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Where Are All the Pragmatist Feminists?

CHARLENE HADDOCK SEIGFRIED

Unlike our counterparts in Europe who have rewritten their specific cultural philosophical heritage, American feminists have not yet critically reappropriated our own philosophical tradition of classical American pragmatism. The neglect is especially puzzling, given that both feminism and pragmatism explicitly acknowledge the material or cultural specificity of supposedly abstract theorizing. In this article I suggest some reasons for the neglect, call for the rediscovery of women pragmatists, reflect on a feminine side of pragmatism, and point out some common features. The aim is to encourage the further development of a feminist revisioning of pragmatism and a pragmatist version of feminism.

A student in an American studies graduate course recently handed in a term paper titled, "Is Liberal Feminism Oxymoronic?" She concluded affirmatively because "it is both internally inconsistent and severely restrictive in the pursuit and achievement of feminist goals."¹ The shortcomings all applied to the individualistic liberalism that John Dewey (1988) also cogently attacked in *Individualism Old and New*, one of the course texts. But although feminist criticisms of liberalism from the perspective of Marxist socialism were used extensively in her paper, pragmatist criticisms were virtually absent. The reason soon became obvious: none of the feminist literature that served as the basis of her critique appropriated or referred to Dewey's writings. Why not?

This question parallels another that has long bothered me: why aren't there more pragmatists writing on feminist issues?² In a recent literature search for articles combining feminist and pragmatist perspectives, I could not find enough to put together an edited volume. This article is a result of reflections raised by my disappointing search for other pragmatist feminist voices. It is exploratory and tentative—more a plea born of frustration than a sustained defense of a thesis. The issue of the paucity of pragmatist feminist analyses is not being raised merely to convict pragmatism of the same shortcomings

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exhibited by any theory that is not explicitly feminist. Rather, pragmatism's very suitability to feminist reconstruction leads me to raise the issue. My explicit agenda is to arouse interest in exploring the mutual benefits of a feminist pragmatism and a pragmatist feminism. I am convinced that pragmatist theory has resources for feminist theory untapped by other approaches and that feminism, in turn, can uniquely reinvigorate pragmatism.

In the first part of this article, I point out the absence of the American tradition of pragmatism in most feminist discourse and make some suggestions to account for this fact. I then seek to encourage the rediscovery of women pragmatists as a first step in examining their contributions to both feminism and pragmatism. Pragmatism seems to me to exhibit a recognizably feminine style, a point developed in the third part of the article, partly in order to help account for its marginalization but also to encourage feminist appropriation of this neglected aspect. Finally, I mention a few features feminism and pragmatism share as a way of arousing interest in exploring them in greater depth. Particularly significant is their recourse to the practices and institutions of everyday life, both to dismantle the social and political structures of oppression and to develop better alternatives.

I. THE ECLIPSE OF PRAGMATISM

It is sometimes incorrectly assumed that pragmatism is missing from theoretical classifications of feminism because it continues liberal assertions of the isolated individual, advocates the public-private split, or is scientistic. Richard Rorty's neopragmatism gives some substance to these assumptions, but he has been vigorously criticized by other pragmatist philosophers for distorting, among other things, the social and political dimensions of the pragmatist tradition.³ A more likely hypothesis is that the ascendancy of logical positivism after World War II eclipsed pragmatism for reasons that feminists would reject. Pragmatism never disappeared, but it was marginalized. Generations of philosophy students grew up mostly ignorant of it, or worse, were inoculated against it by the newly dominant philosophical mainstream of analytic philosophy, the assumption being that anything worthwhile about pragmatism had already been assimilated into the very different agendas of Wilfred Sellars, W. V. O. Quine, Nelson Goodman, and Hilary Putnam.

On the other hand, it has sometimes been claimed that all feminists are pragmatists.⁴ This assertion could be explored as part of feminist reconstructions of pragmatism, but in this article *pragmatism*, *pragmatic*, and *pragmatist* refer to a historically specific philosophical movement that originated in America in the nineteenth century in response to multiple intellectual and social upheavals. It began with Charles Sanders Peirce and William James, was developed further by Josiah Royce, John Dewey and George Herbert Mead, and continues in those who still find in the works of these authors a sufficiently

coherent and attractive philosophical perspective to serve as a basis for their own analyses.⁵ Since pragmatism is a living tradition and not a deductive system, there are many varieties of pragmatist theory, ranging from the more architectonic semiotics based on Peirce to a fallibilist pluralism derived from James. For the sake of simplicity, *pragmatism* is being used in the minimalist sense of “positions developed in dialogue with the philosophic tradition of American pragmatism.” Specific claims will be more true or false of some pragmatists than others. The usage is merely a convenient starting point. In order to engage significantly the varieties of feminist theory—once it is agreed that such an undertaking is worthwhile—a particular constellation of pragmatist themes must be adopted, defended, and developed further, as I do in my other writings and as I intimate in questioning some features of Rorty’s version of pragmatism.⁶

Pragmatism influenced the development of the humanities and social sciences in America, particularly philosophy, psychology, sociology, political science, American studies, and education. Therefore, feminists seeking to ground our analyses in their historical, cultural context can further develop the objective basis of our revisioning of these same disciplines by examining pragmatism’s theoretical contributions. Like Marxism, what has been developed in its name has sometimes been antithetical to its best original insights. Just as feminists are questioning the assumptions and omissions of the various disciplines, so are contemporary pragmatists (Burnett 1981; Hickman 1990) questioning the disciplinary developments falsely attributed to pragmatist theory.

From the beginning, pragmatism appealed to women thinkers and activists who found in it a movement within which they could work for a new intellectual and social order. Katherine Camp Mayhew and Anna Camp Edwards (1936), for instance, hasten to allay suspicions of male dominance that might be aroused by their book title: *The Dewey School*. They chose the title in gratitude for Dewey’s having made possible the Laboratory School of the University of Chicago “by his objective and impersonal attitude of faith in the growing ability of every individual, whether child or teacher” (Mayhew and Edwards 1936, v). They deny that Dewey was ever dominating and testify that he respected the opinions of even the youngest and least experienced members of his staff. They speak from their own experience. Mayhew was vice-principal and head of the science department, while Edwards was a teacher of history and later a special tutor, interacting with all the disciplinary departments for the older age levels. The intellectual appeal of pragmatism was grounded in an absolute respect for the other: “Only a person who has worked in such an atmosphere can understand what inspiration to creative work such freedom gives” (Mayhew and Edwards 1936, v).

If pragmatism has so much to offer feminist theory, one may well wonder at its near total absence in contemporary feminist discourses. There are a handful

of articles that bring together pragmatism and feminism, but there is no general recognition that such a concretely different angle of vision exists.⁷ One can look in vain in books on feminist theory to even see it listed as one among other positions. Alison Jaggar (1983), for instance, organizes her book *Feminist Politics and Human Nature* around “the major versions of contemporary feminism,” which are taken to be liberal feminism, Marxist feminism, radical feminism, and socialist feminism. In a more recent book, *Feminist Thought*, Rosemarie Tong (1989) recognizes eight classifications of feminism, but again no mention is made of pragmatist feminism.

These categories are certainly based on an analysis of the content of actual writings, but categorization itself is political or normative, that is, these categories appear obvious given a certain perspective, with its assumptions, values, and goals. Jaggar, in fact, clearly frames her presentation with the recognition that general agreement on “the appropriate criteria for evaluating normative and scientific theories” does not lead to universal judgments because of disagreements over “what counts as evidence, on what are the data that need explanation and on which explanations are illuminating” (Jaggar 1983, 354). She argues that “the most politically appropriate and theoretically illuminating interpretations of theoretical desiderata are those associated with socialist feminism.” (Jaggar 1983, 355). It is not a criticism to point out that the cogency of her own arguments depends on the acceptance of the same socialist feminist framework of legitimation that is adopted in the text.

I also think that some version of socialist feminism gives feminism the best interpretive norms. But unfortunately, Jaggar’s categories have rendered my version of socialist feminism, which is pragmatist feminism, invisible. According to her schema, pragmatism would perhaps be classified as a version of liberalism, but by the same logic, Marxism would be categorized as a version of idealism. Only if Marx can be accused of being an idealist because he drew on Hegelian philosophy could pragmatism be reductively viewed simply as a version of liberalism. But Marx “materialized” Hegel, just as the pragmatists “socialized” liberalism. In both cases the changes were significant enough to merit a new classification. Moreover, the biggest influence on Dewey and Mead was Hegel, not Hume or Locke. James, for his part, radicalized empiricism by insisting on the reality of relations and non-reductionism to sense data.

The problem with any categorization is that, as Pierre Bourdieu (1991) points out, it gives too much power to the theorist to hierarchize positions, privileging one’s own at the top or the center and subordinating or marginalizing the rest. James recognized as “vicious intellectualism” the related problem of “the treating of a name as excluding from the fact named what the name’s definition fails positively to include” (James 1977, 32). According to this practice, if there are other aspects of pragmatism that do not fit under the labels of liberalism or reformism, or even contradict these two, they can be ignored.

But Jaggard cannot be blamed for marginalizing pragmatism, which was already eclipsed long before she began to write. It may seem strange to talk about the marginalization of pragmatism in the wake of its resurgence, largely in response to Rorty's dramatic rejection of the bankruptcy of analytic philosophy. But these recent developments cannot obscure the fact of a widespread ignorance of the major theories and texts of pragmatism, a philosophical position that was once acknowledged as central to "the golden age of American philosophy." There is a bit of social Darwinist in all of us that assumes that it was a tradition that was tried and found wanting and therefore ceased to be a central part of the philosophy curriculum. But from my perspective it seems that it was criticized and eventually relegated to the margins for holding the very positions that today feminists would find to be its greatest strengths. These include early and persistent criticisms of positivist interpretations of scientific methodology; disclosure of the value dimension of factual claims; reclaiming aesthetics as informing everyday experience; linking of dominant discourses with domination; subordinating logical analysis to social, cultural, and political issues; realigning theory with praxis; and resisting the turn to epistemology and instead emphasizing concrete experience.⁸ Thomas McCarthy, for instance, recently noted the enormous influence of the human sciences and the liberating potential of sociohistorical research on Continental philosophy and American pragmatism and suggests that James and Dewey were ignored by analytic philosophers because "it was not always possible to overlook [their] appropriation of the human sciences," as it was possible in the case of Peirce.⁹

The early pragmatists located reflection in its actual historical, psychological, economic, political, and cultural context and defined its goal as the intelligent overcoming of oppressive conditions. This is reflected in Cornel West's (1989) comment that they influenced engaged public philosophers as much as they did professional philosophers. Pragmatists also hastened the demise of their own movement by inspiring their students to abandon purely conceptual philosophical analysis. West points out that C. Wright Mills, a student of Dewey, gave up philosophy after earning his M.A. and turned to social theory, declaring war on Talcott Parsons's sociology because it supported the corporate liberal establishment. W. E. B. Du Bois "also gave up philosophy after studying under William James at Harvard, turning to the study of history and society" (West 1989, 113). The retreat of academic philosophers to their ivory tower and away from the pragmatists' active engagement in the problems of their day is an indictment, not of pragmatism, but of academic philosophy. James (1968, 329-47) anticipated this development and warned against it to no avail in "The Ph.D. Octopus." If the pragmatists had succeeded in stopping philosophers from turning their backs on active engagement in solving society's most pressing problems, then feminists of our generation would not have had the continuing struggle both to break into academia and to deinstitutionalize and open up academic deliberations to the wider community.

Against the newly ascendant positivist model legislating value neutrality for the social sciences, the pragmatists called for active engagement.¹⁰ They both attacked the supposed neutrality as a self-deceptive mask for unacknowledged interests and advocated a radical social agenda. The social sciences themselves were to be advocates for transformation rather than upholders of the status quo and instruments for the enhancement of power of one segment of the society against another. The subtitle to Dewey's *Human Nature and Conduct*, for instance, is *An Introduction to Social Psychology*. The great issues of self-determination, exploration of values, and problems of community living are not taken as addenda to the science of social psychology; they are its very subject matter. In Dewey's words: "Why employ language, cultivate literature, acquire and develop science, sustain industry, and submit to the refinements of art? To ask these questions is equivalent to asking: Why live? . . . The only question having sense which can be asked is *how* we are going to use and be used by these things, not whether we are going to use them. Reason, moral principles, cannot in any case be shoved behind these affairs, for reason and morality grow out of them" (Dewey 1983, 57-58). The first internationally acclaimed book in American psychology, James's (1890) *The Principles of Psychology*, was also criticized in early reviews for intruding moral issues into a book whose purpose was to distinguish a separate, empirical psychology from armchair philosophical psychology.

Since the pragmatists aimed at democratic inclusiveness, they—with the notable exception of Peirce—fought the development of a specialized disciplinary jargon inaccessible except to a specialist elite.¹¹ Marilyn French (1990, 39-42) shows how such mechanisms of exclusion have unfairly impacted on women over the centuries.¹² In connecting "high style" with patriarchy, she renders plausible my contention that this is one more factor in the displacement of pragmatism by theories elaborated in increasingly technical vocabularies. One need only compare Dewey's *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (1986) with the dominant position now accorded symbolic logic. James held that "*technical writing on philosophical subjects . . . is certainly a crime against the human race*" (quoted in Perry 1935, 387). And Dewey criticized science for being highly abstract and technically specialized and utilizing vocabularies and symbol systems that are impenetrable to the uninitiated. He calls this state of affairs a disaster because it renders "the things of the environment unknown and incommunicable by human beings in terms of their own activities and sufferings" (Dewey 1985a, 173).

In seeking to answer the question of why pragmatism was marginalized from mainstream philosophy, I have drawn on my feelings and recollections of how feminism was rediscovered a few decades after World War II. The first responses to accusations that there were no great women artists, scientists, writers, etc., was to point out their exclusion from the social, educational, and professional ambience of male productivity. This early response led to critical and detailed

studies of the mechanisms of exclusion. Closely following on this early response was the claim that there were talented women, maybe even women of genius in the past, but they tended to be exceptionally situated and spokeswomen for the establishment, such as Queen Elizabeth I. But the search was on. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, published in 1792, for instance, was at first thought to be one of the earliest voices raised in explicit protest. But by dint of research to recover our heritage, we have come to see that she did not spring up out of nowhere but was herself part of a long line of feminist voices that receded into the dim past. Each new discovery raised new questions. If feminist women existed in the past, why didn't we know about them? How had they become invisible? The answers have given concrete content to the theoretical claim that women's intellectual contributions were not just forgotten but were actively suppressed.¹³

The recovery of a history of feminist writings has also contributed to defining some common features of feminist thought, which is otherwise extremely diverse. These two features are (1) the identification and investigation of the oppressive structures that contribute to women's subordination in order to actively dismantle them and (2) the development of analyses of women's experiences that are not systematically distorted by sexist assumptions.

I am not arguing that the loss of influence of pragmatism is comparable to the suffering of women under various forms of patriarchal domination and millennia of misogynist beliefs and practices. I am suggesting that unless we continue to explore the reasons for the absence of pragmatism in core curricula of philosophy, the myth will persist that something vital is lacking in pragmatism itself, rather than in the philosophical milieu, that accounts for its neglect. It would be a shame if the same forces that succeeded for so long in denying that feminist issues were properly philosophical were to succeed in convincing feminists to neglect that very part of our American philosophical tradition that radically joined theory with praxis. If it is true that pragmatism declined in influence just to the extent that it challenged the rejection by professional philosophers of their role as cultural critic and scorned the pseudoscience that reduced philosophy to supposedly value-free epistemology, then feminists have good reasons for reclaiming it as an ally.¹⁴ Moreover, if the history of feminism is any precedent, we should also expect to generate an evolving redefinition of pragmatism, one that explicitly raises feminist issues and that includes women's contributions.

II. CHALLENGING THE CANON: WOMEN PRAGMATISTS

If my assumption that pragmatism is congenial to feminism is correct, then one would expect to find enthusiastic women pragmatists in the heyday of pragmatism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My limited research indicates that this is indeed the case but that these women have fallen

through the cracks of patriarchal public memory and need to be rediscovered. In the absence of any feminist biography of Jane Addams, for instance, who was “the most outstanding progressive activist in the U.S.” (Cook 1991, 61), how can we assess her influence on Dewey and vice versa?¹⁵ Pragmatism’s white, male pantheon needs to be expanded to include women’s contributions, including those of people of color, much as Cornel West does in *The American Evasion of Philosophy* (1989).

I also expect that my own attempts to recover women whose pragmatism bolstered their feminism will be superseded by further research. It is well known, for instance, that James, Dewey, and Mead had many enthusiastic women students. But their names are barely known, let alone their philosophic positions. Lucy Sprague, for instance, was a student at Radcliffe College in the 1890s, studied with James at Harvard, and went on to a distinguished career in education. It is better known that Gertrude Stein studied with James. But so did Mary Whiton Calkins, the first female president of the A.P.A. She also studied with Josiah Royce. Christine Ladd Franklin was a member of Peirce’s first class at Johns Hopkins.

The influence was not one-sided. Lynn D. Gordon, reviewing Antler (1988), tells us that “Sprague’s student themes demonstrate that she challenged her teacher’s views on the grounds that they excluded women’s experiences from their discussions and approached such issues as free will versus determinism from a male-oriented perspective” (Gordon 1989). Mary Mahowald points out that Peirce’s first wife, Melusina Fay Peirce, was a feminist who “called for cooperative housekeeping as essential to the establishment of sexual equality” (Mahowald 1987, 416) and that Dewey credited Jane Addams with educating him about women’s rights. Emma Goldman was also a friend of Dewey’s, one whom he publicly defended against scurrilous attacks. Lynne Adrian suggests that Goldman’s concept of artful living may have influenced Dewey’s aesthetics (Adrian 1988). Like Dewey, Mead actively supported women’s suffrage and worked with Jane Addams and Ellen Gates Starr at Hull House. He discussed his manuscripts with Dr. Irene Tufts Mead, who also assisted in their publication (Miller 1973, xxxi, xxxiv). Continuity with these pioneers was broken because of a double marginalization. Women’s theoretical contributions were not acknowledged in pragmatism and by the time feminism was reborn yet again in the 1960s few women philosophy students had much acquaintance with pragmatism.

I suspect that the pragmatist influence on some current feminist positions is not so much absent as invisible. Just recently I serendipitously discovered such a hidden connection. Only when Sidney Ratner received the Herbert Schneider Award in 1989 for his contributions to American philosophy did I find out that his wife, Louise M. Rosenblatt (1983), was the first person to develop the “reader-response” theory of literature in her 1938 book, *Literature as Exploration*.¹⁶ It is an interesting case of degrees of marginalization and the

mechanisms of disappearance. Rosenblatt is virtually unknown in philosophy, either to feminist or pragmatist philosophers, despite the fact that her literary theory is based on pragmatism, specifically, on Dewey's theory of transaction, and despite the fact that reader-response theory is so central to feminist theories of literature (see Fetterly 1978).

Dewey's theory of transaction replaces that of the Cartesian isolated ego that inaugurated the modern alienation of subject and object. Both subject and object are interactively constituted within a horizon of social praxis. By changing the gender in Dewey's explanation we get:

An experience is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes her environment, whether the latter consists of persons with whom she is talking about some topic or event, the subject talked about being also a part of the situation; or the toys with which she is playing; the book she is reading. . . ; or the materials of an experiment she is performing. The environment, in other words, is whatever conditions interact with personal needs, desires, purposes, and capacities to create the experience which is had (Dewey 1938, 43-44).

Rosenblatt herself did not fully explore the radical consequences of either pragmatism or feminism, but this alone cannot account for her neglect. Her disappearance is a salutary reminder that not only does the dominant philosophic discourse marginalize other discourses, such as feminism, pragmatism, phenomenology, and Marxism, but that the groups so marginalized also have their centers and margins (Seigfried 1987).

There are distinguished women philosophers working today in the pragmatist tradition. Thelma Z. Lavine, for example, is the Clarence J. Robinson Professor of Philosophy and American Culture at George Mason University. She characteristically explained her article titled "Ideas of Revolution in the Women's Movement" as "a treatment of a contemporary cultural issue in the tradition of American pragmatism's social philosophy, explaining, interpreting, and critiquing a problematic situation and its unfolding resolution in terms of its historical, social, psychological, and political components" (Lavine 1977). Beth Singer was one of the founders of and is a past president of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. Carolyn Eisele is a world-renowned Peirce scholar and a feisty woman who, in her eighties, is currently putting together yet another Peirce volume. Before the Sesquicentennial International Peirce Conference held September 5-9, 1989, at Harvard University, she wrote to me that she was working on her invited paper and parenthetically added: "(12 major papers—11 men, 1 woman!)." Among the men invited were Habermas, Chisholm, Quine, Putnam, and Umberto Eco.

Nonetheless, the very effort needed to recover women pragmatists points to a more substantial reason for the dearth of pragmatist feminists. With the exception of Dewey's brief polemical addresses supporting women's issues, women as such do not figure much in pragmatist writings, not even in those of the women pragmatists just mentioned. Moreover, James's views of women were typically Victorian, which is to say patriarchal. Pragmatists often criticize the social and political oppressions of class, race, nationalism, ethnic origin, and monopolistic capitalism, but not of sex. This absence may be partially ameliorated by widening the circle of those who are considered pragmatists, as Maureen L. Egan does in including Charlotte Perkins Gilman because she shared some of the ideas and interests that would eventually be known as pragmatist (Egan 1989, 103). However, the lack of specific analyses of women's oppression in pragmatism will only be overcome by explicitly feminist reconstructions of pragmatist theory.

III. FEMININE STYLE

Two aspects of pragmatist theory, in particular, which I suspect contributed to the marginalization of pragmatism, should also make the theory particularly attractive to feminist reconstruction. One is its explicit linkage of categorizations with value judgments. The pragmatists' position that human knowledge always instantiates particular perspectives, including values, ran strongly counter to the rising tide of positivist ideology espousing the neutrality of science and the objectivity of pure observation. Claims about reality are political. The power to name is exercised most extensively by the dominant forces—individual and institutional—that seek to control society, but it rightly belongs to every human being.

The other feature of pragmatism is more subtle. Indeed, without recent feminist analyses uncovering the gender assumptions and relations influencing modes of discourse, it could not even be recognized or named. On a scale of traits, assumptions, and positions that range from stereotypically masculine to feminine, pragmatism (again excepting Peirce) appears far more feminine than masculine. Among the various aspects contributing to this feeling are a penchant for indirect, metaphorical discourse rather than a deductive and reductively symbolic one, the concreteness of pragmatist methodology, philosophizing out of one's own experience and everyday problems, the priority of human relations and actual experiences over abstract conceptual distinctions, shared understanding and communal problem-solving rather than rationally forced conclusions as the goal of philosophical discourse, the valuing of inclusiveness and community over exaggerated claims of autonomy and detachment, and developmental rather than rule-governed ethics.

This feminine rather than masculine style may help account for why I was drawn to pragmatism in the first place and have continued to find it emotion-

ally sustaining as well as intellectually attractive. I am not the only one to make these connections. Mahowald (1987, 415) also finds feminine elements in pragmatism and suggests that this may have been due to direct feminist influence. She cites Royce's emphasis on community, which refers "more to the relationships that exist among individuals than to their collective or aggregate status," as what attracted her to his writings (Mahowald 1987, 413). She also cautions against confusing feminine characteristics with feminist analyses, which explicitly expose and reject the sexist oppression of women.

Femininity and masculinity are social and psychological interpretations of gender that both instantiate and mask unequal power relations. Feminism exposes the negative impact of such stereotypical attributions of gender characterizations. However, some aspects of experience that have been associated with women, labeled "feminine," and consequently devalued in patriarchal cultures have also been positively revalued by feminists. A nonauthoritarian leadership style comes to mind as an example of feminine behavior that has been revalued and redefined as a feminist method. That I find James's metaphorical and suggestive rather than analytic and explicit style congenial to my own way of thinking can be understood as the expression of a feminine style without implying that all women think this way or that no men do. James (1978, 168; Seigfried 1990c, 181-183), for instance, rejects the polemically virulent style of philosophic argumentation that seeks to triumph over an opponent by convicting them of errors and argues instead for shared understanding as the goal of philosophic discourse. From my point of view, he is rejecting a prevalent form of masculine style for a feminine one.

Before filling in the claim that pragmatism seems more feminine than masculine, something needs to be said about how an intellectual schema can be gendered. What constitutes femininity or masculinity varies over time and among cultures, even taking on opposite characteristics according to what is most valued at particular times and places. The kernel of gender differences may be biological, but the nature and extent of this biological substrate are difficult, and perhaps impossible, to determine given the context of beliefs, values, and expectations that inform the differential psychological developmental patterns that are discussed.¹⁷ According to characteristics that have been associated with women and men in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century America, pragmatism appears far more feminine than what replaced it.

In *The Flight to Objectivity* Susan Bordo draws on Carol Gilligan, Evelyn Fox Keller, and Nancy Chodorow to attribute the configuration of masculine traits she identifies as prominent in modern, western rationalism to the "more rigorous individuation from the mother [which] is demanded of boys (as a requisite to their attaining a 'masculine' identity in a culture in which masculinity is defined in opposition to everything that the mother represents)" (Bordo 1987, 6-7). Whether one agrees with this psychological explanation or finds the origins of misogyny in specific cultural, economic, and political conditions,

the list of masculine traits that results is recognizably plausible. They are “detachment, autonomy, and a clear sense of boundaries between self and world, self and others. This has resulted, in our male-dominated intellectual traditions, in the fetishization of detachment and ‘objectivity’ in ethical reasoning and scientific rationality” (Bordo 1987, 6-7).

Thomas Nagel’s *The View from Nowhere* (1986) is the logical conclusion of a long process, which extends back to Descartes, of distancing self from world. He is also heir to a shift in mainstream philosophizing that was inaugurated by the arrival of members of the Vienna school of logical positivism in America. It is this movement that eventually displaced pragmatism. Bordo connects the extreme mind/body dualism in Descartes’s philosophy with separation anxiety. His disconnectedness from both the natural world and his own body reflects “separation from the *maternal*—the immanent realms of earth, nature, the authority of the body—and a compensatory turning toward the *paternal* for legitimation through external regulation, transcendent values, and the authority of law” (Bordo 1987, 58).

Against such a background understanding of the polarization of masculinity and femininity in Western thinking, it is possible to see how pragmatism would be implicitly categorized with feminine rather than masculine traits, even if such a connection was not made in print or on a conscious level. Descartes reacted to the Galilean and Newtonian displacement of the human. Dewey, on the other hand, responded to the Darwinian reconnection of humans with all of organic life. When separation, generalization, sharp boundaries, and the drive to reduce the multiplicity of experience into as few categories as possible are categorized as masculine, then inclusiveness, concreteness, vagueness, tolerance of ambiguities, and pluralism are seen as feminine. But these latter traits are also characteristic of pragmatist thinking (Seigfried 1982). Compare Bordo’s description of Cartesian separation anxiety, for instance, with one of Dewey’s early articles, explaining his “New Psychology” as a better starting point for philosophizing than abstract analysis of language or of theoretical terms:

The New Psychology is content to get its logic from . . . experience, and not do violence to the sanctity and integrity of the latter by forcing it to conform to certain preconceived abstract ideas. It wants the logic of fact, of process, of life. It has within its departments of knowledge no psycho-statics, for it can nowhere find spiritual life at rest. For this reason, it abandons all legal fiction of logical and mathematical analogies and rules; and is willing to throw itself upon experience, believing that the mother which has borne it will not betray it. But it makes no attempts to dictate to this experience, and to tell it what it *must* be in order to square with a scholastic logic. Thus the New

Psychology bears the realistic stamp of the contact with life
(quoted in Bernstein 1966, 12).

Whereas contemporary philosophers often privilege physics as the most rational model of science, one which should be imitated by philosophers, pragmatists consistently use biological models and examples drawn from ordinary experience and the human sciences. Pragmatism's pervasive metaphors are often as characteristic of women's experiences as of men's. Dewey's are organic and developmental; many were drawn from his involvement with early childhood education, while James's metaphors, which are as striking as Nietzsche's, include the stream of thought, truth as the marriage function of our beliefs with sensory experiences, and the organization of experience as weaving chaos into order. Imagine the reaction of philosophers of the late nineteenth century, who not only prided themselves on their rigorous argumentative form but were also suffering from an acute case of science-envy, to James's exposure of the false objectivity of positivist science:

It is absurd for Science to say that the egoistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egotistic places—they are strung on it like so many beads. To describe the world with all the various feelings of the individual pinch of destiny, all the various spiritual attitudes, left out from the description . . . would be something like offering a printed bill of fare as the equivalent for a solid meal. . . . A bill of fare with one real raisin in it instead of the word "raisin," with one real egg instead of the word "egg," might be an inadequate meal, but it would at least be a commencement of reality (James 1985, 394).¹⁸

It may seem odd that I am pointing out some feminine aspects of pragmatism because it is so often dismissed as an irresponsible instrumentalism. Martin Heidegger, for instance, once contemptuously dismissed it as a philosophy for engineers. But this is a self-indictment, both of his ignorance of pragmatism as a philosophy and of his disinterest in social and political reconstruction. One need only recall Dewey's (1982) definition of philosophy as "reconstruction through criticism" to recognize that he aligned himself with neither a reductionist instrumentalism nor a fatalistic openness to being. He says in "Context and Thought" that "philosophy is criticism; criticism of the influential beliefs that underlie culture; a criticism which traces the beliefs to their generating conditions as far as may be, which tracks them to their results, which considers the mutual compatibility of the elements of the total structure of beliefs. Such an examination terminates, whether so intended or not, in a projection of them into a new perspective which leads to new surveys of possibilities" (Dewey 1985b, 19). Far from blindly advocating a ruthless application of the most

efficient means to accomplish predetermined ends, Dewey's pragmatic instrumentalism advocates criticizing the beliefs that have led to presently unsatisfactory conditions in order to radically reconstruct our society according to nonoppressive and cooperative standards.

IV. THE CONTEXT OF OPPRESSION

I would like to conclude with pragmatism's criticism of philosophy as traditionally practiced and its plea to turn away from the problems found only in academic philosophy journals and toward the problems that arise in actual experience. For pragmatists, philosophical reflection begins and ends with experience, as it also does for many feminists. For both, experience is inextricably personal and social. Pragmatism needs feminism to carry out its own stated program, since feminists are in the forefront of philosophers addressing social and political issues that affect women. On the other hand, the three features that Sandra Harding (1987, 6-9) suggests best characterize feminist analysis have also been developed in pragmatism as ones that should characterize any defensible inquiry. They are related as the specific to the general. Feminist theory distinctively urges women's points of view. Pragmatism argues for the inclusion of diverse communities of interest, particularly marginalized ones.

According to Harding (1987, 6-9) the three distinctive features of feminist research are: (1) it begins with women's experiences as the basis for social analysis, (2) the aim of the research is to benefit women, and (3) the researcher is not a neutral observer, but is on the same critical plane as the subject matter. Support for and development of these three themes can be found throughout pragmatist philosophy, which emphasizes that reflection ought to begin with experience, which is irreducibly plural; that the goal of reflection is to satisfactorily resolve the problematic situations which arise within particular experiences, as these are defined by those involved; and that knowledge is always shaped by—in Harding's words—the “concrete, specific desires and interests” of the investigator (Harding 1987, 9).

Pragmatism and feminism reject philosophizing as an intellectual game that takes purely logical analysis as its special task. For both, philosophical techniques are means, not ends. The specific, practical ends are set by various communities of interest, the members of which are best situated to name, resist, and overcome the oppressions of class, sex, race, and gender. The problem with philosophy's enchantment with “the logic of general notions” is that it forces specific situations into predetermined, abstract categories. Pragmatism's fundamental criticism of traditional philosophy is that it “substitutes discussion of the meaning of concepts and their dialectical relationship to one another” for knowledge of specific groups of individuals, concrete human beings, and special institutions or social arrangements (Dewey 1982, 188).

Dewey says that “we want to know about the worth of the institution of private property as it operates under given conditions of definite time and place” (Dewey 1982, 189). Instead, we get discussions of “*the state, the individual, the nature of institutions as such, society in general*” (Dewey 1982, 188). Instead of assisting inquiry, the disregard of specific historical phenomena for general answers with supposedly universal meaning closes it. “In transferring the issue from concrete situations to definitions and conceptual deductions, the effect . . . is to supply the apparatus for intellectual justification of the established order” (Dewey 1982, 189-90). Women are members of all the categories mentioned, but how specific is pragmatist analysis of women’s situation, individually, socially, and institutionally? According to its own logic, to the extent to which pragmatists do not actually reflect on the status of women and the oppressions of race, class, sexual orientation, and economic forces which women suffer, they are contributing to the justification of the established order.

Feminists, on the other hand, can benefit from such specific theoretical analyses, as that by which pragmatism radically revises the task of philosophy. Dewey, for instance, argues that “neglect of context is the greatest single disaster which philosophic thinking can incur” (Dewey 1985b, 11). Philosophy and other reflective endeavors have their own context of discourse, which is narrowly constrained within disciplinary concerns and which is only tenuously, if at all, connected with everyday life. He insists that the strategic research of the sciences and other disciplines gains its meaning and value from its relation to what is taken to be the purpose of human life as such. What this purpose is cannot be imposed from above, by experts, but must be decided from below, by all those affected. Disciplinary contexts are necessarily narrowly strategic and strategic thinking becomes dangerous to the extent that it is not guided by more encompassing purposes that are agreed upon as being mutually beneficial. It is dangerous for the disciplines to neglect context in a way that is not the case in less explicitly structured situations because “in the face to face communications of everyday life, context may be safely ignored . . . [because] it is irrevocably there” (Dewey 1985b, 5). In everyday life it is taken for granted, but it can be explicitly retrieved when the need arises. “But in philosophizing there is rarely an immediately urgent context which controls the course of thought” (Dewey 1985b, 6).

This “neglect of specific acknowledgement” of context in philosophizing “is, then, too readily converted into virtual denial” (Dewey 1985b, 6). Context includes both the temporal and spatial background which are not consciously attended to and selective interest. It includes the horizon of meaning and value that gives point to everything said. If context is being denied, then the actually informing meanings and values remain unrecognized, uncriticized, and thus unreconstructed. We then passively acquiesce in the operative structures of

power rather than participate in setting the conditions for our own being in the world.

In fighting the entrenched belief that it is “derogatory to link a body of philosophic ideas to the social life and culture of their epoch” (Dewey 1985b, 17), pragmatism is a helpful ally of feminist criticism. I think that both feminism and pragmatism have much to offer each other. Pragmatist philosophy, for instance, explains why the neglect of context is the besetting fallacy of philosophical thought.¹⁹ Feminism cogently and extensively shows how gender, race, class, and sexual preference are crucial parts of context that philosophy has traditionally neglected.

To answer the question posed in the title of this paper: Pragmatist feminists and feminist pragmatists exist among us but in surprisingly small numbers. Pragmatists might be predisposed to be sympathetic to feminism, but too often they do not directly engage in feminist analysis. This is a loss for both pragmatist and feminist theory and praxis. Likewise, many feminists know little about pragmatism, but I think they would find it congenial and helpful. West, unfortunately, exhibits a widespread pragmatist ignorance of feminist analyses of the pervasiveness of sex when he expresses the opinion that American culture “cuts deeper than sexual identity” (West 1989, 181). But he also expresses pragmatism’s openness to revision, its recognition of cultural specificity, and its refusal to speak for those who can more authentically speak for themselves when he follows this statement by saying that “the issue is how American women will reshape and revise pragmatism,” through reflections on their own experiences. “For the difference pragmatism makes is always the difference people make with it.”

NOTES

1. Gina M. Scuteri, seminar on “Liberalism and American Social Institutions,” Purdue University, spring 1989.

2. The title question is directed to both feminists and pragmatists. Earlier versions of this paper were read at the Society for Women in Philosophy, Michigan State, February 1990, and the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy, SUNY at Buffalo, March 1990.

3. See Brodsky (1982), McDermott et al. (1985), and Bernstein (1987; 1990).

4. Denise Riley, for instance, uses pragmatism in this wider sense (Riley 1988, 112).

5. I am deliberately excluding women from the pantheon of pragmatist philosophers to make both a historical and a political point. Historically, classical American philosophy—as it has been handed down in publications and taught in the universities—excludes women pragmatists. Until I began this project, I was not even aware that there were any women pragmatists beyond my own immediate contemporaries. I begin with this tradition in which women are invisible as a heuristic device which enables me to subvert it as the article develops. However, on the level of theory and in my own development as a

philosopher, what comes from feminist and what from pragmatist sensibilities cannot easily be distinguished.

6. My own reconstruction of pragmatism is developed most fully in Seigfried (1990c).

7. Among those not mentioned elsewhere in this article are Ayim (1983), Heldke (1987; 1988), Miranda (1980), and Seigfried (1984a; 1989).

8. See Thayer (1981), Smith (1983), and Bernstein (1983).

9. Thomas McCarthy, "Philosophy and Social Practice: Avoiding the Ethnocentric Predicament," paper read at symposium on "Analysis, Interpretation, and the End of Philosophy," Purdue University, March 17, 1989, pp. 2-3.

10. See Seigfried (1984b; 1990a) and Alexander (1987, 119-182).

11. Peirce's infatuation with systematically technical systems is one reason why he hardly figures in my own reconstruction of pragmatism, although other aspects of Peirce's philosophy are certainly amenable to feminist revisioning.

12. French begins by asserting that "a third feminist principle, to which I myself am committed, is accessibility, language and style that aim at comprehensibility" (French 1990, 39).

13. See Spender (1983) and Russ (1983).

14. For corroboration, see Wilson (1990).

15. But see Deegan (1988).

16. For confirmation, see Tomkins (1980, x and xxvi, n1). See also Rosenblatt (1985).

17. For a pragmatist analysis of the intertwining of biological and normative descriptions of gender, see Seigfried (1990b).

18. See also Heldke (1988).

19. "Thinking takes place in a scale of degrees of distance from the urgencies of an immediate situation in which something is to be done. The greater the degree of remoteness, the greater is the danger that a temporary and legitimate failure of express reference to context will be converted into a virtual denial of its place and import. Thinking is always thinking, but philosophic thinking is, upon the whole, at the extreme end of the scale of distance from the active urgency of concrete situations" (Dewey 1985b, 17).

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