

Pragmatism

441/556 Pragmatism

Fall 2025

Th 3:00–5:50

ETEC B007

Pragmatists challenge the neat division between the theoretical and the practical. Belief involves a commitment to act in a certain way and so too, they argue, does knowledge. Belief involves commitment to act, so the theoretical and the practical cannot be kept apart. This course traces pragmatism from its origin in the 19th-century through to the present day. We will read works by Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, and others.

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Office hours: Tu 11:00–noon, W noon–1:00, and by appointment

Texts: Course readings will be available via Blackboard.

Response papers: Students are required to write a 300–500 word critical response to the assigned readings each week. These should be turned in via Brightspace by midnight (end of day) on **Wednesday** before the class meeting for which the reading is assigned.

A reading response paper should address one of the assigned readings for the week and do three things.

1. Quote and cite a sentence or two of the assigned reading which could be taken as the thesis, capturing the core claim being made. (Direct quotations should include page references and do not count toward the assigned length.)
2. Provide a critical summary of one of the readings. State in your own words what the author is trying to do. Ask yourself: What *reasons* does the author give for believing their thesis? Why do they think it matters?
3. End by raising at least one question about the reading.

Reading response papers should *not* outline the whole reading. You should not try mention everything. Decide what you think is the most important thing, and leave out parts that do not relate to that.

You may pose an objection, but you still need to concisely state what you're objecting to.

If parts were confusing or hard to follow, then you can say so! You are not expected to understand every reading fully before we meet to discuss it. The goal is to engage with the reading, struggle with it, and form an opinion of how things fit together.

Academic honesty: You are encouraged to discuss issues from the course with each other and with others outside of class, but you are responsible for your own ideas and your own words. Students who turn in work that is not theirs will be failed for that item on the first infraction and failed for the course on the second infraction.

Response papers do not need to include full citations for course readings. Other sources (and all sources in the final paper) should be given a complete citation either in a footnote or in a list at the end of the paper.

Turning in text which you have harvested from an AI counts as plagiarism. Don't make the mistake of thinking that an AI can write better than you can. It can put together pretty sentences sometimes, but the fundamental point of writing in this course is to collect and convey your thoughts.

Presentations: All students will make one short presentation, during a regular class meeting, offering a summary of the central claim and argument of a reading and raising points which open class discussion. It should not be a point-by-point repetition of the reading! It may evaluate how successful the article is or connect issues raised by the article to other readings in the course.

Students registered for 556 will make a second presentation, at the final class meeting, pitching the topic of their final paper.

Final papers: Students registered for 441 will write a 5–8 page (about 2000 word) final paper which may be on an assigned topic. Students registered for 556 will write a 10–12 page (about 3000 word) paper on a topic of their own choosing.

Grading:

- 10% Participation
- 45% Response papers
- 10% Presentation
- 35% Final paper

Electronic devices in the classroom: This policy will be discussed and settled upon at the first class meeting.

Schedule of topics

This is a tentative schedule. Specific readings may take more or less time than indicated, we may drop or add some readings as we go.

Week 1 28 aug

Introduction

Week 2 4 sep - Transcendentalism

Ralph Waldo Emerson: 'Self Reliance', 'The Oversoul'

Theodore Parker: 'Transcendentalism'

Week 3 11 sep - Peirce's pragmatism

Charles Sanders Peirce: 'The Fixation of Belief', 'How to Make Our Ideas Clear', 'The Doctrine of Chances'

Week 4 18 sep - the Clifford/James debate

William Clifford: 'The Ethics of Belief'

William James: 'The Will to Believe'

Week 5 25 sep - James' pragmatism

James: 'Philosophical Conceptions and Practical Results', chapter 2 of *Pragmatism*

[optional] chapters 1 and 3 of *Pragmatism*

'Pragmatism' from the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Psychology*

Week 6 2 oct - reactions to James

William Caldwell: 'Pragmatism'

A.O. Lovejoy: 'The Thirteen Pragmatisms'

Week 7 9 oct - Dewey's pragmatism

John Dewey: selections from *Human Nature and Conduct*, 'Context and thought'

[optional] 'What pragmatism means by practical', 'An added note as to the "practical"'

— mid-term point —

Week 8 16 oct - Addams' pragmatic ethics

Jane Addams: selections from *Democracy and Social Ethics*

Week 9 23 oct - Pragmatist philosophy of science

C.I. Lewis: 'Pragmatism and Current Thought'

George H. Mead: 'Scientific Method and Individual Thinker'

Week 10 30 oct - Quine

W.V.O Quine: 'Two Dogmas of Empiricism'

Morton White: 'Normative Ethics, Normative Epistemology, and Quine's Holism'

[optional] Rudolf Carnap: 'Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology'

Week 11 6 nov - Goodman

Nelson Goodman: 'The New Riddle of Induction', 'Words, Works, Worlds'

Week 12 13 nov - pragmatism and democracy

Richard Rorty: 'Pragmatism and Anti-authoritarianism'

Elizabeth Anderson: 'How to be a Pragmatist'

Hilary Putnam: 'A Reconsideration of Deweyan Democracy'

Week 13 20 nov - pragmatism and semantics

Huw Price: 'Truth as Convenient Friction'

Robert Brandom: 'The Pragmatist Enlightenment (and its Problematic Semantics)'

[optional] Cheryl Misak: 'Making Disagreement Matter'

Thanksgiving!

Week 14 4 dec

Conclusion

Paper presentations