

# Perspectives on pragmatism

## A reply to Lorraine Code

**Charlene Haddock Seigfried**

I wasn't clear enough in my book, *Pragmatism and Feminism: Reweaving the Social Fabric*, if Lorraine Code thinks that it meant to include pragmatist philosophy in the 'unrelievedly masculine and andro-centered tradition' that feminists need radically to criticize.<sup>1</sup> Quite the contrary! Not only is William James's and John Dewey's pragmatist critique of the tradition already radical; I unambiguously think that as feminists we can extend and deepen that critique. Code is correct that I did not spend much time pointing out how 'self-identified present-day male pragmatists such as Quine, Goodman, Putnam, and Rorty' could benefit from contemporary feminist and post-colonial criticisms. They may define themselves as pragmatists, but they reject too much of what constitutes the emancipatory potential of the earlier movement to be included in the tradition of feminist influenced pragmatism I advocate. I deliberately distinguished a more marginalized pragmatist tradition that includes Jane Addams, Ella Flagg Young, Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman from the linguistically inspired mainstream pragmatists Code is familiar with.

Like Code, as a late-twentieth-century feminist, I am sensitive to the failure of philosophers to recognize their androcentric biases. In refusing to read past or ignore such biases in pragmatist philosophy, however, I may have given the impression that they were central and pervasive, rather than something that had to be laboriously searched for and disentangled from the more common pluralistic textual approaches. Rather than take the few instances I give of Dewey's failure to contest the public man/private woman dichotomies as a 'sedimentation of that dichotomy in the "absolute presuppositions" of classical pragmatism', as Code does, I took them as exceptions to Dewey's life-long and exhaustive deconstruction of dualisms, especially

ones like class that are based on differential power relations. In my book I tried to show that there was a range of responses (not just 'one omission'), to this issue of the public/private split, not only among pragmatists, but among feminists of the time.

I also wanted to show that even someone like Dewey, who developed an emancipatory philosophy that holds its own presuppositions up to scrutiny and who has the best intentions, can no more transparently grasp the truth as it is than we can. His emancipatory attitudes are important predispositions for radical social reconstruction but are not sufficient. What is needed in addition are the varied experiences and perspectives of those differently situated who can recognize the blind spots we acquire by being members of different classes, genders, ethnicities or sexual orientations. But it was the very realization of these perspectival limitations that led James and Dewey explicitly to welcome and work with those considered to be cultural outcasts and why they both found so valuable Addams's explanation of how she painfully learned to overcome her own unrecognized class biases and to work 'with' people instead of 'for' them. Unless one adopts the assumption of immaculate perception, no one is immune to the limitations of perspectivism. The pluralism of George Herbert Mead, James, Du Bois, Alain Locke, Dewey and Addams means that they recognized the necessity for the inclusiveness of multiple perspectives, classes, genders, races, and so on, in both theory and practice.

I don't understand Code's insinuations that because of Nietzsche's misogyny or Heidegger's Nazi alliances we should be wary of Dewey, who was guilty of neither. Such sliding from a lesser criticism to an extreme charge permeates her article and I have to wonder why she felt a need to exaggerate the danger. Nor do I think that 'an alliance with [James]

would entail serious compromises in gender politics', as Code says. James was a sharp critic of philosophic speculation that ignored the oppressions of everyday life. He also developed an embodied rationality and demonstrated the role of feeling in knowledge. Rather than compromise by reading past or ignoring James's failings, I dug deeply to bring to light every androcentric and misogynist bias I could find. I would not bother to do so for philosophies irremediably tainted by such attitudes, ones which have little or nothing to contribute to my own social/political agenda.<sup>2</sup>

The pragmatist method assumes that biases always inform understanding and must be taken account of or they will subvert the process of understanding as well as the ability to overcome actually oppressive situations. They do not, like Code, assume it is possible to be completely free of bias. Code and I seem to differ on what the purpose of recognizing bias is. For me, the purpose of examining theories for sexist biases is to determine whether they are systematic and irredeemable or whether they are due to historical circumstances or misconceptions that either disappear once they are exposed or provide insights into my own biases and how to overcome or mitigate their influence.

Code questions how far the pragmatist subversion of 'the essentialism of Enlightenment models of human nature' goes. I think it goes very deep indeed. Enlightenment models cannot survive the Darwinian evolutionary insight developed by Nietzsche, as well as the pragmatists, that species are not essences, but organisms that develop and radically change over time. Human organisms, which have developed the ability to select differentially aspects of their natural and social environment, designate these 'takings' as essences, but they cannot be unique unchanging characteristics abstracted from objects since – as James argues – they are a function of our interests, vary with them, and are not discoverable apart from them. What is common, then, about Dewey's and my appeals to a common humanity? It cannot be a reinvocation of 'the dislocated transparent self', nor a commonness 'to which we have direct access as a privileged source of knowledge', because pragmatism denies both possibilities. It must be sought experimentally, in the context of an actually problematic situation. The one Code seems to be presupposing is that already defined in an androcentric tradition that coerces assent and dismisses difference by essentializing the characteristics of humanity from the perspective of white, elitist, male privilege. Dewey rejects such essentialism by calling attention to and specifying the problematic situations in which appeals

to a common humanity can open up possibilities rather than narrow them to a predetermined set.<sup>3</sup> For pragmatists, appeal to a common humanity embodies an intention to make common cause with others, no matter how alien they appear to one's own culture or group. According to Jane Addams, if we properly accent our similarities to others rather than what keeps us apart, then differences of race, language, creed and tradition will not become barriers to communication and cooperation.<sup>4</sup>

Dewey does have an approach that directly addresses the feminist debates of the 1990s over both taking women's experiences seriously to rescue them from androcentric neglect and denigration and yet holding them up to scrutiny as multiply constructed and therefore subject to distortion. Contrary to Code's interpretation, it involves neither simply substituting subjectivity for objectivity nor the empathy of putting oneself in place of the other. Philosophers can only avoid scholastic sterility by taking experience seriously and deriving their subject matter, as feminists advocate, from the felt difficulties and oppressions encountered in everyday life. It is this affirmation of the legitimacy of starting from women's, blacks' and others' experiences that distinguishes pragmatist approaches from traditional text-based analysis. There is no question of a generic 'we' who have direct access to a privileged source of knowledge. It is just because primary experience is mediated through the 'social-cultural-economic-racial-material structures' that Code also recognizes that these constituting factors must be distinguished, the problem defined more exactly, hypotheses proposed, and solutions enacted.

I was not advocating the 'unequivocal value' of empathy in showing how Mead explains the relation of primary to emergent experience. Rather I was hinting at how we are 'materially, socially constituted – yet not deterministically', the very problem Code is concerned with raising. The pragmatist theme of the pluralism of perspectives and their concern to recognize and acknowledge the values and realities of others differently situated by gender, ethnicity, class, and so on, from oneself, leads them to emphasize sympathetic understanding as a precondition for acquiring knowledge. Without such a predisposition sympathetically or empathetically to enter into the world-views of others, genuine reciprocal dialogue cannot take place. This is not empathy understood as already knowing how others feel, but a realization that I am unlikely to intuit how others not in my situation feel and therefore need to let them reveal themselves and their world. Addams is particularly astute in exposing her own

elitist presuppositions and in devising ways not only to 'let the subaltern speak,' but to work together in ways that are empowering rather than demeaning.

Code questions whether pragmatism's special salience for those living in the United States renders it unfit for those like herself who live in other countries. Even leaving aside the similarities of two such Western capitalist countries as the United States and Canada, Code conflates two different issues. The first is pragmatism's radical critique of the centuries-old philosophical illusion, one still alive and well in John Rawls's theory of justice, that as pure rationalists, philosophers speak from nowhere and in their self-proclaimed transcendence of space and time can promulgate universal principles and values valid for all. Pragmatists developed a robust theory of acknowledging the context within which we theorize, and therefore emphasize, as Code also does, that a necessary first move towards thinking about and responding to global and international issues is a self-reflexive critique of our own situatedness.

The other issue is how to get from the specificities of my particular problematic or oppressive situation to larger social, political and cultural problems. The issue for Dewey is how to elicit from particular efforts to overcome troubling situations something that will be of value in future situations. Code could not be more leery of generic claims than are pragmatists. What is generic to a situation designates a quality of a specific interaction of person and environment. Whether it is also generic of a larger range of experiences can only be determined experimentally; that is, by formulating the intention to see if the specifiable features of one situation are helpful in understanding and resolving another problematic situation.<sup>5</sup>

Code ends with a feminist criticism of instrumentalism that reiterates pragmatism's own criticism of it. Pragmatists *do* take exception, for instance, to the mechanistic, reductive and oppressive alignment of 'instrumental reason' with scientism. The problem, I think, is that pragmatism is such a radical reconstruction of philosophy that it takes some time to grasp that, as a result of its paradigm shift, conventional terms like 'instrumental reasoning' have been subverted and have to be understood in a new context. The denigration of mere means in relation to idealized ends is shown by Dewey, for example, to be a result of the Ancient Greek devaluing of the body and of the work of slaves and women in comparison with disembodied reason and elite male activity. By dismissing instrumental reasoning as though it could only mean mere means as opposed to ideal ends, philosophers

perpetuate rather than undermine the pernicious dualisms they have inherited.

## Notes

1. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996. L. Code, 'Feminists and Pragmatists: A Radical Future?', *Radical Philosophy*, January/February 1998, pp. 22–30.
2. My earlier book, *William James's Radical Reconstruction of Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany NY, 1990, should be read together with the chapter in *Pragmatism and Feminism* for a more accurate expression of my assessment.
3. Dewey also criticizes the use of appeals to human nature for the purpose of keeping women and minorities in their place. See Seigfried, 'John Dewey's Pragmatist Feminism', in Larry A. Hickman, ed., *Reading Dewey: Interpretations for a Postmodern Generation*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1998, pp. 187–216.
4. Jane Addams, *Twenty Years at Hull-House*, Signet Classics, New York, 1981, p. 98.
5. Given Dewey's use of the experimental method to call into question dogmatic assertions about sex and race, a method his women students used to undermine sexism, and his encouragement of women to develop their own philosophical perspectives, I am at a loss to account for Code's questions 'about the pull between a tyranny of "experientialism" immune to discussion and the persistent tyrannies of incredulity, denigration and distrust that too often discount women's testimonial accounts of their own experiences'.

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