In 1892, Josiah Royce argued that “You philosophize when you reflect critically upon what you are actually doing in your world. What you are doing is...living. And living implies passions, faiths, doubts, and courage. The critical inquiry into what all these things mean and imply is philosophy” (Royce 1892, 1). I argue that Classical American Pragmatists- Royce, James, Dewey, as well as Du Bois, and Addams subscribed to this view and practiced philosophy by focusing on experience and directing a critical eye to major problems in living. Thus Royce and Dewey explored the nature of genuine community and its role in developing a flourishing individual life but also a public, democratic life. Royce and James argued for a notion of experience itself as both individual and relational and for a close connection between individual development and communal relation. W.E.B. Du Bois applied philosophy to problems of living with discrimination as an African American, while Jane Addams practiced philosophy by explicating the experiences of the lowly with the goal of expanding social progress and democracy. Du Bois and Addams, in their actualization of living philosophy, were instrumental in developing the field of applied sociology as well as co-founding an institution exemplifying this approach to social problems, namely, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

This chapter will explicate the notion of ‘practicing philosophy as experiencing and improving life’ through focus on two central life issues. The first issue addressed is that of balancing the need for individual development and uniqueness while also recognizing the fundamental role of community, both negative and positive in such self-identification and achievement. The second issue addressed is the pursuit of the goal of social justice, seeking to provide those in marginal positions in society, e.g., women, and African Americans, opportunities to develop their full potentials as human beings and citizens. Thus, James, Royce, and Dewey see individual-community interaction as central both for ensuring a democratic way of life and for achieving genuine individuality. Turning to Addams and Du Bois, we find the plea for a democratic way of life that allows a diversity of voices and an understanding of the negative ways in which discrimination and racist paradigms impact on an individual’s ability to develop a sense of authentic and affirming self-identity. We see
especially in Addams and Du Bois a call for social justice, a drive to challenge
the existing structures of power as well as the practice of what has become
known as ‘standpoint’ epistemology, namely, an emphasis on the perspectives
of those existing in oppressed positions in society, giving a voice to these indi-
viduals and thus hoping to promote better understanding between people as
well as actions that can improve their lot and thus the lot of all in the commu-


ity. Addams, for example, speaks of ‘the betterment of all’ in what she calls
‘lateral progress.’ She saw social advancement as occurring not through the
attainments of just a few but as found in social gains held in common. Here
again we see the intricate balance between individual fulfillment and com-
munity fulfillment.

Experiencing Life as an Individual in Community

Both Dewey and Royce discussed the conditions for building community while
also critiquing what they perceived as a prevalent and false, and economically
based individualism that they believed threatened community and even the
future of democracy. Thus, we find Dewey attacking what he calls the ‘older,
rugged individualism’ of the frontier. He saw this kind of individualism as no
longer viable in his time and points out that wilderness and its options no lon-
ger exist except in vicarious form in books and films (Dewey 1981a, 611).
Unfortunately this kind of individualism, the rugged kind that values the indi-
vidual achieving success alone and by his own efforts and thus reaping the
benefits for self and/or also for those he holds close still is prevalent today and
guides the lives of many Americans; to them financial success is the ultimate
goal. Thus, Dewey’s criticisms remain relevant today as humans seek to experi-
ence life in its fullest and to improve life in general for all.

It needs to be clear that it is not individualism per se that is endangering the
ability of humans to develop their fully potentials and to experience life at it’s
fullest. Rather it is the aggressive, single-focused individualism identified by
Dewey and Royce. Neither Dewey not Royce dismissed individualism, but rather
they advocated for a new understanding of individualism. Thus, Dewey argues
that individualism must be redefined not only in terms of new circumstances
but also in the context of developing genuine communities which will foster
the democratic way of life. A new psychological and moral type of individual
must be formed (Dewey 1957, 149). Dewey argues that the prevailing idea of
individualism, based on the idea that property and reward are intrinsically
individual, and defining industry and commerce by private pecuniary gain, has
not provided the development of full human potential, as claimed. It does not