

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



[Cathy Legg](#) is Senior Lecturer in Philosophy at Deakin University. Her research areas include Pragmatism (especially C.S. Peirce), Philosophy of Language, Philosophy of Mind, and Philosophy of Computing and Information. She is the author, with Christopher Hookway, of the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's* entry on "[Pragmatism](#)" and has served on the Executive Board of the Charles S. Peirce Society.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

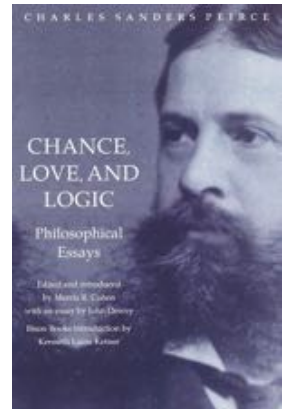
In "[Why American Philosophy? Why Now?](#)" Larry Hickman writes, "American philosophy has its roots in the experimentalism that was required by a people who faced the task of coming to terms with the uncertainties of a radically new environment." Although I believe there's much truth in that statement, as an Australian I would hate to see the United States lay claim to frontier thinking. Moreover, history cuts many ways. If American philosophy is to claim its pioneers' manifest courage and fresh thinking, will it also claim their wars of extermination, not to mention grabbing people from their native lands and working them unto death? But one thing I appreciate about American philosophy is that it's OK to discuss these things.

Hickman also notes, "a true experimentalism always reaches out in an attempt to be inclusive"—suggesting that Jane Addams was the American philosopher who first embraced this in philosophical practice, as she ventured from her privileged Boston upbringing into the immigrant neighborhoods of Chicago. I find such willingness to actually perform "experiments in living" to be one of the most inspiring aspects of American philosophy. Correspondingly, I see one of our biggest challenges to be not dropping back into the comforts of academicism (the existence of which are sometimes concealed by its many institutional frustrations).

How did you become an American philosopher?

My original training was strongly analytic, but a dash of Wittgenstein from my undergraduate education at Melbourne University curdled the philosophical stew, leaving me dissatisfied on a "soul" level, although I retain great respect for what Peirce called "exact thinking."

During my Ph.D training I went on exchange to MIT, and thinking “when in Rome (a.k.a. Boston)...”, I dabbled in Emerson, read Thoreau and made a pilgrimage to Walden Pond, then read Peirce's *Chance, Love and Logic*, which completely upended my thinking about the realism question I was then working on. I found the way that Australasia's self-described “hard-headed” realists came out as extreme nominalists in Peirce's taxonomy quite hilarious. I quickly became hooked on the depth and scope of Peirce's philosophical analyses and his genius at newly synthesizing the Western tradition.



How would you describe your current research?

Most of my career I've been on a mission to bring Peirce's ideas into areas of mainstream philosophy where they might solve longstanding problems and change people's thinking. I spent ~10 years working out the implications of incorporating Peirce's concept of iconicity in philosophies of language, logic and mathematics. (Copies of all my published research can be found on [PhilPapers](#); some of my favorite recent pieces are "[What is Intelligence For? A Peircean Pragmatist Response to the Knowing-How, Knowing-That Debate](#)" (with Joshua Black), "[Discursive Habits: a Representationalist Re-reading of Teleosemiotics](#)", and "[Charles Peirce's Limit Concept of Truth](#)"

More recently I'm moving into philosophy of mind, particularly the new pragmatist-adjacent field of embodied cognition. One day I hope to write a book on applied epistemology that is guided by the question, "what would it mean if we really loved the logic in each other?"

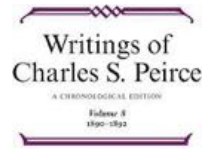
What do you do when you're not doing American philosophy?

At the moment, I'm trying to organize my life more around the principles of permaculture, which has arguably moved beyond “ideas about gardening” to become Australia's own homegrown philosophy.

For further details, see [here](#) — and definitely check out the [video](#) where David Holmgren explains how you can use permaculture to change the world. But in this area I have a long way to go.

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

If you've so far encountered Peirce only through the flawed and dated *Collected Papers*, and find him (that old chestnut) a “choppy mercurial” thinker, I recommend the 8 volumes so far released in the Peirce Edition Project's superbly edited *Writings of Charles S. Peirce: A Chronological Edition*. To read his texts as he composed and published them is something of a revelation.



I'm also a big fan of Sandra Rosenthal's work, particularly her rich 1994 book *Charles Peirce's Pragmatic Pluralism*.

At the risk of reigniting old intra-pragmatist family enmities, a book I think is under-appreciated is James Hoopes' *Community Denied: The Wrong Turn of Pragmatic Liberalism* (1998). Hoopes argues that had 20th century social thought in the US been influenced by Peirce rather than Dewey and James, society could be seen more as “a set of interpretive relationships” than “a collection of discrete interests to be managed from the top down by elitist experts” He urges that such a—more realist, in Peircean terms—liberalism would have proven more resilient against liberalism's recent determined critics. (If anyone wants to discuss this book—drop me a line!)

Finally, I recently reviewed Trevor Pearce's remarkably comprehensive *Pragmatism's Evolution*, and thoroughly enjoyed the insights Pearce draws from the interplay between the first few generations of pragmatist philosophy and the burgeoning new science of evolution.

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