

After Metaphysics?: Pragmatism and the Future of Philosophy

PHIL 620, Spring 2014, University of Oregon

Dr. Colin Koopman

Class Meetings: Tu & Th 2.00p-3.50p in Susan Campbell Hall, Room 250C

Instructor Office Hours: Tu 4.00p-5.50p in Susan Campbell Hall, Room 250A

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Course Description

The potentiality of pragmatism in our contemporary philosophical moment is currently being developed along two, possibly incompatible, trajectories. This debate in pragmatism maps to a larger debate that is increasingly characterizing our philosophical present: *either* abandon the pretense of philosophical foundationalism that for so long seemed the inevitable outflow of any and every metaphysics-first philosophy *or* refocus the work of a metaphysics-centered philosophy such that it can at last do away with its haunting foundationalist shadow.

In the first half of this course we will survey representatives of each side of this contemporary theoretical divide. On the side of ‘philosophy beyond metaphysics’ we will consider Richard Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989) and key chapters from Habermas’s *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (1988). On the side of a ‘revival of speculative metaphysics’ we will read Quentin Meillassoux’s speculative refusal of correlationism in *After Finitude* (2006) and Jane Bennett’s new materialist political theory in *Vibrant Matter* (2010). In the second half of the course we will turn to key writings by the classical pragmatists, including William James’s *Pragmatism* (1907) and *A Pluralistic Universe* (1909), and John Dewey’s *Experience and Nature* (1925). In (re)reading these texts we will be in a good position to ask which side of today’s theoretical divide is most conducive for forwarding classical pragmatism. Throughout the term our overarching attention will be focused on the possibilities of pragmatism (as either post-metaphysical or newly-metaphysical) as a philosophical mode of engaging our cultural (ethical, political, scientific) present in its specificity. The point of the course will be to interrogate the options available to philosophy in the present. Thus, it is hoped, the course will be useful to students on both sides of the above-described theoretical divide.

Reading & Class Schedule

	Introduction
1a 4/1	<i>Introduction to the class</i> : What is Metaphysics? What is Method? What is Philosophy? What can Philosophy be?
	Beyond Metaphysics: Neopragmatism
1b 4/3	Post-Metaphysical Neopragmatism: Rorty, <i>Contingency, Irony, & Solidarity</i> , Chs. 1 & 2
2a 4/8	Post-Metaphysical Neopragmatist Social Theory: Rorty, <i>Contingency, Irony, & Solidarity</i> , Chs. 3 & 4
2b 4/10	Post-Metaphysical Neopragmatist Moral Theory: Rorty, <i>Contingency...</i> , Chs. 7 (pp. 141-146 only) & 9 + “Dewey’s Metaphysics”
3a 4/15	Post-Metaphysical Neopragmatist Critical Theory: Habermas, <i>Postmetaphysical Thinking</i> , Chs. 1-3
3b 4/17	Post-Metaphysical Neopragmatist Critical Theory: Habermas, <i>Postmetaphysical Thinking</i> , Ch. 6 [Guest seminar leader: Rocío Zambrana]
	Reviving Metaphysics: Challenging Correlationism
4a 4/22	New Metaphysics in Political Theory: Bennett, <i>Vibrant Matter</i> , pp. vii-xix, 1-61
4b 4/24	New Metaphysics in Political Theory: Bennett, <i>Vibrant Matter</i> , pp. 62-122
5a 4/29	New Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy: Meillasoux, <i>After Finitude</i> , pp. 1-60
5b 5/1	[Class meeting TBA or canceled - instructor conference travel]
6a 5/6	New Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy: Meillasoux, <i>After Finitude</i> , pp. 60-128
	The Status of Metaphysics in Classical Pragmatism
6b 5/8	James’s Methodologico-Metaphysical Pragmatism: James, <i>Pragmatism</i> , Lectures I & II, pp. 362-390 of WWJ
7a 5/13	James’s Methodologico-Metaphysical Pluralism: James, <i>Pragmatism</i> , Lecture III, pp. 390-405 James, <i>A Pluralistic Universe</i> , Lectures VI & VII, pp. 561-581 & 292-301 of WWJ
7b 5/15	James’s Moral Philosophy, Metaphysical or Methodological?: James, “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” James, “The Moral Equivalent of War”
8a 5/20	Dewey’s Metaphysico-Methodological Pragmatism: Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. viii-xvi, 1a-77

8b 5/22	Dewey's Metaphysico-Methodological Pragmatism: Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. 78-165
9a 5/27	Dewey's Moral Philosophy, Metaphysical or Methodological?: Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. 394-437 Dewey, <i>Unmodern Philosophy & Modern Philosophy</i> , pp. 66-91, 130-168, 242-251
9b 5/29	Dewey's Political Philosophy, Metaphysical or Methodological?: Dewey, <i>The Public and Its Problems</i> , selections TBD
	Contemporary Method and Metaphysics (Again)
10a 6/3	TBD – flex day or readings to be selected based on class interests
10b 6/5	Marres, <i>Material Participation</i> , Chs. 1 & 2 (pp. 1-60)

Student Work

1) Participation, 20% of final grade (these requirements also apply to auditors).

This course will be a seminar. It requires *active participation in a series of discussions that will extend throughout the quarter*. I will expect that everyone (including auditors) to be *very well-prepared* at the beginning of every class session.

- 5% of grade - Toward this, then, I will ask that everyone (including auditors) come to class with a written or printed copy of a well-prepared question (or pair of questions, or trio of questions) concerning the assigned readings for that text. I will collect these at the end of every class.
- 5% of grade - On any given day, I may ask a small group of you (selected at random) to initiate a discussion by starting us off with this question. So I want you to always be prepared to do that.
- 10% of grade – I expect active participation in the class by all students. We have a nice small seminar group which means we have excellent conditions for conversations. I will strive to make the class a welcoming environment for all, but please let me know what I can do further.

2) Final Research Paper (in two stages), 80% of final grade (does not apply to auditors)

You will write a final research paper, which will be developed and due to me in two stages.

First Version of Final Paper

- 35% of grade – You will write a short argumentative essay, due late in Week 9 (probably Thursday at the start of class, but TBD), both in hardcopy in my office and by email.
 - You are expected to develop your own essay topic, with the sole constraint being that the essay must address the subject matter of the course.
 - The first shorter version of your paper should be about 8-10 pages (or about 2500 words exclusive of notes and references). Your essay should discuss assigned primary readings as well as secondary readings (which I can help you locate, so visit my office hour).
 - You will revise this essay and expand it into a longer final research essay due at the end of the term. But this version of the essay should be polished and well-argued. *You are expected to turn in a finalized piece of writing, and not a draft.* You will revise this finalized piece of writing once more, but that just shows that revision is an extensive process. Think of it this way: my written feedback on

- your paper will be more useful to you if you turn in to me a piece of work that you think is perfect; if you turn in something that you know to have shortcomings, then my written feedback will likely only reflect what you already know.
- 5% of grade – You will append to your paper a bibliography that includes three short (100-word) abstracts of secondary literature relevant to your chosen topic. It is important that you craft your paper around a topic for which some secondary literature is available. Find three sources and summarize, or abstract, them in your own words.

Final Version of Final Paper

- 30% of grade – You will then take the first version of your research essay, along with my comments, and other peer comments (if you swap with a peer, which you should), and write a final research essay. This will be due (as a hardcopy and via email) early in exam week (probably Monday, but TBA).
 - This will be a revision of and improvement upon the first version of the paper you turned in late in the term. This essay should engage with one both the assigned primary literature and relevant secondary literature.
 - The final essay should be about 12 pages in length (aim for 3000-3500 words exclusive of notes and references, i.e. a conference-length paper). Note that 3500 words is a hard limit. I want you to do everything you can to stay within this limit because this is a typical conference-length paper limit.
- 5% of grade – In addition, you must turn into me a one-page (single-space) set of revisions notes (of the kind you will be expected to submit to a journal if you get a ‘revise and resubmit’). This will explain all major revisions you made in your paper. It will also explain any decision you have made to *not* institute revisions in light of reviewer (i.e., instructor, i.e., me!) comments. You should write this as a letter.
- 5% of grade – You will include at the front of your paper two short abstracts of different length, according to customary conference-submission and journal-publishing standards. The first abstract should be a 100-word summary describing the core argument of the paper. The second abstract should be a longer 250-word version of that. If you need to see a sample abstract please ask me for one.

Books & Reading Materials

The following books are available for purchase at the campus bookstore—please use the editions noted here. If you use an electronic edition, it must match our pagination (so Kindles, &c., are not recommended). All other required readings on the syllabus but not listed below will be made available through a course website or via email.

- Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge)
- Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (MIT)
- Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* (Duke)
- Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (Continuum)
- James, *The Writings of William James* (Chicago)
- Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Dover)
- Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems* (Penn State)

Learning Outcomes (620)

Engage central contemporary philosophical debates, through reading both recent philosophical works and works drawn from the history of philosophy.

Compare, contrast, and critique representative authors from various philosophical traditions and historical periods.

Develop and improve basic professional skills including preparing papers for conference submission and preparing article abstracts.