

A Critical Examination of Abstraction in John Dewey's Reflective Thought

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The purpose of this paper is to critically examine abstraction in the context of John Dewey's notion of reflective thought. Abstraction is to be understood as a pragmatic tool that underpins reflective thought. In other words, reflective thought—that is, the capacity to think of practical solutions to problems we confront in our lives,—needs to use the tool of pragmatic abstraction. In the context of reflective thought, I explore and explain how pragmatic abstraction is used. Here, I take issue with how pragmatic abstraction is used as merely a means to bring about 'successful' consequences to a problem. This use of pragmatic abstraction fails to consider the critical question of *whose* success is being brought about. Due to this, 'successful' consequences to a problem can result for some, while negative consequences to the same problem can result for others. The 'reasonable woman standard' that developed in the law illustrates a concrete example of this problematic split and a legal effort to resolve it. Ultimately, by reconsidering how reflective thought uses the tool of pragmatic abstraction, "successful" consequences to problems are brought about in a more inclusive manner.

I. Introduction

In this paper, I critically examine the tool of abstraction, specifically within the realm of John Dewey's notion of reflective thought. Our human capacity to utilize the tool of abstraction is fundamental, essential, and sometimes problematic in our practical lives. We must *reconsider* our use of abstraction (specifically *pragmatic* abstraction) in the context of Dewey's reflective thought, such that we can both improve the tool's utility in our lives, and also ameliorate—possibly even eliminate—the inconsiderate practical results of its past use.

To build up to the critical examination, I will begin the paper by qualifying abstraction as *pragmatic* abstraction, drawing on John Dewey's definition of abstraction in his work *Reconstruction in Philosophy*. Next, I will elucidate the context I will be critically examining the tool of pragmatic abstraction in: John Dewey's notion of reflective thought in his work *How We Think*. First, I will explain reflective thought's process, that is, *how* reflective thought functions. Following this, I will explain reflective thought's purpose, that is, *what* it functions for. This detailed understanding of our context completed, I will build up to critically examining pragmatic abstraction within it. First, I will examine *how* pragmatic abstraction functions within reflective thought (i.e., its process). Following this, I will examine *what* pragmatic abstraction functions for within reflective thought (i.e., its

purpose). Here, I embark upon the principle task of this paper, as I critically examine pragmatic abstraction's purpose and use within Dewey's notion of reflective thought, employing an example in law to illustrate some concrete problems that result. From this, I conclude that we should adopt a *reconsidered* notion of reflective thought (as that which must necessarily consider *whose* practical "success" we are dealing with) because it improves the utility of pragmatic abstraction as a tool and can repair some of the inconsiderate practical results of its past use, ultimately rendering it more 'in touch' with the nuances of each of our lives.

II. Dewey and Pragmatic Abstraction

In his work *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, John Dewey explains what he takes abstraction to mean, "Looked at functionally, not structurally and statically, abstraction means that something has been released from one experience for transfer to another."¹ Viewed in this manner, abstraction is a double movement, one that involves both a release *from* and a transfer *to*. This is to say that there is a release *from* present experience and a subsequent transfer *back to* present experience. Understood in this qualified way, abstraction is very practical, as it both originates from and discharges back into present experience. For the purposes of this paper, we are understanding abstraction as that which I will call *pragmatic* abstraction.

At the outset, it is important to dismiss some understandings of abstraction we will *not* be dealing with in this paper. To this point, merely the initial move (i.e., the release), or just the latter move (i.e., the transfer), abstraction has commonly been understood as complete. This one-way understanding of abstraction cannot account for the complete practical and concrete bearing of pragmatic abstraction. In fact, this strictly one-way understanding precludes all together a complete understanding of pragmatic abstraction. It is important for us to recognize that this incomplete understanding, wherein abstraction is simply the removal of facts from present experience, or merely the appliance of facts onto present experience (as some rationalists hold), is precisely what Dewey is attempting to break through. Although this understanding is not wrong per se, for the purposes of this paper, it is simply not sufficient for *completely* understanding pragmatic abstraction, let alone reflective thought. Given this, we must reject the one-way understanding of abstraction, but keep in mind that it is certainly *part of* pragmatic abstraction.

Abstraction now qualified as pragmatic abstraction, we see that we are dealing with a highly practical, dual aspect tool. Further, we are engaging a tool that is essential in and for our lives. Dewey affirms this, stating, "viewed teleologically or practically, [pragmatic abstraction] represents

1. John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (Boston, Massachusetts: Beacon Press, 1926), 150.

the only way in which one experience can be made of any value for another.”² In other words, pragmatic abstraction allows us to connect one moment of our present experience to another. Further, Dewey stresses pragmatic abstraction is the only *valuable* way one experience can be connected to another. This renders pragmatic abstraction a necessary and essential tool for interpreting and making sense of one moment of our lives in light of another.

In sum, from an understanding of abstraction as pragmatic abstraction, and an understanding of pragmatic abstraction as essential in and for our lives, we have a baseline to work with when we begin to later examine this tool in the context of Dewey’s notion of *reflective thought*.

III. Dewey’s Notion of Reflective Thought

Much like pragmatic abstraction, reflective thought involves a practical, double (i.e., two-way) movement. Further, like pragmatic abstraction, reflective thought is essential in and for our lives. It will be seen that a life without engaging reflective thought is not only a life dazed and confused, but also an unrealistic and idyllic life. To this point, I will lay out how reflective thought functions.

Before this though, we can first qualify reflective thought to understand what it is not, this will serve to clear the way for understanding what it is. First, some common and overly-broad interpretations will be cast away. Dewey quips, “He who offers ‘a penny for your thoughts’ does not expect to drive any great bargain.”³ This remark is to comically dismiss an understanding of reflective thought as anything and everything that passes through our minds. Reflective thought must *not* be understood this way, as this understanding is too expansive and even borders on being vague. Examining reflective thought in this sense would be quite cumbersome and, ultimately, unnecessary. To keep with Dewey’s joke, we can say that examining reflective thought in this sense would prove too expensive for this paper’s budget.

This understanding cast off, we must now dismiss another understanding of reflective thought. To this point, reflective thought must *not* be understood as that which is wholly detached from present things. For example, Dewey says that children tell imaginative stories that are not necessarily a “faithful record of observation” of things in present experience.⁴ Given this, we are not engaged with practical (i.e., observed) things, so there is no “aim at knowledge, at belief about facts or in truths” for Dewey.⁵ We see that reflective thought, alongside knowledge, facts, and truths, must be understood *upon the basis* of present things. In sum, reflective thought must not be construed as anything and everything that enters our mind, nor must it be understood as a *baseless*

2. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 150.

3. Dewey, *How We Think*, 2.

4. Dewey, *How We Think*, 3.

5. Dewey, *How We Think*, 3.

invention of our imaginative capacities. Now that we understand what reflective thought is not, we can more precisely understand what reflective thought is.

In Dewey's words, reflective thought is "*Active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends.*"⁶ To elucidate this, we can break it down and begin to examine how this functions. Once its process is understood, we will see that reflective thought—though it lacks the consideration of whose "success" that I claim is necessary—is essential in our lives, just like the tool of pragmatic abstraction.

First, it is paramount to understand that reflective thought must first commence upon a "problem." To this point, Dewey states, "[reflective] thinking *takes its departure* from specific conflicts in experience that occasion perplexity and trouble."⁷ This is to say that when believed facts, knowledge, or truths are thrown into doubt, we have a "problem" before us. Further, the doubt and uncertainty that troubles our believed facts, knowledge, or truths, also obscures how we are to operate practically in present experience.

From this confusion, reflective thought begins operating and is supposed to carefully consider a problem in an attempt to resolve it. But what exactly is the threshold for deeming something a problem where then reflective thought starts functioning? For Dewey, the threshold is minuscule. To understand what constitutes a "problem," we must be "willing to extend the meaning of the word *problem* to whatever—no matter how slight and commonplace in character—perplexes and challenges the mind so that it makes belief at all uncertain."⁸ In other words, we must be willing to understand a problem as anything which stands in the way of us holding, for all intents and purposes, a *certain* belief. Given the broad definition of a problem, we can see why a life without engaging in reflective thought is pure fantasy. For one, life is *anything but* absolutely certain. In fact, it seems to be certainly uncertain! Simply by virtue of living, humans are endowed with uncertain belief, and therefore, are endowed with problems. This is why reflective thought is so gripping and essential as a context to critically examine pragmatic abstraction in. Given any (inevitable) doubt at all in a purportedly *certain* belief, we have a problem which necessitates some degree of "thinking through" to a resolution and this "thinking through" is precisely reflective thought.

Next, but usually in tandem alongside a problem, is the first step of reflective thought. This first step is the observation and noting of present facts that pinpoint (more or less) exactly the

6. Dewey, *How We Think*, 6.

7. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 139. My emphasis.

8. Dewey, *How We Think*, 9.

problem. This step is fundamentally practical, as it pertains to the facts of a problem as they perplexingly appear directly before us. Regardless of whether the observation of present facts is bundled alongside the occurrence of a problem or not, this observational step of reflective thought importantly leads to reflective thought's suggestion step. Dewey states "The seen thing is regarded as in some way *the ground or basis of belief* in the suggested thing; it possesses the quality of *evidence*."⁹ In other words, the observed present facts serve as the grounds for reflective thought's active, persistent, and supposedly careful consideration of what is then suggested. In this way, observed facts pertaining to the problem, confused and perplexing as they stand at present, *suggest* further (more or less) pertinent facts for the consideration of a problem's potential resolution.

For example, if I believe fairly certainly that I try to take precautions to keep my room insect free, yet I observe ants crawling on my desk, I have a problem. Applied to these facts, the problem is holding, simultaneously, both my insect-free room belief and my undeniable observation that ants are on my desk; the latter perplexes the former belief. Important for potentially resolving the problem at hand, this observation suggests further facts for consideration. From this, we can see why the suggestion step is so crucial in the process of reflective thought. If observed facts did not suggest any potential solution to a problem, we are effectively stuck guessing what to do in light of the confusing present facts before us. For suggestions, we always need to remember their need for further facts to confirm them.

To keep with the ant example we were positing, suggestions for potentially solving it could be along the lines of 'attempt removing the old food from my desk they are after' or 'attempt moving the desk off of the ant hill below it', etc. As previously alluded to, to show the efficacy, worth, and "success," of these suggestions, we need to test them out in present experience (i.e., actually remove the old food from my desk, and so on). In Deweyan terms, we need to consider suggestions in light of their practical application to a problem. Here, we come upon the inquiry step of reflective thought that follows from the suggestion step. As Dewey puts it, this inquiry step serves to "confirm or refute the suggested belief" in present experience.¹⁰ For inquiry, we look for evidence in present experience to corroborate a suggestion, given that a suggestion is merely itself: a *possibility until realized*. In this way, the inquiry step functions in reflective thought as a practical justificatory step for the suggestion step.

Similar to a problem for Dewey, what counts as justifiable inquiry into a suggestion is understood very generally, wherein simple sensory operations suffice. To this end, Dewey gives a

9. Dewey, *How We Think*, 7.

10. Dewey, *How We Think*, 10.

simple example of feeling a cold breeze that suggests a storm is coming. To test this suggestion, all we need to do is look to the sky to see if there are indeed rain clouds moving our way. If a problem is not so simple and mere sensory functions are not enough, one may call upon relevant facts, knowledge, or truths *based on* prior practically “successful” experiences. Ultimately, we can comprehensively understand inquiry as the step in reflective thought that aims to justify what is suggested in such a way that this suggestion proves practically useful for solving the problem at hand. This step explained, we have completed our journey through *how* the process of reflective thought functions.

Overall, we have seen that in the process of reflective thought there is a double movement both *from* and *back into* present experience, much like pragmatic abstraction. Much like pragmatic abstraction as well, reflective thought has shown itself to be a very practical endeavor. By later examining pragmatic abstraction’s function and purpose within reflective thought, I believe that we embark upon an exploration of a fundamental aspect of our lives. We have seen that reflective thought necessitates its own occurrence in our uncertain lives. Given this, engaging reflective thought is unavoidable, and pervasive in many practical encounters. At this point, calling into question the necessity of reflective thought in our lives shifts the burden of proof onto the objecting party. It is possible that there is someone to take up this objection, but, for better or worse, I cannot correspond with the dead or the divine.

Now, I will now explain reflective thought’s purpose. It is possible to have already anticipated reflective thought’s purpose from the trajectory of its process. Anyhow, Dewey says, “*Demand for the solution* of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection.”¹¹ This is to say that bringing about a “successful” solution to a problem is the central purpose of engaging reflective thought. Understanding this is key to understanding pragmatic abstraction’s purpose in the context of reflective thought, but we will discuss this in a later section.

Back to the purpose of reflective thought, Dewey states that “the most striking fact about [reflective] thinking as it empirically is—namely, its flagrant exhibition of cases of failure and success—that is, of good thinking and bad thinking.”¹² From this, we see that reflective thought’s striking fact according to Dewey is the fact that it practically exhibits results of either “success” or failure, wherein “success” is a result of good reflective thinking and failure is the result of bad reflective thinking. “Success,” for Dewey, is defined very broadly and is largely unqualified, wherein anything that practically solves a problem is sufficient for being called a “successful” result of

11. Dewey, *How We Think*, 11. Emphasis added.

12. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 136.

reflective thought. Conversely, failure is simply that which does not meet this sufficient condition for being called “successful.” In short, it does not practically solve a problem.

This striking fact for Dewey emphasizes the inquiry step of reflective thought, where suggestions are empirically confirmed or refuted in light of how useful they are for solving a problem. Ultimately, from reflective thought’s striking fact, we may say that the purpose of reflective thought is embodied in good thinking, as good thinking is that which brings about “successful” practical outcomes that solve a problem.

Interestingly, bad thinking can be educational for good thinking, such that the results of bad thinking can inform future good thinking. Nonetheless, this does not permit us to say that bad thinking is equal to good thinking and ultimately equal to reflective thought’s purpose. No, *only insofar* as bad thinking informs subsequent good thinking does it align with reflective thought’s ultimate purpose: a practically “successful” resolution to a problem. In this qualified way, reflective thought’s purpose can be extended to bad thinking.

Anyhow, further explaining good thinking will give us a more in-depth understanding of reflective thought’s purpose. Good thinking is not only that which “successfully” solves a problem, but it is also that which is logical. “The word *logical* is synonymous with wide-awake, thorough, and careful reflection-- thought in its best sense.”¹³ From this, we understand that the term logical is associated with reflective thought in its best form, and this must mean it is associated with good thinking (as opposed to bad thinking). Subsequently, the ‘logical’ is associated with bringing about a “successful” practical solution to a problem. In Dewey’s words, “Logical . . . is at once . . . vital and practical; [‘logical’ is used] to denote, namely, the systematic care, negative and positive, taken to safeguard reflection *so that it may yield the best results under the given conditions.*”¹⁴ Again, this is to say that what is logical is that which guides reflective thought to a practically “successful” end. In this way, logic (and what is logical) takes on a pragmatic character in Dewey’s reflective thought, where it is understood in terms of its practical results, and their subsequent “success” or failure to usefully solve a problem. As already mentioned, being logical is associated with reflective thought’s *best* form (i.e., good thinking), and is equal to reflective thought’s overall purpose of bringing about “successful” practical consequences that solve a problem. At this point, we now understand the purpose of reflective thought in detail and how it can be understood as embodied in good thinking, and further how good thinking can be understood as that which is logical.

13. Dewey, *How We Think*, 57.

14. Dewey, *How We Think*, 57. My emphasis.

To be sure, understandings will be dismissed (as we did with reflective thought) that are not pertinent to the purposes of this paper. The term logical is *not* to be understood as broadly as “any thinking that ends in a conclusion,” as this would represent bad thinking and the failure to bring about solutions to a problem as logical and good thinking.¹⁵ This understanding is clearly nonsensical, and therefore must be dismissed. Further, the term logical must not be understood as narrowly constrained to what is *strictly* logical. To this point, Dewey states “Stringency of proof is here the equivalent of the logical. *In this sense mathematics and formal logic (perhaps as a branch of mathematics) alone* are strictly logical.”¹⁶ In this sense, reflective thought, let alone good thinking, could not be understood as logical at all because it is not understood as *strictly* logical. Given this, this understanding of the term logical must be dismissed. Having a pragmatic definition of “logical” established, we now move on to examining the tool of pragmatic abstraction within reflective thought, keeping in mind reflective thought’s process and purpose.

IV. Pragmatic Abstraction in Dewey’s Reflective Thought

I will begin by examining *how* the tool of pragmatic abstraction functions within reflective thought. *How* abstraction is involved in each step of reflective thought will be elucidated through understanding reflective thought via two new umbrella terms related to it, namely, inductive movement and deductive movement. Let’s begin pragmatic abstraction’s examination in reflective thought by exploring reflective thought’s inductive movement. This movement encompasses reflective thought’s observation step leading into its suggestion step, and thereby tends “toward *discovery* of a binding principle,” one which relates to solving the problem at hand.¹⁷ In terms of pragmatic abstraction, reflective thought’s initial inductive movement is effectively pragmatic abstraction’s initial movement. Pragmatic abstraction initially releases *from* present experience, and in terms of reflective thought, is involved in its movement *from* present facts *to* a suggested binding principle.

We will now move into reflective thought’s origin, and begin our examination of pragmatic abstraction from where reflective thought takes its departure from: a *problem*. A problem is premised upon the same foundation for pragmatic abstraction. A problem, as already mentioned, exists as a “puzzling phenomenon” in present experience.¹⁸ To emphasize the importance of present experience in both processes, we can negatively say that without it, there is no ground or possibility for pragmatic abstraction, let alone a concrete problem to reflectively engage. Given this, we see that

15. Dewey, *How We Think*, 56.

16. Dewey, *How We Think*, 56. My emphasis.

17. Dewey, *How We Think*, 82.

18. Dewey, *How We Think*, 203.

the grounds of using the tool of pragmatic abstraction are fundamentally similar to the grounds of reflective thought's point of departure. In fact, pragmatic abstraction's initial movement occurs in reflective thought's move *from* the present facts of a problem, *to* the next step in its inductive movement: a *suggestion*. As Dewey says, "Suggestion . . . involves going from what is present to something absent. Hence, it is more or less speculative, adventurous."¹⁹ A suggestion is itself a product of pragmatic abstraction's initial 'letting go' or 'release from' present facts. Therefore, because a suggestion comes about via pragmatic abstraction's initial *release from* the facts of present experience, a suggestion itself is said to be absent from all things practical.

Already, in the early stages of reflective thought, we see that pragmatic abstraction is an essential feature. If it did not occur in reflective thought, we would have no outlet for figuring out possible solutions to our present problem. Without abstraction, let alone pragmatic abstraction, the present facts of a problem would stay confused. Again, this is because there is nothing about the present facts, as such, that directly indicates a possible solution; hence, the problem and the importance of reflective thought's suggestion step absent present experience.

Thus far, we have seen *how* abstraction functions in *the inductive movement* of reflective thought. Further, we see that the first half of reflective thought, as starting from what is present and then moving toward the absent, occurs via pragmatic abstraction. Noting this, we move on to explore the latter half of reflective thought (i.e., its deductive movement) to further trace pragmatic abstraction's process within it. The latter half of reflective thought, called the deductive movement, is in fact the occurrence of the second half pragmatic abstraction, that is, its latter 'transfer' movement. In terms of reflective thought, the deductive movement tends toward "*testing—confirming, refuting, modifying*" suggestions from reflective thought's inductive movement and acts as an "instrument of inquiry, of observation and experimentation."²⁰ From this quote, we find that the suggestion step and the final step of reflective thought (i.e., inquiry) are encompassed in this movement. Inquiry, as already mentioned in a previous section, is all about working out and practically testing the suggestions that have been conjured up from the initial inductive movement of reflective thought. More specifically, its role is to practically confirm or refute a suggestion's "success" to solve a problem at hand.

We can now see *how* pragmatic abstraction's transfer movement is fundamentally necessary for moving from reflective thought's suggestion step to its inquiry step. Having an understanding of how pragmatic abstraction functions within reflective thought, I will now examine what the purpose

19. Dewey, *How We Think*, 75.

20. Dewey, *How We Think*, 94.

of pragmatic abstraction is in reflective thought, and this will lead to the paper's principle task: to *critically* examine pragmatic abstraction within reflective thought.

All our previous examinations and explanations in mind, we turn to what pragmatic abstraction's purpose is within reflective thought. From this examination, we will see that pragmatic abstraction's purpose is effectively the same as reflective thought's purpose and turns out to be quite personal. In the following section, we will examine the problematic results of this conflation of purposes. But first, we know that in order to achieve "successful" practical results from reflective thought, we *must* of course initially release from the practical. In this, reflective thought moves from its practical observation step to its absent suggestion step. After this, reflective thought moves from its absent suggestion step to its practical inquiry step. Like its initial inductive movement, reflective thought's following deductive movement is also carried by and reliant on pragmatic abstraction's movement. Though the whole movement of reflective thought relies upon pragmatic abstraction's complete movement, the purpose of utilizing pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought is ultimately derived from reflective thought's deductive movement.

In this movement, pragmatic abstraction's transfer move is utilized to test an absent suggestion's practical "success" or failure for resolving a problem. This practical inquiry is directly aimed at achieving reflective thought's purpose. In this way, reflective thought's utilization of pragmatic abstraction is ultimately for the purpose of demonstrating "success" sufficient to solve a problem. What exactly constitutes "success" sufficient to solve a problem is largely reliant on the individual who works through the problem, and typically varies from person to person. This point is important because pragmatic abstraction is itself indifferent to reflective thought's practical "success" and failure. Pragmatic abstraction in the context of reflective thought on the other hand, is ultimately understood as always being used *for* bringing about practical "success." In other words, the originally impartial purpose of pragmatic abstraction, now taken up in Dewey's reflective thought, follows the lead of reflective thought's purpose and acts as the grounds that usher "successful" practical ends that solve a problem.

Overall, pragmatic abstraction's indifferent practical purpose becomes oriented *for* reflective thought's partial purpose, wherein pragmatic abstraction is used only to provide grounds *for* good, logical, and "successful" reflective thought. As the purpose of pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought, we find two important implications. On the one hand, pragmatic abstraction's redefined purpose is overwhelmingly how we individually encounter our practical environment and pursue interests in life. On the other hand, pragmatic abstraction's redefined purpose changes the use of a practically impartial tool to a use for a practically partial purpose. When reflective thought utilizes

this tool, pragmatic abstraction loses its practical indifference to its results and becomes something more than just that which releases *from* and transfers *back to* present experience. It no longer acts as simply that which allows for both “success” and failure in reflective thought, rather, it becomes that which is always geared toward one outcome: “success.” As the necessary tool for reflective thought, pragmatic abstraction in this context can now be seen to function for practically bringing about *our own* “success.” For solving problems that are not directly related to oneself, the question of *whose* “success” we are practically seeking when utilizing pragmatic abstraction for reflective thought becomes crucial to consider.

V. Critical Examination of Pragmatic Abstraction in Dewey’s Reflective Thought

To begin the critical examination of pragmatic abstraction in Dewey’s reflective thought, it is important to first reiterate that reflective thought fundamentally functions in and for the practical realm, specifically in and for our *individual* practical endeavors. Not recognizing this premise, or straying from it, is largely the reason why the use of pragmatic abstraction for reflective thought sometimes proves practically “successful” to some yet problematic to others. Dewey acknowledges reflective thought’s individual confines when he states that the phrase “Think for yourself” is tautological; any thinking is thinking for one’s self.”²¹ This is to say that reflective thought, or simply any thought at all, is fundamentally personal, though not necessarily self-interested. It is true that many humans may have the same problem, but it is not true that they deal with this problem in the exact same way. To this point, individuals may mutually observe a present fact of a problem yet disagree on the significance of that fact, or individuals may disagree on what suggestion is most likely to yield (via subsequent inquiry) a resolution to a problem. This shows again that utilizing the tool of pragmatic abstraction to engage in reflective thought tends toward only *one* measure of “success”, namely, one’s *own* “success.” Due to this, we now see why extending to others the practical “success” of reflective thought (brought about *via* pragmatic abstraction) must be carefully considered. To this point, I will now dive into an example that illustrates the problematic concrete consequences of ignoring or not being aware of reflective thought’s individualized use of pragmatic abstraction.

A Case Study: The “Reasonable Woman” Standard

This example is one that has played out in the legal realm and is a good indicator of how the tool of pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought can become less problematically used when it is carefully reconsidered. The consideration of *whose* “success” practically results from pragmatic abstraction’s use within reflective is necessary to take into account. In the field of law, there is a

21. Dewey, *How We Think*, 198.

standard that is called the “reasonable woman standard.” This standard has largely come to replace a standard called the “reasonable person standard” in cases of sexual harassment. This replacement speaks directly to why necessarily considering whose “success” is of great practical importance. Further, it illustrates how “successful” yet problematic practical consequences can be (and have been) avoided. Interestingly, these problematic results are precisely what the reasonable *person* standard sought to eliminate. By designating a reasonable person as a standard, who is qualified only to the extent that they are reasonable and human, the law sought a catch-all, non-discriminatory, and undifferentiated standard. Although the intent of this standard seems just and fair, wherein no person’s difference(s) will affect their representation in a case, it actually proves to be the problem.

In sexual harassment cases for example, homogenizing all persons to an undifferentiated standard has concretely proven unfair and unjust. This is due to the fact that these cases have to do with *differences* between women and men. Adhering to the reasonable person standard is equivalent to not considering *whose* “success” we are practically seeking when utilizing the tool of pragmatic abstraction for reflective thought. One of these important differences (that must be considered) may be seen in the case of *Lipsett v. University of Puerto Rico*:

A male supervisor might believe, for example, that it is legitimate for him to tell a female subordinate that she has a ‘great figure’ or ‘nice legs.’ The female subordinate, however, may find such comments offensive. Such a situation presents a dilemma for both the man and the woman: the man may not realize that his comments are offensive, and the woman may be fearful of criticizing her supervisor.²²

The remarks in this case exemplifies a crucial difference between men and women, wherein the man thinks his remarks are flattering, but the woman thinks that his remarks are offensive. In an issue published by the Fordham Law Review, Robert S. Alder and Ellen R. Peirce evince the importance of recognizing this difference in sexual harassment cases, stating that there “is a body of research suggesting that men and women differ in their judgements of what particular behaviors and comments constitute sexual harassment.”²³ From this, we see that our discussion of the reasonable person standard and the reasonable woman standard is at its core a discussion about whether to consider these differences in judgements. If we apply the undifferentiated reasonable person standard, can this important and concrete difference be accounted for? The answer to this question is no, because consideration of *specifically whose* “success” has been barred, save the undifferentiated reasonable person. The reasonable person standard has not only not accounted for difference, but in

22. *Lipsett v. University of Puerto Rico*, 864 F.2d 881, (1st Cir. 1988).

23. Robert S. Adler and Ellen R. Peirce, "The Legal, Ethical, and Social Implications of the "reasonable Woman" Standard in Sexual Harassment Cases," *Fordham Law Review* 61, no. 4 (1993): 775.

doing this, has also provided a framework in which reflective thought (and therefore pragmatic abstraction) is susceptible to the possibility of practically bringing about “successful,” yet biased and unfair results.

This is problematic because there exists a systemic bias in the reasonable person standard that has historically favored men in sexual harassment cases, and has judged in accordance with practical “success” of men. As pointed to in the case of *Ellison v. Brady*, Circuit Judge Beezer rejects utilizing the reasonable person standard because “we [the court] believe that a sex-blind reasonable person standard tends to be male-biased and tends to systematically ignore the experiences of women.”²⁴ Circuit Judge Beezer opts to not use the reasonable person standard because it does not aptly consider *whose* “success” it tends toward and *whose* “success” it ignores. From these remarks, it is clear that the “success” of women has been systemically ignored. Of course, this is due to the standard for judging sexual harassment cases, which up until relatively recently, has been the problematically “sex-blind” and concretely male-biased reasonable person standard.

Pragmatic abstraction, as taken up in reflective thought, though drawn out to a “successful” practical result to a problem, has not been carefully used. This is evidenced by the fact it has brought about practical consequences that are “successful” to one, yet problematic to another. These consequences are problematic because they are concretely unjust and unfair, not to mention biased.

In terms of a critical examination of pragmatic abstraction in the context of reflective thought, this legal example is analogous, as court proceedings for judging a sexual harassment cases move in much the same way as pragmatic abstraction for reflective thought. When we initially *release from* present experience, we move from observed present facts of a problem to what is *suggested* in present experience. In sexual harassment case proceedings, the same happens. Both sides of the bar argue and *suggest* their favorable potential outcomes for the problem at hand *based upon* the observed and recorded present facts of the case. Next, by *transferring back to* present experience, these suggestions seek justification via demonstration and inquiry. In other words, the suggestions that arose from the observed facts of the present problem now return back to present experience for their confirmation or refutation as practically useful to solve the problem. This is precisely what the job of the judge is, to determine whether suggestions are justified or not by further present facts, and from this, to bring about what they think is a “successful” resolution to the problem at hand.

Using the reasonable *person* standard for this justificatory step in sexual harassment cases, judge’s decisions have drawn from a biased and largely irrelevant set of present facts, and this is concretely problematic, as noted in the *Ellison* decision. When judges look to a concrete standard

24. *Ellison v. Brady*, 924 F.2d 872, (9th Cir. 1991).

for justification that does not acknowledge the difference between men and women and is historically male-biased, the resulting decision is “successful,” yet concretely unjust to women. This is precisely what I am critical of, as pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought does not necessarily consider the question of *whose* “success” is resulting. All it has considered heretofore is whether “successful” practical consequences are brought about. This consideration, especially for a judge, is precarious and usually not particular enough to appropriately address a case’s unique set of facts. If we are presented a case where a woman is bringing a sexual harassment suit, this unqualified consideration of reflective thought is wholly inappropriate, and pragmatic abstraction’s use within reflective thought is liable to practical fault. To ameliorate this, we will examine what has largely replaced the reasonable person standard in cases of sexual harassment: the reasonable *woman* standard.

The reasonable woman standard is a clear concrete example of how pragmatic abstraction’s use for reflective thought can be rendered less practically problematic when whose “success” is considered. In the sexual harassment case of *Rabidue v. Osceola Refining Co.*, we really see why this consideration is essential for concretely fair and just results in court. Rabidue, a female employee at an oil refinery, brought a suit against the company alleging that she was “discharged because of her sex” and cited repeated instances of “vulgar and obscene comments made regularly by her supervisor concerning women generally and occasionally the plaintiff specifically.”²⁵ Further, she reported that there were employees who displayed “nude or scantily clad women in their offices and in common work areas.”²⁶ Understandably, this type of workplace environment is hostile to Rabidue, as her experience and image as a woman is denigrated when she goes to her job. In this case, there is an obvious disconnect between what males think of as acceptable behavior and what females think of as acceptable behavior. Like in the case of *Lipsett v. University of Puerto Rico*, what a male thinks is flattering or harmless may in fact be what a female thinks is insulting and harmful.

Curiously, the court ruled against Rabidue, stating “the obscenities were ‘not so startling as to have affected seriously the psyches of the plaintiff or other female employees’” and further suggested that “sex-related humor and vulgar jokes abound in certain work environments.”²⁷ Essentially, the court ruled that given her field of work, and the fact that “boys will be boys,” Rabidue’s case could not prevail. Given this ruling, it is clear what standard the court had used to judge this case. It is interesting to ponder whether even a truly undifferentiated person would find

25. Adler and Peirce, “Social Implications of the ‘Reasonable Woman’ Standard,” 791.

26. Adler and Peirce, “Social Implications of the ‘Reasonable Woman’ Standard,” 791.

27. *Rabidue v. Osceola Refining Co., a Div. of Texas-American Petrochemicals, Inc.*, 805 F.2d 611, (6th Cir. 1986), quoted in Adler and Peirce, “Social Implications of the ‘Reasonable Woman’ Standard,” 791.

this behavior reasonable to tolerate in a work environment, such that it is reasoned not to be a hostile work environment. Anyhow, this case clearly exemplifies the effectively male-biased undertones of the reasonable person standard. By concluding via the reasonable person standard that in certain work environments this is just the way things are, Rabidue's practical experience as a woman was completely ignored and her "success" was not considered. She was treated as if her experiences were supposed to be the same as a man's experiences, and in this way, important differences between women and men were swept under the rug as if they did not matter.

From this case, we see how the reasonable person standard in sexual harassment cases, as the standard ruling reflective thought's justificatory step (which determines what is practically "successful" to solve a problem) is concretely problematic. To this point, a dissenting judge in the case when it went to an appeals court, Judge Keith, notes that "unless the outlook of the reasonable woman [standard] is adopted, the defendants as well as the courts are permitted to sustain ingrained notions of reasonable behavior fashioned by the offenders, in this case, men."²⁸ The "success" Rabidue sought, was opposed to the biased "success" that the reasonable person standard upholds and adheres to, and this is precisely why she was ruled against. Ultimately, by judging the case in terms of a reasonable person standard, which justifies the suggestions of the barristers in terms of male-biased practical facts and "success," Rabidue suffered an unfair and unjust result.

In contrast, a case where the reasonable woman standard was applied illuminates how the consideration of *whose* "success" is important when utilizing pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought. When we do this, we take into account concrete and interpretive differences, and can therefore circumvent "successful," yet problematically biased practical outcomes. In the hostile work environment sexual harassment case of *Ellison v. Brady*, practical and interpretive differences of present experience (i.e., the differences between the practical experiences of women and the practical experiences of men) were recognized, and a just and fair ruling resulted from pragmatic abstraction's use in reflective thought. In other words, by considering *whose* "success" we are practically dealing with, in this case the women's "success," we primarily and justifiably consider the practical facts relevant to a woman's experience. As seen in *Ellison v. Brady*, the court more appropriately adhered to a woman's present experience instead of a man's present experience and therefore judged the practical "success" pertinent to the case's problem at hand.

In adopting the reasonable woman standard, the court wisely avoided the reasonable person standard's problematic susceptibility to take on irrelevant practical facts and biases. As Adler and Peirce write, "In creating a 'reasonable woman' standard, the *Ellison* court clearly intended to

28. *Rabidue v. Osceola Refining Co.*

establish aggressive new guidelines for conduct in the workplace *rather than adhere to a traditional standard that, in its view, simply reinforced prevailing levels of discrimination.*”²⁹ From this, a careful, more considerate, and largely unbiased use of pragmatic abstraction in reflective thought is exemplified by the reasonable woman standard. This standard is evidence that pragmatic abstraction, in the intimately familiar context of reflective thought (now reconsidered to take into account *whose* practical “success”), can expand its horizons. Before the consideration of *whose* “success” in reflective thought, pragmatic abstraction’s use allows for “successful” results for some yet problematic practical outcomes for others. This is exemplified in the Rabadue decision where injustice and unfairness resulted. After the consideration of *whose* “success” in reflective thought, pragmatic abstraction’s use largely circumvents this problematic bind. This is exemplified in the Ellison decision where justice and fairness resulted.

VI. Pragmatic Abstraction in Dewey’s Reflective Thought, Reconsidered

Overall, the Deweyan notion of reflective thought, that necessarily utilizes the tool of pragmatic abstraction, can largely, unproblematically extend beyond its fundamentally individual context when *whose* “success” is considered. By keeping in mind *whose* “success” we are seeking when engaging in reflective thought, the tool of pragmatic abstraction proves to be less practically problematic.

The critical examination of pragmatic abstraction within Dewey’s notion of reflective thought is now completed, and his notion of reflective thought has been reconsidered, rendering pragmatic abstraction a less problematic tool to use. To recap, at the outset of this paper we have come to understand *how* pragmatic abstraction itself functions, *how* reflective thought itself functions, and *what* reflective thought’s purpose is. From these initially separate expositions, we then moved to looking at these pieces in relation to each other. Specifically, our first examination concerned *how* pragmatic abstraction functions within reflective thought, and our second examination concerned *what* pragmatic abstraction’s purpose is within reflective thought. These combinations understood, pragmatic abstraction was critically examined in the latter context. This critical examination was the principle task of this paper, and given its importance, I employed an example to supplement it. To this point, I discussed the transition from the reasonable person standard to the reasonable woman standard in law, specifically in sexual harassment lawsuits. This concrete example is illustrative of the critical examination done of pragmatic abstraction within reflective thought, as it traced out the problematic practical outcomes of not taking into consideration *whose* “success” we are bringing about.

29. Adler and Peirce, “Social Implications of the ‘Reasonable Woman’ Standard,” 801. Emphasis added.

When engaging in reflective thought, the consideration of whose “success” we are bringing about must necessarily be taken into account. As it stands in Dewey’s work *How We Think*, reflective thought necessitates no such consideration, and this has proven concretely problematic. From this, the tool of pragmatic abstraction as used in reflective thought can be (and has been) used to bring about “successful,” yet problematic practical results. Always considering *whose* “success” we are practically dealing with, Dewey’s notion of reflective thought is reconstructed and reconsidered, rendering the use of pragmatic abstraction less problematic than before.

The tool of pragmatic abstraction can now be used much more expansively without producing concrete problems. We gain the ability to appropriately and carefully solve problems that do not directly relate to us and our *own* practical “success.” This use of pragmatic abstraction in Dewey’s reconsidered notion of reflective thought thoroughly accounts for differences in present experience. Though it seems out of good intention to see the similarities in everything instead of the differences, this view detrimentally ignores important nuances and particularities that are essential to appropriately and carefully solve problems. This was exactly why the reasonable person standard failed at adequately redressing certain sexual harassment cases. This was exemplified in the thinking of *Rabidue v. Osceola Refining Co.*, which assumed a bias that effectively posited a woman’s experience and reasoning to be the same as a man’s experience and reasoning. This is obviously not correct and must be either dismissed, or reconsidered keeping in mind *whose* “success” is being dealt with.

In sum, we should adopt the reconsidered notion of reflective thought, as it improves the tool of pragmatic abstraction, and maps more appropriately onto the practical conditions, nuances, and problems of our lives. In this way, we wield a more helpful and expansive tool to utilize in our constant daily, hourly, minute to second engagement with Dewey’s (now reconsidered) notion of reflective thought.