The Blackwell Guide to American Philosophy

Edited by
Armen T. Marsoobian and John Ryder
The Blackwell Guide to
American Philosophy
Blackwell Philosophy Guides

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This *Guide* is the culmination of many years of effort on the part of the editors. Early in the process we received invaluable guidance from John J. McDermott, who strongly believed in the book’s importance given the then prevalent amnesia surrounding the history of American philosophy. The Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy has provided an intellectually nourishing community for many of the scholars who have contributed to this volume. Creating this volume would have been a much more difficult task without this society. The editors would also like to acknowledge a strong philosophical debt to Justus Buchler. It was in Buchler’s seminars at State University of New York at Stony Brook that the editors had their first significant exposure to the rich diversity of thought that marks the American philosophical tradition. We dedicate this volume to the memory of Justus Buchler.

Heartfelt gratitude must go to Erin K. Carter who contributed much toward making the diverse chapters of this volume stylistically consistent and eminently readable. Thanks also goes to Alex Larson, a student assistant, who helped manage many aspects of this project. Finally, Connecticut State University is gratefully acknowledged for the financial support that helped make this project possible.
Editors’ Introduction

This book is a guide to American philosophy, not to philosophy in America. The distinction is an important one. Beginning roughly after the end of the Second World War, as John McDermott points out in the Epilogue to this book, American philosophers turned to various European philosophical movements then current for their inspiration. For most of the latter half of the twentieth century philosophy in America concerned itself primarily with the issues and developments in logical and linguistic analysis that stemmed from the influence of the Vienna Circle and from the work of Bertrand Russell and Ludwig Wittgenstein in the UK. To a lesser extent, some philosophers in America turned their attention to the work in phenomenology and existentialism that had its primary home in Germany and France.

But American philosophy, with which all of the chapters in this book deal, is something else. Above all, it means the philosophical studies undertaken by what are often called the “classical American philosophers” of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This was the period of Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, George Santayana, Josiah Royce, Alfred North Whitehead, and many others; this was the period during which philosophical pragmatism was born, first in the work of Peirce, and soon after to be developed in novel directions by James and Dewey. It was also the period in which American philosophical naturalism developed a sense of itself as a distinctive philosophical perspective. Santayana was a naturalist philosopher, as was his contemporary John Dewey, and building on the work of Dewey and his colleague F. J. E. Woodbridge, a school of philosophical naturalism developed at Columbia University that prospered into the 1960s.

American philosophy of the classical period of course did not create itself ex nihilo. No philosophical perspective ever does. Peirce, James, Dewey and their colleagues knew and valued the work of many of the philosophers in America who had preceded them. Chief among them were the earlier nineteenth-century idealists, including of course the Transcendentalists Emerson and Thoreau. James, in
addition, had greater intimacy with many European ideas as a result of his frequent trips to Germany and France. Peirce and Dewey especially had their philosophical training in the broadly idealistic intellectual milieu of the mid-nineteenth century, under the influence of both Emersonian Transcendentalism and the Hegelianism of recent German immigrants.

But then American idealism was not spun out of whole cloth either. In fact, not surprisingly, the story of American philosophy begins in the early years of the North American colonies, to which brilliant colonial figures brought their European intellectual traditions, which they in turn used in their confrontation with conditions peculiar to their new home. The social and political theory of the seventeenth-century Puritans is a case in point—in fact the entire Puritan intellectual edifice is an example. Puritan philosophy reached its apex in the early eighteenth century in the work first of Cotton Mather and then, most famously, in the person of Jonathan Edwards. At the same time other factors were at work, expressed in one direction by the Anglican philosopher Samuel Johnson, and in a more practical, and ultimately political direction by Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and the entire revolutionary generation. American idealism of the nineteenth century developed as an extension of certain of these trends and as a reaction against others. In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the impact of Darwinism and other evolutionary theories had a telling impact on this idealism and set the stage for the naturalism and scientism of the decades to follow. The point, however, is that there is a continuous story of the development of American philosophy from its Puritan origins through the classical period of the pragmatists and naturalists, to contemporary writings by a number of philosophers who work in the broadly defined pragmatist and naturalist traditions. The chapters in this volume tell that story.

Organization

A word is in order first about the organization of the book, and then about the principles of selection of the individual chapters. The volume is divided into three sections plus an Epilogue. The three sections cover the historical background, the major figures in American philosophy, and the major themes in the tradition. The essays in Part I provide a broad overview of the historical trajectory of American philosophy from the colonial period through nineteenth- and twentieth-century idealism to the pragmatism and naturalism that have dominated the tradition from the late nineteenth century to the present.

Part II, which constitutes the bulk of the volume, consists of individual essays on the major figures in the tradition, as well as those who have particular interest in contemporary circumstances. There is invariably a certain degree of overlap between essays in the first and second sections. Some of the ground covered in chapter 3, on pragmatism, reappears in the essays in Part II on the major prag-
Editors’ Introduction

One of the most difficult problems editors of a volume of this sort face is selecting the topics to be covered, or, more seriously, the individual philosophers to be included. With respect to the topics, it is obvious enough that there must be chapters on pragmatism, idealism, naturalism, community, and experience, since these intellectual movements and topics are at the heart of the American philosophical tradition. With respect to the individual thinkers to be included, it is also obvious enough that there must be chapters on Peirce, James, Royce, Santayana, Dewey, Mead, and Whitehead. Beyond these major figures, the principles of selection

become murkier. Because this, like any volume, is constrained by space, it was neces-
sary to leave out many figures for whom a plausible case for inclusion could easily be made.

First, we decided not to include any essays on figures before the “classical” period, which we regard to have begun with Peirce. Readers interested in the work of Edwards, Franklin, Thoreau, or Emerson may turn especially to the historical chapters in Part I. Second, a collection like this might rightly include, for example, essays on such classical or post-classical period figures as F. J. E. Woodbridge, Roy Wood Sellars, John Herman Randall, Jr., Ernest Nagel, or Sidney Hook, and we could mention many others. In the end, we decided that we would include repre-
sentative figures who developed the classical tradition in interesting or influen-
tial ways. Thus there are chapters devoted to C. I. Lewis, W. V. O. Quine, and Justus Buchler.

We also decided that in the section on major figures we would not include any who are currently writing. That is not because there are no interesting or impor-
tant philosophers currently at work in the American stream, but because the tra-
dition itself is so rich that, given the space constraints, it was impossible to do justice to both its historical depth and its current vitality. Some of the essays in the sections on historical background and major themes, however, do address con-
temporary work, so the reader may look there to obtain a sense of the work cur-
rently being done. It is in those essays that the insights of Richard Rorty, for example, and John Lachs, as well as some of the contributors to the volume itself, for example Joseph Margolis and John McDermott, are discussed. Thanks to these individuals, and many others, the American philosophical tradition is not only alive, but currently in the midst of a robust reawakening.

Finally, we would like to point out that there are essays here that we can say with confidence would not have appeared in a comparable volume twenty or even fewer years ago. This is due to the view we have taken of the nature of a literary canon. As a general point, history, including literary and intellectual history, lives in the present. That is to say that it is in the present that history has meaning, and power. This means, among other things, that the significance of historical devel-
oppments, and again this includes the literary and the intellectual, is to some impor-
tant degree determined not simply by past events but as importantly by present problems and concerns. Within the past two decades, attention among scholars interested in American philosophy has extended to areas it had not inhabited before, particularly with respect to questions of race and gender. That this should happen is particularly appropriate in the context of the study of American philos-
ophy, since it is one of the hallmarks of the American tradition, stated powerfully by Dewey and others, that if philosophy is to have significance it cannot restrict itself to the problems of the past, but it must turn its attention to the problems of the present. This is the heart of what Dewey meant by the phrase “recon-
struction in philosophy.” In that spirit, scholars of American philosophy have in recent years paid increasing attention both to African American and women philosophers in the tradition, and to the bearing their work and insights may have
in contemporary circumstances. Thus we have included chapters on four figures who, though well known before, have only recently taken up an appropriate place among the central thinkers in the history of American philosophy. The chapters on W. E. B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jane Addams, and Susanne Langer describe both the character and power of their thought, as well as the direction of current scholarship in the study and application of their work.

It is our hope that the collection of essays included in this volume, written by the best scholars in the field, can contribute to the current renascence of American philosophy. As Dewey might have put it, we are today sorely in need of intellectual insight and an intelligent approach to the problems of individual and social life. As these essays indicate, there is a wealth of such insight and intellectual guidance in the American philosophical tradition.
Part I

Historical Traditions
Introduction: The Span of Early American Philosophy

The term “early American philosophy” refers to philosophy in the British colonies of North America, in particular the colonies that would later become the United States of America, from the middle years of the seventeenth century until the early nineteenth century, a span of almost two hundred years. That span of time includes as its major stages orthodox Puritanism as it developed in the colonies, the period in the early eighteenth century when Puritanism confronted the then modern scientific and philosophical work of Isaac Newton and John Locke, the social and natural philosophy of the revolutionary period, and the emerging philosophical idealism of the early nineteenth century.

A number of outstanding philosophers and scientists lived and worked in the colonies during this period. Among the more important Puritan thinkers of the seventeenth century were John Cotton, John Winthrop, and Increase Mather, all of whom represented orthodox Puritanism. At the same time there were several important Puritan dissenters, notably Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. By the early eighteenth century Puritanism needed to confront the new work of Newton and Locke. Some early attempts were undertaken by Cotton Mather, and later by the most profound thinker American Puritanism ever produced, Jonathan Edwards. At the same time, other Puritan thinkers began to mix traditional Puritan thought with emerging social ideas of popular sovereignty and even natural rights. In the early eighteenth century the most important of these was the preacher John Wise, and in mid-century Jonathan Mayhew began to mix Puritanism with more secular, almost revolutionary thought.

By the eighteenth century other thinkers, who either broke away from Puritanism or who grew out of other theological traditions altogether, began to engage European philosophy in an American colonial context. One of these was Samuel Johnson, an Anglican minister who became Bishop Berkeley’s most
influential representative in the colonies. Johnson, following Berkeley, was a philosophical idealist, but at the same time as he wrote, which was in the first half of the eighteenth century, a materialist tradition began to develop. The most influential materialist philosopher at this time was the Edinburgh-educated physician Cadwallader Colden, whose fascinating career included philosophical writings on materialism, important contacts with and writings about the Iroquois Confederacy in the New York colony, and serving for 16 years as Lieutenant Governor of the Province of New York. Colden’s career spanned most of the first three-quarters of the eighteenth century, since he died in 1776. Among his contemporaries in what might be called the early American Enlightenment was the much more well-known philosopher, scientist, inventor, entrepreneur, ambassador, and political revolutionary Benjamin Franklin.

By the time of Colden’s death, American philosophy entered a new stage, one that was dominated by the revolutionary break from England and the efforts to forge a new nation, a new government, and in some respects a new kind of society. Not surprisingly, the intellectual emphasis at this time to a certain extent turned away from the theological concerns of the Puritans and the more abstract interests of people like Colden to the social and political issues generated by the Revolution and the subsequent birth of the United States. The most outstanding philosophical figures at this time were Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and James Madison, whose work provided the theoretical background to and the substance of the social and political events of the revolutionary years and the period of the development of the Federal Constitution in the 1770s and 1780s. As important as social and political philosophy was during these years, however, American philosophers did continue to attend to more theoretical questions of natural philosophy. Among the more important of these people were Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Rush, and Thomas Cooper.

By the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries there was a turn away from the natural philosophy, materialism, and revolutionary social thought of the Enlightenment to a more pronounced philosophical idealism, which corresponded to a religious revival that sprang up around the country. One result of the rejection of the early interest in natural philosophy and materialism, coupled with the increasing influence of religion, was the rise of Transcendentalism, a philosophical and literary movement that dominated American thought, particularly in New England.

The Context of Early American Thought

No philosophical thinking ever occurs in a vacuum, in the sense that it appropriates certain intellectual traditions and it addresses issues and problems that are conditioned by the intellectual milieu and by the economic, social, and political contexts of its time. This is certainly true of American philosophy in the colonial
and revolutionary periods. The Puritans of New England brought with them from England a number of philosophical and religious conceptions. They were strongly Calvinist, which means among other things that they regarded the world as fully determined by the will of God, and this included the destinies of human beings both during their lives and for eternity. Their Calvinism was influenced by the sixteenth-century Dutch theologian Ramus, himself a Reformation era heir to the Platonism and Aristotelianism of the later Middle Ages. Puritans’ thinking, consequently, took as a given the view that God was fully in control of the world and human destinies, the truth of certain Platonist and Aristotelian conceptions of the relation of nature and human beings to God, and the belief that their role in creating a society in the New World reflected God’s will.

One of the most important assumptions of the Puritans, in fact the one that compelled them to leave England for the New World, was what came to be called Congregationalism. This is the view that social communities are to be constructed on religious principles, one of which is that social and political authority should reside with the religious leaders chosen by the congregation. As a result of these assumptions, Puritan thinking, even about social and political matters, was thoroughly theological. Puritan communities were theocratic, and their philosophical investigations inevitably reflect that fact.

In the early years of the New England colonies Puritan thinking concerned primarily the details of the ways their theocratic assumptions could best be put into practice. They had to decide how to structure their new societies, how to understand the relation between religious authority and secular problems, how to understand themselves, chosen as they were to do God’s will in the New World, in relation to the native inhabitants of the areas they colonized, and not least importantly the extent of the congregation’s authority in relation to that of the leadership. These were precisely the questions that caused Anne Hutchinson, Roger Williams, and others to dissent from the decisions of the authorities, and ultimately to strike out on their own. The problem was that the Puritans, and similar groups such as the Pilgrims, had left England in search of the freedom to pursue their own religious goals. They did not, however, hold that religious freedom was a good in itself. In America that view belongs to the late eighteenth century. The Puritans searched for the freedom to pursue their religious life not because religious freedom is paramount but because they believed that their view was the truth. It took a good deal of theoretical and practical struggle before religious freedom became a good in itself.

As time went on, the intellectual, economic, and political contexts began to change. By the end of the seventeenth century, for example, the English Crown had reasserted its control over the Puritan colonies, which compelled the Puritan intellectuals to reconsider the place of their congregations in new political contexts. Furthermore, the Puritans, still thinking themselves special in God’s eyes, began to feel threatened by the French Catholics in nearby Quebec, a threat that they saw in religious terms as the encroachment of evil on the kingdom of God’s elect. Again, Puritan thinking began to take a new turn, as it had to address its
problems in a new light. Most importantly of all, however, was the appearance in the New World of the work of Isaac Newton and John Locke in the early eighteenth century. The most astute of the Puritan thinkers, Jonathan Edwards the greatest among them, realized that the world-view expressed in Newton’s physics and mathematics, and the conception of human nature and political relations developed by Locke, were fundamental challenges to their understanding of the world. Edwards attempted to adjust his Calvinism to accommodate them, but he was to fail. Other Puritan thinkers, such as John Wise and Jonathan Mayhew, responded to the new ideas, and to new social and political realities, by adopting new conceptions. For Wise it was a somewhat democratic impulse based on Puritanism’s initial Congregationalism, and for Mayhew it was the conception of natural rights.

By the middle of the eighteenth century the colonial economic situation had changed so thoroughly that to many people the older social and political relations, especially the relationship between the colonies and Great Britain, seemed no longer to work. In this context it is not surprising that a new emphasis on social and political theory arose. As the break with Great Britain approached, it became clear to its leaders that a theoretical justification would need to be developed, the result of which was the appropriation of English and French political theory to support the concepts of natural rights and popular sovereignty, most profoundly and succinctly expressed in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, but in other documents as well. Similarly, the rise in sophisticated political theory, the greatest practitioner of which was James Madison, came itself as a response to the demands of the American political situation in the years after the revolutionary war. Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and others rose to the occasion to create the theoretical underpinnings of the new, secular republic.

History did not end with the creation of the Constitution in 1789, however. The country continued to expand, creating new economic opportunities and problems, and associated social developments. Furthermore, religious thought began to take a different tack, even in the older settled regions of the eastern seaboard that had accommodated themselves to the secularism that underwrote revolutionary social and political thinking. As a result, in both the new settlements in the “west,” and in older communities in the east, theologians, philosophers, and literary figures began to explore more spiritually oriented intellectual possibilities.

The Trajectory of Early American Philosophy

It can be dangerous to attempt to generalize about a philosophical period, especially one as complex as the nearly two centuries that are under consideration here. The danger of course is over-simplification, not to mention the risk of too selective an emphasis. With that danger in mind, though, it is advantageous to consider several themes that appear in early American thought which have been
exceptionally influential throughout American history. If their emphasis is selective, it is because they scream to be selected.

The overriding theme is that of building a new world. From their earliest settlements, the Puritans saw themselves as creating something new, something unique, something special, something particularly delightful in God’s eyes. They referred to themselves as constructing the New Canaan, or the City on a Hill. Their new world would embody God’s will in a way that no other had done before. In this very Puritan conception is the seed of what would come to be called American exceptionalism, the view that for one reason or another America holds a unique place among nations, and that it has a special mission. On the one hand, this view has been the source of great hope for Americans. We are, it is sometimes said, an optimistic people, and it is certainly easier to be optimistic if one believes that one is special, or in a certain sense chosen, or at least that one’s society is the light to which all others look for hope. On the other hand, the belief that one has a special mission or destiny can be tragically dangerous. The Puritan City on a Hill grew into the nineteenth-century notion of Manifest Destiny, which itself was used to justify the ruthless destruction of Native Americans and their societies. It was also the justification of the beginnings of American imperialism at the turn of the twentieth century. And later in the twentieth century it sustained the American leadership, and much of the American population, through the Cold War, sometimes to devastating effect in such places as Vietnam. Even Ronald Reagan would appeal to the Puritan’s own language, as he did in a speech proclaiming again that America was and remains the City on a Hill.

The shortcomings of these consequences of early American thought, however, should not obscure its virtues. The same theme of building a new world that was expressed in Puritanism reappeared in the revolutionary thought of the eighteenth century. The Puritans may have tried to construct a New Canaan, but the revolutionary leaders from 1776 through 1789 succeeded in constructing a new republic. Though that republic was not then, nor is it now, the model of pure virtue that many of its most vocal supporters assert, it is nonetheless a positive historical development of extreme importance. Jefferson, Paine, Madison, and others legitimated, in a way no one else had been able to do, the concepts of rights, of sovereignty, of popular government, of republicanism, of religious freedom, and of democracy. The philosophical and practical uses to which those concepts were put gave them a new currency, and they have continued to inspire social activists and political visionaries to this day.

Seventeenth-Century Puritanism

The Puritans were members of one of the many religious sects that developed in England and Scotland during the course of the sixteenth-century Reformation. By the end of the century, with the reign of Elizabeth I, the Church of England had
assumed the position of the established church in the realm. For many Christians, however, the Church of England had not distanced itself sufficiently from the theology and practices of Rome, and so a number of other traditions developed, many of which were influenced by the Calvinism that had become prominent in several places on the continent. The Puritans were one such group. Since the concept of religious freedom was not well established in any of the religious traditions of the time, however, the Church of England was not tolerant of the many dissenting sects. In the early years of the seventeenth century many of the Puritans, who felt that they would never be able to pursue their religious beliefs and practices freely in England, left first for Holland and then for the New World. In North America they settled in several colonies in what became, collectively, the Massachusetts Bay Colony. By the 1640s the Puritans in England had become much stronger, and in fact they were able, as the leading force in the parliamentary rebellion against the Stuart monarchy, to gain power in England and establish the Puritan Commonwealth, a regime that survived until the Restoration of the monarchy in the early 1660s.

In North America, the Puritan settlers developed their own intellectual, social, and political traditions in response to their unique circumstances and needs. As we have seen, they brought with them the Calvinism, itself heavily Augustinian in orientation, of their home communities in England. In their version of Augustinianism, the history of humankind since the Fall is a history of the battle between good and evil. In the end, because God is in absolute, that is to say complete and fully determined, control of events, and since God is all good, history is the stage on which good progressively triumphs over evil. In that struggle, however, people play a crucial role as instruments of either good or evil. One of the most profound features of Calvinism is its belief in predestination, which is the view that the destiny of any given individual is fully determined by God independently of anything the individual does in life. Any other view would be inconsistent with God’s omnipotence. Since one’s eternal destiny is predetermined, it became important to Puritans to live such lives as would provide “signs” that one is among the chosen, the elect. To be among the elect, and to carry on one’s life in the context of the battle of good with evil, defined the theological atmosphere in which Puritan thought addressed its problems, the most crucial of which were social and political.

The three concepts most central to Puritan social and political theory were the distinction between the visible and the invisible “churches,” covenant theory, and Congregationalism. In the mid-seventeenth century the Puritan leader John Cotton developed his conception of the unity of the visible and invisible churches. As the colonies developed and proliferated, it became necessary to develop an understanding of the relations among them and of their essential unity. Cotton did this by arguing that the “visible” churches, by which he meant the many distinct Puritan communities, all had a single, “invisible” source, and so they were unified as distinct expressions of a single foundation. The invisible ground of the earthly communities was of course God’s will and power, and the distinct
communities, as expressions of that source, took on the single obligation to express and effect God’s will. The political authorities of the communities, then, were themselves understood to be the guardians of God’s will, and they in turn assumed the responsibility to ensure that God’s will and purposes were manifested in the social life of the communities and protected from the threats posed by the ever present forces of evil. In such a community, there was no room for dissent.

The question of the nature of freedom was also important for the Puritans to consider. John Winthrop developed the theory of the distinction between natural and civil or moral freedom. Natural freedom is the capacity to do as one wills, which includes and even allows the capacity to do evil. Natural freedom, or doing as one wills, is to be contrasted with civil or moral freedom which, according to the divine law, places limits and constraints on the exercise of natural freedom. Natural freedom, as the capacity to sin, is an instrument of evil. Civil and moral freedom, by contrast, represent law as it flows from the will of God, law that provides the conditions necessary for a spiritually informed life.

Civil and moral freedom, and the relation between the visible and the invisible church, were secured through what the Puritans called the Covenant. Many later American commentators have regarded Puritan covenant theory as an early expression of what was in the eighteenth century to become social contract theory, one of the most important theoretical foundations of the concept of popular sovereignty and constitutionalism. The Puritan Covenant was an agreement between the members of the community and God, the most famous example of which was the Pilgrims’ Mayflower Compact. Agreements or covenants like this one served as the foundation of Puritan communities, combining as they did the fledgling democracy of Puritan congregations, in the form of a limited popular sovereignty, and the Calvinist commitment to ground society in God’s will.

The incipiently democratic character of Puritan communities, their Congregationalism, was the third significant feature of Puritan social and political theory and practice. One of the objections maintained by those who dissented from the Church of Rome, and subsequently the Church of England, was that too much religious authority was concentrated in the central hierarchy of the church. As an alternative, the Puritans developed an organizational structure whereby individual religious communities, or congregations, would maintain and govern their own religious and social life. On the one hand, this decentralized structure created a problem, since despite its virtues there remained a practical and theoretical need for unity among the congregations. As we have seen, the concept of the “invisible church” was an attempt at the theoretical level to develop the necessary unity. On the other hand, Puritan Congregationalism served over time as a soil in which the seeds of democracy could sprout. Despite its theocratic and what we would probably now consider to be narrow-minded understanding of the world, the legitimation of local, decentralized authority in Puritan Congregationalism made it possible for the eighteenth-century concepts of individual rights and popular sovereignty to break through the tradition of aristocratic privilege and the absolute authority of the monarch.