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Service learning and the just Community: complementary pragmatist forms of civic character education

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Abstract

This article investigates the theoretical link between two approaches to civic character education: Service Learning and the Just Community, given that the two share a strong democratic ethical component. Based on historical research and bibliographical review, we show that John Dewey's pragmatism forms a theoretical foundation of both approaches. Our revision combines the search for a normative foundation of democratic life with the need for contextual agreements: universal principles of justice with conversation and action in specific situations, moral autonomy with social commitment in real circumstances. By merging the two educational approaches to civic character education, we conclude that social and democratic progress does not mean renouncing ethical principles, but drawing them

in a different way: revisably, creatively, dialectically, practically, and intersubjectively.

Keywords

Character education, citizenship education, just community, moral development, pragmatism, service learning

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Introduction

In the face of an education more concerned with developing technical competency than with cultivating civic virtues, the need once again arises of thinking about the meaning and nature of a democratic education. According to international reports, liberal democracy is weakening (V-Dem Institute, 2021). Many citizens, as well as politicians, have become strangers to the responsibilities of citizenship and civic opposition. Unless these responsibilities are continually affirmed and upheld, democracy wanes. The education of civic character remains an ongoing challenge or struggle. Fortunately, however, there is no need to start from scratch: today's endeavors to further democracy through education have much to gain from the efforts of earlier generations.

This article takes up this challenge by drawing together some fertile ideas and

currents of thought that have tended to run in parallel rather than become confluent. The proposals of Service Learning and the Just Community have different ancestries and histories. However, when taken together and newly elucidated in a context of pragmatic philosophy, they offer promising possibilities for civic character education in pluralist societies.

Service Learning, an educational approach that started in the United Kingdom and the United States, is based on the idea of learning by performing a service to the community. Its antecedents date back to the settlements of Toynbee Hall, founded by Samuel and Henrietta Barnett in London in 1884, and Hull House, established by Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr in Chicago 5 years later. The goal of these institutions was to decrease the social divide through the collaboration of college teachers and students who shared their knowledge and life with the people taken in. Currently, Service Learning has become a methodology for the teaching of curriculum subjects, but also for moral education. It is present at many education institutions, especially higher education, in many different countries. Some of its success is likely due to the fact that, as a methodology, it fits in smoothly with a wide range of pedagogical projects and a variety of theoretical approaches. For example, Service Learning programs can often be found at Christian schools and universities. For John E. Hare (2002), a Professor of Philosophical Theology who added Service Learning to his lessons on ethics at Calvin College, at these institutions ‘we need an understanding of the merits of service-learning that is receptive to God’s role in human morality’ (pp. 74-75). He views this understanding as an alternative to the more habitual narrative of Service Learning grounded in authors such as John Dewey. For others, however, the use of these Service Learning programs in a plural context necessitates

moving beyond a religious discourse and entering instead a civil ethics, as seen in Denison University's example of shifting its Service Learning efforts from service based on a charity model toward service based on collaboration and community-based social change (Lewis, 2004). Each of these possibilities for developing Service Learning correspond with that Hare (2002) calls the vertical perspective of moral education, which appeals to the presence of God, and the horizontal perspective, in which 'human moral problems have exclusively human solutions' (p. 74).

In turn, the Just Community is an approach to moral education proposed by the American psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, framed in his attempt to build a Kantian-inspired theory of moral development out of a revised formalism and universalism. The goal of the Just Community is to foster moral development through the democratic organization of school. It arose in 1974 with the opening of the Cluster School in Massachusetts after Kohlberg's experiences on a kibbutz in Israel and at a women's prison in Connecticut. Although the Just Community approach took on different shapes as it spread across the United States and to other countries and merged with other philosophies, it has remained closely linked to Kohlberg's theoretical underpinnings and even to his own personal traits (Oser, et al., 2008). When viewed from the distinction made by Hare above, Kohlberg's Just Community becomes a kind of half-way point. It shares the vertical perspective, the need to appeal to principals of universal value, although not of a religious nature. It also shares the horizontal perspective, the humanist vision and connection to John Dewey's pragmatism, although mixed with other philosophical stances as well.

In this article we argue that, based on their connections with John Dewey's pragmatic philosophy of education, Service Learning and the Just Community can and

should complement each other in the construction of a democratic ethos through education. Their combination can offset the limitations of each while strengthening a deliberative, citizen-based and humanistic horizontal perspective of moral education. Service Learning projects the idea of the *just community* beyond the classroom. In turn, Service Learning programs can themselves be nourished by the Just Community approach, for example by involving the students and the recipients of the service in decisions about its implementation, in response to those who have pointed out that these programs may not be critical enough with the given situations (e.g., Parker, 2016; Stoecker, 2016).

The article begins by analyzing Dewey's contribution to the debate on character education. It goes on to analyze each approach, Service Learning and the Just Community, and to identify where each one connects to key features of pragmatist philosophy. The analysis attempts to justify their complementarity and timeliness, especially when jointly they offer a pedagogically valid approach for civic character education. This we take to be a form of education in which, as the neo-pragmatist Jeffrey Stout (2005: pp. 21-22) points out borrowing from Walt Whitman, character and society are reciprocally related, which means we cannot expect democracy to flourish if we forget civic virtues. The question is how to approach this task in education.

John Dewey's contribution to character education

Today there is an increased interest in character education, both in theory and practice (e.g. Brown et al., 2023). This interest is rooted in the past (McClellan, 1999; Watz, 2011). The United States underwent a surge in this interest at the beginning of the 20th century, drawing inspiration from proposals that had previously been made by

intellectual leaders such as Benjamin Franklin, Horace Mann, and William Holmes McGuffey in the wake of European philosophers. According to Watz (2011),

> These pivotal educational icons laid a foundation for the development of various character programs that would be formulated in early 20th century America. These programs, including the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) and Boy Scouts of America (BSA), would, in turn, influence American society as it struggled to define and implement character education throughout the 20th century and eventually lay the foundation for the most popular character education programs of today. (pp. 43-44)

Controversy went along with this interest, as evidenced by the intense debate on the topic that ensued in the years following the First World War. From a conservative perspective, increased mobility and urbanity, along with the loss of influence of nearby communities, led to rampant moral confusion that could only be combated by direct pedagogical methods based on moral codes and lists of character traits. However, progressive educators, including some liberal religious leaders, were very critical of the proliferation of such programs based on moral codes, advocating instead a character education that embraced the achievements of modernity, science, and democracy (Setran, 2005).

John Dewey's role in this discussion was essential (Pietig, 1977). Even in his earliest works, Dewey (1894) dissociated himself from the dominant conservative stance and the tendency to separate ethical issues from personal experience, a separation that he believed brought about 'the chaos in moral training', as proclaimed the title of an article he published in 1894 in *Popular Science Monthly*. A year earlier, in *Teaching Ethics in the High School*, he drew attention to the need for an ethical theory that would inspire the curriculum and go beyond the moral approach that was being widely adopted at the time, based on the direct teaching of moral rules. To Dewey (2010a [1893]), what is important

from the point of view of ethics and moral education is to understand that ‘the question is not what to do, but how to decide what to do’ (p. 48). Ethics is not so much about abstract principles, but about human relationships in action. The aim of moral education is not for children to learn rules and precepts, but rather to make them acquire the habit of mentally constructing a real scene of human interaction and to delve into it in order to figure out what to do. The purpose to which the method of moral education should be directed is, therefore, ‘the formation of a sympathetic imagination for human relations in action’ (Dewey, 2010a [1893]: 48). This is the capacity toward which the different subjects of the curriculum must collaborate in order to make the school a moral environment. Dewey (2010a [1893]) also calls it *ethical imagination*, that is, ‘the imagination that is occupied with making real for the individual the world of action in which he lives’ (p. 51).

In *Ethical Principles Underlying Education*, from 1897, Dewey again decried the error of separating intellectual work from moral work, the result of which is an education of a pathological and formal nature, that is, centered on correcting behavioral defects and on the habits of the school as an unchangeable entity. Overcoming this split involves understanding school in a different way. Character education is not satisfied with moral lessons meant to instill the importance of certain virtues, but rather, it requires the formation of ‘habits of social imagination and conception’ (Dewey, 1903 [1897]: 23). In this way, character education ceases to be an isolated action and becomes one of the school’s commitments as a social institution. To Dewey (1903 [1897]), this effort boils down to what he calls the *moral trinity of school*: ‘The demand is for social intelligence, social power, and social interests. Our resources are (1) the life of the school as a social

institution in itself; (2) methods of learning and of doing work; and (3) the school studies or curriculum' (p. 26).

In *The Moral Significance of the Common School Studies* (Dewey, 2010b [1909]), and in *Moral Principles in Education*, both from 1909, Dewey (1909) defends his vision of the 'larger field of indirect and vital moral education, the development of character through all the agencies, instrumentalities, and materials of school life' (p. 4). Shortly thereafter, in the entry on *Character* from the *Cyclopedia of Education* (1911) he develops the idea of the trilogy of character education, with resonances in the old Pestalozzian motto of head, hand, and heart: '(1) discriminating judgment as to relative values, (2) direct emotional susceptibility to values as presented in experience, and (3) force in execution' (Dewey, 1911: 569).

This proposal for character education emanates from Dewey's moral philosophy, which he formulated in works such as *Ethics* (Dewey and Tufts, 1908), *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Dewey, 1910b), and *Theory of Valuation* (Dewey, 1939). As Bernstein (1966: 115-129) notes, Dewey's philosophy can be considered a reaction against separating science from values. Opposed to all forms of dualism, Dewey advocated that the scientific method be applied to social and moral life. However, this does not mean ethics should make the same use of empirical science as biology or physics do; rather, it should draw on a science or theory of valuation. Such a theory is grounded on the imaginative capacity of intelligence and on deliberation. Human beings are not limited to simply waiting for things to happen; rather, from some given conditions and prior experiences, they project *ends-in-view*, that is, ends chosen to settle conflicts of specific situations and bring about states of affairs that are judged desirable. This is the creative power of intelligence. But what makes

some solutions more desirable and correct than others? This is where deliberation steps in to give clearer understanding of a situation and the potential consequences of each course of action. But not all deliberation is equally rigorous. To Dewey, that rigor is provided by using an intelligence pervaded with a scientific spirit.

From these premises, it is clear that to Dewey character education cannot consist of teaching a fixed set of precepts. Moral action is rule-based, but the rules are not fixed axioms; they are products of intelligence and deliberation. Character education therefore requires the school to provide the social conditions that enable that intelligence to develop. In *Pedagogical Creed* from 1897, Dewey (1898[1897]) wrote about his educational proposal:

> I believe that this conception has due regard for both the individualistic and socialistic ideals. It is duly individual because it recognizes the formation of a certain character as the only genuine basis of right living. It is socialistic because it recognizes that this right character is not to be formed by merely individual precept, example, or exhortation, but rather by the influence of a certain form of institutional or community life upon the individual, and that the social organism through the school, as its organ, may determine ethical results. (p. 18)

For Dewey, the form of community life that enables rational deliberation and character formation is democracy, in which he sees not only a social and moral ideal, but also the most suitable setting for the freedom of scientific spirit to develop (Bernstein, 1966, pp. 135-136).

In his works from the decades at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, Dewey showed a certain optimism for a renewed character education that could satisfy these conditions. Later, however, in the 1930's, his perception turns more pessimistic.

Thus, in *Character Training for Youth*, from 1934, he does not hesitate to state:

> As far as schools are concerned, the present interest in more effective character education may have two different results. If it is satisfied by merely adding on a special course for direct instruction in good behavior, I do not think it can accomplish much. If it leads public attention to the changes that are needed in the schools in order that they may do more to develop intelligent and sturdy character in the young, it may well be the beginning of a most important movement. (Dewey, 2010c [1934]: 93)

After a period of Dewey's ideas on character education being forgotten, they resurfaced in the form of Service Learning programs and Lawrence Kohlberg's proposal for moral education, thereby extending his influence to the present day through these mediations.

The ethical complementarity of two approaches to civic character education

In this section we examine the connection or nexus of Service Learning and the Just Community on the basis of an ethical re-reading of pragmatism. This connection enables us to establish a complementarity between the two educational approaches: on one hand, Service Learning focuses on the need for social action as a means for civic character education, while, on the other hand, the Just Community approach provides an axiological referent of post-conventional values to social service, insofar as this service fosters a democratic *ethos* for solidarity and social justice.

The pragmatic ethics in the origins of service learning: Jane Addams and the Hull House settlement

Authors such as Giles (1991) and Saltmarsh (1996) have made Dewey's philosophy one of the main theoretical foundations of Service Learning, whose origins in the United States are inseparably associated with the social activist Jane Addams. In 1889, Addams, along with

Ellen Gates Starr, founded the Hull House settlement to address the problem of social marginalization. Hull House was set up as an educational model in a broad sense, the result of a spirit of reform, far from the traditional transmission of knowledge by the cultural or university elite (Camas, 2021; Daynes and Longo, 2004; Rabin, 2009). Addams (1893[1892]) herself expressed it this way:

> It is needless to say that a Settlement is a protest against a restricted view of education, and makes it possible for every educated man or woman with a teaching faculty to find out those who are ready to be taught. The social and educational activities of a Settlement are but differing manifestations of the attempt to socialize democracy, as is the existence of the settlement itself. (p. 10)

In the American origin of Service Learning there is an educational proposal of mutual interaction, closely tied to the community and its development, where for example the immigrants, besides learning English and the culture of their new host country, contributed with gifts such as dance, art, music and performance to enrich the culture and enhance the learning of the locals, always within the conception that English had to be the language of communication, a key point to the newcomers' integration. Addams (1904: 269) linked this Hull House pedagogy to the school initiatives that were being carried out at that time by Francis W. Parker and John Dewey in Chicago. What was being done at the Addams institution fit in perfectly with the new educational philosophy upheld by Dewey, which from the very start was linked to social equality movements. As Rabin (2009: 49) notes, Hull House's initiatives, such as the Labor Museum, were perfectly in line with Dewey's model of experiential and practical learning, since the creation of a space where immigrants' craftsmanship was observed and admired as humanizing work in an increasingly industrial society was part of a genuinely democratic educational program. To

quote Hamilton,

> Addams and Dewey were intellectual soul mates from the moment they met in 1892. Dewey visited Hull House shortly after it opened and before he moved to Chicago to teach at the University of Chicago. Following the meeting, Dewey expressed to Addams an appreciation for Hull House's work and he would become a frequent visitor. There was much intellectual cross-fertilization between Hull House and the University of Chicago and *vice versa.* (Hamington, 2022, section 2)

Similarly, Seigfried (1996, 1999) has highlighted how the work of Hull House contributed directly to the emancipatory character of Dewey's pragmatism, or rather, to his social, inclusive and deeply reformist approach toward problems such as women's marginality, the overcrowding and illiteracy of immigrants, and racial conflicts.

As Daynes and Longo (2004) have pointed out, Hull House was an inspiring source of a new way of understanding of the construction of knowledge and human learning. It is therefore reasonable to imagine a kind of mutual inspiration, in the framework of the progressive movement, between the practical, ethical and social action of Hull House and the proposals for epistemological change fostered by American pragmatism. There is an ethical component to Hull House's social reform actions that requires some theorizing, such as that provided by pragmatism, mainly from Addams herself, George H. Mead, and John Dewey. Thus, as pragmatism postulates, human knowledge is born from practical action, but socially committed action requires an ethical justification to give it an axiological foundation.

Dewey devoted much of his career to making that foundation that sustains initiatives such as Addams's. The change he proposed in ethics frightened, and continues to frighten, those who are used to thinking of ethics in terms of ultimate and unalterable ends,

but this does not mean, as has been said, that Dewey's pragmatism plunges into moral relativism. His faith in a democratic ethic prevents jumping to such a conclusion. Instead, and in accordance with that faith, in the face of an absolutist ethic, Dewey postulated an ethic that is attentive to the circumstances and based on research, an ethic, therefore, that appeals to everyone's responsibility for constructing and improving the social reality. Jane Addams accepted this responsibility for social action based on careful consideration of the circumstances.

The pragmatic thumbprint in the just community approach: John Dewey's influence on Lawrence Kohlberg

Not everyone shared Addams's connectedness with Dewey, and for conservatives Dewey's positions on character education were the beginning of its dissipation. Thus, according to Murphy (2005),

> Dewey could be considered singularly responsible for the dramatic change in schools in the twentieth century, from the character-promoting mission of American education established in colonial days to the current situation in which violence, unethical behavior, and disrespect toward others runs rampant not only in our schools but also in our society. (p. 285)

Lickona connects this purported decline with the emergence of the values clarification approach and Kohlberg's theory of moral development in the 1970s. Each approach made contributions, but each had problems. 'Kohlberg focused on moral reasoning, which is necessary but not sufficient for good character, and underestimated the school's role as a moral socializer' (Lickona, 1993: 7). Lickona's statement is only partly true, insofar as Kohlberg's view of education neither focuses only on the cognitive side of morality, nor

eludes the role of the school as a community. Dewey's pragmatic philosophy is once again behind this broader and more faithful interpretation of Kohlberg.

Kohlberg (1976[1975]) saw Dewey's pragmatic philosophy as the origin of the cognitive-evolutionary approach to moral education that he developed:

> The cognitive-developmental approach was fully stated for the first time by John Dewey. The approach is called cognitive because it recognizes that moral education, like intellectual education, has its basis in stimulating the active thinking of the child about moral issues and decisions. It is called developmental because it sees the aims of moral education as movement through moral stages. (p. 176)

He then went on to refer to the three levels of moral development postulated by Dewey: premoral or pre-conventional, conventional, and autonomous. Kohlberg (1976[1975]) noted that Dewey's distinction was theoretical and that it was Piaget who, on the basis of his previous studies on stages of cognitive development, 'made the first effort to define stages of moral reasoning in children through actual interviews and through observations of children' (p. 177).

A few years later, in his retrospective paper *My personal search for universal morality*, Kohlberg (1994[1986]), explicitly acknowledged his debt to Dewey: 'My views that the study of development both grew out of and furthered moral philosophy were based on John Dewey's philosophy of development and his writings concerning the impulsive, group-conforming, and reflective stages of moral development' (pp. 14-15).

This appeal to Dewey has been questioned. According to Gibbs (2003: 57-77), the Piaget-Dewey combination led Kohlberg to mistake Piaget's interpersonal construction of moral understanding for Dewey's internalization of social norms. Commenting on Gibbs's argument, Bergman has noted that it is an error to attribute this load to Dewey, whose

moral psychology can in no way be considered a theory of social internalization. Kohlberg, however, made a very particular reading of Dewey, especially regarding his proposed three levels of development, which take a secondary place in Dewey's moral theory and are more closely linked with historical moral evolution than with the psychological development of individuals (Bergman, 2006).

But what could have caused Kohlberg to refer to Dewey's influence on him if he felt no convergence with his ideas? As Bergman (2006) notes in his criticism of Gibbs, Dewey was as much a constructivist as Piaget, and it is clear that 'Kohlberg *thought* Dewey's theory was compatible with his own constructivism' (p. 306). While Kohlberg acknowledged the ever-present transcendental background that distanced him from the harshest theses of pragmatism, it is a fact that he appealed to Dewey when he was formulating his proposals for moral education, a process that for both authors is the fruit of active cognitive construction within a community.

Kohlberg (1976 [1975]: 84-185) shared Dewey's critical view of direct, traditional methods of character education, which he called indoctrinating practices underpinned by a 'bag' of conventional virtues. Against this traditional model, in the second half of the twentieth-century Kohlberg built an approach to moral education based on Piaget's neo-Kantian philosophy. The question to address is whether it is possible to educate in a universalistic, post-conventional morality, without, at the same time, resorting to community and the cultivation of certain moral contents linked to an *ethos* or moral character built from action. Kohlberg met this paradox head on and solved it Dewey-style: by confronting his theoretical assumptions and his empirical research on moral development with educational practice. In the retrospective publication cited earlier, he

himself recalled this transition from theory to practice at the beginning of his academic career at Harvard University, under the inspiration precisely of Dewey:

> While dialogue with other scholars was important in developing a meaningful approach to moral education, I felt it was necessary to become immersed in the practice of education in dialogues with teachers and students. Work in the schools started with two assumptions of John Dewey's. The first was that one can't develop a theory of bridge building by applying pure research. It can only come out of building bridges. The second was that building a theory of education is a two-way street involving a collaboration between the teachers, students, and the educational theorist. Central to our efforts has been a faith in democracy as vehicle to creating a just and caring community. (Kohlberg, 1994[1986]: 17)

Kohlberg's first experience in moral education came about in 1969 at Anne Frank Haven, an educational institution at Kibbutz Sasa in Israel. This experience crystallized years later in the Just Community approach. The collective Israeli kibbutzim were democratic communities governed by operational principles to balance collective achievements with individual interests, based on egalitarian relations and democratic, non-hierarchical decision-making. A cross-sectional study of the levels of moral reasoning among adolescents in that democratic community revealed its effectiveness in relation to moral development: 'The results were very positive, with the kibbutz-placed youth showing significantly higher scores than a comparable sample of Israeli urban youth' (Kohlberg et al., 1989b: 39).

The second major educational experience that acted as the basis for the subsequent creation of the Just Community model took place in a women's prison in the state of Connecticut in the 1970s. After intense negotiations with the prison authorities, Kohlberg, together with Hickey and Sharf, succeeded in having the Niantic State Farm Women's

Correctional Facility implement a moral education program in one of its wards in 1971. This program helped to shape the Just Community project by translating the educational philosophy of the Kibbutz into practice for re-socialization in a prison environment. More comprehensive, open, and dialogical measures related to discipline were initiated, involving both prisoners and guards, and moral discussion experiences were scheduled (Blatt and Kohlberg, 1975).

These two practical experiences were the first rough sketch of what would later become the Just Community approach, within a rethinking of the theory of moral development in which, far from focusing on individual moral growth, the emphasis lies on the community, on the contextual conditions for such growth, on the importance of moral action and on the inclusion of the aspects of content and affectivity so important in human morality. In their reconstruction of the history of the Just Community, Kohlberg and his collaborators situate this rethinking along a line that runs from the empirical works carried out with Moshe Blatt to the proposals of moral education of Émile Durkheim, and from Durkheim to the democratic education of John Dewey (Kohlberg et al., 1989a).

Kohlberg took Durkheim's connection with the group as a driving force for socially responsible action, which also means upholding respect for rules and discipline as a means of promoting the collective good. In this sense, 'Durkheim's theory of moral education provides the best elaborated approach for building such a school community, although a democratic element must be supplied' (Kohlberg et al., 1989b: 50). This democratic element is what drives Dewey's progressive pragmatism, allowing for a higher articulation of the relationships between individual and community demands. 'For Dewey a vital community is not a threat to individuality but the only context in which the self can

develop' (Kohlberg et al., 1989b: 49).

Two points need to be clarified here. First, as Althof (2015) has noted, it is misleading to speak of the process that led to the idea of the Just Community as having two stages in Kohlberg's pedagogy, as suggested by Leming. In Leming's (1986) mind, there was a first stage, based on the moral discussions, following Blatt's experiences, and a second, that of the Just Community, which was a 'dramatic shift' from the previous one. According to Althof (2015) this interpretation does not fit reality:

> Not only did Kohlberg think about the need of transforming the hidden curriculum in the school culture into a 'just community' already at about the same time that his group developed the classroom moral dilemma discussion approach, he even played with the thought that the former might work without the latter. (p. 58)

The second point, now following Power (1988), is that Kohlberg's various reformulations of his proposal 'did not mean that he had abandoned his ultimate aim of educating for a principled conception of justice' (p. 205). This led him, for example, to build certain procedural safeguards into the community meetings to keep a small number of people from monopolizing decision-making power. It could be said that the Just Community's greatest aspiration is to combine the universal principles of justice with contextual agreements, that is, Kantian transcendentalism with pragmatic circumstantiality.

What the appeal to Dewey gave Kohlberg in his formulation of the Just Community approach was not only the sense of a communitarian practice versus an individual use of reason. Reason in Kant is also communitarian, and thinking that he advocated a sort of moral individualism is one of the partial readings sometimes made of his philosophy when it is carried over to the field of education (Formosa, 2021). Following O'Neill (1986), this reading ignores that 'by Kant's own standards we will not reason or even think correctly

unless we think in common with others' (p. 546). Thus, in his essay *What does it mean to orient oneself in thinking?* Kant rejected the possibility of there being any freedom of thought in a state of civil compulsion that denies the freedom to speak or write. 'Yet how much and how correctly would we think if we did not think as it were in community with others to whom we communicate our thoughts, and who communicate theirs with us!' (Kant, 1996 [1786]: 16). Freedom of thought requires freedom of communication and tolerance. But it also requires abiding by law. To Kant, reason needs orientation to operate correctly, and without it, it turns into delirium (*Schwärmerei*). What differentiates the public, common use of reason from its private, restricted use is that in the former that thought community is indeterminate. The reference point in public use of reason is the human species as a whole, the world at large, not the particular and diverse others of a specific community. This reason 'must therefore assume no authority which could not be accepted by an unrestricted audience' (O'Neill, 1986: 531). The authority by which reason orients comes from itself. This is what autonomy consists of. Such was the leitmotif of the Enlightenment: the departure from a self-culpable minority of age and the long road toward the autonomy of individuals and societies in the use of public reason (Kant, 2022 [1784]). In Kant, autonomy is neither the absence of law nor solitude, but rather, the capacity for self-regulation in the indeterminate community of rational beings.

The Just Community puts into practice this sense of non-individualistic autonomy. The moral autonomy Kohlberg et al. (1989b) defends is a fully relational, interlinked autonomy, because it is in a context of relations and mutual recognition that the moral personality is truly constructed, always in search of the balance between the common good and fairness expressed in distributive terms: 'Autonomy of judgment [...] does not free the

individual from his or her ties to society, but redefines those ties and places them on a more balanced plane' (p. 48).

Kohlberg would not have needed Dewey's pragmatism to reach this conclusion. What Dewey gave him was something deeper: the need to articulate theory and practice, reason and experience. As Bernstein (1966) notes, Dewey believes that Kant had a profound insight in recognizing the activities of thought in constituting what we know, but he rejected the sharp distinctions between the 'a priori' and the 'a posteriori', the 'ought' and the 'is':

> Dewey claimed that this cleavage between the 'is' and the 'ought' that follows from the dichotomy of experience and reason has led to a severe moral crisis in which fact is separated from value, and science from moral behavior. At the core of these divisions is a faulty view of experience and reason: experience is conceived of in such a manner that it can never provide a sufficient warrant for guiding moral and social behavior. (p. 72)

Faced with this cleavage, Dewey's ethics, the source of his proposal for character education, may, as we have seen, be considered a call for the role of experience in moral life. In this ethic, experience and reason are not two dichotomous realities. Experience is rational and reason is experiential, that is. experimental (Bernstein, 1966: 73).

The Just Community requires the articulation of both parameters. Reason is carried over to life, not in the undifferentiated context of the Kantian world at large, but in a context of real and diverse community, such as a kibbutz, a prison, or a school, and operates through experimentation. As Malitowska and Bonecki assert, Dewey and Kohlberg shared this view of experiential, community-built knowledge:

> Kohlberg is convinced of the necessity of 'experiential' testing of our beliefs and their critical consideration within discourse and argumentation. At the same time these aspects of education -experience, dialoging, and common reasoning- express the general idea underlying Dewey's method of inquiry. To put it in Dewey's (1910a) own words the most significant consequence of the 'scientific method of experimentation' (i.e. method of inquiry) is 'the change of attitude from conservative reliance upon the past, upon routine and custom, to faith in progress through the intelligent regulation of existing conditions'. (Malitowska and Bonecki, 2015: 161)

The progressive perspective of moral education that Kohlberg shares with Dewey takes on a pragmatic epistemology which does not equate knowledge either to inner experience or to a perfect match with external reality, but to a balance in constant conversation between a human being who inquires in common and a troublesome or problematic situation. From this perspective, knowledge constitutes an active change in thought patterns caused by experimental actions in problem solving situations (Kohlberg and Mayer, 1972). This is the epistemological and ethical perspective that underlies both Service Learning and the educational understanding of school as a Just Community, in line with current proposals for a democratic education based on deliberation within a specific school context (Nishiyama, 2021). The Just Community approach can be considered as the preamble to a broad deliberative education, open to the social and political problems of society. At the same time, Service Learning requires critical reflection and common deliberation for the adequate resolution of practical and ethical problems.

The debate on character education at the turn of the century has shown us that, to Dewey, ethical deliberation, as brought to bear on solving those problematic situations, should be based on inquiry and the scientific spirit. As Kauppi and Drerup

have pointed out, without inquiry, any discussion of controversial problems in a way becomes empty. The authors base their argument precisely on the pragmatist philosopher, noting that

> inquiry is in the Deweyan framework inseparably linked with a democratic way of life. Education is a way to achieve this democratic ideal, as we may (collectively and gradually) learn to be better inquirers and thus better solve our problems, avoiding the shortcomings of other kinds of societies. (Kauppi and Drerup, 2021: 224)

To Dewey, inquiry is intimately bound to democratic life. This presupposes 'creativity' (Dewey, 2008[1939]). As happens in inquiry, a democratic attitude requires accepting that what may be a suitable solution to a problem today may not be so tomorrow if conditions change. Inquiry and democracy are both opposites of dogmatism. Kohlberg shared Dewey's rejection of dogmatic, contrary-to-science stances in moral education.

Conclusion: Educating in a democratic *ethos* from a renewed pragmatism

In the current literature, the relationship between Service Learning and Kohlberg's theory of moral education is limited mostly to research that attempts to show how participation in Service Learning programs affects moral development, sometimes using developmental measurements inspired by Kohlberg (e.g. Bernacki and Jaeger, 2008; Coquyt, 2020). According to Hare, however, these studies barely scratch the surface of the matter. In his opinion, Kohlberg has little to offer in terms of understanding the possibilities of Service Learning in moral education due to Kohlberg's biased reading of Kantian ethics, which prevented him from including the

divine aspect of this ethics that came to Kant through Luther, Scotus, Anselm, and Augustine (Hare, 2002: 74).

In this article, we side with Hare to move beyond the ‘tyranny of practice’ (Siegel, 2023) and delve further into a seldom explored theoretic debate. We have attempted to show that, on a theoretical plane, between Service Learning and Kohlberg’s approach to moral education, there is a line of continuity based on their common connection in the ‘progressive philosophy of education’ that Kohlberg shared with John Dewey, and that Hare (2002: 93) confronts in his proposal for vertical moral education. In contrast to Hare’s (2002) reading, we have sought to justify the potential of this line of continuity, without having to trust that ‘there is divine assistance available that can accomplish in us a revolution of the will’ (p. 77) to get the most out of the Service Learning methodology. By merging Service Learning with the Just Community, the two approaches reinforce each other regarding a civic democratic education that does not shy from talking about principles but without having to appeal to any religious underpinnings, thereby giving it greater reach in a secular society.

At the core of that continuity is pragmatism. Nowadays pragmatism is often heralded as a powerful pedagogical and epistemological perspective on which to base Service Learning. There is no need to forego on this habitual narrative. The reason for this association is easily justified by the principle of pragmatic philosophy, according to which human knowledge is constructed from experience, which derives from action. Service Learning is a methodology animated by the principle that action linked to an experience of

service to the community can provide a remarkable means for cultivating civic character and a sense of democratic citizenship in an active, experiential way (e.g. Puig, 2010).

Consistent with pragmatism, the aims of civic education would have to come from the same participation and action of the interested parties, from their conduct and their provisional, contingent agreements, without presupposing a prior 'normative heaven' that would work as a *foundation* (González-Geraldo et al., 2017). According to pragmatism, principles and rules are not the pre-eminent nucleus of ethics, but only one dimension or a complement to it, an aid or support in daily moral decisions. Ethics needs to have another great dimension: experience linked to real action; this helps to redefine or modulate the principles as regulatory guidelines for practice, not as dogmas that systematically constrain it.

Pragmatism also underlies the Just Community approach, with Kohlberg looking to Dewey to expand an educational proposal of a more deontological nature. Unlike Service Learning, Kohlberg's educational approach starts from a 'normative heaven' in the form of universal principles of justice, although the idea of 'community' helped Kohlberg recognize the importance of context and accept the pragmatic notion of democracy as a *way of life* in Dewey's terms. This proposal explicitly acknowledges that civic character education needs foundational axiological references, that is, some minimum foundations that are a condition of democratic society. In tune with pragmatism, the model of the Just Community starts from practical action in the search for norms for the common good, but also from a post-conventional *normative horizon* for a democratic, deeply dialogical society decidedly involved in moral learning.

As we have seen, character education in Dewey involves the exercise of ‘ethical imagination’, a concept whose potential is once again underscored today (Hansen, 2023). To Fesmire (2003), this concept is a central element in pragmatic ethics and brings moral conduct closer to aesthetic perception and artistic creation. The potentiality of this idea in Service Learning projects has also been highlighted (You and Rud, 2010). Pragmatism entailed a ‘turn from transcendental reason to engaged intelligence’ (Fesmire, 2003: 39). Nevertheless, engaged intelligence cannot work in a vacuum. Practical action requires some axiological reference points, among other things so as not to confuse service with servitude. We need a theory that helps order, classify, and value (i.e. to understand) an action one way or another. Praxis is service when it presupposes the validity of *freedom*, so that action is carried out from free will on the basis of a wanted, consensual and agreed commitment. In contrast, imposition or disbelieving indolence turn the act of service to the community into mere servitude, carried out for other purposes (for academic qualification, for obedience, for anodyne and de-substantiated imitation, for fear of punishment or rejection, etc.). Likewise, without the fundamental presupposition of *equality*, service can easily become something performed from arrogance, or in exhibition of the dominion and asymmetry between the one who serves and the one who is served: it can involve an act of mere assistance –thus, ethically superficial- that does not contemplate the dignity of the specific other, but rather, the pre-eminence of the supposedly supportive agent. Without equality coupled with active respect, the service is organized and rendered without regard to the voice and needs of the recipients, without recognizing them as moral subjects.

As Fesmire (2003) points out, the association of pragmatism with a subjectivist relativism has been a common prejudice that has kept us from valuing the definition of ‘*intelligence* as

the mediation of problematic situations' (p. 38). We are talking about an active and shared mediation that combines general guidelines with practical learning in a permanent and radically dynamic feedback process. Rationality is a capability and a process; both are embodied historically, under development, essentially practical, and as such are subject to physical, historical, and cultural constraints. To consider moral development in these terms does not mean disregarding ethical principles, but rather, drawing them some other way: revisably, creatively, dialectically, practically and intersubjectively. This is where pragmatism can join up with the Just Community approach to draw out ethical assumptions or prior evaluative orientations that, without becoming a rigid, *supra homines* regulatory framework, can provide suitable conditions for the process of creative and practical reflection to lead to valid agreements in view of the accommodation or transformation of the real, in deliberative and democratic terms. Hare (2002, pp. 90-92) finds the proposals by Dewey and Kohlberg overly optimistic. We, however, think it more appropriate to consider them commitment perspectives, since they place the responsibility with the world in the hands of men and women. As Dewey (1910c [1908]) stated, an experience-based ethics such as the one he proposed 'may relieve men from responsibility for what they cannot do, but it will promote thoughtful consideration of what they may do and the definition of responsibility for what they do amiss because of failure to think straight and carefully'(pp. 70-71).

To sum up, when setting out the requirements of a moral learning community, we can appeal to discursive or dialogical ethics as Kohlberg et al. (1984: 385-386) did in his later writings. But we can also turn to Dewey when he insisted on an open, critical character education that is focused not so much on what is learned but on how the

appropriate experience for it is acquired. What distinguishes an educational practice from an indoctrinating one is not the teaching of any specific content (content as specific rules, virtues, or habits), but *how* it is taught. This is certainly not in a merely instructive way, or from the severity of an unfathomable and unquestionable authority. Rather, content is taught from critical, dialogical, and inquiry-based understanding, from the possibility of shared revision, based on the acceptance of indispensable requirements for a good dialog that is both ethical and educational (Kohlberg et al., 1989b: 77). The way of life called democracy takes shape from common action, personal and collective inquiry, and lived and shared experience.

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