

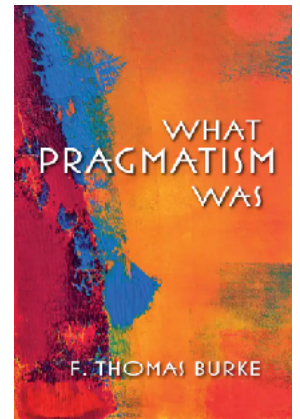
“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”  
—An Interview Series with John Capps—



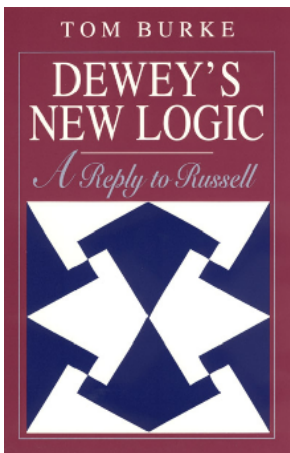
[F. THOMAS BURKE](#) is Professor of Philosophy at the University of South Carolina. He is the author of [What Pragmatism Was](#) (2013) and [Dewey's New Logic: A Reply to Russell](#) (1994), and co-editor of [George Herbert Mead in the Twenty-First Century](#) (2013) and [Dewey's Logical Theory: New Studies and Interpretations](#) (2002). He is a past President of the South Carolina Society for Philosophy, served on SAAP's Board of Directors and is a recipient of the Joseph L. Blau Prize for work on the history of American philosophy.

What does American philosophy mean to you?

American philosophy is a broad enterprise reaching well beyond the borders of the United States, encompassing a wide range of topics and agendas. But, in my opinion, the distinctive, defining, core contribution of American philosophy to philosophy at large is the classical American pragmatism of Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead. This school of thought has influenced philosophical discourse all over the world even as we are still trying to figure out what pragmatism is in the first place.



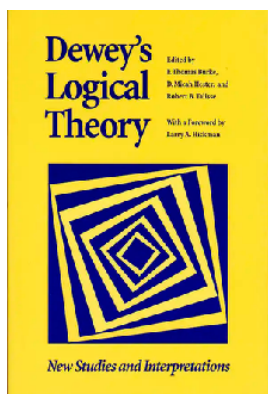
How did you become an American philosopher?



In the late 1980s I was struggling as a graduate student at Stanford to find a dissertation topic. At one point Jon Barwise sent a note to the in-house “situation theory and situation semantics” email list mentioning that during one of his recent talks someone had asked a question concerning possible links to Dewey’s discussions of situations some 50 years earlier. Barwise knew nothing about it and was therefore suggesting it as a possible research topic for anyone who might be interested. I was not particularly interested, but I was struggling. So I took the bait. When I asked him about it, he handed me a copy of Russell’s 1939 review of Dewey’s 1938 *Logic*. This led me to look at the book itself, and I was hooked. I knew next to nothing about Peirce or James, not to mention Dewey, but I was already primed (via some familiarity with James Gibson’s “ecological psychology”)

to jettison modern epistemology in favor of something, anything, that was oriented to a more dynamic interactive conception of ourselves as living things who happen to be able to think.

### How would you describe your current research?



Dewey's conception of logic is an area of study that is ripe for advancement. Dewey was the first to note that his work in this area was tentative at best, and its advancement calls for reconciling it with equally tentative work in contemporary mathematical logic and the so-called analytic tradition more broadly. This includes and/or overlaps with things like pragmatics and 4E-cognitive science at large. My current focus is on showing how to accommodate "standard" first-order extensional deductive logic within a Deweyan theory of inquiry, using Peano arithmetic and classical Euclidean geometry to illustrate Deweyan logical methods (so far as deduction is concerned).

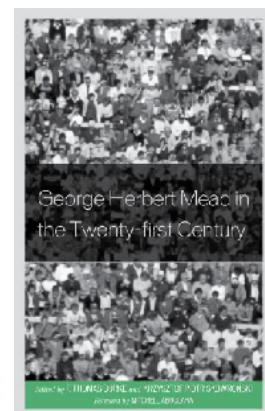
Generally speaking, pragmatism offers a concrete way of doing "semantics" that is directly applicable to concrete if not vital issues that we all face together and that we need to understand, explain, and otherwise talk about together in intelligent ways. In this regard, I have also been invested lately in exploring how pragmatism might help to clarify issues surrounding the problem of gun violence in the United States.

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

I would probably do more fishing if I were not so bad at cleaning and cooking what I catch. I wish I had the space and time for oil painting, an interest (more than an interest) that I had to put aside upon deciding to pursue an academic career with a small family in tow. For now I just think about it.

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

I endorse all the suggestions made by other self-professed American philosophers in this series. Considering such a rich domain of possibilities, I would encourage folks to continue to root through the works of the four classical pragmatists listed above. In particular, G. H. Mead's social psychology needs to be better understood so as to move it closer to the center of academic psychology and philosophy of mind. James Gibson's



ecological psychology is also (still) under-appreciated particularly within philosophical circles. Both Mead and Gibson did important work that fills in many details that were insufficiently developed in Dewey's 1938 *Logic* (my favorite work in American philosophy). For anyone serious about advancing Dewey's logical theory, I would also recommend Patrick Suppes's pioneering work on the ill-named semantic conception of scientific theories. Others have developed this view in productive ways, and any and all of it, if properly interpreted, may help to explain important features of Dewey's logical theory.

(February 2024)

