Introduction

THE AUTHORITY OF EXPERIENCE: REALISM, EMPIRICISM, AND THE PROBLEM OF THEORY

Does experience have any authority to confirm or undermine our worldviews, theories, or value commitments? Those who think that it does usually trace that authority to its status as a way in which "the world" gets to have its say about the acceptability of our theories. And yet such authority seems to pose its own problems: if the world that is supposed to have its "say" is understood as brute nature, how can it make itself understood to us? What kind of language can it speak? When it comes to brute nature, the idea of speaking is metaphorical at best, incoherent at worst.

Furthermore, the intelligibility of our experience depends on its meaningfulness, and this seems to depend on its expression in terms of concepts, which, in turn, seems to depend on its propositional expression—or, at least, the possibility of capturing experience in propositional terms. But if concepts are themselves intelligible only in terms of a complex web of inferential relationships that they have with other concepts, and this web of relationships constitutes something like a "theory" or "worldview," then the contact with the world that experience is supposed to supply seems to slip away, to become merely a vaporous we-know-not-what. As a result, any say that the world might have had about the acceptability of our theories seems itself to disappear, since presumably it can have no say without our (perhaps unconscious)

collusion. Experience must show up in the form in which we allow it to show up, laced up in our conceptual schemes, or in our theories about the world and what it includes.

Anecdotal evidence seems to reinforce skepticism about the extent to which experience is independent of "worldviews" or expectations, and this anecdotal evidence seems to be confirmed by experimental evidence. Thomas Kuhn cites an example of selective perception in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* in which subjects in an experiment with playing cards cannot see anomalous cards, such as red cards in the suit of spades or black cards in the suit of hearts. Kuhn takes this to be evidence that sense experience is dictated to a large extent by our expectations, which come out of our worldviews. The subjects cannot see red spade cards because their theory of playing cards or their entrenched worldviews do not include the possibility of the existence of such cards. Similar "change-blindness" experiments show the same thing. In one, observers charged with counting the number of passes that occur in a slow-paced basketball game fail to notice a person dressed in a gorilla suit who walks right through the middle of the game. In this case, as well as in the playing-card example, it seems that interpretation and projection shape perception and sometimes undermine its accuracy.

But the idea that interpretation and the constructive work of the mind count as distortion depends on "the idea that 'the world' is there once for all and immutably," as Jerome Bruner (1986, 105) puts it in his discussion of Nelson Goodman's work; or that there is what Bernard Williams (1978) has called an "Absolute Conception" of the world—a way the world is independent of our attempts to come to know it. If we give up on this conception of the world, then the interpretive and constructive work of the mind is not distorting, since there is no original it is charged with representing accurately. Psychological experiments like those mentioned above operationalize the assumption that there is some way that the world is, independent of observers who come to know it: whether there is a person dressed in a gorilla suit walking through a basketball game, for instance, is a state of affairs that the mind should be able to represent accurately. There is a right answer to the question: "Was there a person in a gorilla suit on the court?" But for psychologists like Bruner and philosophers like Goodman, the assumption that we can judge what counts

as accurate representation and what counts as distortion can only carry so much weight when we try to apply it to our on-the-go, laboratory-free attempts to grapple with the world. The Absolute Conception is itself a construction or a stipulative premise that we adopt for certain purposes, according to Bruner; it counts as the real, uninterpreted "given" world only through convention. In his summary of this point, Goodman says, "[T]he world is as many ways as it can be truly described, seen, pictured, etc. . . . there is no such thing as the way the world is."[1] Thus there is no single answer to the questions we have about the way the world is. The idea that the playing-card experiment or the change-blindness experiment could tell us something important about our experience of the world assumes that these experimental contexts are sufficiently analogous with our everyday cognitive endeavors to allow us to extrapolate to those from these experimental conditions. Goodman and Bruner are skeptical about the extent to which that analogy is apt.[2]

Yet most of us have a sense that good epistemic hygiene requires that we recognize that some descriptions of the world are more basic than others—less distorted, perhaps, or less embellished, and it is this intuition that the experiments capture. While this might not make our accurate descriptions interpretation-free, they would seem to constitute a more stripped-down ontology—a thinner interpretive veneer perhaps, or, as in the case of the psychological tests above, simply The Way Things Are. This conception of The Way Things Are serves the purpose of allowing us to identify the mistakes the subjects in these studies make, and in our everyday cognitive tasks, it allows us to eliminate some descriptions or interpretations of the world as distortions or errors.

The concept of a Way Things Are, or perhaps less tendentiously, facts of the matter or descriptions that are more basic than other descriptions, is a metaphysical commitment to some extent, but it has been given a naturalistic interpretation as well. In a fairly lengthy debate between Paul Churchland and Jerry Fodor, we find a discussion of the extent to which the modules of the brain that are responsible for sense perception are permeable to the modules that are involved in, for instance, astronomical theory. Fodor argues that the persistence of certain visual illusions even in the face of a conscious belief on the part of the subject that they are illusions shows that observations can be impermeable to theory,

while Churchland argues that actual studies of brain physiology show that there is no such encapsulation. But while they may disagree on the topic of whether observation can be independent of theory, as naturalists they think it is an empirical, not a metaphysical, problem, answerable by appeal to psychology.

In a parallel discussion, we also find that the authority of experience to make deliverances about political theory is a subject for debate. In these instances, the experience in question is less like sensory observation and more like "lived experience," but the challenges to the authority of experience in the domain of political theory have the same contours. Appeals to experience in this domain are taken to be an invocation of a mode of knowing the world that is less distorted and more immediate, and "experience" in these discussions is usually contrasted with "theoretical knowledge" or "theory." According to critics, however, appeals to experience imply that experience is a "no interpretation" zone, and that such appeals constitute an invocation of a "view from nowhere."[3] In these discussions, the authority of experience seems to depend on its naturalness, or the extent to which it is untutored. Critics of appeals to experience in political discourse are skeptical of the opposition between experience and theory, believing either that a commitment to the priority of experience over theory is misguided or that the atheoretical "lived experience" is a myth—and perhaps a dangerous one at that. Terry Eagleton pithily summarizes this concern: experience cannot be a corrective to ideological structures, since experience is "ideology's homeland" (2006, 15). That is, ideological structures are grounded and nurtured in experience. Experience and ideology are tied up together, so lived experience is far from authentic. It cannot serve as a corrective to ideology, because it is, rather, the source of ideology. If experience is theory-dependent and ideologically structured, its authority, granted on the basis of its independence and authenticity, would seem to be undermined.

Yet in some cases, it is the extent to which experience is not untutored that gives it its authority. In some areas, the authority of experience depends on the fact that it is embedded in virtuosity or expertise. While the appeal to experience is sometimes a democratic move, insofar as it is an appeal to evidence that is accessible intersubjectively, or requires no special hermeneutical skills, not all appeals to experience have this leveling effect.

Wine connoisseurs, art critics, radiologists, and musicians are just some of the people whose refined abilities of perception and skilled observation are essential to the authority granted to their descriptions. My daughter, who has been studying music and playing the harp for ten years, can hear things that I cannot, and I take her descriptions of things to carry an authority that mine do not, and should not. If she tells me that the F string on her harp is sharp, or that the singer in the school musical sang flat the whole time, I take her description to be the right one, even if I cannot hear the sharpness or the flatness. We might conclude, on the basis of these kinds of examples, that virtuosos might have more refined—and more accurate—experiences of the world that make their descriptions more authoritative, precisely because they have been refined and educated by learning. Thus, in some instances, experience gains authority by its validation intersubjectively, and in some instances, it gains authority because it is grounded in a process of education and discernment that characterize connoisseurship and virtuosity. The idea that an experienced mechanic is preferable to one who is inexperienced, for instance, implies that experience is a learning process, leading to the accumulation of know-how and the refinement of judgment.

But then the question arises: how do we determine the extent to which a putative description is grounded in a more refined experience of the world, and is thus rightly considered to be a detection of elements of the world, and when a putative description is a projection of a worldview or a theory of the world that has, to a large extent, decided in advance what the world must be like? We are thus back to the question raised by Bruner. Most experience of the world does not occur in the controlled environment of a psychological experiment, in which the experimenter already knows the right answer to the question "What should the person be seeing here?" The experimenter knows both that the subject is being asked to see anomalous cards and which cards they are, and wants to find out whether the subject can also see the anomalous cards. There is an independent standard for accuracy in perception that the experimenter can use to measure the subject's reports in experimental contexts. But outside the psychology lab, in our everyday cognitive tasks, we must determine, without any such measure, the extent to which our experiences and those of others are properly given authority and the extent to which they

are biased by our upbringing, our theoretical commitments, our hopes or our fears. The problem of the authority of experience is a problem that brings together discussions of realism with the theory of the subject of experience.

With so many different and competing storylines in the discussion of experience, we might be tempted to say, with Karl Popper, "if we consider how infinitely problematic the concept of experience is . . . enthusiastic affirmation is far less appropriate in regard to it . . . than the most careful and guarded criticism."[4] And, indeed, the present attitude toward experience in philosophy and in political theory is a decidedly skeptical one, if experience is considered at all. In some quarters, it is not even thought worthy of discussion. This constitutes a major shift in American philosophy in particular.

Reversal of Fortune

Hailed at the beginning of the twentieth century as the well-spring of knowledge and the weapon to vanquish metaphysics and Cartesianism, the concept of experience subsequently underwent a major reversal of fortune. In contemporary philosophy and political theory, it has come to be equated with the metaphysics of seventeenth-century empiricism and the Cartesian model of mind.

The most famous—or perhaps infamous—use of experience as a philosophical tool is probably that of the logical positivists, who used it as a methodological scalpel to sort metaphysical "pseudo-questions" from the questions of what they termed "positive science." Moritz Schlick expresses this methodological caveat as the command that the philosopher, like the scientist, always "abide in the given," by which, he says, he does not mean "appearances" as philosophers usually understand that term, but only "what is simplest and no longer open to question" (1991, 38).

The given—that which is simplest and no longer open to question—is, according to Schlick, to be understood as the circumstances that hold when a certain claim is true. This is determined, Schlick says, on the basis of sensory experiences. If the truth or falsity of a claim makes no difference in the ways in which one experiences the world—if it makes no observable difference whether the claim is true or false—the claim is

literally meaningless, Schlick says. Meaning is a function of verification: the meaning of a statement is captured by confirming or infirming experiences. With this methodological move, he jettisons the metaphysical debates about realism and skepticism. Since our experience of the world would be no different from what it is now if an evil demon were producing our experiences, and the external world were unreal, Schlick argues, claims that "the external world is real" and "the external world is unreal" are equally vacuous, since their truth would have no bearing on our experience. We cannot formulate an empirical test that would allow us to determine which of these claims is true; more than that, we cannot even specify what these claims mean, since they cannot be sorted or defined in terms of what our experiences would deliver if one of them were true and the other false. This and other perennial problems of philosophy, like the question of whether two different people have the same qualitative experience when they see a green object, are, according to Schlick, questions whose answers are logically impossible to verify. For Schlick and other positivists, the use of appeals to experience was meant to help philosophers dispatch those questions that were mere pseudo-questions, while focusing attention on the criteria for acceptable answers to real, scientific questions.

William James was also impatient with what he saw as the vacuity of some traditional philosophical debates. Like the positivists who came after him and the philosophical ancestor he and they identified with, David Hume, James argued that experience was essential to knowledge. But James's "radical empiricism" rejected the atomistic version of experience bequeathed to philosophers and psychologists by Hume. James thought that Hume's account of experience was too thin, and that it actually gave rise to the trends in philosophy that James thought had been most objectionable—including the problem of skepticism and its equally troublesome purported solutions. One of James's primary targets in advocating radical empiricism was transcendental idealism, which he thought had too little connection to the complicated and superabundant "temperament of life" (1977, 194). Transcendental idealism's approach to philosophical debate was too abstract and academic, he charged; it let the world "wag incomprehensibly" (195). In James's view, the emphasis that transcendental idealism (among other schools in philosophy) placed on logical rigor and formal purity was purchased at the price of leaving the world in which

people lived largely dark and inscrutable, and as a result it lacked the ability to help us better understand that life. In Charlene Haddock Seigfried's words, "James's criterion for philosophy is an engaged understanding and transformation of the human condition" (1990, 1). Transcendental idealism could not provide this understanding; it had no resources for improving human life. As a result, in James's estimation, it was not good philosophy; its claims had no bearing on lived experience.

But while James allied himself to some extent with Humean empiricism against transcendental idealism, he added the term "radical" to signal the difference between his empiricism and Hume's. Hume's empiricism, like radical empiricism and unlike transcendental idealism, was a "mosaic philosophy" of "plural facts" that were not accounted for by the idea of substances in which they inhere or an Absolute Mind that creates them, according to James. The mosaic quality of this approach was part of its appeal for James. Nevertheless, he thought that Humean empiricism failed to recognize the ways in which relations like causation, conjunction, similarity, and unity could themselves be experienced. According to James's radical empiricism, these connective relations did not need to be added to experience by an act of association; Hume and his followers ignored the fact that our experiences actually did include such relations, and that "any kind of relation experienced must be accounted as 'real' as anything else in the system" (James 1977, 195). The parsimonious account of experience that Humean empiricism offered prompted rationalists to correct the problems that arose out of this account of experience about conjunction, causation, and so on, by adding "transexperiential agents of unification" (195), such as substances and intellectual categories. Thus Humean empiricism carried with it the seeds of the idealism and skepticism that empiricism set itself against. Since radical empiricism took experience of the world at face value, however, it did not need the transexperiential agents to do the work of unification and conjunction.

But James's ecumenical approach to experience had its own problems, of the projectionist type. James's conviction that the philosopher was obliged to take account of all the varieties of experience was a direct result of his radical empiricism: religious, hallucinatory, and ecstatic experiences were not to be excluded from consideration; they were to be taken at face value, just like garden-variety sense experience. This, of course, led James

into some strange places: he experimented with nitrous oxide, which, he said, gave him a sense of what Hegel had gotten right;[5] he became very interested in spiritualists who claimed to be able to communicate with the dead, and, along with a number of other philosophers, tried to examine these claims scientifically; and he famously worked out a treatise on religious experience that took at face value the accounts of visitation, vastation, and mystic vision offered by a variety of people. Radical empiricism meant that none of these could be eliminated a priori as unimportant, illusory, or deceptive. An emphasis on experience, James believed, would allow philosophy to speak better to the concerns that occupied people, rather than addressing itself to dry, lifeless, and abstract scholastic concerns. And the content of experience could not itself be stipulated, as Humean empiricism tried to do, but was instead to be taken as it was, including connections that Hume thought were added only by the mind. For James, the problems of projectionism and ontological pluralism were a small price to pay if the effort to give a fuller account of experience could give philosophy more relevance to the problems of human life. He thought that, like life itself, a relevant philosophy would be a sloppy, imprecise, asystematic affair. And, indeed, many of his critics charged him with being asystematic and sloppy.

When James is pursuing his goal of rescuing philosophy from itself, he can sometimes sound like a logical positivist. He announces, for instance, that "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience" (James 1885), making him seem to be trying to police the boundaries of philosophical discussion like the positivists.[6] The emphasis on experience is clearly meant to express a departure from an arid scholasticism that James disliked in philosophy, but that departure seems to be motivated as well by a concern to make philosophy more relevant to everyday life. This marks one of the major differences between James's pragmatism and the positivist project.[7] James's primary targets in advocating radical empiricism were transcendental idealism and an anemic conception of the contents of experience, but he was no less troubled by a form of scientism that he thought threatened inquiry into questions of value and meaning.

The democratic urge that drove James's radical empiricism meant that kinds of experiences that philosophers had traditionally dismissed,

such as religious, mystical, and pharmaceutically induced experiences, could not so easily be pushed aside as illusory or too marginal to be worthy of serious consideration. This is one of the important differences between James's emphasis on experience and that which the logical positivists placed on it. James did not mean by "experience" simply scientific experimentation or sense perception—his concept of experience was more capacious, more like "lived experience" than like sense data or sense experience. This had much to do with James's idea of what the subject of experience was like. Not only are subjects of experience sensing and perceiving: they are agents and evaluators as well. They care about values and morality, and these are not simply emotional or affective states (though James would never have used the trivializing term "simply" for emotional or affective states). James shows clear concern for practical knowledge and questions of spirituality and morality, whereas A. J. Ayer and subsequent logical positivists like him excluded moral claims from the realm of statements that could have truth values. This points to a rather important point of disagreement with the positivists—a disagreement that is rooted in James's thicker and more nuanced account of experience. The positivists essentially took Hume's version of empiricism and elaborated it with an eye to capturing the insights of twentieth-century science, using it to argue against the meaningfulness of metaphysical debates. But James rejected the Humean starting point, arguing that it led to either skepticism or transcendental idealism. In addition, such a conception of experience was not even very empirical, according to James—it was not true to the ways in which human beings experienced a world of meaning and value, a world of things and events in which the subject of experience and the object of experience were woven together. In this sense, James argued, experience is a "double-barreled" concept, pointing both toward the consciousness of a subject and toward the world, entwining them.

James's empiricism and his model of science differed from the empiricism and scientificity that the logical positivists advocated. Whereas the invocation by logical positivists of science and empirical method was usually a turn toward eliminativism and reductionism, for James, it was a turn toward something more like "naturalism."[8] James's naturalism was not eliminativist or reductive, however, as we see in the fact that he took the marginal experiences of religious ecstasy and spiritualism quite seriously,

nor was it an embrace of a metaphysical commitment to physicalism or materialism. James thought that a naturalistic philosophy that embraced real empiricism, rather than a prescriptive notion of the contents of experience, should be able to say something about the questions of fundamental meaning and value that present themselves to human beings. James was a natural scientist, and he believed that the practical consequences of a theory, claim, or belief were of ultimate importance. Those practical consequences included the way a particular person would conduct her life as a result of adopting a certain theory. They were not limited to sensory perception, but included the ways in which theories or beliefs led to practices. John Dewey saw James as a humanist and educator above all: James had not sought to displace philosophy from its traditional province by paying attention to the physiological aspects of human cognition and experience; rather, he had hoped that study of these would complement the study of humanistic problems.

James's influence on Dewey was, according to Dewey himself, quite significant.[9] This is clearest in the ways in which Dewey understood the goal of philosophy and in his adoption of James's conception of experience. Dewey wrote three books with the word "experience" in their titles during the first half of the twentieth century: *Experience and Nature*, *Experience and Education*, and *Art as Experience*, and, like James, he privileged experience in his discussions of philosophy's tasks. He offered as a test for any philosophy the following list of questions: "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?" (1981, 256). Dewey, like James, objected to the theory of experience that had been handed down to philosophers and psychologists from the British empiricists, partly because of the poverty of the resources it made available for discussions of knowledge. Experience in the hands of the British empiricists was a veil through which human beings groped toward a representation of the world—it was not part of nature, but was, instead, a filter through which the world could be dimly perceived. The problem with this, Dewey thought, was that the

qualitative aspects of the ways in which "the organism"[10] experiences the world were thought to be irrelevant, or worse, misleading.

This problem was exacerbated by what Dewey took to be the primary vice of philosophy: an "arbitrary intellectualism" that expressed itself as "the theory that all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such. The assumption of 'intellectualism' goes contrary to the facts of what is primarily experienced. For things are objects to be treated, used, acted upon and with, enjoyed and endured, even more than things to be known. They are things had before they are things cognized" (Dewey 1981, 265).

This vice, Dewey argues, and the thin theory of experience that the British empiricists peddled, "accounts for the belief that nature is an indifferent, dead mechanism" (265), which in turn gives rise to the problem of value and desire: why do we value some things and despise others, since, the story goes, "in reality" they are all inert and neutral. The problem, Dewey suggests, should be the other way around: why do things that are experienced primarily as affective or conative become transformed into neutral and inert things to be known and represented, in which the affective, aesthetic, and volitional aspects are seen as secondary, or illusory? Experience is cut off from nature in this transformation, Dewey argues—and this, he thinks, must be remedied.

While Dewey thinks that the kind of reflection on experience that this intellectualism provides is valuable, he worries that it becomes an end in itself for philosophers, and that the products of that reflection fail to make their way back to ordinary experience, becoming, instead, "curiosities to be deposited, with appropriate labels, in a metaphysical museum" (Dewey 1981, 264). In both James and Dewey we see that the emphasis on experience is meant to make philosophy less technical and abstract, and that this sometimes expresses itself in grumblings against metaphysics—another characteristic that they share with the logical positivists. But the scientific approach that the logical positivists advocated was, for Dewey and James, something more like "scientism": while they agreed that the methods of the natural sciences were the right methods for investigating questions of import to human beings, their conception of what counted

as the methods of the natural sciences differed from that of the positivists. While physics was the scientific enterprise par excellence for the logical positivists, Dewey and James did not single out a particular science as representative of all sciences. They thought that the methods of the natural sciences were captured by empiricism, but the broadened conception of experience they used meant that the contours of that empiricism were radically different from those of the empiricism of the positivists. Verifiability, testability, an experimental approach—these were essential aspects of the method of the natural sciences, but the conditions of verification and testability were not limited to simple sensory experience in Dewey's and James's understanding of empirical method.

For James and Dewey, projects, activity, and agency are the central organizing features of experience and cognition; the subject of experience is understood to be engaged in a broad array of inquiries and activities. It is here that we see the significance of Dewey's insistence on using the term "organism" in his discussions of inquiry. Dewey's choice emphasizes the ways in which a particular living being interacts with, responds to, and acts upon its environment. But this environment does not consist solely of inert physical objects; the human organism is engaged in social and political life, and seeks meaning, value, beauty, and enjoyment. Furthermore, Dewey emphasizes the essential place that artistic, productive activity plays in the life of the human organism. According to Dewey, "the history of human experience is the history of the development of the arts" (Dewey 1981, 322), and by this he means that the history of human experience is the history not just of the development of poetry, music, architecture, and so on, but of the wide array of activities, including science, aimed at the delightful enhancement of perception or appreciation. This skillful and intelligent activity that allows natural things to show their meanings, or to take on greater or more nuanced meanings, is what Dewey thinks of as artistic activity, and it is exemplified, not only in the traditional fields we consider the arts, but in the pursuit of science as well. Science, like the arts, is skillful intervention and crafting, and it aims at the enhancement of perception and action. According to Dewey, this activity is a natural aspect of human life. It is not derived from some supernatural force (which might be one way of understanding reason), but rather constitutes a continuation of the kind of informed and skillful activity aimed at

"intensifying, purifying, prolonging, and deepening the satisfactions that [natural things] spontaneously afford" (323). Natural things spontaneously offer us satisfactions and delight, but human activities can be targeted to making new connections, or deepening our appreciation of phenomena and things. In this respect, Dewey says, science is another form of artistic endeavor, since it involves the production of meanings, the arrangement and transformation of natural things that enhance and deepen human satisfaction and understanding.

Dewey's account of science as art is given its foundation in a story about the natural development of human societies. The history of human beings begins as the story of animals reacting to things on a strictly physical level, "pulled and pushed about, overwhelmed, broken to pieces, lifted on the crest of the wave of things, like anything else" (Dewey 1981, 311). The move from the level of brute animality to humanness is achieved when things can be understood as having meanings, as opposed to having only effects, and can be experimented with reflectively, imaginatively, and with enjoyment. This, Dewey says, is the fruition of human life in the artistic: the refinement of experience through reflection, and the initiation of experience on the basis of enjoyment and meanings.

Whereas James emphasizes the extent to which experience gives us access to causation, connection, and so forth, Dewey makes a similar point by emphasizing the fact that experiences have a structure, a plot: they have a determinate beginning and end; they can be distinguished from other experiences; and they have a meaning of their own. While to some extent experience is continuous because it constitutes the interaction of a living organism and its environment, some experience remains inchoate, while other experiences are singled out. Some experience remains inchoate, Dewey says, because our attention is diverted or we are interrupted, but a real experience will have a culmination in the mutual adaptation of "self" and environment: we try to pick up a rock to use to build a stone wall, and the rock is too heavy, too big, or not the right shape; we put it down and pick up another rock, until we find the right one (Dewey 1981, 562). In this way, a human being building a wall adapts to the environment, and adapts the environment to her own needs.

Philosophical reflection, Dewey believed, should aim at the improvement of the lived experience of human beings. Here he picks up a Jamesian

theme, but he also expands it in his discussion of the aesthetic. Experience, for Dewey, is not merely a conduit for information—it is an end in itself, since an essential part of experience is its aesthetic and affective qualities. Science, rightly pursued, could also be used to enhance lived experience. For James and Dewey, philosophical and scientific inquiry could both benefit from an appropriately understood empiricism, but the methodological appeal to experience was meant more as an arbiter of applicability to human life than as a divining rod to track "real science" and eliminate metaphysics, which was the methodological goal of the positivists. The problem with the philosophical orientations of many of their contemporaries, for James and Dewey, was the centrality of a priori reasoning, which blocked inquiry and deformed philosophy, making it unsuitable for the project of improving human life.

This short summary of the appeals to experience that populated analytic and Anglo-American philosophy in the early twentieth century might leave one thinking that pragmatists like James and Dewey and logical positivists like Moritz Schlick were not really talking about the same thing in their invocations of experience. For the positivists, the term is a stand-in for observation or sense perception; for the pragmatists it has a broader connotation, more like the experience of living through something. One might object that grouping these disparate notions under one term—"experience"—is a source of confusion, that the positivists and the pragmatists were attempting to appeal to very different things.

Yet the similarity is not just in the word; the positivists and the pragmatists reached for the concept of experience to capture something that was more quotidian than theoretical. And it seems to be an attempt at tying philosophical thought to outcomes and to an embodied existence of some sort. The invocation of experience by philosophers in the pragmatist and analytic traditions in the early twentieth century was, essentially, an attempt to reconstruct philosophy. Logical positivists wanted to get beyond the metaphysical issues that seemed to bog down progress in the sciences; the attempt to use experience and possible experience as a methodological tool was an explicit rejection of the Cartesian problem of skepticism as a challenge to the legitimacy of science. The positivists offered, not a solution to the skeptical problem, but rather a rejection of it, a way of saying that epistemologists and philosophers of science need not have

a solution to that "perennial" problem. The positivists saw themselves as staking out new territory, formed by a new rupture of boundaries between philosophy and empirical science. The perennial problems of philosophy, like the problem of the reality of the external world, would not be harbored there. If the answer to a particular question could not be framed in terms of the experiences that would serve to verify or falsify that answer, then the question itself was simply a pseudo-question: questions without verifiable answers were not bona fide questions.

The invocation of experience by pragmatists like James and Dewey was also a rejection of the traditional problem of skepticism, but this was mostly because of that problem's status as one of the arid and Scholastic exercises that could not contribute to the goal of improving human life. James's requirement that "the only things that shall be debatable among philosophers shall be things definable in terms drawn from experience" (James 1885) was his expression of impatience with what he saw as useless debates, fostered for the simple sake of debating them. This was, of course, an impatience that the logical positivists shared.

The appeal to experience was an attempt to make philosophy accountable to other domains of inquiry and other aspects of human life. The appeal to experience was also a shift in "philosophical style." If we understand approaches to philosophizing as embodied in the difference between "naïve" and "sophisticated" approaches, where the former are characterized by a distrust of theory and a prioricity and a more thoroughgoing naturalism (in the broad sense of that term), and the latter by an emphasis on theory, a skeptical attitude toward that which is thought to be "given" or primary, and distrust of the deliverances of common sense, then the stance of the logical positivists and the pragmatism of James and Dewey count as naïve approaches. The appeal to experience captured by these naïve approaches was the hallmark of a new way of philosophizing, and the early twentieth century was its heyday.

By the late twentieth century, however, "experience" had been demoted, if not completely displaced from the realm of philosophical concern. In Quine's story about science and epistemology, "experience" is just shorthand for the stimulus input to our sensory faculties.[11] In the move toward inferentialism, this Quinean redefinition of experience allowed Robert Brandom to say that when he speaks of experience, he is

"speaking with the vulgar: 'Experience' is not one of my words" (Brandom 2000, 205n7). The situation was little different among those who rejected epistemology entirely: "experience," Rorty argued, was a term better left behind, abandoned for the term "discourse" (which, he implies, is synonymous with experience), or left on the side of the nondiscursive, where it could only refer to meaningless causal prompts: "Think of human minds as webs of beliefs and desires, of sentential attitudes—webs which continually reweave themselves so as to accommodate new sentential attitudes. Do not ask where the new beliefs and desires come from. Forget, for the moment, about the external world, as well as about that dubious interface between self and world called 'perceptual experience'" (Rorty 1991a, 93).

The advice Rorty has to offer, if we want to overcome the problems bequeathed to us by Descartes, as the early pragmatists and logical positivists did, is as follows: give up on the concept of experience, and on the concept of a self as anything more than a mechanism that reweaves these beliefs and desires. The idea that there is need of an interface between self and world called "experience" is a relic of the Descartes-Locke-Kant tradition and the idea of the mind as mirror that animates that tradition. The faith in the therapeutic role that experience could play in bringing philosophy back from the brink of arid scholasticism, a faith that was alive and well in the early twentieth century, was apparently lost by the end of that century, replaced by a new vision of the human mind and the self that had no place for the concept of experience.

A similar romance and breakup with "experience" was playing out, albeit in a more compressed time frame, in feminist theory and in other disciplines in which the question of racial, sexual, or gendered identity was a central concern in discussions of politics and knowledge. Discussions of women's experience and the experiences of marginalized others populated the discourses of identity politics in the 1960s and 1970s, but by the 1990s, Joan Scott was putting "experience" in scare quotes to signal that the term was intellectually and politically suspect.

Consciousness-raising, a method for analyzing the interplay of the personal and the political that was almost synonymous with feminism and political enlightenment in the 1970s, used personal experience as the springboard for political analysis, often emphasizing the commonalities in women's experience that were thought to cut across class and race lines.

In discussions of racial identity, consciousness-raising drew on the experiences of racism that were thought to cut across class and gender lines. Thus, in 1977, the Combahee River Collective gave the following analysis of the growing black feminist movement:

> There is . . . undeniably a personal genesis for black feminism that is the political realization that comes from the seemingly personal experiences of individual black women's lives. Black feminists and many more black women who do not define themselves as feminists have all experienced sexual oppression as a constant factor in our day-to-day existence.
>
> . . . In the process of consciousness-raising, actually life-sharing, we began to recognize the commonality of our experiences and, from that sharing and growing consciousness, to build a politics that will change our lives and inevitably end our oppression. (Nicholson 1997, 64)

There are experiences that black women share, and this reservoir of shared experiences can be used as a political tool aimed at dismantling racist and sexist institutions and practices.

The experience of the oppressed was also put forward as a starting point for feminist epistemologies by advocates of standpoint epistemology. The standpoint of the oppressed and the marginalized, and the experiences that marked that standpoint, were advanced as a superior alternative to the idea of objectivity as a "view from nowhere" and of knowledge as best pursued from a position of neutrality. Standpoint epistemologies and consciousness-raising understood appeals to experience as correctives to traditional epistemological approaches, as well as to abstract theory and to ideology. Experience as a concept represented a phenomenon at the nexus of the individual, the world, and the political structure: it seemed to present the possibility of something that was both a result of the forces of racism and sexism and a resource for discovering the ways in which those forces could be undermined. The project of making visible the experiences of marginalized members of society was taken to be a defining characteristic of the new fields of women's history, African-American history, and queer studies, among others.

By the late 1980s, however, this faith in experience was beginning to give way to skepticism. Experience is always ideological, carrying with it the "worldview" that was part of the oppressive political system, critics argued, so it could not constitute the check on ideology that its champions

had been assuming it to be capable of. We can only see what we are taught to see, these critics argued, and insofar as what we are taught to see is a function of the political and social system in which we are raised, we can only see what that system thinks is important or relevant.

Furthermore, critics claimed that appeals to experience relied on a model of experience as nondiscursive, authentic, and innocent access to the-way-the-world-is that is prior to (both conceptually and causally) linguistic expression. Appeals to experience valorized the model of seeing as knowledge, a process that is in its essence representational and passive. But since no vision is without a history or a shaping perspective, such a model of knowing obscured the forces that made certain kinds of knowledge possible. Appeals to experience were suspect, amounting to a return of a repressed foundationalism, since the experience in question was taken to be given, rather than a product of interpretation. The critique of occularcentrism led to a critique of experience.

Finally, critics argued that the appeals to women's experience, which had been the lifeblood of political organizing and solidarity in the 1970s, depended upon an outmoded and politically regressive model of an autonomous subject of experience who could simply "mirror" and then report her experiences, a position that failed to take into account the discursive construction of identities as well as experience. According to the skeptics, the autonomous subject of traditional epistemology, as well as that traditional epistemology itself—foundationalism—were both smuggled in with the appeals to experience that earlier feminist theorists had set such store by.

It might seem that these are different, and not necessarily connected, trends in the humanities and social sciences. After all, one might argue, the discussion of the extent to which observation sentences can be theory-independent—the dominant theme in Anglo-American philosophy of science—is not the same as the discussion about whether personal experience can constitute evidence for social theories, or whether it can be suitably revelatory to play the role it is supposed to play in identity politics. The Kuhnian-inspired claim that experience is theory-dependent is different from Joan Scott's claim that experience is discursively constructed, one might object. In this book, I aim to show that the two discussions are actually not as unrelated as they might seem initially; that the theories of

the subject that animate both trends share commitments that make the problem show up in the particular guises that it does. The problem of experience as it manifests itself in these seemingly disparate intellectual trends is made intractable by the gap that opens up between a naturalistic understanding of ourselves and an understanding of ourselves as cultural entities. But it also arises in both philosophy of science and in critiques of appeals to experience as a result of something that both methodologies share: a retreat from the first-person perspective and the concepts of agency, intentionality, and subjectivity that are tied to it.