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**Abstract:** Purpose The purpose of this paper is to use ideas drawn from two founders of American pragmatism, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce, in order to propose a philosophical foundation that supports the value of collaborative tagging and reinforces the structure and goals of the Semantic Web. Design/methodology/approach The study employs a close analysis of key literature by James and Peirce to answer recent calls for a philosophy of the Web and to respond to research in the LIS literature that has assessed the value and limitations of folksonomy. Moreover, pragmatic views are applied to illustrate the relationships among collaborative tagging, linked data, and the Semantic Web. Findings With a philosophical foundation in place, the study highlights the value of the minority tags that fall within the so-called “long tail” of the power law graph, and the importance of granting sufficient time for the full value of folksonomy to be revealed. The discussion goes further to explore how “collaborative tagging” could evolve into “collaborative knowledge” in the form of linked data. Specifically, Peirce’s triadic architectonic is shown to foster an understanding of the construction of linked data through the functional requirements for bibliographic records entity-relation model and resource description framework triples, and James’s image of the multiverse anticipates the goals Tim Berners-Lee has articulated for the Semantic Web. Originality/value This study is unique in using Jamesian and Peircean thinking to argue for the value of folksonomy and to suggest implications for the Semantic Web.

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