



IS AMERICA PHILOSOPHICAL?

Carlin Romano

America *the Philosophical*? It sounds like *Canada the Exhibitionist* or *France the Unassuming*: a mental miscue, a delusional academic tic. Everyone knows that Americans don't take philosophy seriously, don't pay any attention to it, and couldn't name a contemporary academic philosopher if their passports depended on it. As historian Richard Hofstadter dryly observed in his Pulitzer Prize-winning *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* (1963), "In the United States the play of the mind is perhaps the only form of play that is not looked upon with the most tender indulgence."

But if the title phenomenon of Hofstadter’s classic indeed boasts “a long, historical background,” the peculiar attitude directed at philosophy in America is more quizzical than hostile, closer to good-humored wariness than contempt. Philosophy doesn’t threaten or bother the practical on-the-go American. The American middle manager confronted with a devoted philosophy type is most likely to yank out the old cliché “What are you going to do, open a philosophy store?” and leave it at that. If, of course, the information has been accurately downloaded. Tell your seatmate on a short-haul flight that you’re “in philosophy” and the reply is likely to be, “Oh, that’s great. My niece is in psychology, too.”

The infrequent philosophy blips on America’s media screens suggest that philosophy doesn’t register on the American psyche with the gravitas professors in the field deem warranted. When a blip does occur, it drives that impression only deeper.

“Page Six” of the *New York Post*—the ongoing Ground Zero of American gossip even in the age of TMZ—once featured Lauren Hutton, the nation’s fashion model *sub specie aeternitatis*, anointing Camille Paglia as “the greatest living American philosopher” (high praise for someone another newspaper likes to introduce with the phrase “pro-porn feminist”). When a wrestler named Nick Baines declared, after entering the University of Northern Iowa to get his B.A., that he planned to become a professor of philosophy, *The Des Moines Register* treated him as an oddity. Local philosophers, historically wiser, noted that Plato, *nee* Aristocles, actually pulled a similar career move—he adopted his better-known name, which meant “broad shoulders,” while competing in the Isthmian Games.

Summing up the American media mind-set, it seems, was a publicity release from a New York publishing house, hyping a two-book deal with Dennis Rodman, America’s faded, body-pierced, outré, cross-dressing, ex-basketball bad boy. It offered a sweeping historical perspective on its previously unheralded new thinker in ascending font:

Socrates
Confucius
Chopra
RODMAN!!!

Does America take philosophy seriously? One might as well ask whether America takes monarchy seriously. Joking about philoso-

phy in the United States or just ignoring it comes with the territory, like learning the Pledge of Allegiance. Hard-boiled, concrete-minded descendants of everyone from the Pilgrims to the slaves to the boat people, we pick it up along the way, like mistrusting politicians, refinancing mortgages, or choosing whiz-bang smartphones.

It's the way we're supposed to think about a discipline described by Ambrose Bierce (who promptly disappeared into the desert) as "a route of many roads, leading from nowhere to nothing," and by historian Henry Adams as a field that offers "unintelligible answers to insoluble problems."

Tocqueville, that touchstone for all synoptic thinking about America, thought the peculiar attitude of its residents toward philosophy so obvious that he began the second volume of *Democracy in America* by noting it: "I think that in no country in the civilized world is less attention paid to philosophy than in the United States. The Americans have no philosophical school of their own, and they care but little for all the schools into which Europe is divided."

Even Tocqueville, however, nodded. For all his general insight into the fledgling United States, he, like many French intellectuals, saw American thought through the prism of European assumptions. The conclusion he drew from that putative intellectual state of affairs—that "in most of the operations of the mind each American appeals only to the individual effort of his own understanding"—was false then and is even more false now. His misstep came in using the word "only." He should have written that each American "also" appeals "to the individual effort of his own understanding."

For the surprising little secret of our ardently capitalist, famously materialist, heavily iPodded, iPadded, and iPhoned society is that America in the early 21st century towers as the most philosophical culture in the history of the world, an unprecedented marketplace of truth and argument that far surpasses ancient Greece, Cartesian France, 19th-century Germany, or any other place one can name over the past three millennia. The openness of its dialogue, the quantity of its arguments, the diversity of its viewpoints, the cockiness with which its citizens express their opinions, the vastness of its First Amendment freedoms, the intensity of its hunt for evidence and information, the widespread rejection of truths imposed by authority or tradition alone, the resistance to false claims of justification and legitimacy, the embrace of Net communication with an alacrity that intimidates the world: All corroborate that fact.

Mistaking American ribbing of philosophy for what the British call rubbishing, as evidence of a nonphilosophical culture, is only one of the errors traditionally committed by intellectuals in understanding the United States. Even the best philosophical societies, after all, stick it to philosophy once in a while, as Aristophanes caricatured Socrates and his Athenian logic-choppers in *The Clouds* (423 BC). American irreverence, far from posing a threat to philosophical activity, fuels and incarnates it.

Has the talk show declined from Socrates to Bill O'Reilly and Jon Stewart? Maybe, but mixing entertainment and argument isn't why. Are those inside-the-Beltway cable-babble shows really talk-over shows? Sure, but read some of Plato's dialogues and you'll see Socrates stepping on the lines of other speakers. In fact, the proliferation and popularity of American radio and television "talk" stars—from Howard Stern to Charlie Rose, Oprah Winfrey, Stephen Colbert, and Stewart—bear a resemblance, albeit imperfect, to the rise of influential celebrity rhetoricians in ancient Greece, even if today's talkers seek more to persuade *and* entertain (as well as provide forums) than to teach others the arts of persuasion. The story of philosophy in America is not a short subject about a narrow tributary of high Judeo-Christian culture, once commonly restricted to the university and priesthood, that failed to empty into the great river of American thought. When seen properly and whole, philosophy in the U.S.A. is more like a big-budget, special-effects movie—*The Big Muddy That Flooded America!* But it's important to refine and make plain the scope of this metaphorical claim.

To exalt America as the world's philosophical culture par excellence is not just to argue that American philosophers have occasionally swayed everyday society, sometimes in a trickle-down manner, sometimes directly, though a few examples are worth repeating. Just as we acknowledge that, outside America, the work in logic of non-American philosophers such as Bertrand Russell and Gottlob Frege aided the development of the computer and artificial intelligence, we know that Emerson spurred American intellectual independence, and John Dewey co-founded the American Civil Liberties Union, with huge consequences for the republic. We recognize that William James catalyzed psychology into a full-fledged discipline, and that Alain Locke helped spark the Harlem Renaissance that began the explosion of black artistic self-expression in the 20th century. Closer to the present, the theory of justice of John Rawls, the economics-accented jurisprudence of Richard Posner, the end-of-art-history musings of aesthetician and critic Arthur

Danto, affect politics, judicial reasoning, and curatorial practice, respectively.

America the Philosophical means more than that.

It is similarly more than the boom in so-called applied ethics, which over the past 30 years has seen American philosophers taking jobs in corporations, hospitals, service academies, prisons, and other places outside the academy to bring fresh thinking to the moral dilemmas of those institutions. It is more than the effort of individual academic philosophers, such as gay social critic Richard Mohr, or complicated feminist figures, such as Martha Nussbaum and Paglia herself, to draw attention to terrain traditionally bypassed by the discipline's establishment, and to extend their philosophical work to activism on issues, as Nussbaum has done in regard to poor women in India.

Finally, America the Philosophical is more than a phenomenon it encompasses, but to which it cannot be reduced: the transformation by which America, once urged by Emerson to stand on its own intellectual feet, has become a net exporter rather than importer of professional academic philosophy, an intellectual bank whose bottom line is in the black.

The development is not new. As far back as the mid-1980s, *The Economist* observed that "British philosophy now consists of sophisticated commentary on the bright ideas of Americans." In Germany, leading philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas direct their theorizing toward ideas developed by the American pragmatists. In France, Jacques Bouveresse, best known for his maverick promotion of Anglo-American analytic philosophy in the land of sometimes murky "masters of thought," was elected to the prestigious philosophy chair at the Collège de France. In Scandinavia, in Southeast Asia, in South America, professors evoke the names of American giants—Rorty, Danto, Quine, Rawls, Nussbaum—as they once did those of the French, English, and Germans.

No, more than all that, acquiescing in America the Philosophical requires seeing America in the new millennium as directly, ebulliently, and ordinarily philosophical in a way that remains unappreciated by philosophers, media, and the general public alike. It is to see Americans as almost uniquely able, given their rude independence of mind, to pierce through the chief metaphorical scam of desiccated, moribund, yet still breathing Socratic philosophy: the "justification language game" of academic epistemologists that purports to tell the rest of us the precise meaning of concepts

by reasoning through a pocketful of examples. It is to see the United States as the exemplar of a new paradigm of philosophy—albeit one with roots in the pragmatically accented view of the ancient Greek thinker Isocrates (436-338 BC)—suited to the 21st century, and keyed to accelerating trends of globalization in economics, politics, culture, ethics, and communication.

This is not an easy picture to swallow, either within our borders or without. To promote America at home as the world's pre-eminent philosophical culture is to clash with almost every cliché of American intellectual history, including Tocqueville's and Hofstadter's. To exalt it overseas is not only revisionary but offensive, certain to be received as one more example of American cultural jingoism and imperialism, the cerebral equivalent of trying to dominate the film market in France and Japan, or impose our notions of governance on China. Moreover, both here and abroad, it appears to ignore significant evidence for the traditional image of America the Unphilosophical. Consider some of that, then.

In the world of American politics, philosophers play almost no part. A few who did, such as drive-time radio jock and former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, shed their togas fairly early for bare-knuckled politics. Some, like neoconservative icon Leo Strauss, get counted as players only on an extended trickle-down theory because critics insist that they're beyond-the-grave influences on contemporary figures such as Bush-era neocons. Still others—one thinks of William Galston, a former deputy assistant to President Clinton—have come near the actual machinery of policy. But they remain anomalies.

Elsewhere in the world, by contrast, philosophers more directly influence and enter politics, sometimes dominating it. In Italy, philosopher Massimo Cacciari, twice the mayor of Venice, looms large on the political scene, and philosopher, novelist, and journalist Umberto Eco serves as cultural touchstone of the nation. In England, philosopher Roger Scruton, who played consultant to Margaret Thatcher, still loudly voices Tory concerns. In France, the likes of Bernard-Henri Lévy, Alain Finkielkraut, and Alain Badiou follow in the media-provocateur footsteps of Sartre and Foucault. In Peru, the Shining Path terrorists, founded by philosophy lecturer Abimael Guzman (sure enough, while on leave from his department), almost brought the country to its knees.

Is America more philosophical than those lands?

In the world of American print media, a similar lack of standing

remains the norm. An American philosopher's best shot at coverage is an obituary, though few can expect to get what newspaper people call the "skyline"—a headline *over* the masthead, as French star Jacques Derrida nabbed in the *Sddeutsche Zeitung*. *The New York Times* rarely grants philosophers print acreage, and few write regularly for newspapers. Despite a seemingly bottomless appetite for guests, neither the nation's better TV talk shows nor its tabloid trash fests have ever hosted America's great philosophers, even in a pandering format ("Philosophers Who Sleep With Their Ideological Opponents!!!"). When 9/11 terrorized Americans into deep thought on good versus evil, a looming clash of civilizations, and the limits of freedom, academic philosophers were noticeably absent from the airwaves, as they have been throughout the ongoing mess in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Again, the situation across the Atlantic differs sharply. In England, philosophers such as A.C. Grayling and Scruton write regularly for the newspapers, author Alain de Botton hosts a television series about great thinkers, and two general-interest magazines, *Philosophy Now*, a bimonthly, and *The Philosophers' Magazine*, a quarterly, compete for readers. In France, yet another glossy philosophy magazine, *Philosophie*, can be found at kiosks at Orly, and the French tradition of inviting philosophers on talk shows looms so large that one scholar, Tamara Chaplin, devoted an entire study—*Turning on the Mind: French Philosophers on Television*—to the subject.

America the Philosophical? *Mais non*.

In the world of broader American publishing, literature, art, and culture, serious references to philosophy barely register compared with their frequency elsewhere. While a philosopher occasionally breaks out with a book, such as Harry G. Frankfurt in 2005 with his *On Bullshit*, it's almost always a fluke. Frankfurt's brief, casual essay, smartly repackaged by Princeton University Press with a brash title, appealed to those eager to knock off a serious book without too much investment. The combination of title and microsize accounted for the book's allure more than Frankfurt's reasoning, which, the retired Princeton University Spinoza scholar charmingly told one interviewer, he no longer considered cogent.

In England, on the other hand, one can identify a whole genre of art devoted to the celebrated Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein alone. Monty Python immortalized him among a new audience by extolling his beer-drinking prowess, Derek Jarman highlighted his homosexuality in a film, and Dame Iris Murdoch

plunked Wittgenstein spinoffs into her novels for years. Elsewhere in English culture, Tom Stoppard weaves brilliant theater around philosophical repartee, and the pop group Scritti Politti reprises “I’m in Love With Jacques Derrida.” In France, Eric Rohmer made philosophical conversations such as the one in *My Night at Maud’s* a signature of elite French cinema, an art form in which the male protagonist is as likely to be a Sorbonne philosophy professor as a cop. The more philosophical the novelist in France, from Voltaire and Sartre to Michel Tournier and Michel Houellebecq, the quicker the rise to stardom.

Indeed, in fiction throughout Europe and much of the world, attention to philosophy signals literary seriousness without the implication that it estranges readers. Milan Kundera assumed the crown of philosophical novelist from Camus in the 1970s and 80s, and new champions such as Eco and Roberto Bolaño pop up regularly, even outside the largest philosophical cultures. Across Europe, *Sophie’s World*, by Jostein Gaarder, a novel about philosophy by a Norwegian high-school teacher, became an enduring best seller on the order of John Grisham but did less well in America.

Once again, the comparisons to America seem embarrassing rather than supportive of the United States as a powerhouse philosophical culture. Attention to yet a fourth area—education—further challenges the notion of America the Philosophical.

In the United States, philosophy remains, despite its image as a bedrock of the Western humanistic tradition, a subject required of almost no one before college, of few during college (except at Catholic institutions), a major whose popularity is often thought to be eclipsed by business and computer-studies options. In the late 1970s, prestigious Rockefeller University simply disbanded its first-rate philosophy department when a cost crunch hit. In the early 1990s, City College of New York came close to eliminating its philosophy department altogether as insufficiently “vocational.” While pro-philosophy counterexamples exist in the world of education—for instance, the healthy support given the subject by committed philanthropists such as George Soros, Laurance Rockefeller, and Sir John Templeton—philosophy largely lives hand-to-mouth. By contrast, in France, all high-school students study philosophy and take a nationwide exam in it, forever familiarizing them with the basics. As for Germany, the country in which philosophy has traditionally enjoyed its greatest prestige, it even names Intercity trains for philosophers: On a clear or unclear day, you can see the *Hannah Arendt* or *Theodor Adorno* pull out of Frankfurt.

Finally, the views of some of our own intellectuals and authors threaten to drive the last nail into the coffin of America the Philosophical. Richard Feynman, the feisty Nobel laureate in physics, regularly attacked philosophy as “low-level baloney” and derided philosophers for always “making stupid remarks” about science.

Books trumpeting the low intellectual quality of American culture now constitute a genre of their own.

In *Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free*, Charles Pierce argued that we live in the land of his title, “the America of the medicine wagon and the tent revival, the America of the juke joint and the gambling den,” that we remain “the best country ever in which to peddle complete public lunacy.” In *Unscientific America: How Scientific Illiteracy Threatens Our Future*, Chris Mooney and Sheril Kirshenbaum warned that America is “home to a populace that, to an alarming extent, ignores scientific advances or outright rejects scientific principles,” as well as a culture that “all too often questions the value of intellect and even glorifies dumbness.”

Pierce’s prime evidence—conservative talk-show hosts and intelligent-design advocates—hardly made his case. Mooney and Kirshenbaum as well, despite their spirited call to arms, had to acknowledge that America also happens to be “the world’s scientific leader,” that Americans “built the bomb, reached the moon, decoded the genome, and created the Internet.” Indeed, sound judgments about American culture always depend on how one sifts and looks at large swaths of evidence, not an example here or there.

Religious fundamentalism in the United States, for instance, is seen by some as the embodiment of irrationality. But it’s also possible for even an atheist to argue that religious thought persists not because believers are dimwitted, but because concepts like God and faith possess logical peculiarities that stymie disproof of religious belief in the absence of prior agreement on how one defines terms. A general observation by MIT philosopher Alex Byrne applies doubly in this realm: “Conclusive refutations of philosophical positions are about as rare as sightings of the ivory-billed woodpecker.”

All these misgivings provide a sorry counterimage to any picture of a New Athens flourishing between the Atlantic and Pacific. Could it be that the only philosophy books right for Americans are

Tom Morris's *Philosophy for Dummies* and Jay Stevenson's *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Philosophy*? How can America the Philosophical make sense?

It does, I submit, if one emulates what philosophers ideally do—subject preconceptions to ongoing analysis, and use their imaginations. The traditional clichés get it wrong. Examples that run counter to the vision of America the Philosophical prop up the clichés because they imply a musty view of philosophy. They depend too much on activities christened “philosophy” according to antiquated academic criteria, and pay too little mind to what honest intellectuals recognize as philosophy today.

For whether one prefers the view of Habermas, Germany's foremost philosopher, that truth issues only from deliberation conducted under maximum conditions of openness and freedom, or the view of Rorty, America's most important recent philosopher, that better conceptual vocabularies rather than firmer truths should be our aim, it's plain that America's philosophical landscape—pluralistic, quantitatively huge, all potential criticisms available—provides a more conducive arena, or agora, than any other. If we take the best contemporary thinkers at their word and think of philosophy as an ever-expanding practice of persuasion rather than a cut-and-dried discipline that hunts down eternal verities, then America the Philosophical—a far larger entity than the roughly 11,000 members of the American Philosophical Association—not only looks more likely but also clearly outstrips any rival as the paramount philosophical culture. In the early years of the 21st century, America is to philosophy what Italy is to art or Norway to skiing: a perfectly designed environment for the practice.

Some evidence of that comes in the very cultural areas that naysayers deride. Just as Britain has its independent philosophical writers, so America still produces descendants of Will Durant, whose *The Story of Philosophy* (1926) sold millions of copies, launched Simon & Schuster as a publishing power, and introduced more Americans to philosophy than did any other work.

Christopher Phillips, an ethnically Greek graduate of the College of William & Mary (Class of 81), transformed his student love of conversations about Socrates into “symposium” gatherings around the country that he called “Socrates Cafés.” The venues were inspired—among them, Billy Graham's last revival meeting and the Wounded Knee memorial. Three books that followed—*Socrates Café*, *Six Questions of Socrates*, and *Socrates in Love*—drew the praise of no less than Robert Coles, who found in them “ancient

wisdom in all its complexity brought vividly to life.”


At the same time, no fewer than three American publishers—Open Court, Wiley-Blackwell, and the University Press of Kentucky—regularly tap into a bustling market with series that connect philosophy to popular culture, knocking out, at an amazing pace, titles such as *The Matrix and Philosophy*, *Facebook and Philosophy*, and *Twilight and Philosophy*. All contain freshly written essays, mainly by professional philosophers who double as rabid enthusiasts of the pop-culture subject in play. Although the books rarely draw mainstream media reviews, they’ve proved extremely popular. According to David Ramsay Steele, Open Court’s editorial director, his best seller in the series, *The Simpsons and Philosophy*, has sold more than 500,000 copies.

In fact, philosophy books and objects that don’t abandon their down-to-earth American sense of humor—or that even flaunt it—often turn into hits. In 2007 two middle-aged Harvard alumni who became pals as philosophy undergrads, Thomas Cathcart and Daniel Klein—neither of whom continued in academe—co-wrote a book on their shared enthusiasm for “philogags,” jokes that make a philosophical point. In their introduction to *Plato and a Platypus Walk Into a Bar*, they explained that “philosophy and jokes proceed from the same impulse: to confound our sense of the way things are, to flip our world upside down, and to ferret out hidden, often uncomfortable truths about life. What the philosopher calls an insight, the gagster calls a zinger.”

Aristotle and an Aardvark Go to Washington followed the next year. Despite both co-authors’ reaching their biblical three score and ten, along came *Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through Those Pearly Gates* in 2009. More than a few people were laughing—and learning. The same people, possibly, who bought Foucault and Kierkegaard dolls from the Unemployed Philosophers Guild (www.philosophersguild.com), or who submitted questions to www.askphilosophers.org, a Web site on which philosophers answer queries “about love, nothingness, and everything else.” When *The New York Times* added a philosophy blog called the Stone to its menu in 2010, the site, edited by New School philosopher Simon Critchley, drew thousands of comments and six million page views.

The status of America as a philosophical culture, in short, is not an open-and-shut case. But the image of it as unphilosophical persists because conventional academics and pundits continue to identify all philosophy with a Socratic approach despite the undermining of

that method over the past century and a half by critics from Nietzsche and Wittgenstein to the pragmatists. As scholar and former *Economist* executive editor Anthony Gottlieb concluded, in his book *The Dream of Reason*, which examined philosophy from the ancient Greeks to the Renaissance, “the history of philosophy is more the history of a sharply inquisitive cast of mind than the history of a sharply defined discipline.”

Americans have thus not so much “evaded” philosophy, in the provocative phrase of Cornel West, as they’ve sidestepped antiquated conceptions of it. In the post-positivist, post-cold-war, pan-Google era in which we live, America the Philosophical can be seen as a coruscating achievement in the pragmatist project that’s been unfolding for centuries. 

*This essay is adapted from the introduction to *America the Philosophical*, by Carlin Romano, critic at large at *The Chronicle* and a professor of philosophy and humanities at Ursinus College. The book is being published this month by Alfred A. Knopf.*

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