

CLASSICAL AMERICAN PRAGMATISM: PRACTICING PHILOSOPHY AS EXPERIENCING LIFE

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Abstract: I argue that Classical American Pragmatists—Royce, James, Dewey, Perice, Addams, Du Bois, and Locke subscribed to this view and practiced philosophy by focusing on experience and directing a critical eye to major problems in living. Thus Royce and Dewey explored the nature of genuine community and its role in developing a flourishing individual life but also a public, democratic life. Royce and James engaged in a phenomenological analysis of human experience including religious experience developing a rich understanding of human psychological, social, and religious development. Dewey, Royce and Perice applied the lessons of the scientific communal experience to problem solving in everyday life. Dewey explored life's aesthetic dimensions. Addams, Du Bois and Locke applied philosophy to problems of living with discrimination as an immigrant or an African American.

Keywords: experience; religious experience; science; Addams; Du Bois; discrimination; double consciousness.

In 1892, Royce wrote:

You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world. What you are doing is . . . living. And living implies passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean and imply is philosophy (Royce, 1892, p. 1).

I argue that Classical American Pragmatists—Royce, James, Dewey, as well as Du Bois, and Addams subscribed to this view and practiced philosophy by focusing on experience and directing a critical eye to major problems in living. Thus Royce and Dewey explored the nature of genuine community and its role in developing a flourishing individual life but also a public, democratic life. Royce and James argued for a notion of experience itself as both individual and relational and for a close connection between individual development and communal relation. W.E. B. Du Bois applied philosophy to problems of living with discrimination as an African American, while Jane Addams practiced philosophy by explicating the experiences of the lowly with the goal of expanding social progress and democracy.

This paper will explicate the notion of “practicing philosophy as experiencing life” through focus on a central life issue, namely, balancing the need for individual development and uniqueness while also recognizing the fundamental role of community, both negative

and positive in such self-identification and achievement. Thus, James, Royce and Dewey see individual-community interaction as central both for ensuring a democratic way of life and for achieving genuine individuality. Turning to Addams and Du Bois, we find the plea for a democratic way of life that allows a diversity of voices and an understanding of the negative ways in which discrimination and racist paradigms impact on an individual's ability to develop a sense of authentic and affirming self-identity.

Experiencing life as an individual in community

Both Dewey and Royce discussed the conditions for building community while also critiquing a prevalent and false individualism that they believed threatened community and even the future of democracy (Dewey, 1962). Thus, Dewey argued that a democracy based on an atomistic individualism centered in notions of innate human characteristics of free will, rationality and natural rights would not provide the conditions for individual development and the freeing of human potential so crucial to sustaining community life and particularly for fostering "democracy" as a "way of life," a way of being in community. He writes: that "The clear consciousness of a community life, in all its implications, constitutes the idea of democracy" (Dewey, 1957, p. 149).

A central theme throughout Royce's life was "creating community." In *The Problem of Christianity* he set out conditions for "genuine community," and proposed "interpretation" as a method of creating that community—a method that respects the views of each individual involved in a conversation, debate or situation, but which seeks to bring about an increased understanding for all parties of themselves, other selves and relationships as well as the issues being addressed (Royce, 1913). Royce 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." Royce asserted that there were parallel failures (he called them "sins") affecting the human self: (1) the sin of self-loss, becoming part of the crowd, a "they," instead of an "I"; and (2) the sin of self-sufficiency, of the individual who "goes it alone" and believes that genuine selfhood can be achieved in this manner. An individual must not lose oneself in the community or in "mob mentality," but neither can an individual achieve a sense of self and achieve recognition, social and individual, completely free of social and communal input, support, and influence. Royce admired Nietzsche's notion of the individual, noble, courageous self who could transcend narrow interests, mediocrity, and the powerful draw of social conformity in order to live as captain of one's own soul, possessed of one's unique moral value in the face of the chaos (Royce, 1917/2001, p. 176). However, he also asserted that Nietzsche's great limitation was his failure to see that real power for the genuine self lies with the true life of cooperating individuals. Individuals and communities need each other.

The classical American pragmatists, in fact, believed that the relationship between individual and community development was a major social, political and life problem. Thus, for example, Royce and Dewey argued that the ability of individuals and communities to transcend self and to engage in interaction was crucial to countering the tendency toward leveling of views and individuality produced by corporations, advertising, and media in the U.S. and which disposed persons acting via the mob spirit, which Royce characterizes as "a

state of irrationality,” and “sympathization without thought” (Royce, 1908/2005, pp. 1077-1078). Wise social groups, argued Royce, are those that tend to be characterized by contrasts between individuals; such groups can generate a multiplicity of potential strategies for solving a problem or taking social 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” (p. 1078).

Dewey argued that the democratic idea demands liberation of the potentialities of members of the group in harmony with the interests and goods which are common. He writes:

Since every individual is a member of many groups, this specification cannot be fulfilled except in connection with other groups . . . There is a free give-and-take: fullness of integrated personality is therefore possible of achievement, since the pulls and responses of different groups reinforce one another and their values accord (Dewey, 1957, pp. 147-148).

On the individual level Royce argued that self-consciousness arises out of a social contrast between self and non-self, between what is mine and what is not mine. Royce writes:

I affirm that our empirical self-consciousness, from moment to moment, depends upon a series of contrast effects, whose psychosocial origin lies in our literal social life, and whose continuance in our present conscious life, whenever we are alone, is due to habit, to our memory of literal social relations, and to an imaginative idealization of these relations (Royce, 1899, Vol. 2, p. 260; see also Royce, 1895).

The child recognizes early that there are in the world the experiences, intents, and interests of other people—his parents, siblings, playmates. At an early age the child experiences a contrast between his own desires and those of others, between what he can control and what others seem to control. And there is the strong imitative aspect of the self. Royce writes:

What the child does instinctively, and without comparison with the deeds of others, may never come to his clear consciousness as his own deeds at all. What he learns imitatively, and then reproduces, perhaps in joyous obstinacy, as an act that enables him to display himself over against others—this constitutes the beginning of his self-conscious life (Royce, 1899, Vol. 2, p. 262).

William James brings to fore the strong emphasis in pragmatism on both experience and on its relational nature. In his *Psychology: Briefer Course* (1900) James argued that every element of one’s consciousness is personal, yet the stream of consciousness is relational, namely, each element of consciousness is related to both the before and after. Thus, he says, “When thunder crashes it is not thunder pure but thunder-breaking-upon- silence-and-contrasting-with it” (James, 1890/2000, p. 169). In his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1912), James argues that “radical empiricism” consists of a postulate, a statement of fact, and a conclusion. 1. The postulate is that “the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be definable in terms drawn from experience.” 2. The fact is that relations are just as directly experienced as the things they relate. 3. The conclusion is that “the parts of experience hold together from next to next by relations that are themselves parts of experience” (James, 1909/1975, pp. 6-7). James saw human consciousness as an unfinished

stream. And James, like Royce was concerned about self-development and saw self in terms of a process. Both James and Royce argued that the self develops through time via series of interactions with experience.

James postulated a set of various selves. Like Royce he spoke of an empirical self or “Me,” a sum total of all that one can call one’s own—body, psychic powers, clothes, house, wife, children, ancestors, friends, reputation and work. Then there was the social self or “Social Me.” James notes that this self—he speaks of it as “club opinion”—is one of the strongest forces in life. James argues that one must pursue an ideal social self, a self that is at least worthy of approving recognition by the highest possible judging companion. He criticized the Stoic for trying to protect the self by exclusion and denial and he praised sympathetic persons who proceed by expansion and inclusion. James would agree with Royce about the need for the contrast and interaction with others as a key to self-development. James notes that if left absolutely to myself I should probably allow all kinds of spontaneous and unreflective tendencies to luxuriate in me. He says: “I see my own lusts in the mirror of the lusts of others and to think about them in a very different way from which I simply feel” (James, 1971, p. 97). Royce is also clear about the need of social interaction for self-development. Like James he argues that left to ourselves we have difficulty learning what might be our ideals and would be content to not feel any dissatisfaction with oneself. As a social being, he notes, we continually require to look for guidance to our social world. He writes:

My comrades, my teachers, my rivals, yes, even my enemies teach me what it is I want. Through imitation I at length learn self-mastery. . . . My very freedom, in so far as I ever attain freedom, will be due to the fact that I am able to learn through social contact with others, what it is I myself want to be (Royce, 1895, p. 253).

Thus, both James and Royce would argue that self, individuality, even moral autonomy, develop with a social context and the process involves a delicate balance of originality, self-will, contrast, and social confirmation and supplementation.

There is today need today for genuine individual-community interaction, for seeing experience for what it is, provided by my interactions with experience and with others. There is also a desperate need for “democracy” to be seen as a way of life based on experience, needing contrasting, open and respectful communication and openness to change of one’s own views or work toward solutions that in some way answers the needs of all.

Today, there appear to be many persons in a crisis of personal identity, mired in loneliness or drug adduced experience, or lost in a social media that bring new loneliness captured in the title of the latest book by sociologist, Sherry Turkle (2011) *Alone together: why we expect more from technology and less from each other*. Attention to the reaffirmation of a creative individual-community interaction seems most appropriate. One of the major problems in living today is the lack of such interaction. This becomes even clearer when one turns to the problems of discrimination and the struggles of African-American, women, and others to find recognition and an authentic identity. W. E. B. Du Bois, in his book, *The soul of black folks*, developed the concept of “double consciousness,” which describes the struggle of various oppressed and devalued persons to achieve an authentic sense of self which is also validated by the communities in which they live. He writes:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 1999, p. 11).

Du Bois concept of “double-consciousness”, which is the awareness of the “two-ness” of being “an American and an African-American”, and the largely unconscious, almost instinctive movement between these two identities, is useful because it applies to any group who is being set up in negative terms as “the Other” to privilege the dominant group who possess all the “positive” human characteristics. Ironically, this “negative:” veil through which the dispossessed group is always “read” means that this group is more aware of how society actually works because, as the groups subjected to the power of the privileged, they have to understand the dominant group’s version of society while they also have to be conscious of their own under-privileged role and finally, they must understand the relationship between the two. Thus, the dispossessed individual is doubly or triply aware whereas the privileged group can float along believing the world always operates on their own terms.

Ralph Ellison, in his famous book, *The Invisible Man*, speaks of a crazy looking glass world in which people refuse to see him. He writes: “I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. . . . I am surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass” (Ellison, 1952, p. 3). James Baldwin speaks of colored people as lay anthropologists who study the habits of those in power so that they may outwit them in order to survive (Baldwin, 1961). Other races groups such as Latinos face similar invisibility and struggles for identity. Such racism often leads to internalized racism such as exemplified in the story of Claudia in the book, *The Bluest Eye* by Toni Morrison (1970). At Christmas Claudia receives a white, blue-eyed doll which she observes “from the clucking sounds of the adults I knew that the doll was what they thought represented my fondest wish- something every girl treasured.” (Morrison, 1970, p. 20). Claudia dismembers the doll and then in her anger she states that she wanted to dismember Shirley Temple and her light-skinned friend, Maureen Pearl. But, then, she says, “All the time we knew that Maureen Pearl was not the enemy and not worthy of such intense hatred. The Thing to fear was the Thing that made her beautiful and not us” (p. 74). Claudia understands that whiteness or lightness of skin bestows power and beauty, something she does not have. Thus each of these stories enforces the negative power that community can have over individuals and their struggles to seek self-identity.

Du Bois’ two concepts “The Veil” and “double consciousness” are intricately linked and involve at heart the individual community interaction that concerned Dewey, Royce and James. In addition they have general validity for explicating various dominate-dominated, oppressive relationships in our world today. Thus in the area of economics, we can understand consumption relationships via these concepts, e.g. the privileged western customer and the young women working in the factories or agricultural fields, of China or India or Africa. When the Western tourist visits their “exotic country” they are consuming and often wasting the consumer goods and the food which have little value for them as they are so cheap in terms of Western currencies. However, the young peasant women working in China, knows the worth of their labor and the value of the goods they make in terms of their hours of labor, especially as the laborer can’t even afford to buy the trinkets, clothes, or

the food—and certainly wouldn't waste it if they could afford it. When the two come face to face however, the tourist sees only a rather poorly dressed, tired looking, uninteresting young person spoiling his/her image of the "exotic East"—The girls however, can easily see how "invisible" they are to the Westerner.they have no value in terms of their "tourist image".

Their actual relationship is centered on the cheapness of the consumer products the Westerner is consuming, a concept invisible to the privileged one in this relationship—but it is all too evident to the worker who doesn't earn enough in wages to achieve the privileged life style of the tourist. So, the Veil continues to operate at the double level outlined by Du Bois—the tourist can barely see the worker, but the worker is well-aware of how she is seen, and devalued; what her actual role is in the relationship, namely as the producer of the "cheap goods" and she is also aware of how much of her own labor value has been put into those goods which has enabled the tourist to have such a "cheap holiday" at such "reasonable prices."

Jane Addams, founder of Hull House and a classical feminist pragmatist, spent much of her life arguing for understanding the experience of different groups, especially of immigrants and women. Thus in "Democracy and Social Ethics" she explored the situation of live-in-servants in households, contrasting them with their affluent mistresses as well as their counterparts who were factory workers (Addams, 1913). She was a forerunner of what today we call "standpoint theory," a method of acknowledging and overcoming the limitations of dominant world views by utilizing additional perspectives of non-dominant individuals or groups. Addams spoke of 'sympathetic knowledge' that she believed was the only way of approach to any human problem (Addams, 1915). She argued that sympathetic knowledge is a mingling of epistemology and ethics: knowing one another better reinforces the common connection of people such that the potential for caring and empathetic moral actions increase.

Jane Addams demonstrates "sympathetic knowledge" through her work and writing at Hull-House. Despite the privileged social position she was born into, her settlement avocation immersed her in disempowered communities. Addams believed that identification with the common lot was the essential idea of Democracy and democracy was a way of life, an immersion in individual and social experience and a clear understanding of the notion that individual fulfillment depends on genuine community support and flourishing. Thus, she lived and worked amongst the crime, civic corruption, prostitution, sweatshops, and other ills of the community. When Addams wrote or spoke about single women laborers, child laborers, prostitutes, or first and second generation immigrants, she employed first-hand knowledge gained from her own social interactions. Addams leveraged her Hull House experiences to give voice to standpoints marginalized in society. Simultaneously, she worked to give the oppressed their own voice through college extension courses, English language courses, and social clubs that fostered political and social debate.

In an 1896 article in *The American Journal of Sociology*, "A Belated Industry," Addams addresses the plight of women in domestic labor. These were the most powerless of laborers: predominantly women, many of them immigrants with limited English language skills and in a job that afforded little legal protection or organizing possibilities. She draws on her own experience with the Woman's Labor group at Hull House. She addresses the powerlessness of domestic work particularly as it entails isolation and a highly inequitable power relationship: "The household employé has no regular opportunity for meeting other workers of her trade, and of attaining with them the dignity of corporate body" (Addams, 1896, p. 538). Addams

identifies the gendered dimension of this oppressive work: “men would … resent the situation and consider it quite impossible if it implied the giving up of their family and social ties, and living under the roof of the household requiring their services” (p. 540). Addams extrapolates her experience of these workers to imaginatively inhabit a standpoint and give them voice. “An attempt is made to present this industry [domestic labor] from the point of view of those women who are working in households for wages” (p. 536). Addams repeatedly gave recognition to the experiences of oppressed peoples that she came to know in an effort to have their concerns acknowledged in the social democracy she was trying to foster.

She believed recognizing various standpoints was important in promoting social progress through sympathetic understanding. Accordingly, if a voice is given to individuals inhabiting marginalized positions in society, it fosters the possibility of better understanding between people as well as actions that can lead to improving their lot. Addams engaged in the tricky balance of honoring standpoints while simultaneously seeking connections and continuities to build upon. This is exemplified in Addams’ books, one on young people, “Youth and the City Streets,” and one on elderly women, “The Long Road of Woman’s Memory.” The latter work is a treatise on memory, which is based on the memories of first generation immigrant women. Rather than grounding her theory upon the experiences of famous women theorists or writers—and Addams knew most of the prominent women of her day—Addams based her analysis on the women who were her neighbors at Hull House. Addams not only grounded her philosophical work in experience, but in the experiences of those on the margins of society. Addams puts experience before theory. She did not begin by positing a theory about these women. Instead, she retold a number of stories she had heard from them and then drew out conclusions about the function of memory. For Addams, theory follows experience. Addams was in the minority among her peers in philosophy or feminism to believe that working class immigrant women not only should be given a voice but also had something important to contribute to the community of ideas.

Addams fully exemplifies the notion of philosophy as a critical reflection on living and on the problems of life. She consistently took and eloquently supported inclusive positions that sought the benefit of society. As a pragmatist she typically advocated for social progress, but she radicalized the extent of that social progress. Rather than defining progress by the achievements of the best and the brightest, Addams advocates the betterment of all in what she calls “lateral progress.” For Addams, lateral progress meant that social advancement could not be declared through the breakthroughs or peak performances of a few, but could only authentically be found in social gains held in common. Addams’ radical pragmatism ultimately had a feminist dimension as she continually gave voice to women’s experience, addressed women’s issues, and saw a vibrant social democracy as only possible if there was full participation by both men and women.

Conclusion

American pragmatists clearly saw practicing philosophy in terms of experiencing life. They were especially concerned about the development of individuality, of enriched human persons, and of a democratic community in which the ideal of equality of worth and diversity of experiences and ideas was central. Democracy for them was a way of life that exemplified

itself in living experience, in the experiences of many individuals and communities. Theory and practice inter-related; they appreciated the dynamic between theory and action, they not only theorized about ideas, but they lived them. This was especially true of Jane Addams who saw ethical philosophy as guided by the notion of sympathetic knowledge, a type of knowing eminently experiential. For her this was “the only way of approach to any human problem.”

In my judgment our world would be a better place for all if everyone saw philosophy as experiencing life and in concert with others solving its many problems.

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