

Preface

When I told people that I was writing a book about experience, I found that many of them had ideas about it: what it is, who has it, what counts as experience. For philosophers, this everyday word has a very particular meaning, however, which does not always carry over to other disciplines, and is significantly different from its ordinary language use. The term seems to have as many definitions as there are people, which has made writing this book a bit of a challenge. Not everyone will find a story here about what they think we mean by experience, but I think that the narrative line I try to draw through several of these seemingly disparate senses of the term will help illuminate some of the primary problems that have plagued feminist theory, philosophy of science, and epistemology.

And now about that narrative: because the topic of experience is potentially so vast, I have worked very hard to maintain a narrative line that can carry readers through the variety of discussions I touch on in the book. But I couldn't address all the different discussions of experience. The feminist theory chapter was particularly troublesome in this respect. In trying to maintain some textual and narrative integrity, I had to eschew the usual approach to a literature review of the area, focusing instead on selected authors and on particularly important contributions to the discussion. I regret that I was not able to discuss the whole range of attempts to redefine or resuscitate the concept of experience. I suspect that everyone will find someone they think should have been discussed in these pages but isn't—I apologize in advance for that, and ask the reader simply to bear in mind that I am interested in following a particular narrative thread, and that some topics and authors, while interesting, needed to be left out of the narrative so that I could focus on a larger picture of what we mean by experience. The book is a story not just about experience, but about the chasm between experience and discourse that opened

up in twentieth-century accounts of experience as a result of the dominant accounts of human nature and the social-natural relationship that seemed to be forced upon all right-thinking people by advances in empirical psychology, on one hand, and by more sophisticated theories of discourse, on the other. The chasm mirrored an even more fundamental divide: that between a conception of human beings as cultural products and the equally coercive conception of ourselves as information-processing systems or primates with sophisticated theory-building tendencies. Each of these conceptions of human beings arose as the product of more naturalistic approaches to accounting for human nature as well: as ways of taking seriously discourse theory, sociology, history, linguistic anthropology, and cognitive science, among other fields. Talking about experience is ineluctably a way of talking about human nature and human cognitive projects, and the story I tell in the following chapters is about the ways in which our conception of human nature and human cognitive projects changed over the course of a hundred years of philosophical, psychological, social scientific, and political territorial shifts.