Universal Human Liberation and Insurrectionist Ethics or An Excursus
Honoring the Guile and Enmity of Leonard Harris

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Abstract: In this paper I piece together some of the seemingly disparate aspects of Leonard Harris’s critical philosophy in an attempt to locate insights that will sophisticate my own pragmatist position. I discuss Harris’s conception of racism and Harris’s commitment to the uplift of the racial underclass, the immisserated who are stripped of honor and assets. I explain how the advocacy of racial groups need not be antithetical to universal human liberation. I also discuss Harris’s insurrectionist ethics, which outlines the types of moral intuitions, character traits (or virtues), and methods required to garner impetus for the goal of universal human liberation. I argue that Harris’s insurrectionist philosophy offers a compelling view of human liberation and social change, one which allows for righteous indignation and enmity in the face of systemic injustice. I argue that, in particularly brutal and/or hegemonic contexts, a Deweyan pragmatist is not precluded from implementing character traits and methods described in Harris’s insurrectionist ethic.
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Introduction

I am a Deweyan pragmatist; that is, I subscribe to most of the explanations and ideals offered in the philosophy of John Dewey. As such, I recognize human beings as embodied, organic beings, who must interact with their environments to persist. As embodied, mortal beings, human subjects are historically situated, biased, and fallible. Pragmatists, as fallibilists and experimentalists, remain open to the idea that new phenomena or evidence may arise, compelling one to revise and adjust his or her current views. So, pragmatists are leery of claims of impartial objectivity and apodictic certainty. As meliorists, pragmatists tend to steer clear of merely speculative philosophy, limiting philosophical explorations to those topics which have relevance to the lived experience. Following Dewey, I am committed to social amelioration by means of on-going experimentation and cooperative inquiry; extending democracy through democratic means. To this end, education is seen as the fundamental method of social progress and reform.¹ As W.E.B. Du Bois puts it, “All our problems center in the child,” and if we wish to curtail sexism and racism, we must train better children for the future (Du Bois 216).²

Given these commitments, I have had several conversations that run like this:

“Tell me, Lee, what in your Deweyan position allows me to be indignant in regards to social, material, and educational inequity? If the educational system is broken and rational consensus maintains and re-produces egregious conditions for historically persecuted and disadvantaged populations, what then? What resources does your position offer to the downtrodden?”
Or, from a different angle:

“What if I am deemed irrational or irrelevant by the dominant discourse? What in Dewey’s system problematizes or challenges cultural hegemony? How does pragmatism conceptualize power relations?”

These lines of interrogation raise good questions. Is Deweyan pragmatism essentially conservative? Is all social change bound to be piecemeal and slow-going, allowing oppressive conditions to persist? Is cooperative inquiry and democratic social action too lofty a goal? Can an exploited, marginalized population really work cooperatively with a dominant, entitled population to destabilize and abolish social and political institutions that grant that dominant population privilege?

At this point, I will not attempt to champion the Deweyan line. I will not circle the wagons and ardently defend the Deweyan position from all criticism. Rather, I believe that the Deweyan can and should incorporate insights from other positions. For instance, I could incorporate a Chekhovian Christian conception of what it means to be human *a la* Cornel West and explore the ways in which people suffer, shudder, and struggle courageously in the face of tragedy and brutality (*West* xvi). I could take particular insights from Foucault’s analyses of power, recognizing the contingency of power relations, locating and marking the weak points, and opening spaces (i.e., freedom) in the inertias and constraints of the present time (*Foucault* 1984, 124). Rather, I bring forth the critical philosophy of Leonard Harris. I believe Harris provides incisive and compelling ways of thinking through some of these very issues. The challenge for me has been incorporating these insights coherently, without contradicting my core Deweyan commitments.
Harris is known for his numerous contributions to the revival and exposition of Alain Locke scholarship, including an anthology of Locke’s philosophical writings (Locke 1989), two edited volumes critically examining Locke’s critical pragmatism (Harris 1999d; Carter and Harris 2010), and a biography of Locke’s life (Harris and Molesworth 2008). In addition to editing anthologies in American philosophy (Harris et al. 2002c) and racism (Harris 1999c), Harris edited one of the first anthologies in African-American philosophy titled, *Philosophy Born of Struggle* (2000). This paper focuses on aspects of Harris’s work that have been, until very recently, neglected or underappreciated. I, here, refer to his work on universal human liberation (Harris 1998a, Harris 1999b, Harris 2002a, Harris 2002c) and insurrectionist ethics (Harris 1992, Harris 1995, Harris 1997, Harris 1999a, Harris 2002b, and Harris 2003). I set out to provide lucid and charitable accounts for both of these aspects, and establish how they are interrelated. More specifically, I outline Harris’s conception of racism, explaining why Harris argues that we should engage in advocacy and action on behalf of moral communities mobilized around racial identities to eventually achieve universal human liberation. I also give an account of Harris’s insurrectionist ethics, explaining its moral intuitions, its character traits, and its role in bringing about universal human liberation through the agency of adversarial groups. In the end, I argue that within Harris’s adversarial/insurrectionist philosophy the Deweyan pragmatist can find conceptual tools and furtive ideas for challenging cultural hegemony and bringing unnoticed or silenced issues to the fore.

**Universal Human Liberation**

Universal human liberation is central to Harris’s project. While he does not give an exhaustive account of this concept, Harris explains that universal human liberation includes
freedom from various oppressive and debilitating boundaries. For instance, freedom from boundaries that impose or enforce national or racial categories; boundaries excluding the poor or the working class from peership in the human family; boundaries that mark one population as bereft of honor and dignity; boundaries that deny ownership, control, and access to the material resources that make life possible; boundaries that stunt a population’s ability “to accumulate wealth and transfer assets to their progeny” (Harris 1998a, 450; Harris 1999b, 437; Harris 2002c, 151). Harris outlines those basic liberties – the bare minimum – that all human beings should be afforded; freedoms which should be extended to all human beings, without qualification. Importantly, the focus is on securing these basic liberties universally, rather than establishing the right of a privileged few to accumulate and hoard assets and capital. The claim is that everyone should be liberated from those oppressive boundaries that preclude them from basic human dignities, such as, owning themselves and their labor, having parental rights over their progeny, and having access to those material resources that make life possible. The claim is that some populations that have been enslaved, subjugated, or oppressed have yet to be fully liberated from such boundaries. Falling well short of a glossy utopian picture, Harris’s adversarial philosophy focuses on destroying those existing conditions which cause or sustain oppression, poverty, and misery.

Given this conception of universal human liberation, Harris’s conception of racism is easier to comprehend. Harris understands racism as “a polymorphous agent of death, premature births, shortened lives, starving children, debilitating theft, abusive larceny, degrading insults, and insulting stereotypes forcibly imposed” (Harris 1999b, 437). Racism names a process by which a population is systematically stripped of its humanity, typically involving degradation, unspeakable terrors, and humiliation (Harris 1999b, 437). Racist practices and institutions deny
a racialized population ownership of, or access to, material resources, stunting that population’s ability to accumulate and transfer assets across generations. Thus, racism is “a way of killing by viciously robbing the assets of one population for the benefit of another” (Harris 2002a, 247). Notice that this conception of racism captures more than race-based ill-will or separatism, it emphasizes the actual destruction of life, and thereby futures, of racialized populations.

Many scholars are met with a dilemma at this point. How do we combat racism? Some eliminate or reject racial categories and identities, in large part, leaving material conditions of oppression unaffected. Others embrace and mobilize around racial identities, reifying racial categorization. Harris finds space between the two horns of this dilemma – a third alternative. Harris is committed to the idea that “the pursuit of universal human liberation always occurs through the struggles of particular communities” (Harris 1998a, 451). He is also committed to the idea that racial identities are inevitably confining or degrading. Thus, in the pursuit of universal human liberation, Harris strategically advocates a racial identity (or community) that he hopes will one day be annulled (Harris 2002a).

We have to be careful with the term “race.” It is now commonly accepted (by the scientific community at large) that racial essences do not exist. No human trait (e.g., skin color or intellectual aptitude) is sufficient to distinguish one population as a distinctive racial type (Zack 2002, 19). And, genetically speaking, intraracial variation is far greater than interracial variation. So, it is not controversial when Harris says that races, as biological kinds, are not real (Harris 1999b, 444). But that is not to say that racial categorizations and identities have not had a real effect in the world. Races, as social groups, are real. But it is important to note that races, in this sense, are contingent social constructions; they are malleable, porous identities (Harris 1999b, 439). Harris will call these particular communities “social races.”
Harris argues that “racial identities are inextricably tied to, and inevitably, indebted to, degrading, demeaning, and misguided stereotypes” (Harris 1999b, 439). Although we may find momentary pride in some supposed racial trait, be it natural rhythm or mathematical prowess, such stereotypes are misguided or degrading when forcibly imposed upon a population. Racial unity and its attending sense of self-worth have, at best, temporary pragmatic merit (Harris 1999b, 446). This, I believe, is echoed in Naomi Zack’s article, “Race and Philosophic Meaning” (Zack 39-40); it reiterates the point that social races should not be reified as stable ontological entities and that claims to racial essences and racial authenticity are wrongheaded.

But “there are compelling reasons for persons terrorized by race to band together, define themselves, and work on behalf of themselves” (Harris 1999b, 439). Victims of racism need racial identity as long as the source of their victimization is racial and its destruction is aided by racial solidarity among victims (Harris 1999b, 440). In communities mobilized around racial identities, racialized individuals find emotional, economic, and political support. The formation of a racialized adversarial group is an integral step in establishing social agency and combating racism (Harris 2002c, 157-158). To gain a voice and free oneself from racial oppression, the racialized person must work together with other racialized persons to articulate the distinctive nature of their oppression. The creation of an anti-racist, counter-hegemonic perspective and discourse requires the collaborative effort of a community (Harris 2002c, 158; Jaggar 2000, 6-7). These adversarial communities are strategic coalitions, which construct provisional oppositional political identities for themselves (Mohanty 2003, 37; Harris 2002a, 253).

Harris points out that those social entities that strive for universal human liberation seem to anticipate the disbanding of these socially-constructed adversarial groups (Harris 1998a, 451). The liberation of the proletariat requires the negation of the class identity for both the proletariat
and the bourgeoisie. By the same logic, liberation from racial oppression “requires the negation of the racial identity of the oppressor and the oppressed” (Harris 1998a, 451). Thus, “the primary interest of any social race … is the negation of all identity by race and empowerment through control of assets” (Harris 1999b, 440). That is, social races ultimately should strive to negate the social and material conditions that provoke their existence as racial collectives. In other words, there would be no need for provisional adversarial racial communities in a nonracist world (Harris 1999b, 441).

Harris argues that the egregious joys, the privilege/entitlement, and power acquired through the monetary profit secured by racist practices and institutions will not be negated by the mere change of beliefs (Harris 1998a, 455). Quaint platitudes about democracy, sympathy, and communal discourse are grossly inadequate in negating the material conditions that have debilitating effects on racialized populations. Harris maintains that changed ownership, control, participation, and access to material reality will do more to bring about universal human liberation (Harris 1998a, 455; Harris 1999b, 448; Harris 2002c, 157-158). He finds it romantic to think that such changes would happen without agitation and compulsion. He writes:

Destroying racism will require more revolutions. They may be violent or they may be nonviolent…. In either case, power concedes nothing without demand, compulsion, expropriation, and radical redistribution of control over the resources that make life possible. (Harris 1999b, 448-449)

This revolutionary spirit is antithetical to submissiveness, self-effacement, and complacency. In contrast, anti-racists should be confident, demanding, uncompromising, and aggressive (Harris 1999b, 448). This suggests an adversarial or insurrectionist ethic.
Insurrectionist Ethics

Again, Harris believes that the destruction of racism (and other forms of oppression) will require agitation and insurrection. Those who engage in these insurrectionist activities exhibit particular moral intuitions, reasoning strategies, motivations, character traits, and examples of morally just actions. They exhibit an insurrectionist ethics.

Harris locates the spirit of this insurrectionist ethics in the works and actions of David Walker (1785-1830), Lydia Maria Child (1802-1880), Maria W. Stewart (1803-1879), and Henry D. Thoreau (1817-1862) (Harris 2002b, 192). These representative insurrectionists were dedicated to universal human liberation. They recognized the systemic brutality and injustice within their social context, and thus displayed a willingness to defy convention (Harris 2002b, 195). They challenged established community norms and authority, both of which were quite possibly constituted by way of democratic processes (Harris 2002b, 200). They railed against unjust laws and inhumane treatment. They sanctioned the use of subterfuge, protest, civil disobedience, and, in some cases, violence against prevailing authority (Harris 2002b, 195). Captain John Brown embodied this insurrectionist spirit during his raid on Harper’s Ferry.

These insurrectionists understood personhood and basic human dignity in a way that justified radical action on the behalf of the downtrodden. To this end, the insurrectionists sacrificed reputation and livelihood. They recognized that living by insurrectionist principles typically involves material losses, decline in social status, confrontation with established authority and opinion, and disadvantages to one’s family (Harris 2002b, 196). Nevertheless, they evinced a willingness to lend support to or act on behalf of oppressed populations when consequences were likely to be unfavorable in the immediate future and extremely
disadvantageous for individual actors (Harris 2002b, 208). David Walker lost his life shortly after publishing his *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*.

These insurrectionists worked to achieve universal human liberation through the advocacy of particular immiserated groups (e.g., Negroes, women, and Native Americans) (Harris 2002b, 196). They made use of representative heuristics; that is, the idea that individuals or sub-groups within a population represent the whole population (Harris 2002b, 197).9 Harris writes, “Commitment to humanity is always a commitment to some group of humans first and always requires the use of representative heuristics” (Harris 2002b, 207). There are no revolutions or insurrections without representative heuristics (Harris 2002b, 202). Moreover, insurrectionists often rejected the imposition of conceptions of absolutes and arid abstractions and refrained from treating abstract social entities as stable categories (Harris 2002b, 198). Social races and other adversarial groups were understood as porous, constantly evolving communities with contingent futures. The insurrectionist envisioned a world that would overcome the very bounded local identities, categories, and kinds that they represented (Harris 2002b, 198). That is, they represented categories (or social groupings) that they ultimately hoped to destroy.

The historical insurrectionists found moral failing in common character traits of their time (Harris 2002b, 196). Walker, for instance, found submissive, self-effacing slaves to be abject and wretched. Thoreau found the hypocrisy and the tame complacency of his White countrymen to be morally repulsive. Strikingly, these insurrectionists gave esteem to character traits not typically seen as virtuous. Rather than compel the members of subjugated and enslaved groups to aspire to the virtues of benevolence, piety, temperance, restraint, serenity, and compassion, insurrectionists urged them to exhibit aggressiveness, self-assurance, self-
confidence, tenacity, irreverence, passion, enmity, guile, and belligerence in the face of terror, humiliation, and systemic brutality.\textsuperscript{10} The valorization of restraint, serenity, and compassion pacifies and binds subjugated populations, preempting transgressive social action. Notice that pride, self-assertiveness, guile, and tenacity are typically seen as arrogance or insolence when exhibited by a perceived member of a stigmatized underclass (Harris 1992, 191). Harris argues that insurrectionist character traits help to make possible the sort of advocacy and authoritative voices that demand the liberation of the subjugated (Harris 2002b, 208).

In the article “Honor and Insurrection or A Short Story about why John Brown (with David Walker’s Spirit) was Right and Frederick Douglass (with Benjamin Bannekar’s Spirit) was Wrong,” Harris argues that we should honor the character traits that enliven Walker’s \textit{Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World} (Harris 1999, 227). As Harris explains, Walkerian character traits are vital to honor and self-respect (Harris 1999a, 235).\textsuperscript{11} Honor is contingent on our ability to be seen as representing a social entity worthy of respect (Harris 1992, 202-203). Walker believed that we are afforded entitlements when we become members of a moral community. But race-based slavery excluded a population from membership in the human family (Harris 1999a, 234-235; Walker 1965, 26). “Slavery denies the inherent humanity of slaves”; it attempted to strip black enslaved Christians of their claim to redemption (Harris 1999a, 229). Racial slavery denies natural responses to treat particular groups or populations as community members. Harris points out that this exclusion from the human community is an egregious and hurtful insult. He argues that enmity is the most reasonable and emotionally coherent response to insult (Harris 1999a, 236; Harris 2003, 79-80). And, thus, slavery, racism, and other denials of a population’s humanity are insults that justify enmity, if not vengeance, as a natural response (Harris 1999a, 235; Harris 2003, 82). Walker’s Christian version of
insurrectionist ethics entitled enslaved Christians “the use of deadly force to defend themselves and seminal principles of human worth” (Harris 1999a, 230).

Walker’s Christian theology held a stringent requirement for moral action against obvious evil; it justifies radical risks (Harris 1999a, 238). People imbued with this spirit are more likely to risk his or her life for a cause, to flirt with martyrdom. Walker believed that “there is an a priori, apodictically knowable, structure of personhood that should be mirrored in each person’s life” (Harris 1999a, 238). This conception of full personhood bolsters the goals of universal human liberation, emphasizing the recognition of one’s humanity, self-ownership of one’s labor, family bonds, and the ability to transfer assets across generations (Harris 1999a, 238).

It is worth noting that the adherence to Christian theological beliefs is not a necessary feature of the insurrectionist ethic. Notice how the Walkerian a priori, apodictically knowable structure of personhood offers timeless truth claims and grounding for a stringent requirement to engage in highly risky insurrectionist moral action. While Harris uses Walker’s position to problematize other positions (e.g., pragmatism) and motivate insurrectionist moral action, it is not clear that he is genuinely committed to the notion of a theologically grounded structure of personhood that offers timeless truths. Clearly, Harris raises these sorts of provocations, but given his own non-romantic, Weberian and Lockean commitments, he is unable to ground or defend such timeless truths or stringent obligations. When pushed to spell out the grounding of these stringent moral commitments to insurrection, Harris, following Alain Locke, tends to make reference to something like natural tendencies or common-denominator values that are pragmatically verified by common human experience (Locke 56). Yet, the forcefulness of Walker’s moral righteousness and indignation does affective work in the motivational story.
Harris is telling (Harris 1999a, 240). Harris, by his own admission, is exploring “the dramaturgical potential of insurrection,” seeking “the imaginative scenarios of emancipation” that might be developed in such narratives (Harris 1999a, 240; Harris 1997, 112).

In any event, Harris is an exemplar of this insurrectionist ethic. Interpersonally, Harris is aggressive, self-confident, surreptitious, and full of guile and enmity. The insurrectionist ethos is also visible in Harris’s published work. Harris has written several papers that have threatened the status quo and disrupted the comfort level of philosophical societies. He has pointed out inequities, moral shortcomings, and glaring gaps in the philosophical canon. Take, for instance, the short article titled “Believe It or Not’ or The Ku Klux Klan and American Philosophy Exposed,” which was published in the Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association. With satirical guile, Harris writes:

Believe It or Not:

There are those, somewhere, who doubt that the Ku Klux Klan created American Philosophy (some people even doubt that smoking is harmful to health). The denial of deference to groups of persons, across lines of class, independent of scores on standardized tests, performance, philosophic orientation, and political affiliation are certainly signs of prejudice. However, even without the belief that the Klan is the uni-causal source of American Philosophy, there are reasons to think that American Philosophy is compatible with the wishes of the Klan. (Harris 1995, 135)

This is a sophisticated, well-crafted piece of satire. In daring fashion, Harris elucidates the persistent and pervasive appearance of White supremacy in the American Philosophical
Association. It draws attention to a real problem. It pushes buttons. The article ends with the following parenthetical note:

(The author denies responsibility for any slaves who kill, burn, treat the children of white people the way white people treat the children of people of color, acquire a faculty line, gain tenure, interrogate philosophies and philosophers, or run away from their slave masters. The author is not bound to reveal whether he distributes David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, his relationship to Trady Harris, author of “How I Killed My Mistress and Got Free,” nor his role in John Brown’s revolt.)

Harris did receive death threats.

Harris (like Walker) is deeply committed to representative heuristics. He sees himself as a representative of humanity and of African Americans (Harris 1999a, 233). Harris was instrumental in creating a tradition around African-American philosophy and the Black experience. He was a co-founder Philosophy Born of Struggle, an organization he describes as an adversarial construction. This community is not a stable ontological entity, in which all of its members share some essential quality or experience. Rather, it is an ontological entity that is variegated, diffracted, and beset with internal conflicting subgroups (Harris 1999a, 233). Harris is convinced that imaginative scenarios developed in the created tradition of African-American philosophy offer the conceptual space needed to formulate liberating intellectual resources for African Americans, liberating ideas that are ultimately aimed at universal human liberation (Harris 1997, 112). Harris is clear to state that he does not expect that this socially constructed philosophical tradition or its ideas will be neatly mirrored in reality. Rather, he hopes its presence will help form imaginative scenarios of emancipation (Harris 1997, 112). Philosophy
Born of Struggle was formed as an adversarial entity designed “to secure income, assets, dignity, and control over labor and labor time” (Harris 2002a, 253). It is a tool or instrument to further the cause of universal human liberation.

Harris writes:

A radical transformation of misery, exploitation, starvation, the hopelessness of immigrants, racial stereotyping, and ethnocentrism may well depend on ... the adversarial, insurrectional, and revolutionary struggle to materially and institutionally create communities fundamentally different from the horribly confining and destructive boundaries currently constricting freedom (Harris 1998a, 456).

Harris envisions a possible world where modern insurrectionists recognize that the virtues of benevolence, piety, temperance, restraint, serenity, and compassion may work to sustain existing structures of oppression or that tenacity, irreverence, passion, and enmity are apt and responsible character traits to exhibit in the face of brutality and oppression (Harris 1999a, 241). Harris writes, “Maybe, with a few conjuring tricks, the insurrectionist spirit will more frequently find its way into the lives of those viciously abused by modern Christians, rapacious entrepreneurs, sex exploiters, and racists amassing ill-gotten wealth” (Harris 1999a, 241).

**Concluding Remarks**

I began this paper by divulging my Deweyan commitments in brief. I raised a few issues that have compelled me to reexamine the limits of my own philosophical orientation. And while I would contend that the Deweyan pragmatist can advocate and act on behalf of the alienated and downtrodden, I would concede that the Deweyan position’s conceptual resources for dealing
with contemporary forms of oppression, power relations, and cultural hegemony are underdeveloped (Harris 2002b, 201). Seeking conceptual resources to supplement and complicate my Deweyan worldview, I have turned to the philosophy of Leonard Harris.

Harris’s philosophy of universal human liberation offers incisive and compelling ways of thinking through issues of oppression, hegemony, and political agency. His analysis of racism accounts for the strategic developments, the tactics, the blood and violence that brought about the racialized groupings and material conditions recognized today (cf. Foucault 2003, 304). It links racism with material disparity and the denial of basic human dignity, explaining how stigmatized populations have been stripped of honor and assets. It also suggests a plausible mode of adversarial agency that does not rely upon essentialist or nationalist conceptions of race.

Harris’s insurrectionist ethic offers moral intuitions, reasoning strategies, motivations, character traits, and examples of morally just actions to those striving towards universal human liberation. It pushes the members of these adversarial communities to question and challenge cultural norms and authority. It implores moral agents to advocate and participate in adversarial/insurrectionist practices on behalf of the oppressed and brutalized. It gives people who have been oppressed and denigrated a rationale for enmity and indignation. And, given its willingness to exhibit tenacity, guile, irreverence, and belligerence, this position is effective at shaking things up, creating indeterminate situations, and hence introducing new ideas and perspectives into the dominant discourse.

This creation of indeterminate situations is key. According to Dewey, a basic pattern can be detected in virtually all inquiries (LW12:109; cf. LW8:200). First, an agent finds herself in a perplexing, indeterminate situation, which shakes her from her habitual mode of conduct. Second, the agent intellectualizes ‘perplexity-as-direct-experience’ into ‘perplexity-as-problem-
to-be-solved.’ Third, the agent postulates working hypotheses (or guiding ideas) to initiate and
guide the empirical investigation of the indeterminate situation. Fourth, the agent uses reasoning
to modify, focus, and develop the meaning of the working hypothesis; through a process of
reasoning the agent detects the relations or intermediate terms between seemingly disparate
ideas. Fifth, the agent will test her hypothesis by deliberative or overt experimentation. If a
consummatory state – an equilibrium – is achieved, then the agent has successfully transformed
“an indeterminate situation into a determinately unified [situation]” (LW12:121). If an
equilibrium is not found, various aspects of the inquiry may be revisited and newly revealed
insights will be incorporated into the inquiry until a minimally determinate situation is achieved.

On this account, problems do not arise as problems unless we feel a mental or physical
chafing that habitual modes of comportment are ill-equipped to handle; that is, unless we find
ourselves in an indeterminate situation. On a broader scale, social change is sought only after an
indeterminate situation has been conceptualized as a shared or public problem (LW12:111). This
means that it is possible for egregious social and material conditions to persist without being
recognized as problems because particular populations have not been shaken from their habitual
ways. Here, insurrectionist character traits and methods of advocacy are most helpful, for they
grab attention and destabilize habitual modes of conduct. The cunning insurrectionist is adept at
creating indeterminate situations and forcing new perspectives into hegemonic discourses. And,
thus, insurrectionist character traits and methods offer appealing resources to the Deweyan
pragmatist, especially when faced with oppression and hegemony.

However, there are at least two possible points of contention between the Deweyan
perspective and Harris’s insurrectionist ethic. First, one must ask if the character traits esteemed
within Deweyan inquiry run contrary to the character traits esteemed in the insurrectionist ethic.
The Deweyan position esteems character traits that sustain and facilitate cooperative inquiry and shared deliberation, including:

[the] willingness to hold belief in suspense, [the] ability to doubt until evidence is obtained; [the] willingness to go where evidence points instead of putting first a personally preferred conclusion; [the] ability to hold ideas in solution and use them as hypotheses to be tested instead of as dogmas to be asserted; and...[the] enjoyment of new fields for inquiry and of new problems. (LW13:166; cf. LW7:257-258; cf. EW3:51-53)

This is an open-minded, dispassionate, tolerant, unassuming disposition; Dewey likens it to the general attitude taken up by the scientist in the laboratory. The insurrectionist ethic, again, esteems aggressiveness, self-assurance, passion, tenacity, guile, and belligerence. While guile and belligerence may be excellent modes of drawing attention or emphasizing the gravity of the situation, they would seem to be detrimental to cooperative inquiry and shared deliberation. This does seem to raise a genuine problem. How can one person consistently bear two seemingly contrary dispositions?18

My response is that differing character traits are appropriate in differing situations, depending on the conditions. As Harris points out, it seems appropriate to exhibit virtuous traits of pragmatic inquiry (e.g., tolerance) in one context and exhibit insurrectionist character traits (e.g., indignation) in another context (Harris 2003, 93). Tenacity and belligerence seem detrimental in deliberations and collaborative efforts to create provisional adversarial coalitions, just as serenity and tolerance seem grossly inadequate in the face of disenfranchisement and genocide. I would argue that the virtues of cooperative inquiry should be exhibited when all interested parties have access to the dominant discourse and are afforded basic human dignities.
and access to sanctioned systems of justice and retribution. Insurrectionist character traits should be saved for those instances when rational discourse is not a viable option; for example, when one is brutalized, denied basic human dignity, or denied access to sanctioned systems of discourse and retribution. Of course, enslavement would count as one of these instances.¹⁹

Second, one should ask if Deweyan pragmatism can be insurrectionist. Pragmatism is not prone to radical and violent political changes. Ideally, culture is passed from generation to generation. Through socialization, acculturation, and education, we inherit values, principles, and methods. Social change is sought only after an indeterminate situation has been conceptualized as a shared/public problem (LW12:111). This means that it is possible for egregious conditions to persist for long periods before they are recognized as indeterminate situations. Moreover, we must work cooperatively with others, find shared goals, and bring about social action through democratic means. This makes for slow-going, piece-meal social change.

But this does not mean that the Deweyan position lacks an ability to be critical of its own commitments or passionately oppose our inherited culture. Dewey insists that we should be involved in imparting to the next generation those values, principles, and methods worth conserving. Each generation has the responsibility of overhauling its inherited stock of values, principles, and methods and reconsidering them in relation to contemporary conditions and needs (LW7:283; LW9:57-58). Thus, it is important that we are critically reflective about our inherited culture. The Deweyan position prods us to scrutinize, transmit, rectify, and expand our inherited culture; not to reproduce indisputable traditions and doctrines. If the dominant culture does not reflect our values, pragmatists are not precluded from defying convention. In fact, Dewey would prod us to seek creative ways of ameliorating the situation. If experience shows us that
particular methods of social action are ineffective, then the pragmatist should be open to other methods of social amelioration, including public shows of dissent, indignant invective, and ironic satire. This means that the Deweyan pragmatist is not precluded from incorporating the character traits and methods provided by the insurrectionist ethic. When appropriate, the pragmatist can very well summon the insurrectionist spirit.

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REFERENCES


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2 I do not mean to imply that Du Bois is a Deweyan pragmatist.
See racial eliminativists, such as Naomi Zack (1997) and Kwame Anthony Appiah (1999).

I do not mean to imply that Harris’s position is the only view that avoids the horns of this dilemma.

Harris advocates a nuanced form of cosmopolitanism, a moderate cosmopolitanism he associates with the work of Johann Gottfried von Herder, Edward Wilmot Blyden, Pixley Kaisaka Seme, and Alain Locke (cf. Harris 2002c and Harris 2010). Yet, to counter racism, he advocates for (provisional) adversarial racialized communities.

Jane Addams and the women of Hull-House present an interesting test case here. Although they were committed to democracy, sympathetic understanding, and communal discourse, I would argue that these women were involved in more than quaint platitudes (cf. Harris 2002b, 200-201). Their work was directed at changing the material reality of downtrodden populations in Chicago.


Harris is well aware of the drawbacks of representative heuristics. For example, if an Asian person stole a bike, by representative heuristics, we could take this thieving individual as a representative of all Asians. Many degrading stereotypes take this form.

Christine Swanton, in “The Supposed Tension Between ‘Strength’ and ‘Gentleness’ Conceptions of the Virtues,” makes an interesting distinction between virtues of strength and virtues of weakness (Swanton 1997, 499-500).


Harris subscribes to a form of nihilism, by which he means “a philosophy that mitigates against the idea that there are unchanging or revisable universal principles and supports the idea of sheer relativized principles and a perception of the past as completely invented” (Harris 1997, 115; cf. Harris 1998b, 217-218). On this view, one should not fall prey to dogmatism. That is to say, one should not become comfortable or complacent with any particular tradition or community. One should be incessantly moving, attuned to the present, critical, locating and marking the weak points, and opening spaces (i.e., freedom) in the inertias and constraints of the present time (Foucault 1984, 124).

I see the potential for interesting parallels to be drawn between this “dramaturgical” aspect of Harris’s work and the work of Judith Butler on subversive performativity (Butler 2004).

Many of Harris’s graduate students, myself included, often talk about the warrior mentality, the fortitude, the resilience, we developed through our exchanges with Harris. He was there to catch us when we fell, and he continues to be one of our greatest advocates.

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This gives us good reason to concern ourselves with more than “consciousness raising,” “combating ideologies,” and “reconstructing racial habits.” Philosophies of liberation should ultimately be aimed at changing the material conditions in which we live.

See, for example, “Believe It or Not” or The Ku Klux Klan and American Philosophy Exposed” (Harris 1995).


In the article, “Insurrectionist Ethics,” Harris asks whether or not pragmatism can necessarily require a moral agent to support or participate in insurrection against slavery (Harris 2002b, 201). Yet, Harris, given his own commitments to nihilism, is unable to establish a moral theory with this sort of necessary requirement (Harris 1997, 115; cf. Harris 1998b, 217-218).