

A Response to Critics

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As both commentators have noted, *American Philosophy: The Basics* contains an expanded conception of American philosophy and, in addition, it is a challenge to the very conception of what philosophy is. The traditional categories such as metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, and other areas of philosophical inquiry are the primary divisions in each chapter of the book, but that is perhaps the point at which nothing is quite the same. The themes of the book are the practical applications of philosophical ideas, revolutionary and evolutionary thought, and a critical and constructive look at how these two themes lead to the third, which focuses on justice, rights, and equality.

Perhaps part of my insistence to include non-traditional philosophical content in American philosophy, as well as in and in any other philosophy course I teach, has its roots in my own history in philosophy and in cultural traditions and practices that are important to me. When I was an undergraduate, it was men and *only* men whose works were presented as relevant to the canon. I wondered where the women were. I remember reading *On Liberty* and wondering why Harriet Taylor was not listed as a co-author since it appeared that she had so much to do with the book. I thought it odd when as an undergraduate I took American philosophy that my favorite professor never mentioned Elizabeth Cady Stanton or Jane Addams. I heard once that the reason none of the classes I took ever included Native American philosophy was that nothing Native Americans had to say was considered to be philosophy. Quite a few years ago at an American Philosophical Association meeting I overheard a conversation between people I did not personally know but who were prominent members of the APA that African American thought was not really philosophical and that at best it could be counted as some kind of social thought. I was disappointed, to say the least. In addition, I also heard that feminist philosophy was not *really* philosophy at all, and that it was, instead, just women complaining rather than producing something constructive. Women, according to the unidentified philosopher, had never produced anything sufficiently philosophical.

Imagine my relief being at the University of Central Florida where no one tells you that you cannot or should not try new things and new approaches, and where some people are actually even interested in them. Now, this does not mean that I have abandoned the problems and figures of so-called “traditional” philosophy. I think that it is important and essential, but I think it is *not* all that is important and essential in philosophy, and especially in American philosophy. American thinkers on the fringes of traditional philosophy should no longer be marginalized. Their ideas put in practice are, in my view, centrally important and thoroughly philosophical.

As Matt Groe noted, the wide range of topics and historical figures in the book is both a drawback and a benefit. The benefit is that some thinkers ordinarily excluded from the philosophical canon are discussed with respect to the thematic elements of the book. A major drawback is that none of the ideas and thinkers get a detailed explanatory or critical discussion. Yet, the book is about “the basics,” and I intended it to be an introduction to American philosophy, but an introduction to a conception of American philosophy not ordinarily encountered in the field. Just as an introduction to philosophy course is often a summary look at main ideas and historical figures, and students interested in those ideas and people might take more courses to fill in the “missing pieces,” I think this might also be what this little book can serve to do for American philosophy. There are certainly philosophers whose ideas and positions are not represented in my book. The publisher had a word limit, and that led to some tough decisions. To be able to do some justice to the themes, I chose what I hope will expand on them sufficiently for an introductory book.

Groe mentions that I include Kant, who clearly was not an American philosopher, and perhaps I devote too much space to him in this book. He also notes that Nietzsche appears at a point at which some of Emerson’s works are discussed. There are reasons for these two inclusions. One of them is explanatory strength and justification. The other is to show, as I did in occasionally mentioning other non-American philosophers, how American thought is philosophical. Examples include considering Ben Franklin’s understanding of the development of character from an Aristotelian point of view, Thomas Paine’s use of contract theory, and Angelina Grimke’s Kantian conception of individuals’ duties to end slavery. The reason for including Kant in the chapter on Emerson is in part explained by the importance of the dignity and value of the human being pervading much of American Revolutionary thought, from Emerson to Stanton and from Rawls to Nozick and beyond. In the book I discuss Nietzsche briefly because his work on power and strength are similar in many ways to Emerson’s thought.

As Groe notes—and I agree with him to some extent—my explanation of the place of Nietzsche is either incomplete or mis-stated. He takes exception to my discussion of the *ubermensch* with relation to Emerson’s ‘Over-Soul’. While I understand his point that not all those who take power and control are themselves *übertensch*, it does make them at least in part so because those in power often oppress others, and those who are oppressed oppose those who oppress them. Moreover, even if their opposition is resentful and mean-spirited, they still exhibit what they can of strength. Sometimes, righteous indignation over oppression and unfairness is considered resentful and mean-spirited by those who fear that their position of power will be challenged and ultimately lost to those who challenge them.

Groe’s second criticism has to do with my reading of Dewey, and I think the criticism might be expressed such that I take a Rortyan reading of Dewey rather than the more traditional reading,

thus making it appear that Dewey disparaged metaphysics. I think he is right that I take a Rortyan reading of Dewey, but I did not intend to make it appear that Dewey had nothing to contribute to metaphysics. There was a time when I disparaged the work of Rorty as not truly philosophical, and once while a graduate student I flippantly remarked in a seminar on post-modernism that real philosophy died around the time of John Stuart Mill. I am not sure what I meant by that at the time, and I was clearly wrong. Over time, I thought of what has happened and continues to happen in the world. There are wars and conflicts; there are racial divides and cultural misunderstandings leading to further disagreements, violence, cruelty, and dissent. I thought of the fact that Americans are often hated or disparaged while at the same time America is often the destination of those who are marginalized or oppressed – or who can't find jobs anywhere else – and that Americans are even then called imperialist dominators who want to force their culture and social norms on everyone else. Over these things, I sometimes get defensive and even somewhat insulted.

I read Rorty again – and again – and took to heart the notions of contingency, irony, and solidarity, and saw, for my use and for my interpretation, that American revolutionary thought and action, even when misguided or failed, is an attempt to fight oppression and to seek social justice and fairness. Perhaps Americans' attempts to fight oppression and to seek social justice and fairness are often driven after recognizing the accidental placement of ourselves in the world, and the radical contingency of everything we do and everything we are.

So when I take a Rortyan reading of Dewey, it is not much different from the practice of ignoring or reimagining Aristotle's views of the nature and status of women and non-Greeks while still being able to take and use and appreciate what is valuable in Aristotle's work. Alternately put, since I am in some ways a Hobbesian, I choose the parts of Hobbes's ideas that "work for me" and reject others -- such as absolute government, for example -- that go against the grain of the position I may be trying to make using Hobbes's ideas.

Groe also notes that when conflicts arise, it is with reference to Dewey's revisable metaphysics that Dewey thinks we have a chance to resolve different questions of legitimation. And this is just it. Dewey emphasizes the importance of community, and Rorty's uncomfortable combination of the individual and the community allows this reading of Dewey. Much of American philosophy is characterized by the tensions arising between the individual and the community, and this – a somewhat Rortyan reading of Dewey -- is one of the ways to deal with that tension.

Finally, Groe notes that he wants to know what I think philosophers have to learn from ideas taken from other voices. My answer to this is that it is perhaps to develop a feeling of solidarity, taking and utilizing common points and the disparate ones between and among many individuals, to see that we are all in this world together.

I turn now to Olen's comments. He noted that professionalization of philosophy means that philosophers are not concerned with application of their ideas in the professional realm. That is the reason that works from people like Sellars and Lewis are not included in *American Philosophy: The Basis*. They do not fit in the themes of the book. Lewis was writing and producing American philosophy, but without practical application for the purposes of my themes. His work was and is an event in American philosophy generally, but it was not the practical version of American philosophy that is the focus of my attention. Further, there is a distinction between American philosophy done by Americans (or done in America) and philosophy that is in some way distinctly American. While this distinction may not be perfectly clear, perhaps this example will help to explain it. When I write about or teach Hobbes, I am not engaged producing work in American philosophy or teaching American philosophy as I conceive of it. Instead, I am an American engaged in a philosophical pursuit about philosophy more generally.

Olen noted that the sense of professionalization that privileges standardization of style and publication over practical application is "almost *the* definition" of philosophy in our time. Maybe so; but it might also be that this is part of the reason that professional philosophy is widely disparaged in the non-philosophical community. We look to chemistry to be able to create things that we can use and in the ideal cases to make the world and our lives better. Psychological inquiry into areas such as team cognition is used to increase and to enhance the efficacy of work of people in groups. And philosophy ought, in my view, to follow this general approach in practical application. Our discipline is being threatened from many sides, including but certainly not limited to the economic realm in the form of reduced funding and the transformation of philosophy into a service area in higher education. Philosophy is sometimes the target of political agendas. It is subject often to misconstrued and misunderstood notions of what philosophy is. And it is often marginalized with the current emphasis on STEM fields and away from the arts and humanities. The problem with the professionalization of philosophy and its turn toward the model of science is an ironic one, I think. Philosophers who engage in research and teaching on the model of scientific inquiry or procedures are failing miserably since the sciences – STEM fields – generally do not recognize philosophy as having anything much to do with the sciences, and in turn the public does not see us as doing anything worthwhile.

So even if Olen is right that the practical was the focus of 19th-Century American philosophy, but it is not that way so much now, its lack of practicality is the result of looking at what philosophy is from a narrow point of view. It is not a narrow point of view with people such as Rorty, African American philosophers, or Native American thought. If American philosophers engaged in professional philosophy as Olen has described it do not now focus on the practical it is not that they cannot do so, it is instead that they are not doing so – and that is the point at which I

think it depends on how philosophy is defined and who is counted as a philosopher. When we begin to count Americans who are philosophers who create or conceive of ways of doing, being, and knowing that point toward change and what we can do with our ideas, it leads us precisely to the possibility that those who count as philosophers are not just the ones engaged in theoretical pursuits.

So yes, Lewis, Quine, and Sellars count as American philosophers. Perhaps there are two strains of American philosophy – the theoretical and purely speculative, and the practical.

Olen asked how my book applies to recent and contemporary American philosophers. Olen contends that it does not. My answer is that it does not apply to those in the purely theoretical and “professional” tradition, but that when we think of feminist, African American, and Native American philosophers, in addition to those who focus on justice, revolution, and the practical application of philosophical ideas, this book certainly does apply to the 20th Century, to the 21st Century, and beyond.

Olen notes that contemporary Pragmatists are not particularly concerned with the concrete difference their ideas make in general. I think they ought to be concerned, both for the development of philosophy and for the survival of the discipline against the swelling tide that is science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. We as philosophers deal with what ought to be, with what things mean and how we can know them. However, if we persist in limiting philosophy to the speculative or believing that thought is only philosophical when it is speculative, then maybe Hume was right. It should be committed to the flames.