philosophical tradition. My awareness of that tradition increased in 1963 when I began doctoral work at Yale University. That year, my professor John E. Smith published *The Spirit of American Philosophy*. He and his book opened my philosophical world.

Even more influential during my Yale time was John Wild, who was writing *The Radical Empiricism of William James* (1969), which took James to embody an American version of existential phenomenology. Wild's seminar on James in 1964–65 concentrated on James's two-volume *Principles of Psychology*, but I read everything James had published. He spoke deeply to me. No American thinker has influenced me more. My dissertation, guided by Smith and directed by Wild, dealt with James's ethics. A revised and amplified version became my first book, *Freedom and the Moral Life* (1969).

It took time for me to become an American philosopher. Studying James, for instance, led me to Josiah Royce. I still admire his ethical insight if not his Absolute Idealism. In 1966, I began more than forty years of teaching at Claremont McKenna College. My care about American life grew as I taught courses that ranged from Puritan theology and Quaker ethics to *The Federalist Papers*, transcendentalism, pragmatism, and beyond—always with an eye on current events and their portents. When a 1973–74

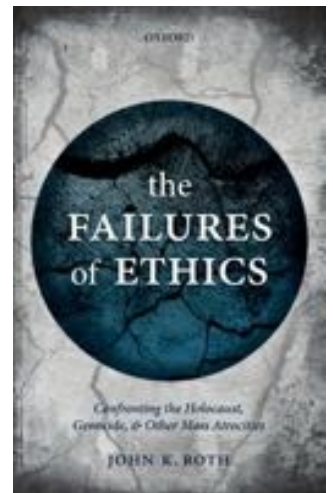


Fulbright appointment at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, included responsibility for a year-long lecture series in American studies, I used the American Dream—that fraught but persistent ideal—as a unifying conceptual thread. From that time onward, my teaching included an annual course called “Perspectives on the American Dream.” Increasingly, I had become an American philosopher, a teacher and writer who drew on the American philosophical tradition to shed light on the dilemmas and possibilities in American life.



But the process of becoming an American philosopher was far from finished. About the time that my second child, Sarah, was born on the Fourth of July in 1972, I was reading the writings of the Auschwitz survivor Elie Wiesel. The collision I experienced then between my good fortune—fatherhood, a promising academic career, living my version of the American Dream—and the destruction of family, hopes, and dreams explored in Wiesel’s Holocaust-related reflections left lasting marks upon me. Tripped by the Holocaust, my life took a personal and professional turn. I became an American philosopher who studied, taught, and wrote about the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocity crimes.

Ethics—loyalty to what is good, just, and true—links these diverse identities. Early on, I wrote about James’s moral philosophy. Later on, I wrote about *The Failures of Ethics* (2015) as I grappled with the fact that absent the overriding of moral sensibilities, if not the collapse or collaboration of ethical traditions, the Holocaust, genocide, and other mass atrocities could not take place.



James held that philosophy could give people courage. Sound philosophical inquiry does not flinch. It insists on going where facts and evidence lead. It urges pursuit of justice and defense of democracy. Philosophy makes me hold that while ethics may be what the American poet William Stafford called a “forlorn cause,” it remains and must persist. An irreplaceable safeguard, it possesses the indispensable corrective for its own failures. But ethics meets that test only to the degree that people keep trying to do what’s right and good.

How would you describe your current research?

Ahead of the 2024 American elections, my philosopher-friend Leonard Grob and I are publishing a book called *Warnings: The Holocaust, Ukraine, and Endangered*

American Democracy. It identifies urgent threats to democracy in the United States and shows how to resist them.

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

I listen to music, mostly classical but jazz as well. I read poetry, especially the work of American poets such as Kay Ryan and Adrienne Rich, Langston Hughes, Lawrence Ferlinghetti, and William Stafford. I love baseball and have followed the major league season for decades.

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

Four books explore outlooks I noted in describing what American philosophy means to me. W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* moves me to resist the racism that infects American life. Josiah Royce's *The Philosophy of Loyalty* encourages me not to give up defending what the United States stands for when we Americans are at our best. Richard Bernstein's *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* champions fallibilism that refuses certainty and defends truth. Philip Hallie's *In the Eye of the Hurricane*, the work of a philosopher who was also a Holocaust scholar, holds me accountable to do what I can to "expand the blue," his metaphor for welcoming the stranger and expanding democratic community.

