

PHIL 320: Contemporary Pragmatism

Whitman College – Fall 2017

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Tue. & Fri. 1-2:30

Course Description

In everyday life, a “pragmatist” is someone who is concerned only with figuring out what will actually work to bring about practical outcomes, rather than getting hung up on abstract theories. In philosophy, a “pragmatist” is someone who is concerned only with figuring out what will actually work to bring about practical outcomes, rather than getting hung up on abstract theories. And since many if not all of the questions and debates that have been the focus of Western philosophy don’t seem to be relevant at all for the achievement of practical outcomes, a pragmatist is inclined to reject those questions and debates as mere word-play. Simply put, the pragmatist says that since it wouldn’t *make* a difference which side of those debates we accept, there *is* no difference between them – and so we shouldn’t bother engaging in the debate to begin with.

Although one can find elements of pragmatism in a wide variety of philosophers throughout the Western tradition, pragmatism as a self-conscious approach to philosophy originated in the late 19th century in America, most famously and influentially in the work of C.S. Peirce, William James, and John Dewey. It flourished through the first few decades of the 20th century, and then was largely eclipsed by the rise of logical positivism, which dominated English-language philosophy for the middle part of the century.

But pragmatism never fully went away, and when criticisms of logical positivism began to mount in the 1950s, some of the most prominent critics drew (very selectively) on elements of pragmatism. A full-blown revival began in the 1970s, primarily through the work of Richard Rorty. His 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* was a watershed, putting pragmatism squarely back on the map of contemporary philosophy. In later work, Rorty developed his particular version of pragmatism more fully, while other philosophers developed their own versions of pragmatism – some very different from Rorty’s, but all in one way or another trying to capture the driving spirit of pragmatism (whether or not they accept the label).

Our focus in this course will be on Rorty, covering a wide range of topics that he has addressed across the span of his mature career. But, we will also take some time near the beginning to examine some of Rorty’s immediate predecessors and influences, in order to be able to identify the innovations that are truly his own – and perhaps, from that, to be able to see other directions that could have been taken from those same starting points. And then in the last part of the semester, we will take some time to examine some competing conceptions of pragmatism currently on the philosophical scene.

Throughout the semester (except for the very last day), we will work exclusively *within* a broadly pragmatist framework. That is because our core goal in this course is to come to understand the nature, impact, and appeal of pragmatism on its *own* terms. That doesn’t mean that you will have to accept the pragmatist’s framework, just that you’ll need to make sure that your challenges and counter-arguments are developed in ways that ultimately advance that core goal, and enable you and the group as a whole to continue working toward it.

Course Materials

There are no books that you need to buy for the course. Instead, the bulk of the readings will be available on the course CLEo site, posted as “Resources.” I strongly recommend that you be able to mark them up and have them available in class. If you choose to print them out, I strongly encourage you to print on both sides of the paper, if possible.

You will also need to read George Orwell’s novel *1984* by the end of October. And if you’ve read it before, you should read it again: the details will be important for our discussions. It’s up to you to decide whether to buy a copy or to borrow one from a library. Any edition will be fine.

If you have the means and interest to collect outstanding and important philosophy books, then you may wish to purchase some or all of the books from which we’re reading excerpts – they contain much more than we’ll be able to read, and are well worth owning. If you’d like more specific recommendations, just talk with me.

A Note on Technology

You are welcome to use a laptop, tablet, or smart-phone in class, in order to access the readings and/or to take notes. But you should *never, ever, EVER* use such a device for any other purpose during our meetings. It’s both disrespectful to the class as a whole, and distracting to those seated around you. I mean it!

Summary of Requirements and Grading

Contributing to Class Discussions – 25% of your total grade

This course will be structured as a seminar, which relies on the active and collaborative engagement of everyone in the room. Students should not just be prepared if called on, or make a point of saying one thing each meeting, as you might in a large lower-level course. Rather, you should consider yourselves jointly responsible for how productive our class meetings are, each and every day. I’ll serve as the moderator of the discussion, and will sometimes shape the agenda – but you should also make sure to develop your *own* sense of the key passages, ideas, arguments, links, questions, and objections as you work through the readings.

In our conversations, you should address and engage with your classmates, and not just me. You should also be willing to think out loud, to raise questions that might seem basic, to offer interpretations that might seem uncertain, to propose links that might seem tenuous, to make arguments that might seem sketchy, and otherwise to take intellectual risks. This is very difficult and provocative material, and our class will only succeed to the extent that we’re willing to struggle through and with it together.

Response Papers – 50% of your total grade

As we are working through this material, it is important for you to reflect on the ideas presented and to develop your own thoughts in response. About every two weeks (as indicated on the schedule below), you will articulate and support your views on the material in a brief essay of around 1000-1200 words. There are only two requirements:

- (1) Each essay must make direct contact with at least one significant idea or passage from at least one of the readings that we discussed in class since the previous essay. It’s fine for you to bring in

earlier readings as well, but make sure that each essay is largely a response to the new material.

- (2) Each essay must develop a unified perspective in response to the material. It shouldn't simply summarize one of the readings nor present a series of disconnected reactions, but rather should defend a specific conclusion or work out the implications of a core idea. The exact topic is entirely up to you, and each essay can engage in any combination of interpretation, application, and/or evaluation of the text(s). You are welcome to use one essay to follow-up on a question or idea from a previous essay, and/or you are welcome to advance entirely different or even incompatible views across your essays. In short, you should use the essays in whatever ways you think will be most productive for you.

Your essays should be typed in Times New Roman 12-point font, with one-inch margins all around. The body of the essay should be double-spaced, with no extra spacing between paragraphs.

Essays should be submitted to your "Drop Box" on the CLEo site, in Microsoft Word format. I will then insert my feedback into the files and upload them back to your Drop Box.

I've set the deadline for the essays as 4:00 on Fridays, but will be happy to provide extensions to the end of the weekend for anyone who wants one. You can ask for your deadline to be pushed back for all of the essays, or can ask for an extension just on a particular essay as needed. Longer extensions will be granted only in unusual circumstances. To arrange for an extension, you should e-mail me as far in advance as you can. Accommodations will be made after the fact only in cases of unforeseeable emergency.

Term Paper — 25% of your total grade

At the end of the semester, you will submit a full-length essay (about 4000 words) engaging in depth with any of the issues, views, and/or authors that particularly interests you. Again, you will be free to undertake any combination of interpretation, application, and/or evaluation. You are welcome, though not required, to build your term paper from one or more of your response papers. So, you might want to keep that in mind as you're composing those shorter pieces throughout the semester.

Your project will need to maintain a significant foundation in the assigned readings, and depending on the topic, you may also choose or need to engage with material beyond them. That could include interpretation, further development, support, and/or critique of assigned readings, and/or it could include separate attempts to address issues that come out of our assigned readings. Regardless, the ultimate goal will be for you to develop your *own* views, and not just to report others'; both the assigned readings and any additional material that you work with should be used as a resource to help facilitate and deepen that process.

More details about the expectations for the term papers will be distributed later in the semester.

Support for Students with Disabilities

If you are a student with a disability who might need accommodations in this course, please meet with Antonia Keithahn in the Academic Resources Center for assistance in developing a plan to address your academic needs. All information about disabilities is considered private, and so if I receive notification that you are eligible to receive an accommodation due to a verified disability, I will provide it in as discreet a manner as possible.

Academic Honesty

All of the work that you submit in this course must be entirely your own. Of course, you can seek help in a variety of ways as you're working on the papers. So it is **permitted** (and even encouraged!) for you: to consult additional readings, to search for material on the internet, to discuss your ideas with other students, to exchange notes with other students, and to read and to discuss drafts of each other's papers. But it is **not permitted** for you to use someone else's words or specific ideas in your written work without providing a proper citation to the source. Even if it's an accident, it's still plagiarism! You have a responsibility to keep track of the origins of the words and ideas in your work, and to include citations to them.

Plagiarism will *not* be tolerated in any form. You have signed a statement indicating that you understand and will abide by the College policy on plagiarism. **Any student caught plagiarizing will automatically fail the course, and may be expelled from the College.** For more details about the College's policies and procedures, see the Student Handbook.

If you have *any* questions about what would or wouldn't be plagiarism in this context, please just talk with me about it *in advance*.

Tentative Schedule of Topics and Assignments

1. Preview of Rorty

Wed. Aug. 30 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), introduction
Rorty, "Philosophy as a Transitional Genre" (2004)

Mon. Sep. 4 Rorty, "Truth without Correspondence to Reality" (1994)
Rorty, "A World without Substances or Essences" (1994), through p. 52
Rorty, "Ethics without Principles" (1994), through p. 83

2. Some Context and Building Blocks

Wed. Sep. 6 Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 2
Hempel, "The Empiricist Criterion of Meaning" (1950), excerpt

Mon. Sep. 11 Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" (1956), §§1-7, 10-18
optional, as needed: Brandom's study-guide to EPM

Wed. Sep. 13 Sellars, "Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind," §§28-37, 19, 38
optional, as needed: Brandom's study-guide to EPM

* **Fri. Sep. 15 @ 4:00** – *response paper due*

Mon. Sep. 18 Quine, "Two Dogmas of Empiricism" (1951)
Quine, "Ontological Relativity" (1969), excerpts

Wed. Sep. 20 Davidson, "Belief and the Basis of Meaning" (1974)
Davidson, "A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs" (1986)

Mon. Sep. 25 Davidson, "On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme" (1974)

3. Back to Rorty, For Real This Time

Wed. Sep. 27 Rorty, "The World Well Lost" (1972)

* **Fri. Sep. 29 @ 4:00** – *response paper due*

Mon. Oct. 2 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979), ch. 3
optional, as needed: Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 5

Wed. Oct. 4 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 4 secs. 1-3

** consider reading 1984 over Fall Break! **

Mon. Oct. 9 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 4 secs. 4-5
Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 6

Wed. Oct. 11 Tartaglia, *Routledge Guidebook to Rorty*, ch. 9 sec. 1
Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 7 sec. 1 & ch. 8 secs. 1-2

* **Fri. Oct. 13 @ 4:00** – *response paper due*

** what a great weekend to start reading 1984! **

Mon. Oct. 16 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, ch. 8 secs. 3-5

Wed. Oct. 18 Rorty, "Pragmatism, Relativism, and Irrationalism" (1980)
Rorty, "Science as Solidarity" (1987)

** if you haven't started 1984 yet, you should get to it! **

Mon. Oct. 23 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989), introduction & ch. 1

Wed. Oct. 25 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 4

* **Fri. Oct. 27 @ 4:00** – *response paper due*

** okay, now you *really* need to read 1984! **

Mon. Oct. 30 Orwell, *1984* (entire)
Wed. Nov. 1 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 7 sec. 1 & ch. 8

Mon. Nov. 6 Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity*, ch. 9
Rorty, "Human Rights, Rationality, and Sentimentality" (1993)

Wed. Nov. 8 Rorty, "Feminism and Pragmatism" (1990)
Fraser, "From Irony to Prophecy to Politics" (1990)

* **Fri. Nov. 10 @ 4:00** – *response paper due*

** *meet with me this week to talk about your term-paper ideas*

4. Pragmatism Beyond Rorty

Mon. Nov. 13 Conant, "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth" (2000), secs. I-VI *including notes*

Wed. Nov. 15 Conant, "Freedom, Cruelty, and Truth," secs. VII-IX *including notes optional, if interested*: Rorty, "Response to James Conant" (2000)

THANKSGIVING BREAK

Mon. Nov. 27 Elshtain, "Don't Be Cruel: Reflections on Rortyan Liberalism" (2003)

Wed. Nov. 29 Price, "Truth as Convenient Friction" (2003)

* **Fri. Dec. 1 @ 4:00** – *term-paper sketch and bibliography due*

Mon. Dec. 4 term-paper workshop

Wed. Dec. 6 Rorty, "Pragmatism as Anti-authoritarianism" (2009)
Sosa, "Serious Philosophy and Freedom of the Spirit" (1987)

** **FRI. DEC. 15 @ 4:00** – **TERM PAPER DUE**