Classical Pragmatism: Engaging Practitioner Experience

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A universe of experience is a precondition for a universe of discourse.

(Dewey, 1938, p.74*)*

The attainment of settled beliefs is a progressive matter; there is no belief so settled as not to be exposed to future inquiry. (Dewey, 1938, p. 8)

In "Why Old Pragmatism Needs an Upgrade" Hugh Miller (forthcoming) praised my recent article "The Community of Inquiry: Classical Pragmatism and Public Administration" and suggested I start including the ideas of new pragmatists like Richard Rorty in my scholarship because in the newer version "public administration would work better" (Miller, forthcoming). I checked out Rorty as Miller suggested and returned with a new appreciation for classical pragmatism and with the belief that public administration needs classical pragmatism not Rorty's linguistic pragmatism.(1) This article gives my reasons and responds to some of Miller's challenges.

All my articles on classical pragmatism and public administration have had an overriding theme. (2) Classical pragmatism contributes to the field of public administration because it embraces the practitioner's "world of tangled, muddy, painful, and perplexing concrete *experience"* (James, 1907, p.21). It makes no sense to "upgrade" classical pragmatism with Rorty's version (3) that dismisses experience as "linguistic behavior" (Rorty, 1995b, p. 97). Rorty and Miller got it wrong because they misinterpreted Dewey (4) and because a linguisticized (5) pragmatism "is out of touch

with ordinary experience and the possible new meanings contained in ordinary experience"(6) (Dewey, 1929, p.6). Classical pragmatism, on the other hand, encourages public administration practitioners to use experience to enrich their lives and the lives of the citizens they serve.

The Elephant Revisited

Early in my "Community of Inquiry" article, I used the Buddhist parable of the blind men and the elephant to demonstrate the three principles of the Community of Inquiry -- problematic situation, scientific attitude and participatory democracy. Miller misrepresented the example.

In the Buddhist version, the three blind men are unable to go beyond their limited view (it's a rope - tail; it's a fan - ear; it's a tree - leg). Miller (forthcoming) suggests I see the light because I seemingly conclude, "we are all trapped inside our limited self and cannot know the truth" (Shields, 2003, p.513). This is where; according to Miller, new pragmatism and old pragmatism have "common ground." Unfortunately, Miller (forthcoming) neglected to note that I did not conclude with the Buddhist parable. *He stopped where my point began.* Classical pragmatism's "community of inquiry" departs dramatically from the story and the "trapped" assessment.

If the blind men faced their *problematic situation* (what is this thing?) using Dewey's ideas they would talk to each other and move around the elephant feeling, touching and smelling. They would engage the empirical world. They would share their experiences with an open mind. They would ask, why do we want to know what this is (have a purpose)? They would also test working hypotheses bringing the *scientific attitude* to bear. They might hypothesize that if it were a tree, it would feel like wood; if

it were a tree, it would not move…. Their investigation would spur action (testing the hypotheses), more questions, more working hypotheses, and more action.(7)

The insight of the classical pragmatist is that by engaging the empirical world in an experimental way and cooperative discussion the blind men have a greater chance of understanding the nature of the world around them. Their sense of the elephant is transformed through inquiry. They will never *see* the elephant (know Truth). They will, however, *not* "be trapped inside their limited selves" with no chance of getting closer to understanding the nature of the elephant.

Now consider a group of Rorty's linguistic pragmatists as the blind men. They would not touch, smell, feel, or measure the elephant. Their experience is only a "concept about reality. It is not reality" (Miller, forthcoming). They would retire to a meeting room and use words alone to try to reach solidarity because objectivity was impossible. Further, this "solidarity" would involve choices about "the many ways to talk about what is going on," none of these ways would move the group "closer to the way things are" (Rorty, 1998, p.1).

There is also an irony here. The blind men begin their discussion by first experiencing the elephant. The discourse began because of their initial experience. Thus supporting Dewey's insight about discourse – "A universe of experience is a precondition for a universe of discourse" (Dewey, 1938, p. 74).

Rorty and Experience

Rorty applauds classical pragmatism, because it repudiates fondationalist notions in traditional philosophy. He renounces classical pragmatism for reconstructing concepts

like experience, reality and inquiry. According to Rorty, Dewey's notion of experience resembled traditional foundational metaphysics because it provided a "permanent neutral matrix for future inquiry" (Rorty, 1982, p. 81). By focusing "on the relation between language and the rest of the world rather than between experience and nature" he maintains that his linguistic pragmatism is better able to make a radical break from the foundationalist philosophic tradition (Rorty, 1985, p.40). Thus he replaces language with experience as a centerpiece notion of neo-pragmatism.

Public Administration: Discipline and Practice

Barry Boseman and Jeffrey Straussman (1984, p. 1) distinguish between public administration and Public Administration. The lower case version refers to the practice of public administration and the upper case version refers to the discipline or field of study. Classical pragmatism is appealing because it speaks to both the discipline and the practice. Rorty's linguistic pragmatism limits it effective audience to the discipline and in the process, throws out the essence of the field. Unlike social science disciplines like economics, political science and sociology, Public Administration is tied to the group of professionals that engage in public administration practice. The field of PA would not exist without practitioners. Classical pragmatism is appealing because it offers theory and method that is a gold mine for scholarship. Perhaps more importantly it contains useful organizing principles like the "community of inquiry" that can be applied in practice. Thoughtful practitioners want a field rich in theory and academic rigor. They also want this theory to resonate with their professional experience and be useful in their everyday organizational lives. (Bolton and Stolcis, 2003).

Dewey and Theory-Practice-Product

Dewey's logic of inquiry celebrates the practitioner. This becomes clear if Dewey's philosophy is compared with the ancient Greek's fundamentalist view of theory. "The Greeks used *theoras, praxis* and *poiesis* to classify ways of knowing. Theoras (theory) is derived from the Greek word Theos or god. Theory dealt with 'fixed essence' of nature." Plato, like Rorty, had disregard for the empirical world. To Plato, "aesthetic contemplation precluded or rendered inferior any serious interest in engaging the empirical world in an experimental way" (Hickman 1990, p.107). Praxis (or practice) described the concrete performance of activities based on the deliberate choice of free citizens' (Hickman, 1990, p.107). Poiesis (or product) is associated with productive activities.

In Greek culture "ways of knowing were identified with ways of life" (Hickman, 1990, p. 109). The Greek social organization reflected this ranking, the most prestigious group, the philosopher's, engaged in contemplation, the artisan's (sculptor, ship designer) engaged in making, the craftsman (carpenter, shipbuilder) handle the society's production of goods and services. The Greek philosophic formation, reinforced by a social structure, created a "division between practice and theory, experience and reason" (Dewey, 1938, p. 73). The PA practitioner toils in both the worlds of praxis and poiesis. One can see how this Greek conceptual scheme would give the activities of the practicing public administrator a low status.

Dewey demonstrated how modern science disregarded the Greek hierarchy. For modern science, "theory became a tool of practice and practice a means to the production

of new effects. Theory no longer had to deal with final certainty but instead as working

hypotheses with the tentative and the unsolved" (Hickman, 1990, p.99). In other words,

according to Dewey, scientific progress occurred in the interaction between practice and

production (the empirical, experiential world). Further, the world of work and

experimental method, suppressed by aristocratic politics, is "liberated and rationally

transformed by democratic culture, and hence by a philosophy that assimilates theoretical

to practical and productive reason" (Depew, 1995, p. 7). Theory is not foundational,

rather a tool that mediates scientific progress.

Public administration is most clearly set in the worlds of practice and production -

linked to the empirical world of experience. For classical pragmatism, theory and

language are essential tools that enable discovery, interpretation, understanding, synthesis

etc. Why would disregarding experience make public administration "work better" as

Miller suggests?

If PA were to use classical pragmatism as an organizing principle the logic and

method of science would provide a framework for both theory and experience. This

framework is not foundational. It works best within a problematic situation and a

democratic community – a community of inquiry!

The Detectives

The blind men example is perhaps far afield from the problems of public

administration. Lets consider the example that opens my "Community of Inquiry" article,

the homicide detectives in P.D. James' novel *A Certain Justice*. The detectives debate the

meaning of the evidence (knife) using a scientific attitude -*working hypotheses* and the

knowledge that *inquiries go wrong* when the police *act in advance of the facts (8)* (scientific attitude). Participatory democracy is revealed in their dialogue.

The detectives explore the problem of the homicide within a "situation" and "experience" that includes laws and norms like justice. Laws come into play because first, murder is a crime. Secondly, laws govern how the detectives can conduct the investigation. Miller uses linguistic pragmatism to challenge both the role of law and norms in public administration. By throwing out the scientific attitude and experience the "radical implications of the situational orientation" are "clarified" (Miller, forthcoming). Thus, "government is not constituted by laws, but by the problems it manages." For classical pragmatists, laws are part of the problematic situation and experience. Discounting, laws would not square with the practitioner's experience. (9)

The detectives also take into account norms like justice as they consider the problematic situation. Why would Miller suggest that when a norm like justice is incorporated into the problematic situation, classical pragmatism becomes a "vulgar instrument" and a "handmaiden" of an "ethical presupposition" (Miller, forthcoming)? Laws, justice, knives, knowledge of past investigations are all part of the detectives ordinary experience. This experience is more than a "word-shaped object whose meaning is up for grabs" (Miller, forthcoming). In contrast, classical pragmatism's focus on inquiry and reflection is about giving an experience meaning.

I am having a hard time imagining a detective team made up of linguistic pragmatists. How would they solve the murder? Would laws be considered in the discourse? "Facts" and "evidence" would be nothing more than "word-shaped object (s) whose meaning(s) is (are) up for grabs" (Miller, forthcoming). All that is needed is "an

approximate mixture of unforced agreement with tolerant disagreement" (Rorty, 1991, p. 41). Unfortunately, there is no reason to believe that the result of this agreement would have merit in a court of law or that justice would be served.

Neither linguistic pragmatism nor classical pragmatism will guarantee that the detectives discover how the murder occurred; who killed the victim, get a conviction, or that justice is achieved. There is no certainty or absolute Truth. I am arguing that the classical approach would reach a better outcome – an outcome that conforms with end-in-view or purposes of the investigation - more often. This argument has validity on its face.

Experience and Language

Aside from challenging the role of the "scientific attitude" in classical pragmatism, Miller (forthcoming) uses language to assert that experience is a foundational concept in classical pragmatism. Perhaps he is confusing Dewey with British empiricists such as David Hume, John Stuart Mills, and Bertrand Russell. These men link experience with sense data. They also suggest that logical propositions (words) linked to sense data can lead to immutable truth. Thus, "a foundation is provided by the data of immediate experience. Sense data or introspective data or both are taken to yield the allegedly required absolute certainty" (Kaufman, 1950, p. 219). Dewey did not adhere to this position because it disregards the fact that knowledge is essentially contextual. "Isolated sense data or introspective data are not objects of knowledge; they acquire cognitive functions only when they are employed as signs of something beyond themselves" (Kaufman, 1950, p. 219). "Dewey is likewise opposed to the rationalist claim that empirical knowledge, …must have an immutable basis which is provided by

logic" (Kaufman, 1950, p. 219). This view is indeed one of the chief targets of his criticism, He never tires of driving home the point that the quest for certainty, for the immutable and indubitable is incompatible with the acknowledgement of the autonomy of the self-correcting process of inquiry." (Kaufman, 1950, p. 219 and Dewey, 1920).

Miller (forthcoming) uses a correspondence theory (10) of language to assert that experience is a foundational concept in classical pragmatism. In other words, Miller asserts that classical pragmatism includes a "direct denotative link between words and fact" (Miller, forthcoming). This assertion is wrong. Dewey has a sophisticated theory of language. "The fundamental principle of Dewey's theory of language is that language is a tool used in transforming some phase of the raw material of experience into new objects according to some purpose" (Wienphal, 1950 p. 272). (11)

Far from asserting a correspondence between words and facts "Speech forms are our great carriers: The easy-running vehicles by which meanings are transported from experiences that no longer concern us to those that are yet dark and dubious" (Dewey, 1910, 175).

Dewey's Criticism of Rorty's Pragmatism

Rorty's linguistic pragmatism substitutes language for experience and is unabashedly non-empirical. In *Experience and Nature,* Dewey (1929, p.6) challenges non-empirical philosophies on grounds that ring true today. First, "there is no verification - no effort to test and checks". Second, "the things of ordinary experience do not get enlargement and enrichment of meaning as they do when approached through the

medium of scientific principles and reasoning." Here he is referring to engaging experience in an experimental way. Third, because non-empirical philosophies are out of touch with ordinary experience and the possible new meanings contained in experience the philosophy itself "becomes arbitrary, aloof -'abstract' when that word is used in a bad sense to designate something which exclusively occupies a realm of its own without contact with the things of ordinary experience." From the perspective of the practitioner, Rorty's linguistic pragmatism is aloof and abstract in the "bad sense." Public administration is a field of study that cannot be separated from the ordinary experience of practitioners. The beauty of classical pragmatism is that it focuses on inquiry. Inquiry is the landscape where experience is given meaning. It is also the landscape where theory and practice meet. Reflective practitioners can used the principles of pragmatism to engage the empirical world, grow intellectually, listen to colleagues and citizens and act in the public interest. This makes public administration better!

Endnotes

(1) What Miller refers to as new pragmatism is more generally referred to as neopragmatism, post-modern pragmatism or linguistic pragmatism (Hildebrand, 2003a and 2003b). I use linguistic pragmatism because it is the most descriptive. Rorty (1995a, p.35) proclaims that "I linguisticize as many pre-linguistic-turn philosophies as I can, in order to read them as prophets of the utopia in which all metaphysical problems have been dissolved, and religion and science have yielded their place to poetry."

(2) See Shields (1996); Shields (1998); Shields (1999); Shields (2002); Shields (2003a & b).

(3) According to Hollinger and Depew (1995, p. xv) pragmatism has gone through three stages - classical pragmatism, positivized pragmatism and post-modern pragmatism. The positivized pragmatism of Charles Morris moved pragmatism closer to logical positivism. Hollinger and Depew (1995) argue that Rorty was reacting to the positivized pragmatism of the 1930s and 1940s and misread classical pragmatist's like Dewey.

(4) The most comprehensive discussion of how Rorty misinterpreted Dewey is Hildebrandt (2003a and 2003b). Other philosophers that document how Rorty got it wrong are Haak (2000), Hickman (1990), Gouinlock, Alexander (1987), Westbrook (1991).

(5) See endnote one for a Rorty quote using "linguisticize."

(6) According to Thomas Alexander (1987, p.57) from the beginnings of Dewey's philosophic life "he was concerned with developing a theory which would do justice to the fullness, richness, and organic complexity of experience." Thus it is impossible to summarize Dewey's notion of experience in an article. Indeed, Dewey wrote three books that dealt with different dimensions of experience *Art as Experience, Experience and Education, Experience and Nature*. Although inadequate, Alexander (1987, p. xiii) has a useful depiction of Dewey's notion of experience. For Dewey, "experience" meant "a process situated in a natural environment, mediated by a socially shared symbolic system, actively exploring and responding to the ambiguities of the world by seeking to render the most problematic of them determinate." In *Art as Experience,* Dewey (1934) focused on the aesthetic quality of an experience. Alas, the "Art of Public Administration" examined through the lenses of Dewey's pragmatism is the subject for another article.

(7) In addition, the process of discovery is itself a worthwhile human endeavor with the potential to enrich the lives of the investigators in unknown ways. Asking and answering questions can be fun, intellectually stimulating, friendships can begin and deepen – transformations occur. Further the blind men might discover some unknown use for this thing (the elephant) or develop a tool that can be used to test what the elephant (or something else) might be.

(8) This is a public administration example. In addition, given the regulatory and investigatory role of government – the detective example has widespread application. Consider both the concerned taxpayer and the honest public administrator. Would either prefer the internal auditors about to visit a public agency to be guided by linguistic pragmatism? I think not.

(9) Miller's understanding of Dewey appears to have come primarily through Rorty and other post modernist commentary about Dewey's pragmatism. He gives the impression that classical pragmatism has a narrow old fashion view of both government and laws. Perhaps Miller should read Dewey's (1954/1927) *The Public and its Problems* to get a more accurate representation of Dewey's ideas.

(10) I found this section of Miller's argument confusing. I scanned several philosophy books including those written by Rorty. I was unable to find an index word linked to "correspondence theory." Most indices nestled "correspondence" under truth. According to Rorty (1998, p. 1), people that believe in the correspondence theory of truth "Think that truth is correspondence to the way reality 'really is'." I am just not sure how Miller's reference to "facts and language" fits here. What correspondence theory is he referring to?

(11) Dewey (1938, p. 46) even suggests that tools are a mode of language. "A tool or machine ... is not simply a simple or complex physical object having its own physical properties and effects, but is also a mode of language. For is *says* something, to those who understand it, about operations of use and their consequences.

Dewey (as cited in Winn, 1959, p. 71) asserts a relationship between language and indirect experience. "All language, all symbols, are implements of an indirect experience; in technical language the experience which is procured by their means is 'mediated.' It stands in contrast with an immediate, direct experience, something I which we take part vitally and at first hand, instead of though the intervention of representative media... Direct experience is very limited, If it were not for the intervention of agencies for representing absent and distant affairs, our experience would remain almost on the level of that of the brutes. Every step from savagery to civilization is dependent upon the invention of media which enlarge the range of purely immediate experience."

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