

PHILOSOPHY AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CULTURE

Pragmatic Essays after Dewey

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Validating Women's Experiences Pragmatically

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Carolyn Whitbeck says that she regards "feminist philosophy as primarily concerned with the construction and development of concepts and models adequate for the articulation of women's experience and women's practices."¹ Denise Riley, on the other hand, questions the possibility of an experience that is specifically women's when she deconstructs the category of 'woman' in *'Am I that Name?'*² She examines the ambivalent attitudes towards the designation of 'woman' that feminists have exhibited over the centuries. The recurring difficulty is that the more women are differentiated as women, the less they embody the characteristics of humanity.³ The instability of the designation, woman, is particularly problematic for political organization and emancipatory campaigns, since "to be named as a woman can be the precondition for some kinds of solidarity."⁴ The indeterminacy of 'women' means that "while it's impossible to thoroughly be a woman, it's also impossible never to be one."⁵ The undecidability of the issue is magnified in debates over women's experience.

Riley does not simplistically solve the problems she raises, since she expects that feminism will continue to oscillate between asserting and refusing the category of 'women.' She takes her stand "on a territory of pragmatism," and argues that "it is compatible to suggest that 'women' don't exist—while maintaining a politics of 'as if they existed'—since the world behaves as if they unambiguously did."⁶ She is using "pragmatism" in its conventional sense and not referring to the philosophical tradition of pragmatism, but her further explanation is remarkably consistent with pragmatist philosophy: "And the less that 'women workers' can be

believed to have a fixed nature, as distinct from neglected needs because of their domestic responsibilities, the more it will be arguable that only for some purposes can they be distinguished from all workers. Feminism can then join battle over which these purposes are to be.”

John Dewey, like Whitbeck, defends the primacy and ultimacy of concrete experience, understood as the process “of continuous and cumulative interaction of an organic self with the world” (LW 10:224). He also, like Riley, rejects fixed natures, and replaces them with explanations of relative stabilities within the flux of experience which have developed over time. What has traditionally been called a nature is a way of effectively organizing experience to answer our needs, intentions, and purposes. Therefore, the traits of experience, whether of women’s or of some other designated group, cannot just be read off from nature but must be reconstructed within a historical process with which we are continuous. We are not contemplatively detached from experience, but are ourselves formed within it as “desiring, striving, thinking, feeling creature(s)” (LW 1:67).

In this chapter I explore those aspects of Dewey’s analysis of experience which seem particularly apt for enriching feminist explorations of women’s experiences. These are (a) the identification and rejection of philosophical dualisms which have systematically distorted our understanding of everyday experience, (b) the thesis that ignoring the perspectival nature of experience is a source of oppression, (c) the development of standards of judgment and values out of concrete experience, and (d) the role of feeling in experience. Dewey’s explanation of experience is interrogated throughout from the perspective of feminist analyses of women’s oppression. In the final section I suggest that the systematic identification and rejection of Dewey’s gender bias will begin to yield an analysis of actual existences and events capable of guiding those decisions that both feminists and pragmatists seek about ends to strive for, goods to be obtained, and evils to be averted.

Lifting the Burden of Tradition: Attack on Dualism

In *The Quest for Certainty* Dewey seeks the origins of present-day beliefs, assumptions, and values by turning to history and anthropology. He strips away the veneer of pure rationality that is attributed to widely held attitudes by showing that they arose within definite human communities in answer to felt needs. He specifically wants to account for the hierarchical dualisms that have systematically distorted experience. The four, in particular, which must be rejected in order to clear the way for pragmatist philosophy, turn out to be the same ones that feminists have also identified

as oppressive: (a) the depreciation of doing and making and the over-evaluation of pure thinking and reflection, (b) the contempt for bodies and matter and praise of spirit and immateriality, (c) the sharp division of practice and theory, and (d) the inferiority of changing things and events and the superiority of a fixed reality. The criticism of dualism is also central to most varieties of feminist analysis.⁸ Susan Sherwin, for instance, points out that most traditional philosophical methodologies accept dichotomous thinking that "forces ideas, persons, roles, and disciplines into rigid polarities. It reduces richness and complexity in the interest of logical neatness, and, in doing so, it distorts truth."⁹ Dichotomies undergird patriarchy, which is sustained by power relations that both assume and construct unbridgeable differences between the sexes.

Dewey also argues that philosophers who denigrate doing and making and praise theory above practice are self-serving (LW 4:4). They perpetuate these dualisms by first rationally formulating and then justifying them, but philosophers did not originate the position. The subordination of practice to theory originates far back in history, when physical work was onerous and done under the compulsion of necessity, and intellectual work was associated with leisure. The least pleasant and more burdensome practical activity was forced on slaves, serfs, and women. The social dishonor attributed by those in power to the slave class and to women was extended to their work. Dewey asks why such attitudes to social castes and emotional revulsions should be raised to dogma. A class-based genealogy alone, however, cannot explain why the body should be held in contempt in relation to spirit.

This is not just a historical question, because the negative effects of these dualisms are still with us. Morals, for instance, have been understood as the province of an inner, personal attitude and not as "overt activity having consequences" in those areas in which action is manifested, such as industry, politics, and the fine arts (LW 4:5). Theories of knowledge and of mind also suffer from the separation of intellect from action. Dewey argues that the historical grounds for elevating knowledge above making and doing is the quest for certainty to overcome the perils which daily beset us in a hazardous world. We can change the world directly through "the complicated arts of associated living," such as building shelters and weaving garments (LW 4:3). Alternatively, we can try to coerce unpredictable forces by ritual, sacrifice, and supplication. In earlier times the security that could be obtained by an individual or a community through overtly changing environing conditions was inadequate to overcome the dangers encountered. Recourse to religious or rational absolutes was therefore more comforting.

Certain traits of practical activity account for this preference. A brief comparison with the absolute standards of rational thinking can bring

them out. Practical activity involves individualized and unique situations, which undergo change, while rational categories are universals, and rationality privileges invariant necessity. In contrast to Platonic Forms, Aristotelian essences, and Cartesian clear and distinct ideas, overt action involves risk because eventual success is never entirely in our control. Since unforeseeable conditions can always thwart us, our intent alone cannot bring about a successful outcome, but we can unerringly assert the Kantian categorical imperative. If the perilousness of existence has tended to evoke a corresponding search for security, including intellectual stability, then one can understand why the absolute predictability of abstract principles comes to be more highly valued than the relative predictability of even the best understood practice. But this separation of theory from practice, of truth from the messy details of experience, of absolute good from particular, limited goods has had dire consequences.

A radical change is needed in our understanding of knowledge and value. When once values are connected with the problem of intelligent action, then we can investigate what must be done in order to make objects of value more secure in existence. Traditionally, philosophers obtained cognitive certification, whether through intuition or a process of reasoning, by seeking to identify an antecedently existing, immutable truth and goodness (LW 4:35). This understanding of knowledge as disclosure of a reality independent of the knowing process perpetuates the vain search for values subsistent in the properties of Being apart from human action.

All the ways that human individuals experience things, whether through love, desire, fear, or need, are real modes of experience, not reducible to cognitive judgments. But these emotional and practical realities remain fragmentary and inconsistent and subject to forces beyond our control until they are intellectually grasped. A new way of dealing with these experiences is needed, one which does not simply reduce them to cognitive objects. Dewey proposes examining the relations and interactions with one another of the widest range of experienced objects. This will yield a new kind of experienced object, no more or less real than unintellectualized experiences of objects, "but more significant, and less overwhelming and oppressive" (LW 4:175). The monopoly of more specialized forms of knowing can be broken by turning to the ways that welfare mothers, artists, students, daughters, and untold persons in everyday life manage to solve problems and thereby extract knowledge from their daily concerns.

Dewey advocates that philosophers cease trying to formulate general theories that seek to settle for all time the nature of truth, knowledge, and value.¹⁰ Instead, we should find out "how authentic beliefs about existence as they currently exist can operate fruitfully and efficaciously in connection with the practical problems that are urgent in actual life" (LW 4:36).

Experience Is Reality

Taking over James' characterization of experience as a double-barreled word, Dewey says that "like its congeners, life and history, [experience] includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and also *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine—in short, processes of *experiencing*" (LW 1:18). Dewey spoke more accurately than he knew when he defined experiencing as what men do, feel, value, and imagine. Historically, men have had disproportionate power to inscribe their point of view on the world.

Given the exaggeration of gender differences in most organizations of society, it would be expected that women's experiences will differ in various ways from men's, and certainly women's access to dominant structures of power has been severely restricted in most societies at most periods of history. Dewey most likely did not realize that he was privileging a masculine perspective, since he did not do so in his political activities, but his gendered discourse nonetheless testifies to a male bias. However, since he was also alert to hidden forms of oppression, this bias does not vitiate what he says, but disappears once it is exposed. If anything, it provides unintended—and therefore even more forceful—evidence for his claim that our experiences influence our perspectives and value judgments.

What he said can easily be appropriated by feminists to good effect. By taking the integrated unity of what is experienced and the concretely embodied way of experiencing as the starting point of philosophic thought Dewey not only avoided the extremes of materialism and idealism, but he provided a means of legitimating women's special angles of vision and tendency to theorize on the basis of our experiences. The concrete specificity of Dewey's explanation of experience stands in stark contrast to the practice of philosophy as sterile argumentation and symbol manipulation. He says, for instance, that " 'experience' denotes the planted field, the sowed seeds, the reaped harvests, the changes of night and day, spring and autumn, wet and dry, heat and cold, that are observed, feared, longed for; it also denotes the one who plants and reaps, who works and rejoices, hopes, fears, plans, invokes magic or chemistry to aid him, who is downcast or triumphant" (LW 1:18). The "him" can be replaced by "her" without distortion, which is not true of most male-biased theoretical discourse.

Long before the current wave of poststructuralism, Dewey argued that "our analysis shows that the *ways* in which we believe and expect have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe and expect" (LW 1:23). Following Hegel, and anticipating Foucault, he showed how our inherited beliefs and institutions continue to influence our perceptions, that is, how

historicity is constitutive of our peculiarly human interactions with nature. "We learn, in short, that qualities which we attribute to objects ought to be imputed to our own ways of experiencing them, and that these in turn are due to the force of intercourse and custom." Moreover, he argues that "this discovery marks an emancipation; it purifies and remakes the objects of our direct or primary experience."

As far back in history as we have records of women's denunciation of their situation, we have evidence that women have recognized the emancipatory potential of the discovery of (the effect of preconception on reality). When once it is realized that what we take to be straightforwardly matters of fact are actually active transformations of experience which include socially transmitted preconceptions, then we can dispute historically widespread claims that women's perceived inferiority is due to a fact of nature and is therefore inalterable. Even facts can be questioned.

Not only presuppositions, but social, political, economic, and psychological practices contribute to the facticity of facts. There is no way to strip away all subjective factors and just reductively identify the facts that remain. So-called subjective factors are constitutive of the objectivity of the facts. Therefore, it is not irrelevant to respond to a cited statistic about the different mathematical ability of boys and girls by asking for the underlying cultural expectations and political agenda which helped constitute the experimental procedure. Expectations, values, and beliefs are already part of any experimental situation. By drawing our attention to them feminists and pragmatists are not politicizing an otherwise neutral, objective field, but they are seeking to disclose the full complexity of the actual situation. It is pernicious to deny minority groups and women the means to develop the intellectual skills needed to function successfully in a highly technological society just because such denial does not leave the victims intact; the assumption of lesser ability contributes to bringing about as an actual result what was initially merely a preconception.¹¹

But some feminist theorists presuppose that it is possible to expose the misogynist biases of explanations which perpetuate distorted views of reality and replace these with objective claims which transparently capture reality as it really is, apart from any presuppositions or value orientation. They think that anyone could just look and see that the feminist explanation is the one true one. According to William James as well as Dewey, this belief in a univocally true transcription of reality, which is the possession of any one group or theoretical stance, is itself one of the bases for many oppressive practices over the centuries.

That one has good intentions in pointing out what reality really is does not lessen the oppressive results of the belief. It is the belief itself that one has a privileged access to reality that does the harm. If I am simply right about reality, for instance, in some absolute way, and you oppose

my claim with a different one, then it follows that you are necessarily wrong. This accounts for the confrontational basis of so many academic and wider social disputes. The stronger the belief in one's own integrity, the greater the confrontation.

That reality is always as much a function of one's angle of vision and lived experience as it is of what is available to be experienced has been dramatically enacted over the years in challenges to feminist theory from within. African American feminists charge white feminists with racism, lesbian feminists charge heterosexual feminists with homophobia, and third world feminists charge first world feminists with colonialism.¹² The early feminist agenda of speaking out on behalf of women has been challenged as distortive by those who want to speak in their own voice about their own experiences. This phenomenon could simply be interpreted as being that of an initially false theoretical position being challenged by the true one. The earlier theories were homophobic, sexist, and racist and the new ones replacing them are not. But this does not adequately describe the complexity of the dynamics. Earlier feminists conscientiously argued against oppression as they saw it. But their angle of vision was necessarily partial. They recognized some aspects of the situation, but not all. This does not show that their original position was false, but that it was finite, incomplete, and in principle revisable when new experiences and reflective interpretations became available. These were quickly supplied by women who felt that their experiences were not being accurately described.

In the sixties, through consciousness-raising sessions and critical reflections on personal experience, it became possible to recognize, name, and criticize the web of social, cultural, and political structures within which experiences took on the particular oppressive dimensions they did. The very homogeneity of the white, middle-class experiences being expressed generated a sense of sisterhood and conviction that their political analyses truly named and provided a remedy for the felt oppression. It soon became evident, however, that not everyone had the same experiences or shared the same values. It took different perspectives to recognize the hidden biases that had not been recognized. But these challenges were often put forth as themselves complete and the final word. Some lesbians, for instance, accused heterosexual feminists as not only perpetuating homophobia, but as also being fundamentally flawed in their way of life. They said that these misguided sisters could not be totally emancipated until they gave up their sexual orientation and became completely woman-identified.

The finite partiality of lesbian experiences allowed lesbians to recognize the one-sided nature of heterosexual experiences, but not of their own, just as the one-sided nature of the heterosexual experiences had blinded

heterosexuals to their homophobia. If one looks at the complex dynamics of the sometimes confrontational dialogues over the years, it is obvious that the wrong position was not simply replaced by the right one, but that gradually each modified their initial stance as they assimilated different ways of naming the contested experiences. The quality of the experiences themselves changed as beliefs changed and beliefs changed in response to new experiences.

How, then, can we appeal to experience as a bulwark against the ideological distortions which we have absorbed merely by growing up as a member of a particular community? Dewey's philosophy is a major achievement precisely because it combines explanations of the perspectival character of our grasp of reality, which is active and transformative, with analyses of the ways in which we can legitimately distinguish merely subjective from warrantably objective claims about reality. Dewey denies that the unavoidably subjective element in our active dealings with the world makes it impossible to objectively determine genuine aspects of any given situation. He also denies that there is an infinite regress or infinite plurality of interpretations of experience, just as he denies that there is one, hegemonically definitive transcription of reality.

Dewey's accomplishment cannot be grasped unless it is realized that he rejects the privatization of experience that has come to be taken for granted. The recognition of the contributing influence of personal attitudes and their consequences, which was liberating in actual life, had pernicious results in philosophy (LW 1:24ff.). When philosophy took the subject matter of psychology to be the interior or subjective response to objective reality, then experience was reduced to the act of experiencing, and experience to the single aspect of perceiving (LW 1:11). Dewey asserted instead "the primacy and ultimacy" of the material of ordinary experience (LW 1:24). Experience is primary in uncontrolled form and ultimate as regulated, given significance through "the methods and results of reflective experience." In rejecting the subjectification of primary experience, Dewey provides arguments for acknowledging the reality of the material conditions, the objectivity, of women's experience.

Life Experiences

Pragmatist philosophy begins with life experiences, which consist of both doings and undergoings (LW 10:9, 50–53). Experience is not just naively undergone, it is overlaid and saturated not only with previous philosophical interpretations, but also with past beliefs, values, and classifications. Since the origins and validity of these earlier interpretations are for the most part lost, they differ little from prejudices. But whether they are

taken as the incorporated results of past reflection or as prejudices, they are welded onto genuinely firsthand experiences and can be a source of enlightenment when reflected upon. They distort present experience just to the extent that they are not detected. "Clarification and emancipation follow when they are detected and cast out; and one great object of philosophy is to accomplish this task" (LW 1:40).

Dewey moves back and forth between labeling earlier interpretations of experience, which continue to influence our understanding of present events, as sources of enrichment or causes of obfuscation. Consequently, it sometimes seems that the reflective effort to identify them should properly issue in deliberate recovery, and then again, in rejection and emancipation. This ambiguity is deliberate because we ought to continually and critically reflect on these inheritances. Some will be found to be enhancements of present experience and others to be distortive and counterproductive. Which is which cannot simply be decided hegemonically by a privileged elite or tradition, nor can it be determined beforehand by purely rational analysis. Instead, we should find out "what wearing them does to us" (LW 1:40).

Dewey calls the discriminative judgment by which we decide to continue or reject aspects of our culture the cultivation of a naïveté of eye, ear, and thought. But this is not a return to an original innocence, rather it is a genuine grasp of experience acquired through a discipline of severe thought. In fact, traditional philosophy has failed the ordinary person by denigrating just such a concern with everyday experiences. The authoritarian arrogance of much philosophizing has given the impression that only those few who have access to the classical thinkers of the past are qualified to judge what is important and what not. The denigration of ordinary experience and praise of pure thought or rational analysis for its own sake is one of the greatest failings of traditional philosophy precisely because it denies to the nonspecialist the authority of their own experience. By almost exclusively focusing on classical texts or papers given at professional meetings or articles published in professional journals, philosophers "have denied that common experience is capable of developing from within itself methods which will secure direction for itself and will create inherent standards of judgment and value" (LW 1:41). An avowed pragmatist goal, therefore, is to create and promote respect for concrete human experience and its potentialities.¹³

But "Whose experience?" feminists want to know. Not only have classical texts and elite professional discourse characterized traditional philosophizing, but also male reflections and experiences have been exclusively privileged. Dewey does explicitly raise the issue of "Whose experience?" as a criticism, but only in order to deny its relevance (LW 1:178ff.). His intention in doing so is a good one, namely to undercut the

subjectivity traditionally ascribed to experience as a basis for excluding it from the abstractly rational deliberations of philosophers. However, good intentions do not override the harm done by not taking the objection more seriously. Unlike Dewey, I cannot ignore the source of experienced claims because, from my point of view as a member of a marginalized group, the male-centered angle of vision of supposedly generalized experiential claims is both obvious and oppressive. I grant the validity of Dewey's rejection of the subjectification of experience, since women's experiential perspectives have consistently been dismissed by philosophers as being merely subjective. But defenses of the objective character of experience can be made without denying that gender, as well as race, class, sexual orientation, and many other distinctions contribute to its objectivity, and therefore it is not only appropriate but imperative to question whose experience is being used as a paradigm for explication.

My objection, therefore, is not meant to undercut Dewey's explanation that experience is dependent on the objectively physical and social structures of natural events. "It has its own objective and definitive traits," which are describable without reference to a self, if by self is meant the isolated individual in the privacy of consciousness (LW 1:179). Moreover, selves are specifiable, definable events within experience and not occurrences outside, underneath, or beside experience, as they are traditionally held to be in the pernicious dualisms of spirit and matter, mind and body.

Dewey also argues that for some purposes and consequences, it is imperative to recognize and acknowledge personal ownership. The self can be objectified, just as other objects like trees and planets are discriminated as aspects of experience. "To say in a significant way, 'I think, believe, desire,' . . . is to accept and affirm a responsibility and to put forth a claim" (LW 1:179-80). It signifies the self as an organizing center, who accepts future benefits and liabilities as the consequences of one's deliberate actions, rather than crediting them to nature, family, church, or state.

"Existentially speaking, a human individual is distinctive opacity of bias and preference conjoined with plasticity and permeability of needs and likings. One trait tends to isolation, discreteness; the other trait to connection, continuity. This ambivalent character is rooted in nature" (LW 1:186). For certain purposes we can distinguish what pertains more to the subject and what more to the object. Dualisms are objectionable when they convert dynamic principles of formulation and interpretation into antithetical absolutes. "Sociability, communication are just as immediate traits of the concrete individual as is the privacy of the closet of consciousness" (LW 1:187).

In chapter 3 of *Experience and Nature* Dewey explains that one of the most striking features of human experience is direct enjoyment, as found in

feasting, ornamentation, dance, and festivities of all kinds. Luxuries and embellishments transform the everyday even at the subsistence level, so that those living in hovels, for instance, nonetheless erect and decorate temples of worship and adorn their bodies, even if clothing is scarce. Useful labors are transformed by ritual and ceremony. Dewey gives the following example: "Men make a game of their fishing and hunting, and turn to the periodic and disciplinary labor of agriculture only when inferiors, women and slaves, cannot be had to do the work" (LW 1:69). This example passes without comment or criticism. Dewey is too intent on demonstrating the connection of the consummatory phase of the direct appreciative enjoyment of things with instrumental, laborious productivity.

Not until the end of the chapter does he remind us that "to point out something as a fact is not the same thing as to commend or eulogize the fact" (LW 1:97). He criticizes the class structure which permitted a privileged elite to engage in pure intellectual activity without the need of making a living. The ultimate contradiction for the philosophical tradition is that it praised thought as universal and necessary and the culminating good of nature, but did not bother to condemn the restriction of its exercise to a small and exclusive class, and therefore did nothing to extend it to those not privileged by birth, economic, or civil status.

Obviously, why women were taken to be inferiors is not an issue which interests Dewey to the extent that class does, nor does he seem aware of the male-centered view uncritically expressed. He does continually criticize and seek to overturn the class-based nature of traditional philosophizing, pointing out its dependency on slave labor, but he does not similarly reject its gender bias. His arguments for the objectivity of experience can be supported without agreeing that the question of whose experience it is should not be raised. We can only realize the full emancipatory potential of the analysis of experience by bringing in those whose experience has been excluded in the past.

Feeling as a Quality of Life Forms

Pragmatist explanations of the relation between self and world, experience and knowledge, theory and praxis deny the strict separation of emotions and intellect that feminists frequently criticize as a masculinist distortion pervasive in the Western tradition of philosophy.¹⁴ In Dewey's transactive model of experience feelings and intellect are continuous, although distinguishable for certain purposes. Needs, efforts to satisfy needs, and satisfactions distinguish living from nonliving things (LW 1:194). When the activity of need-demand satisfaction acquires certain additional abilities to secure the interactive support of needs from the environment, the

subsequent organization is psychophysical. The perpetuation of patterned activities as an aspect of organizing capacities serves as the basis of sensitivity. Selective bias in interactions with environing conditions serves to perpetuate both the organism and the whole of which it is a part. Sensitivity is thus always discriminative. On a more complex level of organization, biases become interests and satisfaction of needs are reflectively determined to be values, rather than simply mere satiation.

Dewey's use of the term 'organism,' instead of person or body, is deliberate. He speaks of the "organism in its entirety" (LW 10:64) and "the whole of the live creature" (LW 10:87). This usage emphasizes the post-Darwinian awareness of the human continuity with other animals and recognizes that we are not embodied minds but interactive organisms with many ways of taking in the world and responding to it.¹⁵ The mind/body split is an inherited dualistic classification, which either distinguishes the body and mind so rigidly that it becomes impossible to figure out how they are related, or pits each against the other in an adversarial relationship. Both feminists and pragmatists have pointed out at great length the oppressive consequences of this split. It is difficult to retain one side of the dualism, the body, without its ghostly double distorting what is meant by body, embodiedness, or lived body. By contrast, we experience organic transactions within situations and are aware that this process does not leave either pole of the transaction unchanged.

Sensitivity and interests are realized as feelings, which can be sharp and intense or vague and diffuse, such as in massive uneasiness or comfortableness. "Activities are differentiated into the preparatory, or anticipatory, and the fulfilling or consummatory" (LW 1:197). Anticipation of food or sex or danger is suffused with the tone of the consummated activity. This capacity to sensitively anticipate an outcome is actualized in feeling. Feelings, therefore, are not simply private, internal events, but a valuable "susceptibility to the useful and harmful in surroundings," a premonition of eventual lived consequences.

When the consummated satisfactions or disappointments accrue, they reinforce the anticipatory activities, including feelings. The experience is no longer haphazard, but becomes an integrated accumulation. "Comfort or discomfort, fatigue or exhilaration, implicitly sum up a history, and thereby unwittingly provide a means whereby (when other conditions become present) the past can be unravelled and made explicit" (LW 1:197). Although feelings themselves are relatively undifferentiated, they have the capacity to take on innumerable distinctions. As they are refined they can vary more and more in quality, intensity, and duration.

Feelings are thus distinctively related to environing conditions and interactive outcomes. They *have* these connections, but not necessarily mentally, as an explicit grasp of meaning. When feelings are meaningful

as well as experienced, then mind has emerged. In an intricate but succinct summing up, Dewey adroitly manages to avoid dualistic explanations while retaining the complexity of human organisms. "As life is a character of events in a peculiar condition of organization, and 'feeling' is a quality of life-forms marked by complexly mobile and discriminating responses, so 'mind' is an added property assumed by a feeling creature, when it reaches that organized interaction with other living creatures which is language, communication" (LW 1:198). Feelings become suffused with meaning as they serve to objectively discriminate external things and relate past and future episodes. They recall and foretell. As language develops, pains, pleasures, colors, and odors acquire the capacity to objectify the immediate traits of things. Qualities do not essentially reside in organisms or in things but emerge in interactions with each other. But for purposes of control they may be treated as if located in one or the other. Psychologists, for instance, have traditionally treated women hysterics for their symptoms, thus substantializing the subjective pole and privatizing it, rather than taking the hysteric behavior as a quality of their interactions with their human and material surroundings. The latter would make it possible to objectively identify the hysteria as a process whose roots, and therefore cure, is deeply entangled in an objectively identifiable situation.

Sensory qualities do not identify themselves. They exist as the indispensable means of any noetic function, but must be transformed through a system of signs. When a particular feeling of listlessness is identified as a response to repeated beatings, then attention is directed to a particular, objective interaction and it becomes possible to change the conditions which are bringing it about. Qualities just merge into the general situation until, through communication, as shared meanings to social consequences, they acquire objective distinctiveness (LW 1:199). When the same listlessness is interpreted by society as inappropriate behavior for a wife, and the woman internalizes this explanation, then she is likely to cooperate in therapies designed to change her behavior rather than her surroundings, including the actions of the aggressor.

Feelings inhere neither in matter nor mind, but are qualitative aspects of a particular field of interacting events. A battered woman feeling badly enough to seek help can be aided or obstructed in the identification of the objective interactions defining her situation, depending on the meanings projected onto the events by others. It cannot be assumed that the woman already has an explicit understanding of the full reality of her situation, which is why she can be caught in a series of inappropriate responses. Neither can it be assumed that neutral observers, such as social work professionals or law enforcement officials, have a privileged access to the truth of her situation. Interactive communication is required for a progressively better understanding of the situation. But the battered

woman has one advantage no one else has. She knows how she feels and what she observes, and these can be articulated ever more accurately as meaningful connections begin to be appropriately named.

The View from the Fringe

For all his sensitivity to different angles of vision, Dewey does not finally recognize how much his philosophic perspective derives its strength from the fact that it is a view from a privileged center. He comes so close to the realization, and even provides the philosophic resources for doing so, that the fact that he does not gives added weight to his own claim that there is something authoritative about experience that cannot be had any other way. He deliberately and consciously subverts the hegemony of privileged centers, and the means by which he does so can still be appropriated to good effect. Nonetheless, he, himself, is not a member of any group whose experience has been systematically distorted and therefore has not developed a sensitivity to some specific limitations of his own experiential understanding. Pragmatist feminists can profitably criticize, incorporate, and develop Deweyan pragmatism further, just as socialist feminists have moved on from Marxism, but first it is important to see just what is missing.

In *Experience and Nature* Dewey says that "it is natural to men to take that which is of chief value to them at the time as *the real*" (LW 1:31). Dewey takes "men" as a generic term for "human." The intention in doing so is benign, but the consequences are not. Compare Dewey's statement with a superficially similar one from Simone de Beauvoir, where by "men," she means males as distinguished from females: "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth."¹⁶ Oddly enough, Beauvoir and Dewey are making substantially the same point, namely, that what we take to be objectively given reality is actually filtered through our presuppositions and values. Given a different perspective we would literally be experiencing a different reality. They are also making the point that we are usually blind to this intersubjective character of the constitution of reality and that its realization is the first step to liberating ourselves from the pernicious effects that follow from not doing so.

The consequences of not recognizing his own gender bias is apparent in Dewey's subsequent remark that "in ordinary experience this fact does no particular harm." According to the context of his discussion, equating reality with what we value does no harm in everyday experience because it is easily compensated for by simply turning to other practical experiences exhibiting other interests. The harm comes from reflective disciplines like

philosophy, which are deliberately removed from everyday experience and, therefore, encounter no corrective influence from counterindicating events. This indictment of modern philosophy for substituting categorial analysis for reflections on concrete experience is well taken, but not the claim about the self-corrective nature of ordinary experience. At the very least, some qualifications about how it is corrective have to be introduced.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton, in a speech before the New York legislature in 1860, pointed out precisely what harm is caused in everyday life by men's conflating what they value with what is real. She said that "man, the sculptor, has carved out his ideal. . . . He has made a woman that from his low stand-point looks fair and beautiful, a being without rights, or hopes, or fears but in him—neither noble, virtuous, nor independent. . . . We have bowed down and worshiped in woman, beauty, grace, the exquisite proportions, . . . her delicacy, refinement, and silent helplessness—all well when she is viewed simply as an object of sight"¹⁷ She contrasts this type of womanhood carved by man, with "our type of womanhood," namely, "the women who are called masculine, who are brave, courageous, self-reliant and independent, . . . they who have taken their gauge of womanhood from their own native strength and dignity—they who have learned for themselves the will of God concerning them." Stanton is not just pointing out women's disadvantages relative to men in nineteenth-century America. She also identifies its source in the masculinist angle of vision and suggests how this perspective can be contested when she refers to those "who have learned for themselves." The reasons she gives for this disparity can still be usefully applied in our own century.

Stanton points to the *deliberate* maiming of women to make them appear lesser—to themselves as well as to men. Such distortion of women's own experience is motivated by the drive to gain, consolidate, or extend power. This strategy works best when some noble motivation is explicitly claimed. For one thing, this renders plausible the accusation that those pointing out the implicit motivation hidden under the explicit one are inventing ill will where none exists. There are many ways to explain situations, depending on the aim in doing so. The same situation can be described neutrally, that is, as a slice of life, as if causes were too diffuse to identify. The causes can also be described in moral or psychoanalytic terms, so that the larger structural or institutional web in which they are embedded is ignored. For instance, it is reported that a husband shoots his wife because he has been drinking or is jealous, as though this were an isolated incident, totally explainable in terms of the man's moral shortcomings or pathology.

The behavior can instead be related to many others very similar to it in order to bring out the full dimensions of the societal structures which

contribute to such behavior patterns. The fact that assaults against women by men is much greater than women against men and that less violence against women is perpetrated by strangers than by intimates, is often not mentioned as relevant to the incident. Many newspapers and magazines follow this policy of isolationist, know-nothing reportage. This false neutrality is defended as keeping editorializing off the news pages. But it obscures relevant causal factors, ignores aspects of the situation which have to be understood in order to bring about effective changes, and neutralizes critics by making their obviously politicized rhetoric appear by contrast to seem shrill, self-serving and ideological.

Those on the sidelines, who do not have an immediate stake in the particular incident being reported, are often attracted to calm recitals of facts rather than to seemingly shrill rebuttals by feminists who point out connections that are being ignored or distorted. This preference reinforces our sense of ourselves as rational beings, calmly considering the facts of the case. Since every single significant improvement in women's situation—from property rights, access to education, divorce, and birth control, to enfranchisement—has been controversial, bitterly contested, and won only after many years of struggle, we can begin to perceive one source of the otherwise puzzling phenomenon of women actively opposing their own betterment. Isolated incidents of men pathologically or evilly assaulting individual women, for instance, do not sum themselves up into an indictment of marriage as an institution or of patterns of behavior and expectations in a particular society. When more immediate and acceptable explanations are available, more far-ranging and radical ones appear less plausible.

Geneva Overholser's adoption of a feminist perspective in *The Des Moines Register*, of which she is editor, illustrates how the rejection of a falsely neutral perspective can provide not only a fuller understanding of events, rather than a lesser or distortive account, but also one which is perceived as both plausible and fair. Her newspaper won a Pulitzer Prize in 1991 for a graphic story on rape. In reporting the story *Newsweek* credited Overholser with fashioning "what may be the most feminist daily in America," by which it meant one which proves "that so-called women's issues can be important to every reader."¹⁸ Acknowledging that the *Register* formerly reflected the interests of its mostly male editors, *Newsweek* said that "Overholser has not so much altered the paper as added to it. Topics such as day care, sexual harassment and the safety of contraceptives receive prominent, thoughtful coverage. Reporters and editors have come to view routine stories through new prisms: last week a homicide account noted that five other Des Moines women had died in recent domestic assaults."

Philosophical analyses of the objectivity of experience that ignore the central role of power among the complex motivations which structure our

perceptions of the world are themselves part of the problem of discrimination against women which feminists address. In other words, self-proclaimed neutral analyses, whether put forward by philosophical realists or by feminists, are actually biased in a way that is eventually harmful to women and other oppressed groups. The radical political agendas of feminists are better served by radical analyses of the relation of self and world.

Conclusion

Dewey stands out, even within the pragmatist tradition, for attacking the supposed neutrality of our perceptions of reality. He analyzes the complex ways our perceptions are enmeshed in past beliefs, current anticipations, and values. I have interrogated his analyses of how our experiences interactively construct reality from the point of view of a feminist critique of the structures of women's oppression. This interrogation is consistent with Dewey's contention that we are interested in purposely managing the traits of experience so that we can avoid being victimized by inherited structures and develop ones more conducive to growth. Reflection is not a luxury reserved to a leisure class, but "exists to guide choice and effort" (LW 1:67). Only through thoughtful observation and experiment can the frail and transient goods we experience be substantiated, secured, and extended. But since observations are always from a particular perspective and the good outcomes desired are relative to concretely experienced needs, it follows that feminist angles of vision will extend Dewey's insights in new and unexpected ways.¹⁹

Dewey empowers individuals to trust their own experiences as a litmus test of theoretical explanations. Philosophical theories have long served to repress and distort women's experiences because, like Plato's Forms, they have provided Procrustean beds on which women had to fit at the pain of seeming irrational. Dewey's emancipatory move reverses this priority by making theory answer to practice. This does not mean just repeating what we know or do already, but can include strikingly different interpretations and actions and even the unmasking of our own misconceptions. The relevant criterion is that they clarify rather than distort our lived-through experiences: "A first-rate test of the value of any philosophy which is offered us: Does it end in conclusions which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful? Or does it terminate in rendering the things of ordinary experience more opaque than they were before, and in depriving

them of having in 'reality' even the significance they had previously seemed to have?" (LW 1:18).

Notes

1. Caroline Whitbeck, "A Different Reality: Feminist Ontology," in *Women, Knowledge and Reality: Explorations in Feminist Philosophy*, ed. A. Garry and M. Pearsall (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989), p. 69, n.1
2. Denise Riley, "Am I that Name?" *Feminism and the Category of 'Women' in History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
3. Ibid., p. 13. A recent example can be found in Sheila Ruth, *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction of Women's Studies*, 2d ed. (Mountain View, Calif.: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1990): "How, generations of women have asked, can one integrate claims to full equality with a sense of women's special identity?" (p. 413).
4. Ibid., p. 99.
5. Ibid., p. 114.
6. Ibid., p. 112.
7. Ibid., p. 113.
8. A brief literature survey of feminist critiques of dualism is included in Caroline Whitbeck's "A Different Reality: Feminist Ontology" p. 69, n.1.
9. Susan Sherwin, "Philosophical Methodology and Feminist Methodology: Are They Compatible?," in *Women, Knowledge, and Reality*, p. 32.
10. See my "Like Bridges without Piers: Beyond the Foundationalist Metaphor," in *Antifoundationalism, Old and New*, ed. T. Rockmore and B. J. Singer (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), pp. 143-64.
11. For the pernicious effects of the construction of racial and gender differentiation and a call for a reconstruction of difference, see Paula Rothenberg, "The Construction, Deconstruction, and Reconstruction of Difference," *Hypatia* 5, 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 42-57.
12. See Bell Hooks, *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (Boston: South End Press, 1981) and Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* (Hammersmith, London: Harper Collins Academic Press, 1990); Jill Johnston, *Lesbian Nation: The Feminist Solution* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974) and Nancy Myron and Charlotte Bunch, eds., *Lesbianism and the Women's Movement* (Baltimore, Md.: Diana Press, 1975); Maria Lugones and Elizabeth V. Spelman, "Have We Got a Theory For You! Feminist Theory, Cultural Imperialism, and the Demand for 'The Woman's Voice,'" in *Women and Values: Readings in Recent Feminist Philosophy*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1986), pp. 19-32.

13. For an analysis of pragmatist appeals to concrete experience, see my *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990), pp. 75–116, 183–90, 263–68, 299–306, 317–24, and 356–60.

14. See Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: 'Male' and 'Female' in Western Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987); Robin Schott, *Cognition and Eros: A Critique of the Kantian Paradigm* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988); and Karen J. Warren, "Male-Gender Bias and Western Conceptions of Reasons and Rationality," *APA Newsletters* 88, 2 (March 1989) pp. 48–58.

15. Linda Holler also argues for an embodied rationality in "Thinking with the Weight of the Earth: Feminist Contributions to an Epistemology of Concreteness," *Hypatia* 5, 1 (Spring 1990), pp. 1–23.

16. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), p. 161.

17. Ruth, *Issues in Feminism: An Introduction to Women's Studies*, pp. 469–70. For contemporary accounts of how women are still being molded to men's ideals see Rita Freedman, *Beauty Bound* (Lexington, Mass.: D.C. Heath and Co., 1986) and Jenijoy LaBelle, *Herself Beheld: The Literature of the Looking Glass* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

18. *Newsweek*, April 22, 1991, p. 69.

19. See Lisa Heldke, "John Dewey and Evelyn Fox Keller: A Shared Epistemological Tradition," *Hypatia* 2, 3 (Fall 1987), pp. 129–40; Lisa Heldke, "Recipes for Theory Making," *Hypatia* 3, 2 (Summer 1988), pp. 15–29; my "Where Are All the Pragmatist Feminists?," *Hypatia* 6, 2 (July 1991), pp. 1–20; my "The Missing Perspective: Feminist Pragmatism," pp. 405–16; and Eugenie Gatens-Robinson, "Dewey and the Feminist Successor Science Project," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 27, 4 (Fall 1991), pp. 417–33.