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Jane Addams on Autonomy and Responsibility

Marilyn Fischer

In 1889 with her college friend, Ellen Gates Starr, Jane Addams opened "Hull House" on Chicago's Halsted Street, in an immigrant neighborhood of 18 nationalities. Reflecting on those early days, Addams remembered thinking that "...the mere foothold of a house, easily accessible, ample in space, hospitable, and tolerant in spirit...would be in itself a serviceable thing for Chicago. . . . Hull House was soberly opened on the theory that the dependence of classes on each other is reciprocal; and that as the social relation is essentially a reciprocal relation, it gives a form of expression that has peculiar value" (Addams 1912b, 55).

This Chicago ward had 255 saloons, 7 churches and 3 bathtubs (Addams 1893, 31-32). Her neighbors, many of them former European rural peasants, faced the overwhelming task of making their way in a squalid, crowded district where sewage ran freely in the streets.

Addams and Starr did not have a strategic plan; they resolved instead to be responsive to neighborhood needs. An early endeavor was to provide daycare to assist the many immigrant mothers who spent 14 hours a day working in factories. Disease from uncollected garbage, neighborhood sweatshops, and unsafe factory conditions became foci of Hull House activity. Addams recalls little girls refusing candy at a Christmas party, because they "worked in a candy factory and could not bear the sight of it" (Addams 1912b, 117). She tells of scarlet fever breaking out in rural areas from coats sewn in infected city sweatshops, and of children injured and killed for lack of inexpensive factory safety equipment (Addams 1912b, 124). She described factory workers as "heavy and almost dehumanized by monotonous toil" (Addams 1907, 207). Modern industry, she wrote, is "needlessly ruthless and brutal to her own children" (Addams 1912b, 219). Hull House residents collected statistics, lobbied the legislature. Their efforts led to the first legislation in Illinois regulating factory sanitary conditions, and establishing 14 as a minimum age for hiring (Addams 1912b, 119). With other Hull House residents, Addams was also deeply involved in union activities, both in assisting in their formation and in strike arbitration (See Addams 1912b, chapter 10).

Throughout her 45 years living at Hull House, Addams worked through innumerable voluntary associations to bring about social reform on the local, national and international levels. A very partial list of her involvements include: President of the National Conference of Social Work, Vice-President of the National American Women's Suffrage Association, co-founder of the ACLU and NAACP, Chair of the Woman's Peace Party, and President of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. During the First World War Addams travelled throughout Europe, negotiating with heads of state to bring about an end to the war. In 1931 Addams was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.
Theoretical Perspectives

Addams understands autonomy and responsibility from the perspective of American pragmatism. Like her collaborator and friend, John Dewey, Addams believes one ascertains an idea's meaning and truth by applying it in practice. Hull House was founded explicitly as a pragmatist test for her ideas on ethics and social change (Lagemann 1994, 77).

Verifying philosophical ideas rests on two methodological prerequisites: concrete experience and sympathetic understanding. Addams repeatedly stresses how emotions serve as the starting point for ethical change, although they need to be cultivated and guided by experience and reason. In addressing social problems, Hull House residents first gathered statistics and empirical data, but then interpreted the data in light of their direct experience as neighbors of the poor. This method would give them “sympathetic knowledge,” which Addams calls “the only way of approach to any human problem” (1912a, 11).

Like many of her day, Addams adapted an evolutionary perspective for her theory of ethics. Since the beginning of human history, ethical values and codes have been evolving; as social organization changes, so values should change concomitantly. Values of a previous stage should not be discarded, but adjusted to meet the challenges of new circumstances. Most of Addams’s writings center on the evolutionary stages she calls “individual ethics” and “social ethics.”

These perspectives of American pragmatism and evolutionary ethics give the theoretical framework within which to place Addams’s understanding of autonomy and responsibility. Widely accepted concepts of autonomy, derived from a social contract or Kantian tradition, fall under her critique of the stage she calls “individual ethics,” while her conception of responsibility stems from her delineation of social ethics, or social democracy, the ethical stage appropriate to her time.

Individual Ethics and Enlightenment Autonomy

“Individual ethics” describes the ethical stage corresponding roughly to the Enlightenment, but Addams’s conceptualization is far different from that of better known theorists. Rather than thinking of the individual in terms of contractual rights and duties or autonomous reason, Addams’s unit of analysis is the patriarchal family; the range of moral concern is bounded by family relationships. Her critiques of capitalism and philanthropy as then practiced center on her analyses of these institutions as patriarchal rather than democratic, and as insufficiently responsive to social needs.

Widely accepted conceptions of autonomy are rooted in enlightenment social contract theories, or in a Kantian conception of duty. Here, freedom is preserved and expressed through contract-like, voluntary, human relations, or via the autonomous exercise of reason. Addams criticizes this tradition for its distance from lived experience, and its reliance on reason to the exclusion of sympathetic emotion.

As a pragmatist for whom concrete experience was the defining test, Addams had little use for theories whose conception of the individual bore little resemblance to lived experience. She scorns the ideal man of social contract and natural rights theories, saying, “That old Frankenstein, the ideal man of the eighteenth century, is
still haunting us, although he never existed save in the brain of the doctrinaire" (Addams 1906, 60).

Addams's experiences with her immigrant neighbors revealed just how severely eighteenth century abstractions of justice and equality failed the pragmatist test. Addams writes, "We conscientiously followed the gift of the ballot hard upon the gift of freedom to the negro, but we are quite unmoved by the fact that he lives among us in a practical social ostracism. We hasten to give the franchise to the immigrant from a sense of justice, from a tradition that he ought to have it, while we dub him with epithets deriding his past life, or present occupation, and feel no duty to invite him to our houses" (1893, 3). Addams's critiques of industrial exploitation, as vivid as Marx's, reinforce her claim that to describe labor contracts as voluntary agreements between autonomous equals blindly misreads what experience clearly reveals (Addams 1906, 41-43).

That Enlightenment theorists ignored the ethical potency of emotion is illustrated in her 1915 Presidential Address to the International Congress of Women at the Hague. Addams criticizes Kant's writings on peace as focused too exclusively on reason, stating, "Reason is only a part of the human endowment, emotion and deep-set radical impulses must be utilized as well, those primitive human urgings to foster life and to protect the helpless of which women were the earliest custodians, and even the social and gregarious instincts that we share with the animals themselves. These universal desires must be given opportunities to expand and the most highly trained intellects must serve them rather than the technique of war and diplomacy" (Davis 1976, 70-71).

Concrete experience with immigrants and sympathetic knowledge arising from intimate association with them taught Addams that Enlightenment conceptions of autonomy and responsibility were flawed. They were especially unsuited to the complex interdependencies of urban, multicultural, and increasingly global early 20th century life.

Social Ethics and Responsibility

Social ethics, or social democracy is the evolutionary stage suitable to an urban, industrial society. Addams viewed her own society as one in which traditional kinship-village patterns had been replaced by complex, reciprocal, industrial interdependencies. The hierarchical relations and limited focus of individual ethics were no longer appropriate. For Addams, social democracy is a mode of association, concomitant with society's complex interdependency, in which all persons can participate in defining their own good and designing the good of their community. She writes, "We are learning that a standard of social ethics is not attained by travelling a sequestered byway, but by mixing on the thronged and common road where all must turn out for one another, and at least see the size of one another's burdens. To follow the path of social morality results perforce in the temper if not the practice of the democratic spirit, for it implies that diversified human experience and resultant sympathy which are the foundation and guarantee of Democracy" (Addams 1907, 6-7).

Addams's conception of human equality underlies her understanding of our social
responsibilities. Quoting Delos Wilcox, Addams writes, “Birth, growth, nutrition, reproduction, death, are the great levelers that remind us of the essential equality of human life” (1906, 117). It is this connection with nature, rather than the metaphysical equality of the enlightenment that gives the basis for recognizing human equality.

Addams was strongly influenced by Tolstoy’s conception of early Christianity as expressing love and universal brotherhood. Sharing these sentiments, Addams writes of the settlement movement, “It must be grounded in a philosophy whose foundation is on the solidarity of the human race, a philosophy which will not waver when the race happens to be represented by a drunken woman or an idiot boy” (1893, 23). Within this context of solidarity and universal brotherhood, Addams views each individual, not as an enlightenment bundle of rights and duties, but as a source of social power, “a creative agent and a possible generator of fine enthusiasm.” Each individual has the potential to make valuable and unique contributions, given education and a fertile social soil (1907, 177-78).

This complex understanding of equality underlies Addams' theory of social democracy. Encompassing far more than constitutional guarantees or governmental procedures, democracy is realized when all persons can develop and contribute their unique capacities and participate fully in social life. Correspondingly, our responsibility is to work toward human equality and to seek to enact social democracy in all spheres of life—political, economic, community, and domestic. Addams viewed her work at Hull House, not as philanthropy, but as fulfilling her responsibilities of democratic citizenship (1893, 56).

To reflect the organic relation of individual and society, Addams believes that responsibility for social change should be carried out through what she calls “associated efforts,” rather than through individually directed activities. The latter may appear more effective, but they are apt to be based on an inaccurate assessment of needs, and less apt to develop the skills, talents and social responsiveness of those being helped (1907, 153-155).

Contrasting associated effort with individual effort, Addams writes, “He [the person working through associated effort] has to discover what people really want, and then ‘provide the channels in which the growing moral force of their lives shall flow.’ What he does attain, however, is not the result of his individual striving, as a solitary mountain-climber beyond that of the valley multitude but it is sustained and upheld by the sentiments and aspirations of many others. Progress has been slower perpendicularly, but incomparably greater because lateral” (1907, 152).

Under social democracy Addams would see autonomy and responsibility as deeply intertwined. Autonomy would be understood in terms of human flourishing, of developing and exercising one’s talents, and being able to function as “a generator of fine enthusiasm.” There is no formula for responsibility, such as protecting specified rights or performing abstractly defined duties. But through seeing things whole (the social organism) and knowing things minutely (concrete experience plus sympathetic understanding) one’s responsibility would become clear.

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