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BACK TO THE CONCRETE: A PRAGMATIST RESPONSE TO OPPRESSION[1]

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Abstract: Pragmatism is a vital tool for society today, both because it addresses our more pressing social problems and because it advances beyond other available solutions. As a good deal of recent European philosophy has shown, as in the cases of Adorno and Agamben, for example, our social life is mediated by abstractions that oppress us. With its focus on the immediacy of experience, pragmatism enables us to overcome these abstractions and return to concrete life in a liberating way. I argue against Agamben, however, that the return to concrete life amounts to anarchism. I show that it leads to liberalism instead, along the lines laid out by Dewey in *Liberalism and Social Action*, in which freed individuality is compatible with the exercise of social intelligence and planning.

Keywords: Pragmatism; continental philosophy; oppression; political philosophy.

Introduction

What we learned from World War I, according to Giorgio Agamben, is that in the modern world the individual is insignificant. Those who experienced the war were devastated by it. Quoting Benjamin, Agamben (1993, 13) writes:

> A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.

The desolation of the war undermined the human being, rendering him not a rich center of personal experience, but rather a mere thing, to be destroyed at a moment's notice, without mercy.

Agamben makes it clear, moreover, that our experience today is also obliterated, although in more subtle ways than war. Agamben (*ibid.*, 13-14) sees clearly that

> humdrum daily life in any city will suffice. For modern man's average day contains virtually nothing that can still be translated into experience. Neither reading the newspaper, with its

[1] The phrase, "Back to the concrete," is inspired by Wittgenstein's famous call for us to go, "Back to the rough ground!" although use the phrase in a different sense than Wittgenstein used his (Wittgenstein 1958, 46e).

> abundance of news that is irretrievably remote from his life, nor sitting for minutes on end at the wheel of his car in a traffic jam. Neither the journey through the nether world of the subway, nor the demonstration that suddenly blocks the street. Neither the cloud of tear gas slowly dispersing between the buildings of the city centre, nor the rapid blasts of gunfire from who knows where; nor queuing up at a business counter, nor visiting the Land of Cockayne at the supermarket, nor those eternal moments of dumb promiscuity among strangers in lifts and buses. Modern man makes his way home in the evening in a wearied jumble of events, but however entertaining or tedious, unusual or commonplace, harrowing or pleasurable they are, none of them will have become experience.

Everyone's experience is unique, or at least it should be. But modern life has made us into ordinary people; it has trapped us in its routines. The problem is that we can no longer translate what happens to us, with its untiring monotony, into experiences that really mean something to us as individuals. And Agamben emphasizes that "It is this non-translatability [of events] into experience that now makes everyday existence intolerable—as never before" (*ibid.*, 14).

A major new form of oppression would therefore seem to be at work in the modern world. It is a type of oppression known as "abstractionism" (Rochberg-Halton 1986, 3). The idea is that abstractions have become so intimately a part of our lives that they extinguish our ability to have truly personalized experiences. As J. Bernstein puts it, following Adorno, "anonymous rule systems…have invaded…private existence" (Bernstein 2001, 45). "The concepts of order," says Adorno, which modern society "hammers into human beings are always those of the status quo." Their message is: "you shall conform" (Adorno 2002, 104). You shall become a generality; you shall stand ready to become whatever abstract form is required of you, for instance becoming a producer or a consumer, but nothing more.

My argument in this essay is that classical American pragmatism, with its emphasis on immediate concrete experience, can serve as an important corrective to abstractionism in the modern world. What pragmatism offers is a way back to our concrete selves, a way back, moreover, that avoids some of the errors offered by other thinkers who address this same problem, like Agamben himself. The pragmatists show us that the way out of our oppression lies in a special form of social engagement, not the knee-jerk resistance to all social forms; that to be liberated from abstractions means to be with one another in ways that promote individuality, not to deny the legitimacy of social forms. More specifically, pragmatism offers a new and vital form of liberalism—of social intelligence in action—that promises to be more effective in its liberatory affects than Agamben's anarchist approach.

In the first part of the essay, I explain how a return to concrete life would help us to overcome our oppression by abstractions. In the second part, I contrast the pragmatist characterization of this return to concrete life with Agamben's characterization of it. I conclude the essay by calling on us to try the pragmatist approach in action as the most effective way to test its truth, and as the best resource we have for combating our oppression.

I

When we generalize and bring different experiences under the same rubric, or concept, we seem to exhaust the experiences themselves, and to account for everything that is significant about them. The logic of the concept is the logic of identity, of reducing everything to the same, as Adorno and Horkheimer remind us (Adorno 1995, 10). It is this fact about the concept that lends it its oppressive power. The generalizing concept, the abstraction, presumes to replace the experience in all its actual richness and diversity.

Agamben agrees about the nature of the concept; and in the case of the abstractionism of the modern world, it is, for him, precisely this presumption of the concept to replace actual experience that constitutes our oppression. More specifically, our oppression is due to a dual form of conceptualization: the dominance of scientific thinking, which has taught us to see our own given qualitative experiences as unreal (Agamben 1993, 17ff.) and the dominance of the Western conception of time, which has reduced unique happenings in the world to pre-programmed, mechanically identical moments, one after than other, rather than allowing the existence of "the time of history…in which man, by his initiative, grasps favourable opportunity and chooses his own freedom in the moment" (*ibid.*, 91-105; 104). We have lost "the memory that man's original home is pleasure;" we have lost our own time, and our own qualities, which would be free to occur on their own account and develop in their own unique patterns (*ibid.*, 105).

But, now, if the problem is that "the concept" claims too much for itself, then the solution, as Adorno reminds us, is to access some space before or beyond concepts. We must show that "objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder," that "the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived" (Adorno 1999, 5). The solution to the problem of abstractionism, and thus to oppression, is "to counter Wittgenstein by uttering the unutterable" (*ibid.*, 9-10). We must use words and concepts to point beyond words and concepts; we must try to move past the abstractions foisted upon us today (*ibid.*, 15). Only in this way can we arrive at a better mode of living for human beings—one that allows them, at last, to be what they are, and to have their own individual experiences.

William James says the same thing. According to James, we must learn "to think in non-conceptualized terms" (James 1996, 290). We should dispense with what he calls "intellectualism," whose "edge is broken," since "it can only approximate to reality," and we should turn instead "towards the sensational life for the fuller knowledge of reality" (*ibid.*, 289; 277). The sensational life, behind all abstractions, presents reality in its true shape—a flowing, unconstrained reality, an "excess" (*ibid.*, 286), that can never be fully reduced to order.

James recognizes, of course, that one cannot use words in any customary sense to access this reality:

> I am tiring myself and you, I know, by vainly seeking to describe by concepts and words what I say at the same time exceeds either conceptualization or verbalization. As long as one continues *talking*, intellectualism remains in undisturbed possession of the field. The return to life can't come about by talking. It is an *act*; to make you return to life, I must set an example for your imitation, I must deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk…Or I must *point*, point to the mere *that* of life, and you by inner sympathy must fill out the *what* for yourselves (*ibid.*, 290).

Interestingly, James refers to the operation he is trying to perform here as "the return to life," a phrase that possesses a double meaning in that he is advocating, literally, a return to concrete, lived reality, our life as it exists behind abstract versions of it, and he is at the same time claiming that such a return to the concrete is a way of living once again, of becoming new and different and more alive than one previously was, a way being revived or resurrected. James makes it clear, in any case, that the procedure of returning to life cannot occur through concepts or words. I cannot directly communicate to another person what immediate experience is; I can only refer the other person to the experience itself. I must compel them to action for themselves, so that they may possess immediate experience and its liberating effects in their own lives. "I must leave life to teach the lesson" (*ibid.*, 292). For a pragmatist like James or Dewey, to get

someone to return to life, we need to invent mechanisms for recalling us to our lost selves—above all, through the art of social critique, which has, in fact, been developed by pragmatists to a great extent.[2]

That James intends his referral to concrete experience to have a political importance and impact can be seen when one considers the following passage. Having just explained that "nothing…dominates over everything" and that "something always escapes" our conceptual determinations, James goes on to say:

> The pluralistic world is thus more like a federal republic than like an empire or a kingdom. However much may be collected, however much may report itself as present at any effective centre of consciousness or action, something else is self-governed and absent and unreduced to unity (*ibid.*, 321-322).

Pure experience is a site of resistance. It is "self-governed" and will not be reduced "to unity." It indicates, indeed, something that is "absent" from the counting up of the totality of things, from the conceptual attempt to think it and place it. And it is this inherent resistance in the concrete experience that not only makes experience the way out of abstractionism, but also makes the way out a path to "a federal republic," or a more equitable society and politics.

II

As with Adorno, then, classical American pragmatists like James also help us to see that abstractions cannot be everything. Their shared message is: "Something always escapes" (*ibid.*, 321). However, although thinkers in both the Continental and American traditions seek to free us from the oppression of abstractions by returning us to concrete experience, nonetheless they differ significantly as to the nature of this return; and the pragmatists may have the better account.

For Continental philosophers like Adorno, liberation from abstractionism means something like a return to childhood. As Bernstein puts it, given the dominance of abstractions, we may have recourse only to "fugitive ethical experiences," that is, stolen moments here and there of release from domination, which one can see at work, for instance, in the case of children.

> It is likely that for most of us it is in watching and interacting with children that the promise of another nature is most vocal…Children's unformedness, their vulnerability…the intensity of their conceptually unsaturated experience of the world, all can always feel like the opportunity of a new beginning, one which they bring to their interactions with adults, so almost providing a new beginning for them too (Bernstein 2001, 455).

Not yet completely dominated by society's abstractions, children, and a child-like experience, may be our only recourse. And this, precisely, is what Adorno's mode of liberation strives for: "an emphatic childlike experience," which is "a reminder of 'the child,' injurable, vulnerable life present in each" (Bernstein 2001, 456).

In a similar fashion, Agamben calls for a return to "infancy," or as he also puts it "in-fancy" (Agamben 1993, 4). We must return to play, an event in which "man frees himself from sacred time and 'forgets' it in human time" (*ibid.*, 70). What Agamben means here can be grasped if

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[2] See Stuhr (1997) and Stuhr (2003) for an account of pragmatist methods of social criticism.

we make recourse to another concept of his, what he calls "whatever singularities" (Agamben 2007, 1-5). This term is meant to indicate that which shows up prior to the use of abstractions such as matter, time, work, rationality, and so on, with the word "whatever" serving to suggest that what shows up cannot be understood as part of a program or order that defines and exhausts it. In Agamben's words, "there is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact" (*ibid.*, 43). What one is, he says, is nothing else but "one's own existence as possibility or potentiality" (*ibid.*, 43). One is whatever one singularly is—one's own possibilities, not someone else's, never a predetermined thing.

Now Agamben goes so far as to say that "the only ethical experience…is the experience of being (one's own) potentiality," and that "the only evil consists in the decision…to regard potentiality itself, which is the most proper mode of human existence, as a fault that must always be repressed" (*ibid.*, 44). To be ethical, to do right, is only to be oneself, in the sense of embracing one's own possible ways of becoming, those that are accessible only to oneself and not some generic version of oneself or some other. This is the only thing that it means to be ethical, the only *proper* way of life.

Politically, as we can see, this position leads to a form of anarchism, for in anarchism there can be no program for one's possibilities, and the task here is, precisely, to be one's *own* possibilities, that is, to be oneself without any other program. Agamben makes this political consequence of anarchism clear when he says, "whatever singularity, which wants to appropriate belonging itself…and thus rejects all identity and every condition of belonging, is the principle enemy of the State" (*ibid.*, 87). Notice that here, in the realm of freed individuality, one "rejects…every condition of belonging," every social category whatsoever that might spell out one's possibilities for one. Here there can be no order—no acceptance of any condition of belonging to any group whatsoever—but only the prerogatives of one's own freely developing possibilities. One might associate with others, of course, but such associations must be voluntary, something the originally free and spontaneous individual chooses for herself, and can withdraw from as she pleases.

Contrary to Agamben, however, concrete experience does involve conditions of belonging. Consider that in our immediate experience we already encounter others. In the faces and gestures of those around us, we are continually being shaped by other people. Others respond to us in various ways, including of course with words and concepts also, and they instill certain habits in us. Now the habits we adopt become the self that we are, as Dewey notes quite succinctly when he says, "character is the interpenetration of habits" (Dewey 1988, 29). We adopt social habits from the beginning; and these, like all of our habits, define us. The social, therefore, is already there in our minds; our minds *are* social. We belong to the social reality around us whether we like it or not. But this does not mean that our social minds are always harmfully shaped. Abstractionism is an extreme form of social definition that results when our socially adopted habits become fixed and overly-determinate, not simply when there are some socially determined habits at all; in normal cases, society shapes an individual, who in turn shapes society. There is room for individual response *within* the social.

Pragmatists like Dewey can account for why thinkers like Agamben assume an individualist conception of concrete life, and they can show why this assumption is false. In *Liberalism and Social Action*, Dewey explains that earlier liberalism arose from the idea "that governments are instituted to protect the rights that belong to individuals prior to political organization of social relations" (Dewey 1991, 6-7), and that such a view "bequeathed to later social thought a rigid doctrine of natural rights inherent in individuals independent of social organization" (*ibid.*, 7). He then talks about how this view evolved, with Bentham, into the idea that social organizations

actually existed to assist the individual and to help them to flourish, precisely, *as* an individual. But what persisted throughout this evolution, in many minds, was the old, comforting metaphysics of fixed forms and natures applied to the individual—that the individual was something prior to social organization.

Dewey explains the mistake in this way: "social arrangements and institutions were thought of as things that operate from without, not entering in any significant way into the internal make-up and growth of individuals" (*ibid.*, 30). This, in turn, implied the view that "individuals…have a full-blown psychological and moral nature, having its own set of laws, independently of their association with one another" (*ibid.*, 31). But such a view is mistaken.

> That the human infant is modified in mind and character by his connections with others in family life and that the modification continues throughout life as his connections with others broaden, is as true as they hydrogen is modified when it combines with oxygen. If we generalize the meaning of this fact, it is evident that while there are native organic or biological structures that remain fairly constant, the actual "laws" of human nature are laws of individuals in association, not of beings in a mythical condition apart from association (*ibid.*, 31).

Thinkers like Agamben cling to the myth of the separate individual with her own characters and possibilities, her own "laws." But the idea is fanciful, one with a long history in the liberal tradition that needs correcting through an understanding of its historical emergence. That the myth persists seems to lend it some credibility. Its persistence, however, is due to the fact that it is advantageous to a certain class: it helps bolster the status quo, justifying their rapacious self-interest, to believe in a vision of the separate individual. But the vision is not for that reason true. Indeed, it is for this reason pernicious in addition to being false, and therefore needs to be rejected in favor of the possibility of a social conception of the self, in which the self gains its peculiarly individual definition through social conditions that promote this individuality.

Freed, concrete life, in other words, must be a social life, one without over-determination in its relations, and therefore individual and free, but social nonetheless. The mode of action appropriate to such a life would be social intelligence, an open engagement of inquiry with others into the needs and problems of shared experience. We would work together to shape our social life, and in particular to secure social conditions that promote everyone's individuality, for example by creating equal economic conditions for all or by promoting the development of everyone's powers of creativity. There are conditions of belonging here, since one is always associated with others and would have ties and obligations to them, but the conditions of belonging are not oppressively coercive, since the society would be structured to give one some control in how the society is shaped and to promote one's individuality within it. For this reason, pragmatic liberalism, in which each is committed to the good of each, and employs social intelligence to achieve it, is the proper form of freed life, not the possession of fugitive, individual experiences, however liberating these may feel. For the existence of pure, individualized experiences is a dangerous myth, actually encouraging the wealthy to prey upon us, encouraging their defunct model of the separate self, while liberalism, on the other hand, offers not a myth but a realistic social model of our interactions with others, one in which we cannot help but be engaged with others in *some* ways and the most crucial question is how to achieve the most liberating forms of social interaction that we can.

Of course, Continental philosophers like Agamben might worry that pragmatic liberalism would return us to our slavery, for the category of the social could again eclipse our individuality. Thus, for them, what is needed is constant critique, the refusal of any attempted constructive social response for fear that our lives would again be co-opted by malignant

powers. But it seems to me that this worry is itself the product of an abstraction. Experience brings what it brings; we cannot program the future. The only way that we can know for sure that pragmatic liberalism, in which social forces produce genuine individuals, would actually eclipse individuality, is for this to happen; but we have not had this kind of liberalism yet, so we cannot say that this is what it will bring. There may be a tyranny at work in the Continental position that is too much like abstractionism itself, insofar as it asks us to forgo the pragmatist hope for a genuine liberal society; for like abstractionism, this position presumes to dictate to us what shape experience must have. The pragmatist hope, I would say, is closer to immediate experience itself, which cannot be determined in advance, which unfolds how it unfolds, and which therefore always leaves room for hope. If we add to this the fact that experience seems to be social; that pure individualism, as the essence of all experience, looks more and more like a myth, then it is fair to say that liberated experience will unfold not along separate, isolated paths but as connected field of interactions in which the important point becomes how to shape these interactions to create a better world. But then again, Continental philosophers might say that there is a tyranny in this pragmatist position also, which insists that concrete experience *must* always be social, and that therefore disallows that experience at its roots could be individual. There is a kind of oppression over the shape and fate of experience here too it seems—a tyranny, again, not unlike abstractionism itself.

To be sure, we are confronted here with one of the most difficult questions of philosophy: what is there before words? Insofar as we try to speak about what is there, it seems that anyone could be as correct as any another, and anyone as incorrect. The words will always betray us. However, if James is right and life must teach the lesson (James 1996, 292), then we must go and see if it teaches us the social lesson or not. If life affords the social response to the problem of abstractionism, and it looks as if the world piece by piece might be improved by assuming the liberal position, then it is reasonable to stay committed to a shared search for the good life. Nothing about our individuality would be compromised in that case, since experience would for all practical purposes be social; indeed, in that case, it would only be in the social context that we could be individuals at all, with others treating us as such and we acquiring our individuality in this way.

What does experience reveal, then, at its deepest roots: individual or social life (or something else besides)? I have tried to give reasons for seeing the pragmatist response of social life as the better response. But on this question above all questions arguments and words can only get us so far. "The return to life can't come about by talking. It is an *act;* to make you return to life, I must…deafen you to talk, or to the importance of talk" (*ibid.*, 290). Ultimately, in this matter of what is there before words, and of what it will allow in terms of our political life, we must act to find out—act on our conviction of which position will bring about a better world—and hope for the best. In the end, life itself "must… teach the lesson" (*ibid.*, 292).

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