

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Overview After the arrival of the Europeans in North America, philosophical writing was focused primarily on supporting the social and political ambitions of the Europeans and thus was used to create a foundation for the development of a separate, uniquely American identity. The French philosophes were influential as were the Spanish priests and gold-seekers. However, after the establishment of the new nation, a unique set of philosophical writings began to emerge which were influenced by German, English, and Asian traditions, but which sought its own ends. The result was an emphasis on individualism, personal experience, and human potential for transformation.

Pre-Columbian (Classical)

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): The philosophy of the Pueblo and Southwest Indian cultures was very much aligned with the idea that every act is a sacred one, and that one should respect the gods and seek balance. The key beliefs emphasized the role of “medicine” which is to say spirit, and that the spiritual leaders (medicine men) were a blend of religious leader and teachers of philosophical beliefs, ethics, and ideas about existence.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD): For the Native American Indians of the Eastern Woodlands, all of nature and reality is a manifestation of the Great Spirit. Thus, the philosophical emphasis was on not just on existential ideas and ontological issues (beingness), but also in ethics, and that humanity should consider every aspect of the phenomenal world to be one and the same as the Great Spirit. This is a very unifying belief, and one that requires great reverence to nature as well as close regard of occurrences, which could be considered signs useful for decision-making.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Puritans:

John Winthrop: The first governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, was a strict Puritan and thus upheld and promulgated the notion of strict adherence to the Puritan rules and regulations. His vision was both utopian and socially reactionary in that he supported individual self-expression and absolute loyalty to the Puritan precepts.

Jonathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754) incorporates Calvinism, Newtonian Principia and Locke’s *Essay Concerning the Human Understanding*. It was a key writing, but unfortunately not well understood and often appropriated (and bastardized) to use to justify American independence from England, and to form breakaway states.

William Bradford: As the founder of the Plymouth Colony settlement, Bradford was first and foremost a Separatist, and as such he incorporated his ideas and core philosophy with the two-volume work, “Of Plymouth Plantation.” Essentially, his philosophy was that of individual freedom, freedom of will, and the absence of the notion of the “providential plan” of the Puritans. He was remembered for his “middle course” and tolerance.

Influence of the French Philosophes: In the mid 18th century, ideas from France and England were beginning to influence colonists, especially those who feared that being a colony of England meant the inability to ever achieve self-determination, and also being limited economically, first through confiscatory taxation and later through demanding ownership in prosperous businesses. The French “philosophes” and their writings provided a foundation from which to argue separation from England, self-reliance and independence. Influential works included *The Federalist Papers* by John Madison and Alexander Hamilton, Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense* (1776), the writings of Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson’s *Declaration of Independence* (1776).

Nineteenth Century

Ralph Waldo Emerson: One of the founders of American Transcendentalism, Emerson's essays, which included "Self-Reliance," "Circles," "The Over-Soul," and "Nature," were a blend of German Romanticism, Asian mysticism, and American pragmatism. They resulted in a passionate stance toward freedom of expression and human dignity which connected with the abolitionist movement and also the founding of universities.

Margaret Fuller: An amazing woman who was a bona fide reporter for a newspaper, Fuller's **Woman in the 19th Century** broke ground in calling for better treatment of women on ethical grounds. She advocated education, the right to own property, and the right to vote.

Henry David Thoreau: An advocate of free-thinking and simple living, Thoreau was opposed to slavery and he believed in "civil disobedience" to bring about positive change. He was extremely influential as an apologist for preserving nature and establishing a government that upholds human dignity and allows for social justice and equality.

William James: With writings that explored both mysticism and psychology, James's writings explored the inner anxieties and preoccupations of the late 19th century. His philosophy focused on the relationship between humanity and God as it related to a development of identity and self, and as "varieties of religious experience" are explorations into beingness, ontology, and a notion of what it means to be human.

Twentieth Century

Charles Sanders Peirce: One of the "greats" of American philosophy, Charles Sanders Peirce was renowned as a logician. In addition, he made contributions to the philosophy of language and explored how and why language has meaning. With an underpinning in mathematics, probability and statistics, Peirce proposed that language has semiotic meaning and functions as a "sign" – that idea alone allowed the breakthrough notions of signs, with their different categories, to flow into deconstructivism and the notion that the meaning of language is influenced by who / how / why a sign is assigned a meaning.

George Santayana: Originally from Spain, Jorge (or "George") Santayana was raised in the U.S. He was a pragmatist and was an early advocate of bridging mathematics and logic, as well as looking at the essential work of language in the creation of meaning and a concept of reality.

Charlotte Gilman Perkins: An ardent advocate of individual self-expression and the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, Perkins wrote about women's worlds and roles, and the essential powerlessness of women. Perkins was an advocate of women's rights to vote and to own property individually and independently. She wrote a utopian novel, *Herland*, which details a world where women are in command. Despite that, Perkins is less a feminist and more a humanist who advocates for social equality for all.

John Dewey: As a pragmatist who focused on the consequences of free will and the implications of human agency, Dewey believed that the most important change agent was the individual who was willing to build educational and philanthropic institutions. Dewey is best known for his writings on democracy and education.

Richard Rorty: A controversial neo-pragmatist, Rorty offended many feminists because they accuse him of creating a philosophical framework that reinforces privilege and excludes ideas that are considered in the realm of the "Other." Rorty suggests that human rights arguments are often tainted by sentimentalism, a stance which alienated him from feminists.

Cornel West: One of the most outspoken and influential philosophers of race, race relations, and social hierarchies, West has written influential texts that have provided a foundation for social equality and justice.

Discussion/Questions

1. The philosophical beliefs of the people in the Americas before the arrival of the Europeans were closely aligned with their religious and social beliefs. For example, ideas about reality and the relationship between humans and Nature were often reflected by the overall cosmology that explained the origin of humans, animals, and the earth vis a vis the gods or the Great Spirit. What are some of the main ideas of the Southwest Pueblo Indians and those of the Eastern Woodland Indians? How do they reflect a relationship between human beings and the world at large?
2. The philosophies that the Puritans, the Pilgrims, and the Spanish explorers espoused were often rather self-serving and helped rationalize the particular utopian experiment / social experiment / new colony that they wanted to establish. Explain how the philosophies that seemed to promise a better life for all were in reality easily twisted so that they could rationalize punishing anyone who disagreed with the core concepts or the hierarchy and its leaders.
3. In the 19th century, Industrial Revolution, Westward Expansion, Civil War, and dramatic leaps in literacy and communication resulted in a country hungry for a philosophy that assured the potential transformation of the human being, and the potential to achieve one's dreams. Explain how Transcendentalist philosophies encouraged the development of the American Dream.
4. In the 20th century, a kind of philosophy emerged that suggested that words had no meaning except those that had been assigned to them by the dominant class, and that all kinds of non-textual signs transmitted messages and stories just as well as words. The result was that the study of semiotics (signs that have meaning) merged with the study of language and literature. What resulted was the notion that every text has many possible meanings and interpretations, and because of that, there is always a level of indeterminacy, flux and non-meaning in all forms of communication, but especially in language. What were some of the destabilizing consequences of such a belief or mindset?

Readings

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