

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

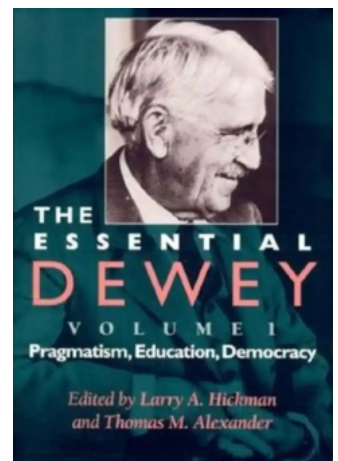


[LARRY A. HICKMAN](#) is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy and former director of the [Center for Dewey Studies](#) at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. He is the author of [John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology](#) (1990), [Philosophical Tools for Technological Culture](#) (2001), [Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism](#) (2007), and [Living As Learning: John Dewey in the 21st Century](#) (with Daisaku Ikeda and Jim Garrison) (2014).

He is also the editor or co-editor of more than a dozen volumes, including *Technology as a Human Affair* (1990), [Reading Dewey](#) (1998), [The Essential Dewey](#) (with Thomas Alexander, 1998), [The Correspondence of John Dewey](#) (with the Dewey Center editorial staff), (1999, 2001, 2005, 2008), [John Dewey: Between Pragmatism and Constructivism](#) (with Stefan Neubert and Kersten Reich, 2008), and [John Dewey's Educational Philosophy in International Perspective](#) (with Giuseppe Spadafora, 2009).

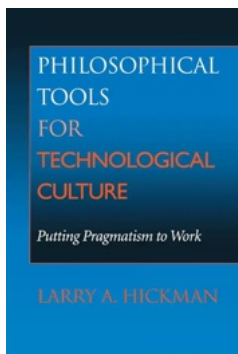
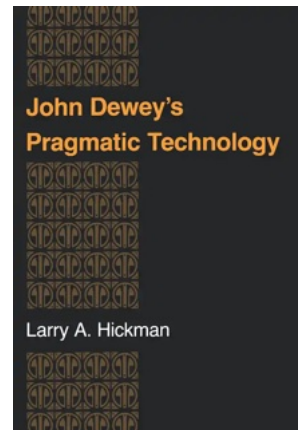
What does American philosophy mean to you?

I think Dewey had it right when he wrote that the various philosophical attempts to respond to the breakup of the “Medieval synthesis” never quite succeeded because they preserved too many of its questionable epistemological commitments. In my view, American philosophy is, among other things, an attempt to separate the wheat from the chaff of those leftovers—to construct new ways of thinking as responses to emergent events. American philosophy has offered a series of responses to Emerson’s invitation to Americans to think for themselves—never to just imitate. I find that American philosophy is not a thing, but multivalent philosophy of culture. In Dewey’s hands it is also a philosophy of education. Is American philosophy exportable per se? I think not. It has its own stories of origins and development. But the evidence is already in. It is culturally malleable and ever-evolving as it interacts with the concerns of world cultures to create new philosophical horizons. Its deepest commitments have provided spaces for interactions with other philosophical traditions that have made its practices an important participant in global philosophical discourse.



How did you become an American philosopher?

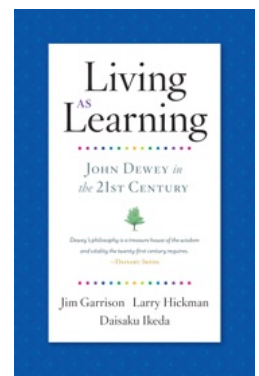
I was fortunate to stumble into the graduate philosophy program at the University of Texas in the 1960's, which at that time had one of the largest philosophy faculties in the United States. It was a fountain of philosophical pluralism and I was like a sponge. What especially caught my eye, however, were courses by Charles Hartshorne on Peirce, by George Gentry on G.H. Mead (his former teacher), and by Irwin Lieb, on Dewey. I got serious about Peirce, but I had some questions about his remarks on Medieval logic so I decided that was a good dissertation topic. After a summer of intensive Latin, I began my research. Finally, after a completed dissertation and a post-doc in Germany that allowed more visits to rare book collections, I published the answers to my question about Peirce on Medieval logic. I completed the circle by returning to the texts of American philosophy.

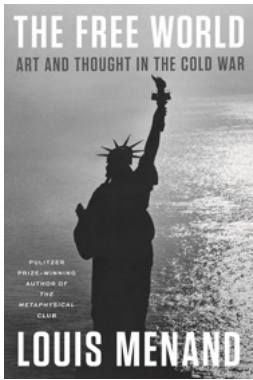


I was teaching at Texas A&M in 1977 when John McDermott came to interview for the vacant department head position. He told me that he had noticed an American philosophy course on the books, and wondered who would teach it if he took the position. I said that I had been teaching it but that I would be the first to audit his course. John opened my eyes to the wider cultural context of what I had been teaching. Though he was a determined opponent of over-professionalization, he nevertheless had a strong sense of the importance of our field and a clear-eyed vision of what it might become.

How would you describe your current research?

I retired from teaching in 2017. Since then I have been publishing at a leisurely pace—about one essay a year on various topics. I don't have a research project per se, but I am happily following my interests in a number of fields that I never had time to explore when I was busy teaching, writing, and editing the *Correspondence of John Dewey*. One is my exploration of new directions in historiography—moving beyond the circumstances and effects of post-colonialism to studies of cross-cultural interchanges that have had broad global-changing consequences. New research on the Mongol domination of much of Asia and portions of Europe is just one example. The two-volume study of Dewey and Confucianism and Dewey and Daoism by Jim Behuniak fits nicely into this project. I have also been working with Soka Gakkai, a Buddhist lay organization on educational issues, and am on the board of Soka University of America.





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

I try to try to keep up with new publications in the visual arts and literature, including literary criticism (for example Marion Turner's excellent new *The Wife of Bath: A Biography*). I enjoy reading books by Pulitzer and Booker Prize finalists. But my favorite non-philosophy readings are in the field of the history of culture. (Orlando Figges' *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* and Louis Menand's *The Free World: Art and Thought in the Cold War* are among the great reads in that field.) Beyond that, I'm trying to improve my cooking and gardening skills.

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

That is a tough question. It is like asking what my favorite food is. It should come as little surprise, given my 30 plus years of writing about Dewey and editing his works, that my favorite work in American philosophy is *Experience and Nature*. I have read it so many times with pencil in hand that there is scarce room left in its margins for additional notation.

What should we all be reading? Again a difficult question, given the cornucopia of great works in American philosophy. I'm going to mention *Mind in Nature*, by Mark Johnson and Jay Schulkin, but there are so many others. Given current international bellicosity, a timely quasi-philosophical read would be Hathaway and Shapiro's *The Internationalists: How a Radical Plan to Outlaw War Remade the World*. (Spoiler alert: Dewey is referenced.)

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