

## Phil 176/276G: Historical Philosophers—American Philosophy

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Overview: Is there a distinctively American philosophy? There are several reasons for pessimism on this score. One reason is the diversity of the nation's population and the histories and ideas of those who have made it what it is. Another is the (supposedly) Protestant English (or Deist) origin of America's founding political philosophy insofar as that philosophy is to be found in our common laws and constitution. Some read those documents and say that belief in the [natural rights](#) of all men to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness (family, friends and property) cannot be the philosophy of the founders given its incompatibility with the racial slavery they practiced. Some say that [Capitalism](#) is distinctively American. Some say [Social Darwinism](#). And some name [Pragmatism](#). But these philosophies also have fairly obvious British origins.<sup>1</sup>

Our aim in this course is to examine these three bodies of thought—(i) the natural rights philosophy articulated in America's founding documents, (ii) the Capitalism or Social Darwinism that accompanied the economic ascendancy of the U.S. in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and (iii) the pragmatic reaction to both Natural Rights philosophy and Social Darwinism framed by Pierce, James and Dewey. The tentative hypothesis we will test this quarter can be traced to Dewey: Pragmatism is our best hope of rescuing our (more or less shared) ideals of liberal democracy from Darwin's destruction of Locke's theory of natural rights. "The weaker our faith in Nature, in its laws and rights and its benevolent intentions for human welfare, the more urgent is the need for a faith based on ideas that are now intellectually credible and that are consonant with present economic conditions, which will inspire and direct action with something of the ardor once attached to things religious" (Dewey, 1939, 164-5)

**Requirements:** (1) Two 5-6-page papers worth 33% of your grade each. (2) One final exam worth 33% of your grade. Points may also be awarded for attendance and participation or deducted for the absence of such. Graduate students must also attend an additional section (yet to be scheduled) and e-mail comments on assigned readings to all the members of the section prior to each meeting.

**Do not plagiarize.** If you use something from the web and do not cite it, that is plagiarism. And if you plagiarize, you **will fail** the class and you may also be expelled from the university.

### 1. Natural Rights Ideology

(1) Locke, J., *Two Treatises of Government*, 3rd Edition, P. Laslett (ed.), Cambridge:

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<sup>1</sup> The roles of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer in the genesis of Social Darwinism are obvious. The role of the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain in the formation of pragmatism is less well known, but it is arguably greater than the role John Locke played in the articulation of America's founding philosophy.

Cambridge University Press (1689/1988).

Recommended:

Algernon Sidney, *The Discourses Concerning Government*  
Joseph Addison, *Cato: A Tragedy*

## 2. Revolutionary Ideology

(2) Thomas Jefferson: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/jefferson/>

Rough Draft of the Declaration

<https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/declara/ruffdrft.html>

Declaration of Independence

<http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/documents/1776-1785/the-final-text-of-the-declaration-of-independence-july-4-1776.php>

Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia\\_Statute\\_for\\_Religious\\_Freedom](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_Statute_for_Religious_Freedom)

<https://blog.oup.com/2014/03/thomas-jeffersons-statute-for-religious-freedom/>

**Paper 1 Assigned: 4/24/17**

## 3. The Connection Between Enlightenment Philosophy and Revolutionary Ideology

(3) J.P. Greene, “An Uneasy Connection: An Analysis of the Preconditions of the American Revolution,” in S.G. Kurtz and J.H. Hutson (eds.), *Essays on the American Revolution*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press (1973), pp. 32-80.

(4) T. H. Breen, “Ideology and Nationalism on the Eve of the American Revolution: Revisions Once More in Need of Revising,” *The Journal of American History* (June 1997), pp. 13-39.

(5) P.H. Wood, “‘Liberty is Sweet’: African-American Freedom Struggles in the Years before White Independence,” in A.F. Young (ed.), *Beyond the American Revolution: Explorations in the History of American Radicalism*, Dekalb: Northern Illinois UP (1993), pp. 149-84.

Recommended: R.D. Brown, *Self-Evident Truths*, Yale UP (2017), chapter 7.

#### **4. The Epistemology of America's Founding Ideology: The Self-Evidence of God-given Rights.**

(6) Morton White, *The Philosophy of the American Revolution*, New York: Oxford UP (1978).

Recommended: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/moral-epistemology-a-priori/>

**Paper 1 Due: 5/8/17**

#### **5. Constitutional Ideology**

(7) Madison, Hamilton. Jay:

(7a) The Federalist Papers:

[http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject\\_menus/fed.asp](http://avalon.law.yale.edu/subject_menus/fed.asp)

(7b) The United States Constitution

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CONAN-REV-2016/pdf/GPO-CONAN-REV-2016-6.pdf>

<https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CONAN-REV-2016/pdf/GPO-CONAN-REV-2016-7.pdf>

Recommended analysis:

<https://www.congress.gov/constitution-annotated/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United\\_States\\_Bill\\_of\\_Rights](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_Bill_of_Rights)

Recommended Analysis:

C.A. Beard, *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, Mineola, NY: Dover (1913/2004), chapters I, VI & VII.

#### **7. Darwinian Skepticism about Natural Rights**

(8) T.H. Huxley, "On the Natural Inequality of Men" (1890), reprinted in T.H. Huxley, *Collected Essays, Volume 1: Results and Methods*, London: Macmillan & Co. (1893), pp. 290-335.

(9) J. Dewey, "The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy," *Popular Science Monthly* (July 1909).

(10) Oliver Wendell Holmes, "Natural Law," *Harvard Law Review* (1918); decision in *Buck v Bell* (1927).

Recommended: M.L. Dudziak, "Oliver Wendell Holmes as a Eugenic Reformer: Rhetoric in the Writing of Constitutional Law," 71 *Iowa Law Review* 833 (1986).

(11) William Graham Sumner, *What Social Classes Owe to Each Other*, New York: Harper and Brothers (1883).

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William\\_Graham\\_Sumner](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/William_Graham_Sumner)

Recommended: D. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press (1944), chapter 5.

### **Paper 2 Assigned: 5/22/17**

### **8. A Pragmatic Alternative**

(12) C.S. Peirce, "The Fixation of Belief," *Popular Science Monthly*, 12 (November 1877), pp. 1-15.

(13) Oliver Wendell Holmes, dissent in *Abrams v. The United States* (1919).

Recommended: B. Kaplan, "Encounters with O.W. Holmes, Jr.," 96 *Harvard Law Review* 1828 (June 1983).

(14) W. James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, New York, Longmans, Green and Co (1921).

Recommended: D. Hofstadter, *Social Darwinism in American Thought*, Boston, MA: Beacon Press (1944), chapter 6.

### **Paper 2 Due: 6/5/17**

(15) John Dewey, *Freedom and Culture*, New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons (1939).