AN INTERVIEW WITH MARILYN FISCHER

MARILYN FISCHER (University of Dayton, Emerita)
& JUDY WHIPPS (Grand Valley State University)

Marilyn Fischer specializes in political philosophy and American pragmatism. She served as director of the Core Program at the University of Dayton, an integrated, interdisciplinary program through which students can fulfill most of their general education requirements. Her research focuses on the philosophy of Jane Addams. She is the author of Ethical Decision Making in Fund Raising (2000), On Addams (2003), as well as an editor of Jane Addams’s Writings on Peace, 4 volumes (2003), Jane Addams’ Essays and Speeches (2006), and Jane Addams and the Practice of Democracy (2009).

Judy Whipps conducted this interview with Fischer on behalf of Dewey Studies in the fall of 2017. Whipps was a co-editor with Fischer on Jane Addams’s Writings on Peace, 4 volumes (2003) and Jane Addams’ Essays and Speeches (2006). She has published work on Addams, Feminism, and many other topics.

Neither Whipps’ questions nor Fischer’s responses have been edited in any way.

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Q: I know you had a somewhat non-traditional academic career. How and when did you come to study philosophy?

Pragmatists talk about how we are social selves. When and where we live and the people and events that intersect with our lives enter into the construction of who we are. My associations with philosophy have spanned several varieties of myself, all of which carry the impress of generational shifts. Growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, no one ever asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. The only course my mother insisted I take in high school was typing, so I could support myself as a secretary until I married and had children. I remember watching a few episodes of a soap opera that featured a woman who was a doctor. I was dumbstruck that women could actually do something! My senior year I took a required civics course with a teacher who, as a Jewish woman lawyer in my conservative Christian town, could get no other job. She gave us some readings by a British political writer—Barbara Ward, if I remember correctly—whose philosophical leanings struck a chord in me. I decided to major in philosophy, not really knowing what it was, while also fulfilling pre-med requirements. After college, philosophy tugged more strongly than medicine, but it didn’t occur to me it could become a career. During my first semester of graduate school, I dreaded my T.A. discussion sessions and hoped that no one would show up. What could I possibly have to say to them? I soon realized that I really did like the teaching part of philosophy, so continued on.

The job market was tight in the early 1980s. After a string of sabbatical replacement jobs, I spent ten years as an adjunct at the University of Dayton, while my children were young. When they reached school age, I was lucky to get a tenure-track job at UD. Had it been ten years later, I probably would have been offered a non-tenure lectureship, with a heavy teaching load and no possibility for research. I have a lot of sympathy for younger scholars, given how hard it is to find a position that enables them to fulfill all of their promise. During my years at UD, I defined myself primarily as a teacher. My favorite course was a two-semester, fifteen-credit marathon that fully integrated history, religious studies, philosophy,
and English. Six to eight faculty members from these disciplines collaborated intensely to develop the curriculum and teach the course. Philosophical texts made much more sense to students and faculty when we could locate them within their original historical settings. The course transformed my teaching and writing. Since retiring two years ago, I’ve been relishing another variety of myself as a full-time writer.

Q: What philosophical questions most intrigue you?

More varieties of the self here. At first, the problem of evil was very real to me, given the disjunct between my legalistic, fundamentalist upbringing and the realities my generation confronted in the midst of the Vietnam War and the movements for civil rights and women’s rights. In the 1980s and 1990s, as “applied philosophy” made its appearance, questions of social justice loomed large. In the 1990s the local chapter of the national philanthropic fundraising organization invited me to work with them on fundraising ethics. That led to my first book, *Ethical Decision Making in Fund Raising*, and my interest in the role non-profit organizations play in a capitalist, democratic society. Since 2000 I’ve cycled through questions in the philosophy of music and issues of multi-cultural diversity.

Q: Music has played an important role in your life as a long-time member of the Dayton Philharmonic Orchestra. How do you see the interaction between philosophy and music?

All throughout childhood, college, and graduate school I took violin lessons and performed at every opportunity. For twenty-five years my night job was as a violinist with the Dayton Philharmonic, an excellent regional, professional orchestra. There is a unique and intimate intensity to being in the very same time, down to the nanosecond, with eighty-five fellow musicians as our ears, minds, emotions, and muscles respond to each other with exquisite precision. It was a privilege to sit just a few feet from Itzhak Perlman, Yo-Yo Ma, Dave Brubeck, and Sarah Vaughan and make music with them. I think of music and philosophy as kindred art forms. Both
seek to cast into beautiful form how life goes and what matters most, the one in tones and rhythms and the other in words and concepts. Now, as I sit at my desk crafting sentences, I feel as though I am making music with my pen.

Q: How did you discover Jane Addams' philosophical work? What speaks to you about her work?

This is not the usual story of writing a dissertation and then spinning out variations for decades. While I was an adjunct at the University of Dayton, a colleague in the Philosophy Department asked if I could pick someone to impersonate for a panel on social justice, along with Adam Smith, Karl Marx, and Willy Loman. I quickly ran through the children's biographies I had been reading to my daughter. I had no idea that my mental coin toss between Dorothea Dix and Jane Addams would change the direction of my life. As I prepared by reading some of Addams’s texts, the quality of her ideas and the texture of her prose resonated. I wrote a few conference papers, unsure if what Addams wrote counted as “philosophy.” I’m grateful to my department colleagues for tolerating this deviation from acknowledged pathways.

Q: Had you studied Dewey before you began working with Addams' philosophy, or did reading Addams bring you to reading Dewey?

I flew by a bit of Dewey in graduate school, but like other social philosophers of the time, I focused on permutations of Rawls. Someone suggested that I send my first fledgling attempts to articulate Addams’s social ethics to Charlene Haddock Seigfried. My first reaction was “How could I? She is a big-time, honest-to-goodness philosopher; how could she possibly be interested in me?” I sent them anyway, and Charlene replied most encouragingly that yes, Addams counted as a philosopher, and yes, I might have something to say. She tucked in a reading list, and was gracious enough not to tell me it was a syllabus for “Intro. to Pragmatism 101.” Charlene also introduced me to SAAP (Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy). I am eternally grateful for her mentoring and
friendship.

Q: You are in the midst of an extensive project on Addams right now. What is your goal for this project and what have you learned that has surprised you?

In 2014 I received a fellowship from the National Endowment for the Humanities to work on a book about Addams’s pacifism. I wanted to track chronologically how she came to formulate the cosmopolitanism that characterizes her understanding of peace. As I worked slowly through essays she wrote in the decade between founding Hull House and writing *Democracy and Social Ethics*, I discovered a deeper, more interesting story. Just underneath the surface of her prose lay a substratum of scientific thinking, drawn from many iterations of late nineteenth evolutionary science. Pragmatists say that theories are tools. Throughout her life, Addams kept right up to date with the latest scientific theories in biology and the social sciences and used them as tools to investigate the social reforms she is known for: child labor, immigration, workplace conditions, sex trafficking, women’s suffrage, war and peace.

The depth of Addams’s engagement with evolutionary science surprised me. The project has now become a projected three-volume work on how Addams used science, literature, and rhetoric as tools throughout her writing career. Volume I, *Jane Addams’s Evolutionary Theorizing: Constructing Democracy and Social Ethics*, is now under review at the publisher. Volume II will cover Addams’s writings on peace and social justice from 1902 until 1914. Volume III will cover her writings during and after World War One.

Q: Is there a common misconception of Addams that you would like to change?

People generally say that Addams came up with her philosophy by reflecting on her experiences, in conversation with a relatively small number of intellectuals. This picture misses how Addams used a vast range of scientific and literary writings as resources for filtering,
shaping, and making sense of her experiences. Far more than is currently recognized, Addams was a complicated and sophisticated intellectual of international reach.

**Q: How do you see the philosophic relationship between Addams and Dewey?**

Contemporary scholars, particularly Charlene Haddock Seigfried and Judy D. Whipps, have done excellent work demonstrating commonalities between Addams and Dewey’s pragmatist methodology, and their views on social democracy, ethics, and education. They also show how Addams went beyond Dewey in addressing issues of class and gender. To fine-tune our knowledge of Addams and Dewey’s philosophical relationship, chronology is key. A few years ago Charlene used Dewey’s lecture notes to show that Dewey didn’t “get” Addams’s pragmatism when he taught *Democracy and Social Ethics* shortly after its publication in 1902. In my manuscript I show that Addams in 1895 was already doing pragmatist ethics by starting with morally problematic situations, well before Dewey articulated the method. In comparing Dewey and Addams we should keep in mind that Addams wrote before, and then in response to, World War One. Many of Dewey’s significant writings came later, when the country and the world faced quite different situations.

**Q: Does the pragmatist feminist work on Addams and other women of her era change how we see Dewey’s work or classical pragmatism?**

Yes! Dewey spent a lot of time at Hull House and served as a trustee. Some of the women who worked at the Laboratory School lived at Hull House. The women at the Laboratory School, as well as at Hull House, had lots of autonomy to work out their own ideas and methods. Dewey was attentive to all this, and I imagine a lot of cross-fertilization worked its way into Dewey’s writings. Sorting all this out would be a splendid project for someone to take on!
Q: Do you have a favorite quote from Dewey (or Addams)?

Two of my favorite quotes from Addams show how she absorbed the literature of her day and transformed it creatively.

The first is from *Democracy and Social Ethics*: “We have learned as common knowledge that much of the insensibility and hardness of the world is due to the lack of imagination which prevents a realization of the experiences of other people. Already there is a conviction that we are under a moral obligation in choosing our experiences, since the result of those experiences must ultimately determine our understanding of life.”

The second is from *Second Twenty Years at Hull House*: “The human power for action mysteriously depends upon our capacity to throw into imaginative form that which we already know, upon a generous impulse to let it determine our deeds.”

In the first, Addams is working off of a passage from Irish historian W.E.H. Lecky; in the second, a passage from English poet Percy Shelley. At the time, borrowing other writers’ words without attribution and embroidering on them was a common practice.

Q: What can we learn from Addams and Dewey that is relevant in today's social and political environments?

Ever so much! I’m glad to be part of a community of scholars in which different people take on different tasks. Look at any SAAP program and you will find lots of presentations that use Addams and Dewey as resources for an enormous range of today's social and political issues. Maurice Hamington on care ethics, Judy Whipps on leadership and adult education, and Danielle Lake on “wicked problems” have used insights from Addams and Dewey to great effect, as have many others writing on aesthetics, the environment, and all aspects of social justice.

I’m glad other scholars are learning enough about today’s issues to be
able to use the early pragmatists in rigorous and meaningful ways. To do the kind of writing I do, I have to keep my head buried in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The relevance of my work on Addams comes from parsing out her interdisciplinary method as clearly and precisely as possible. Addams took the concrete particularities of morally problematic situations and brought to them intellectual insights from a vast array of disciplinary perspectives. Even though the science and historiography she used are long outdated, her method of inquiry is a model for today.