
Presidential Address

HUMAN EXPRESSION AND MEANING MAKING: PONDERING THE
ROLE OF THE MEDIUM IN CREATING A LIFE WORTH LIVING

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This manuscript was originally delivered as the 2019 presidential address at the Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education Society annual meeting in September of that year. Neither I or the attendees knew then what was lurking and soon to be among us: COVID-19—the worst global pandemic to infest humanity in over 100 years. As I sit here revising the “talk” for its publication in this issue of *Philosophical Studies in Education*, the United States is the epicenter of the pandemic, with more than 66,000 new cases in just the last 24 hours and a total of 134,000 deaths nationally—and both growing at an alarming rate. And, there will not be a presidential address at the 2020 OVPES meeting—that meeting has been canceled.

Nor did we know in September of last year that yet another public murder of an innocent black man, George Floyd, at the hands of police was imminent in Minneapolis. The United States is the host for two infestations, one brand new and one that has lingered for centuries. These infestations are not disconnected one from the other; in fact, they continue to intermingle in the most horrible of ways. And, both require communal cooperation, care for the other, and love to conquer, rather than the current political divisiveness and hate most essentially created by the current president and his administration.

What follows has little direct connection to the above actual infestations; and, yet, for those of us who still pay attention to the 24 hour news cycle (or at least periodically check in) and its impact on how we live, what follows is certainly, and importantly, indirectly connected to these life-changing events and the questions this article takes up. On February 27 of this year (and repeatedly since then), the president predicted that COVID-19 will “sort of disappear.” In mid-March of this year, it became very clear that COVID-19 was not disappearing and most of the country issued stay at home orders and shut down all businesses and schools—sending everyone inside where they could follow the devastating march of the virus on the media outlet of their choice. There was, it seemed, only one news item—the pandemic. On May 25th, however, George Floyd was murdered in public by the very people sworn to protect him. A national cry went up and cities literally burned as protesters fought, again, to stop the ongoing killing and institutional racism symbolized by Floyd’s murder.

Here’s the point: as the streets of the country burned in protest, the media swiveled its attention away from the pandemic and to the protests. For

weeks, there was little to no media coverage of the pandemic—all eyes were on our streets, many of which were engulfed in flames. I gotta say, I really did feel like the president was right. What happened to the pandemic? It had seemingly disappeared . . . I ask you to consider seriously how mediums direct our attention, focus our energies, and severely impact our search for creating a life worth living.

Pay attention.

INTRODUCTION

The theme for the 2019 Ohio Valley Philosophy of Education annual meeting was drawn from a suggestion made by William James that philosophy—particularly American philosophy—has been animated by one “simple” question: Is life worth living? And, as noted in the call for proposals, James ultimately answered this query with a resounding “maybe.”¹ As an aside of sorts, the core philosophical question to which James points us makes clear that pragmatically-minded philosophers have not only been cognizant of human existential tragedy, but have been driven to think through the question of life’s worth, and profoundly so, *because* the essential fabric of experience is tightly woven with tragedy—personal, political, material, and social. And, as William James, John Dewey, Jane Adams, and others remind us on this count, the overriding nature of experience is thereby emotional, not intellectual. Our intellectual capacities are, pragmatists suggest, simply tools we’ve been provided with that, if used appropriately, might aid in navigating the emotionally laden series of difficult and tragic experiences that make up a typical life. For those readers who doubt this assertion concerning pragmatism’s focus on tragic difficulties, I ask you to read or re-read the very first chapter of James’ seminal text, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*.² Though I am not focusing here directly on life’s tragic nature, I think it important to keep in mind that what I lay out below is radically informed by this and other pragmatic understandings of human experience.

So, what *do* I have to say in what follows? As a road map of sorts outlining my conceptual journey—and I certainly have yet to reach any hard and fast destination—I first, albeit briefly, distinguish the Deweyan understanding of “impulsion” from that of “expression” as he discusses them in *Art as Experience*. Following that, I take up a general etymological/conceptual reminder as to the role that any medium plays given the space mediums occupy in the act of human expression. I then extend the discussion of mediums and how they operate in the human endeavor of expressing meaning—expression being one of those endeavors that might make life worth living—by way of Neil Postman’s contention that communication technologies as mediums of

¹ William James, “Is Life Worth Living?,” *International Journal of Ethics* 6, no. 1 (1895): 1.

² William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Gorham: Myers Education Press, 2019), first published 1907 by Longmans Green and Co.

expression are inherently and metaphorically ideological; and, as such, dictate in large part what can and what cannot be meaningfully expressed. I conclude by pointing to some serious epistemological dangers given the nature of human expression, contemporary media, and any medium's role in that expression—particularly political expression—and the educational implications those dangers hold given pragmatic understandings of truth.

IMPULSION AND EXPRESSION

Chapter Four of his “little essay” *Art as Experience* is entitled simply enough, *The Act of Expression* and is crucial to laying the groundwork for his extensive discussion of aesthetics generally and his more specifically radical argument that each and every experience might be seen for its aesthetic and/or its anesthetic qualities—the aesthetic being that which can make a life worth living and the anesthetic being that which makes for a life worth reconsidering. Dewey's goal in this fourth chapter is to explore the constituent parts of human expression and in so doing, distinguish expressive acts from non-expressive acts and ultimately anesthetic experiences from aesthetic experiences. In typical Deweyan style, he grows his understanding of expression from a more anesthetic, reactive human doing, which he terms “impulsion.”

Dewey writes,

Every experience, of slight or tremendous import, begins with an impulsion, rather *as* an impulsion. I say “impulsion” rather than “impulse.” An impulse is specialized and particular; it is, even when instinctive, simply a part of the mechanism involved in a more complete adaptation with the environment. “Impulsion” designates a movement outward and forward of the whole organism to which special impulses are auxiliary . . . Because it is the movement of the organism in its entirety, impulsion is the initial stage of any complete experience.³

It is worth noting here that Dewey takes up the question of how experiential obstructions, roadblocks, felt problems or difficulties (as he calls them elsewhere), tragedy, etc. function in the creation of a self . . . in the creation of meaning . . . in the making of a life worth living. On this count, he points out that selves would not exist without such obstructions. If there is no experiential resistance to the pursuit of needs and desires, there is no source for meaning making, no source for self-development, no source for growth. He also notes that the opposite situation, that of insurmountable difficulty, can result in an equally anesthetic existence as we are overwhelmed by said difficulties (this is partially the point made in the first chapter of James' *Pragmatism*). And, as I'll get to momentarily, Dewey suggests that these obstructions become the means,

³ John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, in *John Dewey, The Later Works, 1925-1953*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston, vol. 10, 1934 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 64.

or *media*, for meaningful expression, individual and social growth, and worthy, even artful, living.

“Expression” on the other hand, growing as it does from impulsion, is that which reaches beyond a mere reaction. Though there is “no expression without excitement, without turmoil,” a feeling

discharged at once in a laugh or cry, passes away with its utterance. To discharge is to get rid of, to dismiss; to express is to stay by, to carry forward in development, to work out to completion. What is sometimes called an act of self-expression might better be termed one of self-exposure . . . it is only a spewing forth.⁴

For Dewey, expression is a mediated version of impulsion and in that mediation—I’d note here the etymological connection of mediation and medium—life is potentially made meaningful . . . aesthetically valuable . . . maybe even worth living . . . maybe.

To continue with *Art as Experience* for just a moment or two longer, when impulsions are mediated, and thereby made more meaningfully complete, what is evoked is

not just quantitative, or just more energy, but is qualitative, a transformation of energy into thoughtful action, through assimilation of meanings from the background of past experiences. The junction of the new and old is not a mere composition of forces, but is a re-creation in which the present impulsion gets form and solidity while the old, the “stored,” material is literally revived, given new life and soul through having to meet a new situation . . . It is this double change which converts an activity into an act of expression. Things in the environment that would otherwise be smooth channels or else blind obstruction become means, *media*.⁵

Dewey contends, additionally, that understanding the meaning of expression, as in, “to express” connotes a squeezing out operation as opposed to impulsion which connotes, again, a spewing forth. Finally, as I’ve probably already cooked everyone reading who is suffering from Dewey fatigue, he writes,

The connection between a medium and the act of expression is intrinsic. An act of expression always employs natural material, though it may be natural in the sense of habitual as well in that of primitive or native. It becomes a medium when it is employed in view of its place and role, in its

⁴ Dewey, 67.

⁵ Dewey, 66.

relations, an inclusive situation—as tones become music when ordered in a melody.⁶

I will return to the idea that expression requires a medium and that mediums are intrinsically tied to expressive acts by and by. For now, I'd like to take a brief moment to remind us all what mediums consist of; where they sit in experiential goings on and how they operate, therefore, in human expression—that is, in meaning making.

MEDIUMS

Our contemporary use of the term medium, or mediums, or media, is etymologically sourced in the Latin *medium* and denoted something intermediate or, literally, the middle, intermediary, central, intervening, middling and so forth. However, the first appearance of medium in its more expansive contemporary usage comes in the late 16th century, and since that time, as words tend to do, it has gathered up various additional historic baggage . . .

The following is a laundry list of what a medium has come to connote and even denote today:

- The means, channel, or agency by which an aim is achieved
- A means by which something is communicated or expressed
- The intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses
- The substance in which an organism lives or is cultured
- The material or form used by an artist, composer, or writer
- A person claiming to be in contact with the spirits of the dead

Of the list above, the only understanding I am not concerned with here is that of a person claiming to be in contact with the spirits of the dead . . . on the other hand, this year's conference was initially inspired by the work of William James, famous for his investigations of metaphysics and for being a fan of spiritual mediums, hence its appearance on the list.

Assuming Dewey is onto something here, and I expect he is, and assuming that this brief etymological outline is generally accurate or at least somewhat agreeable, then there seems to me something epistemologically crucial to ponder: how do various mediums “play out” in their intrinsic relationship to meaningful expression given both their potential and their simultaneously restrictive natures? A few typical examples on this count might make my point clearer. Artists, let's take painters and composers, have great medium-connected potential to create projects that are insightfully expressive, original, inspiring, spiritually uplifting, and even lifesaving, yet find themselves simultaneously restricted by the nature of their particular medium. A painter has both a medium tradition and a relatively small number of expressive tools

⁶ Dewey, 69.

at her disposal. The same is true of composers. Musicians? The same. Certainly there have been and continue to be important and engaging shifting movements within each expressive field: realism, abstractionism, surrealism in painting. Classical, Jazz, Blues, Rock n Roll, Hip Hop, in music; Jimi Hendrix forever changed what was possible with a guitar when paired with electricity. However, in each case, expression is dependent and therefore very much guided by the extent to which the medium itself, the tools of the trade (so to speak) might be utilized.

And, for those readers who can find some small expressive success only in our use of words (I am certainly in that category), we are equally restricted by the medium of language just as the painter or musician is restricted by her medium's limitations. Telling someone that you love him just doesn't cover it and much of our expressive history has been, it seems, about trying to find ways to express ourselves completely given that our mere words fall short. The medium of language provides the opportunity for meaningful expression and simultaneously suffers the restrictions of all other mediums given that it resides in the space between an idea or feeling to be expressed and its actual expression—like all mediums, language has both great potential and limiting restrictions. The degree to which mediums are restrictive in full meaningful expression is where, I believe, contemporary epistemological dangers lie.

MEDIUM AS METAPHOR

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared the truth would be concealed from us. *Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance.*⁷

The above quote is from the brief foreword to Neil Postman's 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business*—a Nostradamus-like analysis of public discourse, particularly political public discourse, focused on the inherent role that any medium plays in its mediation of meaningful (or not) expression. The medium Postman focuses mostly on is television. In 2006, a Twentieth Anniversary Edition of *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was published including a new introduction by Postman's son, Andrew. The introduction places the book in historic context, in both looking back to 1985 and at contemporary goings on circa 2006—a more

⁷ Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2006), first published 1985 by Viking Penguin, xix.

ironic publication year for this second edition could probably not have been chosen: George W. Bush was president (do we miss him yet?); we had, in 2003, invaded Iraq to find those pesky weapons of mass destruction and to avenge the 9/11 attack—of course, all based on alternative facts . . . though at that time we still simply called them lies. *Myspace* had come on the scene in 2003; *Facebook* 2004; *YouTube* 2005; and, maybe most ironic, *Twitter* was founded this very year. Reality TV was reaching its apex and, one of the most popular shows in that genre of TV was *The Apprentice*.

Postman is clear to note early in his argument that his is not simply an addendum to Marshall McLuhan’s claim that the “medium is the message.” Instead, Postman suggests that there is a deeper issue to consider: the metaphorical impact of mediums of communication, that is, mediums of expression. To summarize, as there is not space for a complete explication of his argument, Postman’s claim and subsequent analysis is that different communication/expressive mediums have inherent underlying ideological directives—directives that are metaphorically powerful in dictating how and to what extent meaningful expression can be “made.” On this point, Postman writes,

A message denotes a specific, concrete statement about the world. But the forms of our media, including the symbols through which they permit conversation, do not make such statements. They are rather like metaphors, working by unobtrusive but powerful implication to enforce their special definitions of reality. Whether we are experiencing the world through the lens of speech or the printed word or the television camera, our media-metaphors classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, color it, argue a case for what the world is like.⁸

As to why such an analysis is epistemologically crucial to contemporary living, Postman suggests

Its value, such as it is, resides in the directness of its perspective, which has its origins in observations made 2300 years ago by Plato. It is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture. I use the word conversation metaphorically to refer not only to speech but to all techniques and technologies that permit people of a particular culture to exchange messages. In this

⁸ Postman, 10.

sense, all culture is a conversation or, more precisely, a corporation of conversations, conducted in a variety of symbolic modes. Our attention here is on how forms of public discourse regulate and even dictate what kind of content can issue from such forms.⁹

As examples, Postman lists and discusses a historic litany of expressive mediums and how the underlying ideological construction of each directs our capacity to express meaning—both in terms of potentiality and restriction. His list includes smoke signals; print media; the telegraph, and finally, his main target, television.

Before moving along to connect all of the above to the essential matter of meaning making and by extension the making of a meaningful life—that of “making” truth—a quick word about what I think is an important addition to Postman’s argument, one that was first suggested by Northrup Frye: “resonance.” Resonance, I believe, is important and fertile ground for future work connected to expression as it is understood here, particularly given contemporary communication media. Postman claims by way of Frye, that

Every medium of communication . . . has resonance, for resonance is metaphor writ large. Whatever the original and limited context of its use may have been, a medium has the power to fly far beyond that context into new and unexpected ones. *Because of the way it directs us to organize our minds and integrate our experience of the world, it imposes itself on our consciousness and social institutions in myriad forms. It sometimes has the power to become implicated in our concepts of piety, or goodness, or beauty. And it is always implicated in the ways we define and regulate our ideas of truth* (emphasis mine).¹⁰

TRUTH BRIEFLY

Truth, like time itself, is a product of a conversation man has with himself about and through the techniques of communication he has invented.¹¹

One of the enduring projects of philosophy, religion, psychology, history, and so forth is that of understanding the nature of truth in order to appropriately adjudicate truth claims. I will simply assert here that this project has been so enduring because truth’s nature undergirds every aspect of James’ question as to whether, or not, life is worth living and undergirds every aspect of human expression as I’ve conceptualized it here. Given that history, and

⁹ Postman, 6.

¹⁰ Postman, 18.

¹¹ Postman, 24.

given truth's essential importance to mediums of expression and meaning itself, I want to spend just a few moments on what I consider to be a turning point in philosophical understanding: truth understood pragmatically and as most meaningfully expressed by William James himself.

James' rather sublime philosophical prose on the nature of truth and the adjudication of truth claims provides depth and experiential context to an idea first suggested by James' friend and colleague, the logician Charles Sanders Peirce. That idea is that truth does not come as a ready-made, antem, pre-established, un-effected trait that adheres "in" things and ideas that are true and is lacking "in" things and ideas that are not-true. Or, as James simply and beautifully put it, truth isn't inherent in ideas; rather, "Truth Happens to an idea."¹² Most of James' revolutionary writing on the nature of truth can be found, again, in his essential text, *Pragmatism*. To summarize the Peirce/James contention as to truth's nature, I will simply present what is certainly an underdeveloped descriptive list of pragmatic truth traits—again, for the full story, read *Pragmatism*: (1) truth is not a pre-existing unchanging trait that adheres in things and in ideas-about-things simply to be discovered by close examination. (2) Rather, "Truth happens to an idea" and this "happening" is dependent upon human conception, human construction, and human sharing through mediums of expression and these truth "happenings" are made in direct connection to situational facts and how existing meaningful ideas are impacted by those actual facts. (3) The tenuous nature of truth claims, therefore, makes our understanding of actual facts-of-the-matter essential to truth construction and reconstruction—truth is certainly tenuous, potentially multiple, and situationally dependent. James himself named the pragmatic method of adjudicating truth claims, "radical empiricism." (4) Finally, though these matters have historically been part and parcel of religious, spiritual, psychological, and philosophical debates (and remain so), when it comes to putting truths into actual practice (particularly in democratic contexts) political discursive meaning making via any medium wins the day and should be understood deeply.

A quick note before moving on to some concluding thoughts: the rather radical reinterpretation of truth suggested by Peirce, James, and other pragmatic thinkers certainly did not go unnoticed by more traditional abstractionist philosophers. And, of course, their reaction was to generally suggest that pragmatism's claims lead to a relativistic understanding of truth as meaningful expression. Suffice it here to say that though truth as understood pragmatically is tenuous, multiple, and situationally dependent, that does imply relativism. In fact, because truth is directly tied to material situational matters it is much less capricious than abstractionist philosophical understandings that rely on locating "in" things and ideas essentially unchanging Truth—radical empiricism requires that incredibly close attention be paid to the facts on the ground, so to speak. Additionally, this rendition of truth does not imply the lack

¹² James, *Pragmatism*, 102.

of important underlying guiding human principals—though those principals themselves might go through some adjustment based on ever evolving material matters.

CONTEMPORARY MEDIA AND MEANINGFUL EXPRESSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR “DOING”

To briefly summarize what I’ve laid out thus far: Expression might best be seen as a mediated extension of impulsion that depends upon a “staying with” that qualitatively impacts self, others, and environment, materially and conceptually reconstructing each. Expression depends on mediums and can be judged for its aesthetic and/or anesthetic experiential qualities. Mediums themselves sit in an essential existential expressive space and thereby direct how and to what degree we can communicate important human meanings to one another—the “conversation” noted by Postman above. These mediums of expression are not neutral; they, in fact, come chalk full of ideologies concerning the nature of truth, knowledge, expression of meaning, the value of ideas and how they are constructed and communicated. Given that, and given truth’s tenuous nature, it is essential that attention be paid to the existential and epistemological impact such mediums have on our capacity to live a meaningful life. Postman’s target was television; mine is one Postman could probably have never imagined (though he does note the advent of the “microcomputer” in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*). My target: *Twitter*.

Before getting to my concluding analysis, a couple of caveats: I am not concerned here with Twitter’s potential as a platform for quickly communicating, for example, announcements of events. It is, in fact, a great way to immediately share the birth of a child, a change in a meeting date, or an invitation to an event. I am also not concerned with Twitter’s capacity to share images or videos. There are other epistemological concerns with Twitter and other social media on these counts but they fall outside my immediate concerns here. I am also cognizant, as Postman was with television, that *Twitter* . . . particularly “Twitter storms” . . . might very well be a source for fomenting social change—I’ll admit to being a bit doubtful on that count; however, and somewhat mirroring Postman’s commentary regarding television’s role in fomenting protest against the Vietnam War, I certainly might be convinced on this point. Instead, my concern here is Twitter’s impact on meaning making; on understanding truth; on expression.

Twitter has clearly evolved to be a major medium of particularly political/public dialogue. Some would say, political and public expression. If we assume for a moment that much of what I’ve suggested up to this point holds some analytical value, then it appears that Twitter’s near monopoly over political and public discourse is an epistemological danger to consider seriously. Taking for just a moment the important role mediums play in human expression—again, in light of any medium’s essential guiding place between that which is to be expressed and the expression itself—and Postman’s argument that mediums are ideological and as such direct our capacity to

express meaning and potentially “resonate” that understanding widely, Twitter, in its 280 character limit, seems to be a medium whose underlying ideology includes the following: “truth” matters so little that it can be determined briefly—not, certainly, as the complicated matter suggested by Peirce and James; political expression is a simple matter needing little to no factual understanding; and, expression here is often simply a matter of name calling. Twitter is a linguistic medium whose resonant quality . . . its ideology . . . is that dumbing down discussions makes for better policy and policy is easier to get put into action, the more ignorant the population becomes. These mediums, those that exist now and that are potentially on the horizon, are, I believe, epistemologically tragic and lend themselves to anesthetic living—the kind potentially not worth it.

The educational implications, I believe, are clear. Serious study and discussion on the role of mediums must be taken up at every level of education. Included in this study and discussion, must be those related to what it means to express meaning and how different mediums of expression impact selves, our material existence, and our social existence. This would include a developmentally appropriate “taking up” of Dewey’s contention about the difference between impulsion and expression. And, these studies should be connected widely to every discipline as each is ultimately an endeavor of expressing truth and knowledge.

Of course, there is an easy way around my analysis here: *Twitter*, given its limitations, is not a medium of expression; rather, it is a medium of impulsion. If that is the case, and it may very well be, we are in worse epistemological shape than even I have imagined here . . .
