Addams’s Theorizing in “Personal Reactions During the War

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“Personal Reactions During the War,” a chapter in Jane Addams’s *Peace and Bread in Time of War*, is generally read as an autobiographical account of the psychic costs Addams suffered for remaining a pacifist throughout World War One. This is understandable, as Addams writes of how negative press reports gave her a “bald sense of social opprobrium,” resulting in “self-pity, perhaps the lowest pit into which human nature can sink.” She went through “dark periods of faint-heartedness” and experienced the “demons” of her enforced solitude, as she fell into “spiritual alienation” from her former colleagues. In her concluding statement, she declares “the categorical belief that a man’s primary allegiance is to his vision of the truth and that he is under obligation to affirm it” (P&B 86). This has been read as Addams abandoning pragmatism and withdrawing into idealism.

            The chapter is in fact a sophisticated pragmatist exploration of what stance to take during wartime, one that challenges fellow pragmatists such as John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, who supported U.S. participation in the war. Addams’s analysis draws on international and multi-disciplinary sources, including French literary figures Romain Rolland and Henri Barbusse; Swiss philosopher and poet Henri Frédéric Amiel; German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche and scientist Georg Frederick Nicolai; British writers John Stuart Mill, Lowes Dickinson, John Hobson, Henry Brailsford, John Hobden, and Joseph Conrad; and American scientists David Starr Jordan and George Nasmyth.

            Theorists during World War One, both those supporting war and those objecting to war, called on social evolutionary theorizing to support their claims. Addams followed this practice. She places her statements of self-doubt, isolation, and alienation in the context of then current theories of collective psychology, particularly those of British neurosurgeon and social psychologist Wilfred Trotter, British psychologist William McDougall, and German physiologist Georg Frederick Nicolai. These authors use humans’ gregarious, social, and sympathetic instincts to underscore the centrality of associated life for human well-being and the psychic costs of isolation. Here, Addams’s autobiographical statements show her willingness to place herself inside the theories on which she draws, rather than posing as an objective, rational outsider observer. She also draws on John Stuart Mill’s discussions of how much we are subtly affected by others’ feelings, thinking, and sympathy. The proper response to a sense of isolation is not a Nietzschean spirit of defiance, nor an assertion of individualistic autonomy, but careful scrutiny and empirical backing for one’s position.

            Addams cites many scientific theories as bases for her continuing opposition to the war. Using German physiologist Georg Frederick Nicolai’s *The Biology of War*, and American scientist George Nasymth’s *Social Progress and Darwinian Theory*, she counters the then-popular position that war could serve to further society’s evolution as a misinterpretation of Darwin. She reinforces these with British economic and political theorists Henry Brailsford, John Hobson, and Lowes Dickinson.

            Addams’s conclusion that “a man’s primary allegiance is to his vision of the truth and that he is under obligation to affirm it,” should be set next to Mill’s statement that “it is [a thinker’s] first duty to follow his intellect to whatever conclusions it may lead.” In calling this a “categorical belief” Addams highlights how in war, an intellectual is placed in an extreme and anomalous situation. She had previously used John Morley’s *On Compromise*, a highly regarded text among Victorian political thinkers, to justify compromises she had made. Morley argues that compromises are morally acceptable if one advocates for the “best possible” result that also keeps open opportunities for further discussion and reassessment. War is the one circumstance in which these opportunities are closed. Pragmatists, committed to testing the validity of their stances in practice, find that war also makes such testing impossible. All that is left is to claim allegiance to those positions found most convincing through historical and scientific examination. Addams challenges Dewey, Mead and other war supporters to identify those experiences upon which “this pathetic belief in the regenerative results of war could be founded.”

            Addams’s reasoning about pacifism in wartime is valuable as model of how to work creatively with materials from multidisciplinary and international sources. While the specific theories Addams calls on are now outdated, she creatively brings them to bear on what was the most pressing issue of her day, an issue that was at once deeply personal and of international reach: What stance is one to take, as a morally, socially, and intellectually responsible being, toward war? The pattern Addams creates is valuable to us as we seek contemporary resources for addressing contemporary problems.