

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

—An Interview Series with John Capps—



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What does American philosophy mean to you?

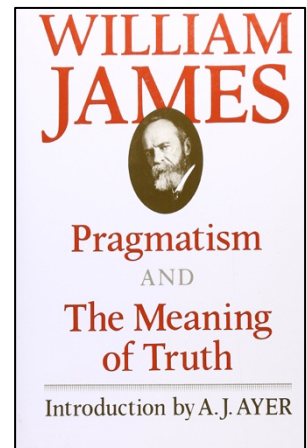
If you're just asking what comes to mind when I think of "American Philosophy," it's mostly James, and to a lesser extent, Peirce and Dewey. Of course, there's more to the Pragmatist tradition than those three, and definitely more to American philosophy—even in the restricted sense used by SAAP members—than just the Pragmatists. Still, I've never found it all that helpful to draw strict lines between philosophical traditions, and given how tied the term is to SAAP and the shifting dynamics of American academia in the 1970s, this particular tradition feels especially hard to pin down (as the wide range of answers to this question in this series makes pretty clear). For the past decade I've co-edited Routledge's series *Studies in American Philosophy*, and the occasional submission has made this sort of definitional question more pressing, but I've tended to be generous in what I'll include in the tent.

For my own part, I tend to think of figures like James as philosophers who happen to be American, rather than as "American Philosophers," and I've never really felt the urge to find some specific "Americanness" in their work.

How did you become an American philosopher?

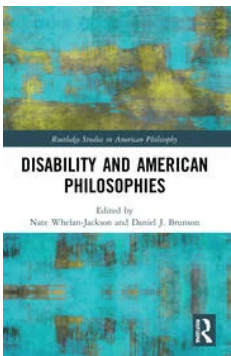
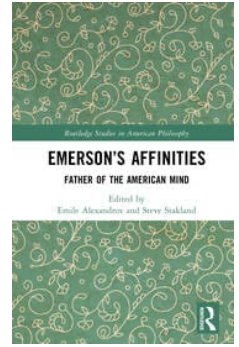
I first read James's *Pragmatism* as an undergraduate in a memorable seminar with Sydney Morgenbesser. His infamous quip—that Pragmatism was "all very well in theory but it doesn't work in practice"—nicely captured the impression he left on me. As a result, I entered graduate school with little inclination to pursue further study in that area.

Still, Pitt required all students to complete five history seminars, and—fortunately for me—one semester the only course that fit my teaching schedule was Richard Gale's seminar on James. While I found myself disagreeing



with Gale's reading of James on many major issues, his enthusiasm for the subject was infectious, and the class sparked a sustained interest in James that has never really faded.

Not that I didn't get a great deal out of my coursework on Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, and Hegel—but those systems always felt, at best, like interesting places to visit. James's philosophical worldview felt much more like home. I think James was right to highlight the role of temperament in philosophy, and while the "sick-souled" side of his personality has always felt foreign to me, his broader "sense of how the world holds together" clearly resonated.

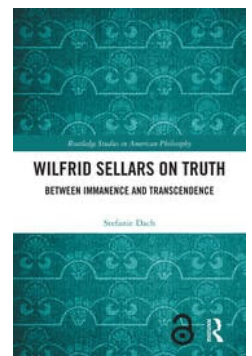


Although my dissertation, supervised by Robert Brandom, could be situated within the broadly "neo-pragmatist" tradition, it remained a project in mainstream analytic philosophy of language. My first academic appointment, at the University of Toledo, was thus centered on teaching formal logic, analytic epistemology, and the philosophies of language and mind. Those responsibilities kept me quite busy, and even if I had been able to teach in other areas, James Campbell already had American philosophy more than adequately covered. Regular attendance at SAAP meetings was crucial to keeping my research interest in American Philosophy active during this period, and that's something I'm grateful for to this day.

One of the major benefits of returning to Canada—and of receiving tenure—was the freedom to devote more time to teaching the pragmatists. Even at the height of my interest in the philosophy of language, I never particularly enjoyed *teaching* the material I was working on. By contrast, teaching the pragmatists—especially James—has always been a pleasure. Over time, and in no small part because he came to dominate my upper-level courses, James became my central research focus.

How would you describe your current research?

I'm currently working on a shorter piece relating James's "The Will to Believe" to contemporary psychological work on "response modulation," but my main project is one that revisits the "two pragmatisms" narrative—a story in which, I believe, James has consistently gotten the short end of the stick. James was often generous in his praise, especially toward Peirce, whose faltering career he went out of his way to promote. He thus had a way of pulling his punches—if he threw them at all—when it came to criticisms of his old friend. Peirce, by contrast, was far less restrained in his critiques of James. That dynamic has helped fuel the common view that their differences stemmed from James's *misunderstanding* of Peirce, whereas I think a case can be made that in many crucial respects James understood Peirce all too well.



This pattern has played out in much of the secondary literature over the past century. Jamesians typically emphasize the areas of agreement and the lines of influence from Peirce, while downplaying

the extent to which James's views were often critical of (rather than merely different from) core Peircean positions. Peirceans, for their part, have been more than willing to advance a narrative in which Peirce represents the rigorous, rational face of pragmatism, while James is cast as the sentimentalist—distorting the tradition to satisfy a personal need for religious belief.

This portrayal of James as the soft-hearted (if not soft-headed) member of the pair is, I think, deeply unfair. James's views may indeed be more "subjectivist" than Peirce's—but that's not because he imported religion into an otherwise pure system. Rather, it's because he was clearer about the implications of ideas they both shared in the 1870s, implications that Peirce was, I would argue, often in denial about.

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

While James has been my primary research interest for a while now, I still spend a good deal of time working on topics in what most of the profession would consider analytic philosophy of language and mind. That said, I'd describe my approach to those topics as broadly "pragmatist," and an increasing focus on what has come to be called "conceptual engineering" has probably made that easier to see.

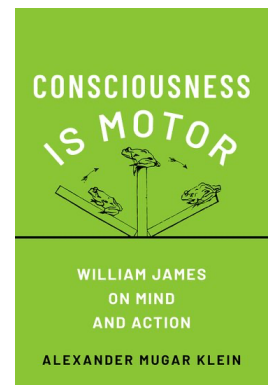


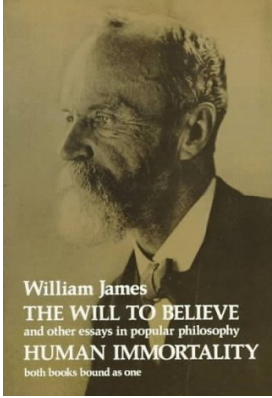
Outside of philosophy, my main interest has always been film. I fell in love with New York's repertory cinemas as an undergraduate, and since returning to Canada in 1999, the focal point of my cultural calendar has been the Toronto Film Festival. Each year, I try to see around 25 films there, typically favoring directors unlikely to receive a major North American release—though I make exceptions for personal favorites like David Cronenberg and Park Chan-wook. Given that philosophy and film have long been my two central passions, it's always been a bit of a mystery to me why the philosophy of film leaves me so cold. In many ways, though, I'm glad it does—much as I love my job, I'd hate for my time in the cinema to start feeling like work.

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

I'll begin with something new, then turn to a classic.

A recent work I'd strongly recommend is Alexander Klein's *Consciousness Is Motor: William James on Mind and Action*. James was undoubtedly a brilliant introspective psychologist, but his manifest gifts in that area has often led scholars to overlook the depth of his engagement with empirical research—so much so that some have even claimed he had little interest in empirical psychology at all. Klein's book is a welcome corrective. It offers an engaging and informative tour of 19th-century empirical psychology and highlights James's important contributions to some of its central debates. Further, it makes a compelling case that contemporary philosophers working on the so-called "hard problem" of consciousness may have to rethink some of their fundamental assumptions if James is right.





As for a classic, though it's a tough call, I'd still choose James's "The Sentiment of Rationality" (originally titled "The Psychology of Philosophizing"). First published in *Mind* in 1879, it's one of James's earliest philosophical essays, and it's striking how clearly his distinctive philosophical voice is already present. "The Will to Believe" (1896) tends to get more attention, and while I love that paper too, its title and emphasis on religious belief can distract from the broader message it shares with "The Sentiment of Rationality". What's more the paper appeared less than two years after Peirce's "The Fixation of Belief" (1877), and these early papers really capture the relation between the two philosopher's positions in the way that their later work tends to obscure.

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