

# Pragmatism & Metaphysics

PHIL 420, University of Oregon, Spring 2014

Dr. Colin Koopman

*Class Meetings:* Tu & Th 10.00a-11.50a in PLC Bldg., Room 353

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

*Instructor Email:* koopman@uoregon.edu

*Course Website:* via Sakai (UO pilot of a new BlackBoard alternative)

## Course Description

This course will focus on the status of metaphysics in pragmatist philosophy. Pragmatism is often thought to be a boldly anti-metaphysical form of philosophizing, but it is just as true that many of the classical pragmatists took their philosophies to involve a reconceptualization of the very work of metaphysics itself. In this course we will interrogate the work of key pragmatist thinkers who have directly engaged with the metaphilosophical question of the status of metaphysics. Our focal figures will be William James, John Dewey, and Richard Rorty. We will also consider a number of contemporary challenges to pragmatism's philosophical optic.

Note that this course is offered as a *reading-intensive and discussion-intensive seminar*. If you do not like to read large selections of dense philosophical material, then this course is not for you! If you do not like to participate in class discussions on complex theoretical issues, then this course is not for you! But if you love difficult books, and you love talking about them, then this course will be right up your alley.

## Reading & Class Schedule

*You are expected to read all assigned material in advance of the meeting for which that material is assigned.*

	<b>Introduction</b>
1a 4/1	<i>Introduction to the class:</i> What is Metaphysics? What is Method? What is Philosophy? What can Philosophy be?
	<b>Beyond Metaphysics: Neopragmatism</b>
1b 4/3	<b>Post-Metaphysical Pragmatism:</b> Rorty, <i>Contingency, Irony, &amp; Solidarity</i> , Chs. 1-2
<u>2a 4/8</u>	<b>Post-Metaphysical Pragmatism:</b> Rorty, <i>Contingency, Irony, &amp; Solidarity</i> , Chs. 3-4

<u>2b 4/10</u>	<b>Post-Metaphysical Pragmatism:</b> Rorty, <i>Contingency, Irony, &amp; Solidarity</i> , Ch. 7, pp. 141-146, & Ch. 9
<u>3a 4/15</u>	<b>Post-Metaphysical Pragmatist Critical Theory:</b> Habermas, <i>Postmetaphysical Thinking</i> , Ch. 3 (avail. online)
<u>3b 4/17</u>	<b>Neopragmatism:</b> Rorty, selections TBD [Guest seminar leader: Aaron Rodriguez]
	<b>For Metaphysics: Challenging Correlationism</b>
<u>4a 4/22</u>	<b>New Metaphysics in Political Theory:</b> Bennett, <i>Vibrant Matter</i> , pp. vii-xix, 1-19, 94-109 (avail. online)
<u>4b 4/24</u>	<b>New Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy:</b> Meillasoux, <i>After Finitude</i> , pp. 1-27
<u>5a 4/29</u>	<b>New Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy:</b> Meillasoux, <i>After Finitude</i> , pp. 28-60
<u>5b 5/1</u>	[Class meeting canceled - instructor conference travel]
<u>6a 5/6</u>	<b>New Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy:</b> Meillasoux, <i>After Finitude</i> , pp. 60-128
	<b>The Status of Metaphysics in Classical Pragmatism</b>
<u>6b 5/8</u>	<b>James's Methodologico-Metaphysical Pragmatism:</b> James, <i>Pragmatism</i> , Lectures I & II, pp. 362-390 of <i>WWJ</i>
<u>7a 5/13</u>	<b>James's Methodologico-Metaphysical Pluralism:</b> James, <i>Pragmatism</i> , Lecture III, pp. 390-405 James, <i>A Pluralistic Universe</i> , VI & VII, pp. 561-581 & 292-301 of <i>WWJ</i>
<u>7b 5/15</u>	<b>James's Moral Phil., Metaphysical or Methodological?:</b> James, "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life" James, "The Moral Equivalent of War"
<u>8a 5/20</u>	<b>Dewey's Metaphysico-Methodological Pragmatism:</b> Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. viii-xvi, 1a-39
<u>8b 5/22</u>	<b>Dewey's Metaphysico-Methodological Pragmatism:</b> Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. 121-165
<u>9a 5/27</u>	<b>Dewey's Moral Phil., Metaphysical or Methodological?:</b> Dewey, <i>Experience and Nature</i> , pp. 394-437
	<b>Contemporary Method and Metaphysics (Again)</b>
<u>9b 5/29</u>	TBD – depending on class interests
<u>10a 6/3</u>	TBD – depending on class interests
<u>10b 6/5</u>	TBD – depending on class interests

## **Student Work**

To pass this course, you must achieve a passing grade in all of the following five areas (meaning that if you entirely neglect one of these assignments, you will fail the course):

### **1) Seminar Participation - 15%**

- a. You are expected to attend class and contribute to discussions. All our meetings will provide ample time for discussion. Students in this course should not expect to be

able to passively attend our meetings and 'soak up information'. Participation in this course means active involvement and engagement. This means that you need to come prepared to each meeting with questions, ideas, and provocations. That is the only way we will be able to successfully *do philosophy* in this course.

**2) Reading Questions Posted to Course Website - 10%**

- a. You must come to every class session with evidence of preparation for our meeting. By every Tuesday and Thursday at 9am (this is a firm deadline) you should post a question or comment to our course website pertaining to that session's primary reading by our primary author. If you fail to post by 9am you will not receive credit for posting for that day. Your posts should be concise (one paragraph maximum—two sentences is ideal). Please start a new discussion thread if necessary (i.e., if by the time you post nobody else has started a new thread). I will on occasion ask you to share these with the class, so please bring to class a record of your question.

**3) In-Class Team Discussion Debaters/Leaders - 10%**

- a. You will partner up with another student in the class to develop an in-class presentation that you will present at the beginning of one of our classes (we have approx. 20 students, so approx. 10 pairs, and exactly 10 sessions for which we need presenters, marked on the calendar above as the dates that are underlined).
- b. Presentations should be around 15 minutes in length—which means no shorter than 10 minutes but also no longer than 20 minutes. Please time yourself so that you do not go over. If you have more ideas you want to cover in that time than is feasible, consider making a handout with additional quotation and discussion.
- c. Your team presentations should do (at least) three things. First, you should briefly summarize the key points in the reading for that day. Second, you should explain why this reading is relevant to our broader topic in the course. Third, you should engage some aspect of either the reading itself or our main author's usage of it that is controversial. Since you will be presenting in pairs, this discussion of the controversial aspect of the class could be presented as a debate (with each member of the presentation duo taking opposing sides or positions, to the extent that this makes sense for your text).
- d. Following your presentation, I will expect the two of you to facilitate discussion for approximately the first half of the class (at which point we will take a break and then return in the second half for more open discussion).

**4) Research Paper, First Final Version - 25%**

- a. You will write a short argumentative essay due to me in my office (or another location to be announced in class) on Monday of Week 9 by noon. You must both turn in a hardcopy and email me a copy of your paper.
- b. The first version of your paper that you turn into me should *not* be a draft. It should be a finalized and polished paper. I will give you feedback on the paper and you will make further revisions from there.
- c. You are expected to develop your own essay topic, with the sole constraint being that the essay must address the subject matter and readings of the course.
- d. This version should be about 7-8 pages.
- e. After I provide you with written comments on your paper, you will revise this essay and expand it into a longer final research essay due at the end of the term (see (6) below).

**5) Research Paper, Annotated Bibliography - 10%**

- a. You will write a short argumentative essay due to me in my office (or another location to be announced in class) on Monday of Week 9 by noon. You must both turn in a hardcopy and email me a copy of your bibliography.
- b. Your essay (see (4) above) should include references to assigned primary readings, but it should also indicate research that makes use of additional secondary literature not assigned as part of the above schedule. Toward this, you will append to your essay a separate sheet or sheets of paper on which you list *three* secondary readings (i.e., material not assigned in class but written on the portion of the assigned class material you are writing about) and provide abstracts (or short 100-word summaries) of these readings in your own words. These abstracts should be professional (concise, informative) and impersonal (not a description of your reaction to the piece, but a description of the piece itself).

**6) Research Paper, Revised Final Version - 30%**

- a. You will write a final research essay, which will be a revision of, improvement upon, and expansion upon your shorter argumentative essay from earlier in the term. This essay should engage with one both the assigned primary literature and relevant secondary literature.
- b. This should be about 9-10 pages in length.
- c. This paper will be due Monday of exam week (in my office as a hardcopy under my door and via email).

### **Books & Reading Materials**

The following books are available for purchase at the campus bookstore. Any other required readings on the syllabus not listed here will be made available through our course website.

- Rorty, *Contingency, Irony & Solidarity* (Cambridge University Press)
- Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (Continuum Press)
- James, *The Writings of William James* (University of Chicago)
- Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (Dover Press edition)

### **Learning Outcomes (PHIL 420)**

Demonstrate critical thinking, reading, and writing skills through use of a broad range of research methods, including collaborative projects and scholarly essays that deal with primary and secondary sources in the literature and are written in an academic format.

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

Engage in philosophical inquiry that examines key topics in human nature, human experience, morality and politics. Engage in metaphilosophical questions concerning how we might conduct such philosophical inquiries.

Define and explain the sub-discipline of metaphysics within the field of philosophy. Develop a specification of metaphysics from with various philosophical fields of focus (especially pragmatist philosophy, neopragmatist philosophy, and continental philosophy).