Hull-House Depicted as the Absolute

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Assignment Description: This is an argumentative assignment; you will develop your own thesis and support that thesis in the essay. You must include a minimum of four supporting premises. You must use the philosophy of John Dewey and/or Jane Addams in the essay.

In this paper I will analyze Jane Addams’ essay, “The Devil Baby at Hull-House,” through the lens of Josiah Royce’s philosophical theory of the Absolute: The universe functions as a single organism, with a single consciousness, and shares in the same ultimate goal and suffering. Hull-House is a sample of the Absolute, and experiences this world as the Absolute does. The Devil Baby rumored to reside at Hull-House represents the shared suffering and consciousness of the Absolute. Both the Absolute and Hull-House have an ultimate goal to live an ideal life in an ideal world. The Absolute and Hull-house, though made up of individuals, have a self-consciousness that wants to perfect itself. It is because of the shared consciousness that when one part of the Absolute suffers, the absolute as a whole suffers, as does Hull-House.

Meaning, for an entire world to be ideal, all the individuals within it must also be living the ideal life with self-possession, unity, peace, and spiritual power. Only then can the world claim the victory of reaching its ultimate goal.

For all individuals to be living an ideal world, the universe must be at peace, unified, and free of oppression. If there were to be turmoil (suffering) in any corner of the universe, the ultimate goal of an ideal world would not be attained. It is this idea of a common goal that makes the idea of the Absolute plausible. Royce, in his essay “The Problem of Job” defines his idea of the Absolute:

The idealist maintains that there is in the universe but one perfectly real being, namely the Absolute, that the Absolute is self-conscious, and that his world is essentially in its wholeness the fulfillment in the act of an all perfect ideal. We exist ourselves as fragments of the absolute life, or better, as partial functions in the unity of the absolute are not illusory, but are what they are in organic unity with the whole life of the Absolute Being (845). The “perfectly real being,” the Absolute, is the Universe and everything in it, functioning as a single, self-conscious organism. Humans exist as “partial functions” within the absolute. Just as humans are individual organisms with many parts working together to make the body function, the Absolute is one organism and

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humans are among the parts that work together to make it function properly. As individuals we are fragments; together we are the Absolute Being.

Royce refers to the Absolute Being as God, in that the Absolute has the qualities that are typically used to define God. The Absolute is infinite, perfectly real, and beyond anything that is human. The Absolute has a consciousness that wants to perfect itself. If the Absolute is akin to God, and we are a part of the Absolute, then we are a part of God. If we are a part of God, then whatever we feel, God feels. So, God feels our joy and our suffering. If we are all a part of God, and God suffers when we suffer, then we suffer when each other is suffering. Additionally, no one in this world is immune to suffering; we have all experienced suffering at some point in our lives, so we can be aware of the suffering of others.

For one to know that there is suffering in the world, even if not directly involved in it, is suffering itself. Suffering of an individual or group is transmuted into absolute suffering. “When you suffer, your sufferings are God's sufferings...identically his own personal woe” (Royce 843). Since the Absolute is of one consciousness, when one part suffers the entire absolute suffers. The suffering of an individual is transmuted into absolute suffering. Meaning, when those around us suffer, we vicariously suffer through them; we share in their pain and sorrow.

John Dewey claims that, “experience and thought are [not] antithetical terms” (61). Meaning that there is continuity between thought and experience. If there is continuity between thought and experience, then Royce would have had to experience his own theory. Since we do not have an account of how Royce may have experienced his idea of the Absolute, we have to find a way to test his theory. Jane Addams gives an account of an experience she had at Hull-House, which I use as a test sample of the Absolute.

Hull-House

Hull-House was a social settlement that opened in Chicago in 1889. Co-founders, Jane Addams and Ellen Gates, opened Hull-House with a goal of offering art and literary education to their less fortunate neighbors. Hull-House began to evolve in attempt to meet all the needs of its surrounding neighbors. Not only did they expand on the types of education offered, but it also became a place where those in the surrounding community could get other services as well. Hull-House began to offer childcare, and other services that filled needs within in the community. Hull-House was constantly evolving to meet the needs of the people it served (Hull-House Museum).

The women who opened Hull-House and those who the Hull-House served were in pursuit of a common ultimate goal; to make the world around them a more ideal place to live in. Just as Royce says all of the individuals within the absolute have a shared goal, so did those who inhabited Hull-House. Addams and Gates saw that the world was not ideal, and set out to improve it. Those who were served by Hull-House were seeking a more ideal life and believed the services they were receiving would help them obtain it. Hull-House represents the unified goal of the Absolute—to improve and perfect the world.

Hull-House, like the Absolute, was filled with individuals with individual needs and concerns, and the house evolved into a place that could meet as many needs as possible.
All of the individuals involved, from its founders to those it served, were all pieces that made Hull-House whole. Separately they were fragments, partial functions; together they were one, sharing in a single consciousness, with one ultimate goal.

Not only was Hull-House known for offering services to the less fortunate in the community, it was also a place for individuals to find companionship when trying to cope with their surroundings (Hull-House Museum). The social environment allowed for a kind of social therapy through companionship. Therapy was not a service Hull-House set out to give. The companionship people found was an organic unplanned occurrence. One day this social therapy transmuted into the tale of the Devil Baby that was rumored to occupy Hull-House.

The origin of the rumor is not known, and there are many different versions of how this Devil Baby came to be. However, all the tales held a common theme: The cloven child was born to a mother undeserving of punishment, for the actions of ungodly, or abusive husbands. Those whom the tale of the Devil Baby had the most power over held the same common theme in their own lives: women who had done nothing to deserve ill treatment from their husbands and children (Addams 10).

The tale of the Devil Baby brought many women to Hull-House that were victims of tragic and oppressive experiences within their own families. The Devil Baby was a manifestation of all the suffering these women felt, and represented the same thing to all the suffering women. The women could see where the Devil Baby could fit into their own lives, as though they had all been punished with a Devil Baby. Even Addams felt as though she was experiencing the Devil Baby, "the Devil Baby seemed to occupy every room at Hull-House..." (Addams 10). The Devil Baby, though merely a rumor, had been given life by shared suffering. Many of the women who came to get a glimpse of it, had experienced the very things rumored to have given reason for the Devil Baby's existence.

Addams was able to see, through the Devil Baby, that the women around her were suffering. She writes, "With an understanding quickened perhaps through my own acquaintance with the mysterious child, I listened to tragic tales from the visiting women" (7). She began to understand why the women wanted so badly to confirm the existence of the Devil Baby. The women related to this tale, and were seeking some sort of confirmation that they were not alone in their suffering. Though the Devil Baby did not exist, these women with common plights were brought together by it.

It is because Hull-House functioned as the Absolute does that the emotions going on inside it affected everyone within it, and when one suffered the house as a whole suffered. Addams writes, "We had doubtless struck a case of what 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" (2). Since Addams was in such close quarters with the women who were flocking to Hull-House, their emotions were becoming contagious. She was not only drawn to the women who were telling their sorrowful tales, she was also able to understand their sufferings. If she was able to understand their sufferings, she must have been able to relate to them in some way through suffering.
It is because emotion is contagious that suffering of an individual within the absolute, is felt by the absolute. “For human society as it now is, in this world of care, is a chaos of needs; and the whole social order groans and travails together in pain until now longing for salvation” (Royce 1037). The salvation Royce is referring to here, is the end that the Absolute and Hull-House are striving for—the ideal life in an ideal world. The groaning and travailing together in pain is what happens when there is suffering in the Absolute. The Absolute, which includes all its parts, feels the pain and the “partial functions” must work together to find a way to subside the pain.

Hull-House was created as a way to make the world a more ideal place for these women to live. It was intended to help give those in need a chance to make a better life for themselves, and an attempt to make the world a more ideal place to be. It was doing this before the Devil Baby ever appeared, but maybe that is why the tale needed to be spun. Hull-House was doing good things to make the world a better place, but the news of the Devil Baby brought in more women who may have never stepped into Hull-House had it not been for the tale. It was as if the tale was a calling to those who were suffering, because their suffering could be eased there.

Hull-House is a fitting sample to test Royce’s theory of the Absolute. The Absolute is composed of the entire universe, and as individuals we are each such a small piece of it that is may be difficult to fathom it as a single organism with a shared consciousness. So, Hull-House can be viewed as a sample of the Absolute, for Hull-House is a group that can represent any part of the world at any moment. Addams writes,

If it has always been the mission of literature to translate the particular act into something of the universal, to reduce the element of crude pain in the isolated experience by bringing to the sufferer a realization that his is but the common lot, this mission may have been performed through such stories as this for simple hard-working women, who, after all, at any given moment compose the bulk of the women in the world (10). Addams is suggesting that the tale of the Devil Baby made what the particulars (individuals) experience into what humans, or more specifically women in this case, experience universally. It was transforming their pain and suffering into something that is universal and shared that offered some comfort. They were able to find comfort in sharing their stories of suffering with each other, and the suffering became something they all experienced. Their shared experiences and sufferings made them function as a single organism with a shared consciousness—The Absolute.
Works Cited


