

Jane Addams: Developing a Social Self  
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In Addams's best known book, *Twenty Years at Hull House*, published in 1910, she reveals her on-going struggles towards a unity of thought and action that characterize her life and ambitions. She also constructs an original and compelling narrative demonstrating the pragmatist thesis of the co-constitution of self and others in active engagements in the world. In weaving together her own history and that of the Hull-House settlement, Addams both predates and illuminates William James's explanation of pure experience or the instant field of the present as consisting of both a mind or personal consciousness and an objective reality. According to James, a mind "is the name for a series of experiences run together by certain definite transitions, and an objective reality is a series of similar experiences knit by different transitions. . . [T]he same experience can figure twice, once in a mental and once in a physical context."<sup>1</sup>

Addams's reminiscences reflect both her state of mind and the history of Hull House, depending on which transitions are followed up or emphasized. Addams selects the incidents she creatively recounts to reveal the interests and associations through which she became who she was, the values, attitudes, and methods she was developing and advocating, and how these were shaped by and in turn shaped the Hull-House settlement. I will examine the transactive nature of these issues in the time allotted by limiting my analysis to some of the Prefaces and Introductions to her books. This is possible because Addams uses her introductory material to focus the attention of readers on the issues she thinks are most important and to develop the perspective they will need if they are to be receptive to the rest of the book. In seeking to articulate a convincing point of view, instead of merely summarizing content, Addams demonstrates her profound sense of the ubiquity of perspectivism,

*Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895)

*Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895) was written by the residents of the inner city settlement house in Chicago fifteen years before *Twenty Years at Hull-House* (1910). *Maps and Papers* is many things. It is a ground-breaking work in urban sociology, a record of settlement activities, a snapshot of urban problems as seen through reform efforts, and an invitation to further engagement. It is "a major work of the progressive movement," and according to Kathryn Kish Sklar, "the single most important work by American women social scientists before 1900."<sup>2</sup> What was it to Jane Addams?

As co-founder, head resident, and chief spokesperson for the Hull-House settlement, she was both its public face and the dynamic personality that bound the residents together. Nevertheless, her brief preface expresses reservations about this important publication by its residents being perceived as illustrative of the settlement way of life. Addams seems most concerned that—despite its authorship which says otherwise—it not be taken as illustrative of settlement work. She especially does not want the settlement approach to be seen as having “been chiefly directed . . . towards sociological investigation.”

What she thinks obviously distinguishes the settlement approach from that of *Maps and Papers* is that, first of all, settlements require settlers, that is, people residing in place. This is important because the value of their observations derives not only from their immediacy, but from long acquaintance with the neighborhood. Secondly, unlike the book, which consists of investigative sociological reports, settlement houses engage in the constructive work of influencing people in poor, working class neighborhoods “toward better local government and a wider social and intellectual life.” Their aim is not to report on subjects or to categorize them, but to be a leavening influence. Facts should not be detached from both the way they came to the attention of the residents nor from the lives they supposedly captured. Doing so left out the subjectivity of both the residents, who were appalled, baffled, and exhilarated, by turns, at the conditions around them and of the people whose lives they were learning about and attempting to ameliorate.

Addams emphasizes that the settlement method of gaining knowledge, its vision of how to ground insights in facts and develop strategies for social reform, was to live among those about whom the residents wanted to learn more and to treat them as neighbors, not as subjects of investigation. The requirement that the relationship be long-standing was to give both residents and their neighbors sufficient time to really get to know, appreciate, and respect each other as the basis for a co-operative approach to bettering often dire local conditions. It is only by living and working together over time that mutual trust can build up. Only gradually and with concerted effort can cultural and social barriers be dismantled, thus enabling genuine understanding and mutual, constructive action. As she had already explained in “The Objective Value of a Social Settlement,” sharing the life of the poor gave residents “an opportunity of seeing institutions from the recipients’ standpoint.”<sup>3</sup>

Far from undermining a strict scientific methodology, she argues that the very cogency and reliability of the facts reported depended on this method of gathering information. Along with other pragmatists, she was defining

scientific methodology as engaged, perspectival, and value-laden at the very time it was portraying itself as detached, indifferent to context, and value-free.<sup>4</sup>

Like the other contributors, her chapter on “The Settlement as a Factor in the Labor Movement” does explain the connection of the social settlement with gathering facts, developing social theory, and working for social reform. But, unlike them, she emphasizes the ethics being worked out by the residents of Hull House. For Addams, the settlement is a factor in the labor movement, as it is in the other reform efforts with which it becomes involved, because of its leading role in the development of a social ethics.

Addams represents the social ethics of Hull-House as something in continuous development as the residents sought to meet the needs of their neighborhood. She develops a pragmatist theory of ethics in which moral understanding is stretched beyond our initial beliefs when it is carried into action which either confirms or challenges them. This was not simply a matter of applying what was already known, nor of coming to a deeper realization of what such philosophical propositions actually mean. Ethical meanings change through the very process of carrying them out. Shortcomings can become apparent, unexpected meanings can emerge, limitations of expectations revealed, and the scope of application widened.

Addams affirmed that “this experience ought to have a certain value and ultimately find expression in institutional management.”<sup>5</sup> She also gives an example of how she expected this approach to have a wider application. She thinks it possible that even men as far apart as the capitalist and the working-man could “have their ‘class theories’ insensibly modified by the kindly attrition of a personal acquaintance.”<sup>6</sup> Later, in *Democracy and Social Ethics* and *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Addams will explain in more detail how living together side by side with one’s neighbors furthers understanding and reform through removing the barriers to understanding caused by one’s own class, ethnic, and religious biases.

*Democracy and Social Ethics* (1902)

Addams argues for a radical moral agenda in her Introduction to *Democracy and Social Ethics*. She dismisses from consideration the personal and social morality that has already become widely accepted and therefore normative. Although the acceptance of personal responsibility for one’s actions lifted earlier generations out of a blind acceptance of fate and the mores of their tribe or group, it is no longer enough in the state of affairs of Addams’s day that she argues required a deeper social morality. The traditional moral obligations of personal and family relations that were accepted on principle, if not always in action, were doing little to assuage the suffering

caused by industrial working conditions that were precarious, poorly paid, and simultaneously monotonous and dangerous. Today, the self-righteous insistence that each person alone is responsible for her or his own economic and social condition is likewise preventing the development and acceptance of a code of social ethics sufficiently robust to address today's widespread un- and under-employment, loss of decent, affordable housing, education, and healthcare, growing racist and sexist attitudes, and increasing urban violence.

The dogmatic imposition of one supposedly right way of approaching social problems increases opposition and conflict and blocks effective action. Addams argues for replacing this rhetoric of righteousness with a recognition of our perplexity about how to address contemporary dysfunctional economic and social conditions. Such a recognition that the old divisions are exacerbating the problems we face can be a strong motivation for developing "a creed and practice of social morality," one that requires being brought into contact with the moral experiences of others as the only sure way of developing a more inclusive, just, and widely shared morality.<sup>7</sup> Such actual interactions can be filled out through literature and other media, since the basic problem is a lack of imagination about the many ways experience can be organized and valued. The balkanization of religious, ethnic, economic, 'racial,' national, and gendered groups prevents the development of "a common fund of memories and affections" from which "obligation naturally develops."

It is not accidental that emphasis on individualistic morality accompanies growing economic disparity between rich and poor. According to Matthew W. Hutson, "Studies since the '70s have also found that Americans who score high on a Protestant Ethic Scale (emphasizing self-reliance and self-discipline) or similar metric show marked prejudice against racial minorities and the poor; hostility toward social welfare efforts; and, among obese women, self-denigration."<sup>8</sup> Addams urged instead the development of a social morality in which the foundation and guarantee of democracy would be found in "diversified human experience and resultant sympathy." Such sharing of diverse experiences provides a necessary corrective to the tunnel vision of each person's limited perspective.

Finally, Addams makes the daring claim that we have a moral obligation to choose our experiences wisely, since, on her pragmatist theory of knowledge, experiences determine our understanding of life. So what we experience and the conclusions we draw from it become through continued reflection and experimentation the basis of our moral life. But the limitations of personal experience have historically led to the privileging of lives we are more familiar with and contempt for others who seem alien. That is why social morality requires the expansion of our experiences beyond our comfort zones to include those, such as illegal aliens, who are so often despised today

just as the waves of working class immigrants were in Addams's time. According to Addams's analysis, they were being denied recognition of their common humanity precisely because their lives rarely intersected with those of their detractors. And when they did intersect, the interaction was framed through power relations, perceived loss of status and victimization, and religious and ethnic stereotypes that remained unchallenged. Predictably, the lack of mutual and mutualizing experiences and recognition leads to a narrowing of morality, which does not rise above the level of group mores. Lacking any shared identity of class, ethnicity, political opinions, nationality, or creed, one's own personal and social groups are believed to express a higher morality which the alien 'other' lacks.

Addams's radical conclusion is that "the identification with the common lot which is the essential idea of Democracy becomes the source and expression of social ethics" (p. 9). Self-chosen isolation in one's clan, religion, political identity, etc., will lead to an 'us' and 'them' mentality that undermines the civic virtues required for a just and thriving democracy. Her "newer conception of Democracy" is the antithesis of liberal or capitalistic theories of democracy in that it requires a recognition of the ties that bind us to one another and the belief that they create obligations of mutual respect and support.<sup>9</sup>

*The Long Road of Woman's Memory* (1916)

The keynote of Addams's Introduction is the power of memory to transmute experience, a transformation that is not the antithesis of experience, but that very experience brought to fruition. John Dewey will also later explain that "Experience is not a veil that shuts man off from nature; it is a means of penetrating continually further into the heart of nature."<sup>10</sup> Addams develops her insights through careful attentiveness to the lives and interpretations of many elderly, working class women she has listened to over the years. She says she took from them something both aggressive and modern; namely, that they remembered selectively in order to undermine the traditions and conventions that were oppressing them.

They were not, as most people uncritically assumed, merely passive victims and purveyors of convention. Addams does subtly indicate that her own interpretations of their experiences were theorized sociologically and so she does not claim that her subjects would interpret them the same way that she does. She confirms that they do not need her to determine their own destiny. Rather, the debt goes the other way. For Addams, the chief obstacle to a more effective criticism of current values is the assumption that one has a privileged perspective and absolute values. This all too common predisposition should be undermined by recognizing the mutual interdependence of all persons and identifying my good with values ever more widely shared.

Social cooperation and mutual participation are quintessential values for Addams and they are obtained through social intercourse and communication. One way that Addams emphasizes that she was learning from the women, and not the other way around, was by saying that what she was hearing amazed her. But she also expresses the transactive, co-constitutive nature of the knowledge acquired by pointing out that we are not always conscious of the ways we refashion memories and deal with new experiences. These variations from the accepted type and groping towards new standards may very well end by establishing new norms. As Addams explains, memory has two functions, first, it plays an “important role in interpreting and appeasing life for the individual” and secondly, it acts “as a selective agency in social reorganization.”<sup>11</sup>

The heroic movement of older women toward overcoming monstrous social injustices may need no more to inspire others than the simple act of recording their rebellious memories, which Addams is doing. What she calls ‘mindedness’ as a basis for social changes can be acquired by others suffering similar social injustices as they learn how some individuals resisted their oppressive treatment. Addams hopes to at least provide such mediation in *The Long Road of Woman’s Memories*, but she also intends to do more. As a reformer, she also hopes that her formulation of the efficacy of specific powers of memory will accelerate the process.

*Peace and Bread in Time of War* (1922)

The first sentence of Addams’s Preface summarizes the book as a brief history of women in the U.S. organizing for peace during “the European War” and the origins of the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom. But as Katherine Joslin points out in her Introduction to the University of Illinois 2002 edition, it was much more personal than that. We learn in the Preface that for Addams, any such history is meaningless unless it conveys the motives and convictions of those involved. This is history as pragmatists understand it; namely, not a bare recital of supposedly objective facts, but as a reflective apprehension of experiences which are inextricably both what is experienced and how it is experienced, as Dewey later puts it, and as William James had argued in 1907 when he said that “[h]uman motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions lurk in all our answers, all our formulas have a human twist.”<sup>12</sup> Up until this point, Addams had understood her mission and that of the settlement as mediating interpreters who forged links across the various social barriers that separated groups and individuals and caused misunderstanding, prejudice, and violence. But she unexpectedly questions her ability to do so.

She no longer feels confident that she understands others well enough to explain their motives across boundaries and therefore declares that she will limit her analyses to her own motives. But this calls into question the

pluralistic method she has so far been arguing for in her writings. The reduction of multiple sensibilities to only one would short-circuit the process whereby the limitations inherent in any single perspective could be compensated for by responding to those of many others. It would block the possibility of developing a more comprehensive, social ethic. But, despite her reservations, Addams cannot abandon her fundamental goal of bringing people together across boundaries and so adopts a second-best position; namely, “that the autobiographical portrayal of [her own motives] may prove to be fairly typical and interpretive of many like-minded people.”

What has brought about this dramatic shift? It was her silencing and the abuse heaped on her and others like her who continued to espouse pacifism in a country that no longer brooked dissent once it had entered the war.<sup>13</sup> It does not indicate a methodological shift from mediating among multiple perspectives to expressing only a singular point of view which might be expressive of those of others. In fact, as the book itself will show that--despite her protestations in the Preface--Addams does continue as the acknowledged spokesperson and interpreter for her co-workers.

The Preface does give us a rare insight into Addams’s inner life at a particularly discouraging time. She uncharacteristically lets her bitterness show through, as when she says that even being martyred for one’s ideas would allow her to retain more dignity than she has been accorded. She speaks of her “odious” position, of inimical misrepresentation, and of having to defend “a mere travesty” of her convictions. There are no doubt philosophers today who criticize her for not being sufficiently detached and objective, just as there were critics in her own day who disparaged her for being too subjective because she used her own life and responses as rhetorical devices to convey objective claims and to advocate for specific social changes. But the depths of discouragement the Preface displays, which haunt the book as well, refute these contentions. They throw in sharp relief how artfully she transmutes her experiences and perspectives in her other writings. Addams not only holds subjectivity and objectivity in a dynamic balance, but she demonstrates their interplay and mutual dependency.

This is not to say that Addams’s deeply alienating experience of being isolated from her fellow workers during the war did not cause her to rethink some of her hard-won beliefs. Given the profoundly social nature of her pragmatist ethics, the forced restriction to her own narrow perspective, untempered by the give and take of discussion and concerted action, must have seemed to her an evil as well as a trial. As Addams says towards the end of the book, “[i]ncident to the irritating and highly individualistic position which the pacifist was forced to assume throughout the war, was the difficulty of combining with his old friends and colleagues in efforts for world

organization which seemed so reasonable” (p. 111). She begins reflecting on how a pragmatist philosopher can continue when deprived of her experimental methodology.

She also works more carefully through the requirements for the legitimacy of interpretive analysis.<sup>14</sup> Addams was always acutely aware of the distortions of reality that came from the bias of privilege in the unequal relationships of ethnicity, class, and gender, but at the end of the Preface, she intimates how troubling it is for her to realize that the views ‘from below’ of the downtrodden, as well as those of the great numbers of people who before the war were her audiences, can also generate barriers to understanding. Addams says that because of war propaganda and misrepresentation of the pacifists’ positions, she is afraid that “even the kindest of readers must perforce still look at our group through the distorting spectacles he was made to wear during the long period of war propaganda.”

*The Second Twenty Years at Hull-House. Sept. 1909-Sept. 1929. (1930)*

Having established the impact of the intervening years on her life, values, and attitudes comparable to what she had done in the first *Twenty Years*, Addams in this Introduction extends her reach to include the whole world. Whether through the war years or their aftermath, Addams has grown to perceive modernity as the development of “an almost mystic consciousness of the continuity and interdependence of mankind” (p. 7).

The principle of the interdependency of persons on one another has been central to all of Addams writings. What is new is both that more people seem to have become conscious of this fundamental value and that it stretches far beyond the more natural affinities of family, neighborhood and nation to include “all the others who happen to be living upon the planet at the same moment.” She reaffirms her continuing interest in discovering and utilizing what motivates people to be moral agents by desiring that this new planetary or “cosmic consciousness,” should be recognized as one of the basic incentives to human conduct. The book she is introducing will show how it has motivated Hull House in the former two decades and it is designed “to define it as well as to illustrate it” and thereby foster it ever more widely.

#### Conclusion

What is Addams doing in these Introductions and Prefaces? She is explaining the perspective readers will need if they are to be open to the rest of the book. She does not summarize the many positions she will be arguing for, but instead tries to articulate a convincing point of view. They demonstrate her profound sense of the ubiquity of



perspectivism and of the necessity of developing a social morality that will interactively take account of this diversity of points of view as a means of reaching a wider, more just, and more inclusive social order.

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<sup>1</sup> William James, *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 39.

<sup>2</sup> Rima Lunin Schultz, Introduction, *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Addams, "The Objective Value of a Social Settlement," in *Philanthropy and Social Progress*, ed. Henry C. Adams (New York: Crowell, 1893), 27-56. Quote from Jean Bethke Elshtain, ed., *The Jane Addams Reader* (Basic Books, 2002), 39.

<sup>4</sup> Louise W. Knight explains the distinction between settlements connected with universities or colleges, "which promoted the 'settlement as laboratory' idea," and Addams's social settlement. *Jane Addams: Spirit in Action* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 7. Although in one sense, Addams's defense of her approach as applied and of universal interest rather than one of research and specialization can be understood as a contrast between scientific and community-based approaches, I think Addams's view is both more nuanced and more radical. She opposes the monopoly of scientific knowledge and practice by institutional elites and returns it to the community and everyday life, as other pragmatists also do.

<sup>5</sup> Addams in Elshtain, *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> All of Addams's quotes are from her Introduction to *Democracy and Social Ethics*, Introduction, C. H. Seigfried (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Mark W. Hutson, "Still Puritan After All These Years," *New York Times* (August 5, 2012), 4.

<sup>9</sup> Knight calls this Addams's rejection of benevolence, a virtue appropriate to societies where power flows from the top down. In a democracy no one should feel themselves superior to anyone else. *Jane Addams*, 106.

<sup>10</sup> John Dewey, *Experience and Nature, Later Works of John Dewey*, Volume 1, 1925, Jo Ann Boydston, ed. (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 5.

<sup>11</sup> Addams, *The Long Road of Woman's Memory*, Introduction, C. H. Seigfried (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>12</sup> William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 1975), 117.

<sup>13</sup> See also *Second Twenty Years at Hull-House* (New York, 1930), ch. 5, on the war years, 1914-1919, 131- 152.

<sup>14</sup> See Seigfried, "Jane Addams: Sympathetic Interpretation as Democratic Practice," Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, Texas A&M, College Station, Texas, Mar., 12-14, 2009.