

"I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER"
—A Series of Interviews with John Capps—



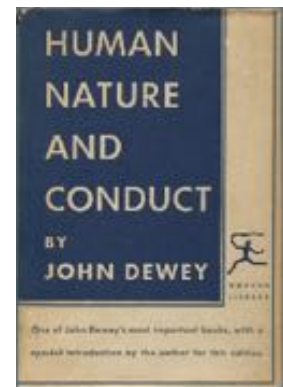
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What does American philosophy mean to you?

I appreciate that this question is getting at the various philosophical commitments that we associate with the tradition, and there's certainly something about American philosophies that opens them up to pluralism in both methods and principles. But at the risk of being cheesy, American philosophy means a lot to me, largely because of the community-building work led by the members of SAAP for decades now. Perhaps I'm biased, but I find our conferences strike a rare balance between openness to a wide array of philosophical projects and deep and challenging critique. For a while now (and I think in contrast to its reputation to those who haven't attended in some time), members have been sharing complex and far-ranging projects, and yet the audience follows along closely and raises sophisticated questions about experience, power, meaning, and some Peirce things I still don't understand.

How did you become an American philosopher?

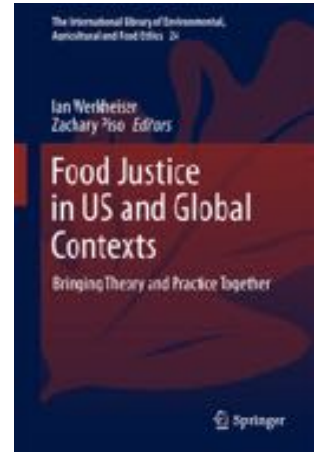
I think it was my junior year at Allegheny College that Bill Bywater had us read *Experience and Nature* and *Human Nature and Conduct*, as part of a seminar on the evolutionary underpinnings of Dewey's pragmatism (Jerome Popp's *Evolution's First Philosopher* was our guiding star). At the time I was in the grip of various reductionisms



in evolutionary biology, not in their more problematic variations, but at least enough to find Dewey's naturalism quite attractive. After balking at the price tag for masters degrees in environmental science (that'd been my major), I spent a year working in the community and intermittently attending philosophy conferences. Lots of patient faculty took the time to talk shop and I eventually decided to head to grad school in the field.

How would you describe your current research?

I'm winding down some projects on the logic of inter- and transdisciplinary collaboration, especially in environmental science, management, and policy. One pertains to the methods that scientific teams deploy for studying the values of stakeholders, values that most agree ought to inform the design and carrying out of scientific research, but that are hard to pin down and liable to various interpretations depending on the method we use to study them. Another considers the notion of "integration" as it figures into interdisciplinary practice, which I argue is neither epistemological nor ontological, but evaluative, and accountable first and foremost to ethical reasoning.



I say "winding down," though, because I'm starting a new position as director of Dayton's Rivers Institute, which is roughly our outreach and engagement office for environmental issues. My work in this position will be even more place-based than much of my more traditional scholarship, which was admittedly never very traditional in the first place.

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

I do think of my community-partnered research as doing American philosophy—indeed I sometimes worry that the conventions of academic publications mean that writing research articles isn't especially philosophical these days—and feel that I'm more of a Deweyan liaison when I'm sitting around a table with various environmental decision makers.

Less philosophical—thank goodness!—are my various hobbies, which this time of year involve a lot of time outdoors, foraging mushrooms, and bringing them home to cook up. And while I love the piece I wrote about the aquarium hobby that I presented at SAAP's wonderful conference in San Miguel de Allende, I do mostly find my time setting up and maintaining fish tanks to be philosophy-free.

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

I've used up my "reject the premise of the question" quota right off the bat, so I'll refrain from saying something like, "put the book down, go out and be a public philosopher." (But, really, that's what you should do.) My bet though is that the books I can honestly call my favorites are ones familiar to anyone reading this: Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* deserves a re-read, and for a shorter read I've always loved Sellars' "Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man." For those interested in environmental pragmatism Bryan Norton's *Sustainability: The Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* is worth a careful read (my students occasionally admit as much). To echo my opening salvo, though, I think our strength is that we are all reading quite different things, often from outside of the tradition, and I think that's what gives American philosophy its charm.

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