PHIL 4110: Theories of Knowledge

Spring Semester, 2011

**Instructor: Bryan Norton, DM Smith, 300**

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**Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday: 1:45-2:45**

**Class Meetings: DM Smith 208: 12:05-1:25, Tues. and Thurs.**

**Course content:**

The subject of this course, theories of knowledge, is one of the oldest and most venerable in all of philosophy: how, and on what basis, do humans know anything about the world around them? The interplay between knowledge and skepticism has been a major topic in philosophy since the early Greek philosophers. Today, problems of knowledge and skepticism are still with us, but they are now intertwined with problems of language—the end of Modernism left all philosophy more conscious of the key role of language in shaping our world and in the process of gaining knowledge. This course is devoted to improving our understanding of traditional epistemological issues as they play themselves out in contemporary American thought. Accordingly, context will be set in the first week by reviewing the philosophy of Rene Descartes, the Father of Modern Philosophy, to set the stage for the emergence of pragmatism and positivism which are best understood as a reaction to Modernism.

Following a brief exploration of Modernist theories of knowledge, we will concentrate on a specific historical context: North America between 1870 and 1980. This period is particularly interesting because it encompasses an ongoing competition and accommodation between two important schools of thought in philosophy, American pragmatism and logical positivism; their interactions have set the stage for contemporary movements and challenges. We will set the historical context—and trace the development of pragmatism—by reading Louis Menand’s book, The Metaphysical Club, which describes pragmatism from its beginnings to early maturity. Menand shows how disillusionment following the Civil War led to a new, and distinctly American, philosophy—pragmatism—and how pragmatism contributed to progressivism and to reform movements prior to the beginning of World War I.

Social disturbance and war in Europe led to the emigration during the 1930s of leading European philosophers to the United States. These arrivals led to a competition between the imported logical positivistic movement and home-grown pragmatism. These philosophies were similar in emphasizing science as a touchstone of knowledge, but they differed strongly in their views on language and truth. Pragmatism was largely eclipsed in the 1930s and 40s but, through the work of W.V.O. Quine, pragmatism has seen a resurgence since, and the pragmatist philosophy has once again asserted itself as a dominant force in American philosophy.

This historical structure, treating early pragmatism, then positivism, and a return to contemporary pragmatism provides insight into the current status of philosophy in America, and will also provide a context in which to examine such concepts as meaning, belief, truth, and knowledge. Central to the debates between positivism and pragmatism are problems of knowledge, justification, meaning and truth and, especially, the nature and role of language in cognition, so students will be exposed to concepts of epistemology as they are employed in a competition between two movements played out in a historical setting. This competition set the stage for current philosophical problems, debates, and positions.

**Course Objectives:**

1. To encourage a deeper understanding, both historically and conceptually, of the current possibilities and issues in epistemology and in American philosophy today.

2. To increase comfort discussing complex philosophical issues and to sharpen philosophical and analytic skills by engaging in philosophical argument.

3. To improve students' ability to write an argumentative paper in philosophy.

**Course Requirements:**

1. There will be three in-class exams of one hour each, including a somewhat longer final on the assigned date in the examination period. These exams will correspond to the three major sections of the course. The final, while concentrating on material from the final one-third of the class, may draw also on earlier readings for contrasts and comparisons. (20 per cent of grade for first two exams; 30 per cent for final)

2. A philosophy paper of about 10+ pages dealing with a topic of interest to the student. (30 per cent of grade). This assignment will be in three stages. Each student, in consultation with instructor as necessary, will decide on a topic and provide a brief description of the subject to be written on by about the 7th week; students will be required to submit a draft of their paper in the first week of November. No grade will be assigned the draft—the only grade will be on the final draft--but the students' final paper will be marked down one letter grade if no draft paper is received. Instructor will critique the students' drafts, and students will write new version responding to the critique, submitting their final paper by Tuesday of dead week (Dec. 2).

**Assigned Texts:**

* Rene Descartes, Meditations
* Louis Menand, The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America, Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2001.
* Louis Menand, Pragmatism: A Reader. Vintage, 1997.

Note: books are stocked at Engineers’ Bookstore on Marietta St. Assignments from other sources will be on T-Square unless otherwise noted in class.

**Course Outline and Reading Assignments** (please try to read entire weekly assignment before Tuesday's class)

# Unit I. Early Pragmatism: Philosophy in America, 1865-1920

Week 1: January 11-13: Rene Descartes and Modern Philosophy

Rene Descartes, Meditations on First Philosophy (Be sure to read the interesting "Letter to the Faculty of Theology," but its OK to skip Ch. 4)

Week 2: Jan. 18-20: The Context of Early Pragmatism: America after the Civil War

Menand, Pragmatism, pp xi-xxxiv

Menand, The Metaphysical Club, pp ix-69

# Week 3: Jan. 25-27 Early pragmatism: Context and Beginnings

The Metaphysical Club, pp. 73-176

Menand, Pragmatism: A Reader, pp 4-25

# Week 4: Feb. 1-3: Charles Sanders Peirce: The Troubled Genius

The Metaphysical Club, 151-232

Pragmatism, pp 26-49; 56-58.

# Week 5: Feb. 8-10: William James and O.W. Holmes

The Metaphysical Club, Review pp. 73-96

Pragmatism, pp 60-68; 93-111; 132-136; 136-180

# Week 6: Feb. 15-17: John Dewey and Jane Addams: Logic and Social Activism

Dewey, "The Influence of Darwin on Philosophy," and "The Supremacy of Method."

The Metaphysical Club, pp. 285-336.

Pragmatism, pp. 181-232, 272-286.

**Feb. 24: FIRST IN-CLASS EXAM. (last drop day March 4,)**

# Unit II. Logical Empiricism (aka Positivism): A Philosophy Immigrates, 1920-1950

**Week 7: Feb. 22-24: Logical Empiricism in Austria:** (Early Rudolf Carnap, Moritz Schlick, Otto Neurath, AJ Ayer)

J. O. Urmson, Philosophical Analysis: Its Development Between the Two World Wars, pp. 1-21.

Ayer, excerpt from Language, Truth, and Logic, pp. 33-45.

Carnap, “The Elimination of Metaphysics through the Logical Analysis of Language,” from Ayer, Logical Positivism, pp. 60-81.

Carnap, “On the Character of Philosophical Problems,” from R. Rorty, The Linguistic Turn, pp 54-62

Neurath, “Protocol Sentences” from Ayer, Logical Positivism, pp. 199-208.

**Week 8: March 1-3: Logical Positivism in America:** Carnap, Hempel, Feigl)

Carnap, “Meaning and Synonymy in Natural Languages,” Appendix to Meaning and Necessity

Carnap, exerpts from his “Intellectual Autobiography,” pp.53-71 in Schilpp, The Philosophy of Rudolf Carnap

Hempel, “Explanation in Science,” from Kourany, Scientific Knowledge (second edition), pp. 261-266.

**Week 9: March 8-10: Logical Positivism in America: Value Theory**

Ayer, excerpt from Language, Truth, and Logic, pp. 102-120.

C.L. Stevenson, “The Emotive Meaning of Ethical Terms”

Feigl, “Validation and Vindication” from Sellars and Hospers, Readings in Ethical Theory

Week 10: March 15-17: Positivism and Pragmatism: A Battle for Dominance, 1920-1962

Carnap, “Empiricism, Semantics, and Ontology,” 1949

Quine, “Two Dogmas of Empiricism,” 1951

Norton, “The Meta-theoretical Nature of Carnap’s Philosophy,” Philosophy of Science, 1977, pp. 65-85.

**Week 11: March 21-25: No Class, Spring Break**

**Week 12: March 29-31: Continuing the Quine-Carnap Debate**

Quine, Word and Object, Ch. 1 T-Square

# Unit III. The Resurgence of Pragmatism: American Philosophy since 1940

# Week 13: April 5 & 7: Pragmatism and Truth

Russell, “Truth and Falsity,” from The Problems of Philosophy

Pragmatism, pp 112-131 (T-Square)

Peirce, excerpts from Collected Papers (T-Square)

Richard Rorty, “Solidarity or Objectivity,” from Objectivity, Relativism, and ¨ Truth, pp 21-34

# Second In-Class Exam, covering Part II of the course

# Week 14: April 13 & 15: Pragmatism and knowledge

Week 13: Nov. 11-13: Pragmatism and Knowledge

Richard Rorty, “The Contingency of Language,” from Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity, pp 3-23. (T-Square)

The Metaphysical Club, pp. 337-376

Pragmatism, 69-92; 382-401

# Week 15: 20-22: Pragmatism and Scientific Knowledge

# Thomas Kuhn, “The Function of Dogma in Scientific Research“ from Kourany, Scientific Knowledge, pp. 301-315 (T-Square)

# Thomas Kuhn, excerpt from The Structure of Scientific Revolutions, Chapter IX: "The Nature and Necessity of Scientific Revolutions." (T-Square)

# Richard Rorty, “Science as Solidarity,” from Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp 35-45. (T-Square)

# Week 16: Nov. 25: Pragmatism and Contemporary Society

The Metaphysical Club, pp 377-442

Pragmatism, pp 329-336

Richard Rorty, “The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy,” from Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth, pp 175-196 (T-Square)

**Third In-Class Exam, covering Part III of the course and also key ideas from through-out the course, to be written during assigned time for course final.**