In Defense of Experience

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This article studies our philosophical understanding of experience in order to question the current political and theoretical dismissal of experiential accounts in feminist theory. The focus is on Joan Scott’s critique of experience, but the philosophical issues animating the discussion go beyond Scott’s work and concern the future of feminist theory and politics more generally. I ask what it means for feminist theory to redefine experience as a linguistic event the way Scott suggests. I attempt to demonstrate that the consequences that she draws from such a theoretical move are both philosophically and politically problematic. A critical study of the evidence of experience does not have to imply metaphysical or epistemological foundationalism, as Scott claims, but on the contrary, such a study is indispensable for challenging them. We must hold onto experience as an important resource for contesting sexist discourses and oppressive conceptual schemas.

Joan Scott’s important essay “The Evidence of Experience,” first published in Critical Inquiry in 1991, has arguably been one of the most influential contributions to the dismissal of first-person accounts of experience in feminist theory and politics in recent decades (Scott 1991). Even though her critique of the evidence of experience was made in the context of historiography, the philosophical presuppositions as well as the political and methodological consequences of her argument have been widely adopted in feminist theory. Appealing to one’s experience as evidence for one’s theoretical or political claims has become theoretically unsophisticated at best, if not completely illegitimate in feminist debates.

My aim in this paper is not to deny the significance of Scott’s essay—it produced a timely shift in feminist theory away from a narrow focus on the issues of identity and victimization to a broader study of their constitutive conditions. However, in our current predicament, characterized by many as postfeminist, I contend that it has become necessary to reassess the philosophical coherence of Scott’s argument and, crucially, its broader implications for the methodology of gender theory and for the future of feminist politics.

The philosophical issues motivating my critique of Scott’s essay thus go beyond the meaning of her work and concern feminist theory and politics more generally. I
ask what it means for feminist theory and politics to redefine experience as a linguistic event the way Scott suggests. I want to demonstrate that the consequences that she draws from such a theoretical move are both philosophically and politically problematic. A critical study of the evidence of experience—which experience is understood in its traditional philosophical meaning as a subjective apprehension of reality—does not have to imply metaphysical or epistemological foundationalism as Scott claims, but is indispensable for challenging them. We must hold onto the evidence of experience as an important resource for contesting sexist discourses and oppressive conceptual schemas.

My argument proceeds in four stages. First, I will present a critical explication of Scott's position. In the second part, I will turn to John McDowell's account of experience in an attempt to understand what Scott means when she insists on the discursive nature of experience. In the third part, I will consider the political consequences of my epistemological and ontological defense of experience. Finally, I will conclude by briefly reflecting on the methodology of feminist theory.

WORDS AND THINGS

The acute political problem with the idea of a collective female experience was its exclusivity: white, middle-class feminists considered their experience the prototypical female experience that defines feminism and its central goals. For a movement that fought precisely against exclusion—women's exclusion—such a shortcoming was fatal. The idea of a common female experience was soon attacked for other philosophical and theoretical reasons too, as modes of thought associated with postmodernism and poststructuralism gained dominance in academic feminist theory in the 1980s. The contention was that female experience, no matter how inclusive or broadly defined, was a theoretically flawed starting point for feminism, because it was constructed through the very same oppressive power relations that feminists wanted to challenge and resist. Feminist theorists, inspired by poststructuralist insights into the constitutive role of discourse, advocated the need to reorient feminist theory toward an analysis of discourses and their political effects and away from all fixed and naturalized identities.

Scott's essay was not only an argument for the importance of analyzing discourses in order to understand how they position subjects and produce their experiences, however. She also advocated an eradication of women's subjective or personal accounts of their experiences from feminist analyses. She notes that if experience was not so deeply imbricated in our narratives, we should abandon the notion altogether (Scott 1992, 37). She accuses feminist projects intended to make the common experiences of women visible of being exceedingly naïve: they preclude analysis of the workings of the patriarchal representational system and its historicity and reproduce instead its oppressive terms. They also preclude inquiry into processes of subject-construction: appealing to experience as uncontestable evidence and as an originary point of explanation means taking as self-evident the identities of those whose
experience is being documented. Female experience thus becomes the ontological foundation of feminist identity, politics, and history while questions about the discursively constructed nature of experience are ignored (25). According to Scott, “it is not individuals who have experience, but subjects who are constituted through experience” (25–26). Hence, the feminist challenge is to redefine experience completely: it must be understood as a discursive effect or a linguistic event. A prediscursive conception of experience is distorted because “it operates within an ideological construction that not only makes individuals the starting point of knowledge, but that also naturalizes categories such as man, woman, black, white, heterosexual, or homosexual by treating them as given characteristics of individuals” (27).

Scott’s argument relies on three distinct philosophical claims concerning experience. The first one is ontological: she denies “a separation between experience and language” and insists on the discursive nature of experience (Scott 1992, 34, 37). Experience is primarily a discursive process of subject-construction and only secondarily and erroneously something the subject claims to have. Second, she claims that the discourses constitutive of experience are always ideological: they reflect oppressive power relations and therefore naturalize normative categories such as man, woman, white, black, heterosexual, homosexual. These two ontological claims about the relationship between experience and language imply an epistemological claim. Experience cannot function either as evidence or as a starting point for feminist analysis because of its derivative and ideological status: the singular character of experience and its first-person perspective must be eradicated in feminist methodology. Scott thus denies the usefulness of documenting women’s subjective experiences as evidence for feminist theoretical claims and urges us to turn instead to the history of concepts as providing “the evidence by which experience can be grasped” (37).

Scott’s ontological position could be labeled nominalist, although it is unclear what kind of nominalist she in fact is. The first source of confusion is that Scott does not seem to differentiate clearly between identity and experience. She notes that “identity is tied to notions of experience” (Scott 1992, 33) and then proceeds, in my view, to conflate them. Although it is fairly uncontroversial to claim that identity categories such as woman or homosexual are discursively constructed (I think this is a truism), it is a significantly different philosophical claim to hold that experience is so constructed. Scott is thus not only claiming that social identities and categories are discursively constructed, but also that the experiences of the individuals belonging to those categories are too.

She argues that we cannot assume a direct correspondence between words and things and calls such an erroneous belief the referential conception of language. We must move away from modes of thinking that “naturalize ‘experience’ through a belief in the unmediated relationship between words and things” (Scott 1992, 36). The problem with such a claim is that we cannot completely sever the relationship between words and things either; otherwise, the philosophical problem of discursive idealism emerges—we become trapped inside a purely discursive realm with no traction on reality. After the linguistic turn in philosophy, it has become fairly uncontroversial to argue that certain discourses and concepts make certain kinds of
experiences possible. We were not able to understand the concept of a universal political right or encounter its manifestations or violations in our everyday reality until the Early Modern Age, for example. However, even if we accept such a constitutive view of language, there seem to be a number of entities in our experiential reality that are not constituted by language: stars, trees, and grass seem to be out there in the world irrespective of how we name them. Hence, even though we can identify something as something only by using linguistically mediated conceptual determinations, our linguistic practices do not create the world, but must be capable of interacting with the things that we speak about. It must be possible to experience something new, something that we simply cannot name, or to experience something in a new way. Such unanticipated events force us to change our linguistic practices, which would otherwise remain completely static. To attempt to explain their dynamic character by simply stating that discourses are “contextual, contested, and contingent” is no explanation at all, but only a reformulation of the initial problem.

For feminist theory, a dynamic understanding of the relationship between experience and language seems particularly important because feminism is essentially concerned with societal and conceptual change. We must be able to account philosophically for the fact that the discourses and the conceptual schemas that we use to make sense of the world can be modified through political action. The feminist criticism of Scott’s position has therefore usually taken the form of denying her first ontological premise that experience could be understood as linguistic through and through. Feminist thinkers appropriating phenomenology, such as Sonia Kruks, for example, have strongly argued that Scott’s attempt to account for experience in terms of discursivity alone poses serious problems for feminist theory (Kruks 2001).

Kruks wants to ground female experience in the female body, and she urges us to acknowledge the significance that nonlinguistic, embodied experiences such as pain must have in feminist theory. She draws on her own experience of working as a volunteer at a battered women’s shelter and argues that embodied experience forms an affective basis for solidarity among women: there is a direct experience of affinity among women that is possible because I can recognize as mine the embodied experiences of another woman, even while knowing that she and I are in other ways very different (Kruks 2001, 152, 166–67). Certain generalities of feminine embodiment thus enable us to feel connections with the suffering of other women, and such connections can potentially become the bases for forms of respectful solidarity among otherwise different women.

Although I am sympathetic to the attempts to appropriate phenomenology for the retrieval of experience in feminist theory, I agree with Scott in that we cannot go back to treating female experience as an irreducible given the way Kruks does. It is my contention that feminist theory must “retrieve experience,” but this cannot mean returning to a prediscursive female experience grounded in the commonalities of women’s embodiment. I will therefore adopt here a philosophical strategy that differs from that of most of Scott’s feminist critics. I will begin by assuming that Scott’s ontological claim about the discursive character of experience is valid. I will then demonstrate that following this idea through does not warrant the epistemological or
political dismissal of women's first-person experience that Scott advocates, but that such an epistemological argument becomes internally incoherent.

In order to proceed, we have to begin by trying to understand what it actually means to hold that experience is discursive through and through. As I noted at the outset, Scott's focus in her essay is on historiography, and her objective is not to provide answers for metaphysical problems properly belonging to the philosophy of mind and language. Her philosophical claims about experience are thus brief and vague. However, it is my contention that in order to draw the epistemological, methodological, and political consequences for feminist theory that she draws, it is imperative to understand what we are in fact claiming when we say that experiences are discursive. I will therefore provide a brief philosophical explication of such a position by turning to John McDowell. His account of experience in *Mind and World* (1994) is arguably the most cogent contemporary argument to demonstrate that experiences are conceptual down to their most basic level. My aim is not to engage in a philosophical assessment of McDowell's position, however. I will not take a stance on whether McDowell is right about the nature of experience because that is not what is at stake in my argument. My objective is merely to appropriate his position and to draw out its epistemological implications in order to provide a philosophically coherent explication of Scott's understanding of experience that does not reduce it to discursive idealism. In other words, I want to show that even given the philosophically best possible reading of her position, her dismissal of the epistemic value of first-person experiential accounts is unwarranted.

**RATIONAL ANIMALS, COGNITIVE DISSONANCE, AND POLITICAL CHANGE**

For McDowell, the idea that experience is linguistic through and through means denying that there could be some basic level of nonconceptual consciousness, a primary, sensory experience that simply captures the world as it is given to us. Rather, all sensory experience already has conceptual content because concepts or conceptual schemas necessarily mediate the relation between us and the world. Conceptual capacities are already at work in the perceptual experiences themselves and not only in the second-order conceptual judgments justified by some bare perceptual impressions. It is only by virtue of our conceptual schemas that the world and the self can become objects of experience at all.

When I identify colors, for example, such identification can take place only against a conceptual background that ensures that I understand colors as potential properties of things. The same holds true for forms of inner experience—experiences that have no identifiable object in the external world, such as the experience of pain. As Kruks, for example, emphasizes, pain is often understood as a paradigmatic example of an experience with no conceptual content or structure. McDowell would insist, however, that for a subject to have an experience of pain, a certain kind of conceptual understanding of what it means to be in pain is required. Although pain is essentially a passive occurrence for the subject, his or her conceptual capacities are
nevertheless drawn into operation. The subject must understand being in pain as a particular case of a more general state of affairs—someone's being in pain (McDowell 1994, 37–38). In other words, she or he must understand that the pain is not exclusively tied to a first-person and present-tense mode, but that being in pain is something that can happen to someone else or to oneself at a different time.

McDowell's primary interest is not in understanding the nature of experience, however. Rather, his interest is epistemological: how empirical knowledge is possible. How can experience rationally constrain and justify our beliefs and thoughts? In answering this question, he attempts to refute two diametrically opposing positions, which he labels “the myth of the given” and “coherentism.” He borrows Wilfried Sellars's famous notion “the myth of the given” (see Sellars 1997) to denote the view that there is a primary level of experience that is nonconceptual, and he acknowledges the epistemological appeal of such a view: if we assume that there are nonconceptual impacts or bits of experiential intake impinging on us from outside the realm of thought, then this allows us to acknowledge an external constraint on our conceptual game, a constraint that moreover seems to provide the grounding for our empirical beliefs and judgments. However, McDowell argues that unfortunately, the myth of the given is precisely that—a myth; it can provide no constraints or grounding for anything.

Empirical knowledge becomes possible only if perceptions and judgments can be rationally connected: a bare presence cannot be the ground of anything. If we conceive experience in terms of impacts on sensibility that occur outside the sphere of concepts, then we cannot appeal to this nonconceptual experience to justify conceptual judgments or beliefs. “The space of reasons does not extend further than the space of concepts, to take in a bare reception of the Given” (McDowell 1994, 14). In other words, if our conceptual, empirical judgments are based on the content of our experience and these reason-constituting relations are genuinely recognizable as reason-constituting, then we cannot confine thinking within a boundary across which the relations are supposed to hold. The relations themselves must be able to come under rational scrutiny (53). Experiences cannot provide reasons for judgments if they are outside the reach of rational inquiry: if experiences are nonconceptual, they cannot be what thoughts are rationally based on.

McDowell also denies the coherentist upshot of this argument, however, which he attributes to Donald Davidson (McDowell 1994, 14). Davidson accepts the above argument and then simply concludes that experience can never count as a reason for holding a belief: “nothing can count as reason for holding a belief except another belief” (see Davidson 1986, 310). Davidson thus denies experience any justificatory role in knowledge because we simply have no convincing way to credit ourselves with empirical knowledge. He advocates a coherence theory of truth and knowledge, which confines knowledge to the sphere of thought. Davidson, like Scott, thus seems to believe that the myth of the given can be avoided only by denying that experience has any epistemological validity.

For McDowell, such a conclusion is intolerable. There must be some external constraint on our thought that warrants its bearing on objective reality: it cannot be
reduced to “frictionless spinning in a void” (McDowell 1994, 11). Although he wants to refute the myth of the given—the view that truth and knowledge must depend on rational relations to something outside the conceptual realm—he also insists that knowledge cannot degenerate into moves in a self-contained game. Experience must play a role as a legitimate source of knowledge.

McDowell’s solution is to insist that our conceptual capacities are also drawn on when we perceive the world: the experiential intake is not a bare getting of an extra-conceptual given, but a kind of occurrence that already has conceptual content. When we trace the ground for an empirical judgment, the last step takes us to experience. But experiences already have conceptual content, so this last step does not take us outside the space of concepts. When one forms a judgment on the basis of experience, one does not have to accomplish an impossible leap from nonconceptual data to conceptual content. However, experience does take us to something in which our sensibility or passive receptivity is operative, so we need not worry that there is no external constraint on our conceptual games or that they have no bearing on the world at all. Experience in a crucial respect is passive: in experience we find ourselves saddled with content that is not of our choosing.

McDowell and Scott would thus both hold that experience cannot be epistemologically foundational in the sense of being an originary, nonconceptual given that language would only secondarily reflect. However, McDowell demonstrates that the conceptual character of experience does not warrant Scott’s epistemological claim, namely, that the evidence of experience becomes insignificant. It is exactly because experience is conceptual, down to its very basic level, that the claim it makes is epistemologically valid: because experience is conceptual, it can provide the traction on reality that warrants empirical knowledge. Hence, from the premise that experiences are constituted through discourse, it does not follow that women’s experiential accounts of the world are insignificant or necessarily false. We can obviously be mistaken at times—the evidence of experience is not epistemically infallible—but it is nevertheless capable of being veridical.

At this stage we can perhaps anticipate a critical rejoinder. Scott is not only claiming that experience is discursive, she is also claiming that the discourses that constitute it are ideological. In other words, even if experience were able to tell us something veridical about the world out there, we are still left with the problem that what it tells us only reflects the dominant ideological constructions of reality. Scott might be happy to grant that in the current patriarchal ideological framework the evidence provided by women’s experiences seems veridical, but that is precisely because experience and discourse are necessarily coextensive. Experience is constructed so that it corresponds to the dominant criteria of verification: it reflects oppressive discourses and power relations. Hence, what we would really need to ask is how experience can provide evidence that contests the dominant conceptual schemas. We would have to ask McDowell, for example, how, exactly, can experience bear critically on our accepted schemas if it is entirely conceptual? It would seem that experience can only draw into operation ideological concepts that we already have. But how can judgments ever become modified by experience if experience is only the
result of the passive operation of the same concepts that are already linked into judg-
ments?

This problem seems to bring us back to the phenomenological position. In order
to account for cognitive dissonance and political change, we must argue, similar to
the feminist phenomenologists critical of Scott’s position, that experience and dis-
course are not coextensive and that experience therefore provides a legitimate source
of challenging sexist discourses and oppressive conceptual schemas. In order to
account for revisions in our stock of inherited judgments, it seems that we have to
acknowledge at least a minimal nonconceptual aspect of experience, even if we
accept that experience can never be completely independent of language.

For McDowell, it makes no sense to try to argue that the content of experience is
partly nonconceptual, however, as this is just another version of the myth of the
given. He argues against the attempts to do so by considering the example of recog-
nizing colors. The proponents of the partial view would argue that the level of detail
that the contents of experience have can never be captured by the concepts at the
subject’s disposal. In other words, our repertoire of color concepts, for example, is
cooarser in grain than our abilities to discriminate shades, and therefore is unable to
capture the fine detail of color experience. Words and phrases such as “red,” “green,”
or “burnt sienna” express concepts of bands on the spectrum, whereas color experi-
ence can present properties that correspond to something more like lines on the spec-
trum with no discernible width. A purely conceptual account of experience, such as
McDowell’s, thus does not seem to allow for the fact that I could recognize a com-
pletely new shade that would contest the existing schemas of color, or that such
experience could lead me to recognize the ways that the current discourses/schemas
distort and impoverish my experience.

McDowell responds by insisting that a person’s ability to embrace colors within
her conceptual thinking should not be restricted to predetermined concepts express-
ible by words like “red,” “green,” or “burnt sienna.” It can also include demonstrative
concepts such as “that shade” or “that shade that I saw yesterday,” for example. These
concepts are importantly recognitional, meaning that they can be rationally inte-
grated into our thoughts and judgments, but not in a predetermined way. McDowell
notes that thoughts are not always capable of receiving an overt expression that fully
determines their content, but that does not mean that they are nonconceptual
(McDowell 1994, 56–58). As we saw above, he insists that perceptual content has to
be conceptual in order to function as evidence for our judgments in any way—
whether to confirm them or to contest them. If the perceptual content were not con-
ceptually organized in any way—if I did not recognize the perceptual content as a
shade of color that was in some way different from the shades that I am currently able
to name with my repertoire of words—it could not challenge or contest the existing
schema of color.

The basic conceptual level of experience is thus so rudimentary and indeterminate
that it can be rationally linked with a variety of judgments and articulations. Our
language games are also potentially infinitely varied, allowing for the constant con-
testation, modification, and transformation of our judgments, beliefs, and worldviews.
The same conceptual capacities that are in operation in perceptions are exercised in judgments, and that requires them being rationally linked into a whole system of concepts and conceptions—an encompassing conceptual schema or a worldview. The linguistic and cultural tradition into which human beings are first initiated serves as a primary source of this conceptual schema, “a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what” (McDowell 1994, 126). However, this tradition must be subject to reflective modification by each generation that inherits it. McDowell goes so far as to state that “a standing obligation to engage in critical reflection is itself part of the inheritance” (126). We are continually engaged in a process of having to negotiate our conceptual schemas in light of our experiences. Whether we realize it or not, we are persistently adjusting our thinking to our experience and vice versa.

Because Scott denies the epistemological and political significance of the evidence of experience, she has problems acknowledging women’s role in the renewal and transformation of the cultural and linguistic tradition in which they find themselves. She fails to recognize the continual negotiation and adjustment of thought to experience and experience to thought that must characterize the dynamism of cultural traditions. Even though women’s sexual experiences, for example, are constructed through patriarchal discourses, these experiences are never wholly derivative of or reducible to them. It is possible, for example, that women have, if not a fully articulated feminist critique of their situation, at least a sense of disorientation and dissatisfaction with the dominant cultural and linguistic representations of their experience. It is exactly this dissatisfaction, this gap between their personal experiential accounts and the dominant cultural representations, that can generate critique as well as create new discourses capable of contesting and contradicting the old ones.

Feminist Theory and Practice

Scott’s aim is not to engage in debates in the philosophy of mind, but neither is it to solve epistemological questions about the legitimacy of empirical knowledge. If her essay has broader implications for feminist theory beyond feminist historiography, these implications must concern feminist politics. Whether it was her intention, her essay has been read not only as a refutation of identity politics, but as a denial of the importance of any experiential accounts in feminist politics.

I want to make clear at the outset that in defending the political importance of experience here, I am not advocating a return to forms of identity politics based on a shared experience of a naturalized identity. Scott and numerous other poststructuralist feminists have been right to challenge such a project. My aim is not to retrieve the political importance of experience in order to group people together on such a basis. My first point is more fundamental: the political importance of the evidence of experience lies in its power to motivate us to demand social change irrespective of whether our own experience confirms or coincides with it. In other words, my worry is that the politically troubling consequence of denying experience as a basis for
identity politics is its unwarranted extension to all forms of feminist politics: the
wholesale refusal to acknowledge that women’s personal accounts of experience have
any political relevance. First-person accounts of experience are indispensable, not
only for a politics of interest based on a shared identity, but for a politics of solidarity
based on recognition and sympathy. The evidence of experience crucially makes col-
lective political action possible by allowing us not only to identify with other people,
but to dis-identify from the singularity of our own position.

Consider the key feminist issue of rape, for example. I am not suggesting that the
evidence of experience would warrant the attempt to find commonalities in women’s
embodied experiences in order to identify some essential core of female identity:
women are essentially beings who can be raped, for example. The experiential evi-
dence of rape should nevertheless raise some critical realization or awareness in me.
It should prompt me to question the prevailing gender relations and attitudes to sex,
and it should motivate me to act politically by supporting date rape awareness cam-
paigns or rape crisis centers, for example. Even if most of the accounts that women
give of their experiences were epistemologically suspect, ideologically produced, and
made us cringe, they are still the only rationale on the basis of which we can make
radical feminist political demands and contest sexist political arrangements and social
practices. A history of concepts alone will not provide any motivation for radical pol-
itics that would attempt to instigate profound social transformation. It is only when
we understand how these concepts function politically in the lives of real people—
how they restrict, oppress, and impoverish the experiences of the individuals to
whom they are attached, for example—that we have a powerful rationale for politi-
cally contesting, problematizing, and transforming them. In other words, accounts of
personal experience motivate and legitimize us to demand change irrespective of our
own identity and experience—irrespective of whether we are women, men, or trans-
gendered ourselves.8

Second, even if we accept that experiences are culturally and linguistically con-
structed, through and through, this does not mean that they can have no legitimate
political role to play in creating communal political action. On the contrary, recog-
nizing that the particular cultural, economic, and political conditions of a person’s
development are necessarily shared implies the existence of communal experiences.
As long as we recognize that such communal experiences are culturally contingent
and politically constituted, and not a manifestation of an essential and naturalized
identity, they can function as an important source of critical reflection and societal
transformation. The realization that our experiences are normalized, impoverished,
painful, degrading, or disempowering in contemporary culture may not only lead to
political action and societal transformation, however. Such realization itself often
requires a collective, political project. These experiences need to be voiced, shared,
and critically reflected upon.

Sandra Bartky has voiced the concern that an insurmountable gap lies between femi-
nist theory and practice: we have produced sophisticated theories without any corre-
sponding political practice (Bartky 2002, 14). To be sure, if our theories have no
traction on reality, if they are just “frictionless spinning in a void,” it is easy to see how
a motivational deficit could arise. Feminist theory becomes an intellectual game with no connection to real lives or experiences. I am suggesting that the epistemological and metaphysical retrieval of experience that I am advocating here could remedy that motivational deficit and legitimize a corresponding practice: consciousness-raising.

Consciousness-raising was a feminist practice that for some time already has been considered outdated, if not outright ridiculous. However, if we accept the ideological nature of the discourses constitutive of experience, then a defense of the political importance of the evidence of experience must imply a qualified defense of consciousness-raising. I want to suggest that we think of the consciousness-raising practices conducive to critical self-transformation and collective political action along the model of the practices of the self that Foucault advocated in his late thought. These practices could be understood as a form of consciousness-raising in the sense that their goal is a qualitative transformation of one’s experience. Their aim is not a naturalization of our identity, but its deconstruction.

Cressida Heyes has appropriated Foucault’s idea of the practices of the self for feminist theory in a seminal way. She describes feminist practices of self-transformation as being “a kind of therapy.” These practices would be both ethical and spiritual, and they require techniques that are “somatic, meditative, artistic as well as communal” (Heyes 2007, 108). If I read Heyes correctly, these remodeled practices of consciousness-raising would not imply simply sharing our personal stories in order to find empowering commonalities between women. The aim would rather be a problematization of who we are and who we aspire to be—a critical reflection on the social and political conditions constitutive of our normalized experiences. Neither would the aim of these practices be simply to correct false beliefs about embodiment, but to actually change our embodied selves by “creating new and more expansive forms of embodied self-expression” (92).

Practices of the self are often criticized as apolitical and as compatible with the current neoliberal ethos of turning away from the shared realm of politics to the realm of private self-fashioning. However, these practices should be understood as essentially collective practices that can gain their meaning only in a shared cultural context. Although it is undoubtedly true that they do not by themselves necessarily imply any radical political movements, I want to insist that the reverse is nevertheless true: radical political movements necessarily imply practices of the self. Hence, the political importance of experience is connected to the broader question of what feminist politics is and what its goals are. It is my contention that feminism as a radical political project must aim at profound social transformation, not merely at some quantitative gain such as increase in women’s power, political rights, or social benefits, for example. It has to aim to change who we are—both as men and as women. In other words, it has to assume that our experience of the world could be qualitatively transformed if our society operated along different kinds of cultural and political practices and were governed by different norms. Such transformation requires politics that is able to question and transform the cultural representations and values that shape and structure our experiences, but it also requires self-transformation—political practices that aim to change our singular experiences.
To sum up this section, my endeavor to foreground the epistemological and political importance of experience here is almost diametrically opposed to the feminist project of attempting to find essential commonalities in women's embodied experiences in order to identify some essential core of female experience. In effect, I am suggesting that we attempt the reverse: we must engage in a critical study of our experiences in order to identify the fractures—those aspects of experience that break with normative femininity, naturalized identity, and the culturally scripted accounts of female experience. An important strategy of radical feminist theory and politics has been the attempt to produce cultural representations—scientific and literary texts, films, and art—that would represent women's experiences in new, alternative, and more liberating ways. For this quest to make any sense, politically or philosophically, we have to assume that women are not completely “one-dimensional”—that they recognize and are able to voice, in some way, the fact that their experiences are impoverished, painful, distorted, degrading, or disempowering in contemporary culture. It also assumes that they are able to transform, at least to some extent, the norms and cultural discourses that shape experience. It does not require assuming that women's experiences are prediscursive or authentic in some sense of being outside of language and culture. As I argued in the previous section, experiences can contest discourses even if, or precisely because, they are conceptual through and through.

THE POSSIBILITY OF PROBLEMATIZATION

I have argued so far that feminist politics attempting to change society in some significant way requires critical analysis of first-person experience. Such critical analysis of experience can contest identities, norms, and conceptual schemas; it can motivate us to produce enriched cultural expressions, as well as create solidarity with others whom we accept as different. Such analysis should not be limited to other women's experiences of oppression and suffering, but must also essentially include radical self-reflection—a reflexive interrogation of one's own experience. In this section I want to conclude my argument by showing that such reflexive analysis of experience is indispensable, not just for feminist politics, but also for the methodology of feminist theory.

Radical reflection on one's own experience must be an essential element of feminist theory: the person studying sexist society must be able to take critical distance, not only from the familiar and taken-for-granted meanings of various forms of experience, but also, and most fundamentally, from her own experience. She must try to critically analyze her own experiences, beliefs, and theories as being formed in a community with its attendant practices, beliefs, and language. It is my contention that such critical reflection on one's own experience will not provide a secure foundation for theoretical activity, but, on the contrary, provides the only possibility for problematizing the existence of any such foundation.

How this radical questioning of the constitutive conditions of one's own experience can be accomplished remains a difficult question. Judith Butler writes that “the
questioning of taken-for-granted conditions becomes possible on occasion; but we cannot get there through a thought experiment, an *epoche* or an act of will. One gets there, as it were, through suffering the breakup of the ground itself” (Butler 2004, 107–08). Although I agree with Butler about the impossibility of a complete *epoche*, I believe that it is nevertheless possible to try to deliberately cultivate the practice of problematization: the attempt to take critical distance from dominant norms and to question at least some of the constitutive conditions of one’s own experience. Even though we have to discard the possibility of a complete *epoche*, which aims at freeing us from all presuppositions including those carried by language, the importance of phenomenology as a philosophical method nevertheless lies in its realization that only a first-person perspective makes possible a radical philosophical critique of naturalism.

From the point of view of phenomenology, the difficulty with Scott’s account is not the claim that experience is constituted through culture, history, and language. The intersubjective readings of phenomenology claim exactly that (see, for example, Steinbock 1995; Zahavi 2001). Rather, the philosophical problem is historicism: how can we study the constitution of experience through empirical accounts of factual history? Experience must be historicized, it must be studied as the effect and the end product of a historical process, but it is we ourselves who write this history. We cannot transcend our own historical point of view to find some view from nowhere capable of revealing an objective account of the constitution of our experience. Historicism would entail this mistake of adopting a view from nowhere. Neither factual history nor any empirical study in isolation can explain the constitution of our experience without falling into circularity: it presupposes that which it attempts to explain. A key phenomenological insight consists of the acknowledgment that an empirical account of the constitution of our own experience is as impossible as lifting ourselves in the air by our hair.

Scott’s attack on foundationalism therefore spawns an unacknowledged foundationalism of its own. If we deny the methodological significance of the first-person experiential perspective, a critical reflection on those background beliefs and ontological commitments that our own experience carries and that are constitutive of the historically objective accounts of experience becomes impossible. Without a critical scrutiny of our own experience we are left with no means to even attempt to question them.

The critical analysis of our own experience is interlocked with the study of the experiential accounts of others. It is my contention that for the critical questioning of our own experience to have any hope of succeeding, even partially, it requires that we pay critical attention to the experiential evidence of others. We must listen especially to those whose experiences have been marginalized and whose voices have been silenced, not because they are in possession of some authentic truth about reality revealed only through suffering or oppression, but simply because their perspective is different from ours. It might therefore reveal some contradictions and alternative presuppositions that are not available to us and that might therefore shake the invisible privileges built into our own perspective. A precondition for feminist theory and
politics is the ability to speak and to act, but also, importantly, to listen. When we stop listening, we are bound to lose our way.

Notes

1. A study of female experience would therefore lead to a form of gender essentialism, which Angela Harris, for example, has described as “the notion that a unitary, essential women’s experience can be isolated and described independent of race, class, sexual orientation, and other realities of experience” (Harris 1990, 585).

2. Nancy Fraser elegantly sums up the tripartite ways in which a philosophical conception of discourse can foster more interesting theoretical perspectives. First, it can help us understand how people’s social identities were discursively constructed in historically specific social contexts. It can thus be used both to understand social identities in their full sociocultural complexity and to demystify static, single-variable, essentialist views of gender identity. Second, it can help us understand how, under conditions of inequality, social groups are formed and unformed in response to struggles over social discourse. Third, a conception of discourse can illuminate how the cultural hegemony of dominant groups in society was secured and contested. Therefore, it can shed light on the prospects for emancipatory social change and political practice (Fraser 1997, 152–53).


4. Ian Hacking, for example, argues that strict nominalism leaves our interaction with the world, and our description of it, a complete mystery. For him, nominalism about human artifacts presents no problem. We manufacture pencils; that is why they exist. Nominalism about grass, trees, and stars, however, is a problem (Hacking 2002).

5. For recent critiques of McDowell’s position, see, for example, Dreyfus 2005; Schear 2012.

6. Linda Alcoff has appropriated phenomenology to argue that it is not only a metaphysical error to claim that experience and language are co-extensive, but that the political consequences of such a view are disastrous (Alcoff 2000, 46). She discusses the phenomenology of rape and takes as an example the controversy over the term date rape and the ongoing refusal of US state laws to recognize rape within marriage. In connection with these forms of sexual violence, she urges us to consider the political consequences of holding experience and language as co-extensive. A position that links experience to discourse too securely might argue that, prior to the discourse of date rape, the experience itself could not occur, or at least not the sort of experience we now associate with date rape. Thus, date rape could be said to be a fiction invented by feminists, which is now having material effects in needlessly traumatizing impressionable young women. Although it is clear that the changes in discourse have effected changes in the experiences of such traumas, it is also clear that we have more than adequate reason to believe that rapes occurred on dates and in marriages before the 1970s when these issues first became widely discussed. See also Alcoff and Gray 1993.
7. McDowell holds that we share with animals a perceptual sensitivity to features of our environment, but that we have this capacity in a special, conceptual form. Conceptual thinking is thus not an exemption from nature; rather, it is our special way of living an animal life (McDowell 1994, 64–65). Human children are initiated into conceptual capacities through their upbringing, and these capacities become part of their second nature. Human beings are thus not set apart from animals in some “splendidly non-human realm of ideality” (88). We are animals, but the kind of animals whose natural being is permeated with rationality (85).

8. Ann J. Cahill argues that the second-wave feminists’ success in placing rape on the political agenda was possible only because women were finally prepared to speak the unspeakable (Cahill 2001, 197). Women were explicitly encouraged to be more open and less self-blaming about the violence that had been done to them. Cahill acknowledges that women’s first-person descriptions of rape cannot be taken as authoritative in any unproblematic sense; nevertheless, she argues that such descriptions are indispensable in the effort to raise awareness of the pervasiveness of rape. The first-person accounts of rape have been able to foreground the complexity and specificity of rape vis-à-vis other experiences of violence. Because sexual violence is committed disproportionately against women, and because women’s representations of that violence are met with social disbelief and suspicion, it is crucial that women speak out about their personal experiences (128). Kruks similarly argues that, for those who suffer domestic violence, it can be an empowering process for experiences to be shared (Kruks 2001, 139). In presenting their experiences, individuals may come to realize that their own predicament is part of a wider problem and that forms of resistance they have not previously envisaged might be possible.

9. In his classic work, One-Dimensional Man (2002), Herbert Marcuse analyzes a situation in which consumerism, advertising, mass culture, and capitalist ideology integrate subjects effectively into the capitalist system and make them “one-dimensional”: subjects have lost their ability for dissent, autonomy, and critical thought; they are content with their lot and are unable to perceive any alternative dimension of possibilities that would transcend the present. The system that manufactures, superimposes, and administers their needs presents itself as the best and only possible means of satisfying them.

10. Michel Foucault, for example, describes problematization as a process of thought through which familiar or taken-for-granted practices, actions, and forms of behavior lose their familiarity and appear as possible objects of politicization, redescription, and ultimately change. Often this process is instigated by social, economic, and political difficulties, but Foucault insists that, ultimately, effective problematization can be accomplished only by thought. He writes that when thought intervenes, it does not assume a form that is the direct result or the necessary expression of the social, economic, or political difficulties. It is always an original and specific response (Foucault 1991, 388–89).

11. Many feminist phenomenologists discard the transcendental reduction. They usually turn to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and reiterate his view on the impossibility of a complete reduction: “The most important lesson which the reduction teaches us is the impossibility of a complete reduction” (Merleau-Ponty 1994, xiv). See, for example, Alcoff 2000; Kruks 2001.
REFERENCES


