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Contents

Articles

SYMPOSIUM ON CARLIN ROMANO’S AMERICA THE PHILOSOPHICAL

CARLIN ROMANO: AMERICA THE PHILOSOPHICAL
James Campbell 323

THE RELEVANCE OF RELEVANT THINKING: REMARKS ON CARLIN ROMANO’S AMERICA THE PHILOSOPHICAL
Esa Saarinen 338

DO NOT BLOCK INQUIRY: PHILOSOPHY IN AMERICA—PERICLE AND Socrates
Jacquelyn Ann Kegley 353

ON THE VERY IDEA OF A PHILOSOPHICAL CULTURE: OR, THE AMERICAN EVASION OF POLITICS
Paul C. Taylor 366

AFTERTHOUGHTS ON AMERICA THE PHILOSOPHICAL
Carlin Romano 373

ON PERICLE’S CLAIM THAT BELIEF SHOULD BE BANISHED FROM SCIENCE
Benoit Gaultier 390

AMERICAN REALISM, OBJECTIVE RELATIVISM, COLUMBIA NATURALISM, AND JUSTUS BUCHLER
Lawrence Ca hone 416

JOHN DEWEY’S RADICAL LOGIC: THE FUNCTION OF THE QUALITATIVE IN THINKING
Gregory Fernando Pappas 435
Reviews

Recovering Integrity: Moral Thought in American Pragmatism
By Stuart Rosenbaum
Reviewed by Todd Lekan 469

Rawls, Dewey, and Constructivism: On the Epistemology of Justice
By Eric Thomas Weber
Reviewed by Torjus Midtgarden 476
Symposium on Carlin Romano’s
America the Philosophical
Abstract

This paper explores Romano’s presentation of philosophy-as-a-way-of-life, as distinct from philosophy-as-an academic discipline, on the American scene. After briefly indicating the nature of his belief in America as philosophical, emphasis is placed on surveying the breadth of philosophical America – from Emerson through Obama, and from psychological therapy through cyber-philosophy – and on Romano’s valuable blurring of our fixed ideas about what philosophy is and should be.

Keywords: Carlin Romano, Philosophy, American Philosophy, Pragmatism, American Philosophical Association, Pluralism, Public Philosophy.

America the Philosophical is a slyly funny book, and one that hints at how the last few decades of being a philosopher might have been more interesting. Through its many sub-themes, we are introduced to a philosophical interpretation of America that widens our sense of both philosophy and the meaning of the American experience. All in all, Romano offers us a magnificent, idiosyncratic, disjointed feast, only parts of which I can consider in my own personal response that follows.

I.

From one point of view, philosophers are people who find experience intellectually puzzling and try, by thinking on their own and in cooperation with like-minded others, to untangle these puzzles. In this sense, it is surely legitimate to talk, as Romano does, of “America the Philosophical.” While he notes the various clichés that “imply a musty view of philosophy,” he
discounts them because of their origin in “activities christened ‘philosophy’ according to antiquated or academic criteria,” criteria that “pay too little mind to what honest intellectuals increasingly recognize as philosophy today” (15).

Fully grasping the perspective behind America the Philosophical requires that we come to see contemporary America “directly, ebulliently and ordinarily philosophical in a way that remains utterly unappreciated by [academic] philosophers, media and the general public alike” (8). America, Romano writes, with its books of popular philosophy and its openness to experimental philosophy, is “a perfectly designed environment for the practice” of philosophizing (16). Warming to his task, he further suggests that, because of its breadth and diversity, “America’s philosophical landscape . . . provides a more conducive arena, or agora, than any other” (15). Here, he points to such factors as: “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, [and] the embrace of Net communication with an alacrity that intimidates the world” (6), all of which prove that America at the present time “plainly outstrips any rival as the paramount philosophical culture” (15) and is in fact “the most philosophical culture in the history of the world” (6).

Romano’s approach understands philosophy as “an ever-expanding practice of persuasion, rather than a cut-and-dried discipline that hunts down eternal verities” (15). It is thus an approach that stands in strong contrast to that of the American Philosophical Association. The APA, which he characterizes as a “black hole in American media and public life” (184), brings us to a second sense of philosophy, and reminds us how philosophy as an academic endeavor too often can become narrow and sectarian. The official philosophers in America, those with advanced degrees and academic appointments, are often more comfortable with what he calls “the scientism of analytic philosophy” that has “remained the most prestigious form of philosophy, regardless of the way it bored undergraduates and drove numbers down in philosophy classes” (130). Some of these professionals even find self-satisfaction in the fact that most people are not capable, for reasons of inferior intellect (the professionals would claim) or superior sanity (dissenters might argue), of doing what passes for ‘real’ philosophy.

If what the APA does is real philosophy, and few civilians want any part of it, then many of these civilians will be tempted to say that the whole premise of America the Philosophical is nonsense. “Everyone knows that Americans don’t take philosophy seriously,” Romano admits, they “don’t know much about it, don’t pay any attention to
it and couldn’t name a contemporary academic philosopher if their passports depended on it” (3). Ours is an educational system that has decreasing room for abstract thinking, as students, parents, and legislators become ever more myopically job-oriented. Further, given the blissful idiocy of large swaths of America’s anti-intellectual popular culture, the distinction between philosophy as a job and philosophy as a way of living needs to be recognized and the latter approach cultivated.

Romano calls us to the task of defending the broader meaning of the term ‘philosophy.’ Under his approach, “[t]he 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” (6). It is, rather, an approach that sees philosophy as useful for dealing with the problems of experience that are encountered by us and our fellow humans. Seen in this way, philosophy plays a vital role in the larger culture. I might suggest as examples here Ralph Waldo Emerson’s call for a religion of experience and not of ceremony, or Frederick Douglass’s challenge to the self-congratulations of Fourth of July revelers (64); Eric Hoffer’s celebrations of the power of physical labor to both advance the common good and develop self-worth, or Gloria Steinem’s efforts to disentangle erotica from pornography and intimacy from conquest. Romano continues that we must recognize that “America the Philosophical” has “sidestepped antiquated conceptions” of philosophy and become “a coruscating achievement in the pragmatist project that’s been unfolding for centuries.” America has thus become “a rough-hewn implementation of what truth, ethics, beauty and a host of core philosophical notions must be” as we attempt to puzzle our way through our problems “in an interdependent nation and world village no longer able to ignore variant traditions and conceptual categories of others, but equally unwilling to give up the notion that some beliefs are better than others” (23). Further, rejecting the familiar suggestion that American philosophy has declined since “pragmatism’s heyday” (136), Romano maintains that, whatever has happened of late in our philosophy departments, “America the Philosophical overflows with other academics and intellectuals who have supplanted philosophers as public disputants” but who cannot be accused of being “popularizers and lowerers of standards” (168–169).

II.
Romano begins “the grand parade of American philosophy as most have understood it” (65) with a very brief survey of the central figures of this tradition. He offers their views in a social context because, as he writes, “even our biggest ideas in American life exercise their influence by messy, flesh-and-blood engagement with our lived reality” (64). Noting that it is “the messy amalgam of their ideas, predilections and
personalities” that engages us (65), Romano emphasizes “the human dimensions of the parade” (184). Ralph Waldo Emerson, for example, helped to shape “the American temperament” (69) because he was more than a transcendental intellect. Charles Sanders Peirce, the great founder of the Pragmatic movement, fell victim to problems of living, although the impact of his ideas continues to grow. William James carried forward Peirce’s work – or maybe not – in any case, he advanced a practical and pluralistic approach to experience that saw all philosophies as pragmatic perspectives. John Dewey brought James’s message to the broader society by attempting to remove the quest for certainty from philosophical endeavors, and by turning to educational and social reform. George Santayana offers more complexity to Romano’s narrative because of “the intensely personal spine of his philosophy” (79). Given Santayana’s own view that any person’s philosophy is “a personal work of art which gives a specious unity to some chance vista in the cosmic labyrinth,” no unified story would seem to be possible.

As he proceeds, Romano generally follows the familiar path that locates the history of academic American philosophy in the twentieth-century primarily in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Certainly within the professional practice of philosophy, such Harvard figures as W.V.O. Quine, Robert Nozick, John Rawls, and Stanley Cavell have been prominent, even if they could not agree among themselves about what philosophers should be doing. Romano writes that, for Quine, philosophy is “a scientific examination of problems in logic and language that needn’t concern the man in the street” (95), while for Cavell, the understanding of American Transcendentalism via the study of classic American films is a more profound undertaking (125). Other academic philosophers who draw Romano’s attention include such non-Harvard figures as Ronald Dworkin, Richard Posner, and Arthur Danto.

Romano concludes his examination of academic philosophy in America with the transitional figure Richard Rorty, whom he describes as “the most notorious renegade in the history of professional philosophy” (138), a charge made more plausible by the difficulty of naming a number two. Through his 1979 volume *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, “with its radical view that the theory of knowledge was dead, that scientific method in philosophy was a myth, that philosophy and science are both forms of literature, that philosophy should be no more than a kind of sophisticated, cosmopolitan conversation among intellectuals” (129), Rorty “attacked the discipline at its core” and hoped to strike “a death blow against epistemology’s role as the main business of philosophy” (133). While it is certainly necessary to be informed by epistemological study, Rorty maintained that it is a mistake to become obsessed with it. Further, it was necessary to champion imagination in the place of rigor (150). Armed with these and other positions, Romano writes that Rorty blew “like a gust through a dusty attic”
(130; cf. 19–20, 127). Of course, many philosophers had already left the epistemological attic by this time, or had never wandered in, and, led by such figures as John E. Smith (128), John J. McDermott, John Lachs, and others, there was a thriving sub-culture of pluralism within academic philosophy before Rorty’s rise to prominence. Thus, while Rorty admittedly posed an important challenge to many within the epistemological tradition, determining his role in the larger renewal of American Pragmatism has been a complicated question. Rorty thought of himself as a Pragmatist (148–149), and he certainly did influence many people to pursue Pragmatic themes by offering them the cover of insider respectability. Still, there were those who found his initial efforts inadequate to Pragmatism’s task of public philosophy. Even in his later writings, it is possible to wonder, as Romano does, whether Rorty was more of a relativist than a Pragmatist (153) or, if we grant him his Pragmatism, to wonder if he was excessively Jamesian.

As he moves on, Romano begins to examine the ideas of white male thinkers who are not officially philosophers. Among this number he rightly considers William James (“Will”) Durant, whose popularizations of Western ideas, written alone and with his wife Ariel, did not water the ideas down but attempted to plant them in new minds. Unfortunately, as Romano notes, this task was complicated by remainders of the highbrow/lowbrow mentality, with philosophy professors “typically belittling popular thinking and being ignored by popular culture in turn” (177). Epistemology continued to reign in academic philosophy and often philosophers, buffeted by conflicting winds of political correctness and multiculturalism, preferred to work with topics over which they had more control. Following in the footsteps of such thinkers as Benjamin Franklin, however, the residents of “America the Philosophical” recognized the importance of common sense addressed to matters of public concern. Romano’s understanding of common sense is not a homogenization of methods or conclusions, but “a common sense in which no one tried to bulldoze anyone else about the parameters of what can be true, or justified, or what it took to get everybody from disagreement to agreement” (182).

Continuing on with his reconsideration of “the philosophers in America who haven’t been philosophy professors” (184), Romano begins with those who work in psychology and psychiatry. He discusses, for example, B.F. Skinner and Abraham Maslow. The former thought we might move beyond goals like freedom and dignity; the latter advocated that we move towards them. Romano then turns to the explorations of Howard Gardner into various aspects of intelligence. A fourth figure in this chapter, and the most thoroughly examined, is Robert Coles. Romano is most interested in his work with and about children and women in crisis, and his ability to integrate his intellectual life with community service. Given the focus of his volume, Romano
might also have explored more thoroughly Coles’s close affinity for the psychological thought of William James. They both were fascinated by the complexity of consciousness. At his Jamesian best, Coles writes that “we not only have dreams and nightmares, and free or not-so-free associations, and anxieties and phobias, but we (most of us) every day do things, act, make decisions, show ourselves to be competent, effective human beings, men and women going about the business of living with a thankful absence of self-consciousness.” As a result, however, we can also “mouth pieties, then go on to climb over our neighbors and friends in pursuit of money, power, prestige, whatever and in so doing let ourselves off the hook by calling all sorts of other people a variety of unfriendly names, thereby clearing our own slates quite thoroughly.”

A related theme is Coles’s account of James’s Pragmatism that presents it as a “realistic, empirical, commonsense, down-to-earth American tradition that turns its back on thought for thought’s sake, on highfalutin postulations and conceptualizations, on big-time theories that don’t prove themselves ‘real.’” Fortified with such a stance, James could live without ultimate certainty. He “felt no apparent need to be unequivocal in his psychological assertions, and perhaps, as a result, lost those many followers who want certitudes handed down from an academic on high.” A third theme in Coles’s discussion of James that might have arisen here is his emphasis upon pluralism. James, he writes, was “ever prepared to ask, and ask again, to wonder, to describe but let the reader decide, to reverse direction, to acknowledge hesitations, doubts, second thoughts, to await what will be shown by others, to call upon what has already been offered by others, to delight in the mind’s b[l]ooming, buzzing confusion.”

In his discussion of literature, Romano considers the critics Kenneth Burke, Irving Howe, Harold Bloom, and Edward Said. For Romano, Bloom develops possible connections between Emerson and gnosticism; Said, who he notes offers a “black-and-white vision of West and East” (230), addresses themes colonial and post-colonial. Surprisingly, however, Romano does not venture beyond literary critics to explore the ideas of philosophical novelists like Walker Percy and Charles Johnson, who would seem to have a major role to play in “America the Philosophical.” Turning to the realm of political theory, Romano considers Francis Fukuyama and the dangers of triumphalism, Dennis F. Thompson and the importance of both a recognition of political reality and a respect for political ethics, and George Fletcher and the issue of loyalty. Romano’s final political figure is Noam Chomsky, and the general tenor of his analysis can be drawn from the following: “Amid the vacuum of professional philosophers willing to reflect philosophically on American foreign policy, Chomsky seized and stood his ground over the years, adding uncommon viewpoints to America the Philosophical. He simply lacked supportable truths most of the time” (248). Romano
then turns to other areas beyond the philosophy departments. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson deal with philosophical questions of reason; but their interests are in reason embodied, rather than in philosophy's traditional mentalism. Robert Kaplan is a mathematician who is interested in nothing, or more precisely the importance of zero. The neurologist Oliver Sachs pursues the by-ways of consciousness through his affectionate studies of people with anomalies. Romano then discusses a quartet of gurus and anti-gurus: Anthony Storr, Robert Fulghum, Paul Fussell, and Hugh Hefner, each of whom offers a philosophy of sorts, designed to help us live well.

Romano's consideration of philosophers in the world of print begins with the often neglected Max Lerner, who, Romano writes, viewed America as “a new civilization, not a spinoff of European predecessors” (285). He presents Lerner’s 1957 America as a Civilization as a Pragmatist intellectual history of the American experience, “a narrative that insists twists in American history emerged from complex, intricate problems in real life, not from a script driven by one powerful idea” (287). As Lerner writes in that volume, “Americans find their ideas in things: they understand generalizations in terms of the operations involved in using them.” As a consequence, truth is not to be found “in absolutes or in mechanical formulas but in the whole operative context of individual growth and social action in which the idea was embedded.” Elsewhere, Lerner writes that Pragmatism at its best is “a hard-headed militant preference of fact to theory,” with a primary regard for “the changing experience of the present” over “the accumulated experience of the past.” Another scribe whom Romano discusses is I.F. Stone. Rather than focusing on the important role of I.F. Stone’s Weekly in America political life, or even on the various charges of Stone’s links to Moscow, Romano concerns himself with Stone’s attack on Socrates in his volume, The Death of Socrates. While this approach might seem out of place in this volume, Romano’s discussion of Stone’s presentation of Socrates as anti-democrat indicates Stone’s understanding of the centrality of citizenship to the America mind, even if it risks, as Romano points out, making Socrates a puppet of Plato (290). Romano also considers Christopher Hitchens and a series of broadcasters who were attempting to actualize the never-realized possibilities of television: Howard Kurtz, Bill Moyers, and Joseph Campbell.

In the chapter on African Americans, Romano notes the persistence of the white canon in philosophy long after its demise in other disciplines (318, cf. 32–3) before considering some rare exceptions. Among these figures is Alain Locke, who managed to integrate his philosophical explorations into the developing life of the Harlem Renaissance. Arising from these activities, or driving them, was his advocacy of cultural pluralism, explored with great care in Locke’s introductions to the 1942 volume, When Peoples Meet. Also considered is William Thomas
Fontaine, who was tragically caught between the blinders imposed by academic philosophy and his personal interests in broader racial issues. More recently, as Romano notes, individuals such as Cornell West, Anthony Appiah, and Michael E. Dyson have reached levels of prominence as public philosophers in “America the Philosophical” that transcend whatever official departmental affiliations they might have.

As he turns to the role of women in “America the Philosophical,” Romano recognizes the traditional minimizing of the contributions of Margaret Fuller to Transcendentalism. He also notes the difficulties that disciplinized academics have had attempting to sort the contributions of Jane Addams, the Quaker advocate of domestic and international peace who found in the settlement movement both objective value for communities and subjective value for the residents. He considers as well the personal and public circus that has surrounded Ayn Rand, the champion of objectivism and individual rights. Romano then offers a more detailed exploration of some aspects of the thought Hannah Arendt. Although he seems to be at least as interested in Martin Heidegger as in Arendt, Romano does connect up her attachment to him as rooted in her philosophy of friendship (375), rather than in blindness to what he calls “the fervor and tawdriness of Heidegger’s cooperation with National Socialism” (369). More emphasis might have been placed on other aspects of Arendt’s work, like her championing of the value of solitude, while at the same time warning against private loneliness and public isolation as paving the way for totalitarianism.12 Romano considers as well Betty Friedan, whose 1963 volume The Feminine Mystique protested the presentation of women in the media and advertising as requiring protection from the burdens of a full life, and he hints at her place in later developments. In his longer examination of Susan Sontag, the writer and so much more, Romano attempts, with great success, to find her place in “America the Philosophical” by connecting up various threads of illness and war, direct experience and imposed interpretations, photography and theater, sexuality and politics. Other women philosophers, some with philosophy jobs, whom Romano discusses in this ninety-nine page chapter are: Camille Paglia, Martha Nussbaum, Christina Sommers, Ellen Zetzel Lambert, Nancy Etcoff, Jean Bethke Elshtain, and Anita Allen. Emerging from this discussion of feminism and beauty, lesbianism and race, is a sense that, while “America the Philosophical” has not been a particularly welcoming place for women, its future holds better possibilities.

Two further themes undertake to rethink other aspects of America’s historical blindness. The first is the position of Native Americans in “America the Philosophical.” While Americans may have overcome their vile prejudices about ‘savages,’ Romano indicates that they are only slowly coming around to appreciate Native American belief systems as philosophies, and to undertake comparative studies that
explore, for example, possible parallels with Pragmatism. The second theme results from the fact that “mainstream professional philosophy in twentieth-century America devoted scant attention to gay life” (451). Romano’s own presentation, heavy with discussions of Europeans Ludwig Wittgenstein and Michel Foucault, perhaps proves his point. As exemptions to this neglect, Romano considers Judith Butler and, at greater length, Richard Mohr who, he writes, “courageously stated his arguments, and not just his wish list, about crucial gay matters such as outing, gay pornography, AIDS and the radical tactics of Act Up,” all the while emphasizing dignity and opposing “society’s denigration of gays” (459–460).

Romano then turns to an examination of cyber-matters. Guided by the contributions of such figures as John Perry Barlow, Paul Saffo, Kevin Kelly and John Pavlik, Romano considers the importance of technology, the internet, and the emergence of new kinds of thinking. As a summary statement, Romano notes that, with only slight competition from abroad, “American thinkers began turning out a more concrete genre of cyberphilosophy about the effect of the digital revolution on politics, religion, literature, romance, journalism, film, music, business and every other part of life” (476). Taking up the political implications of the internet, Romano points to such questions as which American political party might benefit more from it, and whether democracy will ultimately benefit. From the side of cyber-religion, Romano notes both the potential for new sects, and the emergence of new metaphysical questions like the possibility of computers with souls. He also considers the impact of cyber-literature, both in terms of content and format. Finally, Romano considers the cyber-cynics, those who are less than fully enamored of the cyber-age. Among the potential drawbacks to which they point are: doubts about artificial intelligence and virtual reality, the creation of new problems through automation, risks to privacy, and various instances of cyber-shaming.

After considering this broad sweep of American philosophers, Romano’s devotion of twenty-five or so pages in the context of this volume to Isocrates, an admittedly “nearly forgotten” (21) Greek philosopher, might seem self-indulgent, or at least incidental to his larger topic. Romano believes that Isocrates should be as famous as Socrates, perhaps moreso. More importantly, given the two visions of philosophy that we have been considering, Romano suggests that Socratic philosophy, in its striving to be scientific, is more like our academic philosophy, whereas Isocratic philosophy approximates public deliberation and is thus of more value to “America the Philosophical.” As he presents the message of Isocrates, Romano stresses his views that knowledge about useful matters is far more important than knowledge about useless ones, and that “for a philosopher, development of judgment trumps acquisition of knowledge” (550). Further, Isocratic
philosophy concerns itself with “the real problems of real people in everyday life” (551), and with the cultivation of educated opinion based on the realization that, while humans are incapable of attaining more than opinion, we are certainly able to develop better opinions. For Romano, foundational philosophy and the centrality of epistemology, on the other hand, are part of the Socratic/Platonic understanding of philosophy; and he wonders why this inherited approach continues to be taken as the correct one when, as he writes, “Isocrates, not Socrates, is our man” (560).

Romano’s take on John Rawls’s project to rethink justice can be seen in his characterization of it as a “magnificent failure” (561). Rawls wanted to offer a new defense of the social contract, one that was able to counter arbitrary twists of fate by means of what he called the original position and the difference principle. He hoped that we would be able, through complex processes of reasoning, to build upon our initial common insights and to attain broader agreement. That is, he hoped to demonstrate that people’s original perspectives overlapped more than they realized; but his inability to lead them through reasoning to his conclusions called this assumption into question. Rawls ultimately ran into difficulties because, Romano writes, “no country exhibits a pluralism of philosophical and political beliefs as strongly as the United States” (560). As a result, while Rawls articulated his own convictions, he could not sell his vision of justice to the America public. Romano notes, however, that over time Rawls “evolved from a champion of objectivism to a pragmatist who emphasized not true principles of justice, but principles Americans can live with” (107), and he attempted to articulate “principles that would keep a society both just and stable” even if it was not able to come to any agreement on “shared, demonstrable, objective moral truths” (114).

The culmination of Romano’s volume is an epilogue that considers the phenomenon of Barack Obama as “Philosopher in Chief” and explores the importance of his “cosmopolitan ideal of the American thinker . . . committed to cooperative conversation” (596–597). In such a system everybody counts the same. Similarly, cosmopolitanism should offer an ideal vision that leads us into the future without overestimating our past achievements. Romano believes that Obama portrays this vision correctly by pointing to the Pragmatic moral ideals that indicate “what made Americans wonderful without declaring that Americans were wonderful” (598). As we have repeatedly seen in our shared lives, however, pluralistic evenhandedness is not a popular political stance. It may be fine when our philosophers listen to each other and explore a common good; but we want our politicians to care primarily, or evenly exclusively, about us. The contribution of a growing cosmopolitanism is that it can broaden our sense of who we are. Obama clearly is, as Romano writes, a “rare statesman” (604); he
may even be the embodiment of “America the Philosophical.” Sad to say, events since 2009 also provide evidence that, even though America contains “the broadest spectrum of ethnicities, philosophies and means of communication, the widest boundaries of freedom of expression, of any country in history” (605) – we are still earning the title of “America the Philosophical.”

III

Before closing, let me briefly register three complaints about America the Philosophical. The first is that the volume has no notes. Perhaps to preclude such a complaint, Romano writes at one point that “in an age of nanosecond attention spans, among a people who check their smartphones every minute,” the philosophers have “rests predominantly in the headlines they communicate to us, not the footnotes” (65). Still, I hope that he will see my call for more documentation to be a necessary counter to such short-attention-span thinking. My complaint is in two-parts. On the one hand, there are places in the volume where Romano wanders off the trail, and having to provide evidence for specific claims might have saved him. To cite just two examples from his discussion of Dewey, Romano considers the influence of Dewey’s Catholic mother (86), although she was clearly a Congregationalist, and he points to the unlikely drafting of Dewey’s volume Reconstruction in Philosophy as a soldiers’ vade mecum during WW II (88). In both of these cases, and in others, preparing citations would have avoided the problem. On the other hand, a volume as rich and challenging as this one necessarily takes readers into many unfamiliar places. For example, when faced with the extraordinary array of cyber-topics that he explores, we – or at least I – need more precise guidance than a simple bibliography, however thorough. (The bibliography at times is not that thorough. Charles Sanders Peirce, for example, fails to even make an appearance.)

My second complaint is that Romano’s criteria of inclusion and exclusion are unclear. While I am perfectly willing to accept his informed discussions of figures whom I do not value as highly as he does – because he may prove to be right – I wonder about those who I think are insufficiently appreciated in America the Philosophical. Granting his general focus on “the past fifty years” (184), I still wonder whether we can develop an adequate understanding of “America the Philosophical” without a careful consideration of the contributions of, not just occasional mentions of, such figures as: Margaret Mead, Reinhold Niebuhr, William F. Buckley, Jr., James Baldwin, Herbert Marcuse, Studs Terkel, and Thomas Samuel Kuhn. Moreover, can we completely ignore such figures as: C. Wright Mills, Samuel Phillips Huntington, Carl Sagan, Erving Goffman, Susanne Langer, and Loren Eiseley? Perhaps we can; but I would like to have a clearer sense of
why Romano thinks so. What are his criteria? I realize that part of the answer to my question is to be found in the close relationship between Romano's various journalistic endeavors over the years and the ultimate shape of this volume. Still, this fact would seem to be an accident rather than a criterion.

Admittedly, I may not myself be able to offer a clear criterion that would sharply distinguish philosophers from other important thinkers. My distinction is usually pragmatic. In my “American Philosophy” courses of late, I have focused, after some preliminary considerations of Jonathan Edwards, Franklin, and Emerson, on a careful examination of Peirce, James, and Dewey. Then we turn to briefer units on one or two of the other figures, like Josiah Royce, George Herbert Mead, or Santayana. I conclude the course with an open-ended consideration of what is not to be found in terms of race, gender, and topic in this classical approach, with an emphasis on how the shape of this course is evolving. At the same time that I have been teaching the narrowly-focused course on “American Philosophy,” I have also been teaching a two-semester course on “American Intellectual History.” I have thus been able to explore the ideas of many of the lost souls whom Romano would include as philosophers, and a few others, even if I have not been very successful in challenging their segregation. In my approach, America remains a philosophical place, although not all of its thinkers are philosophers.

My third complaint about America the Philosophical is that it embodies unquestioned much of America’s obsession with the elitism that is poisoning our system of higher education. If our topic is attempting to understand “America the Philosophical,” I find it disappointing to read almost exclusively about the graduates and faculty of Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Chicago, Stanford, etc., with only occasional mentions of public universities as in the case of “the highly ranked University of Michigan” (442) and with only one, highly negative mention of community colleges.15 What is Romano’s position on the unstated connection between philosophical quality and America’s academic elite? How does he understand the relationship between those who have risen, through some combination of merit and accident, to the top in our analytically-skewed system and those who have not? From the point of view of America the Philosophical, almost all of our official philosophers will live out their entire academic lives in a shadowy, open-admissions underworld, where adjectives like ‘selective’ and ‘leading’ and ‘prestigious’ are as misplaced as their endowments are paltry. Romano unfortunately does not take up questions like: Who has done more for “America the Philosophical”: some of his high-profile star figures, or some array of invisible instructors who struggle to awaken in students of marginal talent and inadequate preparation what he calls “the soul of the true philosopher: a self-critical spirit” (197)? Part of the problem,
I suspect, is that Romano concerns himself almost exclusively with the research and publishing end of higher education. If we are going to attain the full potential of “America the Philosophical,” however, we need to think just as much about teaching. He considers very briefly developments in philosophical therapy; but he only hints at efforts to develop philosophy for children. He considers neither the APA’s work on teaching, nor the decades of effort by the American Association of Philosophy Teachers, and others, to bring teaching to the forefront of philosophic discussions.

IV. I noted initially that America the Philosophical hints at how the last few decades of being a philosopher might have been more interesting, and suggests ways to widen our sense of both philosophy and the meaning of the American experience. In this philosophical interpretation of America, Romano has given us both a rich assessment of our present situation and some hints as to where we, as philosophers, might direct our efforts as we move into the future.

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REFERENCES


NOTES


2. On the larger question of a golden age of American philosophy, see my essays: “One Hundred Years of Pragmatism” and “A History of Pragmatism.”


4. At times, Romano offers stronger versions: that Rorty “urged academic colleagues to abandon epistemology” (126), or that he favored “the death of epistemology” (143).

5. See, for example, my essay: “Rorty’s Use of Dewey.”


9. Lerner, America as a Civilization, 212, 723.

10. Lerner, Ideas are Weapons, 100–101.


13. George Dykhuizen writes of Lucina Dewey’s “evangelical pietism” and her membership in the First Congregational Church of Burlington (Life and Mind of John Dewey, 6). Robert Westbrook discusses her “evangelical Protestant faith” and “emotional Congregational pietism” (John Dewey and American Democracy, 3).

15. Romano notes the perhaps excessive dedication of those who might be willing to teach “Intro” at a community college in North Dakota (47) just to remain part of the discipline.

16. Romano is critic-at-large of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and he spent twenty-five years as the literary critic of *The Philadelphia Inquirer*.

17. Romano even slips on one occasion into a negative description of the classroom experience itself when he writes of many philosophy teachers, “sentenced to a lifetime of teaching the same texts, from the same ossified canon, with the same bureaucratic boundaries constraining their imaginations” (212). Surely Romano, however many times he teaches any text, does not feel imprisoned by his work.
Abstract

This paper elaborates on Romano’s landmark book as a paradigm extension from philosophy as a doctrine to philosophy as a personal disposition to think reflectively. Romano’s pragmatism highlights philosophy as a reflective tendency in the service of the relevant and for the benefit of a better life as it is actually lived. Rather than staying within its own territory, the point is to enter what might seem like non-philosophical realms of action with the idea of cultivating them. Breaking away from the overtly academic boundaries of philosophy, Romano’s book paves the way for a positive philosophy movement and for philosophy that contributes to people’s actual conduct of their lives.

Keywords: Carlin Romano, Life-philosophical reflection, Philosophy as a practice, Positive philosophy

I remember distinctly the moment I heard “All My Loving”, the first song by the Beatles I ever heard, in 1963 when I was 10 years of age. While puzzled by the unconventional long hair of the musicians of whom I had heard rumors, the music touched me. It felt right. I got a similar feeling when I started to read Carlin Romano’s hefty book in digital format one night in Athens whilst I was attending the World Congress of Philosophy. I was impressed by its rakish humor, joyful style, its warm, friendly, inspired scholarship, and the author’s passion to uncover the relevance, grandeur and vitality of the philosophizing attitude as the author saw it. The book covered many thinkers far beyond my expertise and general knowledge, but
his excitement was contagious. As a non-expert reader, which is what I am with regard to many sections of the book, I join with delight and upswing Romano’s call for a movement of thought far beyond my immediate interests.

But there is more to Romano’s book than just the fact that it provides such a good read. To wit:

1. Romano locates philosophy in spaces and territories (topics, contexts, expressive environments, practices, ways of life) which are overlooked, dismissed or disrespected by academic philosophy and its practices, and insists that that broader-than-anybody-had-realized landscape provides gold mines for philosophical thinking; there is far more territory for philosophy out there than anybody had envisioned;

2. Romano links the philosophical to the thinker’s personal life, suggesting that the two cannot be separated; philosophical thinking is a fundamentally personal affair, more so than most people inside or outside philosophy had thought;

3. Romano considers philosophical thinking as a vital, transformative force to the actual living of everybody’s lives, to democracy and to human progress;

4. Romano perceives a glimmering galaxy of possibilities for micro and macro level philosophical contributions, far beyond what anybody had envisioned.

Romano extends the philosophical territory with a passion to make philosophical thinking both personal and germane.

From Doctrines of Thinking to Dispositions to Think

I believe Romano presents a powerful case for the significance of applied, life-philosophically relevant thinking. Romano offers what could be called a dispositional view of thinking on themes that matter. I salute this, having devoted almost three decades to an effort to develop something similar: a dispositionally oriented, positive and constructive, indirect and decidedly a-disciplinary philosophical practice in the lecture context. The way I see it, Romano’s book is a contribution in the literary format to the same meta-philosophical paradigm extension that I have tried to develop through the spoken word in the lecture setting.

Some pedagogues consider the lecture format as one-directional, passive and old-fashioned, even submissive, and certainly the world has seen enough of bad lecturing. But I believe a new era is dawning for lectures as a platform for stimulating thinking. I am not talking about lectures in the “massive open online courses” or some other digitally enhanced format, but in the old sense, in which the lecture is delivered
in front of real people in a specific space and time. I am talking about philosophical lecturing as a form of performing art.

In a series of earlier papers I tried to describe some aspects of such lecturing. (Saarinen and Slotte 2003; Saarinen 2008; Saarinen 2013a; Saarinen 2013b, Saarinen and Lehti 2014; Saarinen 2015; Saarinen and Korhonen 2015). Philosophical lecturing as I have developed it envisions the lecturer as a “conductor of thoughts” in the sense of a symphony orchestra. Just as in a symphony orchestra, the individual musicians are playing their own instruments and are supported by the conductor and by the communal set-up. The flow of thought, the build-up of the intensity, and the attunement between “the musicians” and “the conductor” are all equally essential. But unlike in music performance, in the lecture “the musicians” are not playing their “thought instruments” according to any pre-fixed score. The lines of thought, associations, narratives and experiences that the lecture invites the participant to reflect upon are not delivered from outside, but unfold from within, with only some support from what comes from without.

Life-philosophical lecturing as a performing art and as a life-philosophical practice is a crossover phenomenon, somewhat like has been seen in the evolution of music. (Byrne 2012). It combines aspects of traditional lecturing and inspirational speaking with unconditional respect for the individual as the source of his or her own thoughts and insights. Externally, the set-up looks like an energized highly focused communal reflection session with the appearance of a lecture. The point is to create an empowering space, an enabling environment, a supportive setting for people to engage in life-philosophically relevant reflection. The aim is to nurture a setting for life-transforming interventions that emerge from within and for any interested participant irrespective of his or her expertise in philosophy. (For discussion of some of the philosophical and pedagogical aspects involved, see Hämäläinen and Jones 2013, Lonka 2013, and Wilk 2013.) What is characteristic of my life-philosophical lecturing is the emphasis that is placed on the participant’s own thoughts and insights as they emerge in the course of the event. The point is to create a safe base and expanding space for the participant’s inner dialogues. My own talk as the lecturer, apparently the focus, is in fact a support act. The idea is to provide an occasion for undertaking reflective processes that ordinarily are bypassed yet might bear fundamentally on the participant’s life.

The critical question becomes: what kind of contexts and what kind of occasions best serve life-philosophically relevant internal dialogue? The “When” and “Where” become more important than the “What.” Instead of asking, “What are the most important themes, concepts, categories and thinkers people should know about life-philosophy as a
doctrine?” I ask: *When and where could a participant engage in a personally rewarding process of life-philosophical reflection?*

One reply to this question is: by reading Romano’s book. Another: by attending my life-philosophical lectures. In both cases the truly critical point is not what the book claims, or what are the themes that are covered, but what can happen to the participant as he or she engages in the reflective process the book or the lecture aims to stimulate and facilitate. Adopting the title from a remarkable elaboration of the dispositional view of thinking, the current article could be called “When is Philosophical Reflection” (cf. Perkins and Richard 2004).

No doubt one can read Romano’s book from the point of view of its scholarly material and by focusing on its propositional content and knowledge claims. As a result, the “What” would become highlighted, and no doubt the reader is likely to engage in potentially heated debate as to why Hugh Hefner is included but (say) Thyla Tharp is not. Why is Romano not even discussing Christopher Alexander? Susan K. Langer? The mindfulness greats Ellen Langer, Jon Kabat-Zinn and B. Alan Wallace? Mark C. Taylor? Martin Seligman, Barbara Fredrickson? Anne Bogart? But Romano’s point is in the “When” and “Where.” He wants the reader to engage in a personal process of reflection with a potential to change. It is secondary to what Romano actually claims of the particular figures he covers, or even who they are. You could go on to argue that his views on this or that are flawed, unjustified or one-sided, but that is not the point. Romano’s arena is reflective life-philosophy. He wants to provide a platform for people to engage in internal reflection, inner dialogue, with a possibility of transforming their lives through that personally conducted movement of thought. This, I submit, is Romano’s overriding pathos in *America the Philosophical*. His conception is that America is exceptionally rich in thinkers, writers and activists whose chief interest has been that same passion to move people’s thinking regarding how life is lived.

**Reflection as the Core of Philosophy**

What makes the efforts of the people in Romano’s Hall of Fame *philosophical?* Among the characteristics Romano mentions, the following seem to me pivotal:

1. They “subject preconceptions to ongoing analysis” (p. 15);
2. They “open eyes and change minds” (p. 19);
3. They think “imaginatively about how problems can be solved” (93) and provide “imaginative revision of the way we think” (p. 21);
4. They provide “persuasive narratives about real experience” (p. 142);
5. They connect experience, study and reflection with “life itself” (p. 115);
6. They resist “eternal right answers” (p. 21);
7. They engage in “persuasive activity” (p. 21);
8. They remain committed to “reasonably careful thinking, sensitive to reality” (p. 551);  
9. Often reflecting “a ‘can-do’ attitude” they are “eager to bridge the gap between thought and action” (p. 88);
10. They hold that genuine philosophy “must always engage the real problems of real people in everyday life” (p. 551).

None of these characteristics are strictly professional, specific to some particular experts, or relate to some particular domains or subject matter. None of them fall within the privileged authority of philosophy or some other discipline. If there is any one category the traits suggest, it is one of “human, all too human” in an engaged and positive sense – in the sense in which humanity involves its own transcendence while at the same time being embodied and tied to concrete life. I would say “being philosophical” for Romano means an orientation to reflective action, a tendency, disposition and an aspiration to life as one involving serious, open consideration along with the need to act.

Romano calls for a paradigm extension from philosophy as a doctrine to philosophy as a disposition to think reflectively. This is a challenge for narrow doctrine specialists, but nowhere does Romano say their work is worthless. His project is one of inclusion rather than exclusion. But free spirits who want to use their intellect and conceptual imagination to connect with the rest of the world and with life as a process of interaction, adventure and change – spirits such as discussed by Romano in his book – are likely to celebrate Romano’s vision more than narrow specialists.

It Works in Practice

Had I not moved beyond the dominant doctrine-driven view of philosophy, I would never have created what I call “the Paphos seminar,” a one-week seminar on Cyprus. Since 1995 the seminar has been organized 47 times for over 4000 participants, and it represents my best effort as a “philosophical practitioner” in the service of “better life through better thinking” and with no doctrine taught (Saarinen 2013a, Saarinen 2015).

I think it is fair to say that a great many of the thousands of participants that have come to the pointedly open-to-all seminar since it started (many repeatedly) would not have undertaken the reflective processes that they now have now conducted, had they not stepped into that cognitively stimulating, emotionally elevating, unconditionally respectful, warm, liberal and a-doctrinal context for a week.
After 21 years and 47 seminars, there is no doubt that the Paphos seminar works. As an occasion to engage in positive and constructive, potentially life-transformative inner dialogue, without any pressure to initiate some particular change or commit oneself to some particular conclusion, the case has been tested and proven to work in practice. Participants that vary radically in their age, educational background, professional affiliation, life situation, political and religious views, and even in their willingness to come to the seminar in the first place have proved that the seminar provides an occasion for “time well spent.” The success rate is extremely high if judged in terms of the significance participants assign to the experience of their own thinking process, in the form it has emerged in the seminar, and how it has contributed in their own eyes to their life afterwards.

My experience points to the following conclusions:

1. People have a need to reflect on their life; people will enthusiastically seize the opportunity to undergo personal life-philosophical reflection, provided the context feels right and is sufficiently stimulating and safe;
2. People are not keen on receiving unsolicited advice on how they should live their lives;
3. People don’t need new knowledge on life’s fundamentals as much as they need to revisit constructively and connect reflectively with what they already know.

The point here is that everybody has the innate ability to think in ways that will make the person’s life better. It is possible to create contexts to facilitate just that. Yet professional philosophy does not see the point. It is too busy with its expert themes and intellectual debates to address head-on the possibility of philosophical reflection as a source of life-improvement.

**Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf**

One can be a famed economist in a major university without being able to understand, in any apparent way, real-life economic phenomena. One can be a leading philosophy professor without being able to understand, in any apparent way, real-life philosophical phenomena. Theories have their own intrinsic value, but life beyond theories does also exist.

Some academics take pride in their distance from the life of the average men and women on the street. No matter how artificial or remote from real life an intellectual system might be, some people still want to become its high priests and guardian gatekeepers. Systems of representation gain lives of their own, and soon entire institutions, disciplines and ways of life are devoted to them. But the world of theoretical problems cannot make the life as lived disappear.
Romano’s striking idea is not to fear life. His passion is to open a wide broadband connection from philosophy to life itself, de-authorizing the privileged one-way expert channels. Growth is back. Personal responsibility is back. Adventure, challenge and creativity are back. The theme of personal growth as something that cannot be outsourced is back. Most especially, reflection as a resource of unfathomable significance is back. But you need to do it yourself. No expert can take your position when it comes to reflecting on the fundamentals of your life, any more than in living it.

Reflection needs life, and life reflection. Reflection needs to be exercised, facilitated, inspired, and put into active use. It needs connections to life’s original uncertainties, to behavior and conduct, with life as an ongoing and unfolding process that is subject to human intervention. Reflection, like life itself, can always be recharged, revitalized and reoriented.

That is the undertaking of Romano’s Hall of Famers: they help in our reflective life by showing how we might move forward.

Where the Action Is
“Practicing philosophers are … the very model of theoreticians”, Jay F. Rosenberg writes in his The Practice of Philosophers, “and since the objects of their theorizing are at one remote from the facts, the very opposite of practical folk.” (Rosenberg 1984, p. 9)

This dominant view is one that Romano forcefully challenges. Romano seeks the active, life-engaging reflection that is acutely informed of the human necessity to take action. In Romano’s view, philosophical thinking should be tested by pragmatic affairs and cannot be separated from them. For him, philosophical reflection is not a self-contained activity conducted in solidarity and as distanced from the real concerns of real people. The reflective activism of Romano stands on the shoulders of giants such as Emerson, William James and John Dewey, and it is geared to make a difference. The pragmatism of Romano highlights philosophy as a reflective tendency, disposition and aspiration, as I would put it, to the service of the relevant and for the benefit of a better life.

Thus viewed, the task of philosophy is fundamentally life-enhancing and dynamic, it is vital to growth and progress. Being philosophical means becoming mindful of and acutely aware of what truly matters, while also recognizing the crucial role thinking itself plays in forming such judgments. Philosophy is not about detached observations but a channel to a more mindful and contribution-rich engagement with the world. It implies a never-ending dialogue regarding what is relevant. It highlights the human reflective capabilities, our ability to think and re-think, to take perspective, to adopt and reframe, to transform and decide, to take distance and ponder, to orient and reorient, to compare and relate.
Life is where the action is, and all action is philosophical. To me Romano’s inspiring call is to point to the imaginative and boundless nature of philosophy as an engine of human dynamism. Human activities, practices and ways of life are the domain that the philosophical mind should connect with, address, target, conceptualize, and be ready to change. The chief thesis of Romano’s book is that America is abundantly rich in its philosophical contributions to that effect.

**Servant Leadership for Mass Flourishing**

Romano’s *America the Philosophical*, in its lively, multifaceted and often astonishing discussion on diverse thinkers, writers, and activists, does not pay much attention to academic theoretical philosophers that focus their work on “the justification of narrow knowledge claims by piece-meal and supposedly scientific argument” (p. 129). This is not to deny their merits. It is just that “the chief glory of our country’s intellectual tradition,” as Romano says with the words of Richard Rorty and following in the footsteps of William James and John Dewey, lies outside the realm of narrow science-imitating philosophy.

At stake is the idea of engaging with philosophical reflection serving as a stepping-stone towards bringing out the nature of the philosophical which is to connect with activities outside philosophy itself. Its idea is to be useful, communicative and enriching. It is not a delivery mechanism for formal, flawless bulk commodities well scrutinized by some experts. Romano implies a conviction of philosophy as a fundamentally applied enterprise. Rather than staying within its own territory, the point is to enter what might seem like non-philosophical realms of dynamism and arenas of action with the idea of cultivating them. This is the midwife-view of philosophy, celebrated by Socrates but dismissed by current academic philosophy.

**The Ancient Promise of Philosophy**

One central thesis of Romano’s is that “America the Philosophical” “operates under the sign of Isocrates” (p. 18).

For Romano, the Athenian educator and rhetorician Isocrates exemplifies and promotes the philosophical stance of the United States. Romano boldly and astonishingly claims that America is “the world’s preeminent philosophical culture” (p. 8). The fact that apparently America seems to be one of the least philosophical cultures is due to a distorted view of philosophy that just happens to be dominant.

In ancient Greece the concept of philosophy was still in the process of being formed. Where Plato emphasized access to abstract ideals and a knowledge-based view, Isocrates stressed judgment in action, speech and situational, concrete betterment in the company of other people and for the benefit of the city. Isocrates developed his view in a number
of masterful writings, but as a historical fact, subsequent history of philosophy has wiped him out. While recognized as an educator and rhetorician, as a philosopher Plato overshadowed Isocrates to the extent that the latter has become a philosophical non-entity. As a result, the alternative Isocrates poses to Plato’s concept of philosophy, and to the tradition that follows it, disappears from philosophy. Isocrates is categorized out of the horizon of philosophical relevance.

The whitewashing of Isocrates from the canon of philosophy is staggering. For instance, in Frederick Copleston’s well-known and comprehensive nine-part History of Philosophy Isocrates does not get even a paragraph. Sir Anthony Kenny’s recent History of Western Philosophy does not mention him. In The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy he does get a brief entry, as a “rhetorician and teacher who was seen as the chief contemporary rival of Plato,” but in The Oxford Companion to Philosophy he is passed over in complete silence. The cover to the collection of the English translations of Isocrates in the “Oratory of Classical Greece” series published by the University of Texas Press indicates that the two volumes contain “speeches” by “the Athenian rhetorician Isocrates.”

Yet Romano elevates Isocrates to a towering position in philosophy. For him Isocrates is nothing less than a philosopher par excellence.

As I read Isocrates he comes across as an educator of character, as a stimulator of personal insight for excellence and virtue. The context of pursuing philosophia is in ethics, politics, public speaking, in cultivating one’s soul, and in living one’s life virtuously. Most importantly, for Isocrates philosophia is an activity that should “have a bearing on our lives,” and should “help our activities” (Antodosis 252). The aim is to lead “thoughts and actions” and to “desire advantage” (pleonexia).

The notion of philosophy that Isocrates presents centers around “human excellence,” “betterment” of one’s soul, character and actions, and on good judgment in practical affairs, on “serious study” and “close examination.” Is such a concept of philosophy not too wide? Does it not inflate the notion of philosophy?

No. To the extent we want to take seriously the possibility and duty of philosophy to contribute to human affairs, to individual lives and to the fates of communities, Romano’s Isocratic view of philosophy as a reflective, open, growth-directed, character-building, situational, pragmatically relevant and applied discourse is nothing short of being vital.

Theoretical philosophy as an expert discipline has its time and place. But applied philosophizing has its time and place all the time, as emphasized and demonstrated by Socrates and by Isocrates. In its excitement of abstractions and formalisms, technical jargon, knowledge claims and expert cultural institutionalizing, academic theoretical
philosophy has all but forgotten the noble roots of the philosophical passion as the pivotal and irreplaceable urge to cultivate our abilities towards improvement and towards a life well lived.

**The Transfiguration of the Commonplace.**

Why is something a work of art when something exactly like it is not? This is the question with which Arthur Danto approaches art. Danto saw Andy Warhol’s Brillo Box in a New York gallery and was struck by the fact that the “piece of art” did not differ in any discernible way from the real cardboard soap-pad container it copied. Why was it a work of art? Because it is presented as something requiring interpretation, Danto replies in *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. The institutional context is relevant, the atmosphere in which the object is presented. This is the act Romano is after in *America the Philosophical*. He provides a context in which what does not seem at first “philosophical” is transformed into such.

This is in line with my own effort in my life-philosophical lecturing practice in the Paphos seminar and elsewhere. I’m aiming at a “transfiguration of the commonplace”, by providing elevated reflective environments in which ordinary thinking and experience will start to require interpretation given the atmosphere where it is presented.

Danto envisions “interpretations as functions which transform material objects into works of art.” Interpretation is “the lever with which an object is lifted out of the real world and into the artworld, where it is becomes vested in often unexpected raiment” (Danto 1986, p. 37). For me the life-philosophical lecture is the lever with which a seemingly ordinary point of view, experience, mode of thinking, habit or story is lifted out of the mundane and into the world of life-philosophy.

The point is that any thinking can be turned into philosophical thinking by staging it as such. Romano is the master literary craftsman of such scaffolds. The reason why that is beneficial is because it opens the door for further transfigurations in the realm of thinking, experience and actions.

**Report from the Sports Desk**

“What’s good about this crisis?”

As an opening line to a conflict, say a civil war, this line might seem absurd, but it is sometimes used when considering the attitude of President Martti Ahtisaari, the Nobel Laureate for Peace in 2008, famed for his brilliance in bringing about peace.

Far from being an ideological “positive thinker” who would not confront brute facts, Ahtisaari is a no-nonsense man of action. It is his realistic pragmatism that helped him negotiate the independence
of Namibia from the apartheid era South Africa, to resolve the dispute
over Kosovo after it declared independence from Serbia, and to bring
peace to Indonesia’s Aceh after decades of civil war. A man who would
loom large in *Finland the Philosophical*, Ahtisaari uses constructive,
solution-seeking reflection and spirited communication in the context
of building a better future.

In peace negotiations, there is a limit as to how long it is wise to
dwell on the atrocities of the past. Positivity broadens and builds, as
the work on positive emotions by Barbara Fredrickson (1998; 2009)
demonstrates. Observing this, it is striking to note how conspicu-
ously absent positivity is from the field of academic philosophy. An
implicitly negative agenda prevails. Even in Socrates, we primarily
see a man with a mission to show *that something’s wrong* in some-
body's position. While the critical faculty of mind is essential for any
progress, and while it is imperative to develop one’s abilities to spot
ignorance masquerading as knowledge, there is more to philosophy
than that. It is philosophy as a positive undertaking and as the reason-
ified effort to broaden and build that Romano advocates in his
landmark volume.

You cannot win matches in football, if you only focus on defense. A
winning team needs offensive mastery as well, but the logic, psychology
and modes of action of defense and offense are different. By just man-
aging the negative you do not inspire the offensive line to imaginative
breakthroughs.

Romano’s point is that philosophy has a contribution to make as
a generator of new perspectives, discourses and points of view and as
an enricher of our action-thought repertoires. That positive function
of reflective philosophical thinking cannot be reduced to the critical
agenda of philosophy and to an analysis of narrow knowledge claims.
The positive side of philosophy calls for speculation and for creation,
for bold, imaginative energies that might be uninformed of prevailing
modes of thought and accepted paradigms. While methodological con-
cerns are often important for many mainstream practices of thinking,
in the positive dimension *anything goes*. The positive space of philo-
sophical thinking is one where Paul Feyeraband’s (1975) methodologi-
cal anarchism can be a useful ally.

Hence therapists and literary critics, virtual world pioneers and
mass media figures, casual wisemen and native Americans, essayists
and social activists in the Hall of Fame of *America the Philosophical*.
Romano is a champion coach of the offensive line-up of pragmatically
relevant thinking.

*Not a Smiling Affair*

In his Presidential address to the American Psychological Association in
1998, Martin E.P. Seligman created a sensation.
Seligman pointed out that psychology has been rich in analyzing various kinds of mental disorders and in healing damage, but “such almost exclusive attention to pathology neglects the flourishing individual and the thriving community”. “When we became solely a healing profession, we forgot our larger mission: that of making the lives of all people better.” (Seligman 1999)

Seldom has any single speech for a scholarly community seen similarly immediate impact. Seligman’s address gave rise to the movement of positive psychology, one of the success stories of our time, as a growing number of researchers tackled happiness, flourishing, meaningful relationships and various others aspects of “what makes life worth living”. (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi 2000, Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi 2006).

As for philosophy, the old established rule remains in place. There is no positive philosophy movement. But Romano’s book is a chapter in the future history of it.

The signs are unmistakable. What Romano is in effect saying is that it is more humanly rewarding to develop new modes of thinking and fresh perspectives that enrich the movement forward than it is to demonstrate that something is wrong. As Richard Rorty once put it, following the lead from Oakshott, the idea is to continue “the conversation of mankind” (Rorty 1979; Oakshott 1959/1991).

This was Isocrates’s idea. Where Isocrates stresses the facilitation of discourse and speech, much of the action of Socrates centers on spotting flaws and argumentative gaps in the thinking of fellow citizens. It is important to know what one doesn’t know, and to reveal forms of blurred, ignorant, confused thinking, but the reflective mind can also be put to positive use not reducible to its negative functions.

Even when we are ignorant of something important, which is most of the time, we can still make things better. Even when lacking accurate knowledge there is room for the improvement in concrete action. What a genuine philosopher should do is to “pursue the truth, educate their students about the affairs in which we act as citizens, and develop their students’ experience of these matters, with the consideration that it is much better to conjecture reasonably about useful things than to have precise knowledge of what is useless, and that to be a little ahead in important matters is better than to excel in small matters that are no help in life” (Helen, 4–5).

Isocrates continues by emphasizing fair and timely judgment rather than the acquisition of formal knowledge: “Since human nature cannot attain knowledge that would enable us to know what we say or do, after this I think the wise [sophoi] are those who have the ability to reach the best opinions [doxai] most of the time, and philosophers are those who spend time acquiring such an intelligence as quickly as possible.” (Antidosis 271).
Isocrates is here advocating a position regarding “the serious business of self-improvement” (Antidosis 286) that any responsible educator, or any parent raising a child, de facto follows. When growth, action, and future are the focus, in the context of an ever-present veil of ignorance, critical analysis and search for exact knowledge, while important are insufficient, and simply will not take us far enough quickly enough.

The Noble Call of Philosophy
“Genuine philosophy, then, must always engage the real problems of real people in everyday life” (Romano, p. 551). This position of Romano’s might be challenging to integrate to the current institutions of higher education, but at least it is a possible view regarding the nature of philosophizing.

In his outspoken Nobel speech, F.A. Hayek spoke of the “pretence of knowledge” of his discipline (economics) and “the failure of economists to guide policy” (Hayek 1975). As Hayek saw it, the deficiency in the contribution of economists “is closely connected with their propensity to imitate as closely as possible the procedures of the brilliantly successful physical sciences.” According to Hayek that is an error involving as it does an “uncritical application of habits of thought to fields different from those in which they have been formed.” A similar mistake seems dominant in the field of philosophy. The impact of that mistake is that the discourse and communication that is sought is left without a living connection to the real experiences of the everyday. A living connection to people’s experience of life as it is lived is pushed aside as in the hard sciences.

I salute Romano’s book. It sets the course for philosophy as a never-ending enricher of improvement, as an art and science of the better, in the context of one’s personal life and our communal life, by using the acumen at everyone’s disposal: our endowment for philosophical thinking.

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REFERENCES


Abstract
This paper joins Carlin Romano in challenging philosophers in America for their narrow focus while urging that the signs of openness and inclusiveness continue. It explores Romano’s idea of “America” as an agora for debate, argument, and the search for truth, but seeks the models for philosophical practices not so much in Rorty and Isocrates but in William James and the Socratic model. A central question for contemporary philosophical and agora discussion is how can we pursue democratic deliberation and the search for social justice in an context of seeming irreducible difference?

Keywords: Carlin Romano, Richard Rorty, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, William James, Michael Walzer, Classical Pragmatism, Social Justice Pluralism, Democratic Deliberation.

Carlin Romano’s book, America the Philosophical, challenges philosophy and America, while also celebrating evidence of philosophical energy in American culture in general. Romano claims that in America we find a true agora, a unique marketplace of truth and argument. Yet, in his view, academic philosophy fails miserably in its focus on issues of knowledge and its lack of public relevance. He then draws on a wide spectrum of persons outside of academic philosophy as models for how philosophy should be done. In the philosophy camp, he sees value in classic pragmatism and the contemporary work of Richard Rorty. Rorty, an insider in the tradition of professional analytic philosophy, came to reject its narrowness of spirit and empty

Do Not Block Inquiry: Philosophy in America—Peirce and Socrates
Jacquelyn Ann Kegley
precision and opted instead for a notion of philosophy as conversation. Romano’s other model for philosophy is “Isocrates,” a contemporary of Socrates, who, says Romano, saw philosophy as a form of ‘civilized discourse,’ ‘public deliberation,’ logos politicos, aimed at persuasion about great matters. Romano writes: “He [Isocrates] is the single intellectual of Ancient Greece who incarnates the contradiction, pragmatism, ambition, bent for problem solving and getting things done that mark Americans.”

In what follows I will challenge Romano on his choice of models of philosophical practice, focusing on an essay by Josiah Royce on William James as a “representative philosopher of America.”5 I will also explore in more detail the nature of “America” as an agora for debate, argument, and the search for truth. The “nature of contemporary America” provides essential clues to what kind of philosophy and philosopher is needed today. One of my sources for understanding America today is one Romano also cites, namely, Michael Walzer’s essay, “What it Means to Be an American.”4

I applaud Romano’s overview of some of many philosophical activities that challenge the standard image and focus of contemporary academic philosophy including the Public Philosophy movement, the Philosopher’s Café, and the intriguing insights offered by such books as The Simpsons and Philosophy, The Matrix and Philosophy, Twilight and Philosophy; Aristotle and the Aardvark Go to Washington; and Heidegger and a Hippo Walk Through those Pearly Gates.5 I thoroughly applaud Romano’s challenge to contemporary American philosophy on its past tendency to exclude groups not fitting the mainstream and failure to include thinking about race, gender and ethnicity as well as paying attention to Eastern thought and Latin American and other Hispanic philosophies. Part III of his book discusses “The Rising Outsiders,” — African American, Women, Native American, and Gay/Lesbian, Transgender philosophers.6 I join Romano in challenging contemporary American philosophy to continue to expand its path to inclusiveness all areas; offering these issues and philosophies a more central place in APA programming. Romano also discusses the explosion of cyberphilosophy. These sections of his book are worthy of attention and action. I will focus on continual reform within some of the more mainstream areas of philosophy, asking: what shall be our model for philosophical practice?

**Classical Pragmatism and William James as Models for Philosophical Practice?**

First, Romano is correct that the pragmatic tradition holds the key to re-envisioning the nature and role of philosophy both in its academic and public role. One of the problems of mainstream contemporary philosophy in America is that it either has ignored its history or
misinterprets the ideas of the classic pragmatism. History tells us that the early pragmatists all argued for a re-envisioning of philosophy and emphasized its public role. Thus, John Dewey and Josiah Royce both criticized academic philosophy for its inward focus on problems of knowledge rather than on the practical problems of contemporary life. Dewey held that philosophy should seek to apply what is known to the intelligent conduct of life, while Royce claimed that “You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in the world.” Charles Sanders Peirce criticized the Cartesian paradigm—one that still dominates philosophy and other disciplines today—and he and Royce presented a view of science unlike today’s scientism, which exalts ‘so-called’ scientific truths above any others. These classical pragmatists viewed science as the ideal community of critical inquiry and the scientific process as self-correcting, based on reasonable doubt, problem focused, and recognizing that there is no possibility at any time of one’s beliefs gaining certainty, whether these beliefs are about physics, biology, or in some other domain. This view of science is probably that of most practicing scientists; it is the philosophers, and even the general public that have come to hold science as the final arbiter of truth. One role that philosophers need to play today in America is to educate the public both about scientific knowledge and about its reliable but fallible nature.

William James captured the views of Royce, Peirce, and Dewey on critical inquiry in his Will to Believe when he argued that one always holds one’s beliefs hypothetically and with an open mind, while also drawing on the current wisdom of other areas of inquiry. Human knowledge, in any domain, is always fallible, and, as Peirce advocated, “never block the road to inquiry.” Further, for James inquiry is driven by three kinds problems: (1) those that are ‘genuine’ that is, a live problem for the inquirer; (2) those that are ‘forced’, i.e. forced needs a resolution now, and ‘momentous’, i.e. those having significant impact on one’s life and that of others. James, as other pragmatist, objected to Cartesian emphasis on radical doubt which did not arise out of actual living doubt, but from hypothetical thought experiments. This approach to knowledge seeking, to inquiry, is needed in all of contemporary philosophy today and not just in some areas of study. This is one aspect of a good model for philosophical practice.

What, then, are other characteristics of a model for philosophical practice? Romano holds up Richard Rorty as one of his models of philosophy. However, Rorty, along with others, misinterprets or ignores certain basic aspects of classical pragmatist thought. As a result, Rorty provides an inadequate pragmatist model of philosophical practice in his emphasis on free-flowing conversation that is individual and private and not focused on public issues, debate, or argument. In contrast to Romano, and unlike Rorty, Dewey, Peirce, and Royce
saw critical inquiry, not conversation, as an essential element in a responsible philosophical response to pressing human problems. These pragmatists, though not ignoring the role of the individual, viewed community as an essential part of such inquiry, contributing significantly to the self-correcting aspect of such a process, as it does in science. Dewey and Royce both criticized the strong individualistic bent of American life. Dewey found the "enormous ineptitude of individualistic philosophy to meet the needs and direct the factors of the new age." He argued that the new age must be one of human relationships . . . . and a fraternally associated public." Till the Great Society is converted into a Great Community, the Public will remain in eclipse."12

Both Dewey and Royce viewed the human self as fundamentally socially embedded and the community as essential to full human development. A central theme throughout Royce's life was "creating community." He argued that without supportive, genuine communities you could not have "genuine individuals," nor, indeed, could "genuine communities develop without the loyalty and work of these "true individuals." Interaction within a community fosters individuality while also pushing both individual and the community to see beyond their own interests and beliefs, to hopefully avoid dogmatism in the form of premature or absolute loyalty to one's current beliefs and perspective, and to recognize that the beliefs of others might have some valuable grains of insight and offer further possibilities to solve current problems. Royce believed that one condition for building genuine communities was the ability of selves to extend in time and place and so recognize error, weakness, and the need for others. For Royce, self-understanding involves self-criticism, humility, and an understanding of limits. Royce criticized the tendency to adopt a mob spirit and argued for the importance of diversity in developing both genuine individuals and genuine communities. He argues that 'wiser social groups' are usually characterized by an emphasis upon the contrasts between various individuals. Royce believed diversity and individual difference is crucial to a genuine community that Royce always sees as a "unity with variety." Another benefit of creative individuals to the community is that they can generate a multiplicity of viable potential strategies for serving a cause or a project or solving a problem, thereby enhancing both individual and communal opportunity for effective action. Royce writes: "the effectiveness of human action at the level of community will be enhanced by a pluralism of ideas and strategies which can be realized only through the cultivation of individual differences."15

The common pragmatic theme of testing habits and beliefs by the new and the different is stated well by James when he writes: "The individual has a stock of old opinions already, but he meets a new
experience that puts them too strain. He seeks to modify and latch on
to a new idea that ‘mediates’ between the stock and the new experience
and runs them into one another most felicitously to make them admit
of ‘novelty.’” 16 A key notion in Dewey’s philosophy was the disturbance
and changing of habits through encounter with a problem, with the
“new.” Again, individuals in isolation are not necessarily good philo-
sophical inquirers for they are missing the critical feedback of one’s
fellow philosophers as well as the public in general. Philosophers today
need to explore new and creative ways to balance genuine individual-
ism and genuine community and to practice humility and openness to
views other than their own.

This brings us back to the inadequacy of Rorty as a model for serv-
ing as our philosophical model. Rorty was an advocate for the pri-
ivate and the individual, and he argued to keep the private, individual
domain of life and any public engagement of an individual separate.
He asserts that we need to be “content to treat the demands of self-
creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incom-
mensurable.” 17 The demands of people to achieve their private ends,
their pursuits of endless self-creation, need to be clearly separate from
demands for social fulfillment, justice and freedom. Rorty focused on
developing new creative vocabularies, but we must keep those devel-
oped in pursuit of personal fulfillment, self-creation, and self-realization
completely distinct from those developed for deliberation about social
goods and social and political arrangements. A crucial question to
Rorty by his critics was always “is such a separation viable?” Feminist
philosophers, of course, have argued an opposite extreme, namely that
the private is public, and certainly in terms of crucial issues of family,
and the rights and protection of women and children this seems to be
a valid point. 18

Who then might be a model for philosophical practice today? In
addressing this question, I want to use claims made by Royce, in his
memorial piece for James. 19 In that piece he speaks of James as “a rep-
resentative American philosopher.” The characteristics he cites I believe
are very relevant to today. Royce begins with two central characteristics:
(1) The philosopher thinks for himself (herself), fruitfully, with true
independence, and with successful inventiveness, about the problems
of philosophy; and (2) he (she) must give utterance to philosophical
ideas which are characteristic of some stage and of some aspect of the
spiritual life of his/her own people. On the first point, Royce notes
that James, like Edwards and Emerson, also representative American
philosophers, was an independent thinker, who respected history and
drew resources from both philosophy and other disciplines. However,
he transformed these and also connected them with his own personal
experience and the experiences of his time, applying his thought cre-
atively to both philosophical problems and those of his age. Royce says
that in James “certain characteristics of our national civilization have found their voice.”

Turning to the key ideas and issues of James’ time that James sought to address, Royce cites three. First, James was working in the period of the second and most important period of evolutionary thought, namely, the period of widening and deepening these new ideas. All four classical pragmatists—Peirce, James, Dewey, and Royce—took evolutionary thought seriously in forming their own views and contributed to the application of evolutionary ideas to other areas of thought and practice. This becomes significant when we note the importance in our time of evolutionary thought and its wide-ranging applicability for explaining many areas of human life and thought. Though incorporating evolutionary thought in their own work, the classical pragmatists maintained a cautious attitude toward scientific theories and ideas, recognizing their reliability, but also their fallibility. Unfortunately, many contemporary philosophers have reverted to an earlier period, already transcended by classical pragmatism. Thus, Royce notes that philosophers and others were no longer engaged in “polemic about these ideas.”

The energy wasted today on polemic appears to be that of a group of scholastic type philosophers who wish to defend and exalt scientific views as authoritative for all areas of life, while dogmatic religionists assert the priority of religious truth and focus. Once again the representative philosopher for today needs to engage in interpreting the implications of evolutionary thought for human living while also promoting a sense of humility about science as a valuable area of critical but self-correcting inquiry. While advocating for tolerance and open-mindedness, philosophers need to be vocal critics of any form of reductionism about reality and life—all is not explained by physics, or genetics, or computation, or by religion. Each domain may have valuable insight for solving human problems.

James addressed a second major aspect of his time, according to Royce, when he played a significant role in developing the new science and discipline of psychology, an area to which Royce and Dewey also contributed. James’s psychological writings are still held in high value today and most importantly, James argues, as did Royce and Dewey, that there is no sharp division between emotional and cognitive faculties, “that what we are able to believe in, and do in fact believe in, is a response of the whole person to his or her entire complex of experience that takes into account diverse kinds of factors.” All three philosophers combined this psychological insight with their concern for developing an adequate ethic for living. Such an ethic had to pay attention to the whole person and to the person as socially embedded, as well as to an obligation for the person to act to better their community and society. The emphasis in ethics cannot be exclusively on the rational or cognitive but must include the emotional, imaginative, and even the
spiritual dimension of human persons. Excellent work is now occurring on the emotional and other factors in forms of decision-making, ethical and otherwise. Feminist and other philosophers, especially in political and social philosophy and thought, argue against the dominant focus on rational debate and consensus in understanding democratic deliberation. However, scientism and exclusive emphasis on the rational is still very evident in contemporary philosophy and psychology.

The developing focus today in psychology is on the brain and neuroscience, and with often-exclusive emphasis on brain and on science. Again, dogmatism and reductionism in this discussion must be avoided. Are selves merely brains? There are those philosophers and psychologists, many of them drawing on the pragmatic tradition, who do advocate a broader view of the various mechanisms in human psychology and thought. One such group, advocates of “embodied cognition,” argue that many features of cognition are embodied, i.e., they are deeply dependent upon characteristics of the physical body of an agent such that the agent’s beyond-the-brain body plays a significant causal role, or a physically constitutive role, in that agent’s cognitive processing. In general, dominant views in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science have considered the body as peripheral to understanding the nature of mind and cognition. Proponents of embodied cognitive science view this as a serious mistake.

An even more interesting development is what Anthony Chemero calls “radical embodied cognitive science.” This view is a direct descendant of the American naturalist psychology of James and Dewey, and it follows them in viewing perception and cognition to be understandable only in terms of action in the environment. Chemero, for example, argues that cognition should be described in terms of agent–environment dynamics rather than in terms of computation and representation. Chemero also believes that using this perspective allows some traditional philosophical problems (reductionism, epistemological skepticism, metaphysical realism, and consciousness) to be resolved with comparative ease. A number of contemporary pragmatists are exploring neuroscience in terms of Chemero’s broader understanding. These philosophers appear to be exemplifying the model of a representative philosopher that Royce explicates—they are speaking to the issues of their age in creative ways and with relevance to the problems of living.

Royce discusses a third characteristic of James’s time to which he responded as a philosopher, namely, the age of “occupation of new territory, economic growth and immigration and the aftermath of the Civil War.” Royce further notes that the nation was “attempting to find itself anew, to redefine its ideals, to retain its moral integrity and yet to become a world power.” This bears some striking similarities
to the status of the United State today. Though we are a world power, we seem struggling to redefine what that means. In addition we are facing an immigration crisis demanding solution. And, though we are no longer in a state of civil war, the United States, as a nation, has been involved in the civil wars of others, attempting to advocate human rights and democracy. These efforts have left us viewed with suspicion by many other nations and raised serious questions for many members of the U.S. public. We need to return to the view of the pragmatists that democracy is more than a particular form of government; it is a way of living. Philosophers should be using their intellectual resources to advocate this view and facilitate fruitful democratic discussion among the public. America truly needs to be an agora, a field of democratic debate and deliberation.

Finally, Royce notes another aspect of James times addressed by James, namely, he gave “utterance to the spiritual life of his own people.” 28 Royce says of James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience, “it expresses better than any sectarian could, the recent efforts of this spirit to come to an understanding with modern naturalism and with modern psychology.” 29 Further, James’ view of religious experience, like those of other pragmatists, is deliberately unconventional and intensely democratic.30 “This is significant today because contemporary philosophy is, as Judith Green has asserted about Kitcher and Rorty, “tone deaf” to religious experience.31 Yet there is no doubt that religion plays a crucial role in our time in various ways, whether it be a more sectarian, authoritarian view represented in Christian and Islamic fundamentalism, or the views of Eastern religions, or the commitment of many intelligent, thoughtful people to some kind of religious experience (in contrast to religious doctrine or membership). To speak to contemporary Americans, this tone deafness is a distinct liability. In addition it betrays an ignorance of the history of American philosophy—a history that included a variety of reflections on religious experience including those of Jonathan Edwards, the Transcendentalists, founders like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, and of course, the classical American pragmatists other than James, e.g. Peirce, Royce and Dewey. Royce addressed the tough question “In what sense can a modern person be a Christian” in his The Problem of Christianity and he explored all kinds of avenues for religious experience in his Sources of Religious Insight.32 Finally, Judith Green sees Dewey, in his A Common Faith;33 as advocating a religious humanism, with the concept of ‘God’ representing “one’s highest conception of that ideal good that guides and makes one’s life meaningful.” He also provided a “critique of anti-democratic aspects of mainstream church doctrine, rituals, and hierarchical governance structures and processes” calling for “participatory reconstruction in all of these aspects of the churches in order to makes self-activating
'religious’ experience more widely available and to bring religious communities into interfaith cooperation to advance universal human welfare including making peace and ending poverty." Again, to be tone deaf to religious experience and practice is to be tone deaf to the problems of contemporary America.

**America Today—Pluralism, Democratic Deliberation, and Social Justice**

One cannot speak of a philosophical America without exploring the meaning of the phrase “America.” Romano does this through an exploration of the views of two leading political theorists—John Rawls and Michael Walzer. Rawls was considered by many as the most influential political philosopher of this century, the most important theorist of justice. However, in Romano’s view, he failed to convinced most Americans of his views due to his emphasis on philosophical justification, his image as “the ultimate argument machine and grand systematizer” and his distance from popular culture. In addition, I believe Rawls also failed due to his adoption of the Enlightenment view of the human person as the rational individual chooser, ignoring, as the classical pragmatists did not, the essential role of emotions and other factors in decision-making and deliberation. Further, Rawls and Jürgen Habermas share the belief that somehow, through pure reason, consensus on public issues could be achieved. Important critics of Rawlsian liberalism are a group of feminist political theorists, called ‘agonists,’ who see the nature of politics in a pluralistic democracy as inherently conflictual, with battles over power and hegemony as the central tasks of democratic struggle. For this group, the major question any political theory must address is ‘How should we deal with irreducible difference?’ They also ask how we can design democracy so as to optimize the opportunity for people to express their disagreements. Certainly the example of the activity of Martin Luther King, Jr., exemplifies both the need for other than merely rational discussion as well as the significant role religious experience can play in seeking social justice in a society.

Michael Walzer, in his essay, “What it Means to Be an American,” also sees America in terms of an irreducible pluralism, an association of citizens, a union of ethnic, racial, and religious groups, individuals and groups with varying identities and the freedom to choose which aspect of their identity they wish to emphasize in what context and for what purpose. However, Walzer also argues that the adjective ‘American’ is a political one that emphasizes generosity, tolerance, and accommodation, allowing for the survival and the enhancement and flourishing of manyness. In his view, America is a radically unfinished society and that indeed “for now, at least, it makes sense to say that this unfinishedness is one of its distinctive features.” Classical

Do Not Block Inquiry: Philosophy in America—Plato and Socrates

JACQUELYN ANN KEGLEY

361
pragmatism, of course, emphasizes the openness of all inquiry and of reality itself. And, again, as Romano stresses, attention must be given by philosophers to issues of justice such as discrimination and citizenship rights of immigrants.

Romano cites as his other model of philosophy Isocrates rather than Socrates. Scholars of Isocrates’ work argue that he is not a Sophist, for he demands reflection and deliberative choice, not unthinking response.”

In his writing, *Nicolaes*, Isocrates argues for the paramount importance of language and the liberal arts education that instills in students a flexible, crucial spirit. Isocrates writes: “Since we have the ability to persuade one another and to make clear to ourselves what we want, not only do we avoid living like animals, but we have come together, built cities, made laws, and invented arts.” Romano is correct that this attitude seems to be that of pragmatism in its emphasis upon creative problem solving, and thus Isocrates can serve as one of our Greek models. But there are others. Socrates represents critical dialogue and problem solving, an image overshadowed by Plato. And there is Protagoras, “the first democratic political theorist in the world.” who emphasized that arguments depended on audience and context and thus on plurality of experience. Greek liberalism, unlike that of Rawls and other contemporary political theorists was fundamentally communal and rhetoric: the art of persuasion was central to the polis. This fits with the emphasis by the pragmatists on continual, communal critical inquiry.

This is an aspect of the model for philosophical inquiry for today. In addition, there is the need to promote a sense of humility about science as a valuable area of critical but self-correcting inquiry, while advocating tolerance and open-mindedness. This includes vocal criticism of any form of reductionism about reality and life- all is not explained by physics, or genetics, or evolution, or computation, or by religion. In addition, philosophers should be using their intellectual resources to help address issues of justice including discrimination and citizenship and to advocate for fruitful democratic discussion among the public. This is also a central point made by Romano, namely, that contemporary American philosophy has not been in touch with crucial public issues. Romao is also correct in pushing philosophy to be more inclusive in including philosophical thought outside the mainstream, particularly that provided by African, Women, Native/American, Gay/ Lesbian, Latin American, and Eastern thinkers. Roman also is on track in pushing more attention to issues arising out of new technologies and what he calls’ cyberphilosophy.” I have no quarrels with these emphases. Finally, today’s philosopher can no longer be tone deaf to religious experience and practice for this is to be tone deaf to the problems of contemporary America.

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NOTES

2. Romano, 537.
5. Romano, 17–18.
18. Carol Hanisch, 1969, “The Personal is Political,” Notes-The personal is political, also termed the private is political, is a political argument used as a rallying slogan of student movement and second-wave feminism from the late 1960s. The phrase was popularized by feminist Carol Hanisch and it underscored the connections between personal experience and larger social and political structures. In the context of the feminist movement of the 1960s and 1970s, it was a challenge to the nuclear family and family values. It differentiated the second-wave feminism of the 1960s and 1970s from the early feminism of the 1920s, which was concerned with achieving the right to vote for women.
20. Royce, 5.
21. Ibid. 12.


27. Ibid.

28. Ibid., 4.


31. Greene, 70.


34. Green, 87.


36. Romano, 565.


40. Walzer, 652.
42. Romano, 550.
43. Ibid.
On the Very Idea of a Philosophical Culture: Or, The American Evasion of Politics

Paul C. Taylor

Abstract

Carlin Romano has set himself the task of rebranding both the United States and philosophy. His United States is a distinctly philosophical enterprise, and philosophy in this United States is much more democratic and diverse than a mostly white, mostly male, elite-aspirant academic discipline. I endorse a great deal of the argument that supports Romano’s story. I admire his determination to re-read the history and sociology of philosophy, to treat philosophy as a possibility for ordinary people in the grip of the right modes of loquaciousness and inquisitiveness, and to credit contributions from the discipline’s and the country’s underrepresented populations. But to get to his views on these things, I have to bracket one inescapable fact: I do not share his faith in the ideas that provide the cornerstones of his book – the ideas of America and of a philosophical culture.

Keywords: Barack Obama, Carlin Romano, philosophy, underside of modernity, sociology of philosophy, philosophy of culture, decolonial, post-national, post-American.

1.

It is an honor to comment on Carlin Romano’s fine and ambitious book. It is also something of a challenge, precisely because of Romano’s ambition. He has set himself the task of rebranding both the United States and philosophy. He has undertaken to compose and sell an image of the United States as a distinctly philosophical enterprise, and a picture of philosophy as something more democratic and diverse than the mostly white, mostly male, elite-aspirant academic discipline that most
people associate with the name. This is a bold undertaking, requiring
the kind of capaciousness that challenges the consumer of the analysis
as much as it does the producer. This capaciousness, combined with the
breezy playfulness with which Romano sometimes conducts the analy-
sis, forces those of us who would engage the work to think carefully
about how and where to begin the encounter.

I could begin to engage America The Philosophical in many places
that would leave me with little to say other than ‘amen.’ One reason
for this is that I am a fan of Dewey and of the democratizing approach
to intellectual work and to culture work that many of us learned or
honored by reading Dewey. Another reason is that I spend most of my
time professionally in the still-small space where philosophy overlaps
with Africana thought, and I have long aspired to expand this space.
Someone who fits this description can hardly help but endorse much
of what Romano says. I particularly admire his humanizing and crit-
cal but still-generous portrait of Rorty, his revival and vindication of
Isocrates, his surprising engagement with Bill Moyers, and his sur-
handed study of the rise of the “outsiders” from philosophy’s underrep-
resented populations.

The breadth of Romano’s analysis leaves room for quibbling over
details, especially in the discussions of justification and of truth. And
the playfulness of his prose leaves room for quibbling about tone, rhet-
oric, and pitch. But these are to a large degree differences of emphasis,
and not the sort of thing that one wishes to put at the center of the
sort of encounter we’ve been invited to have here. Setting aside these
many points of agreement and of by-and-large concurrence allows me
to bring into clearer relief my few concerns about Romano’s book. In
deference to the demands of this genre and to the limits of this space,
I’ll focus on these concerns and say no more about what I think he gets
right – which is to say, about most of the book.

More often than I would have liked, I found myself questioning
Romano’s starting points, and asking about the basic moves that under-
pin the project. What does it mean to double down on honorific terms
like ‘America’ and ‘philosophy,’ to try to reclaim and reimagine them,
when we might just as well interrogate and criticize our attachments
to them? What does it mean to take the idea of a philosophical cul-
ture seriously, to demand the idea’s extension to the populations it has
been used to denigrate? What does it mean to take the idea of America
seriously, in a world of people for whom the idea is already overbur-
dened with meaning? At what point do the peculiar connotations and
functions of these ideas – of America, and of philosophical cultures –
overwhelm our ability, and undermine our need, to use just these ideas
to name and examine our practices? (Or, perhaps: “How does newness
come into the world? How is it born? Of what fusions, translations,
conjoinings is it made?”)¹ And: What does it mean that this way of
looking at philosophy and at America encourages us to look at a head of state, the chief executive of a massive, good-distributing bureaucracy, the commander in chief of human history’s most dangerous military force, and see a philosopher?

These are the questions that strike me as I read Romano’s remarkable book. I value his determination to re-read the history and insist on the sociology of philosophy in the US. I admire his willingness to treat philosophy as something like what Dewey called “intelligence,” which is to say, as a possibility for ordinary people in the grip of the right modes of loquaciousness and inquisitiveness, highbrow-lowbrow distinctions be damned. And I share his view that some of the most interesting developments in philosophy in the US, especially in recent years, have come from the discipline’s and the country’s underrepresented populations. But to get to his views on these things, I have to bracket the one inescapable fact that I mean to explore here: that I do not share his faith in the ideas that provide the cornerstones of his book – the ideas of America and of a philosophical culture.

2.
I come by my suspicion of America honestly, I hope, and by a familiar path. It is the same path that led Du Bois to say “Chin up and fight on, but realize that American Negroes can’t win.” It is the same path that led to the Double V campaign in WWII, and that led Randall Robinson, Assata Shakur, the jazz musicians in early twentieth-century Montmartre, and many others, to leave the US and take up residence elsewhere. It is the path that leads to Malcolm’s inversion of the landing at Plymouth Rock (reordering our thoughts about what lands on what), and to the displacement of Thanksgiving by a Day of Mourning.

With that said, I accept the Ellisonian insight that no place is all goodness and light, and that much of what goodness there is in the United States and its works, and there is a great deal, is due to the influence or the direct ministration of the people some of us still call “minorities.” So the point is not that the United States, or the idea of America that animates it, is necessarily evil and to be despised. The point is, as I said, about suspicion – about remembering the complexity of this place and of its myths and meanings, about maintaining the tragic awareness of a persistent tension between the good and the bad, the laudable and the damnable, the potential and the realities: between America’s dreams of itself and many of its waking actions.

Remembering all this prevents me from getting immediately on board with Romano’s vindicationist project. I have much less at stake in rebranding America than I think Romano wants me to, which makes me slower to warm to the project than I otherwise would be. Still, slowed is not stopped, which is to say that I do feel the appeal
of the argument. As a student of Dewey and such folks, how could I not?

Unfortunately, I remain unmoved not just by the rebranding project but also by the motivation for it. I never had any doubt that the US was and is a philosophical culture. But this is true in part because I don’t put much stock in the idea of a philosophical culture.

The suspicion I tried to register above is the suspicion that comes from seeing America from its underside. I use ‘underside’ here in the way that Enrique Dussel has taught us, to register the sense that modernity’s projects, like the idea of America, the reality of the US, and the practice that for many of us answers to the name ‘philosophy,’ reveal themselves differently to people who see them from the perspective of the displaced, despised, and demonized. Seen from its underside, America is obviously a philosophical project, because it took serious philosophical maneuvering to build a monument to freedom on a foundation of genocide, expropriation, and slavery.

Similarly, when seen from its underside, philosophy in its modern forms has not been the queen of the sciences as much as it has been a treasure trove of resources for justifying invidious racial exclusions and injustices. Seen from this perspective, the idea of a philosophical culture has caused the same sort of mischief that attends ideas like “civilization” and “intelligence,” in part because of its intimate relationships to those ideas.

I am reminded here of an essay by the great Tom Alexander. The essay begins with thoughtful reflections on “the predispositions of the three great philosophical cultures: European, South Asian, and Chinese.” And it offers as a footnoted countermelody to these reflections, apparently without irony, the thought that there is something misleadingly simplistic about the shameful tendency to “lump a group of complex thinkers like James, Peirce, and Dewey together under the term ‘pragmatism…’” Let me get this straight, I thought when I first came to this essay. Dewey and James are too different to get lumped together. But all of Europe is a single culture? All of China? South Asia?

Europe only counts as a single philosophical culture if we ascend to a register that offers us alternatives like ‘Asia’ and ‘Africa.’ And once we ascend to this level, it is exceedingly easy to accept, to assume, the rectitude of the usual way of mapping this register. On this mode of cultural cartography, philosophy, which is nearly to say, ‘civilization,’ appears in only some places. On this picture, Africa and the Americas are, apparently, not great philosophical cultures, and the thought that cultural blinders shape what we, some of us, call ‘philosophy’ is not a thought worth entertaining. I don’t profess to know what Professor Alexander thinks about this; there are surely ways to read his language here as simply careless, or as assuming the things we’d need to assume
to make this come out right. But my point right now is that the very idea of a philosophical culture opens the door to this sort of carelessness, and creates the need for campaigns to make otherwise troubling thoughts come out right.

What all this has to do with *America The Philosophical* is that Romano holds much of this flirtation with neo-civilizationism constant, even as he assembles the resources to mount a challenge. No, philosophy has not been the exclusive preserve of European white men, he shows. But then he uses this revelation not to question the idea that ‘philosophical’ should be a thick honorific term (like ‘civilized’ or ‘smart’), but to vindicate America’s claim to philosophical status. He does question the assumption that philosophy is only an ivory tower affair, done only by people with doctorates. But the impulse behind this questioning has to do with opening the tower to all comers, so that we can all get a glimpse of things from on high. He wants it both ways, to deflate philosophy *and* to hold tight as it floats, fully inflated, above the world of human practice. I confess to being unsure how this works, and to suspecting that it will work a bit like Alexander’s determination to jump and to split all at once.

To be clear: My concern is that the determination to bring the United States into the family of great philosophical cultures, albeit in part due to the contributions of non-white peoples, nevertheless reinforces the idea that there are ‘great philosophical cultures.’ Or, better, since, in some sense, there surely are such cultures: it reinforces the idea that we can confidently and easily identify these cultures and weigh out their virtues in a simple comparative scale. And it obscures the idea that culture-making might itself be a philosophical enterprise, and glosses over the reality that some cultures have been able to inflate and export their philosophical achievements by embedding them in political projects devoted to dominating, appropriating, and silencing the contributions of other cultures.

To be fair, collapsing the distance between the rarefied pursuit of philosophy by capital-P-Philosophers and the everyday pursuit of the good life by ordinary people is part of Romano’s point. But it worries me that he makes this point by taking one problematic idea, the idea of America, and wrapping it in the mantle of another, the idea of philosophy as a cultural honorific. This is a mode of neo-civilizationism that runs counter to the intellectual populism that he means to recommend and enact, and that threatens to evade politics altogether.

I’m put in mind of the evasion of politics by the argument about President Obama that closes the book. Romano’s move there is to say that this man embodies, evinces, expresses our philosophical culture, and he is in the first rank of presidents who exemplify this aspect of US life. The danger with this move is that a philosophical expression is not
most saliently what Mr. Obama is, and to argue otherwise threatens to let his less salient features obscure his more salient ones.

Much of what I have in mind here I’ve already said in another context. But here’s a short version, rephrased for Romano’s particular approach to the Obama-as-philosopher trope. Let’s grant that Obama is our most philosophical president. Shouldn’t it matter that he puts this sensibility, and the admiration it wins him, in service of the broader philosophical project that some call ‘neoliberalism,’ and that is inimical to the cultivation, creation, and maintenance of the spaces in which the practice of philosophy flourishes? Shouldn’t it matter that he rarely says much at all about this philosophical project, despite the stranglehold it has placed on his administration and on life in the United States and around the world? If philosophy is, as Dewey suggested, a criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture, then what happens to Obama’s claims to philosophy? If U.S. culture as it stands is to an alarming degree underwritten by the thought that all human affairs can be turned into market transactions, and should be so turned, then shouldn’t philosophy interrogate this thought? Obama the individual may be philosophical, at least in regard to some things. He is quite philosophical about the need for calm when justifiable outrage, say, at the shooting of an unarmed youth and the brutalization of peaceful protesters, seems indicated. But he is much less philosophical about the marketization of our lives, or about the collateral damage of his sanitized military strikes. These considerations encourage me to say that Obama the president and public figure is counter-philosophical, and Obama the philosopher gives him cover for this dirty work.

The upshot of all this may be that it is impossible for U.S. presidents to be interestingly philosophical, especially in an age of instantaneous, ubiquitous, worldwide communication. The demands are too great, the weight of presidential words too heavy, the bureaucratic inertia too unyielding, for the probing, productively corrosive reflections of philosophy at its best. But if this is right, then what does it mean that we, some of us, so want this president to be philosophical? What does it mean that we set aside the political meanings of this man and his office, and treat him as a deliverance of history and an artifact of the history of ideas? What does it mean that philosophy, the disposition to be philosophical, can be so readily detached from the material, ideological, and structural conditions of the world that awaits its ministrations? Better: what does it mean that we want to see a philosopher in a man who steadfastly refuses to interrogate the social, cultural, and political meanings that surround him and that enshrine his every utterance and action, a man who, on the generous read, cannot engage in this interrogation, in the work, some of us would say, of philosophy, without vacating or sabotaging the office that gives him his claim on our attention?
3. I am all for the deflation of philosophy, for bringing it, as Cornel West used to say, to the streets, for remembering and insisting on its rootedness in and proximity to the real world of human history and affairs. The best moments in Romano’s book, and there are many very good ones, come when he makes clear the need for this deflation, and brings the agents of this deflation to life with his vivid prose. The problem for me is that the impulse to deflate, to burst the pretensions of the ivory tower crowd, runs hand in hand with a desire to join them, to get some of that ivory for himself and for the unwashed philosophical masses. The best moments in the book make clear that it might be better to pull the tower down, and to remind ourselves of the political and ideological work that went into building and populating those towers – and of the ethical and epistemic costs of continuing to inhabit them.

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NOTES

Abstract
A response to four critical essays on America the Philosophical, with added afterthoughts. I reply to each of the essays individually, before concluding with some thoughts about the book’s general reception after more than 50 reviews in various media.

Keywords: James Campbell, Jacquelyn Kegley, Esa Saarinen Paul Taylor, Richard Rorty, Philosophy in America, the publishing industry

The title of any book can bear only so much weight. At its best, a title projects the scope of a book’s ambition, its viewpoint, the territory it covers, and perhaps even serves up some quick entertainment—the joy of wordplay, the pleasurable indictment of a settled belief, even the physical pleasure of a rhyme.

I wanted America the Philosophical to strike both professional philosophers and lay readers as a playful, putative oxymoron, challenging the encrusted belief suggested by such famous book titles as Richard Hofstadter’s classic Anti-Intellectualism in American Life, and the more recent, ephemeral Idiot America: How Stupidity Became a Virtue in the Land of the Free by Charles Pierce, a journalist certainly not to be confused with the worthy namesake of this journal. What, though, did the title phrase imply once one got beyond the initial jolt?

To answer that question, book titles must give way, not to clunky subtitles (in my view, intellectual halfway houses that don’t solve the inherent limitations of a title), but to further, nuanced, reflective consideration of the claims a book title suggests. It’s in that spirit that I very much thank James

Afterthoughts on America the Philosophical
Carlin Romano

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Campbell, Jacquelyn Kegley, Esa Saarinen and Paul Taylor for taking the time to ponder America the Philosophical, and Transactions for giving me the opportunity to say more about the book’s aims, assertions and limitations. For even though a 672-page book is much longer than a title, it, too, like every book, comes with built-in limitations.

I reply to each of the author’s essays individually, before concluding with some thoughts about the book’s general reception after more than 50 reviews in various media. In doing so, and in the spirit of my book, I mix standard philosophical talk with resolutely down-to-earth observations about the realities of publishing and philosophy.

James Campbell
Campbell thoroughly reports many parts of America the Philosophical and approves of a fair number of them, for which I’m grateful. Here I devote myself to his critical concerns. Some small matters that he mentions en passant connect to his three main complaints at the end, so I’ll begin with the former as entry points into the latter.

First, an issue of historical accuracy. Campbell notes, in regard to my section on Rorty’s impact on the philosophy profession, that “there was a thriving sub-culture of pluralism within academic philosophy before Rorty’s rise to prominence.” To be sure, there was a “sub-culture of pluralism.” But did it thrive? Because Rorty struck many as a turncoat from analytic philosophy, or at least its epistemological program, he galvanized pluralist tendencies in a way others, seen by the analytic establishment as laboring in their own second-rate quarries, did not.

I tried to indicate that point by, among other gestures, quoting my own Yale advisor, John E. Smith, whose mighty efforts for pragmatism I admired then and admire now: “Since the people who belong to what he’s criticizing have never learned from anybody but themselves,” Smith himself quipped, referring to Rorty’s impact on the analytic establishment, “they have to learn from someone who has a union card.” (America the Philosophical, p.129).

How much credit Rorty deserves for shaking up the philosophical establishment in the 1980s, and for producing greater pluralism in his wake, remains a live matter of controversy in the profession. I’d agree with Campbell that his direct contribution to what was formally dubbed the APA’s “pluralist” movement should not be overstated. But as the title of my broader section on Rorty suggests—“Rorty’s Revolution”—I’d stick by my guns about his impact on philosophical pluralism writ large.

Several of Campbell’s en passant observations anticipate his later complaint about what the book does and doesn’t cover. I agree with Campbell, in regard to my discussion of Robert Coles, that I “might have explored more thoroughly Cole’s close affinity for the psychological thought of William James,” as I might have explored many other
things. Campbell also writes, “Surprisingly…Romano does not venture beyond literary critics to explore the ideas of philosophical novelists like Walker Percy and Charles Johnson, who would seem to have a major role to play in ‘America the Philosophical.’”

As it happens, I sometimes teach a seminar entitled “The Philosophical Novel,” and so agree here with Campbell that such a section might have fit quite nicely into America the Philosophical. So, too, a section on philosophical filmmakers from former Heidegger scholar Terrence Malick back to Hollywood greats such as John Ford would not have been inappropriate. A few years ago, at an APA Pacific, Robert Pippin and I (along with others) grappled with that lively issue: the philosophical possibilities of film.

In short, I’m sympathetic to observations that I might have included many figures in the book who are absent. Early in America the Philosophical, I acknowledged that, “in a longer book, I might easily have added sections on the growth of Latino philosophy, Asian American philosophy, and other areas worthy of attention.” (America the Philosophical, p.21). A couple of years later, I published a long article in my position as Critic-at-Large of The Chronicle of Higher Education entitled, “Dao Rising: The Take-off of Chinese Philosophy in America.” In a future edition of America the Philosophical, I’d gladly weave that material into Part 4 of the book, “The Rising Outsiders,” currently devoted to African American, women, Native American and gay philosophers.

All these examples of missing elements in America the Philosophical bolster the second of Campbell’s three main complaints. “Romano’s criteria of inclusion and exclusion are unclear,” he contends, asking why I do not discuss such figures as C. Wright Mills, Carl Sagan, Erving Goffman, Susanne Langer and Loren Eiseley.

It’s worth taking a moment to think more systematically about two questions: “Why is this thinker included and not that one?” and “What are the criteria for inclusion and exclusion?” Answering them requires me to make a point that applies, arguably, not just to America the Philosophical, but to all books. In doing so, I feel compelled to pull rank in mentioning my 25 years as the Literary Critic and sometime Book Editor of The Philadelphia Inquirer, but in an odd way. That is, to cite that experience not as one that taught me everything about book reviewing, but as one that left me missing something major. The publication of America the Philosophical, and its reviews, taught me a lesson about books such as mine that marshall huge amounts of journalism—huge heaps of facts—to argue a conceptual claim.

The revelation began when the New Yorker, in its review of America the Philosophical, startled me with its core description of the book: “A comprehensive intellectual history from Emerson to Rawls.” Some other reviews also used the word “comprehensive.” While grateful for
attention from the most important magazine in American literary culture, I immediately gagged at the line. “It’s not remotely comprehensive,” I thought. “It’s simply big.” But as the word kept turning up, I came to realize that for many critics, “comprehensive” functions as a synonym for “big.”

It is, of course, not a synonym. This realization offered an insight I’d missed despite reviewing hundreds of “big” books in my literary career. When we judge or analyze a philosophical article or essay, say in the *Journal of Philosophy* or *Philosophical Review*, we immediately discard the idea that an article will be comprehensive in the true sense. (A possible exception, of course, might be overtly announced “cover-the-waterfront articles” such as those “Recent Work in . . .” overviews that used to appear in *American Philosophical Quarterly*.) I’d say the same dispensed-with assumption takes place when we think of a typical monograph of up to 250 pages. But when a book tops 500 pages, a silent rival assumption enters: “Well, if you’re going to go that long, you’re clearly taking on the obligation to address everything possibly connected to your topic.”

There is, however, no good reason to impute that assumption to an author who doesn’t assume it explicitly. In the case of *America the Philosophical*, many a reader, encountering the roughly 125 thinkers of various stripes that I discuss—not to mention the many more I simply note in passing—jump to the conclusion that these are precisely the figures I regard as American philosophers. By extension, those not included somehow didn’t make my cut for a principled reason.

I, on the other hand, despite the volume of thinkers I offer up, see each of them as examples, as illustrations, as provocations, toward the point I wish to make about America as a vibrant philosophical culture. On my 13-city tour for the book, during which I encountered scores of questions from general audiences of the form, “What about X? Doesn’t she belong in your book?”, I’d often apply, “Yes, you’re right. I take her existence and work as yet further confirmation of my thesis.”

There’s been widespread agreement, in the many reviews of the book, that some of the figures I discuss do not push the envelope of “philosopher” very far (e.g., B.F. Skinner), while others do (e.g., Hugh Hefner). Even the late Umberto Eco, who praised the book as “genuinely exciting and provocative” and successful in its aim to “discombobulate the traditional landscape of American philosophy,” remarked to me in person, “But I think you will have a problem, Carlino, with Hugh Hefner!” And that came from a thinker famous for his own use of pop-cultural figures to make serious philosophical points.

The Hefner example, however, helps demonstrate how figures in the book serve as examples and illustrations, with some meant to test the boundaries of our concept of philosopher. Hefner, for instance, published that paradigmatic product of a philosopher, a huge tome,
entitled *The Playboy Philosophy*, that gathered his scores of essays seeking to persuade readers of his views on sex. While Hefner arguably has become a kind of icon and caricature of himself—a wealthy, narcissistic publisher, a mogul, a symbol of excess—it’s easy to forget that he began as a writer and editor—a word man—with influential views and actions on civil rights. Without question, Hefner’s views on sexuality, projected through Playboy magazine, changed the minds of many American about sexual behavior. Were his arguments syllogistic? Did he provide necessary and sufficient criteria for his concepts? Does that matter? Like many of the figures in the book who were not or are not professional philosophers, Hefner gains entry to test certain boundary conditions on the notion of “philosopher.”

A few more thoughts on what is and isn’t in the book. The circumstances of its publication matter. Many academic philosophers, I’ve found, lack familiarity with the publication of a book for a major trade house, and the constraints that places on an author. A book of more than 500 pages already pushes the upper limits of what such a publisher will accept. In contrast, university and private scholarly presses, the realm of much “official” philosophical work, operate differently. Does anyone remember Derek Parfit’s two-volume *On What Matters* (Oxford University Press, 2011), which comes to 1,365 pages, albeit with short commentaries from worthies such as Tim Scanlon and Allen Wood? (Perhaps I should ask, has anyone read it from page 1 to page 1,365?)

University presses often do little editing of scholarly works, even when in-house editors consider a manuscript bloated—they’d rather shrink the typeface than offend an esteemed professor. Derek Parfit, as we know, is an honored mandarin of the analytic philosophical establishment. No matter how disjointed a book by Parfit or a professional philosopher of comparable prestige may be, it will be published pretty much as the author demands. (In announcing this, I assure, I am channeling what my many friends among philosophy editors of such presses have long told me.)

Quality mainstream houses, publishing books for well-educated general readers, in contrast are much more *engage*. In my case, I had the possibility of publishing my book with Alfred A. Knopf, long recognized as one of the two most prestigious trade publishing houses in the United States, the publisher of presidents and Nobel Prize winners, the publisher of Simone de Beauvoir, H.L. Mencken, Toni Morrison and Gabriel Garcia Marquez. In such a situation, a first-time author must choose his battles carefully.

Which returns me to Campbell’s issue of criteria for inclusion and exclusion, and the second of his complaints—the lack of footnotes. Campbell is correct that subjecting the book to detailed footnoting would have caught the small number of factual errors that slipped
through, such as the religious affiliation of Dewey’s mother. But countervailing reasons prevailed.

By my judgment, I pushed the length of *America the Philosophical* as far up as I could without getting it rejected. From the outset of the project, I very much thought that a book with the ambitious title of *America the Philosophical* needed to possess substantial girth, something on the order of 500 to 750 pages. Yet it couldn’t stretch beyond that without entering the category that trade publishers, as well as prominent literary critics like myself, traditionally regard as “unreadable” (not to mention “unsellable”).

My publisher thought the book could exercise wide appeal and attract the attention of mainstream American public culture—a judgment confirmed when it became the first philosophy book since Allan Bloom’s *The Closing of the American Mind* to receive the undivided front page of the Sunday *New York Times* *Book Review*. So, for instance, as we approached publication, my editor asked me something I’d not anticipated at all—to include photos in the text—and to pay for them out of my advance! Someday, perhaps, I’ll toss off a whimsical essay on that project, including the triumph of acquiring a photo of Hefner (surrounded in 95 percent of his photos by an exhalation of Bunnies), in which he puffs on a pipe and looks remarkably like Bertrand Russell.

My publisher also preferred that the book not drive general readers away with footnotes. Both my publisher and I recognized that given the unusual amount of factual, reportorial information in my book—far more than appears in most philosophy books—rigorous footnoting would require up to 200 pages of notes. If I wanted that, my editor informed me, I would have to cut a substantial amount of text. I decided the text mattered more. I considered the fairly recent option of putting all footnotes online, but there remains resistance in trade publishing to that solution as a kind of cheating of the buyer of a hardbound copy. I suppose doing it remains an option in the future if the philosophical world decides *America the Philosophical* ranks up there with the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and the scholarly world demands it.

This issue of size and appropriate allocation of space to thinkers, of course, has no right answer in regard to a particular book—it’s a judgment call by the author and, in trade publishing, an editor. Thus, for instance, in crediting me with “detailed exploration of some aspects of the thought of Hannah Arendt,” Campbell writes that I might have placed “more emphasis” on other elements of her thought, such as her “warning against private loneliness and public isolation as paving the way for totalitarianism.” Without doubt, he’s right. In a book, however, that discusses at more than passing length the work of roughly 125 writers and thinkers, the decision of how much to expound the beliefs
of any one thinker, and for what purpose, will inevitably be a highly individual one.

Campbell raises two other matters of importance in this area, however, where I do wish to make my own judgment clear. He writes that my "devotion of twenty-five or so pages in the context of this volume to Isocrates, an admittedly 'nearly forgotten' Greek philosopher, might seem indulgent, or at least incidental" to my larger topic. In fact, I consider the Isocrates chapter to be a crucial element of the book, one of the most original aspects of the overarching argument of America the Philosophical. It is perhaps the least responded to by general reviewers, who in most cases lacked the philosophical and scholarly chops to evaluate my claims. I will discuss a that bit more in my concluding remarks, since others beyond Campbell have scratched their heads about the claims I make for Isocrates.

Finally, I acknowledge Campbell’s third complaint, that America the Philosophical "embodies unquestioned much of America’s obsession with elitism that is poisoning our system of higher education." I salute the sentiment, but I don’t agree that I’ve embodied that elitism in the book. Here an issue arises that I’ll address as well in my comments on Paul Taylor’s essay, with its doubts about my embrace of such concepts as “America” and a “philosophical culture.”

What throws off many professional philosophers who read America the Philosophical is its hardcore journalistic principles. I recognize that few writers of philosophical books have been both a Washington Post Style section reporter and a professor of philosophy (though let’s remember that Hegel edited a newspaper for a while, as did Ortega y Gasset). It makes my prose different from that of the typical recent Phd revising his or her dissertation. When I write, I feel both journalism and philosophy traditions breathing down my neck. One difference from the journalistic side—reporters confront and cover the world as it is, not as we’d like it to be. We’re not allowed to decide that Shanghai is the capital of China rather than Beijing. Or, to pick unfairly on Jean Baudrillard’s immortal book title, that The Gulf War Did Not Take Place.

In a kinder world, the teacherly, philosophical work outside of elite venues that Campbell cites and honors—that I honor too—might constitute a greater part of the establishment’s standard view of what constitutes the practice of philosophy. I would welcome such a world. But in strategizing what I described in my introduction as seven separate argumentative “assaults on cliché-crushing.” I thought I needed to target philosophy as it functions today in most people’s minds—the enterprise of publishing texts and views that a wider world of intellectuals and ordinary people, and not just one’s circle of students, responds to.
That said, in a rewritten work, fifteen or twenty pages devoted to philosophy as a practice of teaching would make perfect sense. Campbell writes, in a lovely phrase, “We are still earning the title of ‘America the Philosophical.’”

Yes, we are.

**Esa Saarinen**

Saarinen’s perspective from far-away Finland gratifies me, knowing that in his own public career he’s worked hard to expand the understanding of philosophy in Finnish culture.

Saarinen’s mention of “philosophical lecturing as a form of performing art” resonates for me, as does Campbell’s request for more attention to teaching as a worthy philosophical activity. His image of public philosophizing as like conducting a symphony orchestra, as a conducting of thoughts, jibes with manifestations of philosophical activity I applaud in *America the Philosophical*, such as the “Philosophy Café” movement exemplified by Christopher Phillips’s “Socrates Café” experiments. In Phillips’s case, the symphonic conversations are situated in thought-provoking spots such as the Wounded Knee memorial in South Dakota.

Yet I suppose I prefer a notion of philosophy in which the conductor occasionally does more than conduct—in which he or she makes some music too. Those who know that I served as Richard Rorty’s undergraduate assistant at Princeton when he was writing *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* in the mid-1970s—and who note the extensive attention I give to him in my “Rorty’s Revolution” section—sometimes attribute to me a position associated with Rorty after *Mirror*, one that he came to regret. That’s the idea of philosophy as simply elevated conversation. While admiring Rorty in many ways, I’ve never held the view that elevated conversation of any kind counts as philosophy, or that the mere provoking of philosophy by others represents philosophy at its best. Engaging with Saarinen here is a chance to resist the occasional claim that *America the Philosophical* “dumbs down” philosophy to mere conversation.

To me, philosophy requires making assertions, or, arguably, implying them—the way a movie might—or questioning assertions, as Socrates did. It requires the gathering and adducing of evidence for assertions. It requires the gathering of, and openness to, possible counter-evidence. It requires sustained attention, willingness to listen, and a lack of closure to possible changed facts and circumstances. In that respect, I’m very much on the “Do Not Block the Way of Inquiry” team, a good pragmatist. That’s all before getting into the imaginative part of it that Rorty increasingly emphasized, and whose importance I also embrace.

When Saarinen writes, “Romano calls for a paradigm extension from philosophy as a doctrine to philosophy as a disposition to think
reflectively,” he gets me right, but only so long as that disposition to think reflectively ultimately issues in some assertive or implicative or questioning activity. In that sense, he is correct that “Romano implies a conviction of philosophy as a fundamentally applied philosophy.” Scholars of Asian philosophy often criticize how Westerners place the qualifier “Asian” before philosophy from the East, but deem “European philosophy” just “philosophy.” Paying attention to qualifiers that precede the word “philosophy” in different languages teaches us things. In that respect, I’ve always found the term “applied philosophy” a redundancy, though I understood the reasons why, in the American philosophical world a few decades back, the term caught on to distinguish philosophy that engaged concretely with real-world areas such as medicine, law or business from the then predominant mode of abstract or metaphilosophical inquiry. Yes, all true philosophy is applied philosophy.

Saarinen also gets things right, and perceives a more authentically present Rortyan strain in my thought, when he writes that “Romano’s inspiring call is to point to the imaginative and boundless nature of philosophy as an engine of human dynamism.” Saarinen puts it more romantically and dramatically than I would. But in my acknowledgement early in America the Philosophical that I sought to live up to Rorty’s charge to the modern philosopher to invent a “remapping of culture,” an “imaginative revision of the way we think about both the history of philosophy and American culture, one that might rock some of our clichés in the history of ideas,” we’re on the same page. I’m pleased, therefore, that Saarinen seems persuaded of the scandalous erasure of Isocrates from the history of philosophy, and the importance of his restoration as one step in accomplishing that revision.

When I first read Saarinen’s essay, I thought that he exaggerated my forcefulness in America the Philosophical. After reading it several times, however, I now think that he breaks through to some insights I’d not acknowledged to myself. “Romano’s striking idea is not to fear life,” he writes. “His passion is to open a wide broadband connection from philosophy to life itself, de-authorizing the privileged one-way expert channels.” I hadn’t thought of myself as that heroic, but weighing the idea I must agree with Saarinen that multiple strands of my mixed philosophical and journalistic career, and my approach in America the Philosophical, do arise out of a passion for connecting philosophy to life.

Examples, I suppose, are a number of intellectual demands. My journalistic insistence over decades that professional philosophers abandon artificial epistemological research programs that ignore how knowledge claims are established in the real world, and acknowledge the structures of intersubjective authority that rule such claims. My insistence that philosophers treat the marshalling of fact and evidence as a form of
argument that produces persuasion. My insistence that they read and listen to voices outside established academic citadels of philosophy. My insistence that they write in prose understandable by ordinary educated people, rather than hiding behind pretentious coinages and disciplinary jargon that masks the emptiness of their projects. Much of my early 1980s writing in the Village Voice, about philosophers as varied as Foucault, Quine, Nozick, Gramsci, Perelman and Habermas, grew out of such commitments. (I took pleasure at the time from the knowledge that Peirce had written for the New York Post.)

Yes, Esa Saarinen, I accept the tipped hat to my passion. Finally, I appreciate Saarinen’s own confidence that things needn’t remain as they’ve been in the wider international world of philosophy. When he observes that I “provide a context in which what does not seem at first ‘philosophical’ is transformed into such,” he explains his later startling comparison of what I might be doing to Martin Seligman’s sensational launching of the positive psychology movement in the 1990s—a significant reorientation of the focus of an academic discipline.

Saarinen wagishly comments, “There is no positive philosophy movement. But Romano’s is a chapter in the future history of it.” With that line, he compliments me in a bold, unexpected, and very welcome way.

Jacquelyn Kegley
As one of the foremost Royce scholars of her time, Kegley does me a distinct kindness by not cutting me to ribbons for my scant attention to Royce in America the Philosophical. I quote Royce only twice—both times on Santayana—and mention The Philosophy of Loyalty only in passing, while devoting comparatively full sections to Peirce, James, Dewey and Santayana.

There’s no mystery to that. Royce remained a lacuna in my reading of the classical pragmatists for most of my life, as did Mead. I read The Philosophy of Loyalty in graduate school at Yale, and remember liking it, but it did not send me on to his other work. Only in recent years, spurred by Kegley and a desire to catch up, have I come to recognize the value and importance of Royce’s role in the American tradition. That said, I could justify his tiny presence in America the Philosophical by invoking my journalistic principle stated above—that one reports the world as it is. The standard history of “Golden Age” American philosophy generally leaves Royce behind those gold, silver and bronze medalists I wrote about. But I confess that I would have included more about Royce had I done the legwork.

My familiarity with Royce much improved, I take no issue with Kegley’s vaunting of him, and Royce’s vaunting of James, as models of excellent philosophical practice. The best use of my reply here is to combat Kegley’s adamant rejection of Rorty as also a model of excellent
philosophical practice. I believe it’s based on a misunderstanding of Rorty’s position that’s unfortunately shared by many in the philosophical world.

Kegley writes that “Rorty provides an inadequate pragmatist model in his emphasis on free-flowing conversation, a conversation that is individual and private, and not focused on public issues, debate or argument. In contrast to Romano, and unlike Rorty, Dewey, Peirce, and Royce saw critical inquiry, not conversation, as an essential element in a responsible philosophical response to pressing human problems and they, though not ignoring the role of the individual, viewed community as an essential part of such inquiry…”

As stated earlier, the image of Rorty championing philosophy as loose, free-flowing conversation, as if he thought a multi-hour talkfest in a coffee house constituted the paradigm of philosophy, was one created quickly from his choice of words in Mirror of Nature. Rorty came to regret that notion and distanced himself from it. In fact, I would argue, Rorty very much agreed with the Royce that Kegley quotes, who thought that without supportive communities, you could not have “genuine individuals,” and “genuine communities” could not “develop without the loyalty and work of these ‘true individuals.’” Kegley writes that “individuals in isolation are not necessarily good philosophers for they are missing the critical feedback of one’s fellow philosophers as well as the public in general.” But hermits remain few in any society, Rorty did not apotheosize them, and Rorty’s common-sense notion that individuals move back and forth between private and public spheres gets lost here.

The crux of the problem is the belief that Rorty thought it perfectly fine for individuals to retreat permanently into their private realms, to turn their backs on the community, and pursue their private ends. The locus classicus anti-Rortyans point to in this regard is the same line that Kegley quotes from the introduction to Contingency, Irony and Solidarity. Kegley states, “Rorty was an advocate for the private and the individual, and he argued to keep the private, individual domain of life and any public engagement of an individual separate. He asserts that we need to be ‘content to treat the demands of self-creation and of human solidarity as equally valid, yet forever incommensurable.’”

By “incommensurable,” however, Rorty did not mean that these two dimensions of a person’s personality should not and could not come together in a real person’s life. To attribute that view to Rorty is to saddle him with a position entirely contrary to common sense, as well as to his own plainly declared political sympathies, his call for community solidarity in opposing cruelty and addressing the needs of others, especially the poor and powerless. Indeed, it is difficult to see how anyone could read his later book, Achieving Our Country, and think that Rorty
took such a solipsistic view. In stating, in his own late choice of vocabulary—and as he fleshed out his notion of the “liberal ironist”—that vocabularies of self-creation and public altruism could not logically be reduced to each other, he did not mean that they could not go together in different aspects or phases of a person’s life.

All he meant was that an individual’s private psychological self-creation, no matter how influenced by the community in which he or she is born and raised, will always be logically and psychologically separable from the community-oriented personality that may well engage in profound acts of solidarity and kindness. We know that this takes place all the time. We can name prominent personalities who demonstrate it.

I’d call Kegley’s attention to other passages in the introduction to Contingency, Irony and Solidarity from which she quotes. Rorty writes,

Authors like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, Proust, Heidegger, and Nabokov are useful as exemplars, as illustrations of what private perfection—a self-created, autonomous, human life can be like. Authors such as Marx, Mill, Dewey, Habermas and Rawls are fellow citizens rather than exemplars. They are engaged in a shared, social effort—the effort to make our institutions and practices more just and less cruel. We shall only think of these two kinds of writers as opposed if we think that a more comprehensive philosophical outlook would let us hold self-creation and justice, private perfection and human solidarity, in a single vision.

He adds a further important observation, driving home the point that the incommensurability he speaks of, a term he borrowed from Kuhn, is theoretic, not a description of a bifurcation to which a human person is doomed:

The closest we will come to joining these two quests is to see the aim of a just and free society as letting its citizens be as privatistic, “irrationalist,” and aestheticist as they please so long as they do it on their own time—causing no harm to others and using no resources needed by those less disadvantaged. There are practical measures to be taken to accomplish this practical goal. But there is no way to bring self-creation together with justice at the level of theory. (Emphasis added).

Kegley’s view of Rorty, I suspect, simply betokens the same phenomenon as my early view of Royce—a clipped understanding because of incomplete familiarity with the whole scope of his work and life. Kegley, for instance, endorses Judith Green’s assertion that Rorty was “tone deaf” to religious experience. To be sure, he remained philosophically secular. But I would call to Kegley’s attention a lengthy, fascinating interview with Mary Varney Rorty, Dick’s second wife.
and a philosopher herself, and their daughter, Patricia, that ran in 2010 in Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought. In it, both Mary and Patricia discuss Rorty’s attitudes about their own religious beliefs, his fondness for Mormon hymns, his reading of The Book of Mormon, his respectful interaction with Mormon elders. As Mary puts it there, “having explored other religions growing up,” Rorty “was not wont to begrudge others their own religious experience.” She adds that Rorty’s view was that “there are aspects of many religions, any religion, all religions, that speak to human aspirations, that further them, that provide a context for them, and he could approve of that aspect of them.” Rorty’s views toward religion are more subtle and complicated than many think.

Returning to the issue of private versus public, Rorty sees the individual as swinging back and forth between private space and public space, someone who should not be compelled to spend a designated percentage of time in one realm or the other. In this sense, Rorty would defend the right of, say, the eccentric, reclusive artist to withdraw from society to create his or her own work or personality. But there’s also no doubt that Rorty preferred the individual who, having forged, in private, intriguing and possibly helpful aspects of self that would serve the greater community, re-entered it from the private realm to make contributions in solidarity with all.

In that respect, I think Rorty also counts as a good model of philosophical practice. He very much lives up to the pragmatist spirit that we all should respond to real problems, in real situations of doubt, and help others. He’s simply against automatically signing up for continuous community service that short-circuits service to oneself, one’s evolving ethos, and the ultimate indirect benefit that private self-creation might bring to the community.

Paul Taylor
I appreciate that Taylor, like Campbell, Saarinen and Kegley, welcomes fundamental aspects of America the Philosophical. Here I concentrate on his critical concerns.

Taylor mainly targets what he sees as my complacent acceptance of such notions as “America” and a “philosophical culture.” He wants me to question those notions more incisively. How might I have done so? Perhaps I could have opposed the whole notion of the “United States” as America, a settled usage that drives many Canadians, and Central and South Americans, to distraction. United States the Philosophical, of course, would have lacked a certain ring. Or I might have argued that much discourse in the U.S. is not of the kind I advocated above—assertions back by evidence, openness to counterexamples and counterevidence—but rather conducted through brute force: shootings, foreclosures, profiling, redlining.
My first line of defense here is the position I’ve articulated above: the journalistic devotion to truth that requires recognition of the world as it is, not as we want it to be. Contra Taylor, I’d argue that we all know what we mean by America, its geographical boundaries, its mixed communities, its history, laws and current government.

We also know, less sharply and precisely, what we mean by a “philosophical culture.” To some professional philosophers, it may mean just their professional world—three APAs every year, the journals, philosophy departments, and special societies they frequent. To me, it means the whole American world of reasonably sophisticated persuasive activity about conceptual matters. It may include an incisive debate on “The Charlie Rose Show” about the ethics of torture, a radio jock going back and forth with a string of listeners about whether Donald Trump counts as fascist, the members of a book club debating whether Albert Camus solved the problem of suicide in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Taylor sees it as a weakness that I don’t interrogate or deconstruct the concepts, but I see it as a strength, at least initially. I start—that is, the book’s project starts—from the position that we operate with these concepts in rough form. But it’s simply false that I then wear them like a comfortable suit, devoting no scrutiny to them.

In the early section of *America the Philosophical* entitled “Parsing America,” I spend 19 pages analyzing seven books—John Hall and Charles Lindholm’s *Is America Breaking Up?*, Edward Countryman’s *Americans: A Collision of Histories*; Seymour Martin Lipset’s *American Exceptionalism*; Michael Walzer’s *What It Means to Be an American* and *The Company of Critics*; Morton White’s *Philosophy, the Federalist and the Constitution*; and Michael Kammen’s *A Machine That Would Go of Itself: The Constitution in American Culture*—in order to extract a working notion of America.

In broader form, I’d say the whole 672-page book scrutinizes and explores the notion of a “philosophical culture” as it weighs whether America counts as one. Taylor suggests that we might want to withhold the phrase, as an honorific, from a culture that tolerated slavery and committed enough other iniquities over time to soil any picture of America as a “city on a hill,” a culture that started out moral and wonderful and just kept getting better from there.

But the ethical or unethical behavior of America and its government over time seems to me a separable matter from its status as a philosophical culture. The latter question depends more, I’d argue, on whether freedoms promised by the First Amendment actually existed or exist; whether multiple rival viewpoints achieved or achieve expression in American society; whether the average person can access materials associated with any view, acceptable to the mainstream of society or outrageous and anomalous. As Taylor knows, even long before slavery came to an end, abolitionists made their voices heard in America, as have
activists philosophically Contesting the mainstream on women's rights, gay rights, and many other once controversial issues. Whether the voices were audible enough at different times to justify lauding America as a superior Philosophical culture is a discussion worth having.

Taylor gets my hopes seriously wrong when he writes that in my questioning of “the assumption that philosophy is only an ivory tower affair,” the impulse “behind this questioning has to do with opening the tower to all comers, so that we can all get a glimpse of things from on high. He [Romano] wants it both ways, to deflate philosophy and to hold tight as it floats, fully inflated, above the world of human practice.”

In truth, I'm neither in favor of fulltime life in the tower nor eager to see it torn down. Rather, I'd like to see people regularly commuting. As many of the “rising outsiders” I write about in America the Philosophical can attest, the ivory tower can be a paradise for a thoughtful life, even if one doesn't like the contours of the larger society one sees when peering down from the turrets. Taylor, like many African American and women among former outsiders, has happily chosen to make his life in academic positions and communities. My vision is for those who have access to ivory towers to leave them on a regular basis—maybe every day—to mix with the rest of society, and not just pass through it on the way from the office to home. Philosophy professors who work at urban universities such as Columbia, or the University of Chicago, or City University of New York, strike us as doing this inevitably. Those who teach at isolated rural colleges, even those of high quality such as Kenyon College, perhaps suggest to us that they do not. But they also visit the convenience store, the gas station, the hospital. Maybe philosophers at the latter sort of places simply have to work harder to engage directly with the full sweep of American life.

Taylor's offers one other key objection to America the Philosophical: my closing characterization of Barack Obama as a “philosopher-in-chief.” Taylor recently published a book with Routledge entitled On Obama, so the President is someone he has clearly thought quite seriously and deeply about.

Did I mean to suggest that Obama is a philosopher by the traditional criteria that lead us to say that Kant is? No. But my whole book is meant to question the applicability and necessity of that traditional standard in using the “P” word.

In his essay here, Taylor objects to the characterization mainly because Obama, as a politician holding office, is a split personality not free in his political manifestation to express what he may truly think as a philosopher.

This view, it seems to me, depends on an assumption as naïve as the putatively complacent acceptance of “America” and “philosophical culture” of which Taylor accuses me. Does any philosopher express
views entirely free from conventions of politeness, self-interest, or ambition? Not likely. In America the Philosophical, I argue that some of Obama's early speeches as President—his Cairo lecture and his Nobel Prize address about the use of force in the service of peace—constituted models of pithy philosophical discourse. Since then, I'd say many of his speeches have risen to the same level—on gun control, on terrorism, on who we are as Americans.

In his Obama book, Taylor asks many good questions. He sees Obama as “an historical novelty.” He’s especially concerned with whether Obama’s “preference for consensus-building over ideology, for problem-solving over partisan bickering,” amounts to “a form of philosophical pragmatism.” He wonders whether Obama counts as “post-historical” in the complicated sense of that phrase Taylor expounds. There, at least, Taylor seems open to understanding Obama as a philosophical actor, if not a philosopher.

Here I would simply caution against holding a functioning politician to a higher standard of congruence between expressed belief and everyday behavior than we do professional professors of philosophy. Without naming names, we’ve seen a fair number of cases recently of famous philosophy professors whose behavior—for reasons less defensible than Obama’s—don’t fit well with their official philosophies or expressed ethical theories. In light of the kinds of arguments I make in my own Obama chapter—the President’s serious philosophical reading back to his days at Occidental, Columbia and Harvard, his feisty arguments with thinkers such as Robert Mangabeira Unger at law school, his cerebral speeches—we need more than daylight between his aspirations and his actions to delegitimize him too quickly as a philosopher.

I respect Taylor’s hesitation in enthusiastically endorsing the building blocks with which I construct America the Philosophical—I understand why he writes, in regard to the picture I present, “I do not share his faith.” To which, I think, the answer remains the comment from Campbell I quote above: “We are still earning the title of “America the Philosophical.”

Conclusion
Pulitzer-Prize-winning historian Richard Hofstadter once observed that if you’re going to challenge a hegemonic cultural belief, you probably need to exaggerate a bit in the other direction to get people’s attention. Many reviewers and general readers of America the Philosophical, when they encounter the book’s most spectacular claim, assume that the Hofstadterian principle explains it. I wrote in the introduction: “For the surprising little secret of our ardently capitalist, famously materialist, heavily iPodded, iPadded, and iPhoned society is that America in the early twenty-first 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, nineteenth-century Germany, or any other place one can name over the past three millennia.”

I insist it is no exaggeration.

But I regret that so much of the critical commentary on my book focuses on that claim, and the question of what philosophy is, to the neglect of parts of the book that also challenge philosophical cliches.

My argument for the importance of Isocrates as a philosopher, I believe, deserves more attention. I cite again my declaration in the book’s introduction of my ambition to “fulfill the task Rorty urges on the modern philosopher: an imaginative revision of the way we think about both the history of philosophy and American culture.” The academic philosophical world ignores the scholarship on Isocrates that mandates a rewriting of our understanding of ancient Greek philosophy and how its canon developed.

My argument in the chapter about John Rawls, “Just Saying No to Justification: The Magnificent Failure of John Rawls,” highlights the peculiar way justificatory schemes work in American philosophy, given the wide diversity of our foundational beliefs and what I call our “rude independence of mind.” It has also not been adequately confronted.

I plan to publish more about these issues in the next few years. One project called Isocrates, Philosopher. Another, The Illegality of Philosophy, will flesh out the idea I mention in my critical examination of John Rawls’s failed theory—how jurisprudential metaphors (e.g., justify, legitimate, warrant) deeply complicate all philosophical reasoning that aims to be airtight.

In the meantime, I’m pleased that America the Philosophical is prodding scholars and professional philosophers to think about “America” and “philosophy” just as much as the many general readers who tell me of the difference it has made in their thinking about both notions.