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Abstract	This chapter argues that the dilemmas that arise about the proper place of experience in knowledge are artefacts of a particular theory of mind and the contents of experience: what Alva Noë calls the “brain photoreceptor” model. By giving up this model, we can see that the critiques of experience that have been leveled by feminist theorists and allied anti-foundationalists lose some of their bite. I argue that a model of mind that assumes a fully embodied and active subject—as the brain photoreceptor model does not—does not run into the same conundrums about experience.
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## Chapter 10

# The Politics and the Metaphysics of Experience

Marianne Janack

**Abstract** This chapter argues that the dilemmas that arise about the proper place of experience in knowledge are artefacts of a particular theory of mind and the contents of experience: what Alva Noë calls the “brain photoreceptor” model. By giving up this model, we can see that the critiques of experience that have been leveled by feminist theorists and allied anti-foundationalists lose some of their bite. I argue that a model of mind that assumes a fully embodied and active subject—as the brain photoreceptor model does not—does not run into the same conundrums about experience.

## Introduction

In ordinary discourse, the invocation of “experience” is a shorthand way of marking a certain claim as epistemically privileged. “I know from experience that . . .” is often a way of offering argument-stopping evidence. In this respect, arguments from experience are offered to vindicate a position that is both perspectival and privileged, and that draws its authority from our pre-philosophic commitment to the reliability of first-hand sensory experience. An appeal to experience operates as a thick description: it captures not just a description of how I came to know something, but also carries with it a justification or evaluative charge. When I say, “I know from experience that will never work,” I am describing the way I came to know something and, in the very same gesture, marking that source of knowledge as epistemically privileged—my knowledge is, so to speak, “first-hand,” not subject to the deformations of translation, testimony, or interpretation. Its grounds are (assuming that I am a rational, autonomous being)<sup>1</sup> given the imprimatur of authenticity and reliability.

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<sup>1</sup>But see, for instance, Steven Shapin for an interesting analysis of the ways in which social position, gender, and class contributed to, or detracted from, one’s status as a reliable “experiencer.”

46 This ordinary sense of “experience” is often contrasted with theoretical knowledge,  
47 or knowledge that is justified by other beliefs I already accept.<sup>2</sup>

48 Foundationalism is the epistemology that is built on this understanding of experi-  
49 ence. Foundationalism assumes that all of our knowledge claims are eventually  
50 traceable to something which is itself immediately justified, rather than immediately  
51 justified by other beliefs. Beliefs that are immediately justified might be a priori  
52 judgments (as in the case of Cartesian and Leibnizian rationalism) or they might  
53 be beliefs we hold on the basis of sense data or sense experience (as in the case  
54 of Lockean empiricism). The privileging of experience generally as a foundational  
55 ground can thus be seen as an aspect of modern empiricism.

56 Yet, our post-Kuhnian theories of perception and experience seem to be reasons  
57 to reject this privileging. If we know anything about perception and experience,  
58 it seems that after Kuhn we know that there can never be an “innocent eye” that  
59 sees things as they are in and of themselves. According to post-Kuhnian doctrine,  
60 perception and experience are deeply indebted to theories, outlooks, paradigms,  
61 world-views or conceptual schemes (pick your favorite disciplinary metaphor here)  
62 and our views of the world are structured by those theoretical commitments. We do  
63 not see the world as it is—we see it only as it can show up for creatures like us,  
64 whose contact with the world is necessarily mediated through the thick interpretive  
65 lens of frames or theories.

66 Like the appeal to experience as unimpeachable first-hand knowledge, our com-  
67 mon, everyday understandings of experience have been influenced by this Kuhnian  
68 analysis as well. In addition, however, the Kuhnian analysis has provided feminist  
69 politics with a particular model of activism: a model in which recognizing the ways  
70 in which our experience of the world is shaped by our identities is an essential part  
71 of the political process. In a recent workshop I attended on teaching about race, class  
72 and gender issues, the moderator emphasized the value of trying to get students to  
73 adopt a different “perspective” or “mind-set” that would allow them to see the ways  
74 in which privilege operates to structure their experience of the world. Helping stu-  
75 dents to recognize the effects of class, race, or gender privilege is a process that must  
76 begin with getting them to take up a different perspective, according to the modera-  
77 tor, which will allow them to have different experiences of the world. Quoting from  
78 Joan Scott’s essay “The Evidence of Experience”, the moderator reminded us that  
79 “experience is always political.”

80 These two models of experience—the first, in which experience is understood as  
81 giving us authentic, reliable first-hand knowledge I will call the “Romantic” model,  
82 and the second, in which experience is taken to be theory-dependent I will call the  
83 “Kuhnian” model—create a particular dilemma for feminist theory and practice.  
84 This dilemma has, in turn, given rise to a skepticism about experience that co-habits  
85 uncomfortably with a feminist politics that has given experience a big role to play  
86 in grounding feminist demands.

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88  
89 <sup>2</sup>Williams (116–7) tracks the ways in which “experience” and “empiricism” are contrasted with  
90 “theoretical knowledge”—sometimes as an invocation of authenticity, sometimes as a way of  
condemning it as random or as “mere observation.”

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91 The claim that experience is always political is as close to a cornerstone of twen-  
 92 tieth and twenty-first century feminist theory and politics as we are likely to come.  
 93 Postmodernists, analytic feminists, pragmatist feminists, standpoint theorists, femi-  
 94 nist phenomenologists—I think it is fair to say that none would object to the claim  
 95 that experience is always political. But what does this claim amount to? To say that  
 96 experience is always political is often taken to mean that we learn to see the world  
 97 in certain kinds of ways that support certain kinds of political agendae, and that  
 98 our experience of the world is an effect of the theories we already—consciously  
 99 or unconsciously—accept. Such theories make us take notice of certain things and  
 100 ignore others. According to this metaphysic of experience, our experiences of the  
 101 world are interpretations of the world, not simply data we receive from “brute” real-  
 102 ity, and are structured by—indeed, perhaps determined by—our “perspectives” on  
 103 that world. These perspectives are themselves understood as the conceptual schemes  
 104 that yield these interpretations of the world, which we often mistake for direct,  
 105 unmediated apprehensions of reality. Perspectives are, in essence, theories that we  
 106 learn, and that we mobilize in our attempts to know the world. They might also be  
 107 called “worldviews.” In this sense, the claim that experience is political amounts to  
 108 a reiteration of the Kuhnian model of experience.

109 But if we accept this metaphysic of experience, on what basis could we convince  
 110 others to adopt this new and different—and, presumably, superior—“worldview,”  
 111 “perspective,” or “conceptual scheme” of feminism or anti-racism? The challenge  
 112 seems insurmountable, especially if their experiences of the world either explic-  
 113 itly contradict these constituent theoretical commitments (“Women just are worse  
 114 than men at reasoning”) or, minimally, fail to support them (“I’ve never seen any  
 115 instances of sexism, and I’ve never been discriminated against, so what’s the big  
 116 deal?”). How would one get outside this closed loop? It seems that we do, in  
 117 fact, escape that loop, at least some of us do some of the time. Accounts of fem-  
 118 inist epiphanies constitute examples of such escapes. But if we aren’t entirely  
 119 enslaved by our worldviews, it seems that we would need some version of the  
 120 Romantic model to explain how this can happen. And therein lies the dilemma:  
 121 feminist politics seems to need both the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of  
 122 experience.

123 It seems that the only way to make it possible to have experiences of the world  
 124 that testify to the presence of race, class, or gender privilege on the Kuhnian model  
 125 is to take up a “perspective” or adopt a “conceptual scheme,” “worldview,” or “mind  
 126 set” that accepts the thesis that there is such privilege, and which will in turn yield  
 127 a different interpretation of the world that will confirm that thesis. In essence, it  
 128 seems that in order to be willing to take up such a perspective, we must already,  
 129 to some extent, accept it, or see it as a desirable perspective to adopt. But if, from  
 130 the perspective of feminist politics, the experience of the marginalized is to serve  
 131 as a catalyst for political change, and if that experience is to be taken to constitute  
 132 an account of the world that reveals something true about the world—and that this  
 133 perspective is superior to the perspective from which these facts are hidden—then it  
 134 seems that we must have access to the type of experience posited by the Romantic  
 135 model: experience that is true, authentic and to which our theories are answerable.  
 This would be experience that can itself serve as an arbiter and a source of insight

136 into the world independent of our “perspectives” or “worldviews.” But the Kuhnian  
137 model of experience has, presumably debunked that model.

138 Catherine MacKinnon offers consciousness-raising as a possible strategy for  
139 breaking out of this loop: “Through consciousness-raising, women grasp the col-  
140 lective reality of women’s condition from within the perspective of that experience,  
141 not from outside it” (536), and “as its own kind of social analysis, within yet out-  
142 side the male paradigm, just as women’s lives are [consciousness-raising] has a  
143 distinctive theory of the relation between method and truth, the individual and her  
144 social surroundings” (535–6). The metaphor of “inside” versus “outside”, and the  
145 invocation of feminism as the theory of “women’s point of view” or “perspective”  
146 which lies somehow outside the male “paradigm” (535) is suggestive. MacKinnon  
147 wants to claim both that women’s experience is an effect of our social position  
148 within patriarchy, and that there is something of the outsider that allows women  
149 to engage critically with that experience. Consciousness-raising is the attempt to  
150 reinterpret women’s personal experiences and transform those experiences into a  
151 source of political insight, rather than understanding them as the purely personal  
152 and subjective experiences of a particular woman. What is it that women occupy?  
153 A “perspective” or a “point of view”—both ocular metaphors for a theoretical and  
154 political position.

155 MacKinnon’s analysis of women’s social position seems to imply that women’s  
156 perspective can constitute a critical perspective because it is both “inside” and  
157 “outside” of the patriarchal perspective or paradigm (these terms seem to be used  
158 interchangeably). Women’s experience has its roots in the tension between being a  
159 part of the patriarchal order but also being excluded from it. This understanding  
160 of experience, with its echoes of authenticity and veridicality, seems to hear-  
161 ken back to Romantic notions of experience, and of women as a (natural?) class  
162 with greater access to this authenticity. But to the extent that women’s experi-  
163 ence is constructed by patriarchy, it is difficult to see how to make sense of that  
164 authenticity. MacKinnon’s claims for women’s experience, then, seem to appeal  
165 to both the Kuhnian and the Romantic accounts of experience in a way that  
166 is difficult to account for: women’s experience is an effect of patriarchy, yet it  
167 can, at the same time, provide the resources for resisting patriarchy in virtue of  
168 its greater authenticity and its “outsider” status. We must have access to experi-  
169 ence that is not determined by patriarchal paradigms, otherwise it would be  
170 hard to see how one might have experiences that “put the lie” to patriarchal  
171 interpretations. But for this to make sense, then women would have to either  
172 have access to Romantic experience, or, following the Kuhnian model, women  
173 would have to already have committed to a “feminist perspective” that would  
174 allow them to have the kinds of experiences that would put the lie to patriarchal  
175 interpretations.

176 It might be tempting at this point to just pitch “experience” into the dustbin of  
177 outmoded terms and concepts, like “phlogiston” or “soul” or “the ether.” Following  
178 out the theoretical consequences of the Kuhnian model of experience, Richard  
179 Rorty argues just that. Appeals to experience, and the epistemological machinery  
180 such appeals invoke, are wedded to a concept of mind as mirror, according to

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AQ2 181 Rorty. The model of mind as mirror, a model that Rorty attributes to Descartes,  
 182 encourages us to think of the subject of experience as a passive recipient of data.  
 183 In John Dewey's words, it is part of a spectator theory of knowledge, in which  
 184 knowledge has no—indeed ought to have no—constitutive connection to human  
 185 interests or identity, and in which the subject of knowledge is ideally a pas-  
 186 sive spectator of the world. Similarly, this model assumes that the most objective  
 187 subject is one whose “mirror” is relatively free of cultural or social influences; ide-  
 188 ally, each mirror would be identical (and interchangeable) with any other mirror.  
 189 Appeals to experience, then, are underwritten by the concept of the autonomous  
 190 subject of liberal theory—an individual subject who exists as such prior to cul-  
 191 ture, and is, in this sense, a metaphysical posit. Thus, in the invocation of, and  
 192 appeal to experience, we discover an assumption about the nature of individuals  
 193 and subjects that emphasizes their status as ontologically given, and their social  
 194 identities as either sources of bias, or as irrelevancies. The model of mind as mirror  
 195 serves a particular political role, then, as well as framing a particular approach to  
 196 epistemology.

197 According to Rorty, we cannot free ourselves from this objectionable model of  
 198 mind and identity if we continue to invoke “experience.” Better to jettison the term  
 199 entirely, Rorty thinks, or replace it with “discourse.”<sup>3</sup> But for feminists, this move  
 200 seems to ignore the very important role that appeals to experience can play in fem-  
 201 inist politics, and so to jettison “experience” as a concept in order to escape the  
 202 model of mind as mirror—and the related versions of objectivity it supports—seems  
 203 a rather high price to pay. Joan Scott and Louise Antony, for instance, both reject  
 204 the model of mind as mirror, but neither feels compelled to jettison the term “expe-  
 205 rience” in the wake of that rejection. As I will show, however, the alternatives that  
 206 Scott and Antony offer cannot solve the ideological dilemma posed by the Kuhnian  
 207 and Romantic concepts of experience.

208 This dilemma, it seems to me, is itself an artifact of a particular model of  
 209 mind—“mind as interpreting machine”—which, even as it has promised to help  
 210 us avoid particular problems having to do with objectivity, has had its own trou-  
 211 blesome aspects. I shall begin with a discussion of anti-foundationalist critiques of  
 212 traditional empiricism and the theory of mind that anti-foundationalists identify as  
 213 supporting that tradition, but then argue that the discussion of experience we find in  
 214 anti-foundationalist theorists ends up “linguistifying” experience and agency, as in  
 215 the case of Scott's theory or, alternatively positing a priori a thin account of expe-  
 216 rience, as in Antony's theory. These moves represent a privileging of a particular  
 217 model of objectivity, and a particular model of mind, that in combination give rise  
 218 to the tension between the Romantic model of experience and the Kuhnian model.  
 219

220  
 221 <sup>3</sup>This exchange between Rorty and an interviewer is probably the clearest statement of Rorty's  
 222 position. When asked what he thought of Dewey's theory of experience, Rorty replies: “I regard  
 223 that as the worst part of Dewey. I'd be glad if he'd never written *Experience and Nature*.” When  
 224 the interviewer then asks whether a philosophy shorn of its model of truth as representation and  
 225 its pursuit of the theory of knowledge might not need a theory of experience, Rorty replies, “I'd  
 prefer ‘discourse’ to ‘experience’.” (As quoted in Mendieta 20)

I offer an alternative, naturalistically-informed model of mind that takes agency as constitutive of mind and that offers the possibility of *avoiding* rather than solving, the ideological dilemma.

## Anti-foundationalism, Feminism and the Escape from the Model of Mind as Mirror

In her very influential essay “The Evidence of ‘Experience’” Scott draws on the Rortian attack on foundationalism and its theory of mind to critique feminist projects that put “experience” at the center of a programme for documenting women’s experience or that appeal to experience as a grounding for political claims—such as MacKinnon’s claims about consciousness-raising and women’s experience. This critique has had significant influence in feminist theoretical circles. Among other things, Scott charges that projects or justifications that give a central place to experience tend to “naturalize” experience and the experiencing subject, trading on the idea of experience as a non-linguistic, asocial encounter with the world on the part of a subject who exists as such “naturally.” Appeals to experience, then, are troublesome from an epistemological perspective, because of their complicity with foundationalism, but they also operate with an assumption about the ontological givenness of the subject of experience, and thereby disguise the ways in which subjectivity is an achievement, not an ontological given.

Scott’s claim against empiricist foundationalism and the accompanying Romantic model of experience can best be captured with a paraphrase of Simone de Beauvoir: one is not born a subject; one becomes a subject. Subjecthood in its political sense—related to concepts of social identity, agency, and power—is an achievement marked by the successful appropriation of certain kinds of skills and performances that mark identities and constitute existents as subjects with interior mental lives and perspectives. The correlate of this that Scott emphasizes is the role of language in the constitution of subjects of experience: one might say that the possibility of claiming “linguistic space” is essential to the constitution and achievement of subjectivity because only this allows others to recognize one as a locus of desires, motives, intentions and beliefs. The role of language, however, cannot be overemphasized in Scott’s critique: not only is the possibility of claiming linguistic space essential to the status of subject, but experience, Scott claims, cannot be disentangled from its expression in language. Experience is not prior to language, but is constituted by it.

Scott advances this position by elaborating on the role of discursivity in the constitution of subjects of experience.<sup>4</sup> According to Scott, appeals to experience

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<sup>4</sup>I realize that it can be frustrating to philosophers to encounter terms like “discursive” or “discursive practices” when they seem to have no clear referent. My interpretative strategy when I encounter these terms is to understand them as referring to the concrete context of reason-giving, discussion, and theory construction—that is, as concrete, particular instances of such practices. For anyone with a bent for logic, the idea of a universe of discourse might be a good entry point for

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271 and the related project of making experience visible assume that experience and its  
 272 meaning are prior to language and that language is put at the service of representing  
 273 or expressing experience; in essence, Scott argues, the relationship between experi-  
 274 ence and language is taken to be one in which experience can be meaningful prior to  
 275 its expression in language, and this assumption commits such a position to the idea  
 276 of a pre-discursive autonomous subject. According to Scott this subject is, yet again,  
 277 the liberal individual for whom matters of identity and identification are irrelevant,  
 278 and for whom experience of the world is “natural” and unmediated, as opposed to  
 279 “learned” or “constructed.”

280 Rorty’s related claims about the role of linguistic innovation in the constitution  
 281 of subjects make this position especially clear. According to Rorty’s analysis of  
 282 feminist politics and feminist rhetorical strategies, women’s status as agents is a  
 283 discursive effect, rather than a prior (metaphysical) truth that must be captured or  
 284 represented accurately (“Feminism”). In claiming for women a new moral identity  
 285 as agents, feminists have not unearthed a pre-existing truth that has been hidden by  
 286 patriarchal ideology, Rorty argues; we have created that identity, rather than discover-  
 287 ing it. Agency and autonomy, as defining characteristics of subjects, are cultural  
 288 posits or constructions, according to Rorty and Scott. To be an agent is to be taken  
 289 to be such, and the process of going from non-agent to agent is a process of per-  
 290 suasive redescription. The status of agent is not a metaphysical status. It cannot  
 291 be established a priori.<sup>5</sup> Status as an agent is conferred, and is itself a function of  
 292 being interpreted as exercising agency. But appeals to experience, Rorty and Scott  
 293 imply, are always in danger of invoking and reinforcing the idea of mind as mirror  
 294 and of an autonomous individual who pre-exists the effects of culture and social  
 295 learning.

296 In addition to their tendency to reinforce a debunked metaphysics of agency and  
 297 mind, appeals to experience are, for both Rorty and Scott, “ocularcentric.” Vision  
 298 and visibility are the dominant models for knowledge and with this model we invoke  
 299 at the same time the model of mind as mirror and the conception of experience as  
 300 veridical (ocular) representation.<sup>6</sup> We are misled by this metaphor, Rorty argues,  
 301 and Scott argues that feminist appeals to experience, and the correlative privileging  
 302 of a metaphor of visibility mean that this metaphysics of subject and experience are  
 303 still exerting their undesirable force. Just as subjects of experience are discursively  
 304 constructed, objects of experience are also so constituted. Objects of experience  
 305 and of knowledge are constituted by their roles in epistemic practices and regimes  
 306 of knowledge. They are picked out by their descriptions under some vocabulary  
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308  
 309 understanding how this term is used. Whether Scott means to invoke these meanings is not clear  
 310 from the article, but it seems the most promising and sympathetic reading.

311 <sup>5</sup>See Scott: “. . . [S]ubjects do have agency. They are not unified, autonomous individuals exercising  
 312 free will, but rather subjects whose agency is created through situations and statuses conferred on  
 313 them” (793).

314 <sup>6</sup>Scott has a further objection to this emphasis on visibility, drawn from Foucault’s analysis of  
 315 disciplinary practices. While this is an important aspect of her argument, it is not connected directly  
 to the metaphysical issues that are my concern in this chapter.



316 or rubric. We might think that visual representation is the result of an encounter  
 317 between the passive eye and the simple (and brute) object of vision, but Scott empha-  
 318 sizes the embeddedness of all objects and subjects in discursive practices, without  
 319 which they would have no meaning. Thus, if we follow the anti-foundationalist lead  
 320 that Rorty and Scott have laid out for us, we come to see that vision is not the passive  
 321 in-take of information from the world *an sich*, since visual experience is mediated  
 322 by theories, and thus by language. Visual experience is learned—it is not natural—  
 323 and it is, essentially, discursive—that is, tied up in discourse and knowledge  
 324 practices.

325 While she agrees with Scott and Rorty in rejecting the model of mind as passive  
 326 (and blank) screen onto which visual images are projected, Antony draws on cogni-  
 327 tive science to make her case. Unlike Scott, Antony is not concerned that vision and  
 328 experience might be overly “naturalized” in the model of mind as mirror, but that it  
 329 is not naturalized enough. Antony argues for the epistemic value of “bias” by draw-  
 330 ing on Quinean and Kuhnian arguments about the theory-dependence of experience  
 331 and the naturalized approach to the mind that they implicitly (in the case of Quine,  
 332 explicitly) mobilize. According to Antony, a naturalized approach to epistemology  
 333 and philosophy of mind shows us that “far from being the streamlined, uncluttered  
 334 logic machine of classical empiricism, the mind now appears to be much more like  
 335 a bundle of highly specialized modules, each natively fitted for the analysis and  
 336 manipulation of a particular body of sensory data” (137). Antony argues that the  
 337 most objectionable aspects of “traditional” epistemology and philosophy of mind,  
 338 from a feminist perspective, are the aspects of it that come down to us from classical  
 339 empiricism, which assumed that the *tabula rasa* of the mind was written on only by  
 340 experience, and any elements contributed by the mind itself would inevitably distort  
 341 that experience and thereby undercut the possibility of objectivity and knowledge.  
 342 In this respect, she and Rorty and Scott are fellow travelers; all three critique a  
 343 model of mind and an allied version of empiricism that eschews any kind of in-put  
 344 from the mind. And all three see the inevitability—and necessity—of such in-put as  
 345 requiring a revision of that model.

346 Drawing on Quine,<sup>7</sup> Antony argues that we cannot have knowledge of the world  
 347 without “bias”:

348 A completely ‘open mind’ confronting the sensory evidence we confront could never man-  
 349 age to construct the rich systems of knowledge we construct in the short time we take to  
 350 construct them: from the point of view of an *unbiased* mind, the human sensory flow con-  
 351 tains both too much information and too little: too much for the mind to generate *all* the  
 352 logical possibilities, and too little for it to decide among even the relatively few that *are*  
 353 generated. (137)

354 Experience, according to this naturalized approach, is a thin dribble of sensory  
 355 in-put from the world that is insufficient for the task of producing knowledge of the  
 356 world; to produce full-blooded knowledge of the world we must draw inferences  
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358  
 359 <sup>7</sup>This is another respect in which Antony and Rorty (but not Scott) are fellow travelers; both take  
 360 themselves to be drawing out the consequences of a Quinean critique of classical empiricism.

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361 or come up with explanations (for ourselves) of that in-put. Since the possible  
362 explanations of in-put are underdetermined by that in-put in virtue of its thinness,  
363 then we must furnish the rest from our other cognitive resources.

364 Those resources are, to a certain extent, theoretical (and discursive), but they are  
365 also, to a certain extent, hard-wired into the brain, according to Antony. The theo-  
366 retical resources are what Antony captures in her discussion of “worldviews” (139):  
367 analogous to scientific paradigms, worldviews give us a common language, shared  
368 mores and values, and a common ground for starting inquiry. According to Antony,  
369 worldviews do some of the work of simplifying and streamlining cognitive tasks,  
370 but, *contra* Rorty and Scott’s version of anti-foundationalism, they do not do all the  
371 work. When Antony speaks of the mind as a bundle of highly specialized modules,  
372 or of the role that native conceptual structure (137) plays in helping us to process  
373 information about the world, she is drawing on the approach to cognitive science  
374 pioneered by people like Jerry Fodor, who argue that the physical structure of the  
375 brain—its modules—make certain kinds of cognitive short-cuts possible, and that  
376 the organizing function of such modules is what allows experience to be intelligible  
377 to a subject.

378 One might justifiably ask what Antony’s approach has in common with Rorty’s  
379 and Scott’s, other than an appeal to Kuhnian analyses of paradigms, a commitment  
380 to anti-foundationalism, and a theory of vision and the subject in which that sub-  
381 ject brings something of her own to her visual encounters with the world. After all,  
382 one might object, Antony embraces the results of naturalistic investigations into the  
383 brain and mind to argue against the Romantic model of experience and the model of  
384 mind as mirror, while Scott and Rorty seem to prefer to take up dramatically differ-  
385 ent weapons, *viz.*: the idea of experience and subjects as discursively constructed,  
386 and what we might think of as an “externalized” model of mind. Rorty shares with  
387 Antony an enthusiasm for Quine, it’s true, and that might be said to have trickled  
388 down to Scott, but still the fact of the matter is that, other than a thin veneer of  
389 agreement on the fact that experience is “theory-dependent,” the route that Antony  
390 follows would seem to be a violation of the dictum laid down by Scott that “femi-  
391 nists shall not naturalize.” In that respect, it would seem that the differences between  
392 Scott and Antony constitute an unbridgeable gulf.

393 However, what they share is perhaps more important than what they do not. Scott  
394 and Antony search for a way to reframe experience that does not invoke founda-  
395 tionalist assumptions about the subject of experience. Vision is, according to Rorty and  
396 Scott, the organizing metaphor for knowledge and mind that animates founda-  
397 tionalism. They object to this privileging of vision because vision seems to be a passive  
398 faculty, in which information from the world is passively absorbed and, ideally,  
399 reflected without distortion in the mirror of nature—the mind. Antony does not take  
400 up the issue of whether the model of visual knowledge is appropriate for understand-  
401 ing our attempts to know the world generally, but she does, with Scott and Rorty,  
402 take issue with the model of mind and perception she sees as animating the marriage  
403 of classical empiricism and foundationalism. While Rorty and Scott emphasize the  
404 role of language in the constitution of experience and mind, Antony emphasizes  
405 the role that theory (closely allied to, if not necessarily identical with, language)

406 and brain modularity play in helping us come to know the world through experi-  
407 ence. The commitment to elaborating a model of mind and the knowing subject that  
408 eschews the model of mind as passive is a deep similarity: the mechanism for estab-  
409 lishing the non-passivity of mind for Scott is language and discursive practices.  
410 Recognition of the role these play in the construction of subjects and experience  
411 should lead us to give up the model of mind as an interior space or canvas on  
412 which experience writes. For Antony the mechanisms of non-passivity are theories  
413 and brain structure. While “mechanism of non-passivity” might seem a cumber-  
414 some and ugly stylistic choice on my part, I have a reason for not equating these  
415 “mechanisms of non-passivity” with activity and agency, as I will show in the next  
416 section.

417 In the next section I will argue that the approach to the problem of experience  
418 that we find in Scott and Antony represents a particular model of objectivity, one  
419 that essentially eviscerates the concept of experience. This model of objectivity is  
420 captured both by the linguistifying move that Scott makes in her appeal to discursive  
421 practices and the externalized model of mind they give rise to, and by Antony’s  
422 appeal to cognitive science and its characterization of experience as a type of thin  
423 in-put to a visual system which must then do something with it to come up with the  
424 meaningfulness of states of affairs. In each case, however, we lose the robust model  
425 of experience that characterizes the Romantic model of experience, and to which  
426 feminist politics appeals. This might seem to be the price we must pay to escape the  
427 mode of mind as mirror. But the escape from the hall of mirrors need not lead us to  
428 cede the term “experience” or replace it with a thin imitation of what it once was.  
429 Recognizing agency and the first-person perspective as essential aspects of mind  
430 provide us with other options.

## 431 432 **Impersonal and First-Person Perspectives: Critical Positions** 433 **Versus Avowals** 434

435  
436 Viewed from the third-person perspectives of the anthropologist, the historian, or  
437 the sociologist, the analysis of experience is an opportunity to learn about how a  
438 subject understands her world: what she takes to be important, how she organizes  
439 that world, and how those understandings are deployed in explanation. But from this  
440 perspective, experiences are treated as “experiences”: they are merely data points, or  
441 phenomena in need of explanation. The scare quotes imply a certain ironic stance,  
442 as we see in the title of Scott’s essay. Scare-quote experiences are not taken at  
443 face value as revealing the world as it is, but as revealing the way that a partic-  
444 ular subject interprets her world. The challenge that arises for the historian, the  
445 anthropologist, or the sociologist in understanding how the personal (first-person)  
446 and impersonal (third person) perspectives on a given experience or experiences  
447 relate to each other is the challenge of grappling with an irreducibly personal phe-  
448 nomenon (experience) from an impersonal perspective (“experience”). Yet, when  
449 viewed from the impersonal perspective, the grounds of experience’s epistemic  
450

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451 and rhetorical authority threaten to slip away—its veridicality can be called into  
 452 question, its theoretical grounds or constitutive frameworks viewed and criticized.<sup>8</sup>  
 453 The impersonal perspective is, essentially, a critical or ironic position.

454 Taking up this critical position with respect to our experiences, however, is  
 455 itself an achievement.<sup>9</sup> It is, in essence, the stance of objectivity and critical  
 456 distance, but this stance also seems to threaten with evaporation the very phe-  
 457 nomena it seeks to critique: in taking up a third-person perspective toward our  
 458 own experiences (and those of others) we do not necessarily commit ourselves  
 459 to the theories or frameworks that inform and shape that experience—we hold  
 460 those experiences at a distance, so to speak, without avowing the truth of their  
 461 deliverances. Experience becomes “experience”—no longer carrying with it the  
 462 presumption of veridicality or the assumption of a revelation from an objective  
 463 world, and shorn of its subjective bases.<sup>10</sup> From the critical perspective, we see the  
 464 mind as an interpreting machine, processing in-put from the world, but for the sub-  
 465 ject of these “experiences” the activity of the interpreting machinery must remain  
 466 unacknowledged. From the impersonal perspective we have only “experience”; it  
 467 is only the first-person perspective that can give us non-ironic, no-scare-quotes  
 468 experience.

469 This asymmetry between the third-person and first-person perspectives mani-  
 470 fests itself in our analyses of agency as well; while the critical perspective views the  
 471 subject’s “experience” as data points—as providing us with information about how  
 472 the subject interprets the world—the out-put of that interpretation, when viewed  
 473 from this perspective, can only be behavior, rather than agency. Agency is itself  
 474 something that is essentially constituted from the first-person perspective; it is a  
 475 way of understanding behavior that necessarily invokes the trappings and presup-  
 476 position of subjecthood.<sup>11</sup> Viewed from the third-person perspective, agency can be  
 477 inferred or imputed, but in taking up a third-person perspective toward some being,  
 478 I am at the same time viewing that being as an object—that is, as a non-subject.  
 479 The sideways-on view of a person, or of a set of beliefs, is then different from  
 480 the first-person perspective that has as its essential ingredient agency, and which  
 481

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482 <sup>8</sup>Edward Bruner reflecting on his own discipline of anthropology says: “Traditionally, anthropolo-  
 483 gists have tried to understand the world as seen by the ‘experiencing subject,’ striving for an inner  
 484 perspective. . . [but] we systematically remove the personal and the experiential in accordance with  
 485 our anthropological paradigms; then we reintroduce them so as to make our ethnographies more  
 486 real, alive” (Turner and Bruner 9).

487 <sup>9</sup>See, for instance, John McDowell and Wilfred Sellars, both of whom argue that the ability to  
 488 distance ourselves from our experiences is an achievement that is associated with an “objective  
 489 stance.” Critical distancing from experience is also a hallmark of rationality in some moral theories  
 490 that place a high value on reflective equilibrium as a model for reasoning.

491 <sup>10</sup>Kwame Anthony Appiah (60) makes a similar argument about the ways in which third-person  
 and first-person stances interact with attributions of agency.

492 <sup>11</sup>See, for instance, Moran and a slightly orthogonal, but still relevant argument in Dennett (254–5)  
 493 where he argues that I cannot but see myself as a person, and thus as a subject, in Scott’s  
 494 terminology.

496 avows certain beliefs or commitments. In the case of both experience and agency,  
497 the first-person perspective is essential to the constitution of these concepts. The  
498 third-person perspective that Scott's account privileges—the perspective of criti-  
499 cal distance and objectivity—threatens with dissolution these concepts—experience  
500 and agency—since the first-person perspective from which they are avowed non-  
501 ironically is itself taken to be a discursive effect; an effect that is essentially  
502 third-person.

503 Appeals to experience (as in the case of the Romantic model of experience)  
504 and anti-foundationalist critiques of these appeals (as in the Kuhnian model) are  
505 caught in this conflict between the third-person “objective” or critical stance and  
506 the first-person stance of avowal. For the anti-foundationalist the conflict is resolved  
507 in favor of the impersonal, critical stance—the stance of objectivity. The objec-  
508 tive stance that Scott and Rorty privilege is also inconsistent with attributions of  
509 agency, since taking up the impersonal perspective is just that perspective that is  
510 constituted by exiling agency. To see oneself or others from the impersonal (or  
511 third-person) perspective is just to interpret them as behaving, rather than as act-  
512 ing, since the intentions that would make something an action rather than a mere  
513 behavior are invisible from the third-person perspective. Viewed impersonally from  
514 the third-person perspective intentions can only be imputed or inferred on the basis  
515 of other behaviors (including testimonies). The anti-foundationalist premises from  
516 which Rorty and Scott derive their claims about experience and to which they appeal  
517 in arguing that agency is conferred would be *expected* to deliver these verdicts on  
518 experience and agency because we can get only “experience” and behavior when  
519 we take up this critical position. But, in the attempt to avoid the model of mind as  
520 mirror, Rorty and Scott replace it with a model of mind as interpreting machine that  
521 “outputs” behavior.

522 Antony's version of anti-foundationalism also exiles agency from her account,  
523 but does so by focusing on cognitive modularity and “worldviews.” Antony, like  
524 Scott, offers an essentially third-person approach to the subject and agent, where  
525 experience becomes “experience.” Unlike Rorty and Scott, however, Antony explic-  
526 itly elaborates the concept of experience as thin in-put to a visual system which  
527 then works with that thin in-put, contributing resources from its cognitive resources  
528 (worldviews, paradigms, theories and cognitive modularity) to produce for the  
529 experiencing subject a world of states of affairs, three-dimensional objects, and  
530 meaningfulness. But the assumption that experience is the thin in-put to the inter-  
531 preting machine that is the mind is an a priori commitment to a story about what  
532 experience must be like according to the model that Antony advocates, rather than  
533 a thoroughly naturalistic version of experience. It is one way of approaching mind  
534 naturalistically, it is true, but the naturalistic stance that takes seriously the phe-  
535 nomenological aspects of experience is also viable, as we shall see, and allows us  
536 to preserve some of what is valuable in the Romantic model of experience. Models  
537 serve certain kinds of research purposes—they delineate a field of study and provide  
538 methods and simulacra for the target of investigation. The model of mind as inter-  
539 preting machine has provided solutions to pressing problems in cognitive science.  
540 But the ideological dilemma that presents itself in feminist politics as the dilemma

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541 of interpreting our social experiences, and the relationship of our gendered/raced  
 542 identities to those interpretations, might be an arena for which the model is  
 543 unsuited.

544 One of the virtues of the model of mind as mirror and the Romantic model  
 545 of experience that accompanied it was its ability to fold the first-person aspect of  
 546 experience into mentality. Not only did it preserve the phenomenological aspects of  
 547 experience, but it also helped explain the persuasiveness of experience to the experi-  
 548 encing subject. Scott, Rorty and Antony begin with models of mind that privilege  
 549 “scientific” or third-person approaches to mind—in the case of Scott and Rorty, the  
 550 model is primarily drawn from the social sciences, in Antony’s case from cognitive  
 551 science—that are essentially antithetical to the development of a robust concept of  
 552 experience, since these models have exiled the first-person and phenomenological  
 553 aspects of experience in an attempt to overcome the problems with the Romantic  
 554 model of experience and the model of mind as mirror. The problem of experience  
 555 as we find it posed in the dilemma between the insights of anti-foundationalism  
 556 and the desire to salvage something of experience as a way of coming to know the  
 557 world—between the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of experience—is a relic of  
 558 a priori assumptions about the mind, sense experience, and our attempts to know  
 559 the world that assume that the vehicle of meaningfulness for our interactions with  
 560 the world is theory and language, and that the non-passivity of the mind must be  
 561 attributed not to a fundamental agency, but to theories or brain structures that essen-  
 562 tially project meaning onto the world. The model of mind that Scott, Rorty, and  
 563 Antony are assuming is that of mind as an information processing system or inter-  
 564 preting machine, where theories or “perspectives” are taken to be the software or  
 565 “instructions” according to which in-put from the world is processed. Antony adds  
 566 as well the “hardware” of modularity to this story. But putting agency at the center of  
 567 our account of mind fundamentally reorients the issue, and gives us a different way  
 568 to understand knowledge, mind, and the constitution of subjects. I think this shift  
 569 can be justified on the basis of both its “naturalistic” credentials and its promise for  
 570 allowing us to evade the dilemma that is posed by the model of mind and experience  
 571 that we have inherited from this branch of anti-foundationalism. A different model  
 572 of mind can displace this dilemma.

### 573 574 575 **Agency and Models of the Mind**

576  
 577 Before going further with the argument, I should explain the role that models play in  
 578 theorizing about the mind, since it is my contention that at the heart of the ideolog-  
 579 ical dilemma is the assumption that we must choose between two opposing models  
 580 of mind, one of which has been debunked (the mind as mirror) and the other of  
 581 which has been forced upon us by advances in theory and science. Models, accord-  
 582 ing to Joseph Rouse, like simulacra “[mimic] features of the world which interest  
 583 us in an object that we can manipulate in different ways than we can manipulate the  
 584 things simulated” (*Engaging Science* 227). Models are stand-ins for the target of  
 585 scientific investigation: minds, atoms, hurricanes, or the trajectory of a flying golf

586 ball can all be targets of investigation via computer models, mathematical models,  
587 or in some cases, pictorial models.<sup>12</sup> The distinction between metaphor of mind  
588 and model of mind is blurry in the discussion of experience, however. While mod-  
589 els are used in scientific research, the feminist discussion of experience seems to  
590 be as much a part of our common, everyday language as it is a problem for sci-  
591 ence,<sup>13</sup> and yet the two domains overlap. The spillover of scientific models into  
592 the non-scientific discourses of mind and experience may be one of the things that  
593 distinguishes present-day psychology from present-day physics; while most non-  
594 physicists still resort to and privilege folk physics in their interactions with the  
595 world, folk psychology has been interwoven with scientific psychology as well  
596 as with social scientific models in accounts of behavior. Models are important to  
597 scientific research programmes because they make certain aspects of the target of  
598 investigation more perspicuous, but the cost of that level of resolution is that other  
599 characteristics of the target object are obscured, or vanish altogether. When models  
600 are taken up in everyday political discourse, their role as model—and the prag-  
601 matic ground of that role—is often forgotten: models are then assumed to be simply  
602 descriptions of the entity in question.

603 Scott is correct when she says that the objects of experience and of knowledge are  
604 discursively constructed—and this is nowhere so evident as it is in the discussion of  
605 mind and experience itself. The discursive construction of mind and experience has  
606 been the effect primarily of the overlap between our “everyday” need to understand  
607 others and ourselves with the discourses of anthropology, sociology, neuroscience,  
608 and other branches of scientific psychology. While the models of mind we have  
609 adopted from the social sciences and from scientific psychology have helped solve  
610 certain problems, they have given rise to other problems—in particular the ide-  
611 ological dilemma. But the problem is that the ideological dilemma is not just a  
612 narrowly defined scientific puzzle—it is also, for feminist politics and theory, an  
613 important aspect of political life and engagement. The model of mind as mirror and  
614 the Romantic model of experience gave rise to certain problems to which the model  
615 of mind as interpreting machine provides answers. In some cases, the introduction  
616 of the model of mind as interpreting machine actually led to the dissolution of old  
617 problems (e.g., the missing shade of blue). But the model of mind as interpreting  
618 machine requires that we exile from our account of mind the phenomenological  
619 aspects of experience, including the essentially first-person character of experience  
620 and agency that was a central component of the Romantic model of experience and  
621 of mind as mirror. A particular model of objectivity seemed to dictate this exile,  
622 but that model seems to have its own drawbacks when we try to use it for feminist  
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626 <sup>12</sup>Unlike paradigms, however, models are models in virtue of being taken up in scientific practices,  
627 and are themselves more objects in the world. For an informative discussion, see (Rouse, *Engaging*  
628 *Science* 227–30).

629 <sup>13</sup>My use of the term “science” in this chapter is meant to include not just the natural and physical  
630 sciences, but also the behavioral and social sciences.

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631 political purposes: it gives rise to the ideological dilemma. The ideological dilemma  
632 itself may be dissolved by adopting a different model of mind.<sup>14</sup>

633 Recent developments in empirical psychology have questioned the value of the  
634 “input-output” (or “interpreting machine,” as I have been calling it) model of mind,  
635 in which sensory data is the in-put from the world to the mind while action is the  
636 output of mind to the world. The “enactive theory of mind” fundamentally re-ori-  
637 entes the conflict between first-person and third-person approaches to agency and experi-  
638 ence that constitutes the feminist intellectual inheritance of the struggle between the  
639 Romantic and the Kuhnian models of experience. By placing agency and practical  
640 activity at the nexus of mind and world, the enactive theory of mind can preserve  
641 the meaningfulness of experience to its subject without reverting to the model of a  
642 passive and disembodied mind that mirrors the world.

643 Much of the motivation for Antony’s naturalistic account of the theory-  
644 dependence of perception comes from her commitment to the characterization of  
645 sensory experience as “thin”—a conception that comes from Quine, who himself  
646 borrows it from the going psychological theories of the mid-twentieth century.  
647 According to Irving Rock’s summary of theories of perception, the dominant  
648 approaches to explaining sense perception share a commitment to a model of sens-  
649 ory experience as a thin (proximal) stimulus provided by the “optical array,”  
650 which is itself furnished by brute physical objects in interaction with sources of  
651 light (the distal stimulus). While different schools might disagree over the mech-  
652 anism for producing meaningful representations out of the thin stimulus of the  
653 optical array, none of the dominant computational models questions the assumption  
654 that the in-put is “thin” (Rock, 12). Alva Noë calls this the “brain-photoreceptor”  
655 model of mind, in which the in-put available to the experiencing subject is anal-  
656 ogous to that which is available to a camera, and the brain then “processes” that  
657 thin in-put to produce, from two-dimensional images, a world of three-dimensional  
658 objects.

659 The most striking thing from a feminist perspective about this model of the  
660 brain-photoreceptor and the concomitant assumption that sensory in-put is thin—  
661 analogous to the information available, in essence, to a camera—is the absence of an  
662 embodied and active subject of experience. The alternative offered to us by cognitive  
663 science on which Antony draws does not seem to solve matters very much. While  
664 some cognitive scientists (e.g., Lakoff and Johnson) have bemoaned the absence  
665 of a body in philosophical theories of mind, the body that is usually incorporated  
666 in an attempt to correct that error is only a brain, or perhaps a brain in a body-  
667 schemata. This remains true of the model of mind as interpreting machine—both in  
668 its cognitive science guise, and in its linguistified guise.

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672 <sup>14</sup>I hasten to add that I am not arguing that we ought to give up the model of mind as interpreting  
673 machine entirely—clearly, models have pragmatic value for solving certain kinds of problems in  
674 psychology. What I would argue, though, is that we make a mistake when we take that model of  
675 mind to be a description of what the mind and experience really are, rather than understanding that  
676 model as a problem-solving tool.



676 The discussion of the political nature of experience as we find that in the move  
 677 to replace “experience” with “discourse” and in discussions of identity has not fared  
 678 much better in including the body in its conceptual grounding. The critique of sub-  
 679 jectivity that we find in Scott (and, to a certain extent, in Judith Butler) has taken  
 680 as its primary lens of analysis the linguistic/discursive aspects of experience. The  
 681 problem with this approach is that it tends to miss the fact that discursive prac-  
 682 tices are also constituted by material practices—they are not merely linguistic in  
 683 nature.<sup>15</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, Sonia Kruks, and Paula Moya have been critical  
 684 of these approaches for this very reason: they see in Scott’s approach (and the  
 685 related approach to experience that we find in Butler) a failure to appreciate the non-  
 686 discursive aspects of experience, including the material basis of embodied identity  
 687 and agency. While Alcoff, Linda Martín, Kruks, and Moya draw on the existential  
 688 and phenomenological philosophical traditions, the enactive theory of mind focuses  
 689 on experimental evidence to do essentially the same thing. For the enactivist, per-  
 690 ception is a bodily-based “skillful activity,” rather than the processing of neutral  
 691 in-put.

692 As we saw earlier, part of the goal of the anti-foundationalists is to show that the  
 693 mind is not a blank and passive recipient of neutral data from the world; Scott’s anal-  
 694 ysis focuses on the ways in which experience is not a thin, neutral in-put from the  
 695 world, but is, rather, “discursively constructed”; Antony’s approach is to accept the  
 696 premise that the in-put is thin and neutral, but to emphasize the way that the experi-  
 697 encing subject gets interpretive help in giving that in-put meaning from paradigms,  
 698 worldviews, and brain structure. Yet the Kuhnian analysis of experience they offer  
 699 lends itself to skepticism about the possibility of experiences revealing to us a  
 700 world that is independent of our pre-conceived theories or “paradigms.” The pos-  
 701 sibility of genuinely revelatory experiences and the phenomenological, first-person  
 702 attachment to this is offered by the Romantic model of experience that underwrites  
 703 feminist appeals to experience, but this model seems wedded to the model of mind  
 704 as mirror. Given that feminist political practice seems to support both the revela-  
 705 tory potential of experience and the commitment to a conception of experience  
 706 as “educable” through political engagement, we must look beyond the dominant  
 707 model of mind as interpreting machine and the assumption that identities can be  
 708 cashed out in the highly theoretical—and intellectualized—terms of “worldviews.”  
 709 Understanding perception as a type of skillful activity, where such activity is sub-  
 710 stantially embodied, not merely a brain process, allows us to preserve aspects of  
 711 both the Kuhnian and the Romantic models of experience and evade the ideological  
 712 dilemma.

713 The idea that we directly perceive, rather than infer, the characteristics of our  
 714 environment as affording us certain opportunities for action (Gibson 127) is central  
 715 to the ecological approach to sensory perception, and is adopted by contemporary  
 716 philosophers of mind who advocate the enactivist model of mind. Both reject the  
 717 a priori assumption that sensory experience is thin by resituating the mind as an  
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720 <sup>15</sup>See, for instance, Alcoff, Linda Martín (*Real* 121–6) and Rouse (“Understanding” 449–51).

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721 embodied aspect of a subject of experience who is actively engaged in interacting  
 722 with the world, not merely as a brain-photoreceptor system, but as a walking, talk-  
 723 ing, exploring and curious agent. Perception is conceptually and developmentally  
 724 linked to agency.

725 Gibson introduced the idea of “affordances” to capture what it is that we directly  
 726 perceive when we perceive a state of affairs, and to offer an alternative to the  
 727 assumption that experience is thin. Gibson connects his own theory to that of the  
 728 gestaltists who, he argues, rightly recognized that the meaningfulness and value  
 729 of objects seems to be directly perceived: “The accepted theories of perception, to  
 730 which the gestalt theorists were objecting, implied that no experiences were direct  
 731 except sensations and that sensations mediated all other kinds of experience. Bare  
 732 sensations had to be clothed with meaning” (140). The way the gestaltists tried to  
 733 explain the direct perception of meaningfulness and value, according to Gibson, was  
 734 by postulating the existence of a “phenomenal object” as distinct from the physical  
 735 object. The gestaltists explained the seeming immediacy and directness of the per-  
 736 ception of value and meaningfulness as the result of the interaction between the ego  
 737 and the phenomenal object. Gibson argues that we can preserve the phenomenol-  
 738 ogy of the immediacy of perception by foregrounding an animal or organism’s  
 739 active engagement with, and perception of, the environment. Affordances, then,  
 740 “afford” the organism in question with possibilities for action—possibilities that  
 741 are both embodied and culturally enriched. For the gestaltists, “it was the *phenom-*  
 742 *enal* postbox that invited letter-mailing, not the *physical* postbox. But this duality is  
 743 pernicious. I prefer to say that the real postbox (the *only* one) affords letter-mailing  
 744 to a letter-writing human in a community with a postal system. This fact is per-  
 745 ceived when the postbox is identified as such. . . .” (139). The “worldview” within  
 746 which letter-writing and letter-mailing are possible, and in which we can see the  
 747 affordances of a postbox, is not encoded in a theory, but in a way of acting in the  
 748 world that is both culturally variable, learned, and, for all that, not modeled on a  
 749 disembodied perspective the characteristics of which are encoded in language or  
 750 theories. The perceiver in this case sees what can be done with the postbox, and  
 751 that affordance is directly and immediately perceived when one sees the postbox as  
 752 such. Perception is a skillful activity and always involves the possibility for action  
 753 and use. In addition, the ecological approach to perception, and the enactivist theory  
 754 of mind that builds on it, emphasize that the world is not a cabinet full of neutral  
 755 objects, but is rather a world full of meaning—affordances—that are taken up by  
 756 perceiving, active agents as possibilities for action. Objects are directly perceived  
 757 as meaningful to agents, understood as embodied subjects for whom action is an  
 758 essential ingredient in coming to know the world.<sup>16</sup>

759 The dilemma that seems to press so hard on feminist politics—the conundrum  
 760 of how we can have transformative political experiences that are not mere pro-  
 761 jections of our going theories—is a dilemma that we’ve inherited from traditional  
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764 <sup>16</sup>Sheets-Johnstone gives a good overview of the evidence for the centrality of agency to self-  
 765 consciousness, and Hurley argues that it is essential to the unity of perception.

766 theories of mind and perception. The dilemma arises as a result of thinking that  
767 the vehicles of meaning must be theories of some sort, or theories plus brain struc-  
768 ture (on the Kuhnian conception of experience in conjunction with the model of  
769 mind as interpreting machine) or that experience constitutes mental images that  
770 are projected onto an internal screen, and carry their meanings as such images (as  
771 on the Romantic conception of experience in conjunction with the mind as mirror  
772 model).

773 According to the enactive model of mind, mind is not just “in the head”—it has  
774 intentional relations with the external world—but it is also developed through *prac-*  
775 *tical* engagement with a world that is not sharply distinguished from the cultural  
776 practices in which human beings engage. The line between the “natural” world and  
777 the “cultural” world is blurry. At the same time, however, these cultural practices  
778 do not entirely dictate the affordances of objects, since, as in Gibson’s example, a  
779 postbox can be either an opportunity to mail a letter or, in other instances, an annoy-  
780 ing thing that the snowplow tends to knock down every winter. States of affairs  
781 and objects remain open to new and different possibilities as our practical engage-  
782 ment with the world shifts and morphs. Furthermore, contrary to Rorty’s and Scott’s  
783 claims, our understanding of experience as veridical need not invoke a “spectator  
784 theory” of knowledge; attention to a naturalistic account of sense perception reveals  
785 that sense perception is essentially active, but need not, on that account, be under-  
786 stood as the product of interpretation or inference. Meaning need not be created or  
787 discovered on this model, since it is *both* created and discovered, to some extent. So,  
788 while Scott argues that the problem with our concept of experience is that it leads  
789 us to “naturalize” experience and the subject as agent, the problem seems to be that  
790 we have not naturalized experience and the agential basis of subjectivity enough.

791 The enactivist approach has the virtue of taking seriously a first-person perspec-  
792 tive on our engagement with the world, allowing us to reconstruct the developmental  
793 and phenomenological aspects of our attempts to know the world, and yet it does not  
794 require the assumption of a transcendental subject that is the metaphysical conduit  
795 of agency. Agency is, indeed, “imputed” or inferred in this model, but that agency is  
796 simply the practical activity of reaching for things, grasping them, using them and  
797 understanding them in relation to their potential for such activity. This is not the  
798 metaphysical agency to which Scott and Rorty object; it is a naturalized agency in a  
799 different sense—drawn from our own observations of the world and our recognition  
800 of the relatively seamless integration of subjective states and a world of objects that  
801 are encountered as meaningful.

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## 804 Conclusion

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806 What I hope to have shown is that the assumption that subjectivity is achieved,  
807 paired with the idea that experience is educable, does not necessarily lead to the  
808 conclusion that we can only “see”—metaphorically and actually—what we already  
809 believe. In this respect, I hope to have clarified some of the issues at stake in the  
810 claim that experience is always “political.” In addition, I hope to have made a

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811 case for moving beyond an *a prioristic* approach to the analysis of experience, an  
 812 approach that seems to assume that our only choices for an analysis of experience  
 813 are limited to a model in which we accept experience as “given” and subjectivity  
 814 as an ontological primitive or brute (the Romantic model), or a model in which we  
 815 understand experience as theory-laden, and subjective projection as inescapable (the  
 816 Kuhnian model). What we need, in truth, as feminists and philosophers, is a differ-  
 817 ent approach to the old problem of mind, one that understands mind as embodied,  
 818 agential, and responsive to the problems that present themselves as we try to be  
 819 politically and responsibly engaged in the world.

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## Chapter 10

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