SEVEN

BEYOND MODERNIST CULTURE

The Modernist Self Overcome

Now that we have examined Dewey's early philosophy in detail, we are in a position to understand its promise. The main thrust of this philosophy lies in its attempt to move us beyond the whole problematic culture of Dewey's time (and perhaps of our own), namely, modernist culture itself. In this chapter, I first show how Dewey's philosophy challenges the modernist conception of the self, a conception that for Dewey entailed deep pessimism about human life and its prospects. I then show how Dewey's early philosophy challenges pessimism as such and allows us to have faith in life. I conclude the chapter by describing the new life-affirming form of culture that should emerge, in Dewey's view, after we move beyond modernism.

In the final chapter of this book, I will take stock of everything we have seen so far and show how Dewey's early philosophy, when taken on its own terms, in fact amounts to a new and important form of philosophical idealism, contrary to the standard interpretation of his

early ideas. My aim is to persuade philosophers to study the early ideas more thoroughly, and I conclude the work by examining why Dewey's early philosophy matters.

To see how Dewey's philosophy challenges the modernist conception of the self, let us first remind ourselves of what that is. The modernist position is that there exists a radical split between the self and the world. On the one side, we have the isolated self with its human meanings, and on the other side, we have the facts themselves, the world as it really is, devoid of human meanings. The self cannot find a home in the real world, which lacks human warmth, and so it withdraws into itself and hugs its own meanings closely to itself, in absolute separation from the world. Viennese modernism was our example. We saw in chapter 2 how a whole cultural tradition was built on the belief that the self was ultimately alone, cut off from rude, indifferent nature. But in this isolation and separateness, according to the modernist, the self finds its own special resources. As we saw, artists such as Klimt and Kokoschka gave expression to deep, hidden forces within us, creative powers that made possible great, if sometimes terrifying, works of art.

We also saw in chapter 2 how Viennese modernism was grounded intellectually in the works of Kierkegaard and Schopenhauer, who were in turn influenced by Kant. Examining Kierkegaard in more depth may help us better understand the intellectual commitments involved in the modernist tradition. Kierkegaard serves as a good example of a modernist,[1] for his concepts of "inwardness" and "subjective reflection"[2] describe well what modernism means: withdrawal into one's own interior space as the only place to find meaning and value that are missing from the external, objective world of what we would now call third-person descriptions.[3] Kierkegaard shows us what modernism means: the primacy of inwardness over outwardness, of subjective over "objective reflection."[4]

Kierkegaard also helps us see how the modernist view leads to pessimism and even to despair, as Dewey himself sensed as a young philosopher. That Kierkegaard's modernism entails a deep and disturbing hopelessness is something that Kierkegaard himself stresses

and emphasizes. While writing about "the dynamics of despair," Kierkegaard makes it plain that there are different kinds of anguish one can feel due to the modernist position. There is, first of all, despair in the face of the crowd, when we fear that, submerged in the midst of others, we will never become ourselves; we will never find a meaning in the crowd adequate to ourselves as distinct individuals.[5] Kierkegaard therefore counsels us to withdraw from the crowd and to go into our own selves alone. However, he immediately realizes that such a withdrawal will be not only lonely, but also the basis for a new kind of despair, namely "the despair of defiance," for we will then exist in total isolation, without any real basis for being a self, without the traction and conditions in terms of which alone a self could be a self.[6] This new despair is the result, precisely, of fleeing the external world and attending only to our inwardness. It is the very definition of modernism.

Kierkegaard proposes a remedy to the modernist despair: we should next turn to God and not simply to our own inwardness. But the faith that Kierkegaard recommends here is dependent on the prior experience of individualist despair; for it is only when we despair at being alone that we will feel, in total anguish, the need for choosing to believe in God as someone who is a true self and with whom we can finally connect as selves. With Kierkegaard, there is no escaping despair. Indeed, he thinks we always feel it insofar as we have not yet made an irrational assertion of God's existence.[7] Even when we are not fully conscious of this despair we feel it.[8] Dewey, on the contrary, wants to rid us of all grounds for despair, and he believes his account of faith is rational, because it leads to the creation of more ideal meanings in the world, and the world, at times, seems to lend itself to these creations.

Now Kierkegaard readily admits that his whole account of inwardness and despair amounts to a form of madness.[9] His defense is that too much objective reflection, which leaves out of the world human meanings and values, is also a kind of madness,[10] but this defense in no way takes away the element of madness from his own account. The madness, of course, derives from the absolute and total isolation

of the self and its meanings from the world that Kierkegaard's account requires. An unmoored self, not anchored in anything substantial, clinging to its own cherished meanings alone, without criticism, without rebuke, might as well believe it is Napoleon, because nothing exists for such a self, nothing it must listen to that could contradict this belief. This is a form of madness, indeed, but also, as we have seen, a form of despair, inevitably leading to pessimism and our giving up on life. For life then appears as utterly devoid of anything resembling human meaning and value, and the most we can have along these lines is our own total, despairing isolation, clinging to our own meanings that no one else recognizes. To be sure, Kierkegaard believes that in our despair we will have faith and choose to believe in God, who will secure our meanings in the world for us.[11] But, on the other hand, he admits that such a thing is incomprehensible to him, and stresses that in no way whatsoever can he ever be, or conceive someone else who really could be, "the knight of faith."[12]

Modernism, then, leads to pessimism and despair, the despair that the early Dewey seeks to overcome. My analysis of the *Psychology* has sought to demonstrate how clearly that effort emerges in Dewey's major early work. As we saw there, Dewey emphasizes that there are abnormal and unhealthy modes of thought of which human beings are capable. There is no guaranteed progression of human meaning, and very often people get lost in abnormal forms of experience and life. I have charted the course of these abnormal and unhealthy conceptions as articulated in Dewey's early work, from the egoist to the cynic to the aesthete and beyond. The common denominator of all these unhealthy forms of human life is, precisely, what in the present work we have called modernism. In each case, the unhealthiness and abnormality consists in the isolation of the self and its meanings from the external world of objective fact. With the aesthete, for example, the meaning of beauty exists only for his private pleasure, not for what it says about human life as a whole. This withdrawn and attenuated feeling in fact prevents the aesthete from having any real experience of beauty, for the basis of beauty, the experience of the beauty of objects themselves, is cut off, and the aesthete thereby destroys "all

vitality of feeling." Without an anchor, his feeling "ends by destroying itself"; it loses its source and its standard in actual beautiful objects, and the aesthete himself degenerates into a pompous connoisseur declaiming upon the nature of a beauty that he himself cannot really even understand or appreciate (EW 2: 280). The egoist similarly sees in other people only instruments to use for his own gratification, not objects of sympathy and fellow feeling, not embodiments of the social life of man, and as a result he misses the great joy of life that can be found in human interaction and society (EW 2: 281–82). The cynic, perhaps most tellingly of all, has become old before his years and is world weary. He judges the entire vast cosmos from his own limited perspective, contracting all of it into a simple point within himself, and on the basis of this limited (and undeveloped) point presumes to judge the rest of the cosmos to be as limited, undeveloped, and uninteresting as himself (EW 2: 258–59). But the truth, of course, is not that the cosmos is uninteresting, but that the cynic misses the world and what is exciting about it by taking his own isolated self as the center of things and remaining lost within this limited view. The aesthete, the egoist, the cynic—these are so many manifestations of abnormal life that Dewey identifies and problematizes, so many instances of a self that has failed to come outside of itself and to identify itself more fully with objects in the world. In Dewey's eyes, "the true self finds its existence in objects in the universe, not in its own private states" (EW 2: 259).

We can well imagine, therefore, what the early Dewey may have thought of the Viennese modernist tradition, and of the works of such painters as Klimt and Kokoschka. Withdrawn into the private phantasms of their own minds, without connection to larger, idealized human meanings put out there in the world to reflect back on them and help shape and structure their private selves, artists like these may have seemed to Dewey as if they were descending into madness. Kokoschka fantasizes about murdering his mistress; Gerstl depicts himself laughing in a suicidal state, and then later kills himself.[13] Art, for the early Dewey, is supposed to express an ideal for all human beings, not someone's private fantasies. As exemplified in

dramatic poetry, "It shows us man, not in the interior recesses of his own subjective nature alone, nor man as swayed by forces beyond him to a goal of which he knows nothing, but man as irresistibly pushing on towards an inevitable end through personal desires and intentions. It shows us man's interior nature working itself out as an objective fact" (EW 2: 277). True art molds the world a certain way, a human way; it does not escape into inner, isolated meaning. The true artist has something to say about *us*, not just about himself; about the world as experienced by humans, not just the inner mind of a single person. "The great artists are, after all, only the interpreters of the common feelings of humanity; they set before us, as in concrete forms of self-revealing clearness, the dim and vague feelings . . . in every human being" (EW 2: 278). They reveal "some of those mysteries of our own nature which we had always felt but could not express" (EW 2: 278). Art goes wrong when, in it, "feeling . . . is shut up within itself, instead of being made the key to the unlocking of the beauty, grace, and loveliness of the universe" (EW 2: 280). This is not to say that there are not canons of taste, only that individual feeling must be trusted to get beyond itself (EW 2: 279); only that creative artists must give us meanings beyond their narrow private selves. "The epic of Homer, the tragedy of Sophocles, the statue of Phidias, the symphony of Beethoven are *creations* . . . virtual additions to the world's riches" (EW 2: 77)—they are not simply the expression of the artist's private inner life. Such works mean something for all of us, something about ourselves and our world. They teach us and enlighten us about some real, objective meanings out there in the world that we can apprehend and that apply to us all.

We can see, then, that Dewey is keen to overcome what he regards as the abnormalities of the isolated self, as they occur, for example, in the aesthete and the cynic; he is keen to refute modernism and its unhealthy states. Above all, Dewey is keen to overcome modernism's underlying pessimism and despair. For as Dewey reminds us in the conclusion of the *Psychology,* the work as a whole seeks to show that without faith that our meanings are working in the world, our knowledge "remains a blind postulate" and our

feeling "can be only dissatisfaction" (EW 2: 363). As long as our meanings are separated from the world, they cannot be enough for us; life itself will then be devoid of meaning. To be able to affirm life, and to reach some measure of satisfaction within it, we must be able to realize ourselves; we must be able to find meanings conducive to ourselves in the actual world, not simply in our own minds.

And in fact, for Dewey, this is exactly what we do in our normal and healthy interactions with things. The entire, normal process of meaning-making that he has advanced consists of the self inserting its meanings into facts, and the facts then reflecting back the meanings of the self; meaning-making is about "the putting of self into fact" (EW 2: 270). The result is that facts then contain the self's attributes; the facts give back to us ourselves, for we have put ourselves into the facts from the beginning. And the normal self keeps on doing this, endlessly. It renders some facts meaningful, and the facts then come back to the self in a seemingly external, independent form as meaningful. The self grows as a result (since it has now expanded to include the world outside of itself as part of what it is); the expanded self (which may have grown into new and better formations) is able then to render facts meaningful in new and better ways, which in turn lead the facts to come back to the self as meaningful in new and better ways, and so on continuously. The normal run of things is the progressive realization of idealized meanings, a process that goes on and on with ever-increased meaningfulness, both for the self and for the facts (EW 2:363).

This position, if true, would mean that the modernist position is refuted, for then *there would be no given fact without human meaning attached to it*. Every fact would already be idealized (rendered meaningful) in some recognizable way; hence, there would be no separation between the self with its meanings on one side and the meaningless facts on the other. The facts would already contain meanings, and the self would already find itself in the facts. And so there would be no call for withdrawing from the facts in order to seek out and cultivate the meanings of the self. The meanings of the self would already be there, out in the world. The modernist self, therefore, would be overcome.

That this would actually be the case, we can see by considering once more the nature of feelings. In a key passage of the *Psychology* worth quoting again, Dewey reminds us that when we feel something about an object, the relationship we bear to it

> is not an external one of the feeling *with* the object, but an internal and intimate one; it is feeling *of* the object. The feeling loses itself in the object. Thus we say that food *is* agreeable, that light is pleasant; or on a higher plane, that the landscape *is* beautiful, or that the act is right. Certain feelings of value or worth we attribute spontaneously to the object. (EW 2: 239)

We naturally attribute our feelings to objects as an essential part of what they are. It would be very strange to say, for example—as a modernist might—that the "pleasant" light is not pleasant, we only experience it as such. For we do not experience objects first and then attribute our feeling states to them secondarily. On the contrary: we first and fundamentally experience objects imbued with the qualities of our feelings. Dewey explains the nature of feelings further when he writes:

> It is the same fact seen on the side of emotion, that we have already seen on the side of knowledge. An object becomes intellectually significant to us when the self reads its past experience into it. But as this past experience is not colorlessly intellectual, but is dyed through and through with interests, with feelings of worth, the emotional element is also read into the object, and made a constituent element of it. The object becomes saturated with the value for the self which the self puts into it . . . The world thus comes to be a collection of objects possessing emotional worth as well as intellectual. (EW 2: 239–40)

The object as it is given to us is constructed both by our past experiences and the emotional qualities of our experiences with it. Hence, we always understand the given object as ordered and arranged, as "intellectually significant," and, at the same time, we always feel the object's meaning as the meaning of the object, as part of what the object really is. "All natural, healthy feeling is absorbed in the object or in the action" (EW 2: 250).

It is, of course, possible to convince yourself that there is no meaning in objects and to feign a total detachment from them, seemingly absorbed wholly in your own mind. You could come to believe that you bear an external and detached connection to objects, as opposed to the intimate and internal connection that Dewey describes. But such a belief, for the early Dewey, would be unhealthy and contradictory. It would be unhealthy because it would exhibit an apparent inability—like that of Mersault in *The Stranger*, who is unable to find the situation with old Salamano and his dog deplorable—to emotionally and morally connect with the world around yourself.[14] Indeed, such detachment would always be slightly deranged and abnormal, for it would be a state of mind in which you might say, for example, that oranges do not "really" taste a certain way when you taste them that way; or that the music that moves you is not really moving; or that torture is not really abhorrent, that is only your subjective view of it; or in which you could come to believe that "it didn't mean anything"—did not mean anything out there in the world, in reality—when your mother died, as is the case with Mersault.[15] "Feeling is unhealthy," Dewey says, ". . . when set free from its absorption in the object or in the end of action, and given a separate existence in consciousness" (EW 2: 250). What you normally and naturally feel is that the orange itself *really tastes* as it tastes to you, or that the music itself *really has* the qualities you experience; or you feel that it *really is bad* to torture someone, or when your mother dies. What this shows, again, is that normally there never is a given object devoid of meaning (i.e., devoid of intellectual significance and feeling). The modernist may say that there is, but this assertion, in fact, is not only unhealthy but also contradictory. It is contradictory because it denies what he or she most directly and intimately experiences, namely, that given objects always possess some meaning (if they did not, the modernist would not even be able to place them and make sense of them, and so they would not be given to him or her in the first place). Some feeling and meaning there must always be, even when, like Mersault, you force yourself to deny it.

Although Mersault is apparently unfazed by his mother's death, and feels nothing, nonetheless he cares what his boss or the caretaker thinks of his responses to them; he still participates in some social meanings.[16] In cases like these, Mersault feels "embarrassed," for example, when he says something he should not have said.[17] He also clearly cares about his physical comfort throughout the novel. This, at least, has some meaning for him. At the end of the novel, moreover, to convince himself that he is right about "the gentle indifference of the world," he needs other people to be there and to hate him.[18] "For everything to be consummated," he says, "for me to feel less alone, I had only to wish that there be a large crowd of spectators the day of my execution and that they greet me with cries of hate."[19] Mersault needs people; he needs them to confirm a meaning outside of himself, namely, that the world really is indifferent to him; that it really can be filled with a hating, jeering crowd of people whose hatred only confirms what he already believes about the world. He needs people outside of himself, and he needs to not feel alone, even if it is to confirm that he is alone and that there is no meaning outside of him. Therein lies the contradiction. The world is always meaningful even if we deny meaning. That denial still *means* something to Mersault. He has cherished it all these years and he seeks its external confirmation now. There is always still meaning.

But modernism is the position that maintains that objects are inherently devoid of meaning, and that only the isolated self, utterly detached from objects, possesses what meaning there is, all alone to itself. Seen from a Deweyan perspective, however, such a view is clearly false, for there never is an object given to us that is entirely devoid of meaning. In Dewey's view, modernism is at best an aberration of the intellect, something of which it is possible to convince oneself (as the result of too much withdrawal and self-absorption and a culture that supports these activities), but it is not a true account of things, or even an account that the modernist himself can maintain about his or her own experience. For Dewey, modernism clearly fails, and we must move past it.

But if we accept Dewey's account, for which given objects always have some kind of meaning or other, then we have to accept Dewey's

overall conception of knowledge, feeling, and will, such as I have articulated them in previous chapters, for his account of objects and their meaning is deeply bound up with his overall conception of these matters. But *can* we accept Dewey's conception? Is it correct? Two features of his overall conception seem problematic in particular. Is there really a progression toward more and more idealized meanings, as he says? And even if there is, the root fact of this progression—the first term, as it were—would seem to be forever un-idealized. In the beginning there is not an idealization, but some fact that we idealize afterwards and shape according to our meanings. The first fact would seem to be free from all idealizations, as that which is given to us in order to be idealized; and perhaps it is this fact, above all, that the modernist means when he says that the facts exist un-idealized on one side, and we exist with our idealizations on the other.

In response to the first objection, it can be said that there does seem to be a progression of meanings of some sort. Insofar as there is growth from nature to culture, there would also be a progression from less idealized to more idealized. Recall that "idealized meanings" simply means connections among objects that are established by us; something is meaningful when it exist in a relationship to other things, and signifies something in relation to them; and idealization is simply the process by which relationships between things are established by us, by our negation of their mere givenness and our taking them up into novel connections based on our past experiences. Insofar as this occurs in the shift from nature to culture, I would say that there is at least one step, and probably many more, in a progression of meanings.

Moreover, the progression of meanings that Dewey recounts (say, from egoistic feelings to feelings of sympathy for all of humankind) does not seem to be inherently problematic. The account he gives does not seem to be contradictory, and strikes the reader of his philosophy as coherent. Given that Dewey endorses a coherence theory of truth, we can at least say that his philosophy meets its own criterion for being true. In addition to this, however, we must keep in mind that Dewey's account includes the idea that the self is growing

all along. It makes a certain amount of sense to say that if the self grows, then it can add new and possibly better meanings to what it encounters, and can reshape the world in progressive ways. But there does seem to be a problem here, for how can the self grow in response to the world, if it is only ever finding in the world what it has puts there in the first place? The answer to this question lies in the idea, mentioned previously, that the self does not always recognize that it is putting its own meanings into the world. This occurs for the most part unconsciously and habitually, as in the case of the intelligent arrangement of facts. We just go out to facts and try to give them a familiar shape (as in Dewey's camel in the cloud example that I mentioned earlier [LW 8:117]), but we are not fully aware that we are doing this. As a result, when we look on the world, we can be startled; we can find unexpected meanings there, even though they are our own. For we have only unconsciously put them there; and in many cases the "we" is the human race, all of humankind, not simply the individual. The human race has created a world of culture, which individually we can discover. We can discover a world, therefore; and we can respond to it in various ways. These ways can build on one another, and we can grow as a result of our experiences, even though ultimately it is the human self that shaped the world a certain way in the first place.

We can say, then, that since "the self" (or the collective self of the human race) that puts meanings into facts is a growing self, it stands the chance of adding new and better meanings to the facts as it grows and learns more about the world. A progression of meanings is therefore possible. But does this actually occur in the way Dewey insists? My own sense is, again, that the pattern Dewey develops (say, in the universal progression of feelings) is coherent and plausible, especially when we consider that Dewey in no way argues for a guarantee that one's experience will not flounder in its development and become "abnormal." If there is teleology here, or at least directionality, it is because Dewey is conceiving of the self as plastic and capable of development, and so any one single moment of the self's meaningful states cannot possibly exhaust the self; the self can always move on.

Hence, I would not reject out of hand, as simply naïve, Dewey's ideas about the progress of meanings becoming more and more universal, for if the self has the capacity for development (which it almost certainly does), then I do not see why, under the right conditions, it could not develop in the ways that Dewey claims.

In response to the second objection, namely, that the root fact of all our idealized meanings cannot itself be idealized, there are at least two things one can say. First, I am not sure that there must be a primary, un-idealized fact. If we sift past all of our meanings that we have added on to facts, what do we find? Dewey believes that sensations are already a product of the self, writing that "the mind has the power of acting upon itself and of producing from within itself a new, original, and unique activity which we know as sensation" (EW 2: 43). But presumably there must be some material out of which the self creates its own unique versions of this material, that is, its sensations. To reach this original material underlying sensations, we cannot use exactly correct words, of course, because this effort is anything but precise (we are trying to talk about something prior to our categories of description). But Dewey notes that although we cannot describe this original material precisely, "by analogy, we can form some probable conception of its character" (EW 2: 45).

> Imagine, for example, our organic or general sensation as it is now; the sensation of comfort or discomfort of the whole body, a feeling having no definite spatial outline nor any distinct quality that marks it off. Or, let us imagine our various sense organs losing all their powers of giving distinct sense qualities, and being retracted into a sort of substratum of sensory stuff. Perhaps the nearest we get to such an experience is when we are falling asleep: our auditory sensations fall away; then we lose our sensations of color and of form; finally, our very feelings of contact, pressure, and temperature fade away into a dim, vague sense of nothing in particular. (EW 2: 45)

If there is a first fact, it should be found here, in our direct contact with existence itself, seemingly prior to all idealization. It must be found in something like the act of falling asleep, where all of our

idealizations seem to slowly fade away. But Dewey notes that even here, with these kinds of feelings (those of falling asleep, or what an infant must feel, for example), "the sense organs are still present with their brain connections and with the inherited capacities and tendencies of generations," so that *something* is still felt *by* the organism, rather than the organism being able to directly encounter a purely given fact (EW 2: 46). It may only be the sensation of "a shapeless, vague, diffused state," like might be felt by "an oyster or a jelly-fish," but the original, vague sensation is experienced as something for the organism in any case, and to that extent "idealized," that is, not pure independent fact (EW 2: 46). Indeed, in such cases it becomes impossible to say where the organism ends and the world begins. There is a fusion of "contact sensations with muscular sensations" in a person's experience, as it must already be for the infant (EW 2: 47; 45–46). "Normally [contact sensations and muscular sensations] are inextricably united. It is only in disease that we ever have one without the other. Thus the activities of our own body and those of external bodies are indissolubly associated from the first" (EW 2: 47).

It is extremely difficult, then, to locate the first pure fact, if there is such a thing. As Dewey observes in one of his early articles, what is difficult is to show "that there was somehow, somewhere present to consciousness, a conception of what reality is by which we could measure the significance of our experience. . . . [I]f reality is itself an element in conscious experience, it must as such come under the scope of the significance, the meaning of experience, and hence cannot be used as an external standard to measure this meaning" (EW 1: 192). But perhaps the objection we have posited means to say, not that there must be a first fact that we can somehow experience, but that facts themselves as such must be first, and prior, and wholly independent in their nature, existing as what they are regardless of our experiences and idealizations. The question would then be: how can we say that we really do idealize the facts, as Dewey insists? Our idealizations would rather seem to be so many rickety buildings heaped up on an unsteady foundation. We build up our ideals of facts, let it be granted; but the facts themselves are independent of these ideals,

and so at the substratum or basis of all our ideals, there are recalcitrant facts, and our efforts to idealize the facts could always therefore end in failure.

This objection seems more difficult, and I am not sure that a Deweyan response will satisfy. But the response to make, I think, is this: yes, the Deweyan idealist might say, it is correct that we cannot ever know that the root of all facts lends itself to idealizations, meanings conducive to the self somehow, but nonetheless we can have faith that it is so. This is a point we discussed in the previous chapter, a point about the nature of faith. The weakness of Dewey's possible answer here is that faith is not knowledge, and so ultimately he is asking us to believe something that we cannot know to be the case. The strength of the Deweyan answer, however, is also worth considering. It involves a threefold response, which is meant to convey that this is a *rational* faith that Dewey points to, not an arbitrary and irrational one. Dewey would like us to believe that there are good grounds for saying that the root of all facts contains idealizations, even if this cannot be absolutely demonstrated to be true.

First, from a Deweyan perspective, one could argue that we are entitled to believe that the root fact is idealized in some sense, in that it clearly contains the possibility of being able to take on our various idealized meanings. It offers a shape, or at least the potentiality of a shape, amenable to our creative additions; for example, it can bear the meanings of sympathy and social life, can be rendered intellectually significant, can be transformed into sensations, and so on. The root fact allows these additions, and insofar as this is the case, we can say that it is like a reservoir of potential creative meanings. Something *within* things lends them the possibility of becoming meaningful; and in this sense, they are already meaningful; they are proto-meanings, as it were, or, even better, incipient meanings, which our later creative additions justify as having all along been the case (EW 2:77).

Second, this faith that the root fact lends itself to idealizations is not grounded in the total separation of fact from meaning (as maintained by Kierkegaard, for example), according to which human beings with their meaning are more or less consigned to a form of

madness—the madness of being forever isolated from the real world and its facts, of being lost totally in their own private, individual meanings. On the contrary, the faith that the early Dewey advocates is one in which there is an absolute connection between the given facts and human meanings. Its primary assumption and hope is that the world is meaningful; that our ideals are not totally foreign to the world. This view has a certain vigor. Its adherents might naturally claim for it a kind of normality—for, as we will see shortly, it allows us to shrug off pessimism and the madness of total, hopeless separation from the world and to engage in the world with more confidence. To have faith that the world really does have meanings, just as it seems to, is the faith of healthy-minded common sense, as opposed to the withdrawal and excessive introspection of the modernist.

Third, Deweyan faith has another power to offer, besides the hope of overcoming pessimism. To hold that the root fact will always suffer our idealizations is to say that it can always be transformed and improved, so that we are not ultimately dependent on this root fact. Said another way, since Deweyan faith locates the meaning of facts outside the facts themselves, in the ideals that transform the facts into their meanings, this conception of faith frees us from dependence on facts. It gives us an endless power to critique the facts and to strive to make of them something more than what they are. Surprisingly, this conception of faith has a good deal in common with more recent thinkers, such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, as we will see in the next chapter.

The upshot of these considerations, and of Dewey's early philosophy as a whole, is that we always belong to a meaningful universe, with the promise of always belonging even more. We are surrounded by significant objects and events, with emotionalized objects that we can relate to and understand and in relation to which, to some extent, we can exert our will. This is the kind of world in which we live; it is a meaningful world, and we are entitled to have faith that it really is as we find it, for reality lends itself to these meanings, and we are free to keep creating meaning, rendering the world more and more ideal through our efforts.

With these fundamental points in mind, let us now turn to the main concern of Dewey's early philosophy, overcoming pessimism. With everything that has been said so far about the kind of faith in life Dewey advocates and the way this faith enables the world to become idealized and filled with meaning, we should be in a good position to see how Dewey's philosophy responds to pessimism, and to the entire culture of modernism tied up with this pessimism. As we will see, the early Dewey ultimately seeks a new and better culture beyond modernist culture, a unique social arrangement that allows us to fully embrace life rather than encouraging us to withdraw from it.

After Pessimism

Two beliefs define modernism: 1) that the facts are devoid of human meaning and, in effect, hopeless; and 2) that we should withdraw into ourselves in order to find meaning and consolation. We have seen that the first belief is difficult to maintain, because the facts are filled with human meaning after all. It follows that there is little reason to maintain the second belief. If the facts of life are filled with human meaning, we can go out into the world and embrace life with confidence, comfortable in our understanding that the world is meaningful, that our human meanings are sustained by the world, out there in objective fact.

But how far are we able to take this position? To what extent are we willing to say that the world is filled with human meaning? Let us take the difficult case, the worst-case scenario, and consider whether the fact of death can in some way be rendered meaningful and, more importantly, a cause for hope—an occasion for finding existence to be good and worthwhile rather than an occasion for pessimism and despair. Can even this fact, the fact of death, somehow be rendered "ideal" and conducive to our human needs?

We must admit that the modernist has nothing much to offer along these lines. The modernist accepts the fact of the matter just as it is, without any idealization: that in death we are annihilated. For

the modernist, there is nothing human or comforting or even meaningful about death, if by "meaningful" we intend anything ideal. Death is a cold, hard, merciless reality. In this sense, the modernist has no adequate response to death. He acknowledges death; sees occasion for despair in the heart of the facts, and tell us that the most we can do is to withdraw, to recoil, and to intensify our inner life. The modernist cannot surmount death; the most he or she can offer is inward flight, inner creativity. But the fact of death, conceived in the worst case as annihilation, will of course always persist; it will haunt us and remain always a problem. Isolation and inner creativity may inflate our sense of individual importance and give us a feeling of power, making us seem higher in significance than mere nature, but these results of modernism are not a solution. The objective fact of death remains in all of its horror. The individual self, great as it is, will still be annihilated.

Next consider a potential Deweyan response to death. Dewey mentions "the grave" in the *Psychology* in connection with his claim that facts by themselves are without meaning. A world of bare facts, he says, "would be . . . a world in which the home would be four walls and a roof to keep out cold and wet; the table a mess for animals, and the grave a hole in the ground" (EW 2: 77). He laments: "What a meager life were left us, were the ideal elements removed!" (EW 2: 77). And, we might add, what a sad and tragic death—our personalities would be forever obliterated, and our final resting place would only be "a hole in the ground" and nothing more. The fact of death, in a Deweyan view, should rather be idealized to help give life meaning. We need to create ideals about death and other realities of human life so that we may "make life rich, worthy, and dignified" (EW 2: 77).

The key to seeing how idealization is possible in the case of death is to recall what we have seen earlier. Dewey believes that we are able to identify ourselves with something more than ourselves, with an idealized whole—if not with the cosmos in its entirety, or the human race in its entirety, then at least with the social body to which we belong and of which we are a contributing member. In Dewey's view, the self grows to become more than the isolated, narrow, individual

self that it begins life as, and it comes more and more to identify itself with a larger, idealized whole beyond itself, even as the self acquires a sense of its own individuality in this very process. Said another way, the self recognizes that it is only in terms of a larger whole that it is enabled to become its own truly distinct self. A person realizes that he can identify with the larger whole even as he retains his own sense of self, as when, for example, the social whole is such as offers a distinct place for the individual within it, one that permits him to exercise and develop his own individual responses within a pattern of social meanings.

What the early Dewey would say about the fact of death is that it should not hinder our ability to cope with life, because even in the thought of our own death we can identify with the whole that has allowed us to play our own distinct part within it. The crucial insight here is that we are part of something larger. This is an intuition we can have, Dewey would say; mystics and poets and philosophers have had a similar intuition for ages. It is quite a significant idea, although for one who does not experience this insight, or who perhaps does not recognize it for what it is, the idea is easy to ridicule. In any case, a sense of the oneness of the cosmos (or perhaps merely of the human race, or of one's society), coupled with the realization that one forms a distinct part of this oneness, is what Dewey's early position involves. In the face of death, therefore, in this view, one can let oneself go without feeling that one is losing oneself; one can see oneself as part of something larger, woven into its very fabric, as it were. Thus, as we saw in the case of religious feeling in chapter 6, we come to believe that the continuation of this vast thing is also the continuation of oneself, the continuation of something with which one identifies, or the continuation of something in which one has played one's part. The feeling of peace then descends upon one, a feeling that occurs "so far as one gives up wholly his own particular self . . . and takes the life of the completely harmonious Personality for his own" (EW 2: 291). One is no longer the particular thing, but the larger thing, identifying with the larger thing's interests and not one's own—the larger thing, be it noted again, in terms of which alone any distinct

sense of self is possible. One therefore feels peace, for one feels at one with the ongoing, whole event of the universe, even when this means one's own particular demise, and one is grateful that such an event has allowed one to become oneself in relation to its larger meaning.

This element "of identity and of difference" (EW 2: 126), of finding one's distinct self in relation to a larger whole, is not an arbitrary addition to Dewey's thoughts but is rather built into his very conception of knowledge, as we have already seen. According to the early Dewey's theory of knowledge,

> The relations which connect mental contents are those of identity and of difference. . . . The process of adjustment consists in bringing the past experiences to bear upon the present so as to unify it with those ideal elements which resemble it, and separate it from those which are unlike. These two processes necessarily accompany each other, so that, while the goal of knowledge is complete unity, or a perfectly harmonious relation of all facts and events to each other, this unity shall be one which shall contain the greatest possible amount of specification, or distinction within itself. (EW 2: 126; 130)

With the feeling of peace, Dewey has only extended into an ultimate ideal the idealization processes that are at work in all knowledge—the simultaneous achieving of unity and differentiation. The ideal of a larger whole is, like so many other things we have discussed in Dewey's philosophy, a human construction and meaning that is imaginatively added to the facts of the universe; and yet this construction takes on value and significance and vital force precisely to the extent that we have faith in its genuine existence as a reality at the root of our own being, or at least to the extent that we have faith in our ongoing ability to create more and more idealized meanings like the ideal of a larger whole, for example, a society that is more and more conducive to our needs and that will recognize us as essential elements within it.

In any event, the feeling of peace results because we recognize, when we have faith in the existence of a larger, idealized, meaningful whole of which we are a part, or which we could at least help to create

and sustain, that even in our individual deaths the larger, meaningful whole continues. And since I am identified with its meaning, I identify with its continuing. Since what *it* is includes my distinct part within it, insofar as it continues, so too do I, conceived as a distinct individual whose life and meanings are made possible solely within its larger life and meanings.

This feeling of peace, it should be noted, is consistent with the one mystical experience that Dewey himself is reported to have had. As we have already seen, as Westbrook points out, Dewey once had "an experience of quiet reconciliation with the world . . . [a] blissful moment of 'oneness with the universe,' " which seems to have profoundly affected him for his entire life.[20] Something like the feeling of peace may at some point have descended on the young Dewey, and one could even surmise that this powerful feeling may have shaped Dewey's response to life from then on, allowing him, in fact, to embrace life, that is, to live with security, and hence to be so productive as a man and thinker. Certainly one who felt defeated by life could not have been as productive as was Dewey. Of course, this idea is merely speculative as applied to Dewey's own case, and yet there is logic to the general idea. And in fact the solution to the problem of death is meant to be logical, not only mystical. It is a rational working out of the mystical insight, and stands or falls with the rational explanation, not the mysticism. The idea is that identifying with a larger, meaningful whole enables one to embrace life, for even in death, with the loss of one's self, one is still in a way alive, and one's preferred meanings are still at work in the world (see MW 14:226). Under these conditions one can accept life; one can feel secure in life, no matter what happens. One can therefore live. Rather than seeing life as devoid of warmth and meaning and turning away from it, one can turn toward life as full of immense significance—the significance of a cosmic whole beyond oneself that nonetheless simultaneously includes oneself.

It should be stressed that Deweyan peace is compatible with endless process and rupture. To arrive at the feeling of peace is to feel oneself part of an endless process. A person feels that he is in the "flow" of events, contributing his small part to it. But being in the

flow means being carried by it as well as contributing something to it; and what carries us is always changing too. The peace in question is not the certainty of belonging to an "accomplished result." The world will become many things after I am gone; it will keep changing (and what I amount to within the world will keep changing too). The peace comes, however, in the realization that, as the flow goes, so do I. I die knowing that I am part of something that carries me with it wherever it goes. I realize that I never was anything apart from this larger process, that I belong to it, and that I have been able to contribute my small effect, while alive, to what the process will become. This realization is what brings peace: that I am forever part of the ongoing flow, tension, and development of existence (EW 4:366–68; EW 2:358).

Moreover, in my one life, while I still live, there will always be toil, even when I have this peace. Toil and continued struggle are part of the flow itself; and so the peace I attain in my realization that I belong to the flow is not the absence of struggle, disjunction, and rupture, even in my own life. What happens, rather, is that I am able to affirm life and death—affirm the flow—by virtue of the realization that I am part of the continued struggle wherever it goes. With a calm and peaceful mind, I affirm the endless process of rupture. I am emboldened for the tireless struggle of life and I go out to meet the world courageously and well prepared for the battle (EW 4:366–68).

But does Dewey's solution to the problem of death really solve the problem? Could a modernist ever be won over to it? Let us utilize the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche to answer these questions. Nietzsche was the enemy of all idealisms, and in this he represents a good deal of philosophy in our day, which since Hegel has in various ways moved beyond idealism. Nietzsche was a fellow nineteenth-century thinker, of the same epoch as Dewey, and perhaps struggling with similar issues. It will help to see the contribution of Dewey's early position on these matters if we begin with the hard case, with a stringent critique of his general position and a consideration of an alternative.

However, before we turn to a Nietzschean response to Dewey's early idealism, it is important to point out that Nietzsche himself, at

least as I read him, waffles on the question of whether he is a modernist. On the one hand, he sides with modernism in accepting the fact of death, and bidding us to creatively turn inward as the only proper response to death. On the other hand, at times he tells us that we should not only accept death but love it. He says that we should embrace everything without alteration. These are two very different responses to life and to the problem of death. Let us see how this combination of views might challenge Dewey's idealism. That way we can see how the early Dewey might respond to the modernist, and also how he might respond to another pessimistic but competing account of life.

Let us begin with the Nietzsche who says that we should embrace life as it is. How would this Nietzsche respond to Dewey? No doubt he would try to run roughshod over Dewey's philosophy, critiquing it mercilessly, even mocking it, and commenting, perhaps, that idealisms such as Dewey's are always transparent and laughable for one who knows how to expose their true motives. Nietzsche expresses his opinion of all forms of idealism in a way that shows that the critique of idealism is something like the crux of his own philosophy: "*Overthrowing idols* (my word for 'ideals')—that comes closer to being part of my craft. One has deprived reality of its value, its meaning, its truthfulness, to precisely the extent to which one has mendaciously invented an ideal world."[21] For Nietzsche, idealism is a rejection of reality; it denies the facts, which it fears and despises, and instead of embracing the facts creates fantasies, "ideal truths," which it clings to in spite of the way the world really is.

To be more specific, the facts, for Nietzsche, are heartless and unpitying, or at best utterly indifferent to human concerns. As Nietzsche puts it in an early essay, "And woe to that fatal curiosity which might one day have the power to peer out and down through a crack in the chamber of consciousness and then suspect that man is sustained . . . by that which is pitiless, greedy, insatiable, and murderous—as if hanging in dreams on the back of a tiger."[22] This position, moreover, stays with Nietzsche, who in one of his last works insists not only that life is terrible but also that we need "affirmation of life even in its strangest and sternest problems . . . beyond pity and terror, *to realize*

in oneself the eternal joy of becoming—that joy which also encompasses *joy in destruction.*"[23] For Nietzsche, the facts about our existence are thoroughly un-idealized, and what he councils in relation to them, and to life, is that *we should affirm the facts in all of their uncertain and horrible nature.* "A pessimism of *strength*"[24] would enable us to do so. One who possessed this type of pessimism would be able to love life even in its "sternest problems,"[25] for such "*ascending* life,"[26] as Nietzsche calls it, "wants deep, wants deep eternity,"[27] wants everything just as it is no matter how it is. Such a person will not "slander" life,[28] but instead will accept it and affirm it, even when life goes against his deepest human desires and needs. This is perhaps why Nietzsche's hero is the "*overman*,"[29] the one who is willing to reject deep human needs (like the need to idealize things) and to embrace what is beyond the human.[30]

From the perspective of one who wants no comfort, from the perspective of the pessimism of strength, Dewey's view must appear ridiculous indeed, an attempt to slander life, made by a coward. A Nietzschean might charge that at work in Dewey's position is a very deep dread of materialism: consider the earliest expression we have of Dewey's thought—his first published essay is an attack on materialism, an attempt to reject materialism at all costs (EW1: 3–8). Consider, too, the ideas at work in the *Psychology,* indeed their very basis, which is the refusal to countenance even a modicum of matter in the formation of ideals. As we saw early in this study, Dewey postulates that at the origin of our meanings lies not matter alone, but rather motions. In Dewey's words, "it is not the mere thing, but the thing with the characteristic of motion, that is the extra-organic stimulus of sensation" (EW 2: 30). Dewey will not allow "the mere thing" to be at the root of our sensations and instead holds to the belief in an original movement. Moreover, as we saw, he firmly rejects a materialist understanding of how this original motion would give rise to sensations: "there is no identity," he says, "between the sensation as a state of consciousness and the mechanical motion which precedes it," and hence the mechanical motion cannot ever account for the sensation (EW 2: 40). And so on and so forth. What is clear is that Dewey

will not countenance materialism. Indeed, we have a philosophy here that explicitly amounts to the claim that there are no given facts devoid of the self's meanings. But what is this, a Nietzschean might say, but proof of Dewey's underlying dread of matter, of his subsequent retreat into ideals, and of his willingness to lie about reality—the willingness to lie that Nietzsche says is at work in all idealisms of whatever stripe?[31]

There might also be the further Nietzschean charge that Dewey's philosophy is, accordingly, "human, all too human."[32] Not only does Dewey add human meanings to facts, but insofar as he does so, he reveals thoroughly human motivations for doing so—weakness, fear, perhaps even resentment against the facts and those who can tolerate and embrace the facts. Again, what Nietzsche advises instead is that those who are capable of it should turn to and embrace the facts, even in all of their pitiless nature. We should love life no matter what, even in its brute indifference to human concerns.[33]

These would be formidable charges, coming from a formidable philosopher. One can make the case, however, that Dewey manages to evade such Nietzschean charges and offers the better response to pessimism in the end. For one thing, we must not think that Nietzsche had a monopoly on responding to pessimism. His response is a powerful one, with the seeming capacity to energize and prepare us for the battle of life; it seems at first to have what William James calls that inborn "pugnacity" that makes "life on a purely naturalistic basis seem worth living," giving us the fighting strength to go on.[34] But if we look at the matter more closely, we can see that there is a fundamental element of resignation in Nietzsche's position as well. What he ultimately asks of us is that we should *identify* ourselves with alien forces. We should give up our own human meanings and identify with the raw, merciless facts that supposedly lie at the very basis of the world and are totally indifferent to us.

Is such a thing even possible? Let us continue with our example of death and work through the possibilities. Nietzsche would say that nature is indifferent to us, that death is more than likely annihilation; and that *we should align ourselves with this*—that is, with nothing,

since, after all, we are supposed to affirm all things just as they happen for all eternity. The result of Nietzsche's pessimism of strength would thus amount to a negation of what one is, and not, as Nietzsche has claimed, "how one becomes what one is."[35] In this case, we can see how Nietzsche's vaunted call for us to become what we are really amounts to a negation of what we are. But *can* we really identify ourselves with what we are not? That is, with total and absolute lack of anything? This is not a matter of growing into another self, with which we could then identify. On the contrary, the situation is one in which we would not grow into anything at all; every aspect of us would be obliterated. How can one possibly identify oneself with such a total absence? And yet this is what Nietzsche's philosophy calls upon us to do. For it calls on us not only to love the world as it is—cold and indifferent—but also to will this *same* indifferent world endlessly, for eternity. Such is the meaning of Nietzsche's concept of "*amor fati*."[36] A Deweyan idealist might say that Nietzsche's philosophy is therefore a form of madness, for it demands that we should identify ourselves with what is not, and never can be, ourselves. It is similar to a philosophy that would ask us to consider ourselves to be Napoleon—to see ourselves, point for point, as what we are not and can never really be. In this, it seems, the Nietzschean pessimism of strength is simply out of touch. It is in fact nihilism, choosing nothingness over something, even though, at times, Nietzsche claims he is himself overcoming nihilism. But it is also definitely madness: it is a philosophy that asks the self, as a self—that is, as a something—to affirm the absolute denial of itself, without any hope of reconstituting the self in any shape or form whatsoever. More particularly, one could argue that this is a philosophy of extreme masochism. For it asks us to accept, even to love, our own annihilation, to desire it for eternity, again and again. We are to actively *want* what harms and obliterates us, and to want it repeatedly. It is a philosophy that asks one to identify with, and to love, absolute nothing, to identify with what one never could be, with that with which, in principle, one never could identify; to ask one to do so is, therefore, if not lunacy, at least the product of disturbed thinking.

Madness or peace—these are our options, if we had to choose between Nietzschean pessimism and the idealism of the early Dewey. And it seems fair to say that if we did have to so choose, peace would be the more rational option. We could not rationally choose madness.

So if we want to mount a Nietzschean critique of Dewey, Nietzsche's pessimism of strength may not be the way to go. Instead, the perspective of the more decidedly modernist Nietzsche might offer a greater challenge to Dewey's idealism. Let us turn, therefore, to the response to Dewey that would likely be made by the Nietzsche who says that our best shot in life is to invent ourselves, rather than to embrace all things.

The modernist Nietzsche's main position seems to be that, above all, we must run away from "the herd." Since life is horrible, and the crowd of others around us is mediocre, never striving for greatness, the only thing that can make life worthwhile for us is to seek solitude and work on becoming great for ourselves. But here the problem with modernism that we saw in the previous section of this chapter comes into play. Nietzsche may convince himself that in his isolation he can create himself, but such a view is contradictory. For Nietzsche still needs others in relation to whom he can invent himself. He needs the great dead philosophers to critique, and he needs his future readers, his "philosophers of the future," to confirm his greatness.[37]

An advantage of the early Dewey's view over Nietzsche's in this respect is that it openly admits and affirms our connection to others as the source and meaning of our own individuality. It avoids the contradictory stance of Nietzsche and of modernists in general on this score; and it identifies the specific context in which we can hope to seek out our own individuality, namely, in relation to a certain kind of social order that might allow for it. A further advantage is that in advocating contact with and embrace of what is external—namely, a meaningful social world outside of oneself—Dewey's view allows us manifold possibilities in what we are opened up to and the kind of selves we can become. Contrast this position of openness with the position of the world-weary cynic, contracting in upon himself and chagrined at the world, and we get a sense of the

Deweyan advantage. Indeed, in the case of Nietzsche, we can sense this advantage distinctly; for Nietzsche's position never allows that there could be genuine, meaningful relationships between the self and society. To be sure, when Nietzsche says that we should withdraw from the herd, as Lawrence Hatab makes clear, he also stresses that we can still seek others with whom to be friends, as long as they are our equals, those with whom we can bring ourselves to joust in "an agonistic interaction."[38] But what is this but an admission that Nietzsche's position misses entirely the countless different kinds of joys that are possible through our interactions with others?[39] Like a true modernist, Nietzsche constricts the self to a miniscule point within itself and its opposition to others, whereas Dewey's self relates itself to others (in sympathy, for example, as well as in antipathy), enlarges itself thereby, and grows endlessly in meaning. Nietzsche, one of the "Hyperboreans"[40]—the man who writes from icy heights above humanity—isolates the self to the point of excessive restriction. Deweyan idealism, on the other hand, although it does involve an element of faith, a faith that one's ideals may ultimately be at work in facts, produces meanings—a world of others in meaningful relation to oneself that yields richer and more significant values in one's life than can be achieved by one's own narrow self alone.[41]

But still it may be objected that Dewey's early view is simply too ideal, too implausible to be accepted by thinking people. For, after all, his view admits that meanings are ideal constructions, while at the same time it asks us to believe that these ideal constructions are somehow at work in the very structure of reality. Even when we know that ideal meanings are merely constructions of ours, we are nonetheless supposed to accept them, on faith, as holding for reality. Could there ever be a clearer instance of a position that fits Nietzsche damning remark that " 'faith' means not *wanting* to know what is true"?[42]

One thing this objection misses, however, is that on Dewey's view facts *become* ideal. They really do take on ideal meanings when we give these meanings to them—a sensation, for example, is originally an extra-organic fact (a motion) that literally becomes of a certain

quality through our activity, namely, the quality of the mental sensation we are experiencing. (In a work of art, likewise, some physical objects, newly organized, literally become beautiful objects; in friendship our external relations really do take on a deeper significance through our idealized additions of sympathy and fellow feeling; and so on.) While this would not happen, of course, with religious faith (that is, we would not expect the universe itself to suddenly form a larger, meaningful whole solely through our idealizations), yet faith in such a thing, as we have seen, is a way to allow our continued idealization of facts to occur, and occur in reality—as what counts as genuine reality through our efforts. For Dewey, idealized meanings, let us remember, are *progressive* realizations. The lure of believing in the ideal formation of a larger meaningful whole may be one way to help create it in fact—that is, to idealize the facts in precisely this way.

And here, I think, we come to the heart of the matter with Dewey's early philosophy. It encourages us to have a life-sustaining faith that the universe is one ongoing interconnected event in which we play our part. We come to believe that "there is no such thing as an isolated fact in the universe, but that all are connected with each other as members of a common whole" (EW 2: 201). And while the reality of such a thing is something we can only hope for, and struggle ourselves to create, nonetheless we have a partial realization of this hope and faith in the very existence of our social life (EW 3: 371). This is a point, in fact, that the later Dewey will emphasize, namely, when he says at the conclusion of *Human Nature and Conduct* that

> within the flickering inconsequential acts of separate selves dwells a sense of the whole which claims and dignifies them. In its presence we put off mortality and live in the universal. The life of the community in which we live and have our being is the fit symbol of this relationship. (MW 14: 227)

In this remarkable passage, which could easily have been written by the early John Dewey, we have his essential idea. There is a larger cosmic whole, and the society to which we belong is the symbol of it. For at work in any society, and in our connection to it, is the fundamental idea that the self is not an isolated atom but extends outward

into the universe of other things, and can see itself as a part of these other things (EW 2: 259). This idea plays out socially because the self can only exist to the extent that it can identify with the members of its community. Each self must come out of itself and identify with its community to be itself, to get a definition of itself *as* itself (EW 2: 289). And so, on this view, we identify with the community; we see ourselves as one with it; and we wish for its continued success, for its success *is* our success. We sustain the community in our actions and in our memories. We remember its dead and we give them their due. And others in the community will remember me, and they will sustain their thoughts of me, for I am also one with their common life, and in this sense I shall live on after my death in the life of the community itself. I will take care of the community, and it will take care of me. I will remember each of the others, and they will each remember me.

We will each die, but we will be sustained by the common life that carries us on.[43] And this thought gives us courage. It helps us to live without fear of death; for our thoughts and our actions will not simply *disappear*. They will amount to something in the course of things. They will continue on.

Nietzsche's philosophy, on the other hand, insists that we identify, precisely, with nothing, and it sees our community as that which, above all, should be resisted as we flee into our own isolated, authentic selves. We do not wish the community well, and we do not see ourselves as forming any part of it. Death is annihilation, the total loss of everything, since, never connected to a community, we feel no sense in which we might live on in its presence. We lose everything when we die, and it is this absolute blackness and total loss that Nietzsche, in his madness, asks us to embrace as if it were our very selves.

That social life is of the essence of Dewey's early position can be seen from a fundamental feature of his *Psychology* discussed in the previous chapter. We saw that there is a crucial link for Dewey between social feeling, moral feeling, and religious feeling. Social feeling is rooted in the fact that we feel ourselves—feel who we are—in response to others. Sympathy, that complex emotion in which I feel in

relation to another that I am both myself and, in some sense, the other as well—this feeling, Dewey insists, is at the basis of moral feeling also. Dewey explains that "Sympathy . . . is the reproduction of the experience of another, *accompanied by the recognition of the fact that it is his experience*" (EW 2: 285). In feeling sympathy, we possess

> [f]irst, ability to apprehend . . . the feelings of others, and to reproduce them in our minds; and, secondly, the ability to forget self, and remember that these feelings, although our own feelings, are, after all, the experience of some one else. Sympathy involves distinction as well as identification. I must not only assume into myself the experiences of a man who is suffering from poverty, in order to sympathize with him, but I must realize them as *his*; I must separate them from my own personal self, and objectify them in him. (EW 2: 285)

Or, as Dewey puts it even more succinctly, to feel sympathy, "we must not only take their life into ours, but we must put ours into them" (EW 2: 285). Once more, and as always with the early Dewey, the self expands; it becomes more than it was, and in this expansion the self not only creates new meanings in the world, but also find itself at work in the life and nature of others.

Sympathy, then, is a fundamental social feeling by which meanings are created in the world; and it is also at the basis of our morality, Dewey says. We do not feel moral obligations, at first, to strangers. We do originally feel moral obligations, however, towards those who are like us, those with whom we can sympathize. Thus, according to Dewey, "the moral feelings are based upon the social feelings, and are an outgrowth of them. We recognize moral relations to those whom we feel to be identical in nature with ourselves. The feeling of sympathy as the basis of this identification of natures is, therefore, the source of all moral feeling" (EW 2: 288). But moral feeling differs in that it can enlarge itself to cover all things, so that we can feel a moral obligation to all of humanity, for example, or even to all of nature, which exists beyond our narrow range of friends. Religious feeling, by contrast, is the assertion that this universal moral obligation we feel (rooted in sympathy) does apply to all the world: that the entire

world is a single interconnected whole with which I can sympathize—meaning that I can both identify myself with it and, through this identification, learn the true meaning of my distinct self within the whole to which I belong.

We can see, therefore, that at its root Dewey's philosophy is about sympathy, in particular the sympathy we feel toward the community of which we are a part and toward its members. This element of social life is the basis, the fundament, in terms of which our later idealizations become possible—in terms of which morality and religion become possible. Community is therefore, quite fittingly, the symbol of our larger meanings. It is through our community life that we can distinguish and define ourselves, and it is through it, and through idealized extensions of its meanings, that we gain access to all that may be more universally significant and rich in human life.

It should come as no surprise, therefore, that in trying to overcome modern culture and its pessimism, Dewey should focus his energies on the problematic nature of social life that modernism engenders, and on rethinking what it would mean to have a healthier and more appropriate mode of living together. As we will see in what follows, Dewey's other major work of this period, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics,* is not really so much about ethics, as some commentators have supposed,[44] as it is a response to our cultural condition. Although Dewey never explicitly puts it this way in the book, *Outlines* is about how to conceive of both social life and of the nature of the self as we move beyond modernist culture.

Rethinking Self and Society

In my view, *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* should be situated conceptually in terms of Dewey's larger project; it is not just a work in ethical theory. On the contrary, the book's most essential feature is that it presents Dewey's alternative to the modernist conception of social life. In what remains of this chapter, I cannot hope to offer an extended analysis of this interesting text, but I do hope others might become interested in doing so. It is a rich philosophical work worthy

of more sustained attention. What I can offer here is a basic sketch of what I regard as the book's central feature, that is, its powerful vision of what a culture beyond our current, pessimistic one could look like. The central idea is that by inventing a new, more idealized community and struggling to realize it, we can move closer to creating the kind of world in which each person will matter in the larger scheme of things. We would thereby help to create the conditions by which pessimism can be overcome and life can be worth living.

Modernist culture can only conceive of the self as opposed to society. As Dewey saw so well in his essay, "Poetry and Philosophy," the pessimism of his times amounted to "a twofold isolation of man—his isolation from nature, his isolation from fellow-man. No longer . . . may man believe in his oneness with the dear nature about him" and, although "man, repulsed from the intimacy of communion with Nature, may turn to man for fellowship . . . here, too, is found isolation" (EW 3: 115). Dewey quotes Matthew Arnold:

> Ah, from that silent, sacred land
> Of sun and arid stone,
> And crumbling wall and sultry sand,
> Comes now one word alone!
> From David's lips that word did roll,
> 'Tis true and living yet:
> No man can save his brother's soul,
> Nor pay his brother's debt.
> Alone, self-poised, henceforward man
> Must labor.
>
> (EW 3: 116)

On which Dewey comments: "the life of common brotherhood, struggle and destiny . . . has given way to the old isolated struggle of the individual" (EW 3: 116).

When one is isolated from other people in this way, never able to connect with them and to form a common bond, one is forced to withdraw into oneself and to find one's own law within. "Isolation is translated into self-dependence. Separation throws man farther into himself, deepens his consciousness of his own destiny and of his own

law" (EW 3: 117). It is the solitary man that modernism triumphs—the singular individual who is his own law, who defines himself in isolation, completely detached from his fellow human beings and his relation to them. From everything we know about Dewey's early philosophy at this point, we can see clearly that he will resist such a conception.

In Dewey's alternative vision of culture, the self is actually defined in terms of its *connection* to others. More specifically, it is defined in terms of an ideal "'moral community,'" which is "a unity of action, made what it is by the co-operating activities of diverse individuals" (EW 3: 326). In the moral community, each individual "forms the unity" by "doing his specific part" in the society (EW 3: 326). There is reciprocal interplay and mutual exchange between self and society, not opposition. Each gives something fundamental to the other.

Society gives to the individual a function in life in terms of which he or she may become an individual, that is, a distinct member of the group (EW 3: 326; 339). It is hoped that the individual, in turn, will give to the society by maintaining one of its specific social functions, thereby giving it opportunity to forward some of its ends. Self and society in this way grow together rather than existing in open conflict with each other (see "reciprocal relation" in EW 2:281).

The moral community is an ideal, not a fact. But its possibility is grounded in actual events. It seems clear, for example, that modernism is mistaken about the nature of individuality. As Dewey rightly explains, "individuality means not separation, but defined position in a whole" (EW 3: 326). This is the case because in point of fact "desires are socialized" and do not exist as self-standing, independent forces (EW 3: 387). The individual with his desires grasps the meaning of himself (and his desires) only in relation to others, and, in particular, in relation to the function he performs in the social body. There is a social circumstance in which the individual, as a functioning self, always finds himself and in relation to which his desires are typically formed. "There are environments existing prior to the activities of any individual agent; the family, for example, is prior to the moral activity of a child born into it" (EW 3: 313). What can happen is that

the individual adjusts to the activities of the prior group, which "means *making the environment a reality for one's self*. . . . The child takes for his own end, ends already existing for the wills of others. And, in making them his own, he creates and supports for himself an environment that already exists for others" (EW 3: 313–14). A reciprocal interplay begins to emerge between the self and society: the self adopts certain social norms as its own, a certain given function within the society, and the social norms are sustained and at times even creatively modified through the self's adoption of these norms and the performance of its social function.

The individual, in other words, does not simply adjust to the society; the society also, at times, adjusts to the individual. For it is the individual who is the carrier of the environment and its meanings, and the individual always has some idiosyncrasy or other that is present when he carries the meanings of the environment. "Adjustment," as Dewey puts it, "is not outer conformity; it is living realization of certain relations in and through the will of the agent" (EW 3: 314). Living activity is changing and messy, and sometimes creative, and so does not ever fully reproduce exactly what went before, although it does embody this and carry it on in some form.

Now in adopting the social norms of the group, making them his own, and even developing them in some ways, the individual seems, in effect, to be working for the good of the group, even when he thinks he is only satisfying his own desires. The individual performs a function, he plays a role, as defined by the society; but in doing so he sustains and develops the social environment that affects others as well.

> Since the performance of function is . . . the creation, perpetuation, and further development of an environment, of relations to the wills of others, its performance *is a common good.* It satisfies others who participate in the environment. The member of the family, of the state, etc., in exercising his function, contributes to the whole of which he is a member by realizing its spirit in himself. (EW 3: 314)

There is a secret bond that appears to exist between the individual and society. Looked at from the side of the individual, a person who performs his function is simply trying to fulfill his desires and realize himself: "in the performance of his own function the agent satisfies his own interests and gains power" (EW 3: 327). In giving a person a function to perform, in terms of which he can exercise his powers and realize himself, society grants the person the status of an individual. Looked at from the side of society, however, the individual is ideally sustaining and assisting the society of which he is a member by performing his special function within it.

This latter point is not, however, a certain result. It could be the case that in performing his specific function the individual has no impact whatsoever on others, or that perhaps he only looks out for himself. One might, as an individual, use others to one's own advantage, without contributing to them, indeed in such a way as to positively harm them. This is precisely where, once again, the concept of faith enters into Dewey's early thought. "The Ethical Postulate," as Dewey calls it, is "a faith that, in realizing his own capacity, he will satisfy the needs of society" (EW 3: 320). The individual is fully entitled to throw himself into his own work, and to gain his individual power and meaning thereby, with faith as the only guarantee that he is assisting society to realize itself through this process. Indeed, Dewey goes so far as to say that "the basis of moral strength is *limitation*, the resolve to be one's self only, and to be loyal to the actual powers and surroundings of that self" (EW 3: 321). With so much the modernist would agree. And the modernist would agree with this also: "All fruitful and sound human endeavor roots in the conviction that there is something absolutely worth while, something 'divine' in the demands imposed by one's actual situation and powers" (EW 3: 321). A person will never amount to anything if he does not trust himself as an individual.

And yet, this self-trust, while it energizes the individual and enables him to realize his possibilities and become a distinct individual, is not equivalent to withdrawn, isolated, and egoistic behavior. There

is at work in the individual's behavior, when it is moral (and when his character is formed as such), a faith that by performing his specific function he is at the same time forwarding the growth of others and enabling them to realize themselves as well. The moral individual says to himself: "What is really good for me *must* turn out good for all, or else there is no good in the world at all" (EW 3: 320). The moral individual has faith, in other words, that "self and others make a true community," that the self's interests and activities are not wholly severed from its connections to others, and that it can, in fact, make a positive contribution to the well-being of others (EW 3: 320). This is, again, a faith that one has; nothing establishes it in fact. But it is a vital faith, an essential one, if there is to be any significant connection between the self and society. It is "what is vaguely called 'faith in humanity.' . . . But what is meant is just this: in the performing of such special service as each is capable of, there is to be found not only the satisfaction of self, but also the satisfaction of the entire moral order, the furthering of the community in which one lives" (EW 3: 321–22). It is a faith both in oneself and in others: a faith that each of us can attend to our own individual function and, in doing so, attend to one another.

Such faith is grounded in sympathy, for I must feel some connection to others in whom I have faith, but it builds on this sympathy and goes beyond it by affirming the other's potential to make a unique contribution to society simply by realizing his own powers (EW 3: 321). It is a faith that each counts; that each has something to contribute simply by being himself.

This faith in the moral community finds a parallel in the conclusions of science. Dewey says that "all science rests upon the conviction . . . that objects are not mere isolated and transitory appearances, but are connected together in a system by laws or relations" (EW 3: 323). It is the same with our moral faith. "Moral experience *makes for the world of practice* an assumption analogous in kind to that which intellectual experience makes for the world of knowledge" (EW 3: 323). We have faith that no individual is separate; that his activity is not withdrawn and detached, but out there in the world making an

impact on others and contributing to what they become, contributing to a system of organized relations.

This means, in effect, that there is both unity and difference between the self and society—a reciprocal interplay, as I have called it, rather than an opposition. By performing a specific function, one is distinct from others; but one is also connected to them, or at least one has faith that one is so connected, because one's distinctness functions within society, making a helpful impact on it. "The exercise of function by an agent serves, then, both to define and to unite him. It makes him a *distinct* social member at the same time that it makes him a *member*" (EW 3: 326).

The contrast between Dewey's new vision of culture and that of modernism should be clear. Whereas modernism can see only separation between, say, individual freedom and social obligation, Dewey's vision makes sense of them both together. The modernist, with his isolated self, achieves his freedom only by resisting all social obligation. Or else he achieves social obligation only by sacrificing his own freedom and authentic self-expression. In Dewey's view, by contrast, the self has an obligation to the community of which it is a member, for the self is bound by the rules of the game, by the function it performs, a function that only gains its meaning and definition in relation to a social whole; and yet the self is free at the same time because by performing its function, the self realizes its own capacities and exercises its own individual power (EW 3: 327).

Indeed, in Dewey's view, far from a rift existing between freedom and obligation, both are able to constantly grow together in a "progressive development," in a constant expansive interplay (EW 3: 370). The more society supports the individual in allowing him to perform his specific function, the "richer and subtler individual activity" becomes; the situation results "in increased individualization, in wider and freer functions of life" (EW 3: 370). One becomes more and more of an individual, a unique person with distinct, individual, creative powers. On the other hand, the more the individual is supported by the society in this way, so as to become an individual, the more there is generated—according to the Ethical Postulate, at least—a greater

individual desire for and contribution to the good of the whole. One chooses to support the community that enables one to really be oneself. There is "increase in number of those persons whose ideal is 'a common good,' or who have membership in the same moral community; and, further, it consists in more complex relations between them" (EW 3: 370). Adopting an idea partly from T. H. Green, Dewey even postulates a progression to the development of this belief in the moral community and how far it will extend. "The social consciousness" begins with one's limited group and then extends, ideally, to all of humanity: "There has been a period in which the community was nothing more than a man's own immediate family group, this enlarging to the clan, the city, the social class, the nation; until now, in theory, the community of interests and ends is humanity itself" (EW 3: 371). What is more, with social consciousness increasing in this way, there is also an increase in the kind and quality of moral ends one feels oneself inclined to adopt.

> When the conceived community is small, bravery may consist mainly in willingness to fight for the recognized community against other hostile groups. As these groups become themselves included in the moral community, courage must change its form, and become resoluteness and integrity of purpose in defending . . . humanity as such. . . . Let the community be truly spiritual, consisting in recognition of unity of destiny and function in co-operation toward an all-inclusive life, and the ideal of courage becomes more internal and spiritual, consisting in loyalty to the possibilities of humanity, whenever and wherever found. (EW 3: 371)

The ends of action become more and more spiritual, more and more ideal, to the extent that we conceive of them in terms of an ever-widening moral community. The ends of our action enlarge themselves to include more and more people, and the quality of our desire to assist these other members of our group accordingly grows in richness and meaning, until we might even be prepared to die, for example, for a fellow human being whom we do not even know, because we conceive of him or her after the ideal, as a member of the same

human community, and hence as significant and important as any other human being.

Against modernism, then, which holds that the single human being always exists in opposition to his society, always needing to affirm his freedom in opposition to social obligations or else to lose it, Dewey shows us how it is possible to fundamentally rethink these relationships. Thanks to Dewey's vision, it is possible to think of a social arrangement in which the individual human being is enabled to be singular, and free, even as he becomes bound to his community and bears it some definite obligations. Dewey sums up his new vision with a passage not from the modernist poet Matthew Arnold, but from Shakespeare:

> To thine own self be true;
> And it must follow, as the night the day,
> Thou can'st not then be false to any man.
> (EW 3: 322)

If one were to go against oneself, one would go against something deep and profound within oneself, against something like a principle of all humanity. Conversely, by being oneself, one also achieves something for humanity. Where society empowers the individual to be himself, the individual in turn is able to empower society; that is, he is able to create conditions that might empower other individuals in his moral community. Through belief in the Ethical Postulate, we have faith that where the individual is so empowered to act, he will also definitely empower others.

Incidentally, despite an apparent similarity, Dewey's vision is different than the Kantian principle that by giving myself the law, I also constrain myself to the obligation of respecting other rational beings as ends in themselves and never treating them as mere means.[45] True, it seems as if Kant has also found a way to unite freedom and obligation, since, on his view, I must *freely* give myself the law, which I am then *morally bound* to obey. But the difference is that, as Dewey sees it, Kant's view comes down too hard on the side of the law, that is, of the obligation one bears to the moral community. Kant downplays

desire, as that which cannot be a constitutive part of one's moral obligation. When we choose what to do, according to Kant we need to choose the right thing even if it goes against our desires. The moral law trumps desire. But for Dewey, contra Kant, desires *do* count in what constitutes the moral community and our obligation to it. "The law is not something wholly apart from the desires"; on the contrary, the whole aim and effort of Dewey's vision is to get the individual to eventually possess the desire to obey his or her obligation to others—to no longer see individual desires and obligations to others as separate (EW 3: 293). With the right kind of community, the separation can be overcome; individual desire and social obligation can become one and work together in a mutual, ongoing progression of meaning.

The modernist will object to Dewey's vision, perhaps, and insist, not that individual desires should not count in moral life, but that they are *all* that should count, or at least they should count far more than Dewey will allow. The modernist may well think that as a result of Dewey's vision, the individual would never really be able to exercise his freedom. For from the beginning of this account, it may be noticed, Dewey has insisted that "desires are socialized" (EW 3: 387). The individual is from the start brought into social life, even at the level of his individual desires; and so the modernist might argue that in this view the individual is never really enabled to develop his own free individual self; were he truly to do so, he could only ever act in opposition to the social norms imposing themselves on him.

But here, I think, the early Dewey would simply insist that the modernist is wrong.

> The child finds . . . ends and actions in existence when he is born. More than this: he is not born as a mere spectator of the world; he is born *into* it. He finds himself encompassed by such relations, and he finds his own being and activity intermeshed with them. If he takes away from himself, as an agent, what he has, as sharing in these ends and actions, nothing remains. (EW 3: 346)

"Nothing remains"—nothing remains, in other words, if we try to conceive of the modernist self, the self whose desires and ends are

stripped away of all social meanings and goals. This self is a pure negation, an imaginary entity; for to be a self, even to be a free, independent self, is to be embedded in a social life of some sort, in terms of which the self adopts and strives for certain ends as opposed to other ends and receives the very meaning of its own purposes. In Dewey's words, even "freedom becomes real . . . it becomes force and efficiency of action, because it does not mean some private possession of the individual, but means the whole co-operating and organized action of an institution in securing to an individual some power of self-expression" (EW 3: 349). It takes an enabling, free form of association for the individual to gain some measure of freedom. Social life is omnipresent in the individual; it is inescapable, forming the very ends and desires he possesses, but this fact is consistent with the existence of freedom. The real question is not how to access a separate self outside of society that activates our individual liberty, but rather what type of society or culture will enable us to be free and help us engender genuinely free individuals within it. We know what Dewey will say: it will be the type of society that will enable us (to paraphrase Shakespeare) to be true to our own selves, while also expecting us to be true to others and to enable them to be true to themselves as well. It is a society in which we all work together to be our own selves. This is Dewey's vision.

We have before us, then, Dewey's alternative conception of culture—a culture beyond modernism with its restricted, narrow, and antisocial self, beyond a problematic modernist culture that Dewey believes results in the proliferation of unhealthy types, of cynics and egoists, aesthetes and skeptics, and, above all, of pessimistic and despairing cases who are nauseated with the very prospect of living (EW 3: 41). The early John Dewey wants to help us to move us past all this. He wants to engender in us a potent sense of life's meanings and possibilities; he wants us to become characters who can embrace life, and one another, rather than being nauseated by everything we see around us. Dewey offers us a philosophy of health and vigor as opposed to a philosophy of cynicism and despair. And the crucial element of this philosophy is the recognition it forces upon us that we

can think of ourselves as part of a moral community; we can see ourselves as part of a larger whole that gives point and purpose to our lives. In the end, Dewey's philosophy tells us to have faith in the possibility of achieving a social whole that cares for us and nurtures us as individuals, a social whole that may therefore serve as the symbol of something even larger and more significant—a community of the meaningful relationships we bear to all of reality, to what has been, what is, and what shall be. In Dewey's life-affirming view, we are entitled to think that we count in the nature of things after all; for we possess the symbol for such a conception in our social life, which lends itself to the possibility of striving toward a perfect whole in which each person counts for something significant in the whole, in which each person may realize himself in the society to the height of his capacities.

In conclusion, it must be stressed once more that Dewey's alternative conception of culture is only an ideal—but in this it is actually the culmination of all of his early efforts. Dewey nowhere claims that his conception of culture is real, or even that it ever could be made real. We know by now that for the early Dewey true meaning lies not in mere facts, but in facts that have become idealized, taken on our meanings, the meanings of our healthy, normal, socialized selves. What Dewey advances is an ideal of a better culture, beyond our current one; he explicitly advances it *as* an ideal, and in this he expresses the very essence of his early philosophy. For the essence of that philosophy, as we have seen in the present work, is that through rupture from what is given, idealization occurs, meanings are born, and the infinite movement of self-realization becomes possible. It is only by having faith in such ideals as Dewey has put forward, ideals of a different and better culture, that we can work against actual facts; and it is only by working against actual facts that we can achieve definite meanings, all along in our progress toward the ideal. The real goal, in effect, is not to attain the ideal, but to pursue it. As Dewey says, "The realizing of this ideal is not something to be sometime reached once for all, but progress is itself the ideal" (EW 3: 387).