

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

—An Interview Series with John Capps—



BRYAN NORTON is Distinguished Professor Emeritus in the School of Public Policy at Georgia Tech. He is the author of *Why Preserve Natural Variety* (1990), *Toward Unity Among Environmentalists* (1991), *Searching for Sustainability* (2002), *Sustainability: A Philosophy of Adaptive Ecosystem Management* (2005), and *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change: A Guide to Environmental Decision Making* (2015). A festschrift in his honor *A Sustainable Philosophy: The Work of Bryan Norton* was published in 2018.

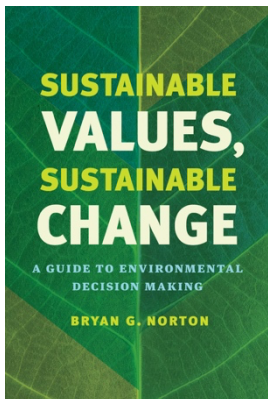
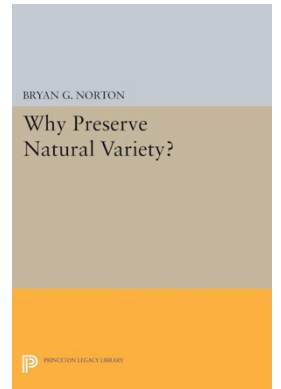
What does American philosophy mean to you?

For me, American philosophy means pragmatism and all the influences on it, and especially its many implications for environmental and social thought. More specifically, I associate pragmatism with the philosophy of language understood as the intellectual space where science fosters the development of new terminology and concepts.

How did you become an American philosopher?

This question requires a two-part answer: First how did I become a pragmatist? And, second, how did I become an American Philosopher?

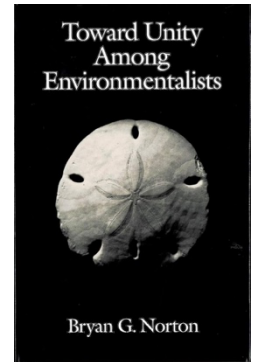
First, as a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I took a class taught by Jaegwon Kim where he assigned Rudolf Carnap’s essay “Empiricism and Ontology.” I became intrigued with this paper because it spoke to a concern I had at the time (and still do): How can we be empiricists *and* still engage “big questions” about the nature of reality? This fascination motivated me to write a paper, followed by a dissertation, and finally my first book (*Linguistic Frameworks and Ontology*). This led me to understand Carnap’s work as reinterpreting philosophy as a coherent “metaphilosophy.” In other words, I took Carnap’s later work to be explaining and developing what was called “the linguistic turn” in philosophy. I was persuaded by Carnap’s argument, developed in “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” that philosophy can, when married with empirical science, contribute to our understanding of the world by clarifying emerging scientific concepts. In particular, I remain convinced by Carnap’s argument that linguistic choices in science must be addressed pragmatically.



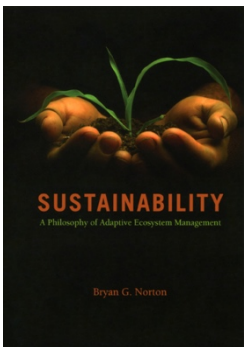
Second, once I had embraced Carnapian pragmatism, I became fascinated with the Quine/Carnap debates over meaning, analyticity and ontology and learned that American Pragmatism is a rich philosophical tradition with roots in American philosophy and branches growing in many directions, and with applications to real and important scientific problems. I was also influenced by Louis Menand's book, *The Metaphysical Club*, which encouraged me to see pragmatism as a rich tradition in American history, one worth studying and applying to contemporary problems.

How would you describe your current research?

Building on this foundational understanding of philosophy, and influenced by Earth Day and growing interest in the environment, I then turned my attention to environmental science. Here, I was fortunate to receive funding (with help from Mark Sagoff) for a research project on the justification for the Endangered Species Act. This research required that I take a deep dive into the relevant science and I spent two and a half years studying the philosophy of ecology. I then completed two books on ecology and economics of environmental protection.



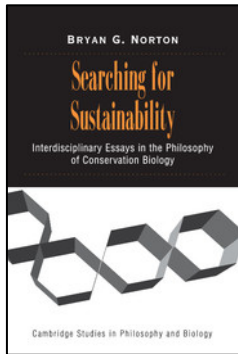
About 1990, I recognized that my research could contribute to emerging work on sustainability—the science-based understanding of our obligations to future generations. Since then I have focused on developing a philosophical foundation for sustainability and ecological resilience. My recent work has concentrated on understanding and guiding collaborative efforts in communities to self-govern including, especially, collaborative efforts to build polycentric, self-governing communities.



More specifically, Paul Hirsch (a former graduate student) and I have completed a paper on how collaborative management efforts can be built on trust, even though the usual forms of trust (which typically develop as a result of face-to-face and other direct interactions among individuals) are often inadequate to address contemporary problems that affect large-scale systems and remotely related individuals. Our paper develops a concept of “system-level trust,” which is not based on individual trust, but rather on characteristics of collaborative groups in their efforts to achieve self-governance.

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

I'm a voracious reader. I read biographies of historical and political figures and I especially enjoy twisty crime novels by authors including John D. MacDonald and Harlan Coben. When not reading, I enjoy watching documentaries on cutting edge scientific topics, while hanging out with my husband, Rafael, and my dog Millie.



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

Of course, everyone should read my two books on sustainability (*Sustainability* and *Sustainable Values, Sustainable Change*).

And while it may signal that I'm stuck in the past, and in 20th century arguments about philosophy as linguistic analysis, I would recommend that novices in philosophy read, cover-to-cover, Richard Rorty's anthology *The Linguistic Turn: Essays in Philosophical Methodology*. I'd also recommend the lively discussion by critics of that work (including Rorty himself).

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