TWO

CULTURAL AND INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND

Pessimism as Modernism

A culture of pessimism—what would it look like? What kind of mood or atmosphere would it express? What types of art works would it produce? What creeds would it espouse? Just such a culture existed in Dewey's day, and it went by the name *modernism*. I will first define modernism and then consider Dewey's objections to it. As we will see, defined in philosophical terms, modernism means Kantianism, and it is this philosophy, above all, that the early Dewey opposes.

To define modernism, I will make special reference to Vienna at the turn of the twentieth century, for it is here that, to my mind, the movement finds its most characteristic expression, although we must remember that modernism was a major cultural movement affecting the entire Western world, and not just Vienna. Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin explain modernism in their book *Wittgenstein's Vienna* in relation to the great cultural critic Karl Kraus.[1] Kraus, they

say, who was influenced by Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard, developed a worldview according to which there existed something deeper and more mysterious than the everyday, apparent world.[2] Kraus thought of this distinction explicitly in terms of gender. As Janik and Toulmin make clear, Kraus thought of the feminine in terms of emotions and the masculine in terms of instrumental reason.

> The emotional essence of woman is not wanton or nihilistic, but is rather a tender *fantasy*, which serves as the unconscious origin of all that has any worth in human experience. Herein lies the source of all inspiration and creativity. Reason itself is merely a technique, a means by which men obtain what they desire. In itself it is neither good nor evil, it is merely effective or ineffective. Reason must be supplied with proper goals from outside; it must be given direction of a moral or aesthetic type. The feminine fantasy fecundates the masculine reason and gives it this direction.[3]

On the one side, we have instrumental reason, which aims to get things done. On the other, we have creative fantasy, which is deeper and more mysterious, and which gives direction to what we do. Emotion provides the ends of action, reason the means.

Janik and Toulmin make clear too that, as Kraus sees it, "fantasy . . . is under attack on all sides in the modern world."[4] Kraus felt that instrumental reason was dominating the world, leaving little room for fantasy in our lives. He thought that the modern, bureaucratic world, which privileged functional reason, provided almost no space for the deeper, more difficult-to-define aspects of our existence, so that we were everywhere compelled to act but without any real feeling. We obeyed reason's command to achieve things, to be effective, but we lost any sense of what we ought to achieve. The modern world was dominated by a cold business culture devoid of the "tender fantasy" or feeling that alone gives meaningful direction to our lives.[5] The proper response to this situation, many Krausians believed, was to withdraw from the world into one's own inner private life.

The movement known as modernism was born, in Vienna at least, from these Krausian reflections. An eruption of intense cultural activity occurred in their wake. Janik and Toulmin explain how in various arts, and in philosophy as well, Kraus's fundamental ideas find

expression. In architecture, Adolf Loos, the master functionalist, strove to put reason in its place by stripping his buildings of all ornament: the rational purpose of a building was to stand on its own; any aspects of beauty or feeling were to be found outside of reason and rational function. Fantasy was to be preserved by keeping it out of the picture—its mysterious sources to be untouched and unmolested by reason.[6]

In painting, Gustav Klimt and Oskar Kokoschka affected a similar aim by trying to allow the deeper, expressive meaning of their subjects to shine forth from their paintings.[7] As Carl Schorske has discussed in *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, Klimt broke with tradition and gave wild, uninhibited expression to his sexual fantasies.[8] Thus he painted naked young women in postures of writhing ecstasy, in, for example, *Watersnakes II* and *Fishblood*.[9] His works bordered on the pornographic, and as Schorske points out, for Klimt this liberation of inner life actually "was turning into a nightmare of anxiety."[10] With his instinctive life freed from all constraint, Klimt in some sense became horrified by what he saw.

Kokoschka, for his part, "sought the spiritual within the intensely individual faces he painted." He tried to "bring out the reflection of a man's character dynamically in his face, especially his eyes, and in his hands."[11] Here again a deeper, hidden meaning was revealed beneath the merely surface phenomena. It should be noted, however, that for Kokoschka, as for Klimt, the freedom of inner expression led to fearful results. In his depiction of male-female relationships, Kokoschka broke out into openly sadistic work, for example depicting a man strangling a woman and trying to stab her.[12] Thus, modernism clearly had a darker side that must be noted to fully understand the movement. There was no guarantee that the deeper meanings underneath human reason were benign or even healthy.

Indeed, as Käthe Springer has observed, dark and disturbing results grew out of modernism in Vienna. "The Viennese decadent movement," as Springer calls it, "looked for the inner person, sought out his moods, and distanced themselves from nature and the external world."[13] The result was "the glorification of the irrational and

the artificial, an attraction to illness and decay. . . . The prevailing mood involved a sense of the fleeting nature of all things . . . and the constant presence of death—expressing the individual and collective insecurity of the times and their pessimistic presentiments."[14] Ungrounded, separated entirely from the external world, the inner psyche of the modernist risked becoming unhinged. In music a similar Krausian separation of creative fantasy and reason was achieved by the great modernist musician Arnold Schoenberg, whose creations could also be very dark. Schoenberg "wished to teach them [composers] *how to express themselves.*"[15] To achieve greater expressive power, he developed atonal music, music that freed composers from reliance on the traditional systems of a music organized around a single, most important tone. He also created the twelve-tone system, whose aim was to help the composer express his or her own inner artistic integrity.[16] What mattered to Schoenberg was not the sound of the composition, but its genuineness.[17] To achieve this "authenticity of the musical idea," the composer must engage in "a 'creative separation' of all dramatic or poetical ornament from the musical idea itself and its presentation according to the laws of musical logic."[18] Only by breaking away from all things save the musical idea itself, and its logic, could the composer truly and freely express the rich range of feelings he had within himself.

Janik and Toulmin explain, lastly, how in philosophy, through Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Krausian ideas manifest themselves as well.[19] This is a long story, but in essence the early Wittgenstein tried to achieve a total separation of the reasoned, instrumentalized world and the mysterious worlds of fantasy, feeling, and imagination.[20] In the first, larger part of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein shows what we can speak about, that is, the everyday, matter-of-fact worlds of empirical life and scientific knowledge, which are imbued with rational (that is, instrumental) purpose. But by culminating his work with, in the words of Newton Garver, a "remark . . . commending silence for everything other than scientific statements,"[21] Wittgenstein opens up a space for all the rest—for what lies beyond scientific and instrumental reasoning, namely ethics and

aesthetics, which remain untouched by reason. These cannot be spoken about, cannot be rationalized or reduced to mere calculation. They remain powerful, determining motives in a person's character despite the rationally overdetermined world.[22]

In each of these cases, we have an immense cultural achievement—an achievement in architecture, painting, music, and philosophy. Each case rests on the idea that a deeper, more expressive side to life lies beneath reason. Beneath our intelligible, communicable, matter-of-fact existence, an abyss of unmasterable emotions resides, a profound source of all imagination, and of deeper, richer nuances of meaning. Drawing on Schorske's claim that Nietzsche was a major figure in the modernist tradition and that Nietzsche's concept of the Dionysian was vital to that tradition, we can say that in the modernist view of existence there exists something like Nietzsche's Dionysian revelry beneath the Socratic picture of the intelligible world.[23]

In his book *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna*, Carl Schorske explains the meaning of modernism most precisely in political terms:

> Traditional liberal culture had centered upon rational man, whose scientific domination of nature and whose moral control of himself were expected to create the good society. In our century, rational man has had to give place to that richer but more dangerous and mercurial creature, psychological man. This new man is not merely a rational animal, but a creature of feeling and instinct. We tend to make him the measure of all things in our culture. Our intrasubjectivist artists paint him. Our existential philosophers try to make him meaningful. Our social scientists, politicians, and advertising men manipulate him.[24]

The essence of modernism is the discovery of psychological man—the discovery of a hidden version of ourselves, existing at a level deeper than that of the everyday, transparent self. In effect, it turns out that we are not fully rational beings, after all, as the liberal tradition maintains. The name alone of Sigmund Freud (another denizen of late nineteenth-century Vienna) helps capture the true meaning of the modernist reaction against the totally rational man of liberal

culture. A new, precarious view of ourselves has appeared on the scene, and henceforth we would be unable to escape the view that we have a darker, less intelligible side that determines who and what we are. Unconscious drives, not rational and intelligible motives, guide our behavior. The assumptions of traditional liberalism are incorrect. We are not sturdy ships captained by our rational minds. We are more like ships gliding through the sea without a captain. The captain we had counted on, human reason, turns out to have been a phantom all along.

Dewey's Response to Modernism

It turns out that Dewey was well aware of modernism thus defined—namely, as a widespread cultural phenomenon that maintained a rigid separation between the transparent, everyday world of conscious thought and our deeper and richer emotional contacts with the world. Dewey could not, after all, have been unaware of this massive cultural phenomenon, and as a thoughtful and even brilliant young man, he must have had an opinion regarding what was happening around him.

Dewey's response to modernism can best be captured, perhaps, in an early essay of 1890 entitled "Poetry and Philosophy." While generally sympathetic to the nature of the problem modernists confronted—how to find meaning in the world—Dewey's response emphatically rejects the modernist solution of withdrawing into the deeper and more hidden resources of the self in order to find that meaning. Dewey begins this essay with a quote from Matthew Arnold: " 'The future of poetry is immense, because in poetry our race . . . will find an ever surer and surer stay' " (EW 3: 110).[25] In the quoted statement, Arnold makes a quintessentially modernist claim that poetry will replace religion, science, and philosophy as guides to life, because modern life demands ever-greater access to human feeling (and poetry, presumably, is more about feeling).

Explaining Arnold's position, Dewey writes:

> In a world of disintegrated intelligence and a broken authority, Arnold sees men more and more turning to poetry for consolation. . . . We may say science is verifiable, but it lacks sympathy, consolation, humanity; it does not afford instruction where instruction is most wanted,—in the ordering of life. (EW 3: 110)

Science seems to destroy our traditional beliefs and challenges the deeper needs of our feelings. Poetry, on the other hand, provides "a kind sympathy with all of its [life's] colored moods." Therefore, as Dewey puts it, "What more do we want? What more natural than, in the difficulty of our times, men turning to poetry for guidance?" (EW 3: 111). Here, indeed, is the essence of modernism; Dewey has put his finger precisely upon it. The liberal tradition, with its emphasis on reason and science, has lost its hold; it has become too abstract, indifferent, and remote. Belief in a promising rational order has disintegrated, leaving men with their feelings and instincts (expressed by poetry) as the true guides to life.

Arnold's poetry is instructive in this regard, as Dewey sees it. For it speaks openly of the loss of order and meaning that besets the age. "Arnold's distinguishing sign . . . is the melancholy beauty with which he has voiced the sense of loss; his sad backward glance at the departure of old faiths and ideals . . . the shapeless, hopeless hope for the dawn of a new joy, new faith" (EW 3: 114–15). Here again we have the central problem of the age, as Dewey conceives it: the problem of the broken authority of traditional codes of conduct and the absence of anything to replace them. Once again, too, the culprit is science, or rather the fact it seems to reveal about nature—that nature is ultimately indifferent to human concerns. "The source of regret which expires from Arnold's lines is his consciousness of . . . his isolation from nature. . . . No longer, he seems to say, may man believe in his oneness with the dear nature about him: the sense of a common spirit binding them together has vanished" (EW 3: 115). Dewey offers a quote from Arnold to make his point:

> Thou hast been, shalt be, art alone:
> Or, if not quite alone, yet they

> Who touch thee are unmating things,—
> Ocean and clouds, and night and day,
> Lorn autumns and triumphant springs.
> (EW 3: 115)[26]

There is no genuine connection possible with nature. For, as we have come to see, "nature lacks the element of purpose which alone could give joyful response to man's needs. . . . Nature goes her own way and man must return to his" (EW 3: 115).

With man thus fundamentally isolated, no amount of patchwork will make the connection. No reason can be found in nature, perhaps not even in our own nature. In truth, for Arnold, we have nothing to fall back on to find a home but our instincts and feelings, since human thought and science present so thoroughly inhospitable a world. Thus poetry and not science should be our guide in life. We have lost all faith in science, which has treated mankind's real needs so roughly. Only by withdrawing into poetry—a more emotional discipline—can we find a vital response to our innermost needs and feelings.

For Arnold, we cannot even turn for aid to other people, to a sense of community, for the old creed of community too has been destroyed by science. Science destroys our belief in the spiritual bonds that once united the majority of human beings in the West, and as a result it leaves us with only our own dear, animal selves that we seek to take care of above all else. "The life of common brotherhood, the struggle and destiny of Christianity has given way to the old isolated struggle of the individual" (EW 3: 116). Thus Arnold writes:

> No man can save his brother's soul
> Nor pay his brother's debt.
> (EW 3: 116)

Each man is thrown back solely on himself. Neither in nature nor the social world can a person find meaning. Thus, Arnold's "last message is one of weakness and despair" (EW 3: 117). The individual is completely withdrawn and helpless. He is totally isolated and can find no meaning outside of himself. But it is precisely here, on the other

hand, that Arnold does offer some solace, in Dewey's reading. There is a melancholy beauty in his poems, after all (EW 3: 114). The beauty comes from the sorrowful realization that, precisely because of his total isolation, the individual has only himself to trust and may even find an uncanny strength in himself.

> If man is isolated, in that isolation he may find himself, and, finding himself, living his own life, lose all his misery. . . . 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)

Isolation shows man the strength of his own law. Withdrawn, impotent isolation now becomes the experience of man in opposition to nature, the experience of man relying entirely on his inner strength and, in this reliance, finding himself able to create a new and potent direction to take.

Now, according to Dewey, it is precisely to the isolated individual that poetry, in Arnold's conception, responds. Poetry allows our full, inner expression free reign, and thus it responds better as a medium for conveying our isolated, inner strength. Poetry lets us evoke our loss, while freeing up our individual response, our purely emotional side, and thus it speaks to us of a new strength, which legitimates our inner, isolated experiences. Thus, according to Arnold, poetry alone can be our guide in life. It alone succeeds in giving meaning and direction where science, and our embrace of the outer world of nature, fails.

Dewey himself describes this schism between poetry and science—or between human needs and the facts of nature—as a "wound" that we most definitely feel (EW 3: 123). He agrees with Arnold and modernism that this predicament characterizes our times. "We need not be detained by what our critic says regarding the existing disintegration of intellectual authority," Dewey says. "All will admit readily that there is enough of unrest, enough of doubt in modern thought, to make it worthwhile to raise this question, Where shall we find authority, the instruction which our natures demand?

Shall we cease to find it in philosophy, or in science, and shall we find it in poetry?" (EW 3: 111). These are legitimate questions; they express the real problem, on our hands today, of trying to determine how, in the face of modern science and what it tells us about nature, man is to find a place for human meaning. Dewey fully agrees with this manner of characterizing the problem of his age and ours, but he thinks that Arnold's solution to the problem—that is, his intentional withdrawal into inner life and away from external nature and fact—is deeply problematic, for it seems to condemn us forever to a separation between human meaning and nature. If we withdraw into ourselves, Dewey thinks, we only reaffirm the loss of meaning; we only render nature truly devoid of human sentiment and value and so render it a place from which we should want to withdraw in the first place. Withdrawal into the self produces no meaning, no significance in nature, which is what the modern self really longs for in the end. Instead of producing true significance, such withdrawal, in affirming that nature is devoid of meaning, only leads to "the agnosticism, the doubt, the pessimism, of the present day" (EW 3: 114). It is better to reject the modernist separation of man from nature from the very start, and to begin with the argument that nature is *already* imbued with its own meanings, if only we know how to go out to nature and affirm it in the correct manner. The "wound" of modernism, in other words, is not intrinsic; it is not a feature of reality but rather a cultural assumption that we must learn how to reject, above all, by conceiving of nature in a different way, as a sphere of reality in which value and significance already exist, that is, as a whole that includes human values within it.

Said another way, Dewey is asserting that even in poetry, there is no unmediated access to a separate self and its meaning, detached from the rest of the world. The poet, too, gets his or her meaning from an already existent scheme of meanings, and hence there are options in terms of how to regard a given poet's works. Poetry does not automatically privilege the modernist conception; it depends on the prior scheme of meaning at work. And Dewey is arguing that we need another scheme than the one the modernist has developed. In Dewey's words,

> Life is not a raw, unworked material. . . . As it comes to the poet, life is already a universe of meanings, of interpretations. . . . For good or for ill, centuries of reflective thought have been interpreting life, and their interpretations remain the basis and furnish the instrument for all the poet may do; he may simply use the assimilated results of the labors of scientific men and philosophers. (EW 3: 113)

So we can see that Dewey severely criticizes modernism. His view is that the reasoned, intelligible world that precedes the poet is the genuine one, the fundamental one. As he says above, the poet "may simply use the assimilated results of the labors of scientific men and philosophers." The poet has no special access to anything deeper than our inherited, everyday meanings provide. He can only respond to the intelligible world around him; to achieve anything else is to be lost in *mere* fantasy—something that presumably is without any direction or legitimate force, "the stagnant marshes of sentiment" (EW 3: 113). To help make his case that the poet responds to the already-interpreted world, the everyday, intelligible world, not to a private, detached meaning of the self, Dewey contrasts the poetry of Arnold with that of Robert Browning. The claim he wishes to make is that each poet responds to meanings that are already present in the world around them, but in different ways, depending on different circumstances, so that there are, in fact, options for us other than the modernist option.

Dewey prefers Browning's poetry to Arnold's, for, unlike Arnold's, it gives us an indication that we can somehow bridge the gap between the facts of nature and the needs of man. Browning's poetry is full of joy and affirmation in the face of life's tensions, rather than despair. "Browning reads a tale of keen and delicious joy. . . . [T]he trumpet peal of an abounding life bursts from Browning" (EW 3: 119). Dewey notes the "strenuous, abounding, triumphant optimism" of Browning, quoting him thus:

> How good is man's life, the men living! How fit to employ
> All the heart and the soul and the senses forever in joy!
> (EW 3: 119)

"What is the source of this note of Browning?" Dewey asks. And he answers: "Browning knows and tells of no isolation of man from nature, of man from man" (EW 3: 120). "The abundance, the intensity, the vibrating fullness, the impassioned sanity of his verse" results from the truth that Browning expresses: the "realization that the world was made for man, and that man was made for man" (EW 3: 120). As Dewey again quotes Browning,

> The world's no blot for us,
> No blank. It means intensely and means good.
> (EW 3: 120)

And again:

> Such a soul,
> Such a body, and then such an earth,
> For ensphering the whole!
>
> The earth's first stuff
> Was neither more nor less, enough
> To house man's soul, man's need fulfill.
>
> How the world is made for each of us!
> All we perceive and know in it
> Tends to some moment's product thus
> When the soul declares itself.
> (EW 3: 120)

We have here the starkest contrast with the modernism of Matthew Arnold. This contrast reveals clearly the early Dewey's overall efforts. Neither our isolation from one another, Dewey wants to show, nor our alienation from nature, is the way of humankind. Rather it is connection and belonging. "How the world is made for each of us!"—this is the early Dewey's most deeply felt and abiding intuition, which his entire philosophy will seek to justify and make good. Modernism, by contrast, keeps us apart from one another, and keeps us separated from nature, as alien beings in a foreign land. Its characteristic expression might rather be: "How nothing in the world is made for me—and how urgently therefore I must withdraw into myself

alone as my only consolation!'' It is precisely this sentiment and the beliefs that seem to support it that Dewey's early philosophy will above all seek to combat.

The Kantian Origin of Modernism

To delve deeper into the meaning of modernism, we must try to appreciate its philosophical underpinnings. We must try to translate it, in other words, into the general language of philosophical concepts, the better to understand what modernism is, what arguments hold it together—and what arguments might potentially dismantle it, as Dewey wants to do.

Janik and Toulmin are again instructive. At the heart of modernism they find Kantian philosophy at work. Of the modernist debate, they write: ''In order to see most clearly the philosophical issues involved . . . we must place them in their historical perspective. This means seeing them in the light of the arguments put forward by the two men who did most to shape the questions under discussion in that debate—namely, Immanuel Kant himself and Arthur Schopenhauer.''[27] It was Kant who first gave clearest expression to the matter at hand, while Schopenhauer, as ''a Kantian revisionist,''[28] took it to its logical conclusion. The matter at hand—a thoroughly Kantian one—is the idea that the world is split into two ''spheres,'' the human (or evaluative one) and the physical (or factual) one.

Kant had shown, as Janik and Toulmin explain, that there are limits to human reason, but that the human mind is nonetheless predisposed to reach beyond these limits and to '' 'precipitate itself into darkness.' ''[29]

> The whole of the 'critical philosophy' is directed toward explaining the proper limits of reason and showing how these limits are overstepped because of reason's innate tendency to pass from sensible experience itself to an explanation of that experience, although such an explanation lies beyond it in the sphere of 'things in themselves.' There is a natural disposition on the part of reason to explain the world of perception in terms of an intelligible world beyond the possibility of perception.[30]

Kant himself wished to confine our knowledge to the side of our perception, to what can be sensed by us, while discounting any claims to knowledge of what lies outside of and causes our experience. He thus reduced our knowledge to physical, tangible events, while undermining the possibility of our having any knowledge of metaphysical ideas of directly human concern, ideas such as God, freedom, and immortality. Nonetheless, Kant reserved a function in human life for these metaphysical ideas.

> Even though it is not possible for us to form a definite idea of what lies beyond experience . . . such ideas as those of the soul, of the world and of God . . . are not without a function . . . they provide the ethical theorist with notions which serve to protect him against the temptation to take materialism, naturalism or fatalism really seriously.[31]

The ethical function of these ideas is to allow us to get beyond the factual world and to posit the existence of objects of truly human (or evaluative) concern as well. Although we are not entitled to say we *know* of the existence of God, freedom, and immortality (since these go beyond any possible experience), nonetheless we are entitled to believe in their existence as forming the bases of our experience, since it is useful to believe so and since, not knowing for sure what lies beyond our experience, it is possible to believe that they do lie there.

Thus, "having started from the idea that reason has an innate tendency to overstep its limits, Kant's critique of reason thus proceeds by positing—and distinguishing—two spheres of activity . . . : the sphere of facts, and that of values."[32] Kant has legitimated, or made room for, each separate sphere. Our knowledge is confined to what we sense, objects in space and time mechanically obeying the law of causality. Our knowledge cannot pass beyond this without creating "intellectual monsters which fetter speculation."[33] And yet there must be some cause to our experience, some "thing-in-itself" that grounds it and makes it possible (or else it would not exist); and we are entitled to believe that this ground has something to do with "the nature of Man as a rational being" and can therefore "provide a foundation

for ethics."[34] Thus Kant posits that there is a realm of values existing beyond our actual experience of physical objects themselves.

And here we have the very essence of modernism. As we have seen, modernism is a cultural movement in which reason comes to seem limited, and the need is felt to press beyond it to less intellectual and more irrational forces. And in almost every cultural expression of modernism, these forces amount to a hidden source of values, as in Kraus's conception of the "creative fantasy" that gives birth to aesthetic and moral considerations, or in Arnold's concept of man in isolation from nature who gains a hidden source of moral strength in his isolation. Here, in cultural terms, we have the equivalent of Kant's separation of facts and values—and the impulse to move away from the factual world to its evaluative basis beyond.

The picture becomes more complete when we turn to the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, who was himself, by his own admission, a Kantian thinker, accepting the core of Kant's philosophy as true and vital.[35] Schopenhauer's innovation, according to Janik and Toulmin, consisted of having sharpened even more the Kantian separation of fact and value, and of drawing his famously dark and pessimistic conclusions from the separation.[36] With this move, Schopenhauer became a virtual patron saint of modernism. The cultural heroes of modernism were confirmed Schopenhauerians, drawing on his pessimistic version of Kantianism to fuel their resignation from the natural world and their move into the realm of vague, poetic fantasy.[37]

What Schopenhauer adds to Kant, more specifically, is the idea that although we cannot know what lies beyond the world of facts, nonetheless we can *feel* it. Our own willing, Schopenhauer thinks, lies closest to what exists in itself, first, because we ourselves, in our innermost nature, must—like everything that is—be part of the in-itself; and second, because willing, unlike rational knowledge and perception, involves less representational cognition—cognition that would tend to separate our knowing from what is known. Our willing, which we directly feel, is less representational, less removed, much less of a copy, than our other modes of cognition. Hence, our feelings of willing correspond more closely than our perceptions and

cognitions with what exists in its own right, beyond all merely human representation of what exists.[38]

For Schopenhauer what this means is that our willing gives us a fairly good sense of what exists in itself, of the nature of reality. Underneath all of our representations, behind all cognition of facts, there is a blind "striving" force (similar to our willing) that makes up the true character of the world. This blind force is a kind of erotic energy, a perpetual hunger and desire, that surges like a mad current beneath all surface phenomena and conditions our behavior in ways we cannot always understand. Our own wills are but the product of this one Will, this blind, universal striving at work in all things.[39]

Schopenhauer's philosophy led him to conclude that the proper response to reality is resignation. The factual world, grounded in the irrational (and insatiable) blind striving Will, could be no source of human comfort and reasonableness. It is better, he argued, to withdraw from nature and the world and to take a detached and disinterested stance towards things. Only in retreat into our own disinterested contemplation of the pointless striving of things would we find any solace.[40]

The modernists who were smitten with Schopenhauer saw in his concept of the Will the source of all creative energy, behind all reason, which we must tap into to be truly authentic. We must part company with the physical world of objects, the world of the push and pull of cause and effect, which is a mere illusion of our cognitive faculties; underneath lies the true reality, even though this reality, too, is ultimately fleeting and inconsequential.[41]

Moreover, it is only when we thus withdraw from nature that we can attain a genuine moral sense. For in Schopenhauer's view the factual, everyday world, being grounded in the Will, is a scene of endless egoism and rivalry, the "striving" of each creature's will against the other's. But beneath these individual creaturely agonies there is the one Will, fighting with itself in its various manifestations. Realizing this, Schopenhauer thinks, is the source of compassion (or "'feeling-with'")[42]: we realize that the other's will is our own will; we each

share the will, and so a genuine response to the other (a more authentic response) consists in denying my own will on behalf of his will (and his denying his will on my behalf). To truly resign from the Will, in other words, would mean to resign from my own willing in the face of the other. Only by resigning from the factual domain of my separate ego and its objects, in which the Will is at work, am I capable of ethical action. Only by denying myself do I deny the Will in me and attain any value beyond cut-throat nature.[43]

Janik and Toulmin explain how Søren Kierkegaard—who also greatly influenced the artists and thinkers of modernism—completes the philosophical picture of the modernist tradition. Kierkegaard locates meaning in life solely in the human subject or "'inwardness.'" Locked wholly in itself, without an external world it can relate to, our inward sense can only hope for an objective correlate to its inner needs. There is absolutely no guarantee that objective conditions will meet our spiritual needs. All we can do, in despair, is take a "'leap into the absurd'" and hope that they will do so. We thus believe despite all—an absurd position that, for Kierkegaard, stands at the basis of faith.[44]

The philosophical underpinnings of modernism should now be clear. Modernism begins with the Kantian idea that facts and values are separate; it continues with the Schopenhaurian resignation from the realm of facts and his belief in the irrational basis of value that exists beyond all facts; and it ends with Kierkegaard's total enclosure of all meaning in isolated, despairing inwardness. Any rational endeavor to connect spirit to world is abandoned. All of these philosophers agreed that the factual world (nature) could contain by itself no real value, at least not for human beings. To attain genuine value, they argued, we must stand outside of nature, in a separate realm—a more distinctly human realm, in which we ground our values, such as compassion and love, despite the world's indifferent and merciless course.

It thus turns out that modernism has its origins in Kantian philosophy. It was Kant who first (and most persuasively) argued that values can come only from outside facts, from outside of nature and its

happenings. While Kant certainly would have disagreed with Schopenhauer and Kierkegaard that there is an irrational basis to morality (Kant found that basis in the rational will), nonetheless for Kant the source of value is beyond overt human experience of the natural world. It comes solely from our autonomy as rational beings, from something therefore beyond physical nature and its bare mechanical occurrences. And this is precisely the core idea of modernism: that we have nature on one side, and human spirit on the other.

If we return now to Dewey's response to modernism as demonstrated in "Poetry and Philosophy," it is interesting to note that he, too, was keenly aware of the Kantian roots of the cultural revolution that had closed in around him. In this essay of 1890, after having laid out Arnold's modernist position in detail, Dewey observes: "This is . . . precisely in the vein of Kant" (EW 3: 118). What Arnold and modernism give us is what Kant gives us: "the individual as shut off from real communion with nature and with fellow-man, and yet as bearing in himself a universal principle . . . within himself finding the secret of a new strength, the source of a new consolation" (EW 3: 118). The early Dewey, it must be said, had a very clear idea of the modernist tradition that had become part of his cultural milieu. He understood readily that this was a Kantian tradition; that it was, in fact, Kantian philosophy that led us to despair of ever finding a truly human connection to nature; and that, as such, it was Kantianism in general that we must combat if we would overcome this despair and affirm natural life as compatible with human interests.

To combat Kantianism, Dewey first makes a move that has important consequences for his entire approach. He translates the whole problematic of Kantianism, modernism, and pessimism into a technical philosophical vocabulary, the better to handle its claims. The agreed-upon terms are *fact* and *thought* (or sometimes *reality* and *ideas*; EW 3: 126). The word *fact* is meant to convey, in compressed form, the natural world in its otherness. Fact is the way nature is, regardless of human wishes and ideals. *Thought* means not only our cognition but, even more importantly, the vast complex of uniquely human, or even spiritual, meanings that humans entertain. It means

the human mind or spirit, and thus includes values, norms, warmth, human kindness, compassion. It designates the specifically human part of our nature.

These terms must be kept firmly in mind because of the way Dewey chooses to address the problem of pessimism, that is, largely in terms of its philosophical equivalents. The previous chapter gave some consideration to one of Dewey's most important essays in this regard, namely "The Present Position of Logical Theory"—a text with an innocuous-sounding title. Logical theory, Dewey explains in this text, is the theory of "the relation of fact and thought to each other" (EW 3: 126). We miss Dewey's point entirely if we fail to appreciate the fuller meanings behind his technical use of the terms *fact* and *thought*. It is a mistake to view his efforts to relate facts and thoughts to each other as purely philosophical (in the pejorative sense), as dealing only with abstract considerations of how thinking can hook onto the world—considerations that for all apparent purposes have no larger implications than solving a difficult epistemological puzzle. In truth, when the early Dewey wonders about "the relation of fact and thought to each other," what he really wants to know is how it is possible, if it is possible at all, to understand nature in such a way as to make room for human value and feeling, for spirit or "personality." How can we overcome our extreme despair in the face of an alien nature and find a human meaning within it? How can we overcome pessimism—the conviction that we shall never be at home in life—and affirm life instead? How can facts, in short, relate happily to our thoughts, if at all—how can the reality of things relate to our human meanings?

We know what modernism (i.e., Kantianism) answers. It says that no such connection is rationally possible. To secure specifically spiritual meanings and values, we must flee from the natural world into our essentially removed subjectivity.

But for Dewey this answer only exacerbates the problem, as we have seen in the case of Matthew Arnold. With this idea in mind, we will only confront nature again and again as an alien entity, inhospitable to our desires; we will continue to feel the homelessness and

loss. To see whether a better answer is possible, one with a more satisfying result, the early Dewey turns to the philosophy of Hegel. He uses Hegel to overcome Kant and thereby to confront the despairing pessimism of his age, the pessimism of modernism; or as he himself puts it, he aims to "heal this unnatural wound" that is the separation of thought from fact in our culture (EW 3: 123).

With this advance to a Hegelian solution, we arrive at the early Dewey's own constructive effort and solution to the modernist problem. Through Hegel, he will try to refute the Kantian separation of facts and thought. He will endeavor to show how facts themselves are able to develop into thought, into spirit and meaning. He will show how to heal the wound of pessimism by demonstrating how our explicitly human meanings can belong to reality after all.

Hegel over Kant

Dewey begins "The Present Position of Logical Theory," as we saw in the previous chapter, with an introduction to the contradiction affecting contemporary society—its simultaneous affirmation and denial of facts. We affirm the facts insofar as we accept science and what it teaches us about the world, while we also deny their reality by taking flight from them in isolated spirit or thought. We thereby keep meaning apart from actual existence; we deny meaning to existence.

Dewey then shifts grounds to logical theory, to seek there relief from the contradiction. Logical theory studies "the relation of fact and thought to each other, of reality and ideas" (EW 3: 126). Dewey resists identifying logical theory with formal logic, which he refers to as a "superstition which . . . holds enthralled so much of modern thought" (EW 3: 127). "It is true enough," he says,

> that nobody now takes the technical subject of formal logic very seriously—unless here and there some belated "professor." . . . But while the subject itself as a doctrine or science hardly ranks very high, the conception of thought which is at the bottom of formal logic still dominates the *Zeitgeist*. . . . Any book of formal logic will tell us what this conception of thought is: thought

> is a faculty or an entity existing in the mind, apart from facts, having its own fixed forms, with which facts have nothing to do. (EW 3: 127)

Dewey's objection to formal logic is that it conceives of thought apart from facts. It cleaves the world in two, thereby perfectly embodying the problem of the age.

"The Present Position of Logical Theory" is crucial to the young Dewey's entire philosophical approach.[45] The core idea of the essay is that, following Hegel, we should understand thought not as a kind of "apriorism" (EW 3: 136), something forced upon facts from without in order to make them fit our ideas, but rather as something the facts themselves are capable of, something developed out of facts when they are understood (EW 3: 136–39). Facts become amenable to thought in their own development; they become meaningful. We are speaking, Dewey says, about "the evolution of fact into meaning" (EW 3: 133).

According to Dewey, it was Kant who forced thought on facts. Hegel went beyond Kant by holding that we can never force thought on facts, only let facts themselves develop as they do and then perceive the thought working in them (EW 3: 136–39).[46] This, in truth, is what science does; it demonstrates the laws, the rationality, at work in the actual world, and for this reason Dewey explains that "I conceive Hegel . . . to represent the quintessence of the scientific spirit" (EW 3: 138). Both Hegel's philosophy and the scientific spirit seek to show the rational interconnections of events, to demonstrate that facts can be systematically grasped, rather than merely lying about in unorganized pieces (EW 3: 139). The question, therefore, is not whether Hegel has forced forms on facts, but whether the facts, as systematically arranged and grasped by science, actually do lead to these forms in specific details. Hegel's own position stands or falls with what we can say about the facts that science discovers about the world: can we say they amount to order and significance, as Hegel contends, or only to chaos, disintegration, and indifference to human concerns?

This approach to Hegel, incidentally, poses a challenge to some more recent Hegel scholarship, most notably Alison Stone's *Petrified Intelligence: Nature in Hegel's Philosophy*. Stone develops "an interpretation of the *Philosophy of Nature* as composed according to the strong *a priori* method."[47] She endeavors to show that Hegel *does* impose forms of meaning on facts, and that this is indeed a good thing, since it helps us to "identify a determinate a problem with the scientific approach: it rests on inadequate metaphysical assumptions."[48] By arguing for the imposition of different forms from those of science, forms such as spirit and purpose, Hegel, in this reading, seeks to show up science's own limitations (its supposition of the indifference of matter).

Dewey, by contrast, views Hegel as much less of a Kantian; indeed, Dewey sees the philosopher as someone who eschews all forms of apriorism. In Dewey's view, Hegel in a sense depends on science to corroborate, not this or that special claim about reality, but the general trend and development of reality itself toward rationality. In this view, it is not that we impress *a priori* forms on facts, but rather that facts themselves can be described in such a way that they can be said to *allow for* the development of human meanings and values out of themselves. From Dewey's perspective, Stone simply reasserts the main problem of the age, which is that human significance is divorced from real, true, actual events, which require *our* forms to take on meaning; and she makes Hegel culpable in this modernist error as well, when in fact Hegel's great achievement was to show the way out. In Dewey's reading, Hegel

> denies not only the possibility of getting truth out of a formal, apart thought, but he denies the existence of any faculty of thought which is other than the expression of fact itself. His contention is not that "thought," in the scholastic sense, has ontological validity, but that fact, reality is significant. (EW 3: 138–139)

As a result of this, even if Hegel could be shown by science to be in error in specific details, "his main principle would be unimpeached

until it is shown that fact has not a systematic, or interconnected, meaning, but is a mere hodgepodge of fragments." But "whether the scientific spirit," Dewey continues, "would have any interest in such a hodgepodge may, at least, be questioned" (EW 3: 139).

Dewey thus rather deftly shifts the ground from idealism to science, or the systematic rendering of observable and verifiable facts. He makes the truth of idealism dependent on scientific insight, or what we can legitimately say about facts. He claims that no matter how objective, how much within the facts, spiritual meaning may turn out to be—as idealism maintains it will be—"yet to man this objective significance cannot be real till he has made it *out* in the details of scientific processes, and *made* it in applied science, in invention" (EW 3: 140). Dewey's own philosophy thereafter, at least his early philosophy, becomes an attempt to answer a single question: "Has the application of scientific thought to the world of fact gone far enough so that we can speak, without seeming strained, of the rationality of fact?" (EW 3: 140). In other words, do science and its inventions actually lend themselves to showing that facts are rational, that existence is significant and meaningful, as Hegel contends?

If it were so, we would have a solution to the problem of the age. The dread of indifferent nature would lose its grip. Facts would be shown to lead to meaningful qualities, to spiritual values, and life therefore would be shown to be meaningful, something worth living. Pessimism would be defeated. And so also a new, more coherent culture beyond modernism would become possible.

Dewey's attempt in these early years to answer this fundamental question—does science lend itself to thinking of facts as germinating into spiritual meanings?—centers most principally on the science of psychology, and finds its fullest expression in his major work of this period, the *Psychology* of 1887. The same question has implications for ethics also, and for the issue of the emergence of a culture beyond modernism. Dewey's principle early ideas on ethics and culture are found in his *Outlines of a Critical Theory of Ethics* of 1891. I will analyze each of these texts in the following chapters, after which we will

have gained a detailed understanding of Dewey's early philosophy and its implications. We will then be in a position to appreciate its merits as a response to pessimism.

Conclusion

This chapter has described the culture of pessimism that arose in the nineteenth century in the wake of the widespread assumption that the human mind is separated from nature and fundamentally opposed to it. Nature—or the view of nature that science supposedly presents to us—came to be conceived of as indifferent to human concerns, while the mind was conceived of as the source of feelings and values, which could be maintained and preserved only through the mind's withdrawal from indifferent nature into its own meaningful inwardness.

Gustav Klimt's paintings, for example, give us a pictorial representation of this cultural assumption, for Klimt tries to show us the realm of mind and feeling set free from the constraints of the external world of life and nature. However, his paintings also reveal some of the problems with this modernist cultural assumption, for some of Klimt's works are almost pathological. As Carl Schorske has said, Klimt's works can become nightmarish, since in them the imagination and the emotions have been freed from any substantial basis and allowed a wild, unconstrained play all their own.[49]

In Dewey's terms, modernist culture foists on us an "unnatural wound" (EW 3: 123). By assuming that nature has no meaning, and bidding us to withdraw into the hidden, inexplicable resources of our isolated selves to find meaning, modernism prevents us from finding meaning in nature and from others around us as well. The modernist picture is best expressed, philosophically, by the Kantian tradition, and especially by the work of Schopenhauer, which insists that reality in itself is devoid of significance and value and that we should resign from it. Modernism in this way condemns us to philosophical pessimism and bids us to give up all faith in outward life. The liberatory promise of Klimt's break with external constraints, or of Matthew Arnold's isolating withdrawal into self alone, amount, in the end, to a

disgust and "nausea" (EW 3: 41) with existence, on the grounds that it is inherently devoid of any meaning worthy of a human being.

It was to help us overcome this nausea and pessimism regarding life, to reject the modernist assumption of the world of facts as thoroughly un-ideal, that Dewey wrote the major work of this period, the *Psychology*. In this book, Dewey seeks to show, above all else, that facts themselves are always meaningful, always idealized in some way, and therefore always possibly conducive to the deeper needs of human beings. The aim of the *Psychology*, as we will see in the next chapter, is to present us with a picture of nature, not as alien and indifferent, but as consistent with human meaning.