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### THREE

## REHABILITATING DEWEY'S *PSYCHOLOGY*



### *The Major Early Work*

Dewey's *Psychology* is one of the great, underappreciated works of nineteenth-century thought. The book has been consistently derided and ignored since its publication in 1887, and its merits are still underappreciated today, even by otherwise sympathetic Dewey scholars.<sup>1</sup> And yet the *Psychology* is a masterwork of philosophical synthesis, providing a general framework that seems to account well (and sometimes beautifully) for every phase of human experience. It offers a compelling account of everything from the nature of knowledge and wonder to what it means to feel malice or hunger, or to be religious, or to appreciate a great work of art, and so on. Dewey's *Psychology* is his *Phenomenology of Spirit*. It can be compared to Hegel's magnum opus in its scope and ambition, in its sheer philosophical breadth.

In this chapter I will first examine the main criticism that has been leveled at Dewey's *Psychology* since its inception, and that to this day

keeps readers from appreciating the book's insights; and I will show why this criticism is invalid. I will then turn to a consideration of the book's merits. As we will see, the *Psychology* is significant for two reasons: first, it argues that there is an infinite ideal, or Absolute, pertaining to facts that renders them meaningful to human beings, so that the threat of meaninglessness posed by modernism can be overcome; second, it argues that the infinite ideal is not a substance, an accomplished entity, but rather a force that disrupts all finite determinations and forever generates the possibility of new and better meanings in life—a conception of the ideal that enables Dewey to go beyond traditional readings of Hegel and offer a significant new version of idealism. In short, the *Psychology* teaches us how to overcome modernism, and it establishes Dewey's early work as a new version of philosophical idealism. Before these points can be established, however, we must first unburden ourselves of the main criticism of the *Psychology*.<sup>2</sup>

### *The Main Criticism and Why It Is Invalid*

The *Psychology*'s initial reception was cold, even chilling. Robert Westbrook records it well. As he shows in *John Dewey and American Democracy*, the main complaint leveled against the work from several quarters, including from Dewey's own students, was that it pretended to be science when in fact it was speculation.<sup>3</sup> "Even though his book was larded with references in several languages to the latest experimental work," says Westbrook, "he failed to meet the empiricists' demand that he show how experience revealed an absolute consciousness realizing itself in the individual."<sup>4</sup> Dewey failed to prove that empirical science realized the Absolute. "The Absolute was not a fact of experience but it was—if one was a neo-Hegelian—logically implied by it. Dewey's book was less a discussion of developments in scientific psychology than a deductive argument grounded in controversial idealist premises."<sup>5</sup>

It was on these grounds that Dewey's contemporaries perceived the book to have failed. As Westbrook relates, G. Stanley Hall thought

"the book would be a hit with adolescents," who tend to like idealism, "but would be direly disappointing to mature minds."<sup>6</sup> Hall thought that Dewey read into the facts far more than they warranted, never letting the facts "'speak out plainly for themselves'" but always interpreting them according to his idealist framework.<sup>7</sup> William James likewise complained that the book failed to offer "'something really fresh,'" and more importantly, when it did present psychological facts, failed to do justice to them in their particularity.<sup>8</sup> Westbrook notes that H. A. P. Torrey, the teacher under whom Dewey had begun the serious study of philosophy and who was initially very supportive of him, had a similar problem with the book. In Westbrook's words, "Even H. A. P. Torrey could not resist a similar dig at his former pupil. 'Psychologically speaking, the world is objectified self; the self is objectified world,' Dewey had written. This, Torrey corrected, was not psychology but metaphysics speaking."<sup>9</sup> Dewey's students also found problems with the book, expressing these problems in the form of a poem, which Dewey biographer George Dykhuizen reproduces as follows:

But first let me say, I'm not myself to blame  
 For wearing a mask that should put me to shame.  
 But man, daring man, of my folly's the source  
 Man,—aspiring to be a Colossus, of course,  
 Having one foot in heaven, the other on earth.  
 And in lieu of real seeing, his fancy gives birth  
 To wild speculations, as solid and fair  
 As water on quicksand, or smoke in the air.  
 With these fancies he clothed me and called me a science,  
 And I—proud of the title, lent him alliance.<sup>10</sup>

Clearly, many of the initial readers of the *Psychology* felt that the book's approach to its subject constituted its major flaw—a view that appears to be shared by Westbrook. Dewey had not treated his subject scientifically, but rather had dressed the facts up to fit the needs of his idealist position. His critics assumed that his aim was to present the facts of psychology, and Dewey had not really followed the facts. Therefore, these readers concluded, he had failed in his project.

These are formidable charges, especially coming, as they do, from so many different sources, including important contemporaries. We should take it into account, however, that both James and Hall were very much concerned at the time to establish psychology as an empirical science independent of philosophy; moreover, James's own *Principles of Psychology* was at the time already being written, with James's own approach perhaps already being established. Both James and Hall may well have had an agenda in their criticisms of Dewey's book. In fact, William James, for his part, did not really read Dewey's book—he simply pronounced upon it “halfway through” and condemned it.<sup>11</sup> Hall probably also had an agenda; namely, as a man of science, he sought to champion “the facts.” The critics wanted to overcome idealism, but this does not mean that Dewey's book was a bad one. The *Psychology* went through many editions, implying that there were readers who saw something in it.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, it must be said that when one *does* read the book through carefully, piecing together its many details into Dewey's grand vision of life and the world, one begins to feel that the main criticism somehow misses the mark.

When one considers the matter carefully, it becomes clear that the problem with the main criticism is that it results from failing to take Dewey's work on its own terms, from not understanding clearly what the book itself intended to accomplish. Westbrook, for example, nowhere examines Dewey's stated method of procedure in the *Psychology*, nor does he consider what Dewey means by *science* (and by giving a *scientific* accounting of the facts) in the work itself. Instead, Westbrook prefaces his account of the *Psychology* with an analysis of Dewey's article “Psychology as Philosophic Method.”<sup>13</sup> Here Dewey claims that idealists must begin with the science of psychology to show how to reach the Absolute. Westbrook (and Dewey's other critics as well, it seems) takes Dewey to mean by this that “experience,” as it had been tested by “experimental work,” was supposed to reveal “an absolute consciousness realizing itself in the individual.”<sup>14</sup>

If one looks to the *Psychology* itself, however, especially the section on Dewey's methodology, one sees straightaway that Dewey does not

mean by *science* what Westbrook and the other critics mean, and that his method is far different from the ones they themselves presuppose. What has happened here is that the critics have read their own terms into Dewey's work, and have therefore missed its real aims and intentions, which are, strictly speaking, *philosophical*, not experimentally scientific. In other words, Dewey never intended to let the facts simply "speak for themselves." This was not his stated approach; it was not what his book was really about. *Psychology* was never intended as a book of experimental science. The main criticism of Dewey's work therefore amounts to a straw man argument: his critics have described a position that differs from Dewey's own, and then skewered that position as if it were Dewey's. The main criticism of Dewey's *Psychology* is therefore off the mark.

In the book Dewey explicitly treats psychology as science in the older and more technical sense in which Hegel understood the term, namely as a comprehensive knowledge of the real, and not in the more limited sense of experimentation, which the word has come to mean in our own times. Indeed, in the section on method, he makes it clear that to treat a subject "scientifically," as he understands the term, means ordering it according to "principles," which may include some level of experimental testing, but which ultimately relies on a rational ordering and organizing of the facts as they present themselves. Dewey puts the point in this way: "the subject-matter of psychology is the facts of self. . . . These facts, however, do not constitute science until they have been systematically collected and ordered with reference to principles, so that they may be comprehended in their relations to each other, that is to say, explained" (EW 2: 11). This is clearly not experimental science as his critics understand it, namely, as a matter of letting the facts "speak for themselves" without comment.

Having explained what he means by *science*, Dewey next considers the appropriate method for doing the science of psychology. "The proper way of getting at, classifying, and explaining the facts introduces us to the consideration of the proper *method* of psychology" (EW 2: 11). The way to get at the facts of mind, Dewey explains, is

primarily though “introspection” combined with other valuable techniques, such as the experimental method, “the comparative method,” “the objective method,” and the method of “self-consciousness,” which are designed to compensate for introspection’s limitations. Dewey explains his use of the term *introspection*; it does not mean “a special power of the mind. It is only the general power of knowing which the mind has, directed reflectively and intentionally upon a certain set of facts,” namely the facts of the self, which, after all, must form the main material of any science of psychology (EW 2: 11–12). Introspection is simply the reflective investigation of the facts of self.

Introspection does have its limitations, however, in that the facts by themselves do not always reveal their true meaning. One cannot simply consider a fact from the perspective of the one who experiences it and renounce all analysis from the external point of view. “Correctly to perceive a fact . . . is a work of analysis. To feel angry is one thing; to give a critical analysis of that feeling is quite another” (EW 2: 12), Dewey writes. Indeed, “there are certainly many mixed and subtle emotional states, states of half-fear and half-hope, for example, which it is as difficult to identify as it is to identify a rare species of bird-life. Even as to anger, persons are not unknown who, the angrier they get, the more earnestly they assert themselves to be perfectly calm” (EW 2:12). Introspection alone, or the reflective consideration of the mental state one is having, can lead to mistakes and misinterpretations. The internal, reflective engagement with an actual mental state, therefore, must be supplemented by external forms of interpretation. Indeed, all such facts of self must in the end receive their meaning from correct and careful interpretation. As Dewey explains the point,

It is well understood that external observation is not a passive process—that it demands active attention and critical thought, and that its correctness will depend largely upon the ideas with which the object is approached. . . . To perceive with no ideas in the mind to which to relate the object is an impossibility. It is not otherwise with psychological observation . . . There is no such

thing as pure observation in the sense of a fact being known without assimilation and interpretation through ideas already in the mind. (EW 2: 13)

Critics of the *Psychology* wanted Dewey to let the facts “speak for themselves”; they felt that he should have refused to interpret them in one way or another. But it is precisely Dewey’s position that through science facts *never* speak for themselves. They must always be interpreted in the most coherent and compelling way. In his view, this means they must be interpreted in the idealist way; but in any case, they must be interpreted. This analytical and careful process of interpretation is what Dewey meant by science, and it is this type of science that he explicitly set out to offer in his *Psychology*.

Regarding the external methods that Dewey says we must also employ, experimental testing occupies only a small and partial place among the available options. Experiments have their import in that we can make changes in the physical body and note how these changes affect the psychic states that eventuate (or vice versa). Such an approach has “yielded ample results,” Dewey says, especially relative to the “composition and relations of sensations, the nature of attention, and the time occupied by various mental processes” (EW 2: 14). But Dewey notes that this approach has strict limitations. It cannot tell us *directly* about the facts of self. It takes only an external perspective, noting the connections between body and mind, but telling us too little about the mind itself, its psychological laws and processes. It provides us only with facts about certain connections that exist between body and mind, which of course require interpretation to gain their actual meaning for psychology. “The mere knowledge of all the functions of the brain and nerves does not help the science, except so far as it occasions a more penetrating psychological analysis” (EW 2: 14).

The more penetrating psychological analysis that Dewey’s psychology demands is further aided by the “comparative method.” Here the facts disclosed under introspection, and sometimes with the aid of experiment, are “compared with the consciousness (1) of animals, (2)



of children in various stages, (3) of defective and disordered minds, (4) of mind as it appears in the various conditions of race, nationality, etc." (EW 2: 14–15). This approach obviously has the advantage of allowing the psychologist to gain valuable insight concerning the nature of mind and self as such, and not only the individual mind under consideration at any one point during introspection.

A further method Dewey employs is what he calls the "objective method." The mind has created things, impressed itself upon reality, and the products of such creation can be studied to teach us about the nature of the mind. Dewey places great emphasis on this method. "The broadest and most fundamental method of correcting and extending the results of introspection," he says, "and of interpreting these results, so as to refer them to their laws, is the study of the objective manifestations of mind" (EW 2: 15). It is evident, Dewey argues, that

science, religion, art, etc., are all of them products of the mind or self, working itself out according to its own laws, and that, therefore, in studying them we are only studying the fundamental nature of the conscious self. It is in these wide departments of human knowledge, activity, and creation that we learn most about the self, and it is through their investigation that we find most clearly revealed the laws of its activities. (EW 2: 15–16)

This is a unique kind of psychology, indeed. Far from relying only on experimental testing, it also draws on and analyzes the external manifestations of the mind such as language, science, art, and religion. For truly these must also reveal something fundamental about what or who manifested such things and what features this creator must have possessed in giving rise to just these manifestations.

The last and most fundamental method is that of "self-consciousness." Here the meaning of objective facts is realized in the actual experience of some actual self, the investigator. Such a process is crucial for understanding, for without it the investigator possesses only a detached, external grasp of an objective process, but lacks an understanding about what these objective processes truly

mean to an actual mind. "The ultimate appeal is to self-consciousness," Dewey explains.

None of these facts mean anything until they are thus interpreted. . . . [T]hey . . . must be interpreted into *individual* terms. What, for example, would language mean to an individual who did not have the power of himself reproducing the language? . . . So the phenomena made known in physiological psychology, would have no value whatever for the science of psychology, if they were not interpretable into facts of consciousness. As physiological facts they are of no avail, for they tell us only about certain objective processes. (EW 2: 16)

The psychologist must interpret the facts of self, not simply by reflecting on them directly through introspection and then also employing experimental testing, comparative analysis, and objective reference to build out a fuller interpretation, but also through the self-conscious experience of undergoing these facts of self (and their interpretation) for himself. The psychologist must feel his or her way into the interpretation, in other words, becoming not simply an external investigator but also an active participant in the investigation, seeing just where the interpreted results square or fail to square with his or her own experiences as a self.

These various methods, then, are the ones Dewey will employ in offering his account of the facts of the self. His explicit employment of each of these methods to "do psychology" saves Dewey from his critics' charge that his book is a work of experimental science gone wrong. Dewey never intended to show that empirical facts by themselves would somehow prove the Absolute. But Dewey's approach does raise another possible objection: that Dewey is the practitioner of a bizarre kind of science, indeed, one that hardly resembles anything that goes by that name.

I am inclined to exonerate Dewey from this charge, however, by pointing out that what he is involved in is actually *not* what we usually mean by science at all, but is, rather, philosophy. Dewey's *Psychology* is not a scientific text in the standard sense; it is a philosophical work focusing on the mind. Dewey makes this clear in the

preface when he writes that he has sought “above all, to develop the philosophic spirit” (EW 2: 4). To be sure, Dewey uses the name of science in the work, but he uses it in the older, broader, Hegelian sense of complete knowledge, not in its narrower modern sense, whereby science is closely associated with experimentation. For Dewey, science is knowledge. In offering a psychology, Dewey is offering knowledge of the self. He employs several methods to gain this knowledge, only one of which is the use of experiment. He is not engaged in experimental science in any fundamental way as part of his task of explaining the self; experimental science is only one small part of his overall philosophical effort. We must get over the idea that Dewey’s book endeavors to be scientific in the way we customarily understand that term today. The *Psychology* does not show Dewey engaged in bad science, forcing facts into a Hegelian mold; rather, it shows Dewey utilizing the various methods of insight available to us and trying to determine with their aid what it is that we can know about the self. It is a philosophical project. The project should therefore be judged not on scientific but on philosophical grounds, which critics so far have consistently failed to do. Dewey’s *Psychology* still lacks the appraisal as a philosophical work that it deserves.

### *Key Ideas*

To better understand Dewey’s philosophy in the *Psychology*, consider its key ideas. The book centers on the finite self or “consciousness” and examines philosophically what it is and how it functions. Dewey explains early on in the *Psychology* that the facts under consideration in the book are “the facts of consciousness,” by which he means an individual’s “cognitive, emotional, and volitional” acts (EW 2: 18). Knowledge, feeling, and will, he holds, are not separate and detached functions but rather “the three aspects which every consciousness presents” (EW 2: 20). We feel something, that is, we take an interest in an object, which produces in us the will to learn about it, and this will to learn can result in our acquiring knowledge of the object. All

three aspects of the mind—knowledge, feeling, and will—are in some form or other at work in every conscious experience (EW 2: 20).

Beginning from here, Dewey eventually moves on to the crucial idea that “it is the characteristic . . . of the subject-matter of our psychological life that it has meaning” (EW 2: 78). Knowledge, feeling, and will together reveal to us objects that are meaningful. *The facts of self*, in other words, do allow for meaning, and they do so because of rupture—that is, because any potential fact has already broken off from itself, so to speak, and become more than a fact. The basic picture that Dewey tries to defend can be seen at work in the claim that “we not only have sensations, but have an intelligent life and intelligible experiences” (EW 2: 78). We always go beyond facts merely present (e.g., the facts of present sensations, such as green and smooth) and transform them into intelligible meanings (e.g., the perception of an object, such as money). Dewey puts the point this way: “Whatever appeals to the investigation of intelligence, offers it material upon which to exert its activities . . . we call *significant*, or possessing *meaning*” (EW 2: 78). There is no *given*, as we might put it today. Anything that gives itself to our consciousness is already something that has allowed our activities to work upon it and in relation to which those activities have produced some meaning or other. (As we will see, this is also true for any apparently given sensation, such as green or smooth, as well). Dewey goes so far as to say that “whatever is meaningless has no point of contact with intelligence. . . . The main-spring of our cognitive experiences is the more or less conscious feeling that things have meaning” (EW 2: 78).

To say that something has meaning, for Dewey, is to say that the objects of consciousness are organized in relation to one another, and it is relative to those relationships that they acquire their significance. So, Dewey holds that knowledge, feeling, and will are activities that above all establish *relations* between objects, relations that are meaningful, significant, and valuable. Knowledge, feeling, and will transform facts into meanings by putting the facts into relationships relative to which the facts have something to say, or take on the properties of being noteworthy, important, or momentous.

Dewey's position is that the self builds up an entire universe of known and felt objects out of facts. And the facts permit these meanings. We do not know, of course, whether the facts will ultimately bear out our meanings, but we are able to idealize the facts to the point where they actually do take on our meanings to a great extent.<sup>15</sup> Even so, a critic might insist, if the facts ultimately do not (or might not) correspond to our meanings, then we have the dilemma of modernism all over again: our meanings are separated from the ways things really are. As Jennifer Welchman puts it, "this new position" of Dewey's "is only partly worked out and on occasion collapses into just the sort of dualism *Psychology* was a protest against."<sup>16</sup> For when we build up meanings conducive to ourselves, this of course in no way guarantees that the facts themselves—prior to our efforts—really bear those meanings. We would therefore seem to be left with the very separation of facts and meanings that the *Psychology* seeks to overcome.

However, it is at this point that Dewey introduces his concept of faith. He believes that we can have faith that the facts could ultimately lend themselves to a perfect and complete harmony with our idealized meanings. This view may sound simple-minded, until we realize that by placing faith at the center of his account, Dewey is actually insisting upon the unsurpassed power of rupture. He is privileging disruption over unity as the condition of meaning-making. In Dewey's words, "Reason must be that which separates itself, which differentiates, goes forth into differences" (EW 1: 44).<sup>17</sup> The movement towards the Absolute occurs as the difference from what is, as the movement toward the ideal, and although we seek higher unities in this difference—and if we are lucky can make these higher ideals real in the process—reason cannot guarantee this outcome, cannot secure its end point in some finally attained Absolute ideal. Only faith can come close. But such faith is not reason; it does not prove our ideals to be so; rather, faith is something we maintain in order to avoid "a contradiction" in our search for meaning, so that "the universal which is its goal" (that is, a world of fully idealized facts) does not remain "a blind postulate, impossible to account for" (EW 2: 363).

We feel compelled to render the facts ideal; and the way to make sense of this feeling—that is, to justify it and our effort to try to make the facts more human and ideal—is to believe that through our effort the facts will lend themselves (under the right circumstances) to our ideals. The possibility of the reconciliation of our higher, ideal meanings with ultimate reality is asserted to exist, in other words, to goad us on to continued idealizing action, in order that we might continue moving past the given and continue to build up more ideals and more and more of a meaningful universe. Dewey is affirming the primacy of rupture here as opposed to the traditional Hegelian privileging of unity; and this means affirming the importance of our continuing to try to render the facts ideal.

What Welchman's objection misses, therefore, is that in Dewey's account of things, we must work to secure the ultimate union of facts and meanings by pursuing ideals. This union is in no way given to us, but neither is the fundamental unbridgeable separation of facts and meanings of modernism given to us. Instead, there is a deep and vague lure at work in our experience that keeps us creating actual, real-life meanings that, though imperfect, would reach toward the ultimate union. This avoidance of both modernism as the separation of facts and meanings, and of the old picture of Hegelianism as the *guaranteed* subsumption of facts under meanings, is precisely the innovation of Dewey's early philosophy. It is a philosophy about creating the kind of world in which we think we ought to live, rather than assuming that this kind of world either does or does not exist.

A close reading of the *Psychology* reveals Dewey's innovation. Dewey holds in the *Psychology* that the self negates the given, seeking to transform it into ideal patterns of meaning (EW 2: 126). The self also does this to itself, which means that it grows, or constantly expands to try to include ever-more-universal aspects as part of what it is (EW 2: 137–38). For example, I first try to identify myself with my body, then with objects, then with other people and society, then with all of humanity, then with nature, and so on. This attempt at expansive self-identification never ceases. Our identities continue to expand, as we seek to identify ourselves with wider and wider aspects of

the universe. We may have faith that these expanded versions of ourselves culminate in the Godhead, of which we are a part, but such faith, Dewey makes clear, is in place to keep us striving in action. We want the fullest, most complete self, but “what this . . . self as complete is, it does not know. It only feels that there is such a goal” (EW 2: 358). An endless, vague yearning to unsettle all of our previous versions of ourselves, to grow beyond ourselves, is what Dewey means by the Absolute, not the reconciliation of ourselves with any aspect of reality.<sup>18</sup>

We can begin to see, therefore, that Dewey's philosophy aims to help us have confidence in life by providing an account of how meaning develops in the universe. The meaning, it turns out, is in the movement—the movement from form to form, in a tireless search for perfection that refuses to rest in any of its stations. The meaning amounts to a passion for life, the desire to go on, to live, and to strive for ideals, but also, at the same time, the attainment of some idealized meanings along the way and our enjoyment of them.<sup>19</sup>

This is a new version of idealism, as I will show in chapter 8, going beyond the typical understanding of Hegelianism's commitment to unity and the inevitable return of reason to itself. With its emphasis on ongoing disruption, caused by a missing goal, this idealism comes close to the *Bildung* tradition that Jim Good identifies, defined “as an organic model of education as growth” and a tradition “the goal of which is the development of the higher humanity within ourselves.”<sup>20</sup> However, the fact that the goal is missing, or at least is unclear and waiting to be created as the search for meaning itself is pursued, would seem to take Dewey beyond this tradition into new areas. As Dewey emphasizes in his idealism, “the final reality for man is that which cannot be made out actually to exist” (EW 2: 292). If anything, this new idealism resembles contemporary philosophies of rupture. As with these philosophies, the lack of ultimate unity is crucial to meaning, with the “absent centre” at the heart of things, as Slavoj Žižek calls it, driving all movement and growth.<sup>21</sup> The early Dewey advances beyond typical Hegelianism to a more open-ended philosophy, but also perhaps to a more uncertain and dangerous one.

With this new understanding of Dewey's early philosophy in place, we can also confront another criticism often leveled against Dewey's findings in the *Psychology*. Once we see that rupture is the central concept of the book, we can overcome from another angle the charge that Dewey fails in his project. Dewey admits in the *Psychology* that "there is always a chasm between actual knowledge and absolute truth" (EW 2: 361), since Absolute truth is universal and the individual, as individual, can never have access to the universal. Westbrook, speaking perhaps for many other critics, sees this as a confession that Dewey cannot deliver what he promises, namely to derive the Absolute from experience: "This time Dewey admitted as much . . . the Absolute was not a fact of experience."<sup>22</sup> What Westbrook fails to see, however, is that for Dewey, there is *necessarily* a chasm between our actual knowledge as we find it and the truth of the Absolute. This is not an admission of failure on Dewey's part; it is the very point he is trying to make. As Dewey goes on to explain in the passage about the chasm, "There can be no knowledge beyond the ground that knowledge actually covers. There cannot be knowledge that the true reality for the individual self is the universal self, for knowledge has not in the individual compassed the universal" (EW 2: 361). The truth of the Absolute is something so far "transcending knowledge," although we do believe and presuppose that this truth is there (EW 2: 361). In fact, belief in the truth of the Absolute is what compels us to know: "the motive to knowledge and the energy of its realization is the *belief* that there is truth" (EW 2: 361). Dewey's point is that the way the Absolute functions—as an ideal beyond us—is precisely by creating discontent with our actual state of knowledge and experience, a discontent or disruption that is the very condition of our searching for (and creating) ideal meanings in the first place. This chasm between our actual condition and the Absolute, Dewey wants to say, is the pregnant source of all meaning.<sup>23</sup>

### *A New Concept of the Absolute*

To understand this new concept of the Absolute that Dewey advances in the *Psychology* it may help to contrast it with another, competing



account of the Absolute. We will examine Josiah Royce's conception of the Absolute as presented in *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*.<sup>24</sup> The differences are particularly sharp and should serve to highlight what is unique about Dewey's concept.

In *The Religious Aspect of Philosophy*, published in 1885, only a few years before the *Psychology*, Royce holds that the Absolute is an eternal entity in which all finite things are reconciled. As Royce puts it, "All reality must be present to the Unity of the Infinite Thought."<sup>25</sup> For Royce, the Absolute is the ultimate container of events, bringing all the disruption and division involved in reality into harmony within itself. It reconciles all division; it renders all disunity into unity in its "Infinite Thought."

The Absolute is, in effect, "a World-Consciousness" that grasps all things.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the actual events in the world, Royce refers to it as "this higher spiritual Life that includes them and watches over them as the spectator watches the tragedy."<sup>27</sup> Moreover, for Royce, the Absolute does not stand above actual events, but is rather inside of them. In events themselves, "dwells the higher spirit that does not so much create as constitute them what they are."<sup>28</sup> The Absolute is present in the events, shaping them into the events that they become. It is those same events seen from an eternal perspective and worked upon by an eternal mind.

Dewey's concept of the Absolute, by contrast, is not an ultimate container; neither does it dwell in the facts. It is not an eternal mind grasping everything, but rather an ideal of perfect harmony that eludes us. The Absolute does not reside in the facts but is, precisely, lacking in them; it is this lack in actual events that compels those events to need to develop in a more ideal fashion.

In the *Psychology*, Dewey makes finite human consciousness the starting point and focus of meaning. The title itself reveals what is innovative about his concept of the Absolute. He does not call the book, *Metaphysics*, as if he were dealing with pure being, but rather *Psychology*, because he is dealing with finite human minds. In a word, the focus of meaning is not *in* the Absolute, in some timeless, eternal entity; rather, it is in the finite, striving mind, which yearns for the

Absolute but always misses it. Dewey's Absolute is an absence, a void—the void or absence at the heart of our experience. Because we lack any ultimate harmony, we constantly seek for it. The Absolute, for Dewey, is a creative lack in our lives.

Thirteen years after he first published the *Psychology*, Dewey wrote an interesting review of another book by Royce, *The World and the Individual*. In it Dewey argues that if we are capable of understanding anything like the Absolute at all, as Royce contends, then the Absolute cannot be something eternal and timeless; rather, this Absolute must center (or perhaps de-center) *in* our experience and must be understood in relation to *us*. If we in our finitude can grasp an infinite Absolute, then we are more than “mere fragments or parts” of it; what must be happening, rather, is that “it is in and through us, and in such an organic and pervasive way that the contrast between us and it . . . is contradicted” (MW 1: 255). The Absolute becomes defined relative to us, relative to a lack of ours, not relative to an eternal totality. “What we need is a reconsideration of the facts of struggle, disappointment, change, consciousness of limitation, which will show *them*, as they actually are experienced *by us* (not by something called Absolute) to be significant, worthy, and helpful” (MW 1: 255–56). In Dewey's view, the idealizing function of the Absolute, rendering things significant, should not be thought of as a unity occurring somewhere in which all finite reality is present and reconciled, but as the very process of our own struggling, finite experience becoming significant. Our own activities, insofar as their disrupted and disjointed parts are developing into meanings that are significant and worthy, is what defines the Absolute. Rupture is here made into the basis of harmony and meaning.

It is true that Dewey published this review over a decade after he wrote the *Psychology*. That this is how Dewey had earlier envisioned the Absolute, however, is suggested by a second review that Dewey wrote of Royce's *The World and the Individual*. This review was also written some years after the *Psychology*, but in it Dewey seems to reveal how he had always understood Hegel: in such a way as to place the center of meaning in particular, finite human life. Referring to

Fichte and Hegel, but especially to Hegel, Dewey explains, "The old transcendentalists were . . . serious with their theory of the Absolute as the meaning and reality of present experience. They worked out the idea into a logic, a *Naturphilosophie*, and a philosophy of history" (MW 2: 136). They derived the Absolute from out of the very fabric of finite, struggling human experience, rather than placing it in an eternal mind.

In pieces actually written during the earlier period, too, Dewey seems for the most part to have understood the Absolute in this way, even outside of the *Psychology*. We often find Dewey insisting that, as he says in one place, "the content of consciousness is known only in and to an individual" (EW 1: 174). This means, conversely, that it is *not* known to the Absolute. "Idealized"<sup>29</sup> meanings are known as they come home to us in individual, finite, and fragmented experience, and only there.

It is true that Dewey relapses at one point, prior to the *Psychology*, as he is working out this innovative conception of the Absolute, and says that "the individual self can take the universal self as its standpoint, and thence know its own origin. In so doing, it knows that it has its origin in processes which exist for the universal self, and that therefore the universal self never has become" (EW 1: 142). This certainly sounds as if Dewey's Absolute is a timeless harmony unto itself. But Dewey quickly recovers himself and goes on to say, "It must not be forgotten that the object of this paper is simply to develop the pre-suppositions which have always been latent or implicit in the psychological standpoint. . . . It must also be remembered that it is the work of Psychology itself to determine the exact and concrete relations of subject and object, individual and universal within consciousness" (EW 1: 142–43). In other words, whatever the claim about the Absolute, it comes from psychology, and can only be grasped in and through the study of human consciousness.

In a similar fashion, in a review of William Wallace's translation of Hegel's *Philosophie des Geistes*, Dewey praises Wallace's text because "it will introduce Hegel to many in a new aspect—as among other things a psychologist, and, according to his lights and the state of

knowledge when he wrote, a physiological psychologist" (EW 5: 344), just as Dewey himself had been. Dewey, it seems, had all along understood Hegelian idealism as situating the Absolute and its worthwhile meanings in the finite life of the individual, even in his physiological life.

My position is that when the early Dewey is at his best, at his most original and compelling, he advances beyond his Hegelian contemporaries to the idea of the Absolute as "only the most adequate possible construing" of the "ultimate meaning and worth" of "'us men,'" that is, of finite human beings (MW 2: 137). Hegel himself believed that "[e]ach of the stages [of life] . . . is an image of the absolute, but at first in a limited mode, and thus it is forced onwards to the whole."<sup>30</sup> What seems to have happened is that the young Dewey's contemporaries focused on the first part of this belief (that finite life is an image of absolute, eternal life, which is most real), while Dewey, at his most original, focused on the second part of the belief (that each stage is forced onwards to the whole). For him, the Absolute becomes merely a prod to compel us beyond any given state to the deeper and richer meanings of which that state is capable (EW 2:358). The focus of meaning is entirely on the actual state struggling to become more ideal, or being forced onwards due to its own insufficiency, its own lack of ultimate harmony. And it is in the *Psychology*, I hold, that Dewey achieves this position most completely, and that his early philosophy comes most fully into its own. It is in this text that Dewey both attains and sustains this insight about the Absolute as the ultimate harmony that escapes us, but that nonetheless gives life meaning, to its fullest and most coherent extent.

What is needed to bring this point out is, above all, a close reading of the *Psychology*. We must move beyond speaking in generalities and engage in a detailed and thorough investigation of Dewey's book. Only then can we fully appreciate what the book is trying to do and what is significant about it. The text is a significant work in philosophy, and it will take several chapters to bring out the complete ideas of the text. In the chapters that follow, therefore, I offer such a reading.

### *Outline of the Psychology*

Before we turn to a fuller analysis of the *Psychology*, it may be helpful to review the book's basic structure and what each part is trying to accomplish. The *Psychology* consists of introductory material about method, discussed above, followed by three parts. The first is titled "Knowledge," the second "Feeling," and the third "Will" (EW 2:xxi–xxii). Each part shows how rupture is at work in producing the kinds of meanings peculiar to each of these activities.

Part I identifies the two basic conditions of knowledge, namely *ap-perception* and *retention*, or the unifying and the preserving of sensations in such a way that we are able to build them up into coherent objects and their relations (EW 2: 78;130). Part I shows us how these conditions of knowledge function to generate ever-wider and more universal meanings through activities such as "perception," "imagination," "thinking," and "intuition" (EW 2:138; 169; 177; 205). The path charted here is from less rich meanings to more rich ones. Perception pertains to objects, but memory adds past content, thereby enriching our grasp of the objects. Imagination adds richer possibilities to perceived and remembered objects, and so on. Eventually, Dewey will maintain, we are capable of arriving at a conception of the universe of known objects as a whole, a single unity, which nonetheless allows for the differentiation of parts within it (EW 2:137–38; 200–1). We create the idea of a cosmos to which we belong; and to the extent that we approximate such a cosmos in our knowledge, feeling, and willing, modernism will be defeated.

In part II of the *Psychology*, Dewey addresses the role of feeling in human knowledge. He asserts that we never simply know objects, but rather grasp them always in terms of how we feel about them, or in other words, in terms of what they mean to us personally. Hence, contrary to the modernist world view, facts are always meaningful for us. Moreover, the facts can become ever more meaningful. Here, too, there is development (never to be completed) from "sensuous feeling," to "formal feeling," and then to the "qualitative feelings" of the intellect, the aesthetic, and the social (EW2: 218; 228; 239). Sensuous

feeling is our basic bodily feeling; formal feelings are feelings of action and reaction, or of the body in motion; qualitative feelings are feelings we have about the content of things we encounter in our activities, such as the content of our thoughts, or our art works, or our relationships with others. We can see the development: feelings move from the merely given, raw sense of something happening, all the way up to the highest refinements of social interaction. The function of the feeling in all of these cases is to help us to develop—to give us a sense, in other words, for the ways we are relating to things and whether our relations assist our development, in which case feelings of pleasure occur, or hinder our development, in which case feelings of pain occur. The highest pleasure is social interaction, or the feeling of community, which ultimately takes on a religious quality. We feel that we might possess unity with all things, although in the end this feeling is ungrounded, for reasons we will explore in chapter 6. In any case, feelings, in Dewey's account, guide us toward better, more ideal ways of acting, and steer us clear of worse ways. There is a development to feelings. In short, feelings are part of the way we idealize the world and grasp it in terms of our sense of things, in terms of what things mean or signify for us, rather than purely intellectually, in terms of some supposedly basic facts of the world. And because of this, once again, modernism, which holds that facts are devoid of meaning, will be defeated (EW 2:216; 291).

Part III is about the will, or the various modes of intention we possess. The will combines knowledge and feeling, in that we understand the way objects relate to one another (knowledge) and we grasp what these mean for us (feeling), which in turn entails a certain desire or action on our part—an intention or tendency to act a certain way (EW 2:20ff). The pattern of development seen with knowledge and feeling repeats itself in will as well. Our will develops from basic impulses, which always contain at least a rudimentary meaning, to acts of “physical control.” It then develops into modes of “prudential control,” and finally to “moral control” (EW 2: 321; 332; 342). Again, there is increasing idealization, increasing development of the self's

meanings, rather than simple repetition of what is given. We gradually learn to control ourselves rather than let external forces control us. In all of these willing processes, our own actions are coming more and more under our control and so they are becoming more and more meaningful, that is, more idealized and dignified than mere brute activity; and once again modernism is defeated. The final instance of this development of willing is moral control, where we have a sense of what it would mean to complete the will and attain the perfect ideal of action, since in *willing* the moral thing we at the same time are *doing* exactly the thing we should. The early Dewey is a deontologist. And yet, for him, the moral will is incomplete in the end, because we never do completely achieve the moral will and will what we should. In the total character of our life as we have lived it up to any given point, we always come up short. Only faith—the assertion that our ideals can always still be realized if we try—keeps us striving to bring our will in line with the will it ought to be, which in turn keeps us producing meaningful intentions and good willing.

These are the vital ideas of Dewey's major early work, the *Psychology*, to be explored in detail in subsequent chapters. In chapter 4 I explain Dewey's account of the nature of knowledge in the *Psychology*. In chapter 5 I discuss the kinds of things we can be said to know given this understanding of human knowledge, including our sense that we belong to a single, interconnected universe filled with meaning. Chapter 6 deals with Dewey's account of feeling and will, in which the universe comes to take on ever-deeper and richer meanings through our idealizing activities. In chapter 7, I discuss how Dewey applies this philosophy to ethical and social issues, especially in such a way as to combat modernist culture. Finally, in chapter 8, I consider the extent to which Dewey's early philosophy is a new and original form of idealism.