This course will explore the question of what it means to be an American from a philosophical perspective, with a special focus on philosophers in the American tradition: Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, William James, John Dewey, Jane Addams, and others. Topics will include questions about immigration and identity, justice and inclusion, nature and technology, and hope for progress. Contemporary affairs will be discussed from a philosophical perspective.
Course Plan

• Oct. 2: The Problem of American Philosophy
  • Who are we? What do we value? What unites and divides us?

• Oct. 9: Individualism, Polarization, and Division
  • Problems: Monism, Pluralism, Relativism and Moral Anarchism

• Oct. 16: Science, Religion, and Secularism
  • Problems: Empiricism, Mysticism, and Fundamentalism

• Oct. 23: Pragmatism, Experimentation, and the Future
  • Problems: Change/Progress, Fear, Meliorism, Hope

American Values Survey

• Please go to our Instagram page (@FresnoEthics) and click the link in our bio to take the American Values Survey.

• You can also click on links posted on Facebook (FresnoEthicsCenter)

• Or Twitter (@FresnoEthics)

• https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSc5qpTWqocBcAe1QcnOMm52ukxEuX3eN4TiD9i6UYeBk7RBQ/viewform
Ethics Center Events
http://www.fresnostate.edu/artshum/ethicscenter/

- Gandhi Candlelight Vigil: October 2; 6 p.m. at the Fresno State Peace Garden
- Gandhi’s Legacy Conference (University Business Center—Peters 191)
- October 10
  - 1:00-2:30 Film & Discussion:
  - 3:00-4:15: Ramsey Jay Jr.,
  - 6:00-7:45: James Lawson, Jr. Satellite Student Union
- October 11
  - 9:00am: Dolores Huerta with James Lawson,
  - 10:00am: Panel with Cheyney Ryan and Amir Hussain
- October 14: Ela Gandhi lecture

Black Elk’s Wisdom

- There can never be peace between nations until there is known that true peace, which, as I have often said, is within the souls of men.
  - Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe* (1953)
Dark skies: UN meeting reveals world in a really bad mood

AP News Sept 29, 2019
https://www.apnews.com/64c82e3def7e42089e8d7f713b3b6c01


• There are those mornings when you come into work and everyone seems cranky. That’s how it felt at the United Nations this past week during the annual gathering of world leaders. Speech after gloomy speech by leaders from all corners of the planet pointed toward one bleaker-than-thou conclusion: Humanity clearly needs a spa day.

October 2:
The Problem of American Philosophy

• What is philosophy? What is American?

• What are American Values? Who best represents them?


• Critical Problems: Rapacity, Selfishness, Colonialism, Eurocentrism, Genocide, Slavery, Immigration, Racism, Sexism

• Questions: Does American philosophy include Canada, Mexico, etc.? Does American philosophy include Latin American, African American, Native American philosophy? Etc.?
Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* Preface 1855

• The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem. In the history of the earth hitherto the largest and most stirring appear tame and orderly to their ampler largeness and stir.

• Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.

• Here is the hospitality which forever indicates heroes.

• The largeness of nature or the nation were monstrous without a corresponding largeness and generosity of the spirit of the citizen.

![Walt Whitman](image)

Walt Whitman
1819-1892

American Philosophy as Practical Philosophy

• My idea of philosophy is that if it does not tell us how we can go about eradicating some of the misery in this world, then it is not worth the name of philosophy. I think that Socrates made a very profound statement when he asserted that the raison d’être of philosophy is to teach us proper living.

  • Angela Y. Davis, *Lectures on Liberation* (1971)

![Angela Davis](image)

Angela Davis
b. 1944
American Philosophy as Practical Philosophy

- Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up and sets each one at work.... If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle.... It is astonishing to see how many philosophical disputes collapse into insignificance the moment you subject them to this simple test of tracing a concrete consequence.... You must bring out of each word its practical cash-value, set it at work within the stream of your experience.... Theories thus become instruments
  - William James, *Pragmatism* (1906)

William James
1842-1910

A Brief History of American Philosophy
The Traditional View

- Colonial
  - John Winthrop (1588-1649)
  - Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
  - Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
- 19th Century
  - Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
  - Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)
  - William James (1842-1910)
- 20th Century
  - John Dewey (1859-1952)
  - Josiah Royce (1855-1916)
  - George Santayana (1863-1952)
  - W.V.O. Quine (1908-2000)
  - John Rawls (1921-2002)
The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy

George Santayana, “The Genteel Tradition in American Philosophy” 1911

• America is a young country with an old mentality: it has enjoyed the advantages of a child carefully brought up, and thoroughly indoctrinated; it has been a wise child. But a wise child, an old head on young shoulders, always has a comic and an unpromising side. The wisdom is a little thin and verbal, not aware of its full meaning and grounds;

• America is not simply, as I said a moment ago, a young country with an old mentality: it is a country with two mentalities, one a survival of the beliefs and standards of the fathers, the other an expression of the instincts, practice, and discoveries of the younger generations.
A Different Vision of American Philosophy

A Brief History of American Philosophy
A Contemporary Reconstruction

- Colonial
  - John Winthrop (1588-1649)
  - Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758)
  - Thomas Paine (1737-1809)
  - Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)
  - Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790)
- 19th Century
  - Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)
  - Margaret Fuller (1810-1850)
  - Frederick Douglass (1818-1895)
  - Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)
  - Walt Whitman (1819-1892)
  - John Muir (1838-1914)
  - William James (1842-1910)
- 20th Century
  - Jane Addams (1860-1935)
  - Charlotte Perkins Gilman (1860-1935)
  - John Dewey (1859-1952)
  - Josiah Royce (1855-1916)
  - George Santayana (1863-1952)
  - Hefiaka Sapa (Black Elk) (1863 – 1950)
  - W.E.B. DuBois (1868-1963)
- 21st Century
  - Noam Chomsky (b. 1928)
  - Enrique Dussel (b.1934)
  - Angela Davis (b. 1944)
  - Naomi Zack (b. 1944)
  - Martha Nussbaum (b. 1947)
  - Cornel West (b. 1953)
  - David Martinez (b. 1963)
  - Carlos Sanchez (b. 1975)
**Enrique Dussell**  
*America Founded by Europe’s Conquering Ego*

• The modern ego cogito was anticipated by more than a century by the practical, Spanish-Portuguese ego conquiro (I conquer) that imposed its will on the indigenous populations of the Americas. The conquest of Mexico thus became the first sphere of the modern ego.

• From 1492, modern Europe used the conquest of the South American continent (North America entered into the picture only in the seventeenth century) as the springboard to obtain a crucial comparative advantage over its antagonistic cultures (Turkish Muslim, Chinese, and so on). For the most part, Europe’s superiority would be the offspring of its accumulation of riches, experience, and knowledge derived from the conquest of the Latin American continent.
  • Dussell, “Europe, Modernity, and Eurocentrism”

**Vine Deloria, Jr.:**  
*Organic knowledge v. knowledge as power*

• In Indian understandings there is nothing but a natural world. The outstanding aspect of knowledge... is that all information about the world we live in has a moral content and is directed at the relationships that humans enjoy with the world and its creatures. It is the moral dimension that makes knowledge whole and useful and requires the individual to act in a manner consistent with his or her beliefs and understanding of things.

• Western civilization, unfortunately, does not link knowledge and morality but rather, it connects knowledge and power and makes them equivalent.

  • Vine Deloria, Jr. Forward to *Words of Power: Voices from Indian America* (1994)
What is the motto of the United States? What should our motto be?

- **E Pluribus Unum**: the first official motto

- **In God We Trust**: became the official motto in 1956

- **Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God**: Benjamin Franklin’s proposed motto Jefferson’s personal motto

- **With God as our Defender**: (Deo Vindice) Motto of the Confederacy
In God We Trust

- 1814: Francis Scott Key, “The Star-Spangled Banner”
  - “And this be our motto: In God is our trust. And the Star Spangled Banner in triumph shall wave, O’er the land of the free and the home of the brave.
- 1860’s: on Coins and Money
- 1950’s: Eisenhower Era
  - “Under God” added to the Pledge of Allegiance
  - “In God We Trust” adopted as National Motto: Must appear on all paper money
- 2000’s: Adopted as State Mottos and put up in public places
- 2017: Fresno City Council adds it to the dais
- June 2019: Supreme Court refuses to hear a lawsuit by Michael Newdow and other atheists claiming that “In God We Trust” on money violates the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause.
First Appearance of “In God We Trust”
1864—2 cent piece

Masonic elements?

• Annuit Coeptis (13 letters)
  • “He nods”
• Novus Ordo Seclorum
  • “New Order of the Ages”
The Great Seal

- E Pluribus Unum (13 letters)
  - Out of many, one

Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God

Thomas Jefferson’s Seal

A medal commissioned by Jefferson as Governor of Virginia

Artwork designed in 1850’s Following Ben Franklin’s design
American history and values
America is:

- A city on a hill that values obedience, mercy, and fear of God. It is a Christian nation.
- A democratic model. It values liberty and self-reliance. It is a leader on human rights and the spread of democracy.
- A racist, slave-master nation. It values domination, obedience, and conformity. It is based on slavery, segregation, eugenics, inequality, and police power.
- An asylum for immigrants. It values hospitality, generosity, and diversity. It helps the poor, the refugees, and those yearning for freedom and opportunity.
- An imperial nation. It values military power and global supremacy. It wants power, global economic and military dominance.
- A secular and scientific nation. It values religious liberty, the separation of church and state, and the scientific method. It defends religious minorities and the freedom of thought, science, technology, and the arts.
- A nation of experimenters. It values creativity, entrepreneurship, and nonconformity. It leads in cultural, technological, and business innovation.
- An anti-intellectual nation. It rejects complex ideas and insists on intuition and feeling. It denies science, promotes superstition, and resists modernity.
- A capitalist nation. It values profit and progress. It exploits labor and the environment in order to extract gains and build wealth.

Who gets to decide?

- Who are the Americans?
- What defines us?
- What keeps us together?
- Should we separate?
‘Love it or leave it’ isn’t the smart path to making America great
Andrew Fiala, Fresno Bee, July 19, 2019

The president accused American congresswomen of hating America. He said, “This is about love for America. Certain people HATE our Country.” He quoted Louisiana Sen. John Kennedy who said, “In America, if you hate our country, you are free to leave.” Republicans yelled “send her back” – referring to Ilhan Omar, a congresswoman born in Somalia.

The “love it or leave it” dichotomy is dangerous and ridiculous. Who are the real Americans who get to tell others to leave?

Where would we look to see the America we are supposed to love? Perhaps the poets can help.

“America, The Beautiful” is a likely source. This mythic hymn was written by a lesbian college professor with socialist sympathies, Katharine Lee Bates. She imagined America’s good as crowned with brotherhood “from sea to shining sea.”
The hope of brotherhood seems quaint today for an America that stretches beyond the seas to include Hawaii, Alaska and Puerto Rico. Our history is too complicated to be beautiful. It includes slavery and Jim Crow. And the Indians, Mormons and Japanese Americans were asked to “love it or leave it” – with brutal results. But Americans also invent, create and liberate. We are entrepreneurs and emancipators.

As Walt Whitman might say, America contains multitudes. Whitman suggested that America is a poem. He spoke of the U.S. in the plural. He said, “The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.” Like any great work of poetry, there is no single interpretation of its meaning. Sometimes it is beautiful. And sometimes the republic goes bananas.

To call America a poem may sound abstract. But Abraham Lincoln said something similar when he explained that this is “a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” The U.S. was willed into existence by the words of the Declaration of Independence. It exists only as long as those words inspire.

This new nation contained diverse new people who all – except for the Indians and the slaves – chose to come here from somewhere else. Whitman wrote, “Here is not merely a nation but a teeming nation of nations.” Whitman suggested that to love a thing as large as America was only possible for a soul that was as big as the country.

Lincoln and Whitman harbored racist ideas, typical of American culture, even among the abolitionists and emancipators. But the nation continued to grow and learn. New voices were heard. The poem was rewritten.

James Baldwin was a black, queer author who stood with Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial when King explained his dream of America. Baldwin said, “I love America more than any other country in the world and exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” Maya Angelou, another new voice, wrote the poem “America” in the 1970s. She said, “The gold of her promise has never been mined.” She worried, “Her proud declarations are leaves on the wind.”

This nation contains King, Baldwin and Angelou as well as Lincoln, Whitman and Bates. It also contains Trump and Omar. It is impossible to simplify this multitude or say simply, love it or leave it.
'Love it or leave it’ isn’t the smart path to making America great
Andrew Fiala, Fresno Bee, July 19, 2019

• Or perhaps we misunderstand the meaning of love. When love is conceived as a line in the sand, the soul shrinks. Love looks to the future. It is expansive and inclusive. Love heals wounds instead of picking scabs. Love of country, if such a thing makes sense, ought to be poetic and creative rather than accusatory, shallow and mean.

• The challenge today is to enlarge our souls. It may seem impossible to love a country that includes both Trump and Omar. But we might begin by asking for modesty, decency and civility. The poem we are writing is larger than us. We need leaders whose vision of America transcends what Whitman called “the lice of politics.” So far, no one is leaving. But we are all waiting to be inspired by a more loving country.

American Values
Donald Trump at the United Nations Sept. 24, 2019

• As we defend American values, we affirm the right of all people to live in dignity. For this reason, my administration is working with other nations to stop criminalizing of homosexuality, and we stand in solidarity with LGBTQ people who live in countries that punish, jail, or execute individuals based upon sexual orientation.

• We are also championing the role of women in our societies. Nations that empower women are much wealthier, safer, and much more politically stable. It is therefore vital not only to a nation’s prosperity, but also is vital to its national security, to pursue women’s economic development.
American Values
Donald Trump at the United Nations Sept. 24, 2019

• Americans will never tire in our effort to defend and promote freedom of worship and religion. We want and support religious liberty for all.

• Americans will also never tire of defending innocent life… We in America believe that every child — born and unborn — is a sacred gift from God.

America First
Donald Trump at the United Nations Sept. 24, 2019

• Wise leaders always put the good of their own people and their country first. The future does not belong to globalists, the future belongs to patriots.

• The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations who protect their citizens, respect their neighbors and honor the differences that make each country special and unique.

• If you want freedom, take pride in your country. If you want democracy, hold on to your sovereignty. If you want peace, love your nation.
America First
Donald Trump at the United Nations Sept. 24, 2019

• Like my beloved country, each nation represented in this hall has a cherished history, culture, and heritage that is worth defending and celebrating, and which gives us our singular potential and strength.

• The free world must embrace its national foundations. It must not attempt to erase them or replace them.

Donald Trump
*The America We Deserve* (2000)

• Often plans and programs that are transparently stupid come from the sponsors’ deep ignorance of human nature and the laws of economics. Has Trump turned philosopher? No. But anybody who thinks seriously about their work is a philosopher.

• Around the world Americans have a reputation for brashness and selfishness and worship of the dollar. The image isn’t entirely wrong. America does love success. I know I do. This is without a doubt the most achiever-friendly nation on earth. We worship people who do well—even those who may be disasters as human beings.
Donald Trump
*The America We Deserve* (2000)

• We don’t have kings and queens. Instead our royalty is made up of people who work hard, play hard, and make their way to the top. We treat our achievers like Greek gods. In know this all too well. I’m a real estate guy—a successful one—and as a result of my success I’ve got people following my every move.

• ...we also like saints, volunteers, and do-gooders...

America is Spiritually Bankrupt
Cornel West, Jan. 14, 2018
[https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/14/america-is-spiritually-bankrupt-we-must-fight-back-together](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/14/america-is-spiritually-bankrupt-we-must-fight-back-together)

• We live in one of the darkest moments in American history – a bleak time of spiritual blackout and imperial meltdown

• The nihilism in black America has become a massive spiritual blackout in America. The undeniable collapse of integrity, honesty and decency in our public and private life has fueled even more racial hatred and contempt.
America is Spiritually Bankrupt
Cornel West, Jan. 14, 2018
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/14/america-is-spiritually-bankrupt-we-must-fight-back-together

• First, we normalize mendacity and naturalize criminality. We make our lies look like the normal order of things. And we make our crimes look like the natural order of things.

• Second, we encourage callousness and reward indifference. We make mean-spiritedness look manly and mature. And we make cold-heartedness look triumphant and victorious.

• Third, we trump the moral and spiritual dimensions of our lives and world by applauding our short-term gains and superficial successes.

The pervasive violence in our domestic lives and military policies abroad are inseparable from the profit-driven marketization of our spiritually impoverished capitalist civilization. And our civilization rests upon an American empire in decline and decay.

• Imperial meltdown is at the center of our catastrophic times. Our ecological catastrophe is real.
America is Spiritually Bankrupt  
Cornel West, Jan. 14, 2018  
https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/jan/14/america-is-spiritually-bankrupt-we-must-fight-back-together

- The political triumph of Donald Trump is a symbol and symptom – not cause or origin – of our imperial meltdown. Trump is neither alien nor extraneous to American culture and history. In fact, he is as American as apple pie.

- He is a sign of our spiritual bankruptcy – all spectacle and no substance, all narcissism and no empathy, all appetite and greed and no wisdom and maturity.

- The painful truth is there is no Donald Trump without Barack Obama, no neofascist stirrings without neoliberal policies – all within the imperial zone. Obama was the brilliant black smiling face of the American empire. Trump is the know-nothing white cruel face of the American empire.

What is “America”? What is “American”?

- America: the continent or the country?
- Who or what is a “Native American”
- The United States is... (singular)?
- The United States are... (plural)?
- A “Federation” of states ( = “the Federalists”—Hamilton/Madison)
- What is the root of America?
  - Italian (Columbus/Amerigo Vespucci)?
  - Spanish/Portuguese?
  - British?
  - Others?
Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776)
The asylum for mankind and defender of freedom

- Europe, and not England, is the parent country of America. This new World hath been the asylum for the persecuted lovers of civil and religious liberty from every part of Europe. Hither have they fled, not from the tender embraces of the mother, but from the cruelty of the monster; and it is so far true of England, that the same tyranny which drove the first emigrants from home, pursues their descendants still.

- O! ye that love mankind! Ye that dare oppose not only the tyranny but the tyrant, stand forth! Every spot of the old world is overrun with oppression. Freedom hath been hunted round the Globe. Asia and Africa have long expelled her. Europe regards her like a stranger, and England hath given her warning to depart. O! receive the fugitive, and prepare in time an asylum for mankind.

The Problem of *E Pluribus Unum*
Assimilation vs. Multiculturalism

- Assimilation = duty to join “we the people”
  - American cultural identity should be preserved and defended
  - Social/political need for cultural homogeneity, shared language, and shared tradition (moral, cultural, political)
  - The framework that allows “e pluribus unum” is a cultural one

- Multiculturalism = right to individual and group difference
  - Individual difference (diversity) is a key value that should not be subordinated
  - There is no singular American identity
  - The framework that allows “e pluribus unum” is a procedural/legalistic one = thin national identity vs. thick cultural identity
E Pluribus Unum

• I believe deeply that we cannot solve the challenges of our time unless we solve them together - unless we perfect our union by understanding that we may have different stories, but we hold common hopes; that we may not look the same and we may not have come from the same place, but we all want to move in the same direction - towards a better future for of children and our grandchildren.

E Pluribus Unum

• This belief comes from my unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the American people. But it also comes from my own American story.
• I am the son of a black man from Kenya and a white woman from Kansas. I was raised with the help of a white grandfather who survived a Depression to serve in Patton’s Army during World War II and a white grandmother who worked on a bomber assembly line at Fort Leavenworth while he was overseas. I’ve gone to some of the best schools in America and lived in one of the world’s poorest nations. I am married to a black American who carries within her the blood of slaves and slaveowners - an inheritance we pass on to our two precious daughters. I have brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, uncles and cousins, of every race and every hue, scattered across three continents, and for as long as I live, I will never forget that in no other country on Earth is my story even possible.
• It’s a story that hasn’t made me the most conventional candidate. But it is a story that has seared into my genetic makeup the idea that this nation is more than the sum of its parts - that out of many, we are truly one.
Conflicting Source of Normativity
Social Contract vs. Natural Rights

• We, the people... do ordain and establish

• We hold these truths to be self-evident

Preamble to the U.S. Constitution
Written 1787, ratified 1788

• We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.
Declaration of Independence

• IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776
• The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America

• When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

Declaration of Independence

• We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.

• That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,

• That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.
Black Elk’s Wisdom
Peace and Unity

• The first peace, which is the most important, is that which comes within the souls of people when they realize their relationship, their oneness, with the universe and all its powers, and when they realize that at the center of the universe dwells Wakan-Tanka (the divine/great spirit), and that this center is really everywhere, it is within each of us. This is the real peace, and the others are but reflections of this. The second peace is that which is made between two individuals, and the third is that which is made between two nations. But above all you should understand that there can never be peace between nations until there is known that true peace, which, as I have often said, is within the souls of men.

• Black Elk, *The Sacred Pipe* (1953)