

ON “THOSE TRUTHS OF EXPERIENCE UPON WHICH PHILOSOPHY IS FOUNDED”

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ABSTRACT: At the turn of the nineteenth century, American pragmatists claimed that philosophy rests on experience. Variations of their empiricism persist at the beginning of the twenty-first century, but, I argue, the notion of experience remains under-analyzed. In this paper I examine Peirce’s and James’s contrasting views of the relation between experience and philosophy, comparing their views with Descartes’s, and I re-enter Dewey’s question, “What are the data of philosophy?” Do different individuals have different data? As it is a commonplace of the twenty-first century that our experiences vary widely with our individual life circumstances and that there are fault lines in human experience that can be organized by notions of gender, race, ethnicity and culture, and historical and economic circumstances, I also consider whether that commonplace has any import for philosophy.

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At the end of the nineteenth century, Charles Sanders Peirce suggested that the then new developments in formal logic could help illuminate the nature of philosophical reasoning and what he saw as the relation between mathematics and philosophy. The difference between the two “sciences” is, he said, “merely one of degree”:

It is that, in mathematics, the reasoning is frightfully intricate, while the elementary conceptions are of the last degree of familiarity; in contrast to philosophy, where the reasonings are as simple as they can be, while the elementary conceptions are abstruse and hard to get clearly apprehended. But there is another much deeper line of demarcation between the two sciences. It is that mathematics studies nothing but pure hypotheses, and is the only science which never inquires what the

actual facts are; while philosophy, although it uses no microscopes or other apparatus of special observation, is really an experimental science, resting on that experience which is common to us all; so that its principal reasonings are not mathematically necessary at all, but are only necessary in the sense that all the world knows beyond all doubt those truths of experience upon which philosophy is founded.¹

Peirce did not immediately supply any examples of “those truths of experience” that “all the world knows beyond doubt,” and one may find preposterous the idea that philosophy, with its history of disputation and refutation, its manifest contentiousness, could be understood to be founded on universal epistemological agreement. It may seem particularly absurd that Peirce wanted to speak of foundational truths at all, when his own epistemology offered a revolutionary challenge to both Cartesian *and* empiricist foundationalisms.

Still, the empiricist flavor of Peirce’s remark must have been agreeable at the turn of that century, and it seems to remain, at least in Anglo-American philosophical circles, broadly attractive today, after another century’s turn. Consider the continuing influence of Quine, clearly a descendant of the pragmatists, who, in his embrace of empiricism without “dogmas”—without, that is, a belief in an analytic/synthetic distinction and without an allegiance to reductionism—insisted on the parity of natural science and philosophy, on their equal underdetermination by experience, but also their equal development from and responsibility to common sense and common experience.

Or consider the sound of some influential twentieth century philosophy in a rather different register, the metaphilosophical remarks of Wittgenstein. Although in the *Philosophical Investigations* Wittgenstein may seem to have wanted explicitly to distinguish science and philosophy—“[i]t was true to say that our considerations could not be scientific ones”²—his suggestion that “[o]ne might . . . give the name “philosophy” to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions” (*PI*, 126) resonates with Peirce’s observation that philosophy “requires no microscopes or other apparatus of special observation.” Moreover, some of Wittgenstein’s diagnoses of the difficulties of philosophical enquiry could be taken as versions of the Peircean idea of philosophy as founded on common and ubiquitous experience—e.g., “The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one’s eyes.)” (*PI*, 129)—as could the remarkable hypothetical claim of section 128, “If one tried to advance *theses* in philosophy, it would never be possible to debate them, because everyone would agree to them.”

I shall not attempt to elucidate that cryptic remark, or to address directly the issue of the continuity or discontinuity of philosophy and science. The puzzle I want to ponder, as especially salient at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century, is raised by the bluff assertion that philosophy rests on “that experience common to us all.” Throughout the history of philosophy, substantial attention has been devoted to questions about the nature of experience,

and there has been an enormous amount of effort devoted to problems about the relation between experience and knowledge. This effort and attention have been directed at what might be called the “generic” experience, representative experience, the idea or structure of experience “in general,” not at particular or distinctive experiences. Outside of philosophy, however, it has become a commonplace of the twenty-first century that our experiences vary widely with our individual life circumstances, and that there are striking fault lines in human experience organized by notions of gender, race, ethnicity and culture, historical and economic circumstances. Does philosophy accept this commonplace?

If it does, what becomes of the idea of “experience common to all,” the truths of experience “that all the world knows”? Are there supposed to be “core” experiences, deeper than all these variations, or defined by their intersection, and are these then supposed to be the stuff of philosophy? Or does philosophy reject the claim of individual and social variation in experience, or cast any such variations aside as not germane to a notion of experience that is interesting and important for philosophy? But then what *is* this notion of experience? If it is not from our ordinary, everyday experiences that philosophy springs, and not to our ordinary, everyday experiences that philosophy appeals, why would it not require “microscopes or other apparatus of special observation,” that is, some avenue to experiences disjoint from or beyond the quotidian?

Writing at the same time as Peirce, William James famously insisted that personal temperament *would* color experience and thus philosophizing. His summary distinction between “tough-” and “tender-minded” people grouped empiricist, materialistic, pessimistic, irreligious, pluralistic, skeptical thinkers (among others) under the first heading, and rationalistic, idealistic, optimistic, religious, monistic, dogmatical types (among others) under the second.³ But James noted that many of us do not have strongly marked intellectual temperaments of a fixed type, that we have mixed and opposing inclinations, none necessarily truly pronounced. This may mean that we will not become imposing figures in philosophy—the “greats,” in James’s view, were understandable as figures of well-marked temperaments—but we may yet be disposed, as James believed the greats were, to load the evidence in one way rather than another, to trust representations of the world that suit our temperaments.

Talk of “loading” the evidence may suggest, however, that there is some neutral store of evidence from among which the philosopher chooses, a broader array of facts or experiences from among which the philosopher selectively culls those that best fit his or her preferences. James did say that “[n]o philosophy can ever be anything but a summary sketch, a picture of the world in abridgement,”⁴ but he may not have meant that there is one full story each philosophy summarizes, one complete and accurate picture variously abstracted or cut short. His view seemed rather to be that philosophy is a condensation, a precipitate, of experience, a construction from parts that remain always partial:

the only material we have at our disposal for making a picture of the whole world is supplied by the various portions of that world of which we have already had experience. We can invent no new forms of conception, applicable to the whole exclusively, and not suggested originally by the parts. All philosophers, accordingly, have conceived of the whole world after the analogy of some particular feature of it which has particularly captivated their attention.⁵

What captures one's attention will vary, of course, with time, place, interests, mood—a host of circumstantial and personal features—including, of course, one's prior experience. What James wanted to emphasize were the pluralistic possibilities for philosophy, and the way in which an individual's constitution—his or her deepest nature and needs—would affect, would be rationalized into, a philosophy. Some will want the universe to answer to their loftiest ideals; some will be struck by its mechanical elements. Some will see order; some will feel disconnections.

James often suggested that the skepticism that is the starting point of modern philosophy was motivated by a fear of being wrong, a horror of errors, a deep worry about being duped. Peirce, too, sometimes mounted psychological *ad hominem*s against the Cartesian, suggesting that the method of doubt was either dishonest pretense or the product of severe self-deception. (See, e.g., “Some Consequences of Four Incapacities” in *Collected Papers*, vol. 5.) But James seemed to think that various souls really do respond differently to what he regarded as our double epistemological duties—believe truth; avoid error—and that modern philosophy, before pragmatism, was colored by its progenitors' passionate aversion to error.

Reacting as if to the person of Descartes may have been eased by the fact that Descartes's *Meditations* was, of course, at least rhetorically, in a personal form, as was the *Discourse on Method*. Is that fact philosophically significant? Endless exegetical attention focuses on some centerpiece first-person assertions: the *Meditations*' “I am, I exist—that is certain. But for how long? For as long as I am thinking . . . I am a thing which is real and which truly exists. But what kind of a thing? . . . [A] thinking thing”;⁶ and the *Discourse*'s *cogito, ergo sum*. The crucial foundation for Descartes's recovery from bottomless doubt could not, it seems, be cast as an impersonal observation about human beings. This philosophical cornerstone could not even be put in the first-person plural. Does that suggest that this philosophy is *not*—to recall Peirce's words—“resting on that experience which is common to us all”?

In the *Meditations*' “Preface to the Reader,” Descartes did use the first-person plural in summarizing his methods: he spoke of reasons which give *us* possible reasons to doubt, of the requirement that *we* know that everything that *we* clearly and distinctly understand is true in a way which corresponds to *our* understanding. And he cast the Second Meditation as portraying “the” mind using its own freedom to doubt and, through this exercise, noticing that it is impossible that *it* should not exist. In other words, he outlined the work

and what he saw as the results of his book in a way that suggests a perfectly general character and applicability. And yet he said he did not expect “popular approval” or a “wide audience” for his “First Philosophy.” The *Discourse* was published in French, but in the “Preface” to the *Meditations* Descartes made a point of that book’s return to Latin, claiming that this fuller treatment of the same subjects was not meant to be read “by all and sundry,” because “weaker intellects” might then wrongly suppose they, too, should follow the same path to truth. He seemed to have small hopes for shared experiences of discovery, even among the educated. His “Preface” included this stern and rueful warning:

I would not urge anyone to read this book except those who are able and willing to meditate seriously with me, and to withdraw their minds from the senses and from all preconceived opinions. Such readers . . . are few and far between.⁷

One might chalk up these latter comments to personal arrogance, or a thin-skinned reaction to objections made to the *Discourse*. But in the *Discourse* itself, in the very passages where he solicited objections, Descartes set a distinctly autobiographical tone and began a brief for his own idiosyncrasy. He claimed he had found a method to increase knowledge, but he disavowed the idea that this writing was an attempt to teach this method to others. The *Discourse* is self-revelation, “a history or, if you prefer, a fable in which, among certain examples worthy of imitation, you will perhaps also find many others that it would be right not to follow.”⁸

My plan has never gone beyond trying to reform my own thoughts and construct them on a foundation which is all my own. . . . The simple resolution to abandon all the opinions one has hitherto accepted is not an example that everyone ought to follow. The world is largely composed of two types of minds for whom it is quite unsuitable. First, there are those who, believing themselves cleverer than they are, cannot avoid precipitate judgements and never have the patience to direct all their thoughts in an orderly manner; consequently, if they once took the liberty of doubting the principles they accepted and of straying from the common path, they could never stick to the track that must be taken as a short-cut, and they would remain lost all their lives. Secondly, there are those who have enough reason or modesty to recognize that they are less capable of distinguishing the true from the false than certain others by whom they can be taught; such people should be content to follow the opinions of these others rather than seek better opinions themselves.⁹

One might again try to dismiss these remarks, perhaps by remembering that Descartes had been worried about running afoul of the Inquisition, so that all Descartes’s disavowals of the idea that others might share his thoughts and his experiences are understood as desperate attempts to keep a low profile, to seem non-threatening to orthodoxy and the public good. The problem with

this line is that it was Galileo's trial and condemnation that evidently frightened Descartes, not, say, the trial of Socrates. The primary issue for the Inquisition would have been Descartes's *own* beliefs, not whether or not his philosophizing corrupted others. And he was here publishing his own beliefs, evidently fairly confident that he would not be condemned by the Church.

His own beliefs were, he suggested, formed by his particular, his peculiar, life experiences. The *Discourse* contains an account of Descartes's schooling, the curriculum he followed and his preferences within it. Descartes summarized what he took himself to have gleaned from his teachers and his books and what motivated him to abandon formal study for study "in the book of the world"—his travel to other countries, his conversations in courts and with soldiers. Most saliently, he claimed that, had he not had the special experiences he had—had he not had good teachers who disagreed with one another, had he not had the opportunity to learn of foreign customs and folkways—he would not have developed the methods of thought, and hence not the thoughts, that we say constitute his philosophy. Reason, Descartes said, was equally divided among all humans; the diversity of our opinions, thus, "does not arise because some of us are more reasonable than others but solely because we direct our thoughts along different paths and do not attend to the same things."¹⁰

So did Descartes thus anticipate James?—What determines our philosophy is the experience we have had of the world, along with the way in which our attention has been captivated? If it seems implausible to link Descartes and James in this way, it is because we take Descartes to have sought a method for overcoming the vagaries of experience and for perfecting the attention of *reason*, the capacity he said was shared equally by all humans. In *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*, Descartes claimed that there were only two ways of arriving at knowledge—through experience and through deduction. Experience, he said, was often deceptive, but deduction could not err, except through inadvertence. That is why, Descartes claimed, arithmetic and geometry are more certain than other disciplines. Both "sciences" are concerned with objects that experience cannot confuse or render uncertain, and both consist in deducing conclusions about those objects by means of rational arguments. The moral, according to Descartes, is not that arithmetic and geometry are the only sciences worth studying. It is rather that, in seeking truth, in doing philosophy, we should emulate arithmetic and geometry: we should begin with objects which experience cannot render uncertain and we should proceed by deduction.

But where do we find these objects? Interestingly, Descartes suggested that they may be found in experience:

Our experience consists of whatever we perceive by means of the senses, whatever we learn from others, and in general whatever reaches our intellect either from external sources or from its own reflexive self-contemplation. We should note . . . that the intellect can never be deceived by any experience, provided that when the object is presented to

it, it intuits it in a fashion exactly corresponding to the way in which it possesses the object, either within itself or in the imagination.¹¹

We go wrong only when we assume that the way external things appear to us corresponds to the way they are in reality. Some of us may be more likely than others to be less careful than we could be about making such assumptions. When we naively believe some bit of gossip, when we do not recognize that our physical or emotional state may be distorting our perceptions, we are less wise than we could be. (These are all problems specifically mentioned by Descartes in “Rule Twelve” of *Rules for the Direction of the Mind*.) Perhaps many of us are often foolish; perhaps some of us are inveterately so. Thus, if Descartes thought that few readers would be able to follow his work, that few would be “able and willing to meditate seriously” with him, we may understand his gloomy assessment as an assertion that philosophy is not for everyone.

If that idea has an uneasy relation to Descartes’s repeated professions that reason is equally distributed throughout all mankind, still, there is no contradiction. Descartes seemed to blame, blame in rather personal terms, those who did not attend to experience carefully enough to distinguish clear and distinct intuitions from the deceptive testimony of the senses and the clouded judgments of imagination. Failure to proceed by the light of reason was a moral fault, one that a different temperament, along with different set of life experiences, might have forestalled.

James’s reactions to temperamental differences were much more tolerant. One might, with a bit of vertigo, simply attribute this to his own more expansive temperament, but it is important to note that a pragmatic approach to epistemology has no place, no need, for the indubitable intuitions secured by Descartes’s pure light of reason. A fallibilistic empiricism can afford to be expansive. It may argue, with Peirce, that even if inquiry begins from a variety of different points, so long as the methods of science are employed, reality will constrain the results, so that the inquiries will eventually converge on the truth. Or the pragmatic epistemology may be, with James, more relativistic, and genuinely embrace the idea of differences in worldviews, so long as, in each case, the view has overall utility and helps the believer negotiate experience. But the question remains, even for the expansive pragmatists at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth centuries, and again for us now, where does philosophic inquiry begin, and what experiences must it help us negotiate?

The last of the classical pragmatists, John Dewey, put these questions—“Where does philosophy begin? Whence does it get its data?”—in a 1932 lecture on common sense, science, and philosophy:

Shall philosophy start with the common materials near at hand or with the more abstract intellectual results of thinking? I think that philosophy should start with the common experiences. But here there is a difficulty. The commoner and more familiar things are, the harder they are to deal with philosophically. We lose consciousness of things that

are quite familiar. We do not hear the loud clock to which we are used, but we notice the instant it stops.¹²

Dewey came very close to Peirce's initial characterization of philosophy, but in the more modest statement that the philosophy that interested *him* most "results from observations anyone can make every hour of . . . daily life, and not on those technicalities which can only be considered by specialists furnished with technical devices."¹³ Do we today, however, at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century, have any new worries about how to instantiate the "anyone" in Dewey's formulation?

Let us consider some contemporary cases. In *Seeing a Color-Blind Future: The Paradox of Race*, Patricia Williams recalls learning, at three, that she was black, "the colored kid," "different." What brings back the recollection is an interchange with a toddler as Williams is dropping off her young son at the daycare center. The little girl, perhaps eager to find and play with Williams's son, seems to ask where he is, and, when directed to look at the Lego table, the child remarks, "Oh yes. Now I see that black face of his." Williams says that she rushed to get her "dangerous broken glass of . . . emotions out of the room":

What made me so angry and wordless in this encounter forty years later was the realization that none of the little white children who taught me to see my blackness as a mark probably ever learned to see themselves as white. In our culture, whiteness is rarely marked in the indicative there! there! sense of my bracketed blackness. And the majoritarian privilege of never noticing themselves was the beginning of an imbalance from which so much, so much else flowed.¹⁴

Williams illuminates the phenomena of racism through a variety of telling anecdotes and observations, many of them designed to highlight a specific experience. The general problem of what she calls "racial voyeurism" is described through an analysis of the O. J. Simpson case but also through adversion to "quieter" cases, for example, the way in which black churches, particularly in Harlem, are visited by tourists—sometimes busloads of tourists—during Sunday services, baptisms, choir rehearsals, and funerals. She says her father, growing up in the segregated South, experienced this tourism in his own boyhood:

[W]hites would come for the thrill of the purportedly boisterous carryings-on in black churches. He describes how it would inhibit the sense of communion, of joy and release, this one-way gaze of the soberly disengaged, in whose world you would never be permitted the intimacy of such study. In deference to the unbidden visitors, the congregation would strain for greater "decorum" so as not to be the objects of anything that felt like mockery, that felt like ridicule.¹⁵

The sense of vulnerability and insult, in the most sacred and in the most ordinary moments of daily life, is presented as part of the common experience of

black people in the U.S. If this is true, does this common experience find its way to philosophy? Is this—the fact of racism—among the truths of experience upon which philosophy is founded?

A friend of mine was using Williams’s book in an undergraduate general education course, and the teaching assistant for the course, a graduate student in philosophy, a white male, reported that, in his discussion sections, he had reviewed Williams’s account of the phenomenon of “racial voyeurism” and that he had made the suggestion that

the reason no one ever hears of other races perpetrating racial voyeurism against whites is that there is nothing it is like to be “white.” There are no “quaint customs” to observe: Try to imagine, e.g., “White-middle-class-dinnertime-spotting”—a group of tourists of African, Asian, etc. descent with their binoculars spying in the window of the well-to-do white home in the well-to-do white suburbs.¹⁶

It is worth noting that this imaginary example, constructed, he thought, to make an argumentative point with pedagogically effective concreteness, was offered almost immediately after he claimed to have reviewed “the issue of the non-racial status of whites.” This was presumably the issue Williams, following John Fiske, called the “‘exnomination’ of whiteness as a racial category,” an issue that Williams made concrete with the story of a moment at the daycare center and that she described more abstractly, less personally, in this way:

Whiteness is unnamed, suppressed, beyond the realm of race. Exnomination permits whites to entertain the notion that race lives “over there” on the other side of the tracks, in black bodies and inner-city neighborhoods, in a dark netherworld where whites are not involved.¹⁷

The teaching assistant blithely summarized the issue, encapsulated his understanding of the asymmetrical possibilities of racial voyeurism this way: “To say that someone acts or thinks in a manner that is ‘white’ is simply to say that he is being ‘normal.’”

Someone who doesn’t know that eating practices vary over time, place, cultural space might be thought merely—if deeply and strangely—ignorant. But when a white graduate student says that “there is nothing it is like to be ‘white,’” should we see this as confirmation of Dewey’s claim that it is difficult to notice what is most familiar? When he says whites have no “quaint” customs, should we think it is as if he is not hearing the ticking of the loud clock that has always been part of his life? If blacks *do* hear the ticking, is their perception too idiosyncratic to count philosophically? Is it too marked as “different”—even if thus marked only by the blindness of majoritarian privilege—to be something philosophy might try to include in the idea of “common experience”?

Consider another example: I attended a colloquium at which a personable young man gave a philosophic paper on the topic of rape. His paper included the memorable line, “the suffering of women is irrelevant to the harm of rape.” Many of the women in the audience—a good share of them not philosophers—were visibly startled; but the men—all of them philosophers—seemed calm, waiting impassively to hear the paper’s argument. And there was an argument, one that the speaker certainly took to have feminist credentials and some prospect for salutary political consequences. The idea was that *consent* was the crucial issue, and the speaker suggested that recognition of this fact would obviate the need for women to prove harm, whether physical (cuts and bruises, e.g.) or psychological (a nervous breakdown or post-traumatic stress syndrome, e.g.)—beyond the harm of overriding their lack of consent—in order to have the wrongfulness of rape properly recognized (and punished) by a just legal system. The speaker pointed to the fact that many rape victims complain of the pain and humiliation they have felt in the course of rape trials, of the feeling that they, not the defendants, are on trial. He thought his analysis of the harm of rape could lay the foundation for a legal response to the crime that would not depend upon the woman’s presentation of a battered body or a tortured mind. If intercourse proceeded without consent, then even if the woman was not physically forced, or threatened with force, and even if she had no psychological ill effects from the episode, this would count as rape. And courts, if they focused only on the issue of consent, would not insist that a woman, to be credible as a victim, must have acquired bruises or mental anguish. The courts would understand that she has been harmed, whether or not there has been physical or mental suffering, by the act of intercourse in the absence of her consent.

Many of the women in the audience were not as understanding as the speaker suggested the courts could be. Some protested that he had underestimated the psychological effects of rape. He said he hoped he did not underestimate these, that he was in no way denying that many—perhaps most—rapes produce serious psychological harm. His point was rather that, *should* there be a case where a woman is so stable and psychologically resilient that a rape does *not* produce psychological harm, the courts should still recognize that a crime has been committed; for what’s crucial is the matter of consent, not the existence or the degree of suffering. Most of the questions from the philosophers centered on epistemological issues in the proposal—how would courts determine lack of consent, except by evidence of struggle, etc.?—but many of the women remained disgruntled about the direction of the paper, even when they could not quite say why.

Perhaps they felt that women’s experiences were being denied or denigrated. Clearly, some women’s experiences *were* being set aside as irrelevant to the issue. (“The suffering of women is irrelevant to the harm of rape.”) But something else about women—their capacity to give and to withhold consent—was being brought to the fore. Notions of consent and autonomy are

pivotal to so much modern political and moral philosophy—to social contract theories and matters of political standing and representation, to issues of responsibility and moral maturity—that this speaker might fairly have assumed that, for philosophers, consent would be understood to be a notion of great import, with enormous implications. The problem, however, was that, from these women’s perspectives, it was not at all obvious why the absence of consent would be a definitive harm, if it were not that, in this matter, lack of consent produces suffering.

Did this colloquium illustrate something about what Dewey identifies as a difficulty for philosophy? Contemporary philosophers in a discussion of a question in the philosophy of law might be expected to take for granted the reverberations of the ideal of consent. The importance of the notion of consent is familiar—if not in the way that the loud and constant clock is, then in the way that the earth’s gravitational pull is. Much has been built upon it. But, as Dewey asks, “Shall philosophy start with the common materials near at hand or with the more abstract intellectual results of thinking?” Why would it be more explanatory, or more illuminating, to locate the harm of rape in the violation of consent than to locate the harm experientially, in suffering? It seems there *is* room for the further question, “Why does consent matter?” while there isn’t for “Why does suffering matter?” If that is not recognized, in the thick of a philosophic discussion, is it because the experience of suffering is too common? The problem, though, the obstacle to a meeting of the minds on this occasion, was that there was a divide—strongly situated along gender lines—in reactions to the salience of experience. Is this a divide that matters to philosophy? Can it be overcome by philosophy?

How does a group, or an individual who is, at least for the moment, identifying herself or himself in terms of some group, make pertinent to philosophy whatever seems distinctive about that group’s experience? This could be seen as a question that presses itself upon us as the twentieth has turned to the twenty-first century, in connection with what might be called sociological changes and changes in the demographics of professional philosophy. But if this question is understood not sociologically, but philosophically, how different is it from the question, “How does an individual make pertinent to philosophy his or her own experience?”

One could argue that a particular twist on this question underlay one of the central methodological debates of mid-twentieth century professional philosophy—the debate on the standing of so-called “ordinary language philosophy.” The idea that philosophical work could be done “by examining *what we should say when*, and so, why and what we should mean by it,” to use J. L. Austin’s formulation of the method of ordinary language philosophy,¹⁸ split the philosophical community into opposing, often mutually contemptuous camps. Some critics of ordinary language philosophy argued that there were no agreed upon methods for verifying the various “seemingly factual statements” that the ordinary language philosopher made about language,¹⁹ and some saw the ordinary

language philosopher as an “armchair linguist,” someone attempting scientific claims from the exceedingly weak empirical base of just one subject or informant—himself.²⁰

John Searle cast the challenge to the practice of “linguistic philosophy” this way: “‘Is it not the case that all such knowledge [as linguistic philosophy purports to provide], if really valid, must be based on an empirical scrutiny of human linguistic behavior?’” and he responded to the challenge in these terms:

Speaking a language is engaging in a (highly complex) rule-governed form of behavior. To learn and master a language is (*inter alia*) to learn and to have mastered these rules. . . . [Thus,] when I, speaking as a native speaker, make linguistic characterizations. . . . I am not reporting the behavior of a group but describing aspects of my mastery of a rule-governed skill.

It is possible . . . that other people in what I suppose to be my dialect group have internalized different rules and consequently my linguistic characterizations . . . would not match theirs. But it is not possible that my linguistic characterizations of my own speech . . . are false statistical generalizations from insufficient data, for they are not statistical, nor other kinds of empirical generalizations, at all.²¹

And Stanley Cavell, defending the practices of ordinary language philosophy in “Must We Mean What We Say?” made this rejoinder to the objection that such practices involve inadequate evidence for their claims:

we must bear in mind that these statements [e.g., that “such and such is said in English”] are being made by native speakers of English. Such speakers do not, *in general*, need evidence for what is said in the language; they are the source of such evidence. It is from them that the descriptive linguist takes the corpus of utterances on the basis of which he will construct a grammar of that language. To answer *some* kinds of specific questions, we will have to engage in . . . “laborious questioning” . . . and count noses; but in general, to tell what is and isn’t English, and to tell whether what is said is properly used, the native speaker can rely on his own nose; if not, there would be nothing to count.²²

In “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy,” Cavell suggested that if “speaking a language is a matter of practical mastery,” such questions as, “What should we say if . . . ?” and, “In what circumstances would we call . . . ?”

asked of someone who has mastered the language (for example, one-self) [are requests] for the person to say something about himself, describe what he does. So the different methods [of ordinary language philosophy] are methods for acquiring self-knowledge.²³

This way of characterizing ordinary language philosophy made a claim for its continuity with one understanding of a definitive tradition in philosophy, a tradition including Socrates, Augustine, and Descartes, for example, (and, for

Cavell, suggested a connection worth elaborating between this tradition and the methods of self-knowledge promised by Freud). But this characterization also highlighted one of the issues raised repeatedly by critics of ordinary language philosophy. If the claims of the ordinary language philosopher express self-knowledge, why are they put in the first-person *plural*? If, as Searle admitted, my idiolect may not match the dialect group I have supposed myself a part of, how could my linguistic characterizations be understood as anything beyond autobiography? (Compare Descartes’s suggestion that in the *Discourse* he could, should, be understood to have written an autobiographical “ history, a fable.”) Cavell noted this objection—“Why are some claims about myself expressed in the form ‘We . . .’? About what can I speak for others on the basis of what I have learned about myself?”—and he produced a startling reply. First the objection, then the reply:

“But how do I know others speak as I do?” About some things I know they do not; I have some knowledge of my idiosyncrasy. But if the question means “How do I know at all that others speak as I do?” then the answer is, I do not.²⁴

Searle took a less anxious line. He said that no evidence concerning the behavior of others could refute the truth that “in my idiolect ‘oculist’ means eye doctor,” but it *is* an empirical hypothesis that my idiolect matches others. Still, according to Searle, I must also be understood to have a lifetime of “evidence” to support this hypothesis. Nonetheless, he said, “if I find that my rules do not match those of others, I shall alter my rules to conform.”²⁵ This readiness to conform is perhaps not surprising when what seems at issue is the meaning of an individual word. (I know someone who, well into young manhood, took the word “sultry” to mean “gorgeous,” because beautiful female movie stars were often described as “sultry.” When told that the basic meaning was “hot and moist,” he saw how he could have misunderstood, or veered slightly off a common line in his extrapolation of a “lifetime of evidence,” and he cheerfully “altered his rules to conform.”)

If it is not a question of a single word, however, and not a question of my acknowledged idiosyncrasies, if the problem is rather that I, with a lifetime of experience of conversing with others—of speaking, listening, reading, writing—in what I think of as “our” native language, cannot say that I know at all that others in fact share with me this language, that they speak as I do, that they mean by those words in those circumstances what I would mean by those words in those circumstances, then the issue is not ignorance, but alienation and isolation.²⁶ Searle noted that there is nothing infallible about linguistic generalizations, because it is not easy to articulate one’s skills. We can certainly fail in claims about “what we should say when and so what we should mean by it”; we can be thoughtless, hasty, careless, confused in these claims, as in other areas of our lives. Nonetheless, if we cannot start philosophic discussion with some confidence that the language we are using is shared, that

we can thus address and perhaps correct each other's oversights and missteps, that we can in turn understand one another's corrections, we do seem reduced to mute alienation and deep isolation.

If we move beyond this worry, however, and we grant that it is tautologous to say that speakers of a language share, at least, that language, we might still wonder whether those speakers' *experience* of the language is shared. And we might wonder further, if we do say there is a shared experience of the language, if that experience might be the sort of common experience upon which philosophy can be founded. Ordinary language philosophers often insisted, against critics, that they were not just talking about words, and that they were talking about words because words are used to talk about other things, that "we learn language and learn the world *together*."²⁷ But, of course, each of us, in learning to "word the world," has distinctive experiences as well, and groups of us have experiences that are related to our being distinguished *as* a group.

If, as I noted earlier, we may at this moment of our history leap to take this last point sociologically, then we should pause to note that one hundred years ago Dewey offered a syllabus for a course on "types of philosophic thought," wherein he announced that "the hypothesis of the course is that various types of philosophy must of necessity take their clues and suggestions from characteristic modes of experiencing."²⁸ He suggested that every type of philosophy has value "as an emphasis of some features of the experienced world," but the variety and conflicts of philosophies are the result of exaggeration of some features of experience and ignorance or denial of others.²⁹ Are these exaggerations and denials inevitable?

Dewey and George Herbert Mead are the pragmatists who, by delineating the social structures of individual experience, added new and constantly changing parameters to James's account of the variability of individual temperament. One might think this personal complexity—different native constitutions, different social structures, different individual positions in any given social structure—would virtually guarantee different modes of experiencing, different emphases and different ranges of neglect. Yet Dewey, like Peirce, expects philosophy to be grounded on common experience. One might well wonder, at the conclusion of another century, has that common experience been found?³⁰

ENDNOTES

1. Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, vol. 3 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1931), 351. References to Peirce's *Collected Papers* are commonly made by citing volume and paragraph number; this quotation (from "The Logic of Mathematics in Relation to Education") is from *Collected Papers* 3.560.

2. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G. E. M. Anscombe (New York: The Macmillan Company: 1953), 47. Subsequent references to Wittgenstein's

Philosophical Investigations will be noted in the text, using the abbreviation *PI*, followed by the section number. This phrase is from *PI*, 109.

3. William James, *Pragmatism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975), 13.
4. William James, *A Pluralistic Universe* (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1967), 8.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Rene Descartes, *Meditations*, II, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, and Murdoch, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 18.
7. Descartes, “Preface to the Reader,” *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 2, 8.
8. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. 1, 112.
9. *Ibid.*, 118.
10. *Ibid.*, 111.
11. Descartes, “Rules for the Direction of the Mind,” *The Philosophical Writing of Descartes*, vol. 1, 47.
12. John Dewey, *The Later Works*, vol. 6, ed. Boydston (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 425.
13. *Ibid.*, 424.
14. Patricia Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1997), 7.
15. *Ibid.*, 23.
16. Quoted from the teaching assistant’s e-mail report to the instructor.
17. Williams, *Seeing a Color-Blind Future*, 7.
18. J. L. Austin, “A Plea for Excuses,” *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1961), 130. It is worth remembering, however, that Austin himself, in describing this method, calls it not “ordinary language philosophy,” but “linguistic phenomenology.”
19. See, e.g., Benson Mates, “On the Verification of Statements about Ordinary Language,” *Philosophy and Linguistics*, ed. Lyas (London: Macmillan, 1971), 121.
20. See, e.g., J. Fodor and J. J. Katz, “On the Availability of What We Say,” *Philosophy and Linguistics*, ed. Lyas (London: Macmillan, 1971), 190–203.
21. John Searle, *Speech Acts* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 12, 13.
22. Stanley Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1969), 4.
23. *Ibid.*, 66.
24. *Ibid.*, 67.
25. Searle, *Speech Acts*, 13.
26. See Cavell, *Must We Mean What We Say?* 69, who uses something like this last formulation to mark a different but related problem.
27. *Ibid.*, 19.

28. John Dewey, *The Middle Works*, vol. 13, ed. Boydston (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 352.

29. *Ibid.*, 353.

30. Philip Quinn offered a graceful commentary on this paper when it was read at the Central Division APA session on “Philosophy in America at the Turn of the Century,” and among his many interesting suggestions was the proposal that the idea of “common experience” could be understood not as “experience accessible to all of us individually” but instead as “experience common to all of us collectively,” as “any experience all of us are either capable of having or capable of imagining vividly when others describe it for us under favorable circumstances.” One consequence of this construal of “common experience” would be, as Quinn notes, the disappearance of the rough distinction Peirce and Dewey wanted to draw, each in his own way, between philosophy and [other] science[s]. Now the “technicalities” obtained by “specialists furnished with technical devices,” with “microscopes [and] other apparatus of special observation,” would be as foundational for philosophy as “observations anyone can make every hour of daily life.” Some would see this outcome as an advantage of this construal—Quinn does and Quine would have—but we would still be left with a fresh and robust version of the problem Peirce, James, and Dewey (along with Wittgenstein and others) meant to address: *How* is something that should be called “philosophy” derived from or related to experience? Is there something, anything, about philosophy’s relation to experience that marks philosophy off, however roughly, from, on the one hand, science and, on the other, literature?