

“I AM AN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER”

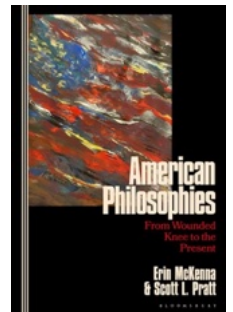
—An Interview Series with John Capps—



SCOTT PRATT is Professor and Department Head of Philosophy at the University of Oregon. A former President of SAAP, he is the author (with Erin McKenna) of *American Philosophies from Wounded Knee to the Present* (2015/2025), *Logic: Inquiry, Argument and Order* (2010) and *Native Pragmatism* (2002), as well as several edited volumes and over 50 articles and books chapters. He is also a past recipient of SAAP’s Joseph L. Blau Prize and its Inter-American Philosophy Award.

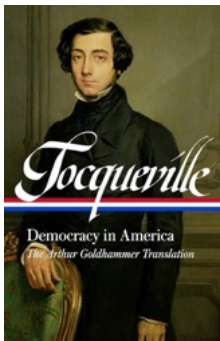
What does American philosophy mean to you?

Claiming to be an American, philosopher or otherwise, is a troubling label in these troubled times—though it has always marked something unstable, obscure, dangerous, and promising. America might seem a poor place to imagine philosophy at all. Alexis de Tocqueville declared, “I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States.” Americans, he said, “have no philosophical school of their own.” For many, philosophy is a European inheritance that involves asking deep questions about the nature of reality, truth, knowledge, beauty, goodness and so on. Failure to ask appropriately deep, appropriately abstract questions is to fail to do philosophy at all.



Still, Tocqueville concludes “without ever having taken the trouble to define the rules of a philosophical method, [the Americans] are in possession of one, common to the whole people.” And that method begins in resistance to the traditions of the “civilized” world:

To evade the bondage of system and habit, of family maxims, class opinions, and, in some degree, of national prejudices; to accept tradition only as a means of information, and existing facts only as a lesson used in doing otherwise, and doing better; to seek the reason of things for one’s self, and in one’s self alone; to tend to results without being bound to means, and to aim at the substance through the form.

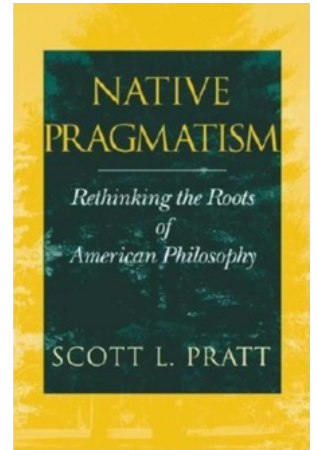


Tocqueville was onto something: that American philosophy was concerned with seeking results by disrupting established ways of thinking.

American philosophy, as I understand it, is a kind of inquiry that responds to disruptions of the ideas and methods of looking at the world that people rely on. This American conception of philosophy even provides a way to reconceptualize the European tradition it broke from. ‘Philosophical inquiry into ideas that frame experience in a culture’ could easily describe the work of European philosophers, often in culturally approved ways. From the European philosophical perspective, the western hemisphere was empty; discovering people there, with languages, land, resources, and diverse cultures was a profound disruption, calling for a new

understanding. Some of those who faced the disruption of their worldview struggled to explain the Americas and its peoples using the concepts they inherited from their past. Others sought answers by actively engaging the new world and the new people they found—or who often found them.

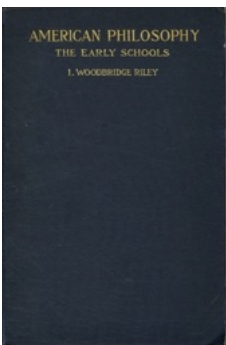
Indigenous Americans, as well as many European immigrants and their descendants, developed new ways of thinking—the sort Tocqueville identified—that resisted the received ways of thinking and sought to find new concepts and ways of living. Pragmatism, I argued in *Native Pragmatism* (2002), developed in this strand of thought, but so did distinctive forms of feminist philosophy and philosophical idealism, African and Asian American philosophies, Latinx philosophy and Indigenous North American philosophies. Erin McKenna and I have written a history of this strand in our book *American Philosophies from Wounded Knee to the Present* (second edition, 2025). We call this tradition “American philosophies of resistance:” that is, philosophical responses to the disruption of on-going colonization, racism and the insistent diversity of American communities. These philosophies are characterized by criticism of ways and ideas meant to eliminate differences and maintain hierarchies, and are committed to shared futures that respect diverse agents (individuals and communities, humans and otherwise), and are pluralistic, placed, and fallible.



The label “American” then is in part a geographic term. It names a shared experience of co-existence, conflict, oppression, and sometimes liberation. It names a history that is told in different ways with different goals: to inform the present and set the stage for what comes next. And it also names a particular vision of the future: placed, plural, bounded, always in the process of interpreting the past and transforming the present toward a hopeful future.

How did you become an American philosopher?

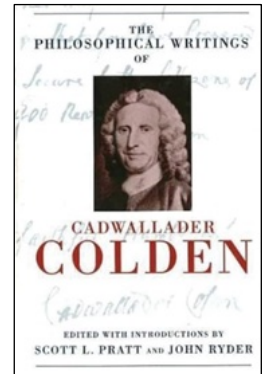
It wasn’t until late in my graduate study at the University of Minnesota that I recognized what I was doing as American philosophy. I had already started writing my dissertation on John Dewey and Bertrand Russell. Reading “around” Dewey (since my department offered no courses in pragmatism or any other “American” philosophy) led me to read James and Peirce. The latter, of course, was at least recognized by the faculty of my analytic program, while Dewey and James were hardly considered philosophers. I stuck to my topic nevertheless with the help of two supportive philosophers, Douglas Lewis and Naomi Scheman, and two faculty in the College of Education, Rob Ortman, and B. Jeannie Lum. I was sure by this point that I was a pragmatist, but I would not have called myself “American” in the relevant sense.



My “American turn” came on a road trip to the Central Division meeting of the APA, when a graduate colleague asked if I thought that pragmatism was somehow influenced by American Indians. He was from New York and had read historians who argued for that the Haudenosaunee people (the Iroquois Confederacy) had influenced the founding of the US as a constitutional republic. I said that I had no idea, but a week or so later while still “reading around,” I happened on I. Woodbridge Riley’s 1907 *American Philosophy: The Early Schools* (one of the first histories of American philosophy). The early schools included expected thinkers like Jonathan Edwards, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, along with others less expected including Ethan Allen (not a furniture maker, but a revolutionary war leader and cofounder of Vermont), Joseph Priestly (the English chemist who “discovered” oxygen and emigrated to

Pennsylvania in the 1790s), and Benjamin Rush (a physician who advocated for the use of vaccines by the Revolutionary Army).

In the midst of Riley's survey of the famous and forgotten, he discussed Cadwallader Colden (1688-1776), an Irish-born physician who emigrated to Philadelphia, gave up medicine and became a surveyor for the province of New York. He eventually became Lieutenant-Governor of the province. What struck me about Colden was the claim that he lived with the Haudenosaunee and had been adopted by one of their nations, the Mohawks. After ten years on the border living with Indigenous people, he published the first English-language history of the Iroquois Confederacy and produced philosophical works that (to Riley and others) seemed incompatible with the dominant philosophical views he would have inherited from his homeland and his study at Edinburgh. Here, it seems to me, was a point of contact that had the potential to answer my colleague's question.



Was pragmatism, what John Smith called "indigenous American philosophy," in fact Indigenous philosophy in its roots? Could distinctive philosophies emerge across deep cultural divides in the context of the lived experience of the American borderlands? If it could, then the American tradition I studied was far richer than accounts of classical pragmatism would suggest. Colden's experience living on the border of English and Indigenous America could not have been unique. He rethought inherited ideas and transformed them and applied them in his work surveying lands, negotiating treaties, and organizing the border between the English province and the nations that surrounded it. What was important to me in Colden's story was not the final success of his ideas (they incorporated Indigenous ideas but did not stop the colonization of Indigenous lands and displacement of Indigenous people) but the realization that philosophy happens somewhere in lived experience and, in the context of differences between people and their ways of thinking, new ideas and ways of thinking, for better or worse, emerge. My work as an American philosopher has aimed to study the emergence of philosophical method and ideas in North America framed by the experience of its diverse peoples.

How would you describe your current research?

I came to study Josiah Royce thanks to the insistence of a student, J. Brent Crouch, who, with the encouragement of his Master's thesis adviser, John J. McDermott, had become interested in Royce's work, especially his logic (enticingly and mysteriously named "System Sigma"). I was up for the challenge. While Royce's social theory (or at least his application of it) was and remains problematic, his conception of logic as the science of order (any order, e.g. formal, literary, social, scientific) was continuous with his idea of how communities come to be, change and develop. Key to the process of ordering is a conception of agency (human, collective, non-human), the concept of betweenness and its particular implications for how things are ordered. I came to understand that logic as principles of ordering (formal and otherwise) is foundational to any social order or process.

The American philosophies of resistance that I study, where distinctive ideas and methods emerge at the border between different communities, can be understood as processes of ordering. Armed with logic as a critical tool, it is possible to look at processes like colonization to see the ways that logic enables it. With colleagues in Europe and the US, I am looking at the history of "natural logic," a concept that developed in the 13th century and became crucial to understanding what it is to be human. The implications of natural logic for education, establishing and maintaining hierarchies, and physically ordering people and space were, in my view,

instrumental in carrying out the work of settler colonialism beginning in the 16th century and in understanding the order of societies and institutions to the present day.

One project, with Julie Brumberg-Chaumont (CNRS, France) develops a history of natural logic. Another coauthored project, with Jerry Rosiek (University of Oregon), develops the implications of logic as the science of order for the criticism of social science research methods. My third project, a monograph with the working title *Absolute Pragmatism*, develops Royce's idea that pragmatism in its received form is limited in its critical potential and can be strengthened by recognizing both the structures necessary for agency (principles of order) and the necessity of imagining and evaluating possible futures.

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

Bertrand Russell may have said that philosophy bakes no bread—but I do, in addition to kayaking the beautiful lakes and streams of Oregon. I also spend more time than I should reading in the history of philosophy, looking for overlooked work in the American philosophical tradition, and trying to improve my French so that I can have access to untranslated philosophical works of the 19th century that influenced American philosophy (not to mention the work of my French colleagues).

I've also become convinced (with Dewey) that Shelley was right when he said that "moral science only arranges the elements that poetry has created." We live in a time when philosophers need to have a "moral science," a philosophy that leads to values that can organize our response to the present world and toward a hopeful future. Poetry, visual arts, music are part of the process of developing values that inform possible futures. So I also read (and often fail to understand) poetry and attend what concerts I can, especially jazz and classical. I also enjoy travel with my wife, sometimes for the sake of philosophy sometimes for fun, and to see our two sons (both academics), their families and especially our six grandsons.

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

Perhaps it's too much self-promotion to suggest that people read *American Philosophies from Wounded Knee to the Present*...but I'm going to do it anyway! While it is not the only story of American philosophy, it is one that retells the tradition in a way that reflects its richness and diversity and reminds its readers that philosophy has a role to play in the present world.

Self-promotion aside, the books that are at the center of my philosophical reflections are Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*; W. E. B. Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* and *Darkwater*; Vine Deloria, Jr.'s *We Talk, You Listen* and *God is Red*; and Royce's *The Principles of Logic* and *The Problem of Christianity*.

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