

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

Recently, I have been thinking of philosophy as the way that a culture reflects upon itself.

I didn't have a context for understanding what was meant by the word "philosophy" when I was growing up and every time I teach a freshman classroom, I see that this is the case for many of us. I majored in philosophy by something like an accident—I had planned to become a lobbyist for publicly funded education and a staff advisor recommended a philosophy degree as the best preparation. In college, I was exposed to European thinkers, came to understand that there was a split between "Continental" and "Analytic" philosophy, and I knew that the latter was associated with the "Anglo-American style," but was not thought of as a tradition in the precise sense. When I learned that there was a history of interconnected thinkers associated with the Americas, it started to dawn on me how little I knew about my own context, and by extension, myself.

American Philosophy is a way of asking who we are and what we have done. It is a way of thinking together about who we might become. It is a conversation that we undertake in the light of the possibilities that we can imagine, based on the circumstances in which we are situated. So it is a conversation about what kind of wisdom might be most germane to those people who are associated with "American"

life—and it is best to leave that signifier open for continuous reinterpretation.

I find it encouraging that American philosophy is so often committed to pluralism as a central tenet, and although it is a difficult vow to uphold in practice, our striving to do philosophy, to think and talk together in the pursuit of genuine pluralism, is the creative tension that generates the highest possibilities for thought. For this reason I am very proud to be an American philosopher.

How did you become an American philosopher?

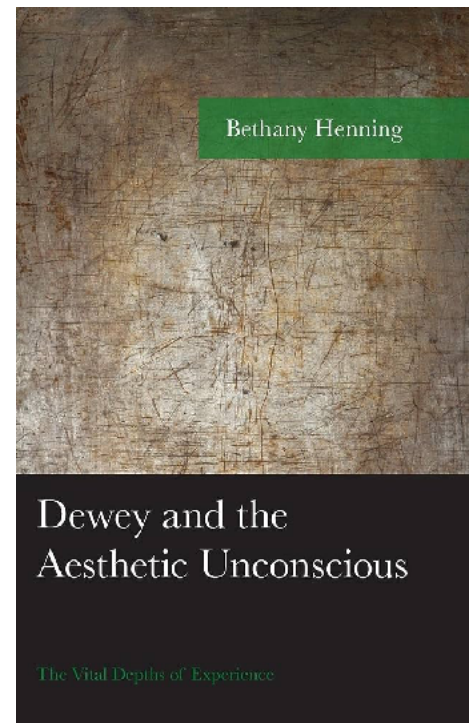
I applied to graduate study at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale after learning that theirs was a pluralist program that was committed to providing graduates with a strong grounding in the history of philosophy, and that they had a reputation for producing well-prepared teachers. My first substantial exposure to American philosophy came in the form of Thomas Alexander's seminar on John Dewey in the spring of my second year. Afterwards, I discovered early American thought with Ken Stickers, the technological Dewey with Larry Hickman, and the creativity of Peirce with Doug Anderson.

My teachers demonstrated that there was depth and resonance in places where I was least prepared to find it. The themes that I encountered in these conversations were uncannily familiar, and I felt a kind of bizarre homesickness, similar to what one might feel upon discovering, after decades pass, an old picture taken in childhood, or an item that belonged to a family member that has passed. I think that such experiences are calls to take responsibility for carrying something from the past into the future.

How would you describe your current research?

I'm interested in the relationship between public and intimate life. I see an analogous tension between the abstract, discursive expression of philosophical thought and the concrete, lived experience from which it emerges and in which it intervenes. I frequently turn to Dewey's philosophy of "experience," psychoanalytic feminism, and phenomenology for concepts that help us productively navigate these passages.

I am currently co-authoring a book about a pragmatist approach to liberal arts education with Seth Vanatta (Routledge), and I am very interested in new approaches to public philosophy as a way of bringing philosophical dialogue back into contact with "ordinary" experience. Not only do I believe that philosophical dialogue serves to strengthen community bonds, but I also believe that inviting non-professional



philosophers into such conversations acts as a vital test of its relevance beyond the academic cloister.

Finally, I am preoccupied with a need to think ecologically, and to reveal continuities between pluralism as a metaphysical, natural, and cultural commitment. When we are confronted by an existential threat, when the stakes are very high, we are especially prone to think in reductive binaries or moral absolutes that seem like they will clarify the field of action for us. When we are imperiled, we tend to become defensive, reactive, absolutists. We are under such conditions now and we will require unprecedented levels of collaborative effort to stabilize the ecological relationships that support complex and meaningful life.

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

This is a difficult question to answer! Philosophical thinking has a way of pervading lived experience, doesn't it? But I was a musician and a music teacher before I came to study philosophy, and I still spend a lot of time practicing and listening to music. I also read novels and I am especially fond of Lauren Groff and Jesmyn Ward. Inspired by the recent cultural rediscovery of "visible mending" as an anti-capitalist practice, my newest hobby is embroidery, and I make up for my distinct lack of talent in this arena with extravagant zeal.

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

My cardinal text is John Dewey's *Experience and Nature*, which I suspect is probably treated as required reading across the board; and I think that we could all stand to be much better acquainted with *Borderlands* by Gloria Anzaldúa. But lately I've been interested in the emerging work of a young scholar named Matthew Spellberg, currently teaching at a new experimental institution in Alaska. While he is clearly an interdisciplinary thinker with formal training in anthropology and literature, and does not self-identify as a philosopher per se, I think American philosophy could learn a few things from him about the significance of the sensuous imagination.

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