

*Feminism and Pragmatism*

*RICHARD RORTY*

THE TANNER LECTURES ON HUMAN VALUES

Delivered at

University of Michigan

December 7, 1990

RICHARD RORTY is Professor of Humanities at the University of Virginia. He received his Ph.D. degree in Philosophy from Yale University in 1956 and, after service in the U.S. Army, taught at Wellesley and Princeton universities. Professor Rorty has been awarded grants from the American Council of Learned Societies and the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and has held numerous fellowships and visiting professorships. He has received the following lectureships: Howison Lecturer, University of California, Berkeley; Northcliffe Lecturer, University College, London; Clark Lecturer, Trinity College, Cambridge; and Romanell Lecturer, Phi Beta Kappa. Many of his works are translated and internationally published, including *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (1979) and *Contingency, Irony and Solidarity* (1989).

When two women ascended to the Supreme Court of Minnesota, Catherine MacKinnon asked, “Will they use the tools of law as women, for all women?” She continued as follows:

I think that the real feminist issue is not whether biological males or biological females hold positions of power, although it is utterly essential that women be there. And I am not saying that viewpoints have genitals. My issue is what our identifications are, what our loyalties are, who our community is, to whom we are accountable. If it seems as if this is not very concrete, I think it is because we have no idea what women as women would have to say. I’m evoking for women a role that we have yet to make, in the name of a voice that, un silenced, might say something that has never been heard.<sup>1</sup>

Urging judges to “use the tools of law as women, for all women” alarms universalist philosophers. These are the philosophers who think that moral theory should come up with principles which mention no group smaller than “persons” or “human beings” or “rational agents.” Such philosophers would be happier if MacKinnon talked less about accountability to women *as* women and more about an ideal Minnesota, or an ideal America, one in which all human beings would be treated impartially. Universalists would prefer to think of feminism as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe de Gouges did, as a matter of rights which are already recognizable and describable, although not yet granted. This describability, they feel, makes MacKinnon’s hope for a voice saying something never heard before unnecessary, overly dramatic, hyperbolic.

Universalist philosophers assume, with Kant, that all the logical space necessary for moral deliberation is now available — that

<sup>1</sup>MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified: Discourses on Life and Law* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), p. 77.

all important truths about right and wrong can not only be stated, but be made plausible, in language already to hand. I take MacKinnon to be siding with historicists like G. W. F. Hegel and John Dewey, and to be saying that moral progress depends upon expanding this space. She illustrates the need for such expansion when she notes that present sex-discrimination law assumes that women “have to meet either the male standard for males or the male standard for females. . . . For purposes of sex discrimination law, to be a women means either to be like a man or to be like a lady.”<sup>2</sup> In my terms, MacKinnon is saying that unless women fit into the logical space prepared for them by current linguistic and other practices, the law does not know how to deal with them. MacKinnon cites the example of a judicial decision that permitted women to be excluded from employment as prison guards, because they are so susceptible to rape. The court, she continues, “took the viewpoint of the reasonable rapist on women’s employment opportunities.”<sup>3</sup> “The conditions that create women’s rapeability as the definition of womanhood were not even seen as susceptible to change.”<sup>4</sup>

McKinnon thinks that such assumptions of unchangeability will only be overcome once we can hear “what women as women would have to say.” I take her point to be that assumptions become visible *as* assumptions only if we can make the contradictions of those assumptions sound plausible. So injustices may not be perceived as injustices, even by those who suffer them, until somebody invents a previously unplayed role. Only if somebody

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 71. See also Carolyn Whitbeck’s point that “the category, lesbian, both in the minds of its male inventors and as used in male-dominated culture is that of a physiological female who is in other respects a stereotypical male” (“Love, Knowledge and Transformation,” in *Hypatia Reborn*, ed. Azizah Y. al-Hibri and Margaret A. Simons [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990], p. 220). Compare Marilyn Frye’s reference to “that other fine and enduring patriarchal institution, Sex Equality” (*The Politics of Reality* [Trumansburg, N.Y.: Crossing Press, 1983], p. 108).

<sup>7</sup> McKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 38.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 73.

has a dream, and a voice to describe that dream, does what looked like nature begin to look like culture, what looked like fate begin to look like a moral abomination, For until then only the language of the oppressor is available, and most oppressors have had the wit to teach the oppressed a language in which the oppressed will sound crazy — *even to themselves* — if they describe themselves *as* oppressed.<sup>5</sup>

McKinnon's point that logical space may need to be expanded before justice can be envisaged, much less done, can be restated in terms of John Rawls's claim that moral theorizing is a matter of attaining reflective equilibrium between general principles and particular intuitions — particular reactions of revulsion, horror, satisfaction, or delight to real or imagined situations or actions. McKinnon sees moral and legal principles, particularly those phrased in terms of equal rights, as impotent to change those reactions.<sup>6</sup> So she sees feminists as needing to alter the data of moral theory rather than needing to formulate principles which fit pre-existent data better. Feminists are trying to get people to feel indifference or satisfaction where they once recoiled, and revulsion and rage where they once felt indifference or resignation.

<sup>5</sup> Frye remarks that “for subordination to be permanent and cost effective, it is necessary to create conditions such that the subordinated group acquiesces to some extent in the subordination” (*Politics of Reality*, p. 33). Ideally, these will be conditions such that a member of the subordinate group who does not acquiesce will sound crazy. Later, Frye suggests that a person's sounding crazy is a good indicator that you are oppressing that person (p. 112). See also McKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 105: “Especially when you are part of a subordinated group, your own definition of your injuries is powerfully shaped by your assessment of whether you could get anyone to do anything about it, including anything official.” E.g., a non-crazy claim to have been raped is one acceptable to those (usually males) in a position to offer support or reprisal. Only where there is a socially accepted remedy can there have been a real (rather than crazily imagined) injury.

<sup>6</sup> When Olympe de Gouges appealed in the name of women to the Declaration of the Rights of Men and Citizens, even the most revolution-minded of her male contemporaries thought she was crazy. When Canadian feminists argued, in the 1920s, that the word *persons* in an act specifying the conditions for being a senator covered women as well as men, the Supreme Court of Canada decided that the word should not be so construed, because it never had been. (The Judicial Committee of the Privy Council, be it said, later ruled in the feminists' favor.)

One way to change instinctive emotional reactions is to provide new language which will facilitate new reactions. By “new language” I mean not just new words but also creative misuses of language -familiar words used in ways which initially sound crazy. Something traditionally regarded as a moral abomination can become an object of general satisfaction, or conversely, as a result of the increased popularity of an alternative description of what is happening. Such popularity extends logical space by making descriptions of situations which used to seem crazy seem sane. Once, for example, it would have sounded crazy to describe homosexual sodomy as a touching expression of devotion, or to describe a woman manipulating the elements of the Eucharist as a figuration of the relation of the Virgin to her Son. But such descriptions are now acquiring popularity. At most times, it sounds crazy to describe the degradation and extirpation of helpless minorities as a purification of the moral and spiritual life of Europe. But at certain periods and places — under the Inquisition, during the Wars of Religion, under the Nazis — it did not.

Universalistic moral philosophers think that the notion of “violation of human rights” provides sufficient conceptual resources to explain why some traditional occasions of revulsion really are moral abominations and others only appear to be. They think of moral progress as an increasing ability to see the reality behind the illusions created by superstition, prejudice, and unreflective custom. The typical universalist is a moral realist, someone who thinks that true moral judgments are *made* true by something out there in the world. Universalists typically take this truth maker to be the intrinsic features of human beings qua human. They think you can sort out the real from the illusory abominations by figuring out which those intrinsic features are, and that all that is required to figure this out is hard, clear, thought.

Historicists, by contrast, think that if intrinsic means “ahistorical, untouched by historical change,” then the only intrinsic features of human beings are those they share with the brutes — for

example, the ability to suffer and inflict pain. Every other feature is up for grabs. Historicists agree with the Wittgensteinian view Susan Hurley summarizes as “the existence of certain shared practices, any of which might not have existed, is all that our having determinate reasons . . . to do anything rests on.”<sup>7</sup> So they think we are not yet in a position to know what human beings are, since we do not yet know what practices human beings may start sharing.<sup>8</sup> Universalists talk as if any rational agent, at any epoch, could somehow have envisaged all the possible morally relevant differences, all the possible moral identities, brought into existence by such shared practices. But for MacKinnon, as for Hegel and Dewey, we know, at most, only those possibilities which history has actualized so far. MacKinnon’s central point, as I read her, is that “a woman” is not yet the name of a way of being human — not yet the name of a moral identity, but, at most, the name of a disability.<sup>9</sup>

Taking seriously the ideas of as yet unrealized possibilities and of as yet unrecognized moral abominations resulting from failure to envisage those possibilities requires one to take seriously the suggestion that we do not presently have the logical space necessary for adequate moral deliberation. Only if such suggestions are

<sup>7</sup> Hurley, *Natural Reasons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p. 32. Hurley is here offering the implications of Wittgenstein’s views, rather than stating her own.

<sup>8</sup> In a recent article on Rawls, Susan Moller Okin points out that thinking in Rawls’s original position is not a matter of thinking like a “disembodied nobody” but rather of thinking like lots of different people in turn-thinking from the point of view of “every ‘concrete other’ whom one might turn out to be” (“Reason and Feeling in Thinking about Justice,” *Ethics* 99 [1989] : 248). Hurley (*Natural Reasons*, p. 381) makes the same point. The historicity of justice- a historicity which Rawls has acknowledged in his papers of the 1980s-amounts to the fact that history keeps producing new sorts of “concrete others” whom one might turn out to be.

<sup>9</sup> See the theme of “woman as partial man” in Carolyn Whitbeck, “Theories of Sex Difference,” in *Women and Values*, ed. Marilyn Pearsall (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 1986), pp. 34-50. This theme is developed in fascinating detail in Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990).

taken seriously can passages like the one I quoted from MacKinnon be read as prophecy rather than empty hyperbole. But this means revising our conception of moral progress. We have to stop talking about the need to go from distorted to undistorted perception of moral reality and instead talk about the need to modify our practices so as to take account of new descriptions of what has been going on.

Here is where pragmatist philosophy might be useful to feminist politics. For pragmatism redescribes both intellectual and moral progress by substituting metaphors of evolutionary development for metaphors of progressively less distorted perception. By dropping a representationalist account of knowledge, we pragmatists drop the appearance-reality distinction in favor of a distinction between beliefs which serve some purposes and beliefs which serve other purposes — for example, the purposes of one group and those of another group. We drop the notion of beliefs being made true by reality, as well as the distinction between intrinsic and accidental features of things. So we drop questions about (in Nelson Goodman's phrase) the Way the World Is. We thereby drop the ideas of the Nature of Humanity and of the Moral Law, considered as objects which inquiry is trying to represent accurately, or as objects which make true moral judgments true. So we have to give up the comforting belief that competing groups will always be able to reason together on the basis of plausible and neutral premises.

From a pragmatist angle, neither Christianity nor the Enlightenment nor contemporary feminism are cases of cognitive clarity overcoming cognitive distortion. They are, instead, examples of evolutionary struggle — struggle which is Mendelian rather than Darwinian in character, in that it is guided by no immanent teleology. The history of human social practices is continuous with the history of biological evolution, the only difference being that what Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett call "memes" gradually take over the role of Mendel's genes. Memes are things like



turns of speech, terms of aesthetic or moral praise, political slogans, proverbs, musical phrases, stereotypical icons, and the like. Memes compete with one another for the available cultural space as genes compete for the available lebensraum.<sup>10</sup> Different batches of both genes and memes are carried by different human social groups, and so the triumph of one such group amounts to the triumph of those genes or memes. But no gene or meme is closer to the purpose of evolution or to the nature of humanity than any other — for evolution has no purpose and humanity no nature. So the moral world does not divide into the intrinsically decent and the intrinsically abominable, but rather into the goods of different groups and different epochs. As Dewey put it, “The worse or evil is a rejected good. In deliberation and before choice no evil presents itself as evil. Until it is rejected, it is a competing good. After rejection, it figures not as a lesser good, but as the bad of that situation.”<sup>11</sup> On a Deweyan view, the replacement of one

<sup>10</sup> Michael Gross and Mary Beth Averill, in their “Evolution and Patriarchal Myths” (in *Discovering Reality*, ed. Sandra Harding and Merrill B. Hintikka [Dordrecht: Reidel, 1983]), suggests that the term *struggle* is a specifically masculinist way of describing evolution and ask, “Why not see nature as bounteous, rather than parsimonious, and admit that opportunity and cooperation are more likely to abet novelty, innovation and creation than are struggle and competition?” (p. 85). The question gives me pause, and I have no clear answer to it. All I have is the hunch that, with memes as with genes, tolerant pluralism will sooner or later, in the absence of interstellar travel, have to come to terms with shortage of space for self-expression. There is a more general point involved here, the one raised by Jo-Ann Pilardi’s claim that Hegel, Sigmund Freud, and others “were burdened with a notion of identity which defines it as oppositional, one which was derived from the psychosocial development of male children” (“On the War Path and Beyond,” in al-Hibri and Simons, *Hypatia Reborn*, p. 12). Just such a notion of identity is central to my claims in this lecture — and particularly to the claims about the possible benefits of feminist separatism I make later. So I am employing what many feminist writers would consider specifically male assumptions. All I can say in reply is that the notion of identity as oppositional seems to me hard to eliminate from such books as Frye’s *Politics of Reality* — and especially from her discussion of feminist anger. Anger and opposition seem to me the root of most moral prophecy, and it is the prophetic aspect of feminism that I am emphasizing here.

<sup>11</sup> John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, in *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, vol. 14 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1983), p. 193. See also “Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey*, vol. 3 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), p. 379: “Goodness is not remoteness from badness. In one sense, goodness is based upon

species by another in a given ecological niche, or the enslavement of one human tribe or race by another, or of the human females by the human males, is not an intrinsic evil. The latter is a rejected good, rejected on the basis of the greater good which feminism is presently making imaginable. The claim that this good is greater is like the claim that mammals are preferable to reptiles, or Aryans to Jews; it is an ethnocentric claim made from the point of view of a given cluster of genes or memes. There is no larger entity which stands behind that cluster and makes its claim true (or makes some contradictory claim true).

Pragmatists like myself think that this Deweyan account of moral truth and moral progress comports better with the prophetic tone in contemporary feminism than do universalism and realism. Prophecy, as we see it, is all that nonviolent political movements can fall back on when argument fails. Argument for the rights of the oppressed *will* fail just insofar as the only language in which to state relevant premises is one in which the relevant emancipatory premises sound crazy. We pragmatists see universalism and realism as committed to the ideas of a reality-tracking faculty called “reason” and an unchanging moral reality to be tracked, and thus unable to make sense of the claim that a new voice is needed. So we commend ourselves to feminists on the ground that we can fit that claim into *our* view of moral progress with relative ease.

We see it as unfortunate that many feminists intermingle pragmatist and realist rhetoric. For example, MacKinnon at one point defines feminism as the belief “that women are human beings in truth but not in social reality.”<sup>12</sup> The phrase “in truth” here can only mean “in a reality which is distinct from social reality,” one which is as it is whether or not women ever succeed in saying what has never been heard. Such invocations of an ahistoricist realism

---

badness; that is, good action is always based upon action good once, but bad if persisted in under changing circumstances.”

<sup>12</sup> MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 126.

leave it unclear whether MacKinnon sees women as appealing from a bad social practice to something which transcends social practice, appealing from appearance to reality, or instead sees them as doing the same sort of thing as the early Christians, the early socialists, the Albigensians, and the Nazis did: trying to actualize hitherto undreamt-of possibilities by putting new linguistic and other practices into play, and erecting new social constructs.<sup>13</sup>

Some contemporary feminist philosophers are sympathetic to the latter alternative, because they explicitly reject universalism and realism. They do so because they see both as symptoms of what Jacques Derrida has called “phallogocentrism”— what MacKinnon calls “the epistemological stance . . . of which male dominance is the politics.”<sup>14</sup> Other such philosophers, however, warn against accepting the criticisms of universalism and realism common to Friedrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Derrida — against finding an ally in what is sometimes called “postmodernism.” Sabina Lovibond, for example, cautions against throwing Enlightenment universalism and realism overboard. “How

<sup>13</sup> Suppose we define a moral abomination, with Jeffrey Stout, as something which goes against our sense of “the seams of our moral universe,” one which crosses the lines between, as he puts it, “the categories of our cosmology and our social structure” (*Ethics after Babel* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1988], p. 159). Then the choice between a realist and a pragmatist rhetoric is the choice between saying that moral progress gradually aligns these seams with the *real* seams, and saying that it is a matter of simultaneously reweaving and enlarging a fabric which is not intended to be congruent with an antecedent reality. Giving an example of such a seam, Stout says, “The sharper the line between masculine and feminine roles and the greater the importance of that line in determining matters such as the division of labor and the rules of inheritance, the more likely it is that sodomy will be abominated” (p. 153). Later he says, “The question is not whether homosexuality is intrinsically abominable but rather what, all things considered, we should do with the relevant categories of our cosmology and social structure” (p. 158). As with the abominableness of homosexual sodomy, so, we pragmatists think, with the abominableness of the absence or presence of patriarchy. In all such cases, up to and including the abominableness of torturing people for the sheer pleasure of watching them writhe, pragmatists think that the question is not about intrinsic properties but about what we should do with the relevant categories — a question which boils down to what descriptions we should use of what is going on.

<sup>14</sup> MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 50.

can any one ask me to say goodbye to ‘emancipatory metanarratives,’” she asks, “when my own emancipation is still such a patchy, hit-or-miss affair ?”<sup>15</sup> Lovibond’s universalism comes out when she says, “It would be arbitrary to work for sexual equality unless one believed that human society was disfigured by inequality as *such*.” Her realism comes out in her claim that feminism has a “background commitment . . . to the elimination of (self-interested) cognitive distortion.”<sup>16</sup>

I share Lovibond’s doubts about the apocalyptic tone and the rhetoric of unmasking, prevalent among people who believe that we are living in a “postmodern” period.<sup>17</sup> But, on all the crucial

<sup>15</sup> Sabina Lovibond, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” *New Left Review*, Winter 1989, p. 12. For a somewhat more tempered account of the relation of postmodernism to feminism, see Kate Soper, “Feminism, Humanism, and Postmodernism,” *Radical Philosophy* 55 (Summer 1990): 11–17. In their “Social Criticism without Philosophy: An Encounter between Feminism and Postmodernism,” in *Universal Abandon?* ed. Andrew Ross (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), Nancy Fraser and Linda Nicholson argue that “a robust postmodern-feminist paradigm of social criticism without philosophy is possible” (p. 100). I of course agree, but I am less sure about the need for, and utility of, “social-theoretical analysis of large-scale inequalities” (p. 90) than are Fraser and Nicholson. This is because I am less sure than Fraser about the possibility that “the basic institutional framework of [our] society could be unjust” (Fraser, “Solidarity or Singularity?” in *Reading Rorty*, ed. Alan Malachowski (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 318), and hence about “the utility of a theory that could specify links among apparently discrete social problems via the basic institutional structure (p. 319). I suspect my differences with Fraser are concrete and political rather than abstract and philosophical. She sees, and I do not see, attractive alternatives (more or less Marxist in shape) to such institutions as private ownership of the means of production and constitutional democracy, attractive alternatives to the traditional social-democratic project of constructing an egalitarian welfare state within the context of these two basic institutions. I am not sure whether our differences are due to Fraser’s antifoundationalist theory hope (see n. 17 below) or to my own lack of imagination.

<sup>16</sup> Lovibond, “Feminism and Postmodernism,” p. 28. See Lovibond’s reference at p. 12 to “remaking society along rational, egalitarian lines.” The idea that egalitarianism is more rational than elitism, rational in a sense which provides reasons for action *not* based on contingent shared practices, is central to the thinking of most liberals who are also moral realists.

<sup>17</sup> A rhetoric of “unmasking hegemony” presupposes the reality-appearance distinction which opponents of phallogocentrism claim to have set aside. Many self-consciously “postmodern” writers seem to me as trying to have it both ways — to view masks as going all the way down while still making invidious comparisons between other people’s masks and the way things will look when all the masks have been stripped off. These postmodernists continue to indulge the bad habits char-

philosophical issues, I am on the side of Lovibond's postmodernist opponents." I hope that feminists will continue to consider the possibility of dropping realism and universalism, dropping the notion that the subordination of women is *intrinsically* abominable, dropping the claim that there is something called "right" or "justice" or "humanity" which has always been on their side, making their claims true. I agree with those whom Lovibond paraphrases as saying "the Enlightenment rhetoric of 'emancipation,' 'autonomy' and the like is complicit in a fantasy of escape from the embodied condition."<sup>19</sup> In particular, it is complicit in the fantasy of escape from a historical situation into an ahistoricist empyrean — one in which moral theory can be pursued, like Euclidean geometry, within an unalterable, unextendable, logical space. Although practical politics will doubtless often require feminists to speak with the universalist vulgar, I think they might profit from thinking with the pragmatists.

One of the best things about contemporary feminism, it seems to me, is its ability to eschew such Enlightenment fantasies of escape. My favorite passages in MacKinnon are ones in which she says things like "we are not attempting to be objective about it,

---

acteristic of those Marxists who insist that morality is a matter of class interest, and then add that everybody has a moral obligation to identify with the interests of a particular class. Just as *ideology* came to mean little more than "other people's ideas," so *product of hegemonic discourse* has come to mean little more than "product of other people's way of talking." I agree with Stanley Fish that much of what goes under the heading of "postmodernism" exemplifies internally inconsistent "antifoundationalist theory hope." See Fish, *Doing What Comes Naturally: Change, Rhetoric and the Practice of Theory in Literary and Legal Studies* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1989), pp. 346, 437–38.

<sup>18</sup> I am not fond of the term *postmodernism* and was a bit startled (as presumably was MacIntyre) to find Lovibond saying that Jean-François Lyotard, Alasdair MacIntyre, and I are "among the most forceful exponents of the arguments and values which constitute postmodernism within academic philosophy" (p. 5). Still, I recognize the similarities between our positions which lead Lovibond to group the three of us together. Some of these similarities are outlined by Fraser and Nicholson, "Social Criticism," pp. 85 ff.

<sup>19</sup> Lovibond, "Feminism and Postmodernism," p. 12.

we're attempting to represent the point of view of women.”<sup>20</sup> Feminists are much less inclined than Marxists were to fall back on a comfortable doctrine of immanent teleology. There is a lot of feminist writing which can be read as saying: we are *not* appealing from phallist appearance to nonphallist reality. We are *not* saying that the voice in which women will some day speak will be better at representing reality than present-day masculist discourse. We are not attempting the impossible task of developing a nonhegemonic discourse, one in which truth is no longer connected with power. We are not trying to do away with social constructs in order to find something that is not a social construct. We are just trying to help women out of the traps men have constructed for them, help them get the power they do not presently have, and help them create a moral identity as women.

I have argued in the past that Deweyan pragmatism, when linguistified along the lines suggested by Hilary Putnam and David Davidson, gives you all that is politically useful in the Nietzsche-Heidegger-Derrida-Foucault tradition. Pragmatism, I claim, offers all the dialectical advantages of postmodernism while avoiding the self-contradictory postmodernist rhetoric of unmasking. I admit that insofar as feminists adopt a Deweyan rhetoric of the sort I have just described, they commit themselves to a lot of apparent paradoxes and incur the usual charges of relativism, irrationalism, and power worship.<sup>21</sup> But these disadvantages are, I think, outweighed by the advantages. By describing themselves in Deweyan terms, feminists would free themselves from Lovibond's demand for a general theory of oppression—a way of seeing oppression on the basis of race, class, sexual preference, and gen-

<sup>20</sup> MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 86; see also pp. 50, 54, for the “post-modernism” suggestion that the quest for objectivity is a specifically masculist one.

<sup>21</sup> We pragmatists are often told that we reduce moral disagreement to a mere struggle for power by denying the existence of reason, or human nature, conceived as something which provides a neutral court of appeal. We often rejoin that the need for such a court, the need for something ahistorical which will ratify one's claims, is itself a symptom of power worship—of the conviction that unless something large and powerful is on one's side, one shouldn't bother trying.

der as so many instances of a general failure to treat equals equally.” They would thereby avoid the embarrassments of the universalist claim that the term *human being* — or even the term *woman* — names an unchanging essence, an ahistorical natural kind with a permanent set of intrinsic features. Further, they would no longer need to raise what seem to me unanswerable questions about the accuracy of their representations of “woman’s experience.” They would instead see themselves as *creating* such an experience by creating a language, a tradition, and an identity.

In the remainder of this lecture I want to develop this distinction between expression and creation in more detail. But first I want to insert a cautionary remark about the relative insignificance of philosophical movements as compared with social-political movements. Yoking feminism with pragmatism is like yoking Christianity with Platonism, or socialism with dialectical materialism. In each case, something big and important, a vast social hope, is being yoked with something comparatively small and

<sup>22</sup> Developing this point would take too long. Were more time and space available, I should argue that trying to integrate feminism into a general theory of oppression — a frequent reaction to the charge that feminists are oblivious to racial and economic injustice — is like trying to integrate Galilean physics into a general theory of scientific error. The latter attempt is as familiar as it is fruitless. The conviction that there is an interesting general theory about human beings or their oppression seems to me like the conviction that there is an interesting general theory about truth and our failure to achieve it. For the same reasons that transcendental terms like *true* and *good* are not susceptible of definition, neither error nor oppression has a single neck which a single critical slash might sever. Maria Lugones is an example of a feminist theorist who sees a need for a general philosophical theory of oppression and liberation. She says, for example, that “the ontological or metaphysical possibility of liberation remains to be argued, explained, uncovered” (“Structure/Antistructure and Agency under Oppression,” *Journal of Philosophy* 87 (October 1990): 502). I should prefer to stick to merely empirical possibilities of liberation. Although I entirely agree with Lugones about the need to “give up the unified self” (p. 503), I do not see this as a matter of ontology, but merely as a way of putting the familiar point that the same human being can contain different coherent sets of belief and desire — different roles, different personalities, etc. — correlated with the different groups to which he or she belongs or whose power he or she must acknowledge. A more important disagreement between us, perhaps, concerns the desirability of harmonizing one’s various roles, self-images, etc., in a single unifying story about oneself. Such unification — the sort of thing which I described below as overcoming splits — seems to me desirable. Lugones, on the other hand, urges the desirability of “experiencing oneself in the limen” (p. 506).

unimportant, a set of answers to philosophical questions — questions which arise only for people who find philosophical topics intriguing rather than silly. Universalists — of both the bourgeois liberal and the Marxist sort — often claim that such questions are in fact urgent, for political movements *need* philosophical foundations. But we pragmatists cannot say this. We are not in the foundations business. *All* we can do is to offer feminists a few pieces of special-purpose ammunition — for example, some additional replies to charges that their aims are unnatural, their demands irrational, or their claims hyperbolic.

*So* much for an overview of my reasons for trying to bring feminism and pragmatism together. I want now to enlarge on my claim that a pragmatist feminist will see herself as helping to create women rather than attempting to describe them more accurately. I shall do so by taking up two objections which might be made to what I have been saying. The first is the familiar charge that pragmatism is inherently conservative, biased in favor of the status quo.<sup>23</sup> The second objection arises from the fact that if you

<sup>23</sup> For a good example of this charge, see Jonathan Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oklahoma City: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), p. 55: “the humanities must make their way between, on the one hand, a traditional, foundationalist conception of their task and, on the other, the so-called ‘new pragmatism’ to which some critics of foundationalism have retreated. If philosophy is not a foundationalist discipline, argues Richard Rorty, then it is simply engaged in a conversation; it tells stories, which succeed simply by their success. Since there is no standard or reference point outside the system of one’s beliefs to appeal to, critical arguments and theoretical reflections can have no purchase on these beliefs or the practices informed by them. Ironically, then, the claim that philosophers and theoreticians tell stories, which originates as a critique of ideology . . . becomes a way of protecting a dominant ideology and its professionally successful practitioners from the scrutiny of argument, by deeming that critique can have no leverage against ordinary beliefs, and that theoretical arguments have no consequences. This pragmatism, whose complacency seems altogether appropriate to the Age of Reagan, subsists only by a theoretical argument of the kind it in principle opposes, as an ahistorical ‘preformism’: what one does must be based on one’s beliefs, but since there are no foundations outside the system of one’s beliefs, the only thing that could logically make one change a belief is something one already believes.” Culler is right in saying that we pragmatists hold the latter view, but wrong in suggesting that we think that *logical* changes in belief are the only respectable ones. What I have called “creative misuses” of language are *causes* to change one’s belief, even if not *reasons* to change them. See the discussion of Davidson on metaphor in various



say that women need to be created rather than simply freed, you seem to be saying that in some sense women do not now fully exist. But then there seems no basis for saying that men have done women wrong, since you cannot wrong the nonexistent.

Hilary Putnam, the most important contemporary philosopher to call himself a pragmatist, has said that “a statement is true of a situation just in case it would be correct to use the words of which the statement consists in that way in describing the situation.” Putting the matter this way immediately suggests the question: correct by whose standards? Putnam’s position that “truth and rational acceptability are interdependent notions” makes it hard to see how we might ever appeal from the oppressive conventions of our community to something nonconventional, and thus hard to see how we could ever engage in anything like “radical critique.”<sup>24</sup> So it may seem that we pragmatists, in our frenzied

---

essays in my *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991) for more on this cause-reason distinction, and for the claim that most moral and intellectual progress is achieved by non-“logical” changes in belief. Culler is one of the people I had in mind in n. 16 above — the people who want to hang onto the primacy of logic (and thus of “theoretical reflection” and “critique”) while abandoning logocentrism. I do not think this can be done. Culler’s charge can be found in many other authors, e.g., Joseph Singer, “Should Lawyers Care about Philosophy?” *Dude Law Journal* 1989, p. 1752: “Rorty . . . has marginalized the enterprise of philosophy, thereby depriving pragmatism of any critical bite.” On my view, pragmatism bites other philosophies, but not social problems as such — and so is as useful to fascists like Mussolini and conservatives like Michael Oakeshott as it is to liberals like Dewey. Singer thinks that I have “identified reason with the status quo” and defined “truth as coextensive with the prevailing values in a society” (p. 1763). These claims are, I think, the result of the same inference as Culler draws in the passage quoted above. Both Singer and Culler want philosophy to be capable of setting goals, and not to be confined to the merely ancillary role I describe in n. 26 below.

<sup>24</sup> Putnam’s *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 114–15. See also Robert Brandom’s formulation of “phenomenalism about truth” as the view that “being true is to be understood as being properly taken-true (believed).” Brandom says that what is of most interest about the classical pragmatist stories (C. S. Peirce, William James) is “the dual commitment to a normative account of claiming or believing [Alexander Bain’s and Peirce’s account of belief as a rule for action] that does not lean on a supposedly explanatory antecedent notion of truth, and the suggestion that truth can then be understood phenomenally, in terms of features of these independently characterized takings-true” (Brandom, “Pragmatism, Phenomenalism, Truth Talk,” *Midwest Studies in Philoso-*

efforts to undercut epistemological skepticism by doing away with what Davidson calls “the scheme-content distinction,” have also undercut political radicalism.

Pragmatists should reply to this charge by saying that they cannot make sense of an appeal from our community’s practices to anything except the practice of a real or imagined alternative community. So when prophetic feminists say that it is not enough to make the practices of our community coherent, that the very *language* of our community must be subjected to radical critique, pragmatists add that such critique can only take the form of imagining a community whose linguistic and other practices are different from our own. Once one grants McKinnon’s point that one can only get so far with an appeal to make present beliefs more coherent by treating women on a par with men, once one sees the need for something more than an appeal to rational acceptability by the standards of the existing community, then such an act of imagination is the only recourse.

This means that one will praise movements of liberation not for the accuracy of their diagnoses but for the imagination and courage of their proposals. The difference between pragmatism and positions such as Marxism, which retain the rhetoric of scientism and realism, can be thought of as the difference between radicalism and utopianism. Radicals think that there is a basic mistake being made, a mistake deep down at the roots. They think that deep thinking is required to get down to this deep level, and that only there, when all the superstructural appearances have been undercut, can things be seen as they really are. Utopians, however, do not think in terms of mistakes or of depth. They abandon the contrast between superficial appearance and deep reality in favor

---

*phy* 12 [1988]: 80). Brandom (as well as Davidson and I) would agree with Putnam that “truth does not transcend use” but I think all three of us might be puzzled by Putnam’s further claim that “whether an epistemic situation is any good or not depends on whether many different statements are true” (*Representation and Reality*, p. 115). This seems to me like saying that whether a person is wealthy or not depends on how much money she has.

of the contrast between a painful present and a possibly less painful, dimly seen, future. Pragmatists cannot be radicals, in this sense, but they can be utopians. They do not see philosophy as providing instruments for radical surgery, or microscopes which make precise diagnosis possible.<sup>25</sup> Philosophy's function is rather to clear the road for prophets and poets, to make intellectual life a bit simpler and safer for those who have visions of new communities.<sup>26</sup>

So far I have taken MacKinnon as my example of a feminist with such a vision. But of course she is only one of many. Another is Marilyn Frye, who says, in her powerful book *The Politics of Reality*, that "there probably is really no distinction, in the end, between imagination and courage." For, she continues, it takes

<sup>25</sup> Joseph Singer, "Should Lawyers Care about Philosophy?" praises Elizabeth Spelman for "using the tools of philosophy to promote justice," and suggests that one such use is to show that "the categories and forms of discourse we . . . have important consequences in channeling our attention in particular directions." Surely it is no disrespect to Spelman's achievement, nor to philosophy, to insist that it takes no special tools, no special philosophical expertise, to make and develop this latter point. The use of notions like "powerful methods" and "precise analytical instruments" in the rhetorics of analytic philosophy and of Marxism constitutes, to my mind, misleading advertising. An unfortunate result of such mystification is that whenever philosophy professors like Spelman or I do something useful, it is assumed that they were doing something distinctively philosophical, something philosophers are specially trained to do. If they then fail to go on to do something else which needs to be done, they will usually be charged with using an obsolete and inadequate set of philosophical tools.

<sup>26</sup> See John Dewey, "From Absolutism to Experimentalism," in *Later Works of John Dewey*, vol. 5 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), p. 160: "Meantime a chief task of those who call themselves philosophers is to help get rid of the useless lumber that blocks our highways of thought, and strive to make straight and open the paths that lead to the future." There is a lot of this road-clearing rhetoric in Dewey, rhetoric which is continuous with John Locke's description of himself as an underlaborer to those who seemed to him the prophetic spirits of his time — corpuscularian scientists like Newton and Boyle. Both metaphors suggest that the philosophers' job is to drag out-dated philosophy out of the way of those who are displaying unusual courage and imagination. Singer, "Should Lawyers Care about Philosophy?" says that "Dewey, unlike Rorty, saw the problems of philosophy as inseparable from the problems of collective life," and that "by separating philosophy from justice, Rorty's vision reinforces existing power relations" (p. 1759). It is true that Dewey often speaks as if social problems and philosophical problems were interlocked, but I should argue that all these passages can best be interpreted in the road-clearing sense I have just suggested. Dewey never, I think, saw pragmatism in the way in which Marxists saw dialectical materialism — as a philosophical key which unlocks the secrets of history or of society.

courage to overcome “a mortal dread of being outside the field of vision of the arrogant eye.” This is the eye of a person who prides himself on spotting the rational unacceptability of what is being said — that is, its incoherence with the rest of the beliefs of those who currently control life chances and logical space. So feminists must, Frye goes on to say, “dare to rely on ourselves to make meaning and we have to imagine ourselves capable of . . . weaving the web of meaning which will hold us in some kind of intelligibility.”<sup>27</sup> Such courage is indistinguishable from the imagination it takes to hear oneself as the spokesperson of a merely possible community, rather than as a lonely, and perhaps crazed, outcast from an actual one.

MacKinnon and many other feminists use *liberalism* as a name for an inability to have this sort of courage and imagination. “In the liberal mind,” MacKinnon says, “the worse and more systematic one’s mistreatment, the more it seems justified. Liberalism. . . never sees power as power, yet can see as significant only that which power does.”<sup>28</sup> The phenomenon she is pointing to certainly exists, but *liberalism* seems to me the wrong name for it. So, of course, does *pragmatism*. I think the main reason — apart from some reflexes left over from early Marxist conditioning — why pejorative uses of the terms *liberal* and *pragmatist* are still common among political radicals is that if you say, with Putnam, that “truth does not transcend use,” you may easily be taken as referring to actual, present use. Again, if you deny that truth is a matter of correspondence to reality, you may easily be taken as holding that a true belief is one that coheres with what most people currently believe. If you think that emancipatory moral or social thought requires penetrating to a presently unglimped reality beneath the current appearances, and find pragmatists telling you that there is no such reality, you may easily conclude that a pragmatist cannot help the cause of emancipation.

<sup>27</sup> Frye, *Politics of Reality*, p. 80.

<sup>28</sup> MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*, p. 221; cf. p. 137.

When, however, we remember that John Dewey — a paradigmatic liberal as well as a paradigmatic pragmatist — spent a great deal of time celebrating the sort of courage and imagination Frye describes, we may be willing to grant that the relation between pragmatism and emancipation is more complex. Dewey said remarkably little about the situation of women, but one of the few things he did say is worth quoting:

Women have as yet made little contribution to philosophy, but when women who are not mere students of other persons' philosophy set out to write it, we cannot conceive that it will be the same in viewpoint or tenor as that composed from the standpoint of the different masculine experience of things. Institutions, customs of life, breed certain systematized predilections and aversions. The wise man reads historic philosophies to detect in them intellectual formulations of men's habitual purposes and cultivated wants, not to gain insight into the ultimate nature of things or information about the make-up of reality. As far as what is loosely called reality figures in philosophies, we may be sure that it signifies those selected aspects of the world which are chosen because they lend themselves to the support of men's judgment of the worth-while life, and hence are most highly prized. In philosophy, "reality" is a term of value or choice.<sup>29</sup>

Suppose we think, as feminists often do, of "men's habitual purposes and cultivated wants" as "the habitual purposes and cultivated wants of the males, the half of the species which long ago enslaved the other half." This permits us to read Dewey as saying: if you find yourself a slave, do not accept your masters' descriptions of the real; do not work within the boundaries of their moral universe; instead, try to invent a reality of your own by selecting aspects of the world which lend themselves to the support of *your* judgment of the worth-while life.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> John Dewey, "Philosophy and Democracy," in *Middle Works* 11:145.

<sup>30</sup> To use an analogy suggested by Charlotte Perkins Gilman's poem "Similar Cases," it is as if one said to the creatures which were eventually to become the

Dewey's doctrine of the means-end continuum might have led him to add: do not expect to know what sort of life is worthwhile right off the bat, for that is one of the things you will constantly change your mind about in the process of selecting a reality. You can neither pick your goals on the basis of a clear and explicit claim about the nature of moral reality, nor derive such a claim from clear and explicit goals. There is no method or procedure to be followed except courageous and imaginative experimentation. Dewey would, I think, have been quick to see the point of Frye's description of her own writing as "a sort of flirtation with meaninglessness — dancing about a region of cognitive gaps and negative semantic spaces, kept aloft only by the rhythm and momentum of my own motion, trying to plumb abysses which are generally agreed not to exist."<sup>31</sup> For meaninglessness is exactly what you have to flirt with when you are in between social and, in particular, linguistic practices — unwilling to take part in an old one but not yet having succeeded in creating a new one.

The import of Dewey's pragmatism for movements such as feminism can be seen if we paraphrase Dewey as follows: do not charge a current social practice or a currently spoken language with being unfaithful to reality, with getting things wrong. Do not criticize it as a result of ideology or prejudice, where these are tacitly contrasted with your own employment of a truth-tracking faculty called "reason" or a neutral method called "disinterested observation." Do not even criticize it as "unjust" if "unjust" is supposed to mean more than "sometimes incoherent even on its own terms." Instead of appealing from the transitory current

---

mammals: "Do not try to imitate the ways in which those larger and more powerful fish cope with their environment. Rather, find ways of doing things which will help you find a new environment." ("Similar Cases" is perhaps most easily available at pp. 363–64 of Ann Lane, *To Herland and Beyond: The Life and Works of Charlotte Perkins Gilman* [New York: Pantheon, 1990]. The point of the poem is that if it were true that, as feminists were often told, that "you can't change your nature" we should have had neither biological nor cultural evolution).

<sup>31</sup> Frye, *Politics of Reality*, p. 154.

appearances to the permanent reality, appeal to a still only dimly imagined future practice. Drop the appeal to neutral criteria, and the claim that something large like Nature or Reason or History or the Moral Law is on the side of the oppressed. Instead, just make invidious comparisons between the actual present and a possible, if inchoate, future.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>32</sup> As I suggested earlier, it is easy to reconcile Dewey's claim that, in philosophy, *real* is as evaluative a term as *good* with "postmodernist" views — for example, those found in Chris Weedon's book *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987). Pretty much the only difference between Weedon's criticism of the philosophical tradition and Dewey's is one which also separates contemporary pragmatists like Putnam and Davidson from Dewey — the use of *language* instead of Dewey's word *experience* as the name of what it is important for the oppressed to reshape. Weedon, like Putnam and Davidson and unlike Dewey, is what Wilfrid Sellars called a "psychological nominalist" — someone who believes that all awareness is a linguistic affair. She says, "Like Althusserian Marxism, feminist poststructuralism makes the primary assumption that it is language which enables us to think, speak and give meaning to the world around us. Meaning and consciousness do not exist outside language" (p. 32). The difference with Dewey has few consequences, however, since Dewey would have heartily agreed with Weedon that one should not view language "as a transparent tool for expressing facts" but as "the material in which particular, often conflicting versions of facts are constructed" (p. 131). The only real advantage to psychological nominalism for feminists, perhaps, is that it replaces hard-to-discuss (I am tempted to say "metaphysical") questions about whether women have an *experience* different from that of men, or Africans an experience different from that of Europeans, or about whether the experience of upper-class African women is more like that of lower-class European men than that of upper-class European women, with easier-to-discuss (more evidently empirical) questions about what *language* these various groups of people use to justify their actions, exhibit their deepest hopes and fears, etc. Answers to the latter questions are jumping-off places for practical suggestions about different languages which they might use, or might have used. I share MacKinnon's skepticism about the idea that "viewpoints have genitals" and Sandra Harding's skepticism about the utility of notions like "woman's morality," "woman's experience," and "woman's standpoint." See Harding, "The Curious Coincidence of Feminine and African Moralities: Challenges for Feminist Theory," in *Women and Moral Theory*, ed. Eva Kittay and Diana Meyers (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1987), pp. 296–315. Although most of the doctrines (e.g., essentialism, Cartesian individualism, moral universalism) which Weedon attributes to "liberal humanism" are doctrines Dewey (a notorious liberal humanist) also targeted, Weedon does not seem able to eschew a longing for what Mary Hawkesworth calls "a successor science which can refute once and for all the distortions of androcentrism" (Hawkesworth, "Knowers, Knowing, Known: Feminist Theory and the Claims of Truth," in *Feminist Theory in Practice and Process*, ed. Micheline R. Malson, Jean F. O'Barr, Sarah Westphalwihl, and Mary Wye [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989], p. 331). But once you put aside universalism, you should neither hope for knock-down refutations nor talk about "distortion." Hawkesworth goes on to criticize Harding for saying that "feminist analytical categories *should* be unstable at this

So much for the relations between pragmatism and political radicalism. I have been arguing that the two are compatible and mutually supporting. This is because pragmatism allows for the possibility of expanding logical space, and thereby for an appeal to courage and imagination rather than to putatively neutral criteria. What pragmatism loses when it gives up the claim to have right or reality on its side it gains in ability to acknowledge the presence of what Frye calls “abysses which are generally agreed not to exist.” These are situations which give the universalist and the realist trouble — ones in which plenty of assent-commanding descriptions are available, but such that none of these descriptions do what is needed.

I turn now to the paradox I noted earlier: the suggestion that women are only now coming into existence, rather than having been deprived of the ability to express what was deep within them all the time. I take MacKinnon’s evocation of a “role that women have yet to make” as a way of suggesting that women are only now beginning to put together a moral identity *as* women. To find one’s moral identity in being an X means being able to do the following sort of thing: make your X-ness salient in your justification of important uncoerced choices, make your X-ness an important part of the story you tell yourself when you need to recover your self-confidence, make your relations with other X’s central to your claim to be a responsible person. These are all things men have usually been able to do by reminding themselves that they are, come what may, *men*. They are things which men have made it hard for women to do by reminding themselves that they are women. As Frye puts it, men have assigned themselves the status of “full persons” — people who enjoy what she calls “unqualified

---

moment in history” (Harding, “The Instability of the Analytical Categories of Feminist Theory,” in the same collection, at p. 19). But prophecy and unstable categories go together, and Harding’s claim chimes with many of the passages I have been quoting from Frye. Harding’s further claim that “we [feminists] should learn how to regard the instabilities themselves as valuable resources” is one that Dewey would have cheered.



participation in the radical ‘superiority’ of the species” — and withheld this status from women.<sup>33</sup> The result of men constantly, fervently, and publicly thanking God that they are not women has made it hard for women to thank God that they are. For a woman to say that she finds her moral identity in being a woman would have sounded, until relatively recently, as weird as for a slave to say that he or she finds his or her moral identity in being a slave.

Most feminists might agree that it was only with the beginnings of the feminist movement that it began to become possible for women to find their moral identities in being women.<sup>34</sup> But most feminists are probably still realist and universalist enough to insist that there is a difference between the claim that one cannot find one’s moral identity in being an X and the claim that an X is not yet a full-fledged person, a person to whom injustice has been done by forbidding her to find her moral identity in her X-hood. For the great advantage of realism and universalism over pragmatism is that it permits one to say that women were everything they are now, and *therefore* were entitled to everything they are now trying to get — even when they did not know, and might even have explicitly denied, that they were entitled to it.

For us pragmatists, however, it is not so easy to say that. For we see personhood as a matter of degree, not as an all-or-nothing affair, something evenly distributed around the species. We see it as something that slaves typically have less of than their masters. This is not because there are such things as “natural slaves” but because of the masters’ control over the language spoken by the slaves — their ability to make the slave think of his or her pain as fated and even somehow deserved, something to be borne rather than resisted. We cannot countenance the notion of a deep reality which reposes unrecognized beneath the superficial appearances.

<sup>33</sup> Frye, *Politics of Reality*, pp.48-49.

<sup>34</sup> I am too ignorant about the history of feminism — about how long and how continuous the feminist tradition has been — to speculate about when things began to change.

So we have to take seriously the idea, made familiar by such writers as Charles Taylor, that interpretation goes all the way down: that what a human being is, for moral purposes, is largely a matter of how he or she describes himself or herself. We have to take seriously the idea that what you experience yourself to be is largely a function of what it makes sense to describe yourself as in the languages you are able to use. We have to say that the Deltas and Epsilons of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* and the proles of George Orwell's *1984* were persons only in the sense in which fertilized human ova or human infants are persons — in the sense, namely, that they are capable of being made into persons. So we pragmatists have to identify most of the wrongness of past male oppression with its suppression of past potentiality, rather than in its injustice to past actuality.

In order to say that women are only now in the process of achieving a moral identity as women, I do not need to deny that some women have, in every epoch, had doubts about, and offered alternatives to, the standard, androcentric, descriptions of women. All I need to deny is that women have been able to *forget* the latter descriptions — the ones which make them seem incapable of being full persons. I am denying that women in previous epochs have been able to avoid being torn, split, between the men's description of them and whatever alternative descriptions they have given to themselves. As an example of the sort of thing I have in mind — of the need to name, and thus to begin to bridge, what Frye calls “abysses generally agreed not to exist” — consider Adrienne Rich's description of her situation when young. She was, she says, “split between the girl who wrote poems, who defined herself as writing poems, and the girl who was to define herself by her relationships with men.”<sup>35</sup> I want to interpret Rich's individual situation as an allegory of the more general situation in which women found themselves before feminism achieved lift-

<sup>35</sup> Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected Prose 1966-1978* (New York: Norton, 1979), p. 40.

off — of their inability to stop defining themselves in terms of their relationships with men. To envisage this inability, consider how Rich's situation differed from that of a young man in a similar situation.

Since Byron and Goethe men have thought of writing poems as one of the best ways to create an autonomous self, to avoid having to define oneself in the terms used by one's parents, teachers, employers, and rulers. Since 1820 or thereabouts, a young man has had the option of defining himself as a poet, of finding his moral identity in writing verse. But, Rich tells us, this is not easy for a young woman.

What is the difficulty? It is not that there is any dearth of true descriptions which Rich might have applied to herself. There were no well-formed — that is, generally intelligible — questions to which Rich could not have given true, well-formed answers. But nevertheless there was, she tells us, a split. The various true descriptions which she applied did not fit together into a whole. But, she is implicitly suggesting, a young male poet's descriptions would have fitted together easily. Rich was, in her youth, unable to attain the kind of coherence, the kind of integrity, which we think of as characteristic of full persons. For persons who are capable of the full glory of humanity are capable of seeing themselves steadily and whole. Rather than feel that splits are tearing them apart, they can see tensions between their alternative self-descriptions as, at worst, necessary elements in a harmonious variety-in-unity.

Rich's account of herself as split rings true, for, as she shows in her essay on Emily Dickinson and elsewhere, the language-games men have arranged that young women should play forces them to treat the men in their lives (or, the absence of men in their lives) as the independent variable and everything else—even their poems — as dependent variables. So insofar as Rich could not tie her poems in with her relationships with men, she had a problem. She was split. She could not be, so to speak, a

full-time poet, because a language she could not forget did not let one be both a full-time poet and a full-time female. By contrast, since Byron, the language has let one be a full-time poet and a full-time hero (just as, since Socrates, it has been possible to be a full-time intellectual and a full-time hero).

What might solve Rich's problem? Well, perhaps nowadays it is a little easier for a young woman to define herself by and in her poems than when Rich was young — simply because she may have read books by Rich, Frye, and others. But only a little easier. What would make it *really* easy? Only, I would suggest, the sort of circumstances which made it easy for a young man in the generation after Byron to make his poetic activity the independent variable in the story he told himself about himself. In the previous generation there had been what now looks to us like a band of brothers — Hölderlin and Keats, Byron and Goethe, Shelley and Chamisso. Bliss was it in that dawn to be alive, and to be a young male with poetic gifts was to be able to describe oneself in heroic terms, terms which one could not have used earlier without sounding crazy. That band of brothers founded an invisible club, a very good club, one which is still giving new members a warm welcome.<sup>36</sup> So young male poets do not face abysses when they attempt self-definition. But, as Rich points out, Emily Dickinson was not allowed into that club.<sup>37</sup> So, to make things *really* easy

<sup>36</sup>The continued attractions of this club in our own cynical century are evidenced by the fact that, even as Bernard Shaw was having *Candida* make fun of Marchbanks, Joyce had Stephen Dedalus write that he would “forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race.” Joyce was not making fun of Stephen, and even Shaw admitted that *Candida* “does not know the secret in the poet's heart.”

<sup>37</sup>“What might, in a male writer — a Thoreau, let us say, or a Christopher Smart or William Blake — seem a legitimate strangeness, a unique intention, has been in one of our two major poets [Dickinson] devalued into a kind of naivete, girlish ignorance, feminine lack of professionalism, just as the poet herself has been made into a sentimental object. (‘Most of us are half in love with this dead girl,’ confesses Archibald MacLeish. Dickinson was fifty-five when she died.)” (Rich, *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence*, p. 167).

for future Dickinsons and Riches, there would have to be a good, well-established club which they could join.

Here, I take it, is where feminist separatism comes in. Rich asks that

we understand lesbian/feminism in the deepest, most radical sense: as that love for ourselves and other women, that commitment to the freedom of all of us, which transcends the category of “sexual preference” and the issue of civil rights, to become a politics of *asking women’s questions*, demanding a world in which the integrity of all women — not a chosen few — shall be honored and validated in every aspect of culture.<sup>38</sup>

Someone who tries to fit what Rich is saying into a map drawn on a universalist and realist grid will have trouble locating any space separate from that covered by “the category of ‘sexual preference’” or by “the issue of civil rights.” For justice, on this universalist view, is a matter of our providing each other with equal advantages. Nothing, in this vision, *could* transcend civil rights and the realization of those rights by institutional change. So, for example, lesbian separatism is likely to be seen simply as an arrangement by which those with a certain sexual preference can escape stigma until such time as the laws have been extended to protect lesbians’ rights and the mores have caught up with the laws.

Frye offers a contrasting view of the function of separatism when she writes,

*Re* the new being and meaning which are being created now by lesbian-feminists, we *do* have semantic authority, and, collectively, can and do define with effect. I think it is only by maintaining our boundaries through controlling concrete access to us that we can enforce on those who are not-us our definitions of ourselves, hence force on them *the fact of our exist-*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

*tence* and thence open up the *possibility* of our having semantic authority with them.<sup>39</sup>

I take Frye's point to be, in part, that individuals — even individuals of great courage and imagination — cannot achieve semantic authority, *even semantic authority over themselves*, on their own. To get such authority you have to hear your own statements as part of a shared practice. Otherwise you yourself will never know whether they are more than ravings, never know whether you are a heroine or a maniac. People in search of such authority need to band together and form clubs, exclusive clubs. For if you want to work out a story about who you are — put together a moral identity — which decreases the importance of your relationships to one set of people and increases the importance of your relationships to another set, the physical absence of the first set of people may be just what you need. So feminist separatism may indeed, as Rich says, have little to do with sexual preference or with civil rights, and a lot to do with making things easier for women of the future to define themselves in terms not presently available. These would be terms which made it easy for “women as women” to have what Dewey calls “habitual purposes and cultivated wants” — purposes and wants which, as Rich says, only a chosen few women presently have.

To sum up: I am suggesting that we see the contemporary feminist movement as playing the same role in intellectual and moral progress as was played by, for example, Plato's academy, the early Christians meeting in the catacombs, the invisible Copernican colleges of the seventeenth century, groups of workingmen gathering to discuss Tom Paine's pamphlets, and lots of other clubs which were formed to try out new ways of speaking and to gather the moral strength to go out and change the world. For groups build their moral strength by achieving increasing semantic authority over their members, thereby increasing the ability of

<sup>39</sup> Frye, *Politics of Reality*, p. 106n

those members to find their moral identities in their membership in such groups.

When a group forms itself in conscious opposition to those who control the life chances of its members, and succeeds in achieving semantic authority over its members, the result may be its ruthless suppression—the sort of thing that happened to the Albigensians, and which Margaret Atwood has imagined happening to the feminists. But it may also happen that, as the generations succeed one another, the masters, those in control, gradually find their conceptions of the possibilities open to human beings changing. For example, they may gradually begin to think of the options open to their own children as including membership in the group in question. The new language spoken by the separatist group may gradually get woven into the language taught in the schools.

Insofar as this sort of thing happens, eyes become less arrogant and the members of the group cease to be treated as wayward children, or as a bit crazy (the ways in which Emily Dickinson was treated). Instead, they gradually achieve what Frye calls “full personhood” in the eyes of everybody, having first achieved it only in the eyes of fellow members of their own club. They begin to be treated as full-fledged human beings, rather than being seen, like children or the insane, as degenerate cases — as beings entitled to love and protection, but not to participation in deliberation on serious matters. For to be a full-fledged person in a given society is a matter of double negation: it is *not* to think of oneself as belonging to a group which powerful people in that society thank God they do *not* belong to.

In our society, straight white males of my generation — even earnestly egalitarian straight white males — cannot easily stop themselves from feeling guilty relief that they were not born women or gay or black, any more than they can stop themselves from being glad that they were not born mentally retarded or schizophrenic. This is in part because of a calculation of the

obvious socioeconomic disadvantages of being so born, but not entirely. It is also the sort of instinctive and ineffable horror which noble children used to feel at the thought of having been born to non-noble parents, even very rich non-noble parents.<sup>40</sup>

At some future point in the development of our society, guilty relief over not having been born a woman may not cross the minds of males, any more than the question “noble or base-born?” now crosses their minds.<sup>41</sup> That would be the point at which both males and females had *forgotten* the traditional androcentric language, just as we have all forgotten about the discussion between base and noble ancestry. But if this future comes to pass, we pragmatists think, it will not be because the females have been revealed to possess something — namely, full human dignity — which everybody, even they themselves, once mistakenly thought they lacked. It will be because the linguistic and other practices of the common culture have come to incorporate some of the practices characteristic of imaginative and courageous outcasts.

The new language which, with luck, will get woven into the language taught to children will not, however, be the language which the outcasts spoke in the old days, before the formation of separatist groups. For that was infected by the language of the masters. It will be, instead, a language gradually put together in separatist groups in the course of a long series of flirtations with meaninglessness. Had there been no stage of separation, there would have been no subsequent stage of assimilation. No prior antithesis, no new synthesis. No carefully nurtured pride in

<sup>40</sup>This is the sort of ineffable horror which creates a sense of moral abomination (at, e.g., intercaste marriage), and thus furnishes the intuitions which one tries to bring into reflective equilibrium with one's principles. To view moral abominableness as capable of being produced or erased by changing the language taught to the young is the first step toward a nonuniversalist conception of moral progress.

<sup>41</sup>To realize how far away such a future is, consider Eve Klossofky Sedgwick's point that we shall only do justice to gays when we become as indifferent to whether our children turn out gay or straight as we are to whether they become doctors or lawyers. Surely she is right, and yet how many parents at the present time can even imagine such indifference? For the reasons suggested by Stout, in *Ethics after Babel*, I suspect that neither sexism nor homophobia can vanish while the other persists.



membership in a group which might not have attained self-consciousness were it not for its oppression, no expansion of the range of possible moral identities, and so no evolution of the species. This is what Hegel called the cunning of reason, and what Dewey thought of as the irony of evolution.

Someone who takes the passage I quoted from Dewey seriously will not think of oppressed groups as learning to *recognize* their own full personhood and then gradually, by stripping away veils of prejudice, leading their oppressors to confront reality. For they will not see full personhood as an intrinsic attribute of the oppressed, any more than they see human beings having a central and inviolable core surrounded by culturally conditioned beliefs and desires — a core for which neither biology nor history can account. To be a pragmatist rather than a realist in one's description of the acquisition of full personhood requires thinking of its acquisition by blacks, gays, and women in the same terms as we think of its acquisition by Galilean scientists and romantic poets. We say that the latter groups invented new moral identities for themselves by getting semantic authority over themselves. As time went by, they succeeded in having the language they had developed become part of the language everybody spoke. Similarly, we have to think of gays, blacks, and women inventing themselves rather than discovering themselves, and thus of the larger society as coming to terms with something new.

This means taking Frye's phrase "new *being*" literally, and saying that there were very few female full persons around before feminism got started, in the same sense in which there were very few full-fledged Galilean scientists before the seventeenth century. It was of course *true* in earlier times that women should not have been oppressed, just as it was *true* before Newton said so that gravitational attraction accounted for the movements of the planets.<sup>42</sup> But, despite what Scripture says, truth will not neces-

<sup>42</sup>Pragmatists need not deny that true sentences are always true (as I have, unhappily, suggested in the past that they might — notably in my "Waren die

sarily prevail. “Truth” is not the name of a power which eventually wins through, it is just the nominalization of an approbative adjective. So just as a pragmatist in the philosophy of science cannot use the truth of Galileo’s views as an explanation either of his success at prediction or of his gradually increasing fame, so a pragmatist in moral philosophy cannot use the rightness of the feminist cause as an explanation either of its attraction for contemporary women or of its possible future triumph.<sup>43</sup> For such explanations require the notion of a truth-tracking faculty, one which latches onto antecedently existing truth makers. Truth is ahistorical, but that is not because truths are made true by ahistorical entities.

Frye’s term *new being* may seem even more unnecessarily hyperbolic than McKinnon’s *new voice*, but we pragmatists can take it at face value and realists cannot. As I read Frye, the point is that before feminism began to gather women together into a kind of club, there were female eccentrics like Wollstonecraft and de Gouges, but these were not women who existed *as* women, in MacKinnon’s sense of “as.” They were eccentric because they failed to fit into roles which men had contrived for them to fill, and because there were as yet no other roles. For roles require a community — a web of social expectations and habits which define the role in question. The community may be small, but, like a club as opposed to a convocation, or a new species as opposed to a few

---

Gesetze Newtons schon vor Newton wahr?” *Jahrbuch des Wissenschaftskollegs zu Berlin* [1987]). Stout (*Ethics after Babel*, chap. 11) rightly rebukes me for these suggestions and says that pragmatists should agree with everybody else that “Slavery is absolutely wrong” has always been true — even in periods when this sentence would have sounded crazy to everybody concerned, even the slaves (who hoped that their fellow-tribespeople would return in force and enslave their present masters). All that pragmatists need is the claim that this sentence is not *made* true by something other than the beliefs which we would use to support it — and, in particular, not by something like the Nature of Human Beings.

<sup>43</sup> I have criticized realists’ claims to explain predictive success by truth in part 1 of my *Objectivity, Relativism, and Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). A related point — that the success of a true theory needs just as much historicosociological explanation as the success of a false one — is made by Barry Barnes and other members of the so-called Edinburgh school of sociology of science.

atypical mutant members of an old species, it only exists insofar as it is self-sustaining and self-reproducing.<sup>44</sup>

To sum up for the last time: prophetic feminists like MacKinnon and Frye foresee a new being not only for women but for society. They foresee a society in which the male-female distinction is no longer of much interest. Feminists who are also pragmatists will not see the formation of such a society as the removal of social constructs and the restoration of the way things were always meant to be. They will see it as the production of a better set of social constructs than the ones presently available, and thus as the creation of a new and better sort of human being.

<sup>44</sup>It may seem that the view I am offering is the one which Frye rejects under the name of “the institutional theory of personhood” — the theory that, as she puts it, “‘person’ denotes a social and institutional role and . . . one may be allowed or forbidden to adopt that role” (*The Politics of Reality*, p. 49). She says that this view “must be attractive to the phallist, who would fancy the power to create persons.” But I do not want to say that men have the power to make full persons out of women by an act of grace, in the way in which sovereigns have the power to make nobles out of commoners. On the contrary, I would insist that men could not do this if they tried, for they are as much caught as are women in the linguistic practices which make it hard for women to be full persons. The utopia I foresee, in which these practices are simply forgotten, is not one which could be attained by an act of condescension on the part of men, any more than an absolute monarch could produce an egalitarian utopia by simultaneously ennobling all her subjects.