Macalester Journal of Philosophy

Volume 12
Issue 1 *Spring 2003*

Article 7

3-10-2011

Envisioning A Pragmatist Feminist Ethical Theory

Joshua R. Fogt
Macalester College

Envisaging A Pragmatist Feminist Ethical Theory

Joshua R. Fogt

> ***"There is a contemporary philosophic movement, popularly known as pragmatism, which, discontented with the current separation of theory and practice, knowledge and action, regards thought and the beliefs which proceed from it as themselves modes of action and strives to envisage them in their directive office in conduct."***
>
> ***John Dewey***[1]

Introduction

"No theory can operate in a vacuum," quipped John Dewey in one of his culminating works, simply titled *Ethics* (173). This view pervades both Dewey's pragmatism and moral philosophy as well as sets the tone for his entire ethical project in *Ethics*. It is the dictum and guiding insight of pragmatism—the ethical and philosophic position that finds the truth, meaning, and value of ideas in their applicability and usefulness in the world around us.

Dewey was a prolific writer. His work is so voluminous that it is difficult to discuss the wide range of his philosophical views by examining only one or even a few of his texts. Nonetheless, what all of his writings have in common is the starting point that characterizes his entire philosophic program: we as people are organically and intimately related to each other and to our social environment. Whether it is Dewey's ethics, pragmatism, epistemology, methodology, or philosophy of education, Dewey is interested in identifying and locating humans, knowledge, and ethics in the historical and social contexts of lived experience and human action, not in transcendental, abstract, universalizable *a priori* principles. Dewey's philosophical projects—as is the case with pragmatism generally—stand in sharp contrast to methodologies and principles of moral decision

---

[1] "Body and Mind." *Philosophy and Civilization*. 1963, pp. 299.

making that rely on pre-ordained codes of conduct, monist principles of rightness, or virtues such as benevolence or even care. Instead, he is giving an alternative approach to morality that requires more of the agent than simply judging or calculating the utility of rules, acts, or kinds of acts. In this way, it is an *attitude* or *way of looking at the world* that requires deliberation, thought, discussion, engagement, and social involvement. Dewey's pragmatic ethics is a response to the dominant tradition in modern philosophy that treated morality as pertaining to individuals—about individual rights, duties, actions, or what Dewey refers to as "individual morality"—rather than to relationships, communities and society, or what Dewey refers to as "social morality." He is responding to an ethical tradition that stems from authoritative rule, divine law, and abstract principles. In doing so, he is refocusing morality on the social, and, as the pragmatist he is, thereby making it both more useful and assessed by its usefulness for contemporary society. Dewey's pragmatism leaves dogma for method and the individual for the social, and in doing so he sets out to completely restructure philosophy and ethics.

If this brief discussion of Dewey's ethics sounds familiar at all to contemporary philosophers, it is for good reason. Feminist philosophy resonates largely with the pragmatism. Both value and take as a starting point for theorizing our current socio-economic position and the historical context from which we come. Both discount the philosophic canon's attempt at abstracting value, meaning, and truth from philosophic discourse and making its findings universal. Both start with the idea that we are relational creatures, and that any account of personhood or self that takes the radical individual as primary is flawed or, at least, incomplete. And from these shared critiques of the tradition, both share a grandiose view of the need for social, theoretical, and intellectual change.

However, in their denial of universals and their critique of the canon, pragmatists and feminists also share a difficult challenge in forming their own ethical theories. That is, if feminism and pragmatism deny universal principles from which to

base an ethical system, how can they coherently form an ethical theory that has any normative weight or value? The challenge is a large one, and is the basis for why I write this paper. In it, I wish to pragmatic feminism by examining what pragmatism and feminism share in common and how they can be complimentary to each other in ethical theorizing. I will argue that in spite of the challenge of finding normative weight, a closer interpretation of their shared ethical positions illustrates a methodology that does prescribe certain moral *oughts* and *ought-nots* (and thereby escape the charge that both face that both positions reduce to some unacceptable form of ethical relativism). In its most basic form, my response will be that instead of giving their followers specific universal decision rules for handling individual, social, and political moral dilemmas, feminist and pragmatist theories provide an ethical methodology for a guided morality whose goal is social change.

In the first section of the paper I will discuss what I perceive to be the relationship between pragmatism and feminism. However, before doing so, I will put forth the pragmatism of the Jamesian and Deweyian tradition. I will discuss where it came from and what its intentions were, what it was and what can it be today. I will then discuss these ideas in their relationship to much of contemporary feminist philosophy. I should note that I am not intending to generalize all of feminist philosophy or even say that one interpretation of feminism accurately describes the diversity of thinking encapsulated under the umbrella of "feminism," and I will try as much as possible to refer to what specific discipline of feminism I am referring to when I make such claims.

In the second section I will go on to discuss pragmatist feminist ethical theorizing, what it must contain and what it must try to accomplish. I believe a pragmatist feminist ethical theory must accomplish two main objectives. First, it must not promote any of philosophy's traditional dualisms in any way. In feminist language we say that dualisms often arise out of male gender bias, and so a commitment to not promoting dualisms means that a pragmatist feminist ethical theory also must not be gender biased;

neither male biased as is traditionally the case when discussing the canon, nor, conversely female biased or constructed in a way that flips the dualism around. Second, it must be contextual to capture the notion that every moral situation is unique in its particular circumstances, and that these particulars matter.

If theorizing in this way can be accomplished, it would advance, and hopefully ultimately accomplish, the pragmatic goal of ambiguous social change and moral development (i.e., because pragmatism does not take gender as a starting point or lens through which to see the world, its call for social change is ambiguous in that it needs to improve the lives of all in society), as well as the feminist goal of ending the unjustified domination of exploited, oppressed, dominated, marginalized groups—other Others. Further, theorizing in this way is valuable insofar as it provides a means to feminist theorizing for males who, whether politically progressive or not, feel the need to account for the social injustices and inequalities based on race, gender or other characteristics, but who may not feel like a "valid" member of the feminist movement because of their own gender.

Section I: A background of pragmatism, its relevance to feminism, and feminism's relevance to pragmatism

Before I proceed any further, I think it wise to first describe the pragmatist tradition as spawned by Dewey, William James, Jane Addams, and John Taft, to name a few. Pragmatism is a distinctively American philosophy that was popularized around the turn of the 20th century. It is important to note that it is "distinctively American," as Dewey believed that philosophy was an intellectual reaction to one's social and environmental conditions. Richard Bernstein writes in his book, *John Dewey,* "Every great philosophy is intimately related to the cultural environment from which it arises. It reflects the basic aspirations, perplexities, conflicts of the culture, and it seeks to give new order, coherence, and direction to what is funded in cultural experience" (Bernstein, *Dewey*, 4).

Further, for Dewey and James, pragmatism arose out of a need to philosophically account for human meaning and value in a newly emerging scientific worldview. Whereas most Western philosophy had been primarily conceived of as the quest for objective, categorical truths (i.e., they transcend time and place, they are abstract or *a priori* in form) to justify certain claims about the nature of reality, thoughts and actions; pragmatism instead looks at what truths do exist about the world or our society and examines their significance in our lives. In his essay, "What Pragmatism Means" William James says, "The whole function of philosophy ought to be to be to find out what definite difference it [an idea] will make to you and me, at definite instances in our life, if this world-formula or that world-formula be the true one" (James, *Pragmatism,* 25). What definite difference will an idea make sounds nothing like what is the true nature of this idea, and it is in its look towards the practical outcomes of ideas and thoughts that pragmatism stands clear of the philosophic cannon.

Pragmatism is not dogma or a body of doctrine nor does it have an objective capital T truth as its end. Rather, it is a methodology or attitude in philosophy that finds meaning, value, and truth in the practicality and applicability of ideas. "Pragmatism unstiffens all our theories, limbers them up, and sets each one at work," says James, referring to how ideas and theories are to be tested by seeing how they work in practice (*Pragmatism*, 26). Summing up the pragmatists' view of the role of the philosopher, Bernstein writes, "Given certain truths, the philosopher wants to understand their general significance, their coherence, the ways in which they alter the intellectual landscape, the ways in which they can lead us to envision new possibilities for human life" (Bernstein, *Dewey*, 2).

So, pragmatism denies objective universal truths because, as Cheryl Misak says, "... it abandons concepts which pretend to transcend experience" (Misak, *Truth, Politics, and Morality*, 1). Theories that explain the world around us should stand up to the test of experience. In this way, much of the pragmatic critique of the canon reexamines traditional dichotomies of mind/body,

rationality/sentiment, objective/subjective, individual/social, and sees these not as two separate horns of a competing dilemma, but rather as an organic whole or two ends of the same pole, depending on the dichotomy he is critiquing. Dewey remarks on how these dualistic distinctions have been so indoctrinated in us that we fail to see the reality of the situation as not, in fact, captured or described by them. In referring to the mind-body split made in traditional philosophy, Dewey writes,

> The division in question is so deep-seated that it has affected even our language. We have no word by which to name mind-body in a unified wholeness of operation. For if we said 'human life' few would have recognized that it is precisely the unity of mind and body in action to which we were referring (*Philosophy and Civilization,* 302).

The "mind-body" dualism is so well entrenched in our language and traditional philosophical discourse that it falsely conceptualizes humans as "made up of" two different and distinct kinds of substances, rather than as parts whose actions make up the organic whole of "human life." It is not that either end of the pole—mind or body—has any more *a priori* truth, meaning, or value than the other; this is because, for pragmatists, the truth, meaning, and value of our ideas and theories depend on the way in which they are used, what their practical implications are, and the context of the situation they are being used in. According to pragmatists, the traditional oppositional either-or, up-down way of thinking about dilemmas and dichotomies impedes our complete understanding of a situation by decontextualizing, ahistoricizing, and universalizing situations.

Lastly, pragmatism is deeply culturally embedded and contextual; 'No theory can operate inside of a vacuum.' It takes our lived experience within a given historical socio-economic time and place as the starting point for inquiry. In his essay "The Fixation of Belief," Charles Pierce, the founder of pragmatism, says,

> In truth, there is but one state of mind from which you can 'set out,' namely, the very state of mind in which you actually find yourself at the time you do 'set out' – a state in which you are laden with an immense mass of cognition already formed, of which you cannot divest yourself if you would; and who knows whether, if you could, you would not have made all knowledge impossible to yourself?" (as quoted from Rooney, "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," *Hypatia*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 22).

Even if (contra-Pierce) we could theoretically separate ourselves from our current states of mind, as hypothesized in "original position" theories (e.g., Hobbes' or Rousseau's) or in theories that ask us to choose principles of justice from behind a veil of ignorance *a la* Rawls, in practice we could never separate ourselves as such. There would be no inquiring "self"—neither an actual self nor a conceptually meaningful notion of what it is to be a self—that remained to do the theorizing, generalizing, or principle building.. Insofar as pragmatism is culturally embedded and contextual, actual felt, lived, social and historical experience has great intellectual and moral import as an "immense mass of cognition already formed" by selves or moral agents.

Note that in stressing the importance of experience is not to deny or discount the importance of rationality in our deliberation. Again, flipping the up-down rationality/experience hierarchy inherent in a theory does not resolve the dilemma; instead, it should be understood that no such dichotomy *practically* exists. All our theorizing, thinking, and actions are the result of both our past experiences and rational capacities; they influence each other and are inherently inseparable. As such, the role of reason is not to supplant our experiences, but instead be grounded in our experiences and carried out through practical action. The pragmatist reconstruction of philosophy, therefore, does not value rationality more than experience, the mind more than the body, or any other "disjunct" in a traditional disjunctive pair of alleged opposites more than the other. Rather, the recognition and mutual cultivation of our lived experiences (and

emotions) and our capacity to reason (rationality) are necessary for social change.

As an ethical position, pragmatism is a response to the modern tradition of individual based ethical systems, or "individual morality." Stated differently, it challenges an ethics that takes as primary a conception of the self as an individual ego, and secondary as a social agent. Although important for the time and context from which they arose, these individual-based ethical systems are not applicable today. For example, in her book titled, *Democracy and Social Ethics,* pragmatist Jane Addams writes, "To attain individual morality in an age demanding social morality, to pride one's self on the results of personal effort when the time demands social adjustment, is utterly to fail to apprehend the situation" (3). Dewey agrees with Addams, clarifying

> That morality is being shifted from personal morality to social morality does not mean that morality becomes impersonal and collective; it remains and must remain personal in that social problems have to be faced by individuals, and decisions reach in the forum of individual minds have to be carried into effect by individual agents, who are in turn personally responsible for the consequences of their acts" (*Ethics,* 317).

As is clear from this quote, Dewey does not intend to simply invert the up-down relationship of personal versus social morality; instead, he is concerned with observing what he considers to be an organic relationship between society and the individuals that make it up. "It is a fact that vast networks or relations surrounds the individual, indeed, 'surrounds' is too external a term since every individual lives in the network as a part of it" (*Ethics*, 318). It is merely for practical purposes though that we do not view morality wholly as an individual endeavor, since no moral question can be reduced the individual on one side and the social on the other.

Morality, in dealing with the interactions of people must inherently deal with the social networks of individual people. When morality discounts these relations and focuses solely on the individual, it sets the individual in opposition to society, but

"...individuals cannot be opposed to the relations that they themselves maintain. Only an unreal and impossible being, one completely isolated, disconnected, can be put in opposition to society" (Dewey, *Ethics*, 323). Simply put, "To suppose that social interest is incompatible with concern for one's own health, learning, advancement, power, judgment, etc., is, literally, nonsensical" (Dewey, *Ethics*, 300).

At this point one might ask: Even if it is a more practical understanding of ethics and the self to view individuals as necessarily embedded in networks of relationships, doesn't this shift in the focus of morality inherently imply that we ought or ought not do anything when faced with moral situations--that individuals are absolved of their moral responsibilities to act? Stated differently, if pragmatism assumes a redefinition of ethics or morality in pluralistic and contextual terms, how does it establish as true any normative claims, since it denies the existence or relevance of abstract, transcendental, universal principles? How does pragmatism escape the ethical woes of relativism?

Unfortunately, at first glance there is no clear answer. Unlike Kant's categorical imperative or Mill's greatest happiness for the greatest number dictum, pragmatism has no steadfast decision rule for moral dilemmas. How then does pragmatism justifiably prescribe moral responses without appealing to some universal principle or foundation? The pragmatists' answer may not be pleasing to their critics, as they seem to skirt the question altogether. Dewey answers, "It is not the business of moral theory to provide a *ready-made solution* to large moral perplexities" (emphasis added, *Ethics*, 316). Cheryl Misak agrees, "We must be prepared for underdetermination, and even for questions with no decent answer," (*TPM*, 128). Yet, Misak gives more of an explanation as to why the diversity of our values make it such that no single foundationalism or universal ethic can adequately account for all of morality, "... a systematic theory makes sense of morality only at the expense of losing its grip on how morality *is*," i.e., how morality is *in the real world* (*TPM*, 129). Indeed, we

need plurality in our moral theorizing to help explain the diversity of values we hold and that are constantly vying for our attention in moral decision making. For pragmatists, morality is more than a decision rule, it is a process of thoughtful deliberation and action. It is a complex process maybe, but only because that is what life is.

Pragmatism is a forward thinking philosophy that re-centers the role of philosophy itself around that of social change. Pragmatism is not merely a critique of tradition. It is not a social commentary that is to be discussed and either acknowledged or ignored. Rather, it is at first a commentary on the way things are and an acknowledgment of the responsibility we face for our thoughts and actions in so far as they guide for our future actions. "The question is whether he [or she] is capable of acting differently next time; the practical importance of effecting changes in human character is what makes responsibility important" (Dewey, *Ethics*, 304). I think that pragmatic ethics finds its normative force in the recognition that social change is necessary.

Yet, this too needs to ground out in something other than some vague notion of change and social necessity; 'change for who?,' 'by whom?,' and 'on what grounds is change necessary?' It is here that I think feminism lends a great hand to pragmatism. Anyone familiar with feminism will have already noticed the vast similarities between feminism and pragmatism: denial of universals and false meta-physical dichotomies, the importance of experience, pluralism, and contextualism to name a few already mentioned in this paper. For this reason I do not dwell on these similarities too long in this essay, nor do I simply repeat the previous claims and arguments substituting some version of the noun 'feminism' wherever there was an occurrence of 'pragmatism.' However, I do set out to show respects in which feminism—or key aspects in feminist ethical theory—may add some very important insight and direction to the pragmatist's cause and help them escape the charge of ethical relativism.

Phyllis Rooney says of pragmatism and feminism, "Both are essentially futurist in philosophy. Both believe that humanly

motivated change is possible, that such change matters, and that philosophy has an important role to play in affecting such change" ("Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," *Hypatia*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 18). Yet, although Dewey, James, and Addams talk about the importance of social change, particularly in terms of education reform, they hardly make explicit what type of change is necessary and why. It is unfortunate that they make such vague references to social change since, in doing so, they are basically engaging in a sort of unhelpful, non-pragmatic philosophy that ignores the particulars of situations or a given context. Thankfully, feminism is much more explicit and helpful here.

Although there is a wide diversity of beliefs as to what exactly 'feminism' means and consists of (there are of feminist philosophies, e.g., liberal feminism, socialist feminism, Marxist feminism, ecological or "eco" feminism, Black feminism, existential feminism and psychoanalytic feminism to name the most prominent), it is safe to assert that contemporary feminism in all of its versions is no longer singularly concerned with the oppression of women. . Although gender is the *starting point* or *lens* through which the analysis of and solutions to oppression occurs, contemporary feminism sees strong and important connections between the unjustified oppression of women and the unjustified oppression of other 'Others' (where "Others" refers to groups that are unjustifiably dominated, marginalized, subordinated, subjugated, exploited, or oppresses). This categorization of Others includes people of color, people of minority ethnic backgrounds, the poor, homosexuals, nonhuman animals and, for some (ecofeminists) the nonhuman "natural" environment. So although the task of empowering and enfranchising these other Others is enormous, and although some feminists focus on giving a voice to and empowering one specific group of marginalized people over another (e.g., Black feminist focus on the oppression of African Americans).), all contemporary feminists are unified in their belief that a primary goal of feminism is ending unjustified systems of oppression and domination. One

need look no further than the historic and current unequal distribution of domestic labor or the exclusion of any of the various members of groups of Others from the labor force to see that there currently exist relationships of power and privilege within the West that systematically advantage males, particularly white middle and upper class heterosexual men of Euro-American descent, over females of all races/ethnicities. (It is beyond the scope of this paper to present convincing arguments for the existence of such gendered relationships of power and privilege that characterize patriarchy or other systems of domination in our society today.)

In light of the recognition of unjustified relationships of male power and privilege in contemporary U.S. society—a recognition about social reality that I think a contemporary Deweyian pragmatist would, in fact, focus on what types of social change are necessary to end patriarchal practices and institutions. In doing so, pragmatism can prescribe at least the minimal conditions moral oughts and ought-nots that give ethical theories their normative force: one morally ought to end unjustified practices, systems, and institutions of male power and privilege over women (i.e., patriarchy) and to the extent that one's ethical conduct or ethical decision-promotes such power and privilege, one is doing something ethically wrong. With the philosophical help of feminism and feminist perspectives (except, perhaps, liberal feminism), pragmatism can become grounded in the current patriarchal socio-economic context of today, thereby giving pragmatism a concrete context from which meaningful social and political change can occur. This is because the recognition of an unjustified system of domination implies that this system should not be tolerated. (Why else would we say it was "unjustified?"). It is the dual recognition that patriarchal practices, systems, and institutions exist and are wrong—a social ill that violates social morality—that prompts a feminist pragmatist normative prescription about what to do and not do.

Section II: Pragmatist Feminist Ethical Theorizing

> Ethical theory began among the Greeks as an attempt to find a regulation for the conduct of life with should have a rational basis and purpose instead of being derived from custom... Ethical theory ever since has been singularly hypnotized by the notion that its business is to discover some final end of good or some ultimate supreme law.

So starts John Dewey's chapter, "Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions" from one of his later, yet culminating books on pragmatism, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (161). I believe any discussion of ethics should start by trying to answer the question, "Is a universal ethic possible, and if so, is it desirable?" Karen J. Warren answers this question specifically,

> "Yes, a universal ethic is both possible and desirable, but its universality consists in its particularity and its status as an ethic consists in its ability to provide a necessary (but not also sufficient) condition account of any legitimate theory: the theory must not promote any "isms of domination," include emotional intelligence with rational intelligence, and, when applied, result in what I call "care practices" (Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy,* Cha. 5).

As I have mentioned above, both pragmatism and most feminisms (e.g., not liberal feminism) reject the view that there are abstract, absolute, ahistorical, universal, necessary and sufficient condition principles of ethics upon which an ethical system is and should be based. Insofar as they are both anti-foundational and anti-absolutism, both pragmatism and (non-liberal versions of) feminism are susceptible to the charge that they are ethically relativist—typically the death knell charge of an ethical theory; each must defend their positions as having normative and prescriptive force and as providing *bona fide* ethical theories. One approach some feminist philosophers such as Karen J. Warren have taken is to provide an account of ethics and ethical principles

as providing necessary but not also sufficient conditions for ethical practice; these principles may be universalizable, even universal in some sense; but they are not based on abstract, absolute, or universal principles (in the traditional sense of 'universal' as ahistorical, cross-culturally valid and absolute principles) (Karen J. Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy,* Cha. 5). Utilizing such feminist accounts of ethics, I now show how a synthesis of pragmatism and (non-liberal) feminism, what I will refer to henceforth as "pragmatist feminism" can provide an ethical theory that can be universally applied without appealing to a priori or universal principles (in the traditional sense of 'universal').. I will do so by outlining what I take to be the nature of a pragmatist feminist ethical theory and what it must try to accomplish.

According to Karen J. Warren, "A feminist ethic involves a twofold commitment: to critique male-bias in ethics wherever it occurs and to develop ethics that are not male-biased" (*Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 97). Although herself a particular kind of feminist—an ecofeminist—philosopher, her description of a feminist ethic captures the minimal conditions of a feminist ethic and highlights the role gender plays in providing a starting point or lens through which feminist philosophers view the world. One question that immediately arises, then, is how pragmatism—nondualistic by conception and construction—deals with the gender lens of feminism that seems to create a dualistic way of critiquing and theorizing moral situations? Is the introduction of feminism to pragmatist theorizing antithetical to the pragmatist view of philosophy? I will briefly attempt to resolve these questions before providing an account of feminist pragmatism..

Consider again Warren's description of feminist ethics as involving a twofold commitment to critique and end male-biased (ethical) theories and to create alternative theories that are not male-biased and genuinely liberatory. Although historically Dewey and other pragmatists did not explicitly critique the philosophical canon's theorizing as male-biased, they did see it as inherently flawed. By abstracting and removing universal principles from particular situations and contexts that are relevant

to understanding and applying those principles, traditional canonical ethics dismisses, denies, overlooks or neglects the importance of experience in the process and product of theorizing; its "inherent flaw" is that it provides an incomplete, decontextualized, ahistorical picture of how we actually do and should conduct our lives. Whether or not canonical philosophy is male-biased was not a concern of Dewey's; to him it was just an incomplete way of looking at things. So, what a feminist perspective adds to a Deweyan ethic is the explicit recognition of the historic association, at least in Western societies, of men with an ideal of detached rationality and of women with emotion and sentiment *and* the ways this historical (contingent) connection has perpetuated (and continues to perpetuate) theories that are male-biased because of this inappropriate abstraction and excessive exaggeration of the role of reason and rationality in ethics, ethical theory, and ethical decision-making. Were Dewey (or any turn-of-the-century pragmatists) to recognize this historical and cultural association and the practical consequences of ethical theories that utilize these associations in their theories and theorizing, I think he would agree that traditional ethical theories need a pluralist cast t that takes account of both rationality and sentiment, abstraction and concrete experience, in ethical theories; theories that do not would therefore be criticized for their failure to create an acceptable "social morality."

In addressing the second commitment Warren mentioned, I think Dewey would again agree that we need to construct an ethical theory that does not promote male-bias, although he probably would have insisted that the resulting ethical theory must not promote one side of a dualism over another. . So, although feminists like Warren and pragmatists like Dewey state rhetorically different positions they are best understood as speaking different dialects of the same language, instead of completely different languages altogether. Since Dewey was against all flawed and incomplete theories, he would not promote any theory that was female-biased instead of male-bias; his main concern was in constructing a theory that was a complete picture

of how all people in a society could operate, not a theory that privileges one gender, race, or class over another.

What, then, would this new hybrid—what I am calling pragmatist feminism—look like as an ethical theory? Pragmatist feminist ethical theorizing must be contextual (historically, culturally, and conceptually) and pluralist (not monist). This is in contrast with traditional, abstract ways of theorizing about moral propositions that ignore the particulars of the situation for fear that they muddy the waters discussion. Context (e.g., socioeconomic, historical, and cultural) matters for the pragmatist feminist because of the belief that every moral situation is unique.

For Warren, this uniqueness is indelibly and irrevocably given by the particularities of experience. This uniqueness is what she means when she says that the universality of universal principles lies in their "particularity" (uniqueness), and that every "universal" principle inherits a "social world " that gives the principle meaning (Warren, *Ecofeminist Philosophy*, Ch. 5).I return to this point later. For now, suffice it to say that Warren understands the universal (e.g., love, obligation, sexism) through the experience of particularities (e.g., the individuals we love, the obligations we have, the sexism we experience) *and* we experience the unique particulars of our lives (e.g., loving someone, meeting our obligations in a particular case, experiencing sexist treatment) through an understanding of the universal. (e.g., love, obligation, sexism).The universal and particular presuppose one another.

Similarly, for Dewey, this uniqueness is indelibly and irrevocably given by the actual situations and experiences of our lives. Although many similar moral dilemmas present themselves to us throughout our lives, for Dewey no two situations are identical; they take place among different unique individuals at different and unique periods of time. If no two situations are the same, then the particulars of any given situation help shape the experience of the situation and need to be reflected in and accounted for in the generalizations that constitute the ethical principles that govern such situations. Dewey says,

> The blunt assertion that every moral situation is a unique situation having its own irreplaceable good may seem not merely blunt but preposterous. For the established tradition teaches that it is precisely the irregularity of special cases which makes necessary the guidance of conduct by universals, and that the essences of virtuous disposition is willingness to subordinate ever particular case to adjudication by a fixed principle. It would then follow that submission of a generic end and law to determination by the concrete situation entails complete confusion and unrestrained licentiousness. Let us, however, follow the pragmatic rule, and in order to determine the meaning of the idea ask for its consequences. Then it surprisingly turns out that the primary significance of the unique and morally ultimate character of the concrete situation is to transfer weight and burden of morality to intelligence. It does not destroy responsibility; it only locates it ("Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions," 163-4).

As Dewey points out in the quote above, the recognition that every moral situation is unique is pragmatic in that examining the particulars of the situation helps us understand, assume, or assign moral responsibility for out social conduct. It "helps" by making the agent judge which particulars are important, which count and should be considered in deliberation, and which are irrelevant or nonfactors. It assigns responsibility to the agent to sift through and isolate these particulars and to determine what their practical implications are.

Within a given context then, the particulars of the situation and of the agents help in determining where moral responsibility lies. These particulars include who is involved both implicitly and explicitly, and the historic and socio-economic positions of the moral agents involved. This process is what the pragmatists refer to as "inquiry;" inquiry would play a large role in pragmatist feminist theorizing. Continuing with the previous passage from Dewey describes this process of inquiry nicely,

> A moral situation is one in which judgment and choice are required antecedently to overt action. The practical meaning

> of the situation – that is to say the action needed to satisfy it – is not self-evident. It has to be searched for. There are conflicting desires and alternative apparent goods. What is needed is to find the right course of action, the right good. Hence, inquiry is exacted: observation of the detailed makeup of the situation; analysis into its diverse factors; clarification of what is obscure, discounting the more insistent and vivid traits; tracing the consequences of the various modes of action that suggest themselves; regarding the decision reached as hypothetical and tentative until the anticipated or supposed consequences which led to its adoption have been squared with actual consequences. This inquiry is intelligence ("Reconstruction in Moral Conceptions," 163-4).

Inquiry is the process that examines all the moral criteria involved, whether it be issues of justice, rights, duties, or other moral claims of others. It is accomplished by sifting through the plurality of views from which a situation can be seen and the plurality of values that may apply.

Once the situation is recognized and the individual has decided which particulars and moral claims count, morality becomes a matter of deliberation leading to informed action. In this deliberation intelligence is paramount. By intelligence I do not mean strictly, primarily, or solely rational or logical intelligence, although both are part of it. As Karen Warren argues, referencing Daniel Goleman's book, *Emotional Intelligence,* and the work of neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (author of *Descartes' Error)*, emotional intelligence and a sympathetic disposition are integral to this deliberation. The recent work on emotional intelligence supports this: People who have lost the capacity for emotional responses due to neurological impairments were incapable of moral (or, practical) reasoning, although they could still make mathematical calculations and do deductive reasoning. Warren says that, "... the absence of emotional intelligence does not just produce faulty moral reasoning, it produces no moral reasoning at all" (*Ecofeminist Philosophy*, 110). Emotions influence rationality and visa versa; emotions and reason are not two completely separate human capacities but interconnected

forms of intelligence. Intelligence, meaning a synthesis of the rational and emotional intelligences, is what is to guide us through our "inquiry"—the moral decision-making process.

Pragmatist feminist ethical theorizing then must have some element of contextualism and pluralism and must be guided by both emotional and rational intelligence. It is not the purpose of this paper to construct what this theorizing might look like; rather I am concerned with setting the groundwork for such theorizing. As such, I now turn to a consideration of what this theorizing must try to accomplish that is not accomplished by traditional ethical theories.

I think the most important thing pragmatist feminist theorizing is trying to accomplish is a universalizable ethic that is a viable alternative to either ethical absolutism or ethical relativism. Consider again Warren's views (expressed earlier in this section of the essay) on the relationship between particularity and universality. (I refer to Warren's feminism, since her brand of feminism is similar in rhetoric, intent, and content to Dewey's brand of pragmatism. In fact, in a personal conversation recently Warren said that she suspected her feminism was a form of pragmatism.) In her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy,* Warren discusses the viability of a universalizable, pluralistic, and contextual ethic by introducing the idea of situated universalism. She says,

> While I defend the universality of moral principles, I argue that their *universality lies in their particularity* – in their giving expression to morally significant values (e.g., rights, duties, utility, care, appropriate trust, and friendship) whose meaning and application are themselves grounded in the particularities and contingencies of real people's lives, in real historical and material circumstances. These are not principles that are 'carved in stone' and absolute or universal in the sense of never overridable (emphasis added, *Ecofeminist Philosophy,* 89).

Warren goes on to claim that the universality of moral principles "does not consist in their being abstract, ahistorical, transcendental, essentialist principles arrived at through reason alone" (113). According to the position she calls situated universalism, "...every situation and theory carries with it a social world" (114). This is akin to Dewey's statement that no theory operating inside of a vacuum.

Like Dewey, Warren breaks down the dualism we create by framing our situations in terms of general versus particular, "The particular and the general presuppose each other: We see the general in the particular and the particular in the general" (114). In trying to accomplish a universalizable ethic, Warren's "situated universalism" helps us make sense of the moral themes that frequent our everyday lives. They do so by helping us see what meaning and value they have in our own given context, while at the same time our own particular situation helps us make sense and find meaning and value in the 'universal' principles. Putting these ideas to work is the type of pluralistic theorizing pragmatist feminist theorizing must try to accomplish.

If the views I have presented about the nature and objectives of pragmatist feminism are true or even plausible, then pragmatic feminism is a philosophical position that promises to satisfy the second commitment of feminist ethical theorizing: constructing theories that are no longer male biased. If our theories capture this fuller picture of morality that pragmatic feminism offers, ultimately the various sorts of objectionable biases of traditional ethical theories will be eliminated. Insofar as this theorizing produces more of a method than a principle for morality, its universalizability consists in its applicability across cultural, societal, religious, or political boundaries. Pragmatist feminist theorizing provides us with an attitude for perceiving and carrying out moral decision making in the real, felt, lived experiences of our everyday lives. It establishes its form of contextual ethical theorizing as a viable, attractive alternative to both ethical absolutism and ethical relativism.

Conclusion

According to Jane Duran, "If pragmatism is in some sense a way of life–a set of practices embodied in a way of life, not divorced from it–the same may be said of feminism," ("The Intersection of Pragmatism and Feminism," *Hypatia*, Vol. 8, No. 2, 166). In this paper I have tried to show how a Deweyian interpretation of pragmatism is or could be relevant to feminism because of its similarities in the way in which it sees and theorizes about the world around us. I have also tried to show how (a non-liberal) feminism is or could be relevant to pragmatism because of the focus and direction it can give it as well as embedding it in the context of today's society. I then set the groundwork for pragmatist feminist theorizing by discussing what such theorizing must be and what it must try to accomplish.

I would like to end this essay autobiographically where it began—by saying a little more about my own motivation for writing this essay. Although I have tried to argue for a pragmatic feminism on philosophic, I think the real attraction of some form of pragmatist feminism as a way of ethical theorizing is that it more accurately captures how we intuitively handle moral situations, or the ways common sense fittingly guides our moral decision-making. Granted, there are or may be times when we need no informed deliberation or process of inquiry into the particulars of a moral situation to determine whether an act or type of conduct is right or wrong. Granted, there are or may be times when it is best to follow some deontological rule, or some teleological decision process. Nonetheless, there are always exceptions and counterexamples that cannot be accounted for through a strict following of either of these more traditional approaches. This is because moral situations are unique: there are times when the particulars of the situation are such that we don't feel like we should follow a familiar or traditional moral rule or strictly adhere to a pre-established example of a moral duty or obligation in the situation. This is the heart of pluralism, that when it comes down to real life, we need ethical theorizing that takes into account the diversity of our values, experiences, and relationships we have.

My motivation in writing this essay, then, was to start modeling an ethical theory that is accessible to all people, not just men and not just women. This raised an issue I feel most troubled by as a male philosopher who wants to call himself a feminist: Where do male theorists fit in and what contributions may male theorists make to feminist philosophy and theorizing?. The feminist theorizing that seems to simply reverse the up-down nature of theorizing by changing the power structure to bias women and 'others' instead of men tends to exclude men from participation in feminist discourse, regardless of how liberal or progressive those men may be. This exclusion of men is something I think is detrimental to the feminist project as a whole. There are certainly feminists who will grant me the label 'feminist,' as well as some who will not. But the pragmatist in me refuses to accept a mere label. My pragmatism requires that I act in accord with the ideas I have promoted in this essay. I hope that this synthesis of ethical theorizing can provide the groundwork for male philosophers like myself to carry out feminist theories in our everyday lives, to actually *be* a feminist and not simply write like one. If this can be accomplished, then we truly are on the path to the forward-looking social change that is central to both pragmatism and feminism.

References

Addams, Jane. *Democracy and Social Ethics*. New York: The Macmillan Company, 1907.

Bernstein, Richard J. *John Dewey*. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966.

Damasio, Antonio. *Descartes' Error*. New York: Putnam, 1994.

Dewey, John. *Ethics,* as reprinted in *The Later Works, 1925-1953, Volume 7: 1932*. Editor: Jo Ann Boydston. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois Press, 1985.

Dewey, John. *Philosophy and Civilization.* New York: Capricorn Books, 1963.

Dewey, John. *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1948.

James, William. *Pragmatism.* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1991.

Misak, Cheryl. *Truth, Politics, and Morality: Pragmatism and Deliberation*. London: Routledge , 2000.

Rooney, Phyllis. "Feminist-Pragmatist Revisionings of Reason, Knowledge, and Philosophy," *Hypatia*, Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1993, pp. 15-37.

Warren, Karen J. *Ecofeminist Philosophy: A Western Perspective of What it is and Why it Matters*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000.