

Leonard Harris, Scott Pratt, and Anne Waters (Editors)

American philosophies: An anthology

MALDEN, MA: BLACKWELL, 2002

*Reviewed by Nancy McHugh*

ISBN: 0631210024

I will use American Philosophies in my Knowledge and Social Action course because of the quality of readings in American epistemologies and the clarity the text lends to the relationship between knowledge claims and how people live.

*American Philosophies* is a thoughtful, provocative and carefully edited anthology that blends together underrepresented voices in American philosophy—those of Native Americans, African-Americans, South Americans of both genders as well as those of Euro-American women—with voices that were previously thought to represent all of American philosophy. The volume shows the living, changing traditions of American philosophies from 1493 to 1944.

Harris, Pratt and Waters carefully situate themselves in the “Introduction” of the text making it easy to understand how these philosophers might use these traditions in their own work, classroom, activism, and life. It identifies concepts that anchor the text and are a site of intellectual exchange amongst the editors: the legitimacy of nationalism in the strong and weak senses and the importance of empirical verification of Indigenous and European knowledge claims. Leonard Harris argues for a “weak” nationalism “believ[ing] that no new nations anywhere should be formed” (1). Methodologically he prioritizes “empirical evidence and the application of logic or systematic analytic tools as ways of determining whether any given philosophy should be believed” (1).

Anne Waters prioritizes nationalism in indigenous entitlements. Waters argues that understanding national philosophies requires recognizing the “interpretive role of the historical, social, and political context” of nations (1). Waters’s favoring of nationalism in the “strong” sense is linked to her location in the American Indian community and the importance she gives to the ethno-philosophies of indigenous populations. This commitment is obvious by the prominence of Native American philosophies in *American Philosophies*.

Scott Pratt’s interests in American philosophy lie with philosophies that seek to “sustain and foster differences and ongoing cultural exchange” (2). Pratt believes that some forms of nationalism “may be warranted in light of particular histories of displacement” (2). Pratt is a pluralist, believing that the “indigenous, immigrant, and enslaved” peoples of North America have contributed to the formation of American intellectual and social life (2). He does not believe that empirical verification is necessary for validating the importance of ethno-philosophies.

Harris, Pratt, and Waters redefine American philosophy, “promot[ing] a new vision: American philosophy as a complex reality, enlivened by historically marginalized, but never silent, voices” (2). *American Philosophies* weaves together the commitments of the editors with a plurality of

readings challenging and symphonic manner. Given their differences and their common ground, I imagine Harris, Pratt and Waters had incredibly rich discussions concerning the structure of *American Philosophies*.

The anthology begins with “Prolegomenon to a Tradition: What is American Philosophy” by Harris. It identifies the beginning of American philosophy as the defining of America as a nation. The defining creates the identities of American indigenous peoples, explorers, colonizers, etc., all of which have meaning in the post-Columbus America. Given this initiation of American philosophy it makes sense that the first reading in the text is “Letter to the Taino/Arawak Indians, 1493” from King Ferdinand of Aragon declaring the authority of the king over his new lands and people.

In “Prolegomenon to a Tradition” Harris argues that American philosophy is a progressive, “ongoing creation” concerned with “conceptions of origin, teleology, theories of knowledge, and ideals of community” (5). These concerns are reflected by the readings included in the text. The readings are akin to the jazz improvisation Harris alludes to in the “Prolegomenon to a Tradition”—they mix together, grow, modify, challenge and harmonize with each other, redefining what is meant by a tradition. Harris’s “Prolegomenon” does a good job of setting out expectations for the text.

*American Philosophies* is divided in the six parts: Origin and Teleology, Minds and Selves, Knowledge and Inquiry, Community and Power, Slavery and Freedom, and Democracy and Utopia. Sections open with a brief description and historical overview of the readings with an explanation of their inter-relation. Readings begins with a brief biography of the philosopher, a list of her/his other works, and an explanation of the importance of this anthologized work. Opening section summaries and reading introductions are pithy, informative, and do a good job setting the tone for the section or reading.

Part One, “Origin and Teleology,” explores diverse origins of American philosophies and explanations of human origins, the origins of human morality, causality and agency. The section blends Eurocentric worldviews, King Ferdinand and Ralph Waldo Emerson, with “non-European ways of organizing human experience” (7), Sa-Go-Ye-Wat-Hal, Arthur Parker, Olaudah Equiano, and Washington Irving.

“Minds and Selves,” the second section, considers questions of identity, soul, and individuality and their relation to communities, locations and cultural histories. It contains “Impressions of an Indian Childhood” by Zit Kala Sa, “Race” by W.E.B. Du Bois, “Our Brains and What Ails Them” by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and readings from Jonathan Edwards, William James, and George Herbert Mead.

Part Three, “Knowledge and Inquiry,” shows the development of activist epistemology, which “consider[s] knowledge as a function of experience” (163). Included readings are “Knowledge” by Frances Wright, “An Introduction to the Study of Philosophy Wrote in American for the Use of a Young Gentleman” by Cadwallader Colden, “What Pragmatism Is” by Charles Sander Peirce, “The Supremacy of Method” by John Dewey, “The Practice of Philosophy” by Susan Langer, and “An American Urphilosophie” by Robert Bunge.

“Community and Power” contains readings concerning the development of new communities, such as “Traditional History of the Confederacy of the Six Nations” crafted by the Committee of Chiefs, detailing the beginnings of the Iroquois Confederacy, and “The Federalist Papers” by Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay. Benjamin Franklin’s “Account of My Life” and Mercy Otis Warren’s “Observations on the New Constitution” both consider the role of the individual in community.

Servitude, struggle and resistance unite “The Pueblo Revolt, 1680” by Don Antonio de Otermin, “Fourth of July Address at Reidsville, New York, 1854” by John Wannaucon Quinney, “Appeal to Coloured Citizens of Color, and Our Duties in Relation to this Subject” by Lydia Maria Francis Child, “Civil Disobedience” by Henry David Thoreau, “Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1852” by Fredrick Douglas, and “Woman versus the Indian” by Ann J. Cooper, which constitute the fifth section, “Slavery and Freedom.”

The final and largest section, “Democracy and Utopia,” considers changing ideals of democracy. Among these readings are “Cultural Pluralism” by Alain Locke, “What the American Indian Means to America” by Luther Standing Bear, “Democratic Vistas” by Walt Whitman, and “Anarchism: What it Really Stands For” by Emma Goldman.

*American Philosophies* is geared toward undergraduates and would be a great text for courses on American Thinkers, pragmatism or the history of American philosophies. It would be good for courses on American activism and American social movements. I will use *American Philosophies* in my Knowledge and Social Action course because of the quality of readings in American epistemologies and the clarity the text lends to the relationship between knowledge claims and how people live. I do wish the text had contemporary readings. This was part of my expectations upon first looking at the text, especially given the emphasis on the living and changing nature of American philosophies emphasized in the text’s introduction. Having said this, I would choose *American Philosophies* over other anthologies of American philosophical traditions because of the quality and type of readings included in *American Philosophies* and how well edited and organized the text is.

**Nancy McHugh** is an Assistant Professor of Philosophy at Wittenberg University and treasurer of Midwest Society for Women in Philosophy. She teaches feminist philosophy, epistemology and philosophy of the body. She is currently working on an article concerning hormone replacement therapy and the use of estrogen in food for human consumption as well as co-editing an interdisciplinary reader on bodies.