**“What Is American Philosophy”**

**Dr. Jennifer Gurley, University of Connecticut, 2014**

Americans have always practiced philosophy. They have asked and tried to answer big questions about the way things are: What is true? What am I? How should I love? What is right? What is wrong? How do I know? The Puritans brought these questions with them from Europe and we still ask them today. American Philosophy itself—as something that was called by that name—first appeared in the late 1860s with the creation of a philosophical movement called Pragmatism (1870-1910). Pragmatism is based on the idea that what is “true” is what works in practice: what has practical, observable consequences for our lives. It was created by Charles Sanders Pierce (1839-1914) and developed by William James (1842-1910), who famously claimed that “truth” is what “happens to an idea.” Pragmatism is the first formal American philosophy, that is, the first philosophy created in American and recognized as a branch within the professional disciplines of philosophy in America, Europe, and around the world. Today it is experiencing a revival.

But Pragmatism didn’t come from nowhere. It arose from earlier philosophical movements carried to American from Europe, and from early American discussions of philosophical questions among its religious, literary, scientific, and political leaders and everyday citizens themselves. The Puritans who came to America in the 1630s believed that humans were depraved, or fallen from God’s grace, but they also believed that they might be saved if they used their human ability to reason – or think – to examine the bible and the world around them in order to understand God’s will. The work of Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) illustrates these claims... The Puritans (like later settlers) also brought with them from Europe the ideas of the Enlightenment, primarily the notion that man is a creature capable of rational inquiry and deliberation. In the 1700s, Americans adapted and used this philosophical idea as a political principle in the period that has come to be called the American Enlightenment (1680-1820). Thinkers and writers of this period believed in learning from tradition and the past, but they disdained blind acceptance of any kind of knowledge, especially of religious doctrines. This is because they held that rational beings are by definition innovative: they adapt what they have learned to respond to the demands of present conditions. The writings of Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826)...are products of the American Enlightenment.

In the early to mid-nineteenth century, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882) inspired a religious, literary, and political movement called Transcendentalism (1820-1870). Emerson and his circle believed that human beings are not only innovative, but perfectible: their power to think enables them to develop their unique talents and become the best version of themselves that they can be. The Transcendentalists also rejected Enlightenment notions of rationality in the abstract and considered the actual experience of persons thinking. They focused on the whole individual: a thinker, yes, but one with feelings who lives in a particular context and tried to make sense of his or her place in the universal order of things. Transcendentalism is often referred to as American Romanticism, and American form of European Romanticism. As late mid-nineteenth century philosophers continued to think about rationality in terms of individual thinkers. Transcendentalism evolved in to Pragmatism’s commitment to the notation that an idea is true if it makes a practical difference in the life of the person who thinks it. Truth is not some abstract certainty that exists outside of human experience.

**Tasks (next class)**

 Be Prepared to Discuss:

* What does the understanding of major American philosophical movements contribute to the reading and interpreting of canonical American literature?
* Is it possible to claim that philosophical movements cause the literature to change—or is it the other way around?
* What did the steadfast adherence to religious ideals in early America cause to happen not only to what we will call American Philosophy, but to American Literature?
* Could the move to Transcendentalism be considered, even by our modern standards, to be a rebellion of sorts?

 Ideas to Consider:

* What contributions were made by Native American/American Indian cultures to American Philosophy and Literature?
* At which point in time can one draw a metaphorical line between English mentalities and American mentalities?
* There has to be more reason than being fed up with paying taxes to the English that drove the people of North America to declare their independence from England. With that in mind, the mentality that such a thing would even be morally acceptable needed to exist as well. It’s hard to tell what contributing factors led to this.

From Mr. Anthony:

* *As we move into the future and technology blurs the lines between nationalities, it becomes harder and harder to tell what is what and what beliefs match up with one’s nation. Should we fight to keep these lines from becoming less clear in the world? Or rather, will nations and national philosophies fade away until we are left pledging allegiance not to where we come from but rather what we believe in? I don’t think there is a right answer, and I hope to spend some time exploring these ideas. This is barely the beginning of the timeline of the evolution of American ideals, and hopefully paring with literary works will give us all a better idea of how to answer these questions.*