In this wide-ranging, forthright, and thought-provoking work, Sharyn Clough urges feminist science scholars to dispense with global epistemological projects and to return to “the empirical and fallibilistic assignment of warrant to individual theories.” (16) On my view, the chief support for Clough’s proposal is to be found in her last chapter, “A Pragmatist Case Study: Back to the Theory of Evolution.” It is here that she presents a compelling sketch of the kind of “internal” criticism (120) that she is advocating. Accordingly, I would like to begin the body of this review by exploring her concluding analyses of biological function and the “pragmatist prescription” (143) that she derives from them.

Clough’s discussion in this final chapter revolves around Margie Profet’s controversial theory of menstruation. In contrast to the traditional view, which emphasizes menstruation’s role in preparing the female reproductive tract for the implantation of a newly fertilized egg, Profet argues that menstruation is best understood as itself a naturally selected system that serves to defend against sperm-borne pathogens. On Clough’s gloss, Profet’s achievement is to have “described the function of menstruation in a way that newly synthesizes a variety of immunological and physiological research previously thought to be unrelated.” (139)

In a manner reminiscent of Evelyn Fox Keller’s treatment of Barbara McClintock’s discovery of transposition, Clough is principally concerned to explain “why Profet’s arguments for menstruation sound so revolutionary and why her work has largely been ignored in the scientific literature.” (140) She begins by presenting an elegant and succinct account of what is involved in giving a biological mechanism a functional analysis, emphasizing that “to ascribe functional status to a mechanism is always relative to a number of pragmatic, or second-order, considerations about the systems within which that mechanism is situated.” (132) Invoking Derek Turner’s suggestion that functional ascriptions require the availability of familiar functional analogues,
Clough claims that “it is likely that human interests and cultural context will (and have) influenced what sort of analogues are available and salient.” (133)

In its widest implications, this recognition of the influence of human interests suggests to Clough the need to undertake what she calls a “genealogical account” (136) of etiological explanations. To facilitate such an undertaking, she appeals to Nelson Goodman’s analysis of confirmation, which she summarizes in the following way: “We decide that a theory or hypothesis is confirmed by its positive instances if the theory contains categories or predicates that our linguistic practices have allowed us to habitually ‘project.’ Projectible predicates, or hypotheses containing those predicates, are those that have been ‘entrenched,’ through practice or habit, in language use.” (122–3)

With specific respect to the neglect of Profet’s theory in the scientific literature, Clough argues that this can be explained by the fact that Profet’s theory lacks two of the three levels of entrenchment “required to get a functional account projected and subsequently tested.” (144) That is, because sustained research interest in the defensive capabilities of the female reproductive tract is lacking, hypotheses concerning menstruation’s role in thwarting sperm-borne pathogens are not yet “projectible.” For Clough, understanding why this is the case is the obligation of the feminist science scholar. In her words, “Examinations of the historical context of particular sorts of masculine bias in biology and physiology (as elsewhere) might help answer how the pregnancy predicate came to be of interest — that is, how it came to be entrenched in physiology and biology — while the sperm-borne pathogen-defense predicate did not.” (146)

This, then, is Clough’s chief constructive recommendation for future feminist science scholarship: Narrow critical focus to how and why certain predicates have become entrenched in particular research programs. It is her conviction that doing so will allow feminist science scholars to stake a viable middle ground between a naïve, “objectivist,” trust in “a correspondence relation between any given knowledge claim and the features of the world described by that claim” (8) and radical skepticism: “we’d be in pretty good shape to criticize the objectivist claim that certain biological systems, and functions within those systems, are ‘naturally given.’ At the same time we would be able to avoid the skepticism of the view that sexist scientists just ‘make up’ functions, or that our feminist prescriptions are merely relative to our feminist politics and/or free from evidential constraints.” (146) For Clough, this is because this kind of “contrite fallibilism” (123) — and the holism that she maintains it implies — permits both confidence in the assumption that “most of the categories that we habitually project must successfully refer” (123) and warrant for a “flexible and dynamic” approach to these categories: “the categories can be refined, we can rethink their range of application, and over time, when necessary, we can discard them.” (124)