

Philosophy 418: 20th-century Philosophy
Topic: The Social Function of Philosophy
Professor Alan Richardson
Fall 2023

"In and of itself, the idea of peace is a negative idea; it is a police idea. There are things more important than keeping one's body whole and one's property intact. Disturbing the peace is bad, not because peace is disturbed, but because the fruitful processes of cooperation in the great experiment of living together are disturbed. It is futile to work for the negative aim of peace unless we are committed to the positive ideal which it cloaks: promoting the efficacy of human intercourse irrespective of class, racial, geographical and national limits. Any philosophy which should penetrate and particulate our present social practice would find at work the forces which unify human intercourse. An intelligent and courageous philosophy of practice would devise means by which the operation of these forces would be extended and assured in the future."—John Dewey, 1915

"The increase in metaphysical and theologizing leanings which shows itself today in many associations and sects, in books and journals, in lectures and university courses, seems to be based on the fierce social and economic struggles of the present. One group of combatants, holding fast to traditional social forms, cultivates traditional attitudes of metaphysics and theology whose content has long since been superseded; while the other group, especially on central Europe, facing the new age, rejects these views and adopts empirical science as its basis.... In many countries, the masses now reject these [metaphysical and theological] doctrines much more consciously than ever before, and in keeping with their socialist attitudes tend to lean toward a down-to-earth empiricist view. In the past *materialism* was the expression of this view; however, modern empiricism has left behind a number of inadequate forms in its development and has found a defensible form in the *scientific world-conception*."—The Vienna Circle, 1929.

"The real social function of philosophy lies in its criticism of what is prevalent. That does not mean superficial fault-finding with individual ideas or conditions, as though a philosopher were a crank. Nor does it mean that the philosopher complains about this or that isolated condition and suggests remedies. The chief aim of such criticism is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members. Man must be made to see the relationship between his activities and what is achieved thereby, between his particular existence and the general life of society, between his everyday projects and the great ideas which he acknowledges."—Max Horkheimer, 1939

Sometimes, often in times of cultural crisis or discord, philosophy finds itself called to account—a demand is made that philosophers speak to the social value or social function of their work. The 20th-century provided a series of such moments—wars among nations that viewed themselves as culturally and philosophically sophisticated, economic crises, the rise of various forms of totalitarianism, the Cold War stalemate, the horrors of colonialism, the colonial wars, and the need to theorize a post-colonial world.

This course will look at three of the ways philosophers in the 20th century sought to express a social function for philosophy: a pragmatist function (given in quintessentially Deweyan terms in the quotation from him above), a scientific function (exemplified in the quotation from the Vienna Circle above), and a critical function (exemplified in the Horkheimer quotation). These are not only social functions for philosophy explored in the 20th century nor are they in every way distinct one from another. Nonetheless, these were among the most serious and sustained attempts to explain what philosophy was for in an era when its value could no longer be taken for granted.

We will look at each of these three views. In the pragmatist camp we shall look most especially at Dewey's view and how it involved many still contemporary issues: pacifism and war, immigration and the immigrant experience (especially in the work of Jane Addams in the Hull House settlement house), race relations, public education, and cultural pluralism. Among the scientific philosophers we shall look most closely at various ways that the logical empiricists expressed the social function of their philosophy. And we shall look at the social function of critical theory in the work Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Angela Davis. And we shall look at arguments proponents of these views had with one another and others.

While we will concentrate on historical texts, the course is not wholly historical. We live again in a time in which philosophy—often under the guise of critical race theory or “cultural Marxism”—is under attack, in which academic freedom specifically in humanities and social science fields is being eroded, and in which universities themselves seem unable or unwilling to explain and protect academic work. We shall reflect on how better to express the point of the projects of philosophy in the cultural conversation in Canada and around the world.

Readings—all of the readings are on Canvas. Here is the weekly list of topics.

Week One (Sep 11): Why You Might Care about the Social Function of Philosophy, 2023
Vivek Goel (2023), "University of Waterloo committed to fostering inclusive and safe environment—for all."

UK Department of Education (2023), "Crackdown on Rip-Off University Degrees."
Canadian Philosophical Association, "Philosophy in Canada: Frequently Asked Questions"

Week Two (Sept 18): Social Function of Intellectual Pursuits in Sociology in the 1920s and 1930s.

Karl Mannheim, excerpt from "The Problem of a Sociology of Knowledge" (1925)

J.D. Bernal, *The Social Function of Science*, Chapter 1 (1939)

Robert K. Merton, "Science and the Social Order" (1938)

Week Three (Sept 25): Social Function of Philosophy: Canonical Texts

John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, Chapter 3 (1915)

Vienna Circle, "The Scientific World Conception" (1928)

Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy" (1939)

Week Four (Oct 12): American philosophy on social issues 1: War, Peace, Democracy

Jane Addams, *Newer Ideals of Peace*, Chapters 1 and 2 (1907)

William James, "The Moral Equivalent of War" (1910)

Randolph Bourne, "War and the Intellectuals" (1917)

Week Five (Oct 16): American philosophy on social issues 2: Immigration, Race, Education

Horace Kallen, "Democracy versus the Melting-Pot" (1915)

Alain Locke, "Modern Race Creeds and Their Fallacies" (1916)

John Dewey, "Nationalizing Education" (1916)

Week Six (Oct 23): The Scientific World Conception, Logical Empiricism, and the Unity of Science

Vienna Circle, "The Scientific World Conception" (1928)

Hans Reichenbach, "The Philosophical Significance of Modern Physics" (1930)

Otto Neurath, "Encyclopedia as 'Model'" (1936)

Week Seven (Oct 30): Unity, Pluralism, Democracy

Horace Kallen, "The Meanings of 'Unity' Among the Sciences" (1946)

Otto Neurath, "The Orchestration of the Sciences by the Encyclopedism of Logical Empiricism" (1946)

Mortimer Adler, "God and the Professors" (1941)

James B. Conant et al, *General Education in a Free Society* (1945)

Week Eight (6 Nov): European Intellectual Marxism
Karl Korsch, "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923)
George Lukacs. "What is Orthodox Marxism?" (1919)

Week Nine (20 Nov): Critical Theory
Max Horkheimer, "The Social Function of Philosophy" (1939)
Max Horkheimer, "The Latest Attack on Metaphysics" (1937)
Otto Neurath, "Logical Empiricism and Unity of Science: A Reply" (1937)

Week Ten (27 Nov): Critical Theory in America
Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Chapter 7 (1964)
Angela Davis, First Lecture on Liberation (1969)

Week Eleven (4 Dec): Crossovers
Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power" (1977)
Richard Rorty, "The Contingency of a Liberal Community" (1989)
Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy*, Chapter 6 (1989)

Work for the Course

Attendance and Participation are expected and worth 10% of your grade.

Discussion Leading: Each of you will lead the discussion (about 30 minutes) introducing one of the readings. This is not summarizing; it is making remarks about the readings that will (you hope) lead to fruitful discussion of the text; often a good strategy is to locate the text both more within the author's philosophical project and within the context of the readings we have done so far. 10% of your final grade.

Written Work: This course is a research course, as much for me as for you. My desire therefore is for you to come up with a project that is meaningful to you. So, here are some options: You could write a standard research paper (say, 6000 words maximum). You could write a couple of shorter papers. You could find a conference on a topic relevant to the course and prepare an abstract or paper submission. You could design a website or write an op-ed or report for funders/policy people or a social media campaign on "why study philosophy" or "what is philosophy for." Or, you could sign on to do a bit of research that doesn't eventuate so much in a paper as in, for example, an annotated bibliography. (I have a lot of ideas for this sort of thing.)

The down side of flexibility is that it is up to you to keep on top of your work and keep me in the loop. Here are some interim deadlines you must meet:

3 October: Proposal of your research project to me (20%)
12 October: Approved projects will be shared with the class
6 November: Progress reports sent to class (20%)
18 December: due dates for final projects (40%)

Policies

All students must abide by the [UBC policy on academic misconduct](#).

UBC does not have a university-wide policy on the use of Generative AI. Here is the policy for this course. First, please understand that generative AI generates sentences without concern for the truth of or evidence for those sentences. It is often radically wrong and it does not usually provide citations for the claims it makes. Thus, it is a deeply unreliable guide in academic writing. Moreover, any sentence the AI generates that you then make use of is a sentence that you did not generate yourself. Thus, it is a source and must be cited. The way to cite generative AI is to provide the URL of the AI you are using and the date on which you used it. [Here](#) is a good template to follow.

The UBC Syllabus Policy mandates that I provide this statement:

UBC provides resources to support student learning and to maintain healthy lifestyles but recognizes that sometimes crises arise and so there are additional resources to access including those for survivors of sexual violence. UBC values respect for the person and ideas of all members of the academic community. Harassment and discrimination are not tolerated nor is suppression of academic freedom. UBC provides appropriate accommodation for students with disabilities and for religious, spiritual and cultural observances. UBC values academic honesty and students are expected to acknowledge the ideas generated by others and to uphold the highest academic standards in all of their actions. Details of the policies and how to access support are available [here](#).