

# The Useful Joy and Joyful Use of Critical Pragmatism

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Let's be clear about what our pragmatist president asks of us in the address just completed. Kathy Hytten asks us to be philosophers in a particular, even peculiar, manner: that is, to be useful by being useless—at least in the context of dominant societal and institutional structures and expectations. She asks us to resist the practices that frame our paid labor because those frames actually distort our calling to philosophy. This is not a simple exhortation to work-life balance; this is a radical invitation to Work-Life integration.

Hytten's opening bid honors recently deceased poet Mary Oliver and makes it clear that the stakes she has in mind are high: the very quality of one's "wild and precious life." Her central claim seems to be this: "We are most useful when we are engaged with others in doing work that is suffused with meaning, and even better, pleasure." She offers a kind of phenomenological deconstruction of the concept of usefulness, rejecting both narrowly economic utility and a utilitarian seeking after some form of the "greatest good," instead linking utility with truly personal meaning and pleasure.<sup>1</sup> She captures this neatly in her title (borrowed from the poetry of Marge Piercy<sup>2</sup>), and then pokes and provokes us with a densely packed subtitle: resisting entrepreneurial subjectivity. She offers an argument in three movements each of which captures an element of the subtitle: the enchantment of philosophy and the subjectivity philosophy makes possible, the (cruel) disenchantment of its contemporary practice in colleges and universities where neoliberal valuing of *homo oeconomicus* holds sway, and a path forward that demands resistance, specifically resisting performativity. In working my way through Hytten's lovely talk, I am reminded of the insight of another novelist/poet, womanist Alice Walker, who proclaimed that Resistance was "the secret of joy."<sup>3</sup> As is true for Walker, the joy Hytten evokes is complicated.

It will come as no surprise to anyone that I am an adherent of Kathy's position. Rather than simply declare my allegiance, I'd like to flesh out the stance she is asking us to take, that of the critical pragmatist for whom a certain kind of positivity, of hope, of optimism is unavoidable.<sup>4</sup> In doing so, I want to push Hytten a bit further than she goes herself to claim that her pragmatism is not simply one philosophical alternative among others but *the* essential element of any stance that takes action seriously—and, I claim, this kind of critical pragmatism is the most interesting and generative philosophical stance currently available.

Hytten's argument supports three calls to action:

- 1) remember—and re-experience—the enchantments that drew us to philosophy;
- 2) acknowledge the disenchantments that pollute, distort, and impede our actual practice of philosophy; and
- 3) take responsibility anyway.<sup>5</sup>

I won't belabor Kathy's first movement, the enchantment of philosophy, except to say something that I think she thinks but doesn't say here. The "enchantments" of philosophy are considerable but always subject to their own pragmatist critique. What counts as philosophy is a question for inquiry, an inquiry that has to uncover assumptions (and bewitchments), analyze language, reveal constitutive dimensions of the experience, and deconstruct the "grand narratives" that make the enchantments make sense.

With respect to the second movement, the systemic disenchantments that distort the practice of philosophy, I'll simply emphasize—as a good pragmatist—the consequences that shape the potential meaning of our work: "diminished community, narrowed scholarly pursuits, selfish striving, and ontological and existential insecurity" in the context of "continuous improvement," "growth models," and an "audit culture." If these are the outcomes our work reinforces, then whatever we are practicing, it isn't philosophy.

It is Hytten's third movement I find especially worthy of our attention, in part because the ask is quite radical, that we live toward Work-Life integration. She pursues a standard pragmatist move: set up a taken-for-granted dualism (in

this case between enchantment and disenchantment), acknowledge the “of course, *that’s* right” in each position, but then dissolve the dualism by demonstrating that being enchanted and becoming disenchanting are not mutually exclusive, but are, in important ways, flip sides of the same philosophical desire.

Philosophy—as we initially understood it—enchanted all of us in some form or fashion and later this evening at the presidential party we can exchange our enchantment stories. The real question is whether, as we come to understand philosophy better, we are still enchanted. I suggest that the initial enchantment which Hytten describes *is* enchantment but not with philosophy. Rather, it’s an adolescent enchantment with our own minds. Enchantment with *philosophy* requires a kind of “second conversion,” a recognition that my own mind—and even the minds of other philosophers—aren’t all that interesting. What *is* interesting, what compels philosophy of education for a lifetime, is lived experience subject always to scrutiny.

Philosophy begins in wonder about the world(s) we construct in and through shared experience (and not merely in texts). Philosophy is what we do when our habits of being and being agent in the world fail (and *not* an insulated armchair activity). It is a function of “what the known demands.” It requires us to be present to life—family life, political life, academic life—and to wonder about it, to scrutinize it, to analyze the language with which we practice it, to uncover the experience of it, to make sense of our (and others) arguments about it, to deconstruct the stories that we tell ourselves to make our practice make sense. The question challenging us, the one that motivates the Work-Life integration Hytten recommends, is whether we actually want to practice philosophy or simply prefer to stay enthralled in enchantment with our own minds.

When one starts out in philosophy of education, one is invited into a conversation.<sup>6</sup> When you first enter any conversation, you have to “catch up.” That is, you have to figure out who already said what. For a long time, you have to just listen. Of course, active listening means checking with the other participants to see if you understand what they had to say. Those are the kind of scholarly products we all start out with: this is what so-and-so says about such-and-such. And we may return to those kinds of efforts from time to time

as we are working out what we think about this or that. But at some point, philosophy demands that we turn our philosophical attention toward Life.

Hytten highlights her own second conversion, that moment when she uncovered “the whiteness of [her] philosophical world” and came to understand philosophy as her path to naming “white supremacy, patriarchy, homophobia and similar systems of privilege explicitly and work tirelessly to disrupt them.” That is not all philosophy is good for, of course. It is good for, for instance, making sense of teaching as a practice, for critiquing the social contexts (and limiting grand narratives) of schooling, for exposing the limits of curriculum, and, as Hytten has done here, for shining light on the social structures that render so-called educational institutions miseducative.

When we do actually *practise* philosophy with reference to these and any other issue life presents, there will be philosophical products of value—and there will be spaces and outlets for the work, though the spaces may not be R1 universities and the outlets may not always be top-tier scholarly journals.<sup>7</sup> We become annoyed, in Hytten’s idiom “disenchanted,” with the pressure to produce, but the real problem may be that we are not actually pursuing grounded philosophical work or that we do not know how to position our work *as philosophy*.<sup>8</sup>

The only defensible approach to that dilemma is, I contend, a critical pragmatist one. When Hytten suggests that there may be other philosophical paths to her argument and other philosophical stances that will confront us with the joy she articulates, the joy that both emerges from and prompts thinking-into-constructive-and-reconstructive action, I think she is not quite right.

In a world of educational action, we are all pragmatists whether we admit it or not, whether we ever take Dewey’s name in vain or not. I have argued elsewhere that digging deeply into equity philosophy, the philosophy of structural critique, feminist philosophy, affect theory, philosophy of science, and even the New Materialism reveals that the best work is pragmatist in temper and in method.<sup>9</sup> This is not quite the pragmatism of Dewey, William James, or Charles Sanders Peirce, but it owes them everything in refusing to narrow the scope of philosophical deliberations and in pushing toward reconstruction of social

relations and personal meaning-making. It is the avowedly critical pragmatism of Jane Addams, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and more recently, Cornel West, Colin Koopman, José Medina, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Donna Haraway. This pragmatism acknowledges that our social circumstances are both useful (to some) and dangerous (to others), open to alteration in search of good and better, but never able to be “fixed.” This pragmatism responds constructively and reconstructively precisely because response is both possible and necessary. This pragmatism “stays with the trouble,” as Haraway puts it, “while learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.”<sup>10</sup> This pragmatism holds space for the affecting power of emotion, the reasoned power of cognition, and the determinative power of behavior in making meaning, and in the process, constituting experience.

Within critical pragmatism, there is room for rational evaluation of arguments, rich analysis of language and discourse, revealing disclosure of the features of experience, and careful exposés of the inequitable assumptions that ground the stories that make our lives make sense and, too often, keep us in line. There is, in Sara Ahmed’s idiom, room to “kill joy” in dialectic with feeling joyful.<sup>11</sup> The more you actually practice philosophy as Work-Life integration, the more you are (re)constructively critical on the way to defensible action, the clearer this becomes. Here at PES—and in our world(s) of educational action—the “cash value” of our expressed ideas is the only measure of productivity needed or possible. It demands of us resistance *and* response-ability. If there is joy to be practiced, being of use in this useless way, is the way to go.

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1 I have in mind poet Galway Kinnell’s distinction between the merely personal (centered on the individual’s idiosyncratic experience) and the truly personal (digging deeper to find what is the essence of oneself in relation with others). See “The Simple Acts of Life” in *The Power of the Word with Bill Moyers* (1989), <https://billmoyers.com/content/the-simple-acts-of-life/>.

2 Dr. Hytten’s title “To Be of Use,” matches the title of a well-known Piercy poem.

3 Alice Walker, *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1992).

4 The critical pragmatist optimism I commend to you is neither naïve, nor arrogant,

nor trained, nor cruel, but an optimism rooted in the recognition that every situation demands response, and that I *can* always respond thoughtfully in ways that change the very terms of the situation. It's an optimism that knows that while pessimism is more immediately attractive, optimism is the more effective affect, the right choice, the best "fit," for those who want to live well and do good. Let me note here that Dr. Hytten wouldn't buy my characterization of the habit she's after as optimism. I think she would prefer to talk about hope. I have written elsewhere about why I settled on optimism rather than hope, but it's not a difference that differentiates us on the way to joy. See Barbara Stengel, "Creative Integration and Pragmatist Optimism: Dispositions for 'the Task Before Us,'" *Education and Culture* 34, no. 2 (2018): 41-62.

5 I interpret Hytten to be calling for us to respond as a philosopher who resists expectations and constraints born out of a neoliberal narrowing of what living well can be and mean, and who loves wisdom, who seeks (self-)understanding, and who endeavors to live well and do good.

6 For a wonderful representation of a philosophical conversation over millennia and across contexts, see Jane Roland Martin, *Reclaiming the Conversation: The Ideal of the Education Woman* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985).

7 I want to insist that philosophy of education practiced at an R1 institution of higher education is not automatically nor necessarily better philosophy. It is simply practiced in a different context though with a remarkably similar set of issues to be addressed. It is important to look for good philosophy of education in every gathering of philosophers and any gathering of educators. You won't always find it, but I'm quite sure that the goodness of the philosophy isn't a function of a flawless meritocratic system that puts the best at the most prestigious institutions.

8 There is one other possibility and that is that we missed our second conversion, that we really don't want to practice philosophy; rather, we want to remain in the enchantment of that earlier version of philosophy. However, I'm going to assume that present company has reached second conversion.

9 Barbara Stengel, "Com-posting Experimental Futures: Pragmatists Making (Odd) Kin with New Materialists," *Studies in Philosophy and Education* 38, no. 1 (2019): 7-29.

10 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).

11 Nishta Mehra, "Sara Ahmed: Notes from a Feminist Killjoy," *Guernica Magazine*, July 17, 2017, <https://www.guernicamag.com/sara-ahmed-the-personal-is-institutional/>.