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# Sympathy and Inquiry: A Reinterpretation of Jane Addams on Epistemic Injustice

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## Abstract

Reviving the work of Jane Addams as a significant contribution to the canon of classical pragmatism has opened a way of examining the intersection of pragmatism and feminism that is both constructive and problematic. Charlene Seigfried writes that Addams shows how pragmatism and feminism are natural allies systematically and thematically: the pragmatist integration of theory and practice, personal and political, and facts and values can be a resource for feminist epistemology and its emancipatory projects, opposing the model of a masculinized universal knower through emphases on feeling and negotiation. According to Seigfried, Addams is distinguished from her fellow pragmatists by drawing on a diverse range of experiences beyond the white male middle class and developing her pragmatist account of experience from women's experiences, particularly neglected groups such as working-class and elderly women. Closest aligned are Jane Addams and John Dewey, whose theory, Seigfried argues, underpins Addams's practice, though she suggests that Dewey is less aware than Addams of the extent and depth of oppressive social institutions and how power operates within them. In retrieving the lost feminist tradition in pragmatism, as found in Addams, Seigfried seeks to make pragmatism of use to feminism.

But the political gradualism of Dewey's pragmatism is rooted in a logic of continuity that renders problematic its deployment in service of feminist epistemology, particularly as regards the recognition of radical difference. Though Addams sometimes exhibits a similar structure of appropriation, I argue, against Seigfried's conflation, that her concept of *sympathetic understanding* is an alternative to a Deweyan model of inquiry centered on *shared interest*, as revealed by Addams's parallels with Josiah Royce's philosophy of loyalty. If sympathetic understanding is acknowledged as systematically different while nevertheless consonant with Dewey's pragmatism, then the link between Addams and feminist epistemology, such as that of Linda Alcoff, may be a guide to how to maintain pragmatic theories of value and knowledge while overcoming the limits of what I will call pragmatic gradualism. Pragmatic gradualism is attentive to what is subordinated and insists on reciprocal knowledge relations, but precludes the emergence of radical difference through its commitment to the ambiguous wholeness of the public. By contrast, if sympathy has a transcendent status in sympathetic understanding, a priority of difference could be internal to it. And if sympathetic understanding intersects with the notion of friendship as a motive for recognition of epistemic injustice invoked by Maria Lugones, feminist epistemology might in turn help to produce new possibilities for pragmatism.

Addams's concept of sympathetic understanding has much in common with Dewey's model of inquiry centered on shared interest, and Addams commits errors of appropriation in *Long Road of Woman's Memory* that arguably inflict epistemic injustice, but systematically, sympathetic understanding is capable of a more radical receptivity. If sympathy is for Addams as

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loyalty is for Royce, then it is a principle that transcends fallibilism, and she does not follow Dewey's logic of continuity. Even if sympathetic understanding is often constructively bound up in shared interest, it is not encompassed by the ambiguous wholeness of the public which the logic of continuity represents. What sympathetic understanding can grasp, then, is not just the possibility that shared value *might* not emerge from the encounter with the other, which Dewey can countenance, but that the production of shared value *may be impossible* even as recognition is nevertheless demanded.

**Keywords:** Jane Addams, John Dewey, Josiah Royce, Charlene Seigfried, sympathetic understanding, sympathy, inquiry, continuity, epistemic injustice, loyalty, difference, feminism, fallibilism