

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



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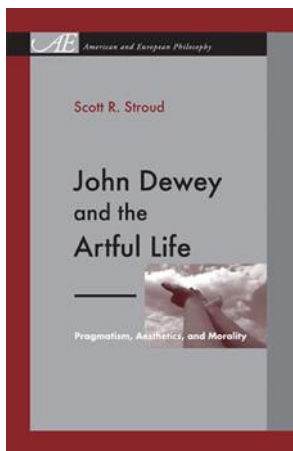
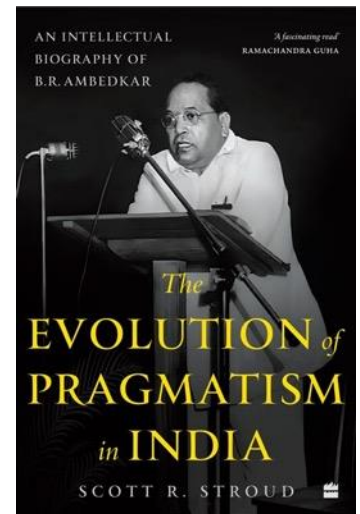
What does American philosophy mean to you?

Philosophies always capture something of the spirit of their context; for me, American philosophy captures the creativity that has animated thinkers in America, for better or worse ends. At its better moments, American philosophy's focus on practice means an openness to seeing the good in present situations, as well as a sensitivity to the ways that the evils of the day can be rectified. In its prominent practitioners—such as John Dewey, William James, and Jane Addams—this openness is both an acceptance of what has been built up and an acceptance of making it better.

American philosophy to me also signifies the acceptance of pluralism: that contrary or contradictory inclinations and judgments can often be held alongside each other without shutting some out—and without shutting down some of those possibilities. In much of the tradition of American philosophy, especially in the complex tradition denoted by pragmatism, I see this openness to a complex world and a pluralistic respect for different orientations toward experience.

How did you become an American philosopher?

I stumbled into American philosophy. I was about to begin graduate study in Temple University's philosophy program, partly because it had an expert in pragmatism and popular culture (Richard Shusterman) and partly because it had an expert in Indian philosophy (J.N. Mohanty). At that time, I hadn't read much pragmatism, but I did have an interest in popular culture due to my previous graduate work in rhetorical criticism. Before starting I also had summer support from a California State University program and Richard Shusterman was nice enough to humor this random student right before he went off to teach in Japan for a year. In reading Dewey and talking with Shusterman for a month, I saw that the tradition of pragmatism could push me far beyond my previous orientation toward the arts and media of everyday life. Studying later with Joseph Margolis and Paul C. Taylor only amplified that effect.



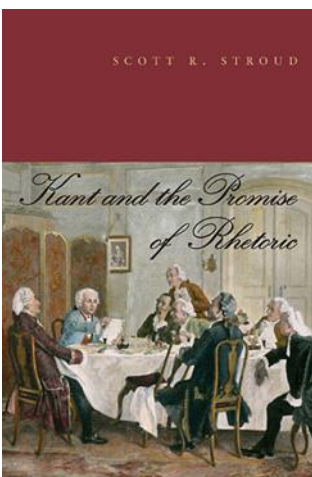
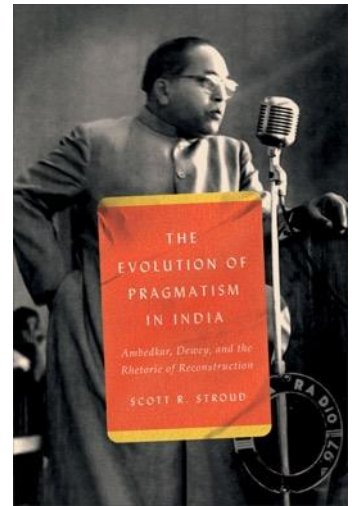
I found in American pragmatism, especially the thought of John Dewey, an openness to the complexity of life, and a toleration of contradiction and tension if it serves some useful purpose. Until I started reading Dewey that summer with Shusterman, I had been surrounded by many academics and authors who proffered right answers, answers that putatively ended conversation—criticisms of this text that excluded that other interpretation, readings of what human dignity meant and what it did not mean, and so on. In Dewey, I saw that our favored answers to such inquiries did not gain value in showing their connection to some real or foundational touchstone; instead, they were good when they were useful contingencies, habits and patterns of activity that may work.

As my career progressed, and as I became more fully ensconced in the field of communication studies and rhetoric, this Deweyan intuition served me well. A

group of us established a beachhead for pragmatism in the field of rhetorical studies. In my own work, textual criticism and critical thinking became less of a pursuit of an answer that others must hold and more of a community endeavor, a way of thinking to and with other people. The rhetorical tradition of the sophists merged in my thinking with Dewey's situational ethics of growth: what in the situation pushes me and others to argue and reason the ways we do, and how might certain ways of arguing and reasoning help create a useful balance among agents and interests in future presents?

How would you describe your current research?

I believe that one of the most exciting areas for novelty and important discovery is the past and future story of pragmatism in India. In a conversation in 2004, Martha Nussbaum asked me about a student of Dewey's from India. She had heard I was doing my dissertation on Dewey, and that I was interested in Indian thought. I mumbled "no," and moved on. I was too focused on Dewey to see the opportunity that this opening represented. Ten years later, I followed this clue out and became fascinated with the thought and life of this student—Bhimrao Ambedkar (1891-1956). While Ambedkar was not an advisee of Dewey's, he was greatly affected by what he heard in three of Dewey's courses during his time at Columbia University in 1913-1916. Like his classmate in 1915-1916, Hu Shih, he would take themes from Dewey's courses back to Asia; he would help write India's democratic constitution and lead a massive civil rights movement there. Unlike Hu, no one in our discipline has told the story of Ambedkar's engagement with Dewey's pragmatism.



Much of my current work focuses on recovering this story of pragmatism's evolution in India, the world's largest democracy. Ambedkar's pragmatism is a unique entry into the range of pragmatist thinkers spanning the globe, and one that we ought to think more about. He represents a tradition in Indian philosophy that's overlooked in those thinkers and programs enlightened enough in the west to count India as part of the global philosophical tradition—the tradition of anti-caste thought. When we talk of Indian philosophy, we tend to talk about thinkers and texts firmly entrenched in the Vedic, or Sanskrit, tradition. This was precisely the line of thought that Ambedkar, a so-called

“untouchable,” harshly targeted as implicitly or explicitly unwriting caste oppression.

In his vast writings and his political activism, Ambedkar extends Dewey's idea of democracy as a way of life to include a diagnosis of caste oppression as a philosophical and cultural obstacle to associated life. He also welds the concept of personality from Dewey's early thought to Buddhism in reconstructing this philosophy as a social gospel that can both resist caste division and combat the allure of Marxism as a global creed in the 1950s. New stories and new frontiers are hard to come by in scholarly fields, but we in American philosophy are truly in for a period of exciting new conversations with more and more attention being paid to the story of pragmatism's past—and future—in India.

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

I have long loved fly fishing, a hobby initiated on the small streams around Philadelphia while I was in graduate school. It seemed to embody what I saw as valuable in Dewey's aesthetics—the idea that the process of an activity (like casting) is just as valuable as its product or result. I also have learned to love making much of the equipment that I rely on myself in fly fishing such as leaders, flies, and poles. I also spend time decompressing from academic work mastering the art of slow-pitch softball pitching and with trail running. And I am still intrigued by the harmonica, although I am far from any mastery of it. I should read more fiction, but then again, I do diligently read my own article proofs.

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

I will mention two works that are always worth our time. Dewey's *Art as Experience* is, in my mind, still his best and most intriguing work. It has his mature view of the phenomenology of experience, as well as of communication and aesthetic experience. It can be made to speak to art and endeavors as rhetorical criticism in my field. It is a rewarding work to revisit and extend.

I also believe we ought to read more of Bhimrao Ambedkar, a pragmatist philosopher in his own right. He's very well known in Indian academic circles, but mostly as an anti-caste philosopher; in my view, you do not see the full extent of his philosophy unless you see it as extending—and resisting—themes in Dewey's work at vital parts. American philosophers ought to read his *Annihilation of Caste*

(1936) with an eye for how Dewey's themes are appropriated, altered, and resisted in this unique critique of caste injustice. There's much in Ambedkar's thought for us in America to learn about concerning the limits and possibilities of revolution and reform in situations of division and injustice.

(April 2024)

