

STH TT 925: Special Topics in Philosophy: Contemporary Pragmatism
GRS PH 620/CAS PH 420: Special Topics: Contemporary Pragmatism
Spring 2012
Syllabus

Instructor:
Robert Neville
Office: STH 334
Office Hours: Tues. 8:30-9:30
Wed: 10-11

Tuesdays: 2-5
CAS 208

The classical pragmatism of Charles Peirce, William James, and John Dewey was a powerful philosophic movement in the last part of the 19th century and the first part of the 20th, dominating the American philosophic scene along with the idealism of Josiah Royce and William Ernest Hocking. In the middle of the 20th century, logical positivism from Germany and Austria, analytic philosophy from Britain, and Continental philosophy from Western Europe displaced the classical pragmatic heritage. In the last decades of the 20th century, however, pragmatism surged back with new developments, all of which can be called “contemporary pragmatism” in the early part of the 21st century. This seminar shall study four such developments.

The first is primarily a critique of analytic philosophy in the name of pragmatism. The pivotal book here was Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, along with his collection of essays, *Consequences of Pragmatism*. We shall read Rorty and also Warren Frisina’s analysis of the problem in analytic philosophy that pragmatism (with help from process philosophy and Confucianism) can help resolve.

The second is an epistemological development of pragmatism, most elaborate in the work of Robert Brandom who was a student of Rorty and also Wilfrid Sellars. We shall read Brandom who tries to reconnect pragmatism with analytic philosophy.

The third is an ethical or social theory extension of pragmatism that has been particularly important among African-American thinkers, of whom we shall read two, Cornell West and Victor Anderson. Combining an interest in both social theory and epistemology, Jeffrey Stout advances important pragmatic themes, and we shall read his *Democracy and Tradition*.

The fourth development is metaphysical or systematic pragmatism. As analytic and Continental philosophies were displacing pragmatism in many academic philosophy departments, process philosophy inspired by Alfred North Whitehead joined interests with pragmatism in sponsoring the continued development of systematic American philosophy through such instruments as the Metaphysical Society of America and *The Review of Metaphysics*. Two of Whitehead’s graduate students, Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, edited the papers of Charles Sanders Peirce and kept systematic philosophy alive until the end of the 20th century, with the strong help of Justus Buchler and his students. We shall read some of the metaphysical pragmatism of the instructor (Robert

Neville) who was a student of Weiss and Sellars and is a friend of most of the others mentioned here.

This course is a doctoral seminar in the School of Theology and the Philosophy Department which also welcomes undergraduate philosophers who keep up with the reading and discussion, as well as non-credit participants who also keep up with the reading and discussion.

Requirements: All students are required to do the reading and participate in the discussion. All are also required to turn in a term paper of about 20 pages, in proper format; the topics of the term papers should be approved by the instructor by April 1, and should demonstrate detailed knowledge of at least one of the authors read and contain a critical or creative contribution. In addition, graduate students are required to make 15 minute seminar presentations on a schedule that will be worked out in class. Undergraduates and visitors are welcome to make seminar presentations but that is not required of them. The purpose of the seminar presentations is to give a brief exposition of the reading for the day that focuses some critical questions for class discussion. The seminar presentations should be viewed as exercises in teaching. Please write out the presentations and bring enough copies to class for people to follow along.

Students with Disabilities—Any students in this course who have a disability that might prevent them from fully demonstrating their abilities should meet with the instructor as soon as possible to initiate disability verification and discuss accommodations that might be necessary to ensure your full participation in the successful completion of course requirements.

The STH Academic Code of Conduct may be found on the STH website at www.bu.edu/sth/academic-conduct. All students are required to familiarize themselves with this code, its definitions of misconduct, and its sanctions. Students should especially familiarize themselves with the section on plagiarism.

Please acquire the following books, which have been ordered at Barnes and Noble; some might be available in digital format.

Anderson, Victor, *Pragmatic Theology* (SUNY Press)
Brandom, Robert, *Between Saying and Doing* (Oxford UP)
Frisina, Warren, *Unity of Knowledge and Action* (SUNY Press)
Neville, Robert, *Highroad around Modernism* (SUNY Press)
Neville, Robert, *Normative Cultures* (SUNY Press)
Rorty, Richard, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton UP)
Rorty, Richard, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (UCP/Minnesota UP)
Stout, Jeffrey, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton UP)
West, Cornel, *American Evasion of Philosophy* (UCP/Wisconsin UP)

Please prepare the readings according to the following schedule.

- 1/17 Introduction, no reading
- 1/24 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, chapters 1-4.
- 1/31 Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, chapters 5-8.
- 2/7 Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism*, chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 9, 12.
- 2/14 Frisina, *The Unity of Knowledge and Action; Toward a Nonrepresentational Theory of Knowledge*, entire.
- 2/21 Monday class schedule, no class
- 2/28 Brandom, *Between Saying & Doing: Towards an Analytic Pragmatism*, chapters 1-4, 6, and Afterword.
- 3/6 West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism*, entire.
- 3/13 Spring break.
- 3/20 Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology*, entire
- 3/27 Stout, *Democracy & Tradition*, Introduction, chapters 1-6.
- 4/3 Stout, *Democracy & Tradition*, chapters 7-12, Conclusion.
- 4/10 Neville, *Highroad around Modernism*, Introduction, chapters 1-5.
- 4/17 Neville, *Highroad around Modernism*, chapters 6, 7, 9, 12.
- 4/24 Neville, *Normative Cultures*, chapters 1-4.
- 5/1 Neville, *Normative Cultures*, chapters 5-8. TERM PAPER DUE.