

PHIL 266: American Philosophy

Spring 2011, The College of Wooster

Professor: Lee A. McBride III
Class Meets: MWF 11-11:50AM, Scovel 004
Email: Lmcbride@wooster.edu

Phone: 330-263-2548
Office: Scovel 202
Office Hours: _____ & by appt.

Course Description

This course offers a detailed examination of the central doctrines of two or more of the following American philosophies: transcendentalism, American idealism, radical empiricism, and pragmatism. We will critically engage (i) the influence of evolutionary theories on traditional conceptions of reality and truth, (ii) the motivations behind individualism and collectivism, and (iii) melioristic faith in moral and religious ideals. Readings will be drawn from challenging and provocative philosophers, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Margaret Fuller, William James, Josiah Royce, John Dewey, and Jane Addams. This will entail the careful reading, interpretation, and discussion of difficult texts as well as the exposition, critique, and construction of arguments.

Course Goals & Learning Objectives

1) Students will be able to effectively identify, formulate, and evaluate arguments.

Success in achieving this goal will be assessed by your ability to:

- Identify the difference between a position and an argument for a position.
- Extract an argument from a piece of text.
- Formulate an effective and well-reasoned argument for and against a position.

2) Students will be able to understand the fundamental methods and purposes of American philosophy and recognize how American philosophy fits into the larger philosophical tradition.

Success in achieving this goal will be assessed by your ability to:

- Recognize the central tenets of transcendentalism, American idealism, and pragmatism.
- Identify and critically evaluate arguments for and against individualism and collectivism.
- Explain American idealist and pragmatist conceptions of truth and reality.
- Construct an argument for and against the Absolute.

3) Students will be able to analyze current social conditions and potential responses to political issues in light of American philosophy.

Success in achieving this goal will be assessed by your ability to:

- Identify and critically evaluate the basic moral and religious commitments which inform political philosophy and ethics in American philosophy.
- Compare and contrast American methods of inquiry and critique by applying them to a current socio-political problem.
- Formulate a solution to a concrete, practical problem and construct an argument for that solution.

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Course Requirements and Methods of Assessment

Class Participation consists of both *active presence* and *classroom citizenship*. In this course, we will make use of a dialectical method, where students will be expected to actively participate in class discussions. You will be graded on the quality as well as the quantity of your contribution to the class.

Attendance is, thus, very important, for if you aren't in class, you can neither contribute to nor benefit from the class discussion. Each student will be afforded two absences (no questions asked). Each unexcused absence beyond two will knock two percentage points off your total course grade.

Students will also be expected to *attend this year's Lindner Lecture: Professor Susan Wolf, UNC Chapel Hill* (April 18th, 7:30PM) and write a *one-page reaction piece*. These reaction pieces will be collected at the beginning of the next class meeting and will count as a study question.

Students will be required to write an undisclosed number of **Study Questions Responses**. Study Questions will be assigned at the end of class. These questions will deal with the relevant reading material, and are meant to prepare the student for class discussion. Your answers are expected to be approximately one page in length, typed and double-spaced. This work will be collected at the beginning of the next class. Late work will not be accepted. There will be no make-up assignments, unless written verification of serious emergency is produced by a physician, police officer, etc.

Students will be required to write **Two Papers** (approximately 5-7 pages typed). Each paper will be on a specific assigned topic; paper guidelines will be distributed. Papers must be typed and follow the format detailed in the paper guidelines. Late papers will not be accepted, unless written verification of serious emergency is produced by The Dean of Students Office.

There will be **One Final Exam**. This exam will test the student's knowledge of some rudimentary concepts in American philosophy and the student's ability to address particular themes and issues critically. There will be no make-up exams, unless written verification of serious emergency is produced by The Dean of Students Office.

Grade Distribution

Participation (5%), Study Questions (20%), Paper #1 (20%), Paper #2 (30%), Final Exam (25%)

Required Materials

Dewey, John, *Freedom and Culture*. Prometheus Books, 1997. (ISBN-13: 978-0879755607, list price: \$15) [FC]

Emerson, Ralph Waldo, *Nature and Selected Essays*, Reissue Edition, ed. Larzer Ziff. New York: Penguin Classics, 2003. (ISBN: 978-0142437629, list price: \$14) [N]

James, William, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*. New York: Dover Publications, 1956. (ISBN: 978-0486202914, list price: \$13) [WB]

Royce, Josiah, *The Sources of Religious Insight*. Washington D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2001. (ISBN-13: 978-0813210735, list price: \$20) [SRI]

The texts are available at the Wilson Bookstore. Readings preceded by an asterisk (*) will be available via Woodle (<https://woodle.wooster.edu/>).

Syllabus is subject to change at the discretion of the instructor.

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Academic Honesty and the Code of Academic Integrity

While you are a student at Wooster, you are expected to know and abide by the rules of the institution as described in *The Scot's Key* and *The Handbook of Selected College Policies* (<http://www.wooster.edu/policies>). The Code of Academic Integrity will be strictly enforced. Academic dishonesty in any of your academic work is a serious breach of the Code of Academic Integrity and is grounds for an "F" for the entire course. Such violations include turning in another person's work as your own, copying from any source without proper citation, and fabricating excuses and lying in connection with your academic work. If you are unsure as to what is permissible, please consult your instructor.

Academic Resources

The Learning Center (ext. 2595) offers services designed to help students improve their overall academic performance. Sessions are structured to promote principles of effective learning and academic management. Any student on campus may schedule sessions at the Learning Center.

The Writing Center (ext. 2205) exists to help students develop their reading and writing skills. Staffed by experienced professionals and trained peer tutors, the Center is a free resource for all Wooster students who seek assistance planning, writing, and revising their academic texts.

Learning Disabilities and Academic Accommodations

Any student with a documented learning disability needing academic accommodations is requested to speak with Pam Rose, Director of the Learning Center (prose@wooster.edu), and the instructor, as early in the semester as possible. All discussions will remain confidential.

Conflicts with Academic Responsibilities

The College of Wooster is an academic institution and its fundamental purpose is to stimulate its students to reach the highest standard of intellectual achievement. The College expects students to give the highest priority to their academic responsibilities. When conflicts arise between academic commitments and complementary programs (including athletic, cultural, educational, and volunteer activities), students, faculty, staff, and administrators all share the responsibility of minimizing and resolving them. As a student you have the responsibility to inform the faculty member of potential conflicts as soon as you are aware of them, and work with the faculty member to identify alternative ways to fulfill your academic commitments without sacrificing the academic integrity and rigor of the course.

