

No More Method! A (Polemical) Response to Audrey Thompson

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Pragmatism has always had its critics on both the political right and left. I once asked my former colleague, Alasdair MacIntyre, who is often placed on the right, why he has never mentioned the great pragmatists of the past, Peirce, James and Dewey, in his genealogies of twentieth century thought. His reply: James was an unmitigated disaster for the twentieth century. Dewey, it seems, was and still is in his eyes not even worth the breath overt criticism would require! On the left, writers such as Cornel West, echoing past critics such as C. Wright Mills, also condemn the classical pragmatists for their bourgeois, liberal inclinations. For both MacIntyre and West, the problem is that the pragmatism of “the Founders” is not radical enough. The problem is that it seems to leave the present situation, with its environmentally destructive, racist, chauvinistic economic and political institutions in place, offering only piecemeal reforms that at best deal with symptoms rather than the real illnesses that lie beneath the surface.

Following such critics, Audrey Thompson attacks the classical pragmatists as unable to accurately detect and adequately respond to “structural problems” in our society. The problem, she claims, is one of method. Instead of the problem-centered approach of Dewey et al., an approach which typically responds to “difference (from the status quo) as deficit,” educational philosophers need “an emergent method of inquiry that avoids reifying prevailing conditions.” Only on the basis of such a method can contemporary educational pragmatists “make a significant contribution to educational change.”

Thompson argues that we can find such a method, a method which is true to the “principles of emergent inquiry and progressive social change that represent the best of the pragmatic tradition,” in the growing body of work of a group of thinkers she labels “political pragmatists.” Political pragmatists, unlike classical pragmatists, utilize a method of inquiry that recognizes systemic conflict between social groups and views experience that embodies such conflict as itself political. As an intellectual endeavor, it articulates such experience and recognizes conflict within it; as a political activity, it is itself a form of work that both creates spaces for imagining liberating practice and undertakes such experiments in alternative social arrangements. As a system of pedagogy, political pragmatism, according to Thompson, promises not merely piecemeal cultural reform, but systemic structural change.

My response to Thompson’s project has two aspects: In my first, rather negative, set of remarks, I express my uneasiness over her insistence that philosophy be seen as a method. I do not doubt that philosophy, however it is to be understood, can be “done” with better or worse social and educational aims in mind. But I doubt that discussions of philosophy at the level of method are of much use in this regard. My second, more positive, comments commend Thompson for what she only

suggests here but embodies elsewhere, that is, an artful philosophical manner of enacting and illuminating social inquiry that makes a difference where a difference is most needed — at a level where the experience of the poor, the oppressed, the have nots of our not yet democratic society can ideally find a place within “the conversations of justice” proposed by philosophers such as Jürgen Habermas and Richard Rorty.

As for the negative, first of all, I want to raise some questions concerning Thompson’s thesis that a distinction can be made between PP, political pragmatism, and CP, classical pragmatism, in terms of different “methods of inquiry.” I’ll agree for now with Thompson that CP can be understood as a method, as the sort of problem-posing methodology Dewey described and recommended in books such as *How We Think* and *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry*. (I’ll even assume, for now, that these two books really accomplish the same thing, an assumption that I have grave doubts about.) Given this, is it really the case that somehow PP *does not* begin with problems found within experience, does not then proceed on to the resolution of ambiguities, etc., while CP *does*? My own sense is that the really important difference between CP and PP taken as methods has to do with *whose* experience is taken as primary. Carter Woodson, like Paulo Freire, believed that the oppressed do better in schools when they begin “where they are,” with (to use Freire’s jargon) their “generative themes,” their situation, materially and culturally. Once we accept such a notion we can ask about the education of the oppressors. Masters, as well as slaves, suffer from split consciousness, but are typically less likely to understand that something is amiss. In this regard, problem-posing pedagogy may be “equal opportunity.” Can there be a Freirean (or Woodsonian) education for the white working class, and perhaps even for affluent students of the elite universities?¹ If so, must these forms of education, like Woodson’s, be (inevitably?) “ethnocentric,” at least in starting point? Must they begin with the generative themes, the experience, of the working class and the elite? (Some like Rorty would say “yes.”) Or will Woodson’s “preference for (the experience of) the oppressed” apply to oppressor education also?

But doesn’t CP, as Thompson claims, ignore the social, political, the structural dimension of experience? Doesn’t its notion of experience fit too easily within the framework of classical, individualistic liberalism? In this regard I’m not at all convinced that either James or Dewey was guilty of “biologizing” experience. In this regard, one might look, for example, at Charlene Haddock Siegfried’s or Bruce Wilshire’s “defense” of James (I’ll return to Wilshire in a bit) or one of Tom Alexander’s or Jim Garrison’s discussions of Dewey.² Or one might, somewhat perversely, look at one or several of the almost infinite number of Deweyan critiques of Rorty’s portrayal of CP, where Rorty’s own supposed biologism and individualism are compared unfavorably with what is taken to be Dewey’s rich communitarian stance.³ Habermas’ and Rorty’s conversations, read through a Deweyan lens, need not suffer from the atomism and atavism typically ascribed to them by adherents of PP.

So far I’ve accepted Thompson’s assumption that CP can be understood in terms of method in order to call into question her manner of distinguishing CP from

PP. But (and here is my second critical point) I wonder if either CP or PP, or just plain P (for pragmatism from Peirce and James, to West and Fraser and Thompson) are usefully described in terms of method at all. Following Rorty, I have doubts that this move pays off. For once we get beyond the idea of method as philosophers have typically understood it — “as a set of steps, one following another and each unambiguous in intent”⁴— we find that there is little to be said beyond Quine’s talk of inquiry as a constant reweaving of the web of belief, beyond Rorty’s talk of “criterionless muddling through,” of a continuing search for equilibrium between hitherto prized principles and currently accepted individual beliefs. Surely some teachers are better than others, just as some guitar players, cooks, and scientific researchers are. But in the more interesting cases, that something — referred to by Aristotle as *phronesis* and Aquinas as judgment — is what is at stake. One learns *phronesis* not by learning a method but through discipline, through apprenticeship, under skilled practitioners. Here I wonder if Thompson, in her portrayal of CP and her espousal of PP, falls prey to what William Barrett refers to as “the illusion of technique.”⁵ Thus I sympathize with Rorty when he says:

The moral of Kuhnian philosophy of science is important....There is no discipline called critique one can practice to get strikingly better politics, any more than there is something called “scientific method” that one can apply to get strikingly better physics.⁶

Think, in this regard, of Wittgenstein’s formative remarks on following a rule. How does one finally know how to go on, to identify a series of things as blue or tall, or as food, or as depressing or annoying or dehumanizing? Does one become acquainted (privately, in the mind) with a series of rules to direct the mind? If so, how, by what further series of rules, does one know how to apply *those*?⁷ How did Julia Child learn just how much of an ingredient to add in any given instance? How did Rilke learn just what word to use at any given time and how to use it? Surely not by learning a method!

Thompson refers to PP as an *emergent* method, that is, a method that not only articulates the tensions within present experience (for example, the student and the student’s teacher in relationship, etc.), but also has a political and practical dimension, an ability to “open up spaces” in which experiments in alternative styles of living and being become possible. I understand Thompson’s use of the term “emergence” to signal conceptual innovation as well as the changed form of life that may accompany such innovation. In this regard I would ask Thompson: Why should we think that in pedagogical or scientific practice some use of reason or method, rather than a heightened sense of imagination, is likely to promote the appropriate conceptual change? Method (insofar as we can talk sensibly about such a thing) can be said to solve puzzles, or multiply anomalies. Only imagination can suggest new paradigms. How can a method produce either a clear sense that any present paradigm (or level of conceptualized experience) must be rejected or indicate how it is to be replaced? Rather than spend time championing new, supposedly liberating philosophical methods, I wonder if we wouldn’t be better off with Rorty’s aim in mind, that is, fostering a culture in which imaginative traditions of protest against cruelty, such as that of the modern novel, rather than philosophical content or method, is primary.⁸

Following Rorty, then, I suggest that we no longer think of pragmatism, either CP or PP, as method but, rather, as a project most relevant to “normal” problem solving, and mainly ancillary to the imaginative activity of “strong” poets. So, for example, I would argue (again, with Rorty) that we should see James not as disclosing a method of discovering (small t) truth but, rather, as trying to get us to give up seeking theories of *Truth* (or *Goodness*, or *Beauty*, or *Being*, or even *Method*), to give up the idea of philosophy as “physics of the abstract.”⁹ Once we *truly* give up this idea we, as philosophers, will be better able to both clear the ground for conceptual innovation and make use of such innovation when it occurs. Perhaps we will even be able to become, to a greater or lesser degree, strong poets or artists ourselves. Here I believe that James’s own example is instructive: As long as he could quiet the urge to theorize about *Truth* or *Method*, he was, according to a recent book by Wilshire on the university, able to begin a kind of reconstruction of experience as an affair of a primordial affective body-mind that promises to free us from the deadening effects of professional purification rituals, rituals that have turned research institutions into the hunting grounds of heartless, dead intellects.¹⁰ In a similar vein, once we get beyond *Truth* as well as *Method*, we will be able to appreciate Dewey’s *How We Think* as an artful portrayal of an alternative pedagogy, and, correlatively, recognize *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* as the abstract, truistic monstrosity that it is.

Besides James and Dewey, other such innovators include, for example, Orwell and Foucault, Marx and Engels, Woolf, Adrienne Rich and Luce Irigaray, Ivan Illich and Paulo Freire and Elizabeth Ellsworth. I suggest that we read such authors best when we see them as journalists or impressionistic essayists or artists (of the modern governmental state, of the prison and related modern institutions, of work, of the lives of women, of teaching and schools) rather than as theorists of human nature or power or pedagogical method. These writers help us see their subjects in radically new ways. (They are like artists: Think, for example, of the way Picasso’s painting “Guernica” helped so many think of war in a radically different way.) So, for example, Freire is most useful when he tells us what he actually sees and does as a disciplined practitioner of literacy training, and of much less interest when he is intent on philosophizing in the traditional manner, as in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*.¹¹ Critics such as Ellsworth, so often understood as debating methodology with Freireans, are better utilized as providing the kind of innovative critique one might make use of in arguing the merits of (say) Julia Child over James Beard, or Gershwin against Brian Eno.¹² They help us to “see” better. But this teaching is not the teaching of a method.

Now, consider again Thompson’s own example, Carter Woodson. What Woodson offers in *The Miseducation of the Negro* is both a plea that the pedagogy of Afro-Americans proceed from an Afro-American point of view, from a problematized Black experience, and an expression of what such a pedagogy might amount to and yield. His “preferential option for the (point of view of) the oppressed” should, in my opinion, be understood not as a methodological imperative (although in a perfectly *mundane* sense, it is that) so much as an ethical one.

Woodson is important for us not because of any method he espouses that might help us better (than the methods of CP) uncover the ambiguities of Black experience and discover new liberating practices; no method can do such a thing. Rather, his importance lies in the moral commitment and artful sensitivity that he displays in examining and exposing the plight of his people and recommending a future path. His importance lies in making us look at the plight of his people with awakened eyes, with the eyes of a child. We ought to follow his example, but to do so is, not in any non-trivial way, to follow a method.

This same sensitivity and commitment is shared by any number of “pragmatic philosophers” that Rorty would place within the historical rubric of liberalism — practitioners such as Jefferson and Emerson, Susan B. Anthony and Eugene Debs, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X who within the realm of education are best understood as seeking not *Truth* but, rather, an equal voice in the conversation of justice, a conversation of flesh and blood, social and political beings such as us.¹³ Here, I believe, Thompson’s classical *and* political pragmatists stand together.

In conclusion, I’d like to express my opinion that what I’ve just said about Carter Woodson’s artistry and moral sensitivity can also be applied to much of Audrey Thompson’s own work. Those of you who were present at the 1995 meeting of the Philosophy of Education Society and heard Thompson’s extraordinary general session paper on “Anti-Racist Pedagogy: Art or Propaganda” will need no further help in understanding what I mean.¹⁴ In this regard, I might also recommend to you her artful reconstruction, in the very paper I am commenting on here, of Woodson’s pedagogical praxis, a reconstruction marred only by a mistaken reliance on the terminology of method to describe and explain what is so important in work such as his as well as her own. Thus, Thompson’s only somewhat misleading account of PP is of value to us in spite of its defects, not only as an exhortation to follow in the footsteps of innovators such as Woodson, but also as part of her own ongoing exemplification of an inspiring ideal.

1. For attempts to apply Freirean, “problem-posing” education to the American experience see Ira Shor’s *Critical Teaching and Everyday Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) and Shor and Freire, *A Pedagogy for Liberation: Dialogues on Transforming Education* (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1987).

2. Charlene Haddock Siegfried, *William James’ Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990); Bruce Wilshire, “Introduction,” in *William James: The Essential Writings* (Albany: State University of New York Press); Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey’s Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizon of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); and James Garrison, “Dewey’s Philosophy and the Experience of Working: Labor, Tools, and Language,” *Synthese* 1 (1995): 87-114, all argue that classical pragmatism already recognizes the social (and to some extent political) dimensions of experience.

3. For one of many examples see Robert Westbrook’s defence of Dewey versus Rorty in his *John Dewey and American Democracy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991). Alan Ryan’s recent *John Dewey and the High Tide of American Liberalism* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1995) also presents a view in which Dewey’s politics lacks very little, if anything, when compared to Marxism’s supposedly rich sense of the structural. For a further attempt to defend Rorty, as well as Dewey, against the complaints of the adherents of something like Thompson’s PP (i.e. “critical theory”) see my “Rorty’s Dewey: Pragmatism, Education and the Public Sphere,” *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 15 (1996): 121-29.

4. My understanding of “method” as opposed to “discipline” is taken from David B. Burrell’s *Exercises in Religious Understanding* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973), introduction “On Hermeneutic Exercises.” The quotation is taken from page 3.

5. See William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique: A Search for Meaning in a Technological Civilization* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1978).

6. Rorty, “Feminism, Ideology, and Deconstruction: A Pragmatist View,” *Hypatia* 8, no. 2 (Spring 1993): 96-103, 100.

7. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, translated by G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953), paragraphs 179-242.

8. This idea is developed in Rorty’s *Contingency, Irony, Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

9. For this characterization of pragmatism, see the introduction to Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982). Wittgenstein is said to have referred to C. D. Broad’s massive tome on the philosophy of mind, *The Mind and Its Place in Nature*, with the comment, “He thinks he is engaged in the physics of the abstract.”

10. This view of James’s reconstruction of experience as applied to the culture of today’s universities is developed in detail in Wilshire’s *The Moral Collapse of the University: Professionalism, Purity and Alienation* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990).

11. See Freire’s *Education for Critical Consciousness* (New York: Seabury, 1973) for a wonderful description of his pedagogy “in action”; of much less interest is the ponderous theory found in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

12. Elizabeth Ellsworth first criticized Freire’s pedagogy in her now infamous “Why Doesn’t This Feel Empowering: Working Through the Repressive Myths of Critical Pedagogy,” *Harvard Educational Review* 59, no. 3: 297-324. Thompson, in a paper co-authored with Andrew Gitlin (unfortunately, in my opinion), approaches the debate between Ellsworth and Freire on the methodological level; see their “Creating Spaces for Reconstructing Knowledge in Feminist Pedagogy,” *Educational Theory* 45, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 125-50. My own view is that both “Creating Spaces” as well as the paper I am responding to here are best read (in, I admit, a partially misleading way) as “strong poetry” rather than part of a debate on, or critique of, method.

13. See Rorty’s “Education without Dogma,” *Dissent* (Spring 1989): 198-204 for a development of this notion of American Liberal Education.

14. This paper has been published in *Philosophy of Education 1995*, ed. Alven Neiman (Urbana, IL: The Philosophy of Education Society, 1996), 130-41.