

Nancy Stanlick

# American Philosophy

the basics

ROUTLEDGE



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# AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

## THE BASICS

What is it that makes American philosophy unique? *American Philosophy: The Basics* answers this question by tracing the history of American thought from early Calvinists to the New England Transcendentalists and from contract theory to contemporary African American philosophy. This lively and compelling book introduces readers to:

- some of the most important thinkers in American history including Edwards, Paine, Peirce, Kuhn, West, and many more
- developments in five key areas of thought: epistemology, metaphysics, religion and ethics, social philosophy, and political philosophy
- contributions of American women, African Americans, and Native Americans.

Featuring suggestions for further reading and assuming no prior knowledge of philosophy, this is an ideal first introduction for anyone studying or interested in the history of American thought.

**Nancy Stanlick** is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Assistant Dean at the College of Arts and Humanities, University of Central Florida, USA.

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## The Basics

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# AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

## THE BASICS

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For my professors who made it possible, and for my students who make it all worthwhile.





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## PREFACE

I wish to thank my students at the University of Central Florida who have over the years taken my course in American philosophy for their questions, comments, and interest. I also wish to thank my friend and mentor Bruce Silver for reading and commenting on several sections and chapters of this book and for offering advice and encouragement to me in many ways over many years. I am grateful to two of my advanced undergraduate students who helped me to compile information for Chapters 7 and 8. Stephen Oldham and Dominique Greene-Sanders took my American philosophy course and spent part of the summer of 2011 doing background research on Native American, African American, and American feminist philosophy. Ann Maukonen, my former student and current colleague, compiled much of the index and helped to prepare the glossary. I thank her more than she will ever know. Karen Jaggar offered to assist with index and glossary entries for Chapters 5 and 6, and to her I extend my heartfelt thanks for stepping in to help. Thanks to the Departments of Philosophy at the University of South Florida and the University of Central Florida for the education I received and the opportunity to educate others. And finally, thank you to my family who has put up with this absent-minded professor and provided encouragement that “it will be done soon” for the past two years.

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## INTRODUCTION

This book about American philosophy might be received by some as a bit short on philosophy. Some might claim that there is too little philosophy in it because many of the thinkers whose works I review are not really philosophers and their ideas are insufficiently philosophical. Perhaps their conception of philosophy, and especially their conception of American philosophy, is too narrow and restrictive.

A look at the history of Western philosophy takes us to times and places where who counts as a philosopher and what counts as philosophy evolves. Hesiod was an ancient Greek poet, but references to his *Theogony* regularly appear in books on Greek philosophy. It is possible that Plato would not recognize as philosophical some elements of Descartes' work and perhaps Benjamin Franklin looks non-philosophical to twentieth-century analytical philosophers. That someone might not be generally accepted as a philosopher by one group or tradition does not mean that the person's ideas have not influenced thought and action or that the person's ideas are not part of a system of thought leading to "Big Questions" that philosophers often ask.

Benjamin Franklin wrote on the **problem of evil** and the existence of God. Thomas Jefferson borrowed from Locke's **social contract theory** to write the Declaration of Independence. Emma Goldman's

**anarchist Marxism** led her to argue against **Puritanism** and patriotism. If Thomas Paine is discounted as a philosopher because his arguments are sometimes weak, then we must discount Descartes because some of his arguments are unconvincing and questionable. We accept Marx as a philosopher because of the form and content of his arguments about economic conditions and their effects on people and politics and we accept Robert Nozick as a philosopher for similar reasons. If philosophical ideas are the intellectual impetus for human understanding and action about reality, knowledge, and the good life, then the American thinkers and writers whose works and ideas are part of the content of this book are as much philosophers as Plato and Aristotle or René Descartes and John Locke.

From the **Great Awakening**'s Jonathan Edwards to the **Enlightenment**'s Thomas Paine, from the **Transcendentalist**'s Emerson to the **abolitionism** of Frederick Douglass, and from Emma Goldman's **anarchism** to the **philosophy of love** in Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights activism, and from the Native American's connection to nature to the American feminist's **ethics of care**, the thinkers represented here have changed the landscape of American thought in many ways. If the influence of ideas on human understanding and human action is a mark of philosophy, then American philosophers and speculative thinkers are as much at home in philosophy as Plato or Descartes, and they deserve to be called philosophers.

What is American philosophy? To answer this question it is necessary to know something about philosophy and then to proceed to what is distinct, unique, and important about *American* philosophy. There are many different branches of philosophy and types of philosophical inquiry. American philosophy deals with all of them.

"Philosophy" may be variously described, but one may begin by thinking of it as the act of wondering. If that is vague, perhaps defining philosophy by describing some of the subjects about which philosophers write and speak will be sufficient. Philosophers study **epistemology, logic, metaphysics, ethics, philosophy of religion, social philosophy, and political philosophy**, among other subjects. Describing some of the branches of philosophical inquiry helps a bit in getting a grasp of what philosophers do and what philosophy is all about.

In the Western tradition, philosophy is a way of thinking about ideas that is usually characterized by reasoned inquiry into the nature and value of **arguments** and conclusions concerning issues in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics, together with questions and analyses of arguments about the existence of God, the aims of science, and the legitimization of political systems. Philosophy may be defined as a system and process of creating and analyzing arguments and positions about these issues. Philosophers engage in analysis of ideas, concepts, principles, and problems to try to understand the nature of things. They do this through arguments. No matter what the position or idea, to be engaged in philosophical inquiry is to argue for claims, to provide reasons and justifications to believe that claims are true, not simply assert them as “true” or as mere facts.

All areas of human inquiry deal in some way with arguments, so it is important also to note that philosophy is certainly different from the sciences and from technical fields even though its subject matter may be in part shared with other disciplines. Physicists often deal with questions about the nature of reality, but the way in which they go about answering them is much different from what is usually done in philosophy. Where a physicist will use the scientific method and quantify data, philosophers often seek qualitative analysis of ideas and arguments to formulate answers to questions about the reason for being and the meaning of existence. Where the lawyer seeks to establish grounds for determining whether a defendant is guilty of a crime, the philosopher may instead be more concerned with the conditions of moral and legal responsibility, whether a person acts freely at all, and what it means and implies to talk about freedom and responsibility.

## BRANCHES OF PHILOSOPHY

Epistemology is the theory of knowledge. **Philosophy of science** in this book is combined with epistemology because science and its methods are connected to questions of the type, applicability, reliability, and quality of knowledge claims. Among major questions or problems in epistemology are the distinction between knowledge and belief, the purposes of inquiry, whether there are **innate ideas** or whether all ideas arise through experience, whether **skepticism** is warranted and whether there are truths that can be known with absolute certainty, and which method of obtaining knowledge is



most efficient and reliable. American philosophers tend to wonder what we can do with epistemological concepts and how knowledge of truth leads to productive results.

Metaphysics concerns issues such as the nature of reality or the fundamental question of what is real or existent. For an American **Pragmatist**, to determine what is meaningful and suitable as a subject of inquiry requires that we determine what difference thinking and theorizing about such things will make. On the whole, American philosophers tend toward finding the “cash value” or use of ideas. In other words, they wonder what concrete difference it would make if some position on the nature of reality is true.

Philosophy of religion is easily considered part of metaphysics or part of ethics. For our purposes, philosophy of religion sometimes appears in chapters combined with metaphysics and at other times combined with ethics, depending on the chapter’s focus and content. Questions from philosophy of religion are common in American thought and have implications beyond questions concerning God and religion and move into ethical, social, and political life. It is therefore useful and productive for understanding many aspects of American philosophy to consider the impact and effects of beliefs and claims about God, religion, and theology on the development of American thought. Issues arising in philosophy of religion range from arguments for the existence of God to attempts to solve the problem of evil, and from questions about the nature of religious belief to the role of ritual in religious practice. In American philosophy, concerns about religion often turn toward the effects of belief on individual people or on a community. American philosophers tend to use religion for various practical purposes to further other philosophical ends or goals, or they provide justifications or criticisms of it with specific attention to the ways in which religious belief or its absence affects people’s lives and happiness.

Ethics, a branch of philosophy concerned with the good, the right, happiness, duty, and human character, has affinities to all the other branches of philosophy. Some of the moral views in American thought to which attention is directed in this book are the concepts of human nature, moral arguments against slavery and oppression, conceptions of the nature of human happiness and the goal of human life, and the distinctions and differences between types of ethical theories and the ways in which they affect action.

Social and political philosophy are distinct, but in this book they appear together as subsections of relevant chapters. This is the case because American social and political thought are not easily separable. From the American revolutionaries all the way to contemporary Pragmatists, Native American and African American philosophers, issues of rights, justice, and equality take center stage. It is not always the case that the issues take center stage in the same way, or with the same reasoning, or even with the same consequences, but there is always a place for social thought in American philosophy. Discussion and argument concerning the value, justification, power, and legitimacy of government occupy American philosophers and theorists. Whatever the issues in American political thought, American philosophers tend to focus on the practical, the useful, and a consideration of how answers to political questions will affect the ways in which human beings live their lives.

## AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

Rich white men, poor Southern former slaves, Christian women, a displaced British pamphleteer, a **Calvinist** preacher, university professors, Marxists and anarchists, **egoists** and communitarians, all grace the history of American thought. Their ideas make the American experience come alive. American philosophy and philosophers are distinct in the pursuit of the application of philosophy to lives played out on the American stage.

Most American philosophers concentrate on the concrete difference that will be made by our conceptions, arguments, and ideas in the lives of individual human beings and groups. This is not to say that American philosophers disparage or fail to appreciate understanding a concept or inquiring into a topic for intellectual satisfaction, but the tendency of American philosophers is still the practical, the useful, and the concrete. American philosophers tend to ask what we can *do* with theories, principles, and arguments.

## CONCLUSION AND PLAN OF THE BOOK

This book is intended as an overview of the history of American philosophy with emphasis on the themes of the practicality of

philosophical ideas, revolution and evolution (change and reform in American thought), and a critical and constructive eye on issues involving justice, rights, and equality. It is inevitable that in a book intended as an introduction to a broad topic there will be some issue or philosopher, some argument or thinker, who will be omitted. It may also be that an idea or thinker is included that some may think should have been left out. I have included some of the major figures and ideas in the development of American philosophy that are particularly relevant to the themes of this book. Given page restrictions and thematic boundaries, it is not possible to include everything or everyone. I have tried, however, to present a consistent view of the history of American philosophy. Part of the goal of this book is to explain what makes American philosophy a national or cultural philosophical tradition.

Discussing the ideas and theories in each chapter by organizing and characterizing them by categories will easily allow the reader to cross-reference ideas between and among chapters. For example, Jonathan Edwards' epistemology can be easily compared with the epistemology of the Pragmatists, and the revolutionary founders' conceptions of freedom and justice in Chapter 3 can be compared with contemporary communitarian social and political thought in Chapter 8. Occasionally, chronological ordering of philosophers and their works overlap between chapters because the lives of philosophers with distinct and different interests also overlap. To maintain continuity, for example, Richard Rorty is part of Chapter 6 on the early American Pragmatists even though he was a late twentieth-century philosopher whose work is concurrent with that of many philosophers discussed in Chapters 7 and 8. A glossary appears at the end of the book for additional clarification of terms and concepts, which are shown in bold in their first or primary occurrences in the main text.

Each chapter is centered on a development in American thought that has had a significant impact on the history of Western philosophy or on the American experience, or both. Each chapter is focused on some figures concerning a particular aspect or topic in American philosophy with attention to major developments within that topic. The following is a general plan or overview of the subsequent chapters.

Chapter 2 involves themes and problems in the philosophy of Jonathan Edwards, a representative of the Calvinist tradition and the

First American Great Awakening. Included is an attempt to situate Edwards' thought in the larger history of Western philosophy from which many of his ideas are derived and from which some diverge. Chapter 3 centers on revolutionary American thinking of the Enlightenment including that of Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and the **Federalists**.

Chapter 4 takes us beyond the original American revolution with ideas influenced by the experiences of those who were discounted or ignored in the promises of the American Revolution. American women, slaves, and abolitionists are at the center of this chapter, including William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglass, Angelina and Sarah Grimké, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, all of whom were concerned to extend the notion of what it is to be fully human and to be entitled to respect, liberties, and full participation in the American experience outlined by the founders of the new American republic. They extend the theoretical underpinnings of the American Revolution to help build a better life and future for all Americans, not just those of privilege and traditional power.

Chapter 5 continues the theme of Chapter 4, but goes beyond it in the work of Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, the two best known and prolific writers among the Transcendentalists. Emerson and Thoreau are well-known for ruggedly individualistic ideas, revolutionary thinking in moral and political realms, and insistence upon a unique look at the American experience and the obligation of Americans to re-invent themselves in a particularly and uniquely American way. The work of the Transcendentalists theorizing about independence, freedom, and fairness is directed against the blandly ordinary and largely pathetic tendencies of people to follow the crowd rather than to forge their own tools of growth to create a uniquely American experience. Closing Chapter 5 is the continuing work of reform of W. E. B. Du Bois and Emma Goldman on African American philosophy and radical Marxist anarchism.

Chapter 6 concerns American Pragmatism and four of its primary proponents (Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty). Pragmatists insist on the "practical" in all matters, whether they are epistemological, metaphysical, religious, moral, social, or political. For the pragmatists, the point is to change

the world, not to try in some vaguely analytical fashion to “understand” it without making understanding count in the realm of action. Like the revolutionary Americans of the eighteenth century, the American Pragmatists argued to produce real, significant, revolutionary, and substantial change in ways of understanding, being, and doing.

Chapter 7, part one of recent developments in American philosophy, deals with some major developments in American epistemology and philosophy of science and an introduction to the unity of Native American philosophy. Chapter 8, the second part of recent developments in American philosophy, closes this book with contemporary social and political thought, **feminist ethics**, and African American philosophy.

Ethics, social philosophy, and political philosophy tend to be heavily represented in American philosophy and in the works of the thinkers whose ideas populate the pages of this book. It is perhaps the case that for American philosophy, understanding what there is, what we know, and our relationship, if any, to a god or gods inform our lives of action in seeking to live in a progressive, peaceful, just, and productive society.

## FURTHER READING

For an overview of Western philosophy, Nigel Warburton’s *Philosophy: The Basics*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2004) is very useful. Nicholas Bunnin and E. P. Tsui-James (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to Philosophy*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003) is a collection of essays on major branches of philosophy. Arthur Danto’s *Connections to the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1989) is an engaging overview of the history of Western thought.

Useful anthologies in American philosophy include L. Harris, S. Pratt, and A. Waters’ *American Philosophies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) which also includes selections from Native American philosophers; Nancy Stanlick and Bruce Silver’s *Philosophy in America: Selected Readings, Volume I* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2004) is a collection of works in American philosophy centered on optimism, individualism, and reform. John Stuhr’s *Classical American Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press,

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1987) and *Pragmatism and Classical American Philosophy* (New York: Oxford, 2000) are important for centering on American Pragmatism.

Internet resources on American philosophy are found on many sites devoted to specific American philosophers or movements in American thought, but a good place to start is always the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (<http://plato.stanford.edu>).

## THE GENESIS OF EURO-AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

Jonathan Edwards (1703–58) is the first systematic European-American philosopher. Edwards' work in epistemology and science, in philosophy of religion, and in metaphysics is the primary concern of this chapter. The ideas of Jonathan Edwards derive from and contribute to the Great Awakening in America. Influenced by the independent spirit of the British colonists, the Great Awakening moved people toward a religious and emotional “sense” in place of formalized religious knowledge, and toward acceptance of an individual relationship with God rather than a distant and doctrine-bound apprehension of religious truth and practice.

### EPISTEMOLOGY, SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, AND RELIGIOUS TRUTH

Even though Edwards was a **religious enthusiast**, he was influenced by the epistemology of John Locke and the metaphysics of George Berkeley, who were British **empiricists**. He contended that all ideas arise through experience, but that we cannot transcend ideas derived from experience to the knowledge of things as they are. Beyond the limits of Locke's philosophy, Edwards claimed that **the “elect”** have a “sixth sense,” a **sense of the heart**, that allows them to apprehend the true nature of God.

It is important to distinguish between the *origin* of ideas and the *character* of knowledge both for Locke and for Edwards. For Locke, in the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1690), ideas arise through sense experience. Knowledge, however, goes beyond experience and is the notice the mind takes of the agreement or disagreement between ideas. So knowledge is about relationships between and among ideas. It is not about “things.” Edwards agreed. Interestingly, however, Locke argued that we could know with probability that material objects exist while at the same time arguing that we really have no strict knowledge of external objects at all. Edwards recognized the problem with this view and adopted instead a view similar to George Berkeley’s **idealism**.

George Berkeley argued that material objects do not exist and that, ultimately, all of reality exists in the mind of God. Combining elements of Locke and Berkeley, Edwards held that truth is consistency of our ideas with the ideas of God. Another way to put it is that truth is agreement of ideas with things as they are. What we call material things exist only mentally (i.e., ultimately in the mind of God) and that, as a corollary, “God is Truth itself.” What is in the mind of God is what is real and science studies what is real. If this is true, Edwards concludes, as Berkeley did, that science and theology cannot be in conflict with each other.

An early indication that Edwards thought studying nature and engaging in scientific observation are consistent with religious truth – and indeed, for Edwards, will produce knowledge about God – is in his short essay, “The Spider Letter” (1723). Edwards carefully observed and made meticulous notes on the life cycles and activities of spiders, concluding that God’s goodness is evident in all of it, from the ability of the spiders to spin webs to providing for the spiders so that they might experience pleasure. All of this means that in observing nature we can find the goodness and glory of God.

The work of God found in nature is part of the **teleological argument** for God’s existence. Edwards found no need to argue that God exists, but his observations of nature and the conclusions he reached are fully consistent with that argument. The teleological argument is consistent with the work of the very pious Edwards and, as we will see in Chapter 3, also with the less than pious Thomas Paine. This argument for God’s existence is consistent with



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