Title: Jane Addams: Educating Toward Constructive and Reflective Listening

Abstract:

This paper is an exposition of the educative philosophy of listening developed in the work of the Pragmatic philosopher Jane Addams. It draws from her work *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory* and attempts to give a justification for her method along with a structure of listening through a framework suggested by Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method*. Fundamentally this is shown through the Gadamerian concepts of the “I-Thou” relation and his notion of the “fusion of horizons” in hermeneutical experience. It surveys the contemporary landscape of listening in philosophy and deals with this framework in Addams’ work.
When John Dewey explains in *Human Nature and Conduct*:

Morals means growth of conduct in meaning; at least it means that kind of expansion in meaning which is consequent upon observations of the condition and outcome of conduct. It is all one with growing. Growing and growth are the same fact expanded in actuality or telescoped in thought. In the largest sense of the word, morals is education.\(^1\)

it seems as though he might have had Jane Addams in mind. So much of Addams’ work seems to be hinting at educating her reader about the difficulties and perils of living in a Democracy. Addams sees the need in a Democracy for listening to the other and also going out of one’s way to seek out those who are normally marginalized in society. This most clearly comes out of her later work. Specifically in *The Long Road of Woman’s Memory*\(^2\) this educative listening is shown.

In the work Addams goes through her experiences at Hull House in Chicago at a time when there were rumors of a “devil baby” being shown to local residents for a fee. The story had many different versions all of which dealt with the theme of divine justice being handed down to some husband who had slighted his wife. The kernel of the story began with gossip surrounding a malformed child with “cloven hoofs, his pointed ears and a diminutive tail; the Devil Baby had, moreover, been able to speak as soon as he was born and was most shockingly profane.”\(^3\) The intimation of the story was that it was the fault of the father. The production of such a beast was blamed on past sins of the father due to maltreatment of the family, excessive drinking, and not fully supporting the household. The women who came to Hull-House were hoping for the promise of showing their husbands the outcome of their horrendous treatment. It was supposed to be, at least in the minds of the folks coming to visit, a warning against the miserable situation they had been experiencing for years. The experience of the “Devil Baby” was supposed to

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3 Ibid., 7-8.
bring about fear in the consciousness of the beholder to the point where the husband, or really any man, would be shorn up with so much self-disgust and worry that he would be overcome with a mental paralysis so as to stop abusing his family and spouse.

Addams explains, “Some of these women, under the domination of that mysterious autobiographical impulse which makes it more difficult to conceal the truth than to avow it, purged their souls in all sincerity and unconsciously made plain the part borne in their hard lives by monstrous social injustices.” At first she was upset at the notion that the residents of Hull House would be involved in such a disreputable practice as to take advantage of a malformed child that had been given over to her care. But she realized after a bit that the story, which she initially thought merely served the purpose of pushing forward superstitious and antiquated notions of the role of the Divine in everyday lives, served a pragmatic purpose in these women’s lives. And specifically it was through listening to the older residents and those who would come to view the baby that she was given this insight. This took openness to the possibility of the elderly women having a purpose in mind when they spun this story.

It was through this openness to the possibility of transformation that led Addams to the conclusion that instead of the story being something which should be immediately balked at to instead be a prime opportunity to listen to the elderly residents and visitors to Hull House. She explains the transformation, “It was gradually forced upon my attention that these reminiscences of the aged, even while softening the harsh realities of the past, exercise a vital power of selection which often necessitates an onset against the very traditions and conventions commonly believed to find their stronghold in the minds of elderly people.” It is through this process of

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4 Ibid., 5.
5 Ibid., 4.
selection that Addams sees the use of memory in general and also is given the opportunity to listen to these elderly women. These stories “make even the most wretched life acceptable.”

She goes on throughout the work to delve deeply into the meaning of the story in these women’s lives and shows its use and value for the elderly. She explains the function of the story:

> These old women enjoyed a moment of triumph- as if they had made good at last and had come into a region of sanctions and punishments which they understood. Years of living had taught them that recrimination with grown-up children and grandchildren is worse than useless, that punishments are impossible, that domestic instruction is best given through tales and metaphors.

Addams goes so far as to say that it is the power of memory that seems to be so much stronger than even the life of the present. In the Jamesian notion of our truths being funded by past experience this is very clearly seen. James states in describing the Pragmatic method, “The most violent revolutions in an individual’s beliefs leave most of his old order standing.”

While Addams most definitely appreciates this she realizes that it is our own histories that we live through so much of our lives and it is our specific histories which are constantly expressing themselves in our lives. She could only come to this insight through listening.

While listening is normally disregarded in most philosophical discussions Addams clearly seems to be developing an educative theory of listening. Maurice Hamington describes what Addams is doing as an “active listening.” But it seems as though the process could be characterized in a different manner. Fundamentally Hans-Georg Gadamer gives a structure to listening which has an emphasis on the relation of history which seems to suit Addams educative

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6 Ibid., 7.
7 Ibid., 10.
philosophy more clearly. In general, Gadamer’s hermeneutic project works well with a pragmatic account of listening because of two reasons. The first is Gadamer’s emphasis on tradition, not merely as a static push on the person, but as something which is constantly transformed through critique is akin to Addams’ discussion of the importance of the past in the lives of the old women spoken of in the “Devil Baby” story. It is through this first point that the second can be made clear. Contemporaries of Gadamer, specifically Derrida, run the risk of totally forsaking the past and creating a situation where the interpreter can fall prey to Cartesian arrogance. This specifically comes in the form of not realizing that one is an embodied, historically situated, and fundamentally contextual being. Addams and Dewey both emphasized the necessity of this realization throughout all of their works. The emphasis placed on the fact that we are finite, situated beings and that this is where the possibility of knowledge comes from is fundamentally pragmatic.

It was through that self transformation, which Gadamer describes as the meeting of the I and the Thou, which Addams was able to engage in the fusion of horizons which could attempt to realize the higher ideal present in the experiences she had with these women. Most importantly, after these experiences, and through reflection, Addams came to realize a deep significance of the meaning in the story of the “Devil Baby” and her relation to it. These experiences created the possibility of transforming these disparate meanings into a unified whole; and it was that transformation of the ideal, between both Addams and the women she occupied herself with, that a deeper insight could be revealed. This is extremely similar to the

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10 Jim Garrison also looks to Gadamer in reference to Dewey and attempts to give this structure to listening but it seems more apt to go to Addams as the epitome of developing a Pragmatic account of listening. “A Deweyan Theory of Democratic Listening.” Educational Theory. Fall 1996. Vol. 46 Issue 4.
way that the Gadamerian relation of the I and the Thou works. Between both the I and the Thou there is a higher ideal attained, between both of them, which is reached.

Jean-Luc Nancy in *Listening* speaks of the dislike of listening in philosophical discourse with clear insight, “Is listening something of which philosophy is capable? Or- we’ll insist a little, despite everything, at the risk of exaggerating the point- hasn’t philosophy superimposed upon listening, something else that might be more on the order of *understanding*?”\(^{11}\) Addams is very aware of this danger in her work. One of the reasons that, at least later in her career, she seems to go directly to letting those who are the most oppressed to be given a voice and be listened to comes out of a concern for not reducing the experience down to an interpretation that a supposed objective observer would give to the situation of these women. In talking about the reduction that a psychologist might give to these women’s experiences she states:

> We had doubtless struck a case of what the psychologists call the ‘contagion of emotion’ added to that ‘aesthetic sociability’ which impels any one of us to drag the entire household to the window when a procession comes into the street or a rainbow appears in the sky. The Devil Baby of course was worth many processions and rainbows, and I will confess that, as the empty show went on day after day, I quite revolted against such vapid manifestation of even an admirable human trait. There was one exception, however; whenever I heard the high eager voices of old women, I was irresistibly interested and left anything I might be doing in order to listen to them. As I came down the stairs, long before I could hear what they were saying, implicit in their solemn and portentous old voices came the admonition: ‘Wilt though reject the past/ Big with deep warnings?’\(^{12}\)

In purely Pragmatic fashion Addams does not want to reduce the other down to some sort of psychological malfunction. She does not want to reduce the experiences of these women to some sort of scientific explanation. This seems to be fairly akin to the Jamesian “psychologist’s fallacy” which forsakes all of the aspects of experience, which are constantly overflowing, and attempts to reduce it down to something which does not account for all of the experience as it is experienced by the person. Addams realizes this danger and sees the necessity to just sit with these women and listen. But the listening is self-reflective.

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12 *Long Road...* p. 9.
Through the Gadamerian relation of the “I-Thou” one can see how the nature of listening comes across in Addams. Gadamer’s overall project attempts at a grounding of the Geisteswissenschaften (human sciences) which separates them off from the rest of the so-called hard sciences e.g. physics. And *Truth and Method* attempts to clear the ground for the future work of the human sciences. While this project is not centered on listening it can still be a fruitful endeavor to explore some of the implications of the work and its dealings with the relation of the “I” and the “Thou.” He explains the self-reflective nature of the I-Thou relation:

A second way in which the Thou is experienced and understood is that the Thou is acknowledged as a person, but despite this acknowledgment the understanding of the Thou is still a form of self-relatedness. Such self-regard derives from the dialectical appearance that the dialectic of the I-Thou relation brings with it. This relation is not immediate but reflective. To every claim there is a counterclaim.\(^{13}\)

While the I-Thou relation in Gadamer is an extremely complex idea; its implication into understanding the work of Addams should be clear. She is involved in attempting to understand and listen to the elderly and in the process she is involved in self-reflection. The power of transformation is not just one-sided in listening. The counter-claim here comes from the attention that she gives to the elderly and in the necessity, which arises out of her new novel experience of listening to the stories of the elderly. The elderly are pushing back on her constantly and it is only because she is attuned to their needs and desires that it even occurs to her to listen.

The clearest way that this self-reflection comes out in Addams’ work is in the fact that she devotes numerous chapters to the use of the “Devil Baby” story in the lives of these women and then concludes the book with her own reflections on death and trips to foreign lands she has been involved in. It seems clear that she is attempting to show that this emphasis which she

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wants to place on memory coming through her life would not have occurred to her if she had not been involved in this sort of inquiry through listening. Again she explains the transformation:

> It may have been because I was still smarting under the recollection of the disappointment we had so wantonly inflicted upon our visitor from the poorhouse that the very next day I found myself almost agreeing with her whole-hearted acceptance of the past as of much more importance than the mere present; at least for half an hour the past seemed endowed also for me with a profounder and more ardent life. 

Without listening to these women Addams would never have come to the conclusions that she did about the role of memory in her life and the lives of others. Self-reflection seems to play a key role in her development of listening.

Along with the self-reflection of the I-Thou relation in Gadamer the “fusion of horizons” also plays a key role in hermeneutical experience. Again this requires an openness and a realization of our own finitude. The fusion of horizons for Gadamer is close to a meeting up of histories/cultures which is expressed through the one involved in experiencing the hermeneutical experience and also the object (a term that Gadamer would not like to use in this context but for the point of clarity I am going to use it) experienced. When one is having an experience, for Gadamer, we are involved in our own history coming out of our experience and also dealing with the thing being experienced. The fusion of horizons is a meeting of these histories. Gadamer explains the structure in reference to a text but it seems that it can also be brought into looking at an experience more broadly construed:

> Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. The concept of ‘horizon’ suggests itself because it expresses the superior breadth of vision that the person who is trying to understand must have. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it but to see it better, within a larger whole and truer proportion…. It requires a special effort to acquire a historical horizon. We are always affected, in hope and fear, by what is nearest to us, and hence we approach the testimony of the past under its

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14 Long Road… p. 13.
influence. This it is constantly necessary to guard against overhastily assimilating the past to our own expectations of meaning. Only then can we listen to tradition in a way that permits it to make its own meaning heard.\(^{15}\)

On the surface of it Gadamer is sometimes seen as putting one in a position which emphasizes the past so much in our experience that we seem to be so stuck in our own finitude that hermeneutical interpretation does not even seem to be a possibility. But this is not the case. As opposed to this nihilistic, deterministic view of the self in relation to the other Gadamer is explaining that for us to even have the possibility of understanding a text (or another person) we must be involved directly in our own finitude. It is our finitude that makes hermeneutical experience possible. This would be opposed to some sort of enlightenment claim that objectivity requires our own setting off of our past. Instead Gadamer makes a radical claim in stating that it is *because* of our past that we are even able to interpret anything. We have a specific history, culture, etc. that guides us. And we should be thankful for this. This fusing of horizons is a good thing and we need to realize that we are involved in it constantly. If we are to have any sort of experience which could be productive in any way we must revel in our own finitude. With this in mind one can see that there is also an overcoming involved. If we are to understand a text or a person we must let its own meaning be heard. This requires listening. But it is not the same as just hearing.\(^{16}\) Listening must be constructive.

For Addams this constructive aspect of listening comes out in her explanation of what she realized in listening to the old women. She explains that she took away from her experience the idea that memory has two functions, “And yet, curiously enough, I found that the two functions of Memory-first, its important role interpreting and appeasing life for the individual, and second

\(^{15}\) *Truth and Method*. P. 304.

\(^{16}\) Nancy explains the difference in listening and hearing well, “If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense (either in the so-called figurative sense, or in the so-called proper sense: to hear a siren, a bird, or a drum is already each time to understand at least the rough outline of a situation, a context if not a text), to listen is to be a straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible.” *Listening*. P. 6.
its activity as a selective agency in social reorganization- were not mutually exclusive, and at moments seemed to support each other.” Addams can only come to this conclusion through a process of constructive listening. She realizes her own finitude, is involved in a process of inquiry that begins in listening, and then reflects on the words of others and at the end of this process she comes to conclusions about the role of memory in the lives of these women. She is a shining example of what Gadamer is attempting to explicate. If Addams is going to listen well she must at one time realize her own history meeting up with the histories of these women, not attempt to reduce them to some sort of psychological explanation, fully respect their experience, and then step back and reflect on what she has heard. This cannot be some sort of empty venting but must instead by a constructive listening which requires active engagement and an openness to transformation.

Hopefully, I have shown that there is plenty of fruitful work to be done on the philosophy of listening in general, or at the very least, shown that it at least has a place in philosophical discourse. Through the Gadamerian structure Addams seems to be an exemplar of an example of Pragmatic listening at work. She does this through a constructive listening, which is not just passive but instead is involved in Gadamerian self-reflection, as shown through the I-Thou relation; and also she seems to have happened upon the realization that the experience of the Thou is a fusion of horizons that is not just a mere meeting up with the other but is involved in inquiry that requires a stepping back and reflecting upon what the listening has given her. While Addams is not explicit in claiming that this Gadamerian structure is in her philosophical experience I have attempted to show that Addams method differs in its Pragmatic outlook. As a philosopher she is always involved in education. And if we are open to this possibility it seems

17 Long Road... p. 5.
she is involved in the educative process of teaching us how to listen. It is through this listening that we can be involved in self-transformation, self-reflection, and transformation of others.