John Jacob Kaag

Pragmatism & the lessons of experience

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Experience has lessons to impart. Its ability to teach, however, turns on our willingness to learn. Attending to the lessons of human experience brought American pragmatists of the nineteenth century to a new conception of philosophy, one that embraced the fallibilism that had long defined the natural sciences. It led them back to the abiding existential questions that underpinned the Wisdom Traditions of the past in order to explore the personal, social, and political trials of the present. These thinkers established a new intellectual tradition that allows us to "learn from experience."[1]

Classical pragmatism stood against the prevailing current of European philosophy, which continued to be motivated by Immanuel Kant's insistence that philosophy should be concerned with the limits and conditions of "pure reason," that is, reason devoid of empirical content. In contrast, American intellectuals such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James, Jane Addams, Ella Lyman Cabot, and John Dewey held that philosophy should concern itself with the messiness of human meaning, which James acknowledged as "various, tangled and painful." Philosophy ought to be understood, they thought, as the result of human beings thinking through the meaningful questions of living as embodied, thoughtful organisms. These questions can never be *purely* cerebral; they are laden with emotion, carefully negotiated in daily life, and pressed upon us in moments of personal and social crisis – always, therefore, empirically conditioned and experiential. Experience was to replace pure reason as American pragmatism's enduring lodestone.

Pragmatism took the reconstruction of experience as its principal task: the only way to respond effectively to the dilemma that philosophy faced in the early years of the twentieth century. In 1907, William James called it the "present dilemma," but it now is more accurate to call it a perennial one. It is the crisis that philosophy faces when it jeopardizes its own relevance. Academic philosophy has spent the better part of the past century earning a deservedly bad reputation. Since the time of Socrates and Aristophanes, philosophy has been accused of being only loosely tethered to the world of human affairs, and today the string appears to have been severed completely. As Dewey noted in 1917, the "recovery of philosophy" is only

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possible if philosophers are willing to take a stand with the sciences, and a variety of other academic disciplines, on the ground of human experience.

Experience: the term reverberates as a noun, a verb, and ultimately as a command. While Bertrand Russell, echoing the sentiment of traditional empiricism, reduced experience to a description of "sense-data," the classical pragmatists insisted that human experience is defined by a particular qualitative dimension; by its purpose, effect, and the living memory of past experiences. Experience is not merely something undergone, but also, and always, something actively done. Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) suggests that a human being, like any other organism, continually transacts with its natural surroundings, and this observation serves as the starting point of pragmatic naturalism. For human beings, however, Dewey presents this natural transaction not as a mere fact of existence, but an ongoing question concerning the transaction's origin, history, process, and destination.

While pragmatism maintained a scientific bearing, it was quite careful not to succumb to scientism. Dewey, amenable to the studies of psychology, biology, and early cognitive neuroscience, nonetheless held that these disciplines did not give us *absolute* answers, only useful perspectives on the variety and novelty that define our transactions with the affairs of nature. James, the father of experimental psychology in America, conceded, "[E]xperience as we know, has ways of *boiling over* and making us correct our present formulas."[2] Following his father Benjamin Peirce, C. S. Peirce made a name in mathematics and physics before cultivating a reputation in philosophy. He studied under the foremost mathematicians and physicists of the nineteenth century, but the young Peirce still concluded, "[W]ithout beating longer round the bush . . . experience is our only teacher."[3] At times this teacher seems to know only one pedagogical method: the often painful process of trial and error.

Modern philosophy, beginning with Descartes, had been defined by the search for absolute and enduring principles that might serve as the foundation of human knowledge. In contrast, Peirce echoed Ralph Waldo Emerson by suggesting that experience happens as a "series of surprises" and continually – inevitably – defies the theories and principles that attempt to describe it.[4] Peirce's anti-foundationalism, however, did not signal the ultimate bankruptcy of the empirical and theoretical sciences. Unlike many relativists of the twentieth century, he did not regard uncertainty and fallibility as postulates that proved the futility of analytic disciplines; rather, insights achieved in the midst of inquiry kept these disciplines on the move. "The pragmatist knows," wrote Peirce, "that doubt is an art which has to be acquired through difficulty."[5] The belief that doubt is not something given, but something carefully acquired, distinguishes him from strains of contemporary relativism, as well as the unbridled skepticism that defined the Cartesian system. The Cambridge pragmatists dismissed the *radical* doubt of Descartes, insisting that meaningful skepticism could never be cultivated *ex situ*, beyond the constraints of a pressing and immediate situation.

Indeed the situation, indeterminate and confused, provides the occasion for genuine philosophic inquiry. Dewey explains, "[T]o set up a problem that does not grow out of an actual situation is to start on a course of dead work," and to arrive rather quickly at the dead end of "busy work." Dewey's observation

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changed the ground rules for philosophy. No longer were thinkers meant to retreat to their salons and ivory towers in order to raise questions that would never be negotiated in the world of experience. Instead they were challenged to engage the world and set upon problems, in order to face questions that *ought* to be negotiated – no small challenge. This is never simply a matter of uncovering a question that lays in wait for us. According to Dewey, determining a "problematic situation" is an active process of creation and discovery. A problem arises in the midst of investigation and serves as the pivot between the indeterminacy of the present state and the determinacy that one seeks as the end of inquiry. Once a problem is identified, James suggests that we are able to "unstiffen all our theories, limber them up and set each one to work."[6]

Not surprisingly, the growing number of non-philosophers who claim the title of "pragmatist" often do so in light of comments such as James's, which indicate that theoretical progress ought to be measured in terms of it instrumental consequences. Pragmatism gets stuff done, and if one's thought effects *any type* of change in the "real world," then that thinker is a pragmatist – or so the story goes. However, this version of the story misconstrues the meaning of pragmatism and jeopardizes the future of the tradition in America. Dewey, James, and Peirce did not advocate unreflective instrumentalism. When James suggests that we set our theories to work, he does not suggest that we ram abstract explanations into the face of a relatively unaccommodating world. The world, not our theories, will inevitably win in this sort of confrontation. Instead, James understood abstract concepts as adaptive instruments that can, for the time being, help individuals and their communities negotiate the twists and turns of experience. Pragmatism entails the cultivation of a sensitivity to our surroundings, both local and remote. James echoes Ralph Waldo Emerson's insistence that we attune ourselves to the "slightest sensorial nuance." In this respect, certainty and truth are not relative terms, but *provisional* guides that help us "feel out" the transient flow of experience and the possibility that it affords.

Human experience *is* transient; its lessons are fleeting. For all of its uncertainty, experience assures us of one thing: it will be over soon. This is the hardest teaching that experience has to offer, and it is the enduring one around which the history of Western philosophy has turned. American pragmatism could not make human experience central to its philosophy without attending to the torturous course of experience and its starkly abrupt end. James, along with his colleague Josiah Royce, sought to re-center philosophy around the hard fact of human finitude.

Early American thinkers, such as Roger Williams (1603 – 1683) and Jonathan Edwards (1703 – 1758), established human fragility and terminality as focal points of their respective philosophies. By the 1890s, as pragmatism began to hit its stride, life in New England had grown considerably easier, but human finitude remained fodder for American thinkers. Ella Lyman Cabot, a philosopher who worked closely with Royce and James at the turn of the century, put it thus: "What is our Life? A sleep and a forgetting, a happy rising and a painful setting."[7] Cabot knew that the experience of life is the all-too-hasty process of dying. And she understood, as Plato suggests in the *Phaedo*, that philosophy at its best is principally concerned with the process of dying well.

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What Cabot knew only in theory, Royce knew firsthand, having been raised in near-poverty in Grass Valley, California. He made it to Harvard, but remained at the margins of the intellectual clique there. He continues to remain at the margins of contemporary treatments of American pragmatism, too, in part because he responded to the problem of human finitude by developing "an absolute idealism," a synthesis of Christian theology and Hegelian system-building that ran counter to the methodological novelty of the pragmatic tradition. Whereas Royce maintained the necessity of an absolute God, the pragmatic method self-consciously eschewed such ideas. Royce did, though, influence pragmatism in general and James in particular in at least two respects.

First, Royce's existential insight regarding the human condition – his acknowledgment of the ephemeral and tragic character of human experience – helped temper the forward-looking optimism often associated with what would come to be known as Deweyian instrumentalism. Writing in 1894, Cabot reflected on the difference in temperament between Dewey and Royce:

> Dewey perhaps understates what Royce dwells on too much – the storm-stress aspects of life. Dewey's attitude is tremendously healthy . . . and he is not without feeling and appreciation as the half-unintentional touches in his books show. But could he possibly have such a wide sympathy as Royce with mystics and romanticists? Could he be as fair to them as Royce is? And if not is his position the best one! A healthy scorn for all things abstract and spiritual is a bracing tonic, but passion and pathos and the tragedy and mystery . . . must be met with understanding criticism not mere condemnation.[8]

Most pragmatists resisted the ingrained, often destructive symptoms of Christian ideology of nineteenth-century America, setting themselves against fanaticism of all forms and the stultifying effects that dogma had on individuals and their communities. Royce, aware of the pitfalls of institutionalized religion, recognized the valuable role that religion has, *for better and for worse*, played in the lives of individuals; this was Royce's second contribution to the pragmatic tradition. In his diary of 1873, several years prior to meeting Royce, James reflects on this value: "Religion in its most abstract expression may be defined as the affirmation that all is <u>not</u> vanity."[9] Vanity, the grim prospect that our limited efforts come to naught, defines large swathes of human experience. In spite of this fact, we doggedly, triumphantly, often irrationally marshal on. James was fascinated by this determination. His close interaction with Royce encouraged him to face the challenge of adjusting pragmatism to account for the full range and depth of human experience, an experience willfully embraced despite its inevitable limitations. According to James, pragmatism was to make philosophy more "tough-minded," more scientific, experiential and empirically grounded. Yet pragmatism was also to preserve the "tender-minded" temperament which was keenly attuned to the existential situation to which religion responds and the actionable belief that religion entails – namely that life is worth living.

But is it? In his 1895 article, "Is Life Worth Living?" James keeps the answer to that question intentionally vague: "Maybe." For the pragmatist, religious belief is an open question or possibility, not a promise. Maybe there is afterlife; maybe there is a transcendent spiritual

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reality; maybe there is redemption to our suffering. James's audience was disappointed by his ambiguity, but he explained that scientific life has much to do with "maybes," and human life on the whole has everything to do with them. Scientific advancement, political revolution, social reform, evolutionary adaptation, psychological treatment: all turn upon a "maybe," a risky possibility that things may turn out otherwise. Why should we expect more certitude from religious beliefs?

Just as fallibilism does not have to threaten scientific inquiry, existential risk does not cut short life's broader projects in which human beings seek meaning. To the contrary, only by risking ourselves in an encounter with possibility do we broaden our projects and ourselves. Possibility exists at the border of selfhood, a permeable, indeterminate, precarious region that individuals explore at their own peril. The danger is real, but so, too, are the meaningful alternatives that can only be found in this experiential borderland. In "Circles," Emerson sets the groundwork for a pragmatic conception of selfhood: "There is no outside, no enclosing wall, no circumference to us."[10] This comment can cut in one of two directions, both of which provided fruitful avenues for thinkers such as James, Dewey, and Addams.

First, Emerson suggests that experience is essentially open-ended, a fact that corresponds to a metaphysical position that holds that the universe itself is not bounded by a set of determinable limits. Pragmatism maintains that there is neither a single god's-eye view to be sought nor a totalizing divine force to be worshiped. If anything is to be considered sacred, it is time itself, the medium through which individual humans work out the creative business of living. Second, Emerson points to the fact of continuity; there are no walls that *inherently* cordon off the ground of experience. This openness is at once an invitation for communion and conversation.

The fact that modernity continues to be defined by disciplinary, interpersonal, and experiential divides has nothing to do with experience itself, but rather with the rigid conceptual schemes that individuals habitually employ, often to poor effect, in understanding their respective worlds. When an individual peers over these self-imposed walls, James believes that one catches sight of "a universe ... that possesses in its own right a concatenated or continuous structure."[11] When this individual ventures beyond the narrow confines of self-definition, there is the chance to experience this relational world, with all of its subtle and novel connections, as one's own. Failing to venture, according to Emerson, constitutes "the only sin," for it forfeits the potentiality that quietly resides at the heart of being human. It is in this sense that "experience" is not only a description, but also an imperative.

If failing to recognize fertile possibilities in one's own life is a sin, it follows that individuals have a moral obligation to foster communities and societies that provide the vistas and pathways by which individuals can explore their own experiential frontiers. This is the conclusion that drove classical pragmatists into a variety of academic disciplines in order to develop living networks that embody this ideal. It led Peirce to a new vision of science as the cooperative processes of a certain type of community. In the 1890s, John Dewey extended Peirce's insight concerning group dynamics in order to place educational and democratic theory on a new footing. Jane Addams followed suit a decade later by employing it in es-

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tablishing the early peace movement and cultivating social reform in Chicago. George Herbert Mead, Addams's colleague in the 1920s, adjusted this angle of vision in order to develop the basis for a significant branch of modern sociology.

At the core of the pragmatic understanding of community are three related tenets, all of which stem from experience: interpretation, pluralism, and loyalty. Experience does not come ready-made as discrete points of sense-data, but rather blooms with meaning as individuals tend it in the process of careful interpretation. According to Peirce, neither meaning nor truth are simply matters of objective fact, but rather matters of inter-subjective interpretation. It is in this sense that he states, "Nature is a book which science interprets."[12] This is not to say that the findings of science are the stuff of whim and fancy. Genuine interpretation always points to an object that is being interpreted. In the case of nature, the object of interpretation is never wholly stable, but this dynamic object can, and does, serve as the ground on which science makes its collective findings. According to Peirce, the "dynamical object" provides the limits, but also the enabling conditions, for scientific interpretation. The limits of interpretation are set by nature but also by the course of human history. Even the most novel interpretation depends on convention – the history of past interpretations – for its communicability. The pragmatists appropriated the long-held understanding of aesthetic taste as being conveyed in a common sense, and claimed that it might provide a systematic organization for the sciences.

Pragmatic common sense is a curiously flexible benchmark. It expands, contracts, and evolves under the pressure of current circumstance, in accord with the living struggles of the present. At every moment, its emergence, like the development of natural selection, depends on the precondition of variation. Without a variety of perspectives, the scientific community would be ill-equipped to deal with the indeterminacy of novel situations. The pragmatic concern for pluralism is not merely an issue of convenience or expediency, but one of experiential honesty. If we are honest with experience, we cannot neglect its variety of forms, each with its own qualitative dimension. It is impossible to anticipate which perspective will prove fortuitous in the course of human inquiry. "Fortuitous" variation is only identified in hindsight; in the midst of development there is only variation *tout court* and its continual engagement with experiential realities.

Interpretation and pluralism serve as the drivers of pragmatic inquiry, but thinkers such as Royce and James knew that these ideas lacked power without the energy of loyalty, or the will to believe. Pragmatism hoped to redeploy the notion of loyalty, often associated with the willingness to adopt the cause of a particular or exclusive group. In so doing, it maintained that the identification of individual interests with communal projects could, and should, be inclusive and seek the greatest degree of participation without compromising the personal stakes that underpin the lives of individuals.

In the 1930s, at a time when rigid ideological categories defined international and domestic affairs, John Dewey continued to express a loyalty to cultural and political pluralism. Pluralism, a vital lesson of experience, was not to remain hide-bound in lecture halls and libraries, but let loose and enacted in the public square. While Peirce and James

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celebrated diversity primarily in theory, Dewey and Addams translated this celebration into projects of social activism. In so doing, they began to make pragmatism truly practical. As a founding member of the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Dewey maintained, "[A] progressive society counts individual variations as precious since it finds in them the means of its own growth."[13] He continually, if not unerringly, sought to honor, encounter, and foster diversity, taking the message of *Democracy and Education* to Japan and China in 1919; seeking education reform in Turkey in 1924 and in the Soviet Union in 1928; and chairing the Dewey Commission in 1936, which aimed to engage and critique the growth of authoritarianism in Communist Russia.

Dewey's intent as a public intellectual, however, was not to set "freedom on the march," but to explore carefully and humbly those political frontiers that remained uncharted. His initial endorsement of American interventionism in World War I quickly shifted in light of the experiential realities that emerged after the military confrontation. In a remark that remains disturbingly prescient, Dewey maintained that the war (and the subsequent peace) failed, to the extent that it prioritized abstract ideals over experiential evidence:

> [The United States] took into the war our sentiment, our attachment to moral sentiment...our pious optimism as to the inevitable victory of the "right," our childish belief that physical energy can do the work that only intelligence can do, our evangelical hypocrisy that morals and ideals have a self-propelling and self-executing capacity.[14]

The ideals of freedom and pluralism can neither march on their own nor be dictated to a foreign population. At best, they can be embodied in diplomatic missions that seek to expose alternatives and possibilities indigenous to experience and that might be cooperatively negotiated.

Advocating a genuinely pragmatic approach to foreign policy is difficult in a nation of ideals. It becomes nearly impossible when exceptionalism and nationalism are among these ideals. Jane Addams learned this lesson the hard way. Having been quicker than Dewey to denounce U.S. military involvement in the early years of the twentieth century, Addams was deemed "the most dangerous woman in America" by Theodore Roosevelt in 1917. In a time of war, cooperation was a subversive act. Her work with the Women's Peace Party stemmed directly from the social reform that Addams spearheaded at Hull House beginning in 1889. Addams suggested that instead of traveling abroad in order to experience genuine difference, one needed only open her eyes and step through any doorway in nineteenth-century Chicago, just beyond the stereotypes that bar the way of mutual understanding. The settlement house movement that Addams initiated was unique in its approach to cultural difference and took pragmatism not only as its intellectual touchstone, but as an enduring way of life.

Working among the immigrant poor of Chicago led Addams to recognize "lessons of experience" that could never be replicated in the elite academic centers of the Northeast. Residents of Hull House emphasized the value of local diversity, the unique relation that individuals living in close quarters had to language, ethnicity, gender, and class differ-

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ences. Addams reinforced the pragmatic thesis that experience is never had at a distance, but only in the intimate familiarity of local and provincial circumstances. Today, provincialism has the connotations of restriction and narrow perspective. Addams, however, suggested that fostering democratic practices must begin at home, in the neighborhoods and locales where experiential knowledge takes place. She endorsed provincialism for countering the broad and damaging generalizations that accompany and exacerbate the tensions of class and race. Pragmatism was, after all, a middle-range theory that aimed to clip the wings of abstract concepts in order to ground philosophy in the particularities of everyday life. *Twenty Years at Hull House* roots Addams's pragmatic commitment in the ability and enthusiastic willingness to live amidst concrete issues of difference. Describing the residents of a settlement house, she writes, "They must be content to live quietly side by side with their neighbors, until they grow into a sense of relationship and mutual interests."[15]

Just as Emerson suggested that being quiet was necessary to attune oneself to the "slightest sensorial nuance," Addams held that a type of active receptivity was integral to identifying the subtle needs of a diverse community. The pragmatic desire to identify mutual interests stood against a bureaucratic imposition of projects and purposes on a given community. Handling social difference is never a matter of dictation and assimilation, but rather the careful process of integration in which ideals are recast in order to accommodate the widest range of living realities. This sort of accommodation and integration provided the basis for the social progressive movement on the whole, and more particularly, the pragmatic conception of meliorism.

This approach to thoughtful living and social reform seems so difficult, so ambiguous, so complicated. *So why bother?* This is perhaps the most difficult question that philosophy ever has to confront. Cabot repeatedly faced the challenges entailed in thinking, working, and living pragmatically. Being attentive to experience, and more specifically, being wide-eyed to the experience of others, caused Cabot to suffer from what she called a type of "moral sleeplessness." After a trip to Hull House in the early 1890s, Cabot began to formulate her reasons for bearing the sleeplessness that attends the social and political projects of pragmatism. She wrote, "[T]he art of living is becoming other people."[16] This pithy statement lends itself to two interpretative frames. First, individuals participate in the "art of living" to the extent that they continually and creatively expand their experiential horizons. In effect, each of us engages in a process of self-discovery, uncovering broader, deeper, and more intricate aspects of ourselves. Second, this process of self-discovery depends on an individual's ability to find oneself in a wider community of interpretation. The cultivation of selfhood is never an isolated affair, but an interpersonal project of integrating a variety of purposes and interests. Our empathetic and careful involvement with others always determines the extent to which we "become other people."

"What the true definition of Pragmatism may be, I find it very hard to say."[17] Peirce was correct when he penned these words in 1903, yet somehow it's become easier than ever to say, quite confidently, "I am a pragmatist." What exactly are we saying when we claim to be pragmatists? When William James addressed this question in his 1907 Lowell Lectures,

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he concluded that this American intellectual tradition was "a *new* name for some old ways of thinking." Today it is no longer a new name. Indeed pragmatism seems rather worn down, a tool damaged by use and misuse. Like any instance of jargon, "pragmatism" risks becoming an old name with a forgotten history.

Genuinely reviving this American philosophical tradition depends on our ability to retrace and extend various ways of *thinking through experience*. Pragmatism is difficult to define because it is not one thing. It bespeaks ways, directions, and pathmarks that guide us in traversing the rough terrain of the experiential landscape. In its attempt to reclaim the original meaning of philosophia, a relatively small group of American thinkers began to do just that, giving voice to the enduring lessons that only experience has to offer.

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ENDNOTES

1 I would like to thank Dr. Robert Innis for his suggestions and encouragement in the drafting of this article.

2 William James, "Pragmatism's Conception of Truth," in *Pragmatism* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1907), 222.

3 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 5, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1934), 37.

4 Emerson writes, "Life is a series of surprises"; Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Joel Porte and Saundra Morris (New York: Norton Critical Edition, 2001), 181.

5 Charles Sanders Peirce, *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 6, ed. Max Fisch (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 498.

6 James, "What Pragmatism Means," in *Pragmatism*, 58.

7 Ella Lyman Cabot, "Philosophy and Nature," December 13, 1884, in Assorted Poetry, Ella Lyman Cabot Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, (A-139) Folder 226.

8 Ella Lyman Cabot, "Notebook 1892," in Philosophical Reflections, Ella Lyman Cabot Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, (A-139) Folder 320.

9 William James, "Notebook 1873," William James Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, MS AM 1092.9 (4500).

10 Emerson, "Circles," in *Emerson's Prose and Poetry*, ed. Porte and Morris, 175.

11 William James, *The Meaning of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 7.

12 Peirce, *Writings of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. 1, ed. Fisch, 55.

13 John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1916), 357.

14 John Dewey, "Force and Ideals," in *Characters and Events: Essays in Social and Political Philosophy by John Dewey*, vol. 2, ed. Joseph Ratner (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1929), 631.

15 Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull House* (New York: Macmillan and Company, 1911), 126.

16 Ella Lyman Cabot, "Notebook on Growth," in Philosophical Reflections, Ella Lyman Cabot Collection, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, (A-139)

Folder 324. See also John Kaag, "Women and Forgotten Movements in American Philosophy: The Work of Ella Lyman Cabot and Mary Parker Follett," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 44 (1) (Winter 2008): 134–157.

[17] Charles Sanders Peirce, *Pragmatism as Principle and Method of Right Thinking: The 1903 Harvard Lectures on Pragmatism*, ed. Patricia Turrisi (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 164.

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