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ONE

DEWEY'S PROJECT



Beyond the Standard View

Any extended study of John Dewey's early philosophy must grapple with the fact that this body of work has not been well received. Given the kinds of naïve claims it is making, the critics have said, this philosophy is not worth lingering over, except perhaps if one is interested in tracing Dewey's philosophical development as a whole. Dewey's project at this time was to defend Hegel in some rather bizarre ways, so the argument goes, and there does not seem to be anything in the philosophy of this period that is still worth considering today.

This assessment is what I call the standard view of Dewey's early philosophy. The standard view tells us that Dewey's early philosophy is, at best, uninteresting, and, at worst, an embarrassment to its author.¹ As a Hegelian, Dewey is supposedly committed to defending an absurdly naïve position in which the universe is believed to be some kind of gigantic thinking mind. Moreover, his Hegelianism is

considered particularly unlikely, holding that the best science of the day, especially the psychology, can be interpreted in Hegelian terms; and he makes all sorts of contortions of the intellect to force scientific conclusions into a Hegelian mold. To be sure, this view grants the importance of understanding that Dewey was a Hegelian if we want to better understand his later philosophy with its emphasis on organic unity. But his early thought is held to be uninteresting, even absurd, apart from its relation to his later philosophy.²

The standard view seems like a solid position; it is certainly venerable. But this view is not without its difficulties. It mischaracterizes Hegel's philosophy, for one thing. But the main problem with the standard view is that it fails to grasp the actual aim of Dewey's effort, which is not simply to defend Hegelianism at all costs.

To begin to appreciate what Dewey is really up to we must first develop a better understanding of the nature of his most central endeavor, which is to see to what extent we can have faith in life. What goes largely unrecognized, eclipsed by the seeming optimism of Dewey's later work, is the extent to which Dewey's early thought is a direct response to pessimism. His early work is a response that feels keenly the crisis of the possible meaninglessness of the universe, yet resolves itself in favor of faith—not in God, Transcendental Ego, or Absolute Spirit—but in life itself and the significance of living.

In this respect, Dewey's work in the nineteenth century forms an important link (and counterweight) to that of other writers dealing with similar ideas, particularly Schopenhauer and Nietzsche.³ It also compares favorably to new interpretations of Hegelianism coming from the Continent, interpretations of Hegel not as the totalitarian philosopher of enforced harmony in the Absolute but a philosopher of actual life and its ruptures, its agonies and tensions. For *rupture* is an important part of Dewey's early philosophy. It is primarily through rupture and disruption, the early Dewey believes, that meaning is made, so that to embrace the process of rupture is to embrace a meaningful life as such. Dewey's Absolute is not a pre-given substance, but rather the ideal point of thinking that forever unsettles our given world; and it is, for him, through this very unsettlement,

this negation of the given, that ideal meanings are created and life can be affirmed (as he shows in some detail in his *Psychology*). Life's very tensions and agonies, therefore, are for Dewey the basis of its meaningfulness, so that it is false to say, with the pessimists, that life is devoid of meaning. The very fact of life's divisions and separations, which pessimists take as proof of life's utter meaninglessness, Dewey shows to be the basis of life's meaning and the reason to embrace it.

In my interpretation, then, two of the most significant aspects of Dewey's early philosophy are 1) that it employs a concept of rupture, and 2) that through its concept of rupture it gives us a new way to combat philosophical pessimism and to find meaning in the world. It poses a serious challenge to pessimists and teaches us how to have faith in life. But Dewey also goes further than this, using his new concept of life affirmation as the basis of a critique of culture. He finds that modern times have been caught in the grips of an unhealthy despair, which his thought endeavors to overcome through a serious reworking of the modern (that is to say, alienating) relationship between the individual and society. In this respect, his early philosophy is also significant because it offer us a new critique of modern culture.

Three core concepts, then, define Dewey's early work as I interpret it. These concepts are rupture, meaningfulness (or faith in life), and critique. These three concepts had never before been brought together in the exact combination in which they are arranged in Dewey's early thought—neither in Hegel's idealism, in the idealism of Dewey's teacher George Sylvester Morris, nor anywhere else. His is a new and original philosophy, one dealing with issues of genuine interest, and therefore a philosophy that is worth investigating fully and carefully.

Dewey's idealism is open to criticism, to be sure, but it deserves the serious criticism appropriate to a significant and well-worked-out position, not the dismissive criticism appropriate to an unoriginal and youthful indiscretion, nor to an undeveloped pragmatism-in-waiting. Like all idealisms, early Deweyanism is open to the challenge that it is too spiritualistic and mystical, as well as too humanist, privileging human beings over animals and nature. But Deweyan idealism—the early work—marks an interesting new development of the

idealistic school that should be studied (and criticized) alongside other idealisms such as those of Fichte, Hegel, Royce, and Bradley, and alongside the work of other important nineteenth-century figures such as Nietzsche and Schopenhauer. Our understanding of nineteenth-century thought, and its continuing relevance for us, is incomplete as long as we lack a fuller reckoning with Dewey's early philosophy. And any serious effort to overcome pessimism and despair must certainly retain its relevance for our own time, which is not lacking in reasons for despair.

Dewey's Main Concepts

To clarify the main aspects of this new philosophy, I will define in more detail its three central concepts, but it should be stressed that the evidence that these concepts are at work in the philosophy can only be laid out during the course of the whole of the present study. For to a certain extent Dewey himself does not always appreciate his best insights. He does not give all these concepts names as I do here. Nonetheless they are at work throughout his early philosophy and are one with his intentions. To see this one must grasp the whole narrative of Dewey's early thought, but to assist the reader in seeing up front what is new in Dewey's early work, I provide the following shorthand summary. Dewey's three central concepts are:

Rupture. In general, meaning, for a Hegelian, is a dynamic process. The meaning of an event is never given to us all at once, but rather develops through time. The way it develops is through the working interaction of disruption and harmony. The play between these two forces gives the meaning, in the sense that a static state by itself is never a complete meaning, but requires development to unfold its full potential and significance. Harmonious states require disruption and movement to fulfill them and attain their true meaning. On the other hand, disruption by itself is insufficient for meaning to occur, because there must be some settled, well-arranged, or harmonious state that we achieve in order for there to be a space for us to apprehend and enjoy meanings and for meaning to exist. Thus, harmony and disruption are each needed for meaning-making.

However, they are not necessarily needed in equal degrees. Hegelians might differ on where to put the emphasis. To say that Dewey's early philosophy emphasizes rupture is to say that his position entails, to be sure, the working interaction of disruption and harmony, but that disruption is the primary concept. The early Dewey's innovation is to assert that meaning occurs primarily through rupture. In Adorno's words, the idea is that "connection is not a matter of unbroken transition but a matter of sudden change."⁴ Meaningful events occur "not through the moments approaching one another but through rupture," through the moments suddenly breaking apart from one another and becoming differentiated.⁵ The term *rupture* derives from Adorno's reading of Hegel, and is never explicitly used by Dewey. However, I hold that the concept is nonetheless the overriding concept at work in Dewey's early thought. The *logic* of Dewey's position fully accords with the logic of rupture, as we will see.

This means, more specifically, that settled states are "undone," and that this "undoing" is the primary force in the meaning-making process. Rupture, for Dewey, is primary in the sense that it is the *source* of the meaning that occurs in the harmonious state in which we possess meaning. For Dewey in these early years, any actual, harmonious state that is attained derives its meaning from an absent ideal, from something outside of the state, against which the state must be measured in order to receive its significance. The emphasis is on the disruptive quality of this absence. A lack is felt, and this drives us beyond our current condition. The emphasis is on the lack as the creative source of idealization and meaning. To be sure, there must be harmonious states, namely states of temporary rest in which we can enjoy the partial realization of our ideals. And our attainment of these harmonious states counts as some evidence that we are partially realizing the ideal. But rupture is primary, in the sense that these harmonious states get their meaning from rupture, from the absent ideal. Rupture drives the process, the search for ideals, which leads us to partially find and obtain some idealized meanings (which we recognize by the harmony they impart), but these ideals are attained and enjoyed only partially, only relative to some ultimate harmony

that is missing, that is always missing, always lacking in our lives, and yet, precisely in this lack, leading us on to obtain partial instances of it (EW 2:273; 358).

Meaning. As defined by the early Dewey, this is the belief that the sense and importance of things consist in the establishment of ideal relationships between them, rather than in their actual relationships. Bare, given particulars have no meaning for Dewey. They become meaningful only through the process of rupture, by which they are negated in their actuality and taken up by the self into a coordinated set of practices and previous understandings of things that alone confer significance upon them. Because there are no bare facts that ever reach the self without having already been rendered meaningful, Dewey holds, there is meaning in the world, in events, that we can embrace, and we can affirm life as being a place of significance for human beings, a place, moreover, that always has the potential to grow in ideal significance through rupture (EW 2:121).

Critique. On the basis of his view that life can be embraced, Dewey turns toward the culture of his own times (which is perhaps still that of our own times) and criticizes it for its pessimism and despair. What this means, more specifically, is that he criticizes it on the grounds that it encourages the withdrawal of the individual in the face of life. "Cynicism," egoism, hyper-self-consciousness, "*aestheticism*," the despair of the isolated individual—these have become common features of modern culture, as Dewey sees it, and he critiques the culture for continually producing these features.⁶ He also formulates a new vision of culture and society that he thinks will help create more healthy and outgoing individuals in the world.

The "Logic of Rupture"

To gain an initial sense of what is unique and important about Dewey's version of idealism, consider, by way of contrast, some of the prominent idealisms of Dewey's own day.⁷ Nearly all of them can be seen as responding to pessimism, in that they each try to render external nature conducive to mind and its meanings—to find a place for

human meaning in the universe. But they also nearly all achieve this position by resolving external nature and mind into an overarching harmony or unity, whereas Dewey will insist instead on disruption or disharmony as the basis of meaning in life.

T. H. Green, for example, who was one of the most prominent idealists when Dewey was writing his early works, shares with him the argument that, in the words of Anthony Quinton, "Nature is a system or tissue of relations" and that "relations . . . are the work of the mind. Therefore, nature, at least as regards an essential aspect of it, is the work of the mind."⁸ But Green goes further and also asserts, according to Quinton, that "the nature that the individual mind constructs in experience is not wholly that mind's construction. It intimates the existence of an eternal consciousness adequate to support the system of nature as a whole."⁹ This eternal consciousness is Green's Absolute, which involves the belief in an ultimate Mind that grasps all things within it, an ultimate unity bringing all things together. As Quinton explains, for Green, "this all-inclusive system of relations that constitutes nature . . . presupposes an all-sustaining mind. It is a unity and, therefore, must be held together by a single mind, the eternal consciousness. We are all, Green contends, parts or participators in this eternal consciousness."¹⁰

A similar claim for the primacy of the finished and accomplished Absolute, for the definite existence of a harmonious, "eternal consciousness," is made by other important idealists in Dewey's day. Bradley, for example, who was, as W. J. Mander points out, "the greatest thinker of the idealist movement," likewise believed in one unified reality in which all particular things are submerged and in which, in fact, they lose their own individual reality.¹¹ Bradley admitted that the world appears to exist as a series of related things; he accepted, in appearances, anyway, "the thoroughly relational nature of all things," but "he argued that all relational thought . . . leads to contradiction and thus that reality is wholly nonrelational or monistic."¹² He argued for the existence of a "nonrelational, monistic whole. . . . Bradley's attack on relations was uncompromising. It even extended to the self; that, too, he argued, is relational and thus

unreal.”¹³ The only reality, for Bradley, was the single, unified reality of the Absolute. Or, as Bradley himself puts it, “We have seen that Reality is one, and is a single experience.”¹⁴

Even an idealist such as Caird, another prominent figure in Dewey's time, a figure who, as W. J. Mander explains, “stood out as a champion of the dynamic side of things” and argued for “the notion of universal and ceaseless evolution”—even he still believed that ultimately the Absolute Mind was eternal, fully present to itself, a harmonious and timeless whole.¹⁵ As Mander makes clear, Caird believed that things developed within the Absolute, but he did not believe that the Absolute developed. “Caird freely admits that the Absolute *itself* does not evolve. Time and change hold only *within* it. It may contain nothing but change, yet it itself does not change.”¹⁶

Each of these idealists shares the belief that the Absolute is fully present; it is present to itself in eternity. In this sense, they each privilege harmony as the superior or ultimate member of the working pair of harmony and disruption. Bradley will, in effect, deny all relations, all movement and disruption, while Caird will allow for these things, but in the end the Absolute for both thinkers is conceived as the final container and unifier of any dynamic processes of development. The Absolute exists as a real entity standing above all events and encompassing all time states, with every discrete moment united within its infinitely larger perspective. All moments are brought together into a unified whole. In this way, by believing these things, the other idealists privilege harmony over rupture.¹⁷

The early Dewey, by contrast, privileges rupture over harmony. In other words, he holds that the Absolute is missing. It is absent. And because of this absence, we are compelled to seek for its presence, its higher unity. We are compelled to try to create ever more harmonious states, in other words, precisely because of something that is lacking, some antagonism or tension that continues to develop in our lives, no matter how harmonious they become. The absence of any absolute harmony makes us seek it. What we feel is the absence and the longing for its presence; and this makes us try to create it, to bring it into existence over and over again.

Dewey explains his position in this way in the *Psychology*: There is an "ideal will," he says, which "serves as a spur to the actual self to realize itself. It leads to discontent with every accomplished result, and urges on to new and more complete action" (EW 2: 358). He explains further: "the self has always presented to its actual condition the vague ideal of a completely universal self, by which it measures itself and feels its own limitations. . . . The self always confronts itself . . . with the conception of a universal or completed will towards which it must strive." However, "what this will or self as complete is, it does not know. It only feels that there is such a goal" (EW 2: 358). There is an ideal whose precise meaning and complete presence eludes us in our experience, and whose vagueness and lack of full existence in the present moment we feel. It is this absent, unrealized ideal that serves as "a constant motive power," compelling us to seek it (EW 2: 359). And we do, at times, attain partial instances of the ideal because of this search. When we experience truth, beauty, and morality, we have realized the ideal to some extent. "The feeling of harmony, which is the mind's ultimate test of intellectual truth, aesthetic beauty, and moral rightness, is simply the feeling of the accord between the accomplished act and the . . . ideal" (EW 2: 358). All of these accomplishments are the result of our search for a missing ideal. They are the harmonious states we do obtain and in which we possess meanings. But the absent ideal defines them and is the source of their meaning. The absent ideal is "a constant motive power, which has energized in bringing forth the concrete attainments in knowledge, beauty, and rightness" (EW 2: 359).

Far from postulating a completed Absolute, therefore, the early Dewey stresses its absence and incompleteness. What he insists upon is the "progressive appropriation of that self in which real and ideal are one," that is, not a fusion somewhere (e.g., in eternal consciousness) of real and ideal self, but the break between them as the vital source of life's ongoing, "progressive" development (EW 2: 363). Harmonious states of meaning are achieved, in which the self's actual state is closer to an ideal one, but then these harmonious states break apart, and then lead to new harmonious states, which then break apart again,

and so on. And the breaking apart is the decisive and primary phase of this progression because the ideal will is "the source, the origin of ideals," the source of the meaning in the harmonious states, which then gets partially realized in the life of the actual self and its experience (EW 2: 358). The meaning of the unified experience derives from outside of it, measured by what is missing from it, although the unities that are achieved are the place or space in which the meanings can occur as we progressively realize them and draw closer to the ideal (EW 2:363). But Dewey stresses that, though we feel we are closer to the ideal in these harmonious instances of life, closer to our true selves, as in the experience of beauty, for example, still "this does not mean that we have a prior conception of our nature" (EW 2: 273). We are struggling for the Absolute meaning that is missing from us, whose nature we do not know or understand, and it is this struggle that produces meaning.

In a fascinating letter to his wife written in 1894, Dewey sums up his philosophy up to that point, the philosophy of his early work.¹⁸ In the letter, we can see especially well the role that Dewey believed struggle and disruption played in his early thought. The letter describes an encounter he had with Jane Addams, a pivotal encounter judged by the contents of the letter, for it seems that this encounter may have encouraged him to change his early philosophy and to shift it in new directions. Addams, according to Dewey in the letter, explains that "she had always believed & still believed that antagonism was not only . . . useless and harmful, but entirely unnecessary; that it lay never in the objective differences, which would always grow into unity if left alone."¹⁹ Dewey, who was already starting to lose his Hegelianism at this point, first agrees with Addams. But then he objects and asks her whether she did not think "personal antagonisms" as well as "that of ideas & institutions" existed and "that a realization of that antagonism was necessary to an appreciation of the truth, & to a consciousness of growth." Addams disagreed, "& she said no."²⁰ Dewey confides to his wife that he was not persuaded. "At least I can't saee [sic] what all this conflict & warring of history means if it's perfectly [sic] meaningless; my pride of intellect, I suppose it is,

revolts at thinking its all *merely* negatively, & has no functional value.”²¹

Here we have the heart of Dewey's early philosophy. The letter states in an informal way what Dewey's philosophy also struggles to articulate, namely that antagonism has a functional value; that it is “necessary to an appreciation of the truth, & to a consciousness of growth.” Indeed, judging by the account provided in this letter, it was Addams, and not Dewey, who maintained something like the traditional Hegelian approach, holding that antagonism, disruption, and rupture are all “a mere illusion because we put ourselves in a wrong position & thus introduce antagonism where its all one.”²² Dewey balks at this idea and says to his wife: “When you think that Miss Addams . . . believes it in all her senses & muscles—great God.”²³ Dewey himself does not believe it. “She converted me internally,” he says, “but not really, I fear.”²⁴ He believes the opposite, in fact, namely that antagonism is “functional” and has a creative role to play; and so here we can see Dewey's philosophy of rupture confirmed and assented to in his own personal estimation of his work. For, as becomes crystal clear in the letter, Dewey, oddly enough, eventually is converted to Addams's way of thinking, but, at the moment of conversion, looks back on his previous philosophy and describes it as I have described it: “I can sene [sic] that I have always been interpreting the Hegelian dialectic wrong end up—the unity as the reconciliation of opposites, instead of the opposites as the unity in its growth, and thus translated physical tension into a moral thing.”²⁵ Here Dewey likens the central concept of his previous philosophy, his early philosophy, to physical tension, an active struggle, an antagonism, or what I have called disruption and rupture. And he describes that previous philosophy as he has understood it in his work, as achieving unity through opposites, *through* tension and disruption, rather than saying, as he now wants to say, with Addams, that the opposites *already constitute* a “unity in its growth.” In the end, he is converted to Addams's way of thinking; he changes his previous view, and he says: “I guess I'll have to give it uall [sic] up & start over again.”²⁶

Further examination of this fascinating letter would take me too far from my present purpose of giving a first, initial look at Dewey's concept of rupture and the primacy he gives to it. The letter offers a keen insight into why Dewey may have left his early philosophy behind; namely, he was converted by Addams into believing that unity was more fundamental than antagonism. Such an insight has far-reaching implications for interpreting Dewey's later philosophy, but this is not my goal. What the letter reveals for our present purposes is that Dewey, in his own estimation of his early work, had indeed taken rupture (or "antagonism") to be primary. He believed that antagonism should not be seen "merely negatively" but had real "functional value" instead. It could lead to something valuable.

It will take the full length of the present book to articulate sufficiently just what Dewey means by ascribing a functional value to antagonism and to explain how this idea plays out in a systematic way in his early philosophy. The point to emphasize for now, however, is that tension is creative for the early Dewey. Unity of meanings can be achieved, but the source of meanings, the value they come to embody, derives from the clash of energies at work within them, from the disruptive quality that leads them to be unities no longer and to press forward in search of higher unities that they might become, but that are nowhere present within them.

The next point to notice is that Dewey employs the concept of the primacy of rupture in the service of a larger goal. Ultimately, he is concerned to overcome pessimism. He wants to show that there is meaning to life. His innovation is to show that this meaning is achieved in and through antagonism and disruption. The key idea to be developed throughout the present work is the idea that in Dewey's early work, the antagonisms that may exist between the self and the world are not such as must lead to pessimism, but are rather the very means by which pessimism can be defeated. It is a striking idea: the forces of pessimism are turned against themselves. Division and alienation are seen as creative and productive forces, giving rise to unified meanings in life, rather than as the occasion for total separation, antagonism, and inevitable despair.

A Response to Pessimism

Many people will be surprised to think of Dewey's philosophy, whether earlier or later, as somehow responding to pessimism, for Dewey is heavily associated with a kind of stubborn, blind optimism. Scholars often claim, for instance, that Dewey has no tragic sense, or that he is far too optimistic about life and its progress.²⁷ That Dewey is at all concerned with pessimism and other dark matters will therefore strike many as unlikely.

In the remainder of this chapter I will demonstrate not only that the early Dewey is concerned with pessimism, but that it is indeed his central concern. Many scholars miss this about the early Dewey, first because they are held captive by the standard view that there is nothing very interesting to find in the early work, and therefore they rarely read it; second, because Dewey's real effort is often couched in technical terms that may prevent readers from grasping his actual message. People often miss the concern with pessimism, too, because philosophical pessimism is often seen as a topic of concern in Continental philosophy but not in American philosophy, and disciplinary boundaries get in the way of understanding. We must remember, however, that the early Dewey was a Hegelian, and insofar as Hegel himself was concerned with pessimism, so would Dewey have been.

On what grounds, then, can we say that John Dewey's early philosophy was a response to philosophical pessimism? Sometimes an author's real focus—his main, driving idea—comes out only in the margins of his work. Writing can be an act of wandering, the mental equivalent of an aimless stroll, in which the main ideas, like the interesting stops on a walk, are hit upon rather than explicitly planned for or foreseen. This is especially true of Dewey's thought, which, as one glance at his collected writings shows, contains this wandering element to a great degree. Especially in the early work, there seems to be no core, central text that spells out Dewey's entire effort and exhausts his interests. There is no single, privileged text, although the *Psychology* comes close and constitutes his major early work. Instead, young

Dewey's mind ranges widely, exploring this idea and that, from the nature of logical theory to tips for educational practice to the latest interpretation of French literature. Given that Dewey was considering so much diverse material at once, one might almost expect that when his own coherent philosophy actually begins to form, his real interests will be happened upon in the process of inquiry, rather than explicitly anticipated, carefully developed, and put into a single text.

And this is what occurs. Dewey's main concern emerges in the smaller, occasional pieces that, despite their lack of professional philosophical intent, still detain him. This reading can be corroborated by the way in which, despite the wandering nature of Dewey's early work, his core ideas begin to shape and inform the other matters he is concerned with in his philosophical strolls. The marginal ideas, as we will see, begin to crystallize into an entire philosophy.

A key marginal text in this regard is a seemingly casual review of a book on French literature that Dewey nonetheless addresses with a peculiar passion and energy. The topic of the book is pessimism.

In "The Lessons of Contemporary French Literature," Dewey offers a review of Paul Bourget's *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, a work that appeared in 1889 (EW 3: 36–42). What Dewey finds fascinating in this book is its "criticism of the souls of the writers passed in review," namely Baudelaire, Renan, Flaubert, Stendhal, and Taine. "Its aim is not external description," Dewey goes on, "but internal penetration. It is psychological analysis of the French spirit as revealed in its representative authors; it is the dissection of their thoughts, their emotions, their attitude toward the problems of life" (EW 3: 36–37). The attitude Bourget reveals in the five French authors is, as Dewey quotes him, "'the same creed of the thoroughgoing emptiness of the universe. These magnificent minds are completely nauseated with the vain strivings of life'" (EW 3: 37). The French wisdom of the day seems to exude above all, as Bourget tries to show, a great exhaustion with existence itself. In Dewey's words, which should be noted for their sensitive appreciation of the position, "Everywhere . . . is there to be found the gradual enfeebling and paralysis of the will;

the decay of hope, courage and endeavor; the growing belief that the world is bankrupt" (EW 3: 37).

As so often in his early work, Dewey uses a review or occasional piece to help explore and shape his own viewpoint. In the case of the Bourget review, Dewey uses the piece to come to terms with his own view of pessimism. As he delves deeper into what interests him in the book by Bourget, he finds it to be its precise analysis of the causes of pessimism (and, by the end, the search for a way to circumvent these causes). "The interest [in the work]," Dewey explains, "does not center in this general conclusion [of the emptiness of the universe]. It gathers about the analysis of the various influences which have shaped this pessimism, and the various forms which it takes" (EW 3: 37).

Dewey goes carefully through Bourget's account of what causes pessimism. He identifies three crucial causes: "dilettanteism, the influence of physical sciences, and . . . romanticism" (EW 3: 38). By *dilettanteism*, Dewey means what Michael Principe has called, after Arthur Danto, "directionless pluralism,"²⁸ or simply relativism: "the feeling that so many things in general are true that nothing in particular is very true. It is . . . a disposition which induces a thinker to lend himself to all points of view without giving himself to any" (EW 3: 38). The dilettante refuses to hold on to any one belief firmly; he is always ready to see, with equal justification, the other side of things. All beliefs in this way are leveled out, none truer or more worth fighting for than any other. "Thus dilettanteism leads to pessimism," Dewey thinks.

It is not the wild pessimism of the nihilist; it is not the soured pessimism of Schopenhauer; it is the mild and tender consciousness that the doom of transitoriness is upon all aspects of life, upon all forms of what we call truth. The sentiment that all shades of belief have their own relative justification, that from its own standpoint each is as true as any other, is, in reality, the sentiment that no belief has justification. Such a feeling is pessimistic, for it finds that the universe takes no sides; it is more than impartial—it is indifferent. The world of the lover of culture has no bias in

favor of anything—not even of truth and goodness. It teaches but one thing—the hopelessness of action which is more than playing with various forms of experience in order to obtain from them some self-development. (EW 3: 39)

The dilettante embraces inaction. His pessimism stems from his extreme subjectivism. If no beliefs are truer than any others, none are worth acting on. “The part of the wise man is to take no part” (EW 3: 38). Aside from an egoistic self-creation and inverted withdrawal into personal fantasy, there is no cause for doing anything. One might as well resign from life’s noisier, external happenings. One might as well resign from life—especially since, as Dewey notes, no one can really convince himself for long that his own private interests are more important than the universe (EW 3: 39). When such a person realizes the universe is, in fact, vastly more important than him and his private self-development, but that it is also, as he still thinks, utterly indifferent, this leads to pessimism. One concludes in horror that the universe does not care about anything whatsoever, least of all one’s individual projects.

The second cause of pessimism is the effect of science on our feeling. Science shows that “human nature is simply one part of physical nature” (EW 3: 39). But physical nature is ultimately indifferent to the needs and aspirations of human beings. If good things happen, it is pure happenstance and on equal par with bad things. “Reason and health are, in Taine’s words, happy accidents” (EW 3: 39). Physical nature is nothing but a material process of endless changes, each with its own cause, life and death, health and insanity, each occurring with equal causal justification. Reduced to physical beings, human beings reduce away. The main ideas of science “resolve all human aspirations, loves, and ideals into the insignificant outcome of petty changes. All hope is vain, all effort is fruitless, all aspiration unavailing. Thus there arises . . . the swelling tone of the worthlessness of life—the tone of saddened pessimism” (EW 3: 40).

Human personality in truth has no effect on events. Events occur, rather, in mindless, blind ways, without purpose or intention, and

human personality follows suit. As a result, we have only “the simulacrum of personality” (EW 3: 40). We have no free, independent will. Like rocks, trees, and other animals, like all natural forces, we can only submit to blind forces, and in submitting “give up the possibility of moral action and of religious faith” (EW 3: 40). As a result, without these very human meanings that give significance to our efforts, “life is shorn and empty” (EW 3: 40).

The third cause of pessimism that Dewey, using Bourget, identifies and explains carefully in his own terms, is romanticism. By *romanticism* Dewey means sensualism, the view of life that finds meaning to reside solely in ever-greater stimulation of the affects. “In all ways and at hazards, fresh, vivid, and continual emotion!” (EW 3: 40). This view leads to pessimism because it is so much at odds with actual, everyday life. “The school staked its belief in the worth of life upon the one point whether life affords the desired abundance and intensity of passions; and it found every passion a pathway to a grave” (EW 3: 41). Reality sets in. The world does not provide endless stimulation. In addition to stimulation, it offers boredom; it offers the mundane and humdrum. It offers, too, the pains and ills of excessive living; it offers fatigue, illness, and death. Having pinned all hopes in life on intense, vital passion—a passion that cannot be sustained—the romantic ends up losing all hope in life whatsoever. He had given too much allegiance to one view of life, an unsustainable one, and in the end stands bereft of any positive consideration for the life that has failed to meet his expectations and has let him down.

Having thus identified the causes of pessimism in his age, through the work of Bourget, Dewey then turns to refuting this pessimism. His efforts are instructive for the whole of his early philosophy.

Each form of pessimism, Dewey says in agreement with Bourget, amounts to “a nausea . . . at the emptiness of life” (EW 3: 41). Such is the collective meaning of these forms. Yet each form, with its own distinct cause, nonetheless forgets the crucial role of *faith*. The faith Dewey has in mind here is the faith in the reality of “spiritual things,” “unseen ideals,” “moral choice,” “personality” (EW 3: 41–2). He means that there must be some ideal quality to things beyond how

they appear in their brute givenness. There must be “a criterion which, though unseen, shall serve to measure all that is seen and felt” (EW 3: 42). We can see here that Dewey’s impulse is very strongly to combat pessimism with faith. Indeed, he goes so far as to say that “the problem of the nineteenth century reduces itself to a choice between faith and pessimism” (EW 3: 42)—a quote that should serve to demonstrate that pessimism, or coming to terms with the terror of the possible emptiness of life, does indeed form the core problem of Dewey’s philosophy at this time.

Dewey seems to perceive keenly the agonies of his age. He seems to be very much aware of the deep dread that life is capable of evoking, especially, it seems, in the nineteenth century, with something like the death of God very much occupying people’s minds. Indeed, Dewey captures this dread in accurate, and even chilling, language. He speaks of the “nausea” of the age, “the emptiness of life,” and so on. Even so, that Dewey felt the force of pessimism has been denied in a major study of his early years. In *Young John Dewey: An Essay in American Intellectual History*, Neil Coughlan states that Dewey definitely was not dealing with any kind of spiritual crisis, as other thinkers of the age were doing. After providing a splendid account of the bone-chilling despair that gripped Dewey’s good friend and philosophical collaborator, G. H. Mead, for countless years of his life, a despair very similar to the one that haunted William James, Coughlan makes this observation:

All of the intellectual and productive giants with whom Dewey’s career is closely associated were afflicted with one or another trouble of the spirit: Mead, James, Veblen, Santayana, Bertrand Russell, even G. Stanley Hall. Dewey alone was exempt. No crab-biness, no *idées fixes*, no discernible fatigue, no alienation.²⁹

Dewey alone among his peers, Coughlan states, existed without the spiritual troubles that others shared.

The problem with Coughlan’s view of Dewey, however, is that it ignores essays like “The Lesson of Contemporary French Literature,” where Dewey is clearly concerned with pessimism. Moreover, even

assuming that Dewey showed no discernible fatigue and that he had something of the heroic temperament about him, working with immense industry throughout his long life and rarely if ever expressing despair, it does not follow from this that he had no trouble of the spirit. Such trouble can manifest itself in many ways, even in productivity, especially if, as is the case with Dewey, what is produced amounts to a major effort to come to terms with despair and to teach us how to live in the face of it. Indeed, as William James biographer Richard Robertson observes, James maintained that “even for the heroic mind, ‘the objects [of despair] are sinister and dreadful, unwelcome, incompatible with wished-for things.’”³⁰ What appears to be Dewey’s divine composure in the face of what caused so many others despair may well be the manner in which he confronts, and philosophically overcomes, his despair, as I hope to show in what follows.

It is worth keeping in mind that Dewey’s first published essay was an attempt to combat materialism, a position closely associated in Dewey’s early days with philosophical despair and pessimism (EW 1: 3–8). In addition, it should be noted that not all biographers agree with Coughlan about Dewey’s untroubled spirit. Robert Westbrook, for one, emphasizes that in his youth Dewey experienced a profound sense of “alienation” that he subsequently sought to overcome.³¹ Indeed, Dewey even seems to have had a mystical experience in his life, the nature of which argues strongly in favor of his having confronted pessimism and won. Westbrook reports that Dewey told Max Eastman he once had an intense moment where he suddenly felt a kind of absolute security and confidence in life descend upon him, “an experience of quiet reconciliation with the world, a feeling that ‘everything that’s here is here, and you can just lie back on it.’ He compared it to the poetic pantheism of Wordsworth or Whitman as an undramatic yet blissful moment of ‘oneness with the universe.’ He would never lose touch with this feeling.”³² That Dewey would experience sudden and profound security in this way suggests a prior state in which he felt insecure, that is, a state in which he may have felt the need for security, and which his moment of faith seems to have attained for him.

In any case, Dewey's solution to pessimism at this time, as presented in "The Lessons of Contemporary French Literature," is also faith, faith that human personality—or our distinctly human meanings and values—belongs to the universe after all, and is not wholly alien to nature and the world. It is a faith that human beings fit in; that they are at home in the course of things. "Faith," Dewey explains, "involves the determination that personality shall not be the playground of natural forces, but shall itself be a moving force counting for something in the universe" (EW 3: 42).

What the early Dewey wants to show, above all, is that pessimism can be overcome. Recall that, for him, "the problem of the nineteenth century reduces itself to a choice between faith and pessimism" (EW 3: 42). We must choose one or the other. The gloom of life is too thick to avoid; we must either succumb to it or find the resources to pierce through its darkness. We can find the resources, Dewey thinks, for overcoming this despair, the acute feeling of the emptiness of life. We can legitimately believe that human life is "a moving force counting for something in the universe" (EW 3: 42). We can have faith in life.

It is interesting to note that when Dewey moves away from Bourget's analysis and provides his own account of the problem of pessimism in another early article, he settles on one single and most important cause of the pessimistic temper—the problem of how the scientific understanding of the world affects human life. In "The Present Position of Logical Theory," Dewey notes "the remarkable fact" that the contemporary age is defined by a major "contradiction" (EW 3: 125). The contradiction consists in our simultaneously embracing the scientific account of things (i.e., naturalism) and resisting it. Science has given us an amazing amount of knowledge and the opportunity to understand reality better. We accept it in terms of what it teaches us about the nature of the world. Yet, at the same time, we reject science when it encroaches upon more humane and human areas, such as morality or religion. When it comes to everyday life and its direction, there is no trust in scientific intelligence.

Dewey accounts for this contradiction in our cultural life by saying that "science has got far enough along to make its negative attitude

towards previous codes of life evident, while its own positive principle of reconstruction is not yet evident" (EW 3: 125). Science, in other words, has destroyed our previous, inherited beliefs about values and the meaning of life, but it has not replaced them yet with anything else. Science destroys, for example, our previous belief in human personality counting for something in the universe, a belief inherited from Christianity. Instead of the idea of our having a soul, around which the entire drama of the universe revolves, science reduces us to mere physical elements, no different in quality than any other. It displaces man from the center of things and makes him an animal like others, different only in degree of physical organization, not in terms of any higher meaning or significance. Reduced to nature, we can only accept its merciless destiny. "So . . . the methods of physical science, pure naturalism, lead to pessimism simply because they do not allow that free movement of personality called choice" (EW 3: 42). Previously we might have appealed to supernatural aid for the guidance of life; thanks to physical science, we can only appeal to the mindless push and pull of brute physical events.

Science has thus destroyed our previous codes of life, but it has not yet constructed alternatives. It has not yet shown how physical nature could make room for value and the possibility of better and worse directions for living. Science is still only in its destructive stage as regards traditional beliefs and concerns. It merely spells out the facts, facts that vitiate traditional conceptions. We are therefore left with the disintegration of our previous beliefs and nothing in their place. This existential vacuum brought on by science forms for Dewey the crucial, definite form of pessimism. Thanks to science, we are now exposed without assistance to the brute facts of physical nature—to a cruel, indifferent universe of which we are mere playthings. Life now seems completely cold and hopeless by human standards—standards of human warmth, feeling, love, and consideration. "Life," it seems, "is shorn and empty" (EW 3: 40).

It is important to realize that the problem of pessimism thus formulated by Dewey corresponds point for point to the main problematic of Hegelian philosophy. Dewey is saying that where once we

thought we were at home within the universe, due to science we have become alienated from it. The experience of such alienation in fact defines the fundamental impulse of Hegel's philosophical efforts as well. "The aim of knowledge," Hegel says, "is to divest the objective world . . . of its strangeness, and, as the phrase is, to find ourselves at home in it."³³ The objective world is strange, for Hegel, because we experience it as other than us—as a series of merely brute, indifferent, physical events, while we experience ourselves warmly and intimately as spirit or mind (or personality). Hegel states explicitly in the preface to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that the age has lost its old traditions and that his philosophy seeks to rectify this.³⁴ And he explains how the act of the intellect itself, as soon as it arises, separates off from the universe by distinguishing itself from the objects that it comes to know, an act that, as Robert Stern reminds us, is equivalent to the Fall itself.³⁵ There is even a story told that Hegel, when asked by Heine to notice how beautiful the stars looked at night, replied, "The stars, hum! hum! The stars are only a gleaming leprosy in the sky."³⁶ For Hegel, human experience is alienated from the natural world, and the goal of philosophy is to overcome this alienation. Hegelian philosophy seeks to reunite man with nature by showing how nature, after all, contains room for the growth of human spirit.

We can see now, I hope, just how gross a misinterpretation it is of Hegel to say that he naively believed the universe to be some kind of gigantic thinking mind. The impulse of Hegel's philosophy is not to show that "the world is mind," as some critics maintain.³⁷ The impulse rather is to show that nature is not alien to the human mind, that nature makes room for the human mind. True, Hegel will argue that nature makes room for mind because nature turns out to have been mindlike from the beginning. But, as Richard Schacht has shown, for Hegel the world in the beginning is only *incipient* mind; it is, as it were, merely capable of becoming mind, which it then becomes, in part, when it evolves into thinking, feeling human beings.³⁸ There is an incipient possibility for mind in nature itself; mind is therefore not an alien addition to the universe, not a foreign element, but rather something happening *inside* the universe as a continuous

outgrowth and part of it. Nature is not entirely antithetical to mind, in other words. Nature has room and place for mind in its ongoing development. Such is the major claim of Hegel's philosophy.

We can see, then, that Dewey's own concern with pessimism—with the consequences of human alienation, of personality not counting in the course of things—very much parallels that of Hegel. Like Hegel, Dewey, too, is concerned that our exposure to nature will strike us as a naked exposure to an alien force. The great fear (a fear capable of driving us to despair) is that we simply do not and never will belong to the universe, that we and our values and interests are hopelessly other than the universe, which is indifferent to us from beginning to end. This fear Dewey and Hegel share.

Hegel's influence, in fact, provides the very problematic of Dewey's philosophy. Overcoming pessimism—overcoming the possibility of succumbing to the idea of an indifferent universe—is the primary and sustained motive behind Dewey's early intellectual efforts, just as it was for Hegel, his great teacher. This is not to say that Dewey's early philosophy reduces itself to Hegelianism pure and simple. One can be a disciple in a nonpejorative sense, accepting the general framework and problematic of a given philosopher because these seem to be true to life's needs, and, working within these, offering something new and helpful. One can in this way make an important contribution to the larger effort. It is in this sense that the early Dewey is Hegelian. He accepts the master's problematic, but makes his own original contribution in how he seeks to resolve it.

The general direction of Dewey's original effort to alleviate the problem of pessimism stands out in a single sentence from "The Present Position of Logical Theory." Dewey writes: "It seems to me obvious enough that the contradiction [in our culture] is due to the fact that science has got far enough along to make its negative attitude towards previous codes of life evident, while its own positive principle of reconstruction is not yet evident" (EW 3: 125). Science does have, in other words, a positive direction to offer in the way of reconstructing our destroyed moral and religious beliefs. The problem is that

this positive principle is not yet evident. The solution is to make the principle evident.

At this point, again, Dewey draws on Hegel, in terms of a possible solution. Both thinkers want to show how nature *can* produce meaning. But Dewey offers a renewed effort to show it, with special focus on taking science further than it has so far developed and showing how its naturalism is compatible with human meanings. The idea is to show that “science” in the narrow sense of the term, as an intellectual commitment to the facts, is consistent with a philosophical (or Scientific) grasp of the real, in which human meaning is possible. Deweyan idealism forms the scientific wing, as it were, of the Hegelian mansion. His *Psychology*, in particular—an important early work that I will analyze in more detail in chapters 3, 4, 5, and 6—aims to show how facts are consistent with a world of human concern. In particular, in the *Psychology* Dewey will attempt to demonstrate that the creative power of rupture, of breaking away from facts towards their ideal rendering, is actually the means by which facts come to be ideal. The faith in life that Dewey embraces is the faith that in moving away from life (as it is without ideals) we move towards it (as the place where ideals can be realized). We help ideals take shape in facts by negating them as mere facts and reshaping them into something closer to an ideal. We help to make the world more meaningful through our efforts and the world allows us to do so.

Before we consider Dewey's unique solution to the problem of pessimism, however, we will benefit by first lingering a while longer on the nature of the problem. As the later Dewey said, “a problem well put is half-solved” (LW 12: 112). To grasp in full Dewey's solution, we must first understand the true extent and nature of the problem itself. More specifically, we must come to see how deeply engrained the idea has become that facts are *inherently* devoid of all meaning and incapable of being made better by us. We must come to see just how far-ranging in cultural terms—in terms of the overt creations and productions of social life—the problem of pessimism has come to be. We must also appreciate the true philosophical basis of the cultural

problem and gain a more thoroughgoing account of its elements and arguments. Only when we appreciate the extent to which Kantianism, in particular, forms the very root of the problem of pessimism as Dewey sees it, can we fully appreciate the way in which Dewey, in drawing on Hegel to go beyond Kant, seeks to go beyond our cultural malaise of pessimism as well.