THE PROBLEM OF NIHILISM: A PERSONAL JOURNEY FROM NIETZSCHE TO DEWEY

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The title of my paper is in the spirit of the title of this journal, *Dewey Studies*. The paper is a personal narrative of where Dewey's religious humanism first fit into my Nietzschian inspired concerns for an aesthetic solution to the problem of nihilism. Ultimately, I will show why I came to prefer Dewey's democratic approach to self-creation as a social, community achievement as more substantial and enduring than Nietzsche's obsession with the doings of a lonely self-absorbed monster of creation (i.e., the übermensch). However, along the way, I will point out many surprising similarities between Dewey and Nietzsche including their pluralism, naturalism, empiricism, and robust perspectivalism (among others), as well as differences: such as Nietzsche's obsession with the will to power and with nominalism. Dewey has an important existential sensibility too often ignored.

Volume 1 · Number 2 · Spring 2017 · Pages 70-94

Why do you study John Dewey? Why does anyone? There are as many answers as there are students of his work. Here I offer one very personal, autobiographical account. For me, Dewey's religious humanism offers the best response available to the challenge of nihilism. The non-teleological aim of education is growth because the meaning of life is to make more meaning. Dewey feeds my existential needs and desires, although naught sates them. However, people's passions diverge in many ways. In a pluralistic universe, much less a pluralistic democracy, individual needs and desires vary greatly and none necessarily exceeds any other in scope or significance.

After Dewey, the philosopher that has most influenced me is Friedrich Nietzsche. For someone such as I who retained a residual theism until my late 20's the felt undeniability of the following percussive passage had an identity shattering affect. It involves a question posed by a madman with a lantern lit in the bright morning hours:

> "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. *We have killed him*—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing. Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us. Do we not need to light the lanterns in the morning? . . . . God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.[1]

How did humankind kill God? Simple, "he" was an anthropomorphic creation that served human, all too human, purposes. Of course,

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, 1974), Bk.III, sec. 125.

having slain God we may have also slain "Man" his creator along with such essences as "rational animal," "featherless biped," and such.[2] It is a chilling, dark, and disturbing proclamation. Nietzsche thought the collapse of absolute cosmic values would determine the history of Europe for 200-years. I think it will be a source of global struggle for centuries, although of course many world religions do not postulate a God at all.

Upon first announcing the death of God, Nietzsche declared: "God is dead: but given the way of men, there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown. —And we— we still have to vanquish his shadow."[3] The ghost of God Nietzsche immediately assails is materialism.[4] He concludes with a plea pleasing to a Deweyan naturalist:

> When will all these shadows of God [matter, substance, the "astral order," and such] cease to darken our minds? When will we complete our de-deification of nature? When may we begin to "*naturalize*" humanity in terms of a pure, newly discovered newly redeemed nature?[5]

Walter Kauffman remarks of this passage: "'Naturalize' is here used in the sense of naturalism; as opposed to supernaturalism. Man is the be reintegrated into nature." We are not spectators of natural events; instead, we are an event among events. Nietzsche shares Dewey's participatory naturalism while helping us understand why spectator theories have such a hold on humanity.

Having assaulted materialism, Nietzsche is quick to foreclose the possibility of pure, dispassionate "rationality" and its allies (e.g., causal explanation, mathematico-logical equality, science disassociated from "artistic energies and the practical wisdom of life",

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[2] Of course, "rationality" as *the* aim of education disappears with "rational animal" as the human essence, although it is possible to continue pursuing intelligence and wisdom as long as we do not assume they have a fixed and final essence.

[3] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* Bk.III, sec. 108.

[4] Ibid., Bk.III, sec. 109.

[5] Ibid.

etc.) as substitutes for God[6] as well as "humanity" itself.[7] For his part, Dewey, having asserted, "rationality" (i.e., intelligence) is "the generalized idea of the means-consequence relation as such," explicitly rejects "*Intellectus Purus.*"[8]

In assailing God, Nietzsche most famously dismisses transcendent Platonism in all of its forms including mathematical, logical, and scientific Platonism among others. The shadows of Platonism still darken our minds. Nietzsche is also a strident critic of Kant's transcendentalism, which he excoriates throughout much of his later work. For instance, Kant famously limits knowledge to make room for God, free will, and immortality as unknowable things-in-themselves. After a discussion of the "ascetic priest" and the priest's low "*valuation*" of "our life" of embodied passion and purpose as "a wrong road,"[9] Nietzsche depicts Kant's "ascetic self-contempt and self-mockery of reason in the assertion that *there* is a realm of truth and being, but reason is excluded from it!'"[10] Ethereal shadows of transcendentalism and quasi-transcendentalism still haunt our thought.

In summary, Nietzsche is dismissing anything metaphysical (*eidos*, *ousia*, *arche*, *entelecheia*) that would provide metaphysical comfort deriving from completing the quest for immutable certainty. It is easy to show Dewey does the same for the essence of "God" or "Man" (i.e., the human), rationality, ultimate epistemological or metaphysical foundations, or cosmic purposes in history.

Early in *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche clarifies what he means by nihilism: "What does nihilism mean? *That the highest values devaluate themselves.* The aim is lacking; 'why?' finds no answer."[11]

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[6] See Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* Bk. III, sects. 110 – 113.

[7] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* Bk. III, sec. 115.

[8] John Dewey, *The Collected Works of John Dewey,* 1882-1953, ed. By Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969-1991), (LW:12:17-18)

[9] Nietzsche, *On The Genealogy of Morals,* translated by Walter Kaufmann and R. J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage Books, 1967), Bk. III, sec. 11.

[10] Ibid., Bk. III, sec. 12.

[11] Nietzsche, *The Will To Power*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Random House, 1967), Bk. I, sec. 2.

Nietzsche distinguishes four kinds of nihilism as a psychological state. The first three are passive and incomplete. The first arises "when we have sought a 'meaning' in all events that is not there."[12] Previously, we had assumed our highest universal ideals must eventually achieve actualization in the order of existence. What all such ways of thinking have in common is that "something is to be achieved through a process—and now one realizes that becoming aims at *nothing* and achieves *nothing.*"[13] Humankind realizes it is "no longer the collaborator, let alone the center, of becoming."[14] Finding no cosmic purposes operating in the universe to join forces with, the nihilist becomes discouraged, pessimistic and gives up on life.

The second passive psychological state arises when "one has posited a totality, a systematization;" that is, some sort of "unity, some form of 'monism'," demanding the "devotion of the individual."[15] When one realizes there is no such totalizing universal, the individual finds they have lost "faith in his own values when no infinitely valuable whole works though him."[16] "He" needed the totalizing vision "in order to be able to believe in his own value."[17] Totalitarians die with their supposed unity, their totalizing, all-inclusive hallucination.

The first two passive states of nihilism assume becoming has some aim or unity. The third passive state arises when the idea of true Being beyond becoming fails. This form of nihilism exhibits "disbelief in any metaphysical world and forbids itself any belief in a *true* world."[18] Having reached this postmetaphysical point "one grants the reality of becoming as the *only* reality, forbids oneself every kind of clandestine access to afterworlds and false divinities—*but cannot endure this world though one does not want to deny it.*"[19] Nietzsche concludes that when "the categories 'aim,' 'unity,' 'being'

[12] Ibid., Bk. I, sec. 12.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibid.

which we used to project some value into the world" collapse "we *pull out* again; so the world looks *valueless.*"[20] The incomplete nihilist is now entirely exhausted.

The fourth psychological state of complete nihilism realizes the first three passive states themselves must undergo devaluation. They were simply mistakes "that refer to a purely fictitious world."[21] We have made a mistake and must now begin to look for meaning and value somewhere else. It is the response of "*active* nihilism," which is a sign of the "increased power of the spirit."[22] Whereas passive nihilism is life denying and destructive of the aims, unity, and true Being or God we have *created*, active nihilism is a sign of strength that devalues eternal, immutable aims, unity, and true Being, but realizes the grandeur of the capacities that created them. The complete, active nihilist begins to join the power of creation to the power of destruction.

Having announced humankind has slain their God, the highest values devalue themselves, and the universe is devoid of meaning and value, the madman poses another question: "How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers?"[23] If the passive postmetaphysical nihilist does not commit self-murder, they might distract themselves by consuming material goods created by others rather than the God they once worshiped. The madman offers a better postmetaphysical alternative. Having slain the *summum bonum*, the creator of supreme meanings and values, humankind has no choice but to become themselves creators:

> Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us—for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto.[24]

[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Ibid., Bk. I, sec. 22.
[23] Nietzsche, *The Gay Science,* Bk. I, sec. 125.
[24] Ibid.

To become like God is to assume the creativity of "the Creator." Becoming our own value creators is the aesthetic, or better artistic, response to the crisis of nihilism. I believe the creative response is the best response.

Passive nihilists despair that they cannot find any fixed and final values anywhere. They are weak, exhausted, and life denying. The active, complete nihilist may escape nihilism altogether by becoming strong, enthusiastic, and life affirming by taking upon themselves the joys of value creation and self-creation previously assigned to "the Creator."

Morality is not given; it is created to oblige and obligate human purposes. Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* not only exposes the contingency of the construction of Western morality, but the secondary will to power it serves.[25] For Nietzsche, morality lay in obeying laws of our own nature, creating new laws of self-control, then recreating them when they fail to serve us well by inhibiting our growth.

Nietzsche's empirical naturalism is positively disposed toward the sciences, although he stridently rejected logical positivism and the like. For him, scientific knowledge is not given; the laws of nature are not discovered. Knowledge is created to satisfy finite human purposes arising from being participants in the affairs of existence, which is not to say it lacks objective constraint. Any artists must know the limit of her materials. Nietzsche's *Gay Science* is a defense of a naturalistic, empirical, pluralistic, perspectival science that aids the life affirming needs, desires, and purposes of those that create it and use it as an instrument of creation. Nietzsche does not question the objectivity of truth, only the claim that truth is the supreme *value* for humankind. Nietzsche held the classical ideal of philosophy as love (i.e., *philo*) of the wisdom (*sophia*) that lies beyond knowledge. The value of knowledge lies in serving wisdom and the sagacious creation of values.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche offers his ideal image of

[25] For Dewey's application of the genetic method to morality see, "The Evolutionary Method As Applied To Morality" (MW 2: 3-38). He uses the word "genetic" or the phrase "genetic method" over two dozen times in this essay.

the *übermensch* as a joyful, life-affirming, disciplined, determined, strong, agile, and constant creator and re-creator of values obsessed with the artistic-aesthetic activities expressing his will to power. [26] When in "On Truth And Lie in an Non-Moral Sense," Nietzsche writes, "What, then, is truth? A mobile army of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms" the *übermensch* commands the regiments.[27] While there is no self-foundation, there is self-assertion and creation, including self-creation, and above all an exercise of individual will to power.

Discovering Dewey

I read Nietzsche "avocationally" in the evening and weekends during the two years of odd jobs that occupied me between taking my doctorate and beginning a two-year stint as a junior investigator on an NSF grant in mathematical logic. I had come to intellectually accept the individualistic will to power version of the aesthetic solution to nihilism, although it did not accord well with my own sensibilities. I was a wavering, although complete and active nihilist when I discovered Dewey.

One day in the fall of my first year on the grant, I causally pulled a copy of the original 1925 *Experience and Nature* off the shelf in the department library where I am sure it had lain long before I arrived in graduate school eight years earlier. I am not sure why I grabbed the book; however, it quickly captured my attention as I began to read the "Introduction"[28] which I still prefer to the revised "Introduction" of the 1929 version. As best I can remember, here is what seized me at the time

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[26] For a devastating critique of "the will to power," see MW: 14: 97ff. Dewey remarks, "In the beginning, this is hardly more than a name for the quality of all activity" (MW 14: 97). Dewey is especially interested in creative activity: "Activity is creative in so far as it moves to its own enrichment as activity, that is, bringing along with itself a release of further activities" (MW: 14: 99). The aim of creative activity is vital to the aim of education and life.

[27] Nietzsche, "On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense" in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 146.

[28] See Dewey, LW 1: 365-392.

My first undergraduate degree was in neurophysiological psychology. It included a course on human perception that taught me the world of objects is a hypothesis constructed (in the case of sight) from an electromagnetic event transmitted to our brain by a electro-chemical process where it was assembled under the influence of physical, biological, and cultural conditions. Hence, perceptual objects and their relations are contingent falsifiable constructions. This course drove me stumbling into philosophy.[29] I guessed quickly Dewey was treating experience phenomenologically, although not transcendentally.[30] When I got to the fourth paragraph, I was riveted for I understood exactly what Dewey was about:

> There are two avenues of approach to the goal of philosophy. We may begin with experience in gross, experience in its primary and crude forms, and by means of its distinguishing features and its distinctive trends, note something of the constitution of the world which generates and maintains it. Or, we may begin with refined selective products, the most authentic statements of commended methods of science, and work from them back to the primary facts of life. The two methods differ in starting point and direction, but not in objective or eventual content. Those who start with coarse, everyday experience must bear in mind the findings of the most competent knowledge, and those who start from the latter must somehow journey back to the homely facts of daily existence.[31]

I would soon learn Dewey was introducing his empirical denotative method, which Thomas M. Alexander rightly calls his philosophical

[29] I was required to take the sophomore introduction to philosophy course my first semester of graduate school. I received a "C" on my first paper in this course.

[30] My hopeful suspicions were soon confirmed when later Dewey writes, "experience for philosophy is method not distinctive subject-matter" (LW 1: 371). Experience is not a distinctive subject-matter, although we may designate distinctive subject matters within it by applying the denotative method.

[31] Dewey LW 1: 366.

method.[32]

My course in perception eventually led to a dissertation for a doctorate in the history and philosophy of science and mathematical logic titled: "*Geometry as a Source of Theory-Ladenness in Early Modern Physics.*"[33] The history of science indicates theories not only explain phenomena, they determine data selection. The result when done well is a virtuous circle of continuous and contingent construction, testing, confirmation, falsification (Peirce was in my dissertation), and revision.[34] I realized immediately that what Dewey is depicting above is how to carefully trace the up and down pathway of construction and criticism leading to revisions of our constructions. Later I would learn this was a philosophy of reconstruction.

My dissertation confirmed my belief first acquired in my perception class that humans create the world of objects and such, including scientific objects, although there are objective constraints because we do not create *ex nihilo*. One may make an infinite number of things from a block of clay, but one cannot make anything they like, although creative possibilities arise with emergent skill, techniques, tools, and warranted assertions.

Reading Nietzsche expanded my insights regarding the human creation of meaning and value. There are no meanings and values without meaning and value makers. Consider the following passage through a meaning and value creating interpretative lens:

> But the history of thought shows how easy it is for them [the scientific practitioners] to forget that science is after all an art, a matter of perfected skill in conducting inquiry; while it reveals that those who are not directly engaged in the use of this art readily take science to be something finished, absolute in itself, instead of the result of a certain

[32] Thomas M. Alexander, *The Human Eros: Eco-ontology and the Aesthetics of Existence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), p. 54ff. The denotative method like Dewey's logical instrumentalism is an instance of genetic method.

[33] For a Deweyan version of value-ladenness, see Putnam (2002).

[34] Later in the 1925 "Introduction," Dewey concedes: "Inevitably our argument travels in a circle and comes back to where we started" (LW 1: 378).

> technique.[35]

For me then and now this is a statement of gay science. What I thought this Dewey was saying above was later confirmed in chapter 9, "Experience, Nature and Art" by such passages as this one:

> But if modern tendencies are justified in putting art and creation first, then the implications of this position should be avowed and carried through. It would then be seen that science is an art, that art is practice . . . . When this perception dawns, it will be a commonplace that art—the mode of activity that is charged with meanings capable of immediately enjoyed possession—is the complete culmination of nature, and that "science" is properly a handmaiden that conducts natural events to this happy issue.[36]

Putting art first is the solution to nihilism. Science is the art of creating warranted assertions serviceable to other arts.[37] Those that read Dewey scientistically are simply mistaken.

In the very next paragraph of *Experience and Nature*, I encountered the following happy convergence of primary phenomenology and phenomenological analysis sans the transcendental: "But coarse and vital experience is Protean; a thing of moods and tenses. To seize and report it is the task of an artist as well as of an informed technician."[38] Art, including the arts of the technosciences, perform all the functions claimed for *a priori* transcendental structures.[39]

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[35] Dewey LW 1: 366.

[36] Dewey LW 1: 268-269.

[37] Dewey says, "The idea is, in short, art and a work of art. As a work of art, it directly liberates subsequent action and makes it more fruitful in a creation of more meanings and more perceptions" (LW 1: 278). We may say the same for our entire mathematico-logical arrangement of kinds, concepts, logical structures, and such.

[38] Dewey, LW 1: 367.

[39] Of course, in the radical empiricism Dewey shares with William James, relations, including temporal relations, as well a relata are experienced.

It was pleasing when later in the 1925 "Introduction," Dewey puts even gay science in its place: "Science will then be of interest as one of the phases of human experience, but intrinsically no more so than magic, myth, politics, painting, poetry and penitentiaries."[40] Gay science should serve not enslave the creative mind. In the 1929 "Introduction," Dewey indicates,

> [T]he great vice of philosophy is an arbitrary "intellectualism" . . . By 'intellectualism' as an indictment is meant the theory that all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter, all nature, is, in principle, to be reduced and transformed till it is defined in terms identical with the characteristics presented by refined objects of science as such.[41]

A bit later in the revised "Introduction," he adds: "When intellectual experience and its material are taken to be primary, the cord that binds experience and nature is cut."[42] Transcendent (e.g., Plato, Gödel, Russell, *etc.*) and transcendental (e.g., Kant, Heidegger, Derrida, etc.) philosophy cuts the cord. Pragmatism puts modern philosophy's obsession with epistemology in its proper place.

Outside the intellectual (e.g., categories, concepts, subjects, and their predicables) resides such matters as immediate anoetic experience on one side and wisdom on the other. Dewey's phenomenology "indicates that *being* and *having* things in ways other than knowing them, in ways never identical with knowing them, exist, and are preconditions of reflection and knowledge."[43] "All cognitive experience," Dewey continues in his 1925 "Introduction," "must start from and must terminate in being and having things in just such unique, irreparable and compelling ways."[44] Dewey also affirms "the old saying that philosophy is love of wisdom, of wisdom

[40] Dewey LW 1: 369.
[41] Dewey LW 1: 28.
[42] Dewey LW 1: 29.
[43] Dewey LW 1: 377.
[44] Dewey LW 1: 378.

which is not knowledge and which nevertheless cannot be without knowledge."[45] A God could be both omniscient and a fool.

Something else about Dewey's 1925 "Introduction" captivated me. Like Nietzsche, Dewey is a perspectival empirical naturalist that knows there is no pre-given cosmic aim, unity, or true Being:

> The operation of choice is, I suppose, inevitable in any enterprise into which reflection enters. It is not in itself falsifying. Deception lies in the fact that its presence is concealed, disguised, denied. An empirical method finds and points to the operation of choice as it does to any other event. Thus it protects us from conversion of eventual functions into antecedent existence: a conversion that may be said to be *the* philosophic fallacy, whether it be performed in behalf of mathematical subsistences, esthetic essences, the purely physical order of nature, or God.[46]

This passage stridently opposes classical metaphysics. Aims, unities, or true Being (e.g., eternal, immutable essences) are eventual artistic functions of human creative action. We make meaning and value endlessly in service to our privations and purposes without assurance of success.

By the time I finished reading *Experience and Nature*, I was convinced that like Nietzsche only more extensively and systematically, Dewey is a champion of the genetic method, although he eventually came to prefer the "compound word 'genetic – functional' to describe what I regard as the proper method of philosophy."[47] Within his genetic–functional method, traits, natural kinds, linguistic meanings, essences, are all subfunctions we creatively construct from antecedent existence. For instance, "The name objects will be reserved for subject-matter so far as it has been produced and ordered in settled form by means of inquiry;

[45] Dewey LW 1: 305
[46] Dewey LW 1: 389.
[47] Dewey LW 14: 147.

proleptically, objects are the objectives of inquiry."[48] What Dewey says about "objects," and by implication all onto-theology, applies equally well to all of the other subfunctions of logic including its norms (i.e., values), which are themselves the falsifiable, contingent consequences of prior inquiry. Of course, it also applies to cosmic aims, unity, and true Being.

Having read the 1925 "Introduction" I moved quickly to complete the book, although I found myself often having to stop, put it down, and walk about. Besides the magnificence of chapter 9, chapters 2, "Existence as Precarious and as Stable" and 5, "Nature, Communication and Meaning" especially satisfied my existential cravings. For those that can accept it, the following propels them at least as far as complete active nihilism:

> The stablest thing we can speak of is not free from conditions set to it by other things. That even the solid earth mountains, the emblems of constancy, appear and disappear like the clouds is an old theme of moralists and poets. The fixed and unchanged being of the Democritean atom is now reported by inquirers to possess some of the traits of his non-being, and to embody a temporary equilibrium in the economy of nature's compromises and adjustments. A thing may endure *secula seculorum* and yet not be everlasting; it will crumble before the gnawing tooth of time, as it exceeds a certain measure. Every existence is an event.[49]

Dewey is rejecting the classical metaphysics of substance (i.e., *eidos*, *ousia*, *arche*, *telos*, *entelecheia*) throughout *Experience and Nature*. He had long held such a perspective.[50]

The following also from chapter 2 became the topic of my second published paper.[51]

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[48] Dewey LW 12: 122.

[49] Dewey LW 1: 63.

[50] James W. Garrison, "John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, and the Metaphysics of Presence." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 35, No. 2, 346-372.

[51] James W. Garrison, "Dewey and the Empirical Unity of Opposites." *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 21 No. 4, 549-561.

> As against this common identification of reality with what is sure, regular and finished, experience in unsophisticated forms gives evidence of a different world and points to a different metaphysics. We live in a world which is an impressive and irresistible mixture of sufficiencies, tight completenesses, order, recurrences which make possible prediction and control, and singularities, ambiguities, uncertain possibilities, processes going on to consequences as yet indeterminate. They are mixed not mechanically but vitally like the wheat and tares of the parable. We may recognize them separately but we cannot divide them, for unlike wheat and tares they grow from the same root. Qualities have defects as necessary conditions of their excellencies; the instrumentalities of truth are the causes of error; change gives meaning to permanence and recurrence makes novelty possible. A world that was wholly risky would be a world in which adventure is impossible, and only a living world can include death. Such facts have been celebrated by thinkers like Heracleitus and Lao-tze.[52]

The primordial existential task for those that wish to live long, lovely, and meaningful lives requires creatively using the relatively stable and slow moving events of existence to prevail over the relatively precarious. If there are no eternal immutable values, there is yet delight in making ones that endure.

Chapter 5 contains a clue to the superiority of Dewey's response to nihilism that I comprehended upon first reading, but would have to do a good deal more work to adequately appreciate. We begin with the following crucial distinction between antecedent existence, socially constructed linguistic meaning, and equally socially constructed logical essences: "Yet there is a natural bridge that joins the gap between existence and essence; namely communication, language, discourse."[53] The evolving existential

[52] Dewey LW 1: 47.
[53] Dewey LW 1: 133.

event called "human nature" creates meaning, essence, and value from the other evolving existential events. This participant stance implies other events may also use us. The philosophic fallacy arises when we assume that the products of our creation exist antecedent to language and inquiry.

Dewey's philosophy of language contributes substantially to the superiority of his solution to the problem of nihilism: "Primarily meaning is intent and intent is not personal in a private and exclusive sense."[54] Chapter 5 is an extended argument for the social construction of meaning that resembles that of the later Wittgenstein.[55] Dewey claims,

> Language is specifically a mode of interaction of at least two beings, a speaker and a hearer; it presupposes an organized group to which these creatures belong, and from whom they have acquired their habits of speech. It is therefore a relationship, not a particularity. This consideration alone condemns traditional nominalism.[56]

A meaning is a bounded universal shared by at least two people. Dewey devastates Nietzsche's nominalism. All meaning is social and the social gives rise to mental functioning. "Mind is seen to be a function of social interactions:" hence, a "genuine character of natural events when these attain the stage of widest and most complex interaction with one another.[57] Similar remarks hold for the social nature of the self, although Dewey's friend and Chicago colleague George Herbert Mead does a much better job of working out the details. The social nature of the mind and self takes us

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[54] Dewey LW 1: 142.

[55] See M. Medina, "In Defense of Pragmatic Contextualism: Wittgenstein and Dewey On Meaning and Agreement. *The Philosophical Forum,* Vol. XXXV, No. 3, 341-369. See also W.V.O. Quine, "Ontological Relativity" in *Ontological Relativity and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969) pp. 26-68. See also Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1979).

[56] Dewey LW 1: 145.

[57] Dewey LW 1: 6-7.

beyond Nietzsche's nominalistic ideal of a lonely self-absorbed monster of creation, especially self-creation, exercising "his" will to power. Self-creation is always social self-creation. The selfish self-creation of the übermensch along with his lesser cousins Rorty's ironist and Foucault's dandy is simply a mistake.[58]

However, Dewey did not de-emphasize the importance of individuality, far from it. For him, individuality is a task of social self-creation: "Freedom or individuality, in short, is not an original possession or gift. It is something to be achieved, to be wrought out."[59] Dewey thought individuals had a unique potential that society should strive to educate such that each could make their unique contribution to society. This notion of moral equality celebrates incommensurable one-time-only qualitative individuality. It is so radical Dewey argues that society may not know it needs the function until the individual that can perform it arrives.[60] This is part of Dewey's democratic pluralism discussed in the next section. Nietzsche despised democracy.

Dewey thinks "the social, in spite of whatever may be said regarding the temporal and spatial limitation of its manifestations, furnishes philosophically the inclusive category."[61] He repeats this conclusion near the end of the essay: "I do not say that the social as we know it *is* the whole, but I do emphatically suggest that it is the widest and richest manifestation of the whole accessible to our observation."[62] Social transactions emerge from physical and organic transactions, although they are not reducible to them. It is only through the social that language and meaning emerge.[63] Even the

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[58] See my 1998 article, "Dewey, Foucault, and Self-Creation." *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, Vol. 30, no 2, 1-134.

[59] Dewey LW 2: 61.

[60] See my 2012 article, "Individuality, Equality, and Creative Democracy—The Task Before Us." *American Journal of Education*, Vol. 118, No. 3, 369-379.

[61] Dewey LW 3: 45.

[62] Dewey LW 3: 53.

[63] Dewey thought only human beings were linguistic, hence capable of constructing meanings, essences, and values. There is considerable evidence other primates are also linguistic. Kanzi and some of his close relatives may be linguistic. If so, Kanzi acquired language by taking the attitude of others in a hybrid Bonobo-Human community of practice. The philosophical theory behind this community

übermensch exercising his individual creative will to power is socially "wrought out." By the time I had finished reading the original 1925 version of *Experience and Nature*, I was convinced Dewey offered a better because more social artistic-aesthetic solution to my nihilistic crisis.

Some Other Things I Have Learned about the Aesthetic Solution from Studying Dewey

I still believe Dewey's solution to the crisis of nihilism excels that proffered by Nietzsche. This section fills out a few more details regarding such an assertion. I begin with Dewey's magnificent essay, "Construction and Criticism," which I would retitle 'Construction, Criticism, and Self-Creation" for many reasons one of which is its masterful use of a reference to a passage from Emerson's "Self-Reliance":

> A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within," and "Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another.[64]

A great deal of the art of student centered teaching resides in detecting our student's "gleam of light."[65] After Schopenhauer, Emersion is perhaps the most important influence on Nietzsche's

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derives from Wittgenstein, but is entirely compatible with a Deweyan account (see Segerdahl *et. al.*, 2005).

[64] Dewey LW 5: 139.

[65] See James W. Garrison, Review of *The Gleam of Light* by Naoko Saito. *Teachers College Record*, 1650-1655.

thinking.[66]

However, my primary interest in this essay involves the opening paragraph:

> I have used the word construction rather than creation because it seems less pretentious. But what I mean by it is the creative mind, the mind that is genuinely productive in its operations. We are given to associating creative mind with persons regarded as rare and unique, like geniuses. But every individual is in his own way unique.[67]

I wish Dewey had been more pretentious. If scholars were to read Dewey's philosophy of construction and reconstruction as a philosophy of creation and re-creation the aesthetic response to nihilism would be readily recognizable.

Dewey thought creativity everyone's prerogative. Following Emerson, Nietzsche thought creativity only the special privilege of geniuses. "Each individual that comes into the world is a new beginning;" Dewey believed, "the universe itself is, as it were, taking a fresh start in him and trying to do something, even if on a small scale, that it has never done before."[68] This claim leads directly to Dewey's commitment to pluralistic communicative democracy and unique potentiality already discussed. While the details of Dewey's democratic thought are immensely important in filling out exactly how his solution to the crisis of nihilism surpasses Nietzsche's, it is sufficiently well known as not to detain us on this occasion.

Nietzsche goes boldly beyond good and evil, a place many consider Dewey far too timid to venture; the many are mistaken:

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[66] See Kaufmann's "Introduction" to Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, pp. 7-13. The original version of *The Gay Science* included an epigraph from Emerson. Kaufmann argues that Nietzsche may even have derived the idea of gay science from Emerson. Dewey's own reading of Emerson is quite compatible with Nietzsche's in this regard (see MW 3: 184-192). Significantly, Dewey draws democratic inspiration from Emerson whereas Nietzsche does not.

[67] Dewey LW 5: 127.

[68] Ibid.

> The idea and the practice of morality are saturated with conceptions that stem from praise and blame, reward and punishment. Mankind is divided into sheep and goats, the vicious and virtuous, the law-abiding and criminal, the good and bad. To be beyond good and evil is an impossibility for man, and yet as long as the good signifies only that which is lauded and rewarded, and the evil that which is currently condemned or outlawed, the ideal factors of morality are always and everywhere beyond good and evil. Because art is wholly innocent of ideas derived from praise and blame, it is looked upon with the eye of suspicion by the guardians of custom . . . . Yet this indifference to praise and blame because of preoccupation with imaginative experience constitutes the heart of the moral potency of art. From it proceeds the liberating and uniting power of art.[69]

Dewey's philosophy of re-creation glides easily beyond conventional good and evil. The creation of values that human beings are prepared to sacrifice themselves for takes us directly to Dewey's religious humanism.

One may read *Experience and Nature* as an expression of religious humanism. The opening paragraph of the 1929 "Introduction" identifies the title of the book with Dewey's "empirical naturalism" or "naturalistic humanism."[70] Let us quickly clear the air regarding humanism. Consider Dewey's essay, "Does Human Nature Change?" Dewey answers the question posed by his title in the first paragraph with an emphatic Yes! Like the rest of ontology for Dewey, speaking proleptically the contingent falsifiable human essence is the objective of creative collective inquiry across generations. Human nature is not an antecedent existence one may discover.

Dewey's *A Common Faith* is the fullest statement of his religious humanism. For him, "the religious" as adjectival is, as with the aesthetic, available in every domain of experience; it is a function

[69] Dewey LW 10: 351.
[70] Dewey LW 1: 10.

not a substance. Religious humanism offers "better adjustment in life and its conditions," but no cosmic aims, unity, or true Being.[71] Much of the humanism resides in the appropriate adjustment of one's self to the larger pluralistic universe (i.e., right relationship) of which we are a part, including our families and local community:

> The *whole* self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. Hence the idea of a thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected) operates only through imagination—which is one reason why this composing of the self is not voluntary in the sense of an act of special volition or resolution. An "adjustment" possesses the will rather than is its express product.[72]

The ideal of a whole self is a product of the creative imagination. It is involves faith in things unseen such as peace on earth, the end of racism, and such. Notice that while achieving such a state no doubt involves willful action it is an adjustment involving accommodating our selves to events as much as adapting events to our needs and desires. Composing our selves (i.e., self-creation) is not an act of special volition or will to power.

Faith is required to allow an imaginative unifying ideal end-in-view of our own creation vanquish us in thought, feeling, and action:

> Conviction in the moral sense signifies being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end; it signifies acknowledgment of its rightful claim over our desires and purposes. Such acknowledgment is practical, not primarily intellectual. It goes beyond evidence that can be presented to *any* possible observer.[73]

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[71] Dewey LW 9: 11
[72] Dewey LW 9: 15
[73] Ibid.

Faith may be evaluated by the extent of our willingness to make sacrifices while striving with creative intelligence to overcome obstacles in securing the ideal.[74] Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. died for his dream.[75]

Controversially, Dewey expressed his religious humanism in part by asserting: "It is this *active* relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God.' I would not insist that the name *must* be given."[76] In a letter to army private Charles E. Witzell, Dewey clarifies his stance:

> I have taught many years and I don't think that any of my students would say that I set out to undermine anyone's faith. . . . The lectures making up the book were meant for those whose religious beliefs had been abandoned, and who were given the impression that their abandonment left them without any religious beliefs whatever. I wanted to show them that religious values are not the monopoly of any one class or sect and are still open to them.[77]

In the following, Dewey expresses to his friend Max C. Otto his own sense of God's existential status in his typically unpretentious manner:

> For I feel the gods are pretty dead, tho I suppose I ought to know that || however, to be somewhat more philosophical in the matter, if atheism means simply not being a theist, then of course Im an atheist. But the popular if not the etymological significance of the word is much wider. It has come to signify it seems to me a denial of all ideal values as having the right to control material ones. And in that sense

[74] Dewey LW 9: 19.

[75] King also had an intelligent method he used as a means to his ideal end-in-view—Henry David Thoreau's civil disobedience. Mohandas K. Gandhi had already successfully tested it in India.

[76] LW 9: 34.

[77] Dewey, Correspondence, Volume 3 [1943.06.05 (22265)]).

> Im not an atheists and dont want to be labelled [sic.] one.[78]

Dewey's religious humanism requires the creation of contingent "ideal values" (for example, pluralistic, communicative, social democracy) we may then seek to serve and to which we may sacrifice.

After his early works (1882-1898), Dewey expresses little interest in "religion." Many think he wrote *A Common Faith* only for those that have abandoned traditional belief, but nonetheless felt religious. Surely, his letter to private Witzell suggests such a reading. If so, then Dewey is mostly appealing to people like me. I acknowledge my reading not only of Dewey's philosophy of religiosity, but of his entire corpus is idiosyncratic with regard to my personal existential concerns. I have spent a lifetime developing an aesthetic solution to the crisis of nihilism adequate for my purposes that I could confidently offer to others when their highest values transvalue themselves. However, mine is only one motive for studying Dewey. So, in the spirit of pluralism I ask again: Why do you study John Dewey?

[78] Dewey, Correspondence, Volume 2 [1935.01.14 (08049)]).

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