

Meaning Is More Than Words and Deeper Than Concepts

The central thesis of this book is that what we call “mind” and what we call “body” are not two things, but rather aspects of one organic process, so that all our meaning, thought, and language emerge from the aesthetic dimensions of this embodied activity. Chief among those aesthetic dimensions are qualities, images, patterns of sensorimotor processes, and emotions. For at least the past three decades, scholars and researchers in many disciplines have piled up arguments and evidence for the embodiment of mind and meaning. However, the implications of this research have not entered public consciousness, and so the denial of mind/body dualism is still a highly provocative claim that most people find objectionable and even threatening. Coming to grips with your embodiment is one of the most profound philosophical tasks you will ever face. Acknowledging that every aspect of human being is grounded in specific forms of bodily engagement with an environment requires a far-reaching rethinking of who and what we are, in a way that is largely at odds with many of our inherited Western philosophical and religious traditions.

To see what this reconceptualization means, consider this: The best biology, psychology, cognitive neuroscience, and phenomenology available today teach us that our human forms of experience, consciousness, thought, and communication would not exist without our brains, operating as an organic part of our functioning bodies, which, in turn, are actively engaged with the specific kinds of physical, social, and cultural environments that humans dwell in. Change your brain, your body, or

INTRODUCTION

your environments in nontrivial ways, and you will change how you experience your world, what things are meaningful to you, and even who you are.

THE ILLUSION OF DISEMBODED MIND

Contrast this embodiment hypothesis with our commonsense view of mind. Although most people never think about it very carefully, they live their lives assuming and acting according to a set of dichotomies that distinguish mind from body, reason from emotion, and thought from feeling. Mind/body dualism is so deeply embedded in our philosophical and religious traditions, in our shared conceptual systems, and in our language that it can seem to be an inescapable fact about human nature. One pervasive manifestation of this dualism in many of our ethical, political, and religious practices is the assumption that we possess a radically free will, which is assumed to exist apart from our bodies and to be capable of controlling them. We postulate a "higher" self (the rational part) that must seek to control the "lower" self (body, desire, emotion). We assume that each of us has an inner core (a "true self" or a "soul") that transcends our bodily, situated self. We buy into the notion of thinking as a pure, conceptual, body-transcending activity, even if we realize that no thinking occurs without a brain.

This pervasive illusion of disembodied mind, thought, and meaning is beautifully explored and criticized by the American poet Billy Collins, who unmask our dream of pure thought by showing that we can think and imagine only through our bodies.

PURITY

My favorite time to write is in the late afternoon,
weekdays, particularly Wednesdays.

This is how I go about it:

I take a fresh pot of tea into my study and close the door.
Then I remove my clothes and leave them in a pile
as if I had melted to death and my legacy consisted of only
a white shirt, a pair of pants and a pot of cold tea.

Then I remove my flesh and hang it over a chair.

I slide it off my bones like a silken garment.

I do this so that what I write will be pure,
completely rinsed of the carnal,
uncontaminated by the preoccupations of the body.

Finally I remove each of my organs and arrange them
on a small table near the window.

I do not want to hear their ancient rhythms
when I am trying to tap out my own drumbeat.

Now I sit down at the desk, ready to begin.

I am entirely pure: nothing but a skeleton at a typewriter.

I should mention that sometimes I leave my penis on.

I find it difficult to ignore the temptation.

Then I am a skeleton with a penis at a typewriter.

In this condition I write extraordinary love poems,
most of them exploiting the connection between sex and death.

I am concentration itself: I exist in a universe
where there is nothing but sex, death, and typewriting.

After a spell of this I remove my penis too.

Then I am all skull and bones typing into the afternoon.

Just the absolute essentials, no flounces.

Now I write only about death, most classical of themes
in language light as the air between my ribs.

Afterward, I reward myself by going for a drive at sunset.

I replace my organs and slip back into my flesh
and clothes. Then I back the car out of the garage
and speed through woods on winding country roads,
passing stone walls, farmhouses, and frozen ponds,
all perfectly arranged like words in a famous sonnet.

Ah, if only mind could float free of its carnal entanglements, thinking pure thoughts of things certain, eternal, and good. *But that is a dysfunctional dream!* It is our organic flesh and blood, our structural bones, the ancient rhythms of our internal organs, and the pulsing flow of our emotions that give us whatever meaning we can find and that shape our very thinking. Collins humorously reminds us that if we want to write great love poems (or any poems), we had better retain not just our sexual organs, but also our whole fleshy body, with all of its desires, emotions, and moods.

HOW THE BODY HIDES OUT

René Descartes, one of the most famous mind/body dualists in the Western philosophical tradition, argued that just by clear thinking, we can in-

dubitably see that mind and body are two radically different and distinct kinds of thing:

I have a complete understanding of what a body is when I think that it is merely something having extension, shape and motion, and I deny that it has anything which belongs to the nature of a mind. Conversely, I understand the mind to be a complete thing, which doubts, understands, wills, and so on, even though I deny that it has any of the attributes which are contained in the idea of a body. This would be quite impossible if there were not a real distinction between the mind and the body. (Descartes 1641/1984, 86)

Simply by knowing that I exist and seeing at the same time that absolutely nothing else belongs to my nature or essence except that I am a thinking thing, I can infer correctly that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing. It is true that I may have (or, to anticipate, that I certainly have) a body that is very closely joined to me. But nevertheless, on the one hand I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in so far as I am simply a thinking, non-extended thing; and on the other hand I have a distinct idea of body, in so far as this is simply an extended, non-thinking thing. And accordingly, it is certain that I am really distinct from my body, and can exist without it. (Descartes 1641/1984, 54)

Why should it seem so obvious to most people that mind and body are two, not one? One important reason is that our lived experience itself reinforces an apparently inescapable dualistic view of mind versus body. We don't have to work to ignore the working of our bodies. On the contrary, our bodies hide themselves from us in their very acts of making meaning and experience possible. The way we experience things appears to have a dualistic character. Ironically, it is the nature of our bodies and brains that gives rise to this experience of a split (mental plus physical) self.

Drew Leder (1990), following the groundbreaking work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962), has catalogued the many ways in which the successful functioning of our bodies requires that our bodily organs and operations recede and even hide in our acts of experiencing things in the world. One of the chief ways the body hides from our conscious awareness is a result of what Michael Polanyi (1969) called the "from-to" character of perception. All our acts of perception are directed *to* or *at* what is experienced and *away from* the body doing the perceiving. This is what phenomenologists call the *intentionality* of the mind. In Polanyi's words, "Our body is the only assembly of things known almost exclusively by relying on our awareness of them for attending to something else. . . . Every time

we make sense of the world, we rely on our tacit knowledge of impacts made by the world on our body and the complex responses of our body to these impacts" (1969, 147-48).

For example, our acts of seeing are directed toward and focused on what we see. Our intentionality seems to be directed "out there" into the world. The mechanisms of our vision are not, and cannot be, the focus of our awareness and attention. We are aware of what we see, but not of our seeing. The bodily processes hide, in order to make possible our fluid, automatic experiencing of the world. As Leder says, "It is thus possible to state a general principle: insofar as I perceive through an organ, it necessarily recedes from the perceptual field it discloses. I do not smell my nasal tissue, hear my ear, or taste my taste buds but perceive with and through such organs" (1990, 14). In a discussion of the "ecstatic body," Leder names this perceptual hiding of the body "focal disappearance" of the specific bodily organs and activities of perception.

In addition to focal disappearance of our perceptual organs, there is also a necessary "background disappearance" of other processes and activities that make perception possible, processes of which we are seldom, if ever, aware. This includes such things as the complex of bodily adjustments and movements that make it possible for a certain perception to occur. I see *with* my eyes (which undergo focal disappearance), but that seeing would be impossible without those eyes' existence in a body that makes a number of fine adjustments, such as holding the head in a certain way, keeping the body erect and pointed in a certain direction, and moving the body in ways that ensure a clear line of sight. When I reach out to pick up a cup, I am not aware of the multitude of fine motor adjustments or the ongoing cooperation of hand and eye that make it possible for me to locate and touch the handle of the cup.

Emphasizing dimensions of nonconscious bodily processes, Shaun Gallagher has usefully distinguished between our *body image*, which involves "a system of perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs pertaining to one's own body," and our *body schema*, which is "a system of sensory-motor capacities that function without awareness or the necessity of perceptual monitoring" (Gallagher 2005, 24). It is our body schema that hides from our view, even while it is what makes possible our perception, bodily movement, and kinesthetic sensibility. Our body schema is "a system of sensory-motor functions that operate below the level of self-referential intentionality. It involves a set of tacit performances—preconscious, subpersonal processes that play a dynamic role in governing posture and movement" (*ibid.*, 26). As Gallagher documents with great care and insight, it is only when some

breakdown occurs in our body schema, such as through traumatic bodily injury or a lesion to some sensorimotor area of the brain, that we even become aware that we have a body schema.

Another major type of bodily disappearance is based on the recession of the internal organs and processes throughout nearly all of our experience. Without these visceral processes performed by the respiratory, digestive, cardiovascular, urogenital, and endocrine systems, we would die, and so, in an almost trivial sense, they provide conditions for the very possibility of experience. More significantly, these systems underlie some of our most powerful experiences, even though we are almost never aware of their operations, and some of them are simply inaccessible to conscious awareness. To cite just one salient example, our emotional experience depends on complex neuronal and endocrine processes, although we typically cannot have a felt awareness of those processes. The result is that we feel a feeling, but we never feel our internal organs generating that feeling. Joseph LeDoux (2002) and his colleagues have studied the crucial role of the amygdala in the feeling of fear. The amygdala receives neural information about a certain stimulus and controls the release of hormones that create effects in many organs and systems, such as increased heartbeat, changes in respiration, and the activation of certain defense responses. We are not, of course, ever aware of the operations of our amygdala, but only of the systemic organic effects of those operations.

In short, the body does its marvelous work for the most part behind the scenes, so that we can focus on the objects of our desire and attention. We can be directed out into our world and be about the business of affecting the character of our experience so that we may survive and flourish precisely because our “recessive body” is going about its business.

The principal result of these forms of bodily disappearance is our sense that our thoughts, and even our feelings, go on somehow independent of our bodily processes. Our body-based experience reinforces our belief in disembodied thought. Leder summarizes the bodily basis of our latent Cartesianism:

It is the body's own tendency toward self-concealment that allows for the possibility of its neglect or deprecation. Our organic basis can be easily forgotten due to the reticence of the visceral processes. Intentionality can be attributed to a disembodied mind, given the self-effacement of the ecstatic body. As these disappearances particularly characterize normal and healthy functioning, forgetting about or “freeing oneself” from the body takes on a positive valuation. (Leder 1990, 69)

There are disturbing overtones to the dream of “freeing oneself from the body,” as if this would actually be a good thing to strive for! It reinforces the dangerous idea, so deeply rooted in Western culture, that purity of mind entails rising above one's bodily nature. Immanuel Kant famously argued for a “pure reason” that generates formal structures that are supposedly not based on anything empirical and thus are in no way dependent on our embodied, phenomenal selves. Kant also claimed that moral laws could issue only from “pure practical reason,” completely free of feeling, emotion, or bodily constraints. A good will, on Kant's view, is a pure will, one that rises above the demands of our bodily desires and answers only to the commands of pure moral reason. Within most Christian traditions, a person's “true” self is not of this world of the flesh, even though it must temporally dwell *within* that world. In Kantian terms, this is formulated as the view that we most essentially are rational egos—transcendent sources of judgments, spontaneous free acts, and universally binding moral imperatives.

In short, the idea of a fundamental ontological divide between mind and body—along with the accompanying dichotomies of cognition/emotion, fact/value, knowledge/imagination, and thought/feeling—is so deeply embedded in our Western ways of thinking that we find it almost impossible to avoid framing our understanding of mind and thought dualistically. The tendency of language to treat processes and events as entities reinforces our sense that mind and body must be two different types of thing, supporting two very different types of properties. For example, just asking the question “How are body and mind one, not two?” frames our whole conception of the relation dualistically, since it presupposes that two different kinds of things must somehow come together into one. Consequently, anyone who is trying to find a way to recognize the unity of what Dewey called the “body-mind” will not have the appropriate vocabulary for capturing the primordial, nonconscious unity of the human person. Even our language seems to be against us in our quest for an adequate theory of meaning and the self.

MEANING RUNS DEEPER THAN CONCEPTS AND PROPOSITIONS

In challenging our inherited mind/body dualism, my real target will be the disembodied view of meaning that typically accompanies such a dualism. According to the view of “mind” and “body” as two different substances, structures, or processes, meaning is something that belongs

first and foremost to words. Linguistic meaning (the meaning of words and sentences) is taken to be based on concepts and their capacity to be formed into sentence-like thought units that philosophers call propositions. I am going to argue that this notion of meaning, which underlies much mainstream philosophy of mind and language, is far too narrow and too shallow to capture the way things are meaningful to people. Any philosophy based on such an impoverished view of meaning is going to over-intellectualize many aspects of human meaning-making and thinking.

The dominant view of meaning and thought that I will be challenging is what I will call the conceptual-propositional theory of meaning. Here is a capsule summary of its key points:

THE CONCEPTUAL-PROPOSITIONAL THEORY OF MEANING
Sentences or utterances (and the words we use in making them) alone are what have meaning. Sentences get their meaning by expressing propositions, which are the basic units of meaning and thought. Propositions typically have a subject-predicate structure. Our language and thought are thus meaningful to the extent that they express propositions, which allow people to make assertions about the way the world is and to perform other speech acts, such as asking questions, issuing commands, pleading, joking, expressing remorse, and so on. Our capacity to grasp meanings, and our capacity for reasoning, depends on our conscious use of symbolic representations in the mind that somehow can relate to things outside the mind. These symbolic representations (usually thought of as concepts) are organized into meaningful propositional structures via formal rules of syntax, and then the propositions are organized into thoughts and arguments via formal rules of logic. According to this objectivist semantics, neither the syntactic rules, nor the logical relations, nor even the propositions themselves have any intrinsic relation to human bodies.

The key components of disembodied views that I want to challenge are the seriously mistaken claims that meaning and thought are exclusively conceptual and propositional in nature and that the apparatus of meaning, conceptualization, and reasoning is not intrinsically shaped by the body, even if these processes have to occur *in* a body. I will argue in chapter 2 that if babies are learning the meaning of things and events, and if babies are not yet formulating propositions, then meaning and understanding must involve a great deal more than the ability to create and understand propositions and their corresponding linguistic utterances. Obviously, I do not mean to deny the existence of propositional thinking, but I see it as

dependent on the nature of our embodied, immanent meaning. In short, contrary to the fundamental claim of Gottlob Frege (1892/1970), the father of modern analytic philosophy, propositions are *not* the basic units of human meaning and thought. Meaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and eventually concepts and propositions.

One popular strategy for acknowledging that there is nonpropositional meaning while still privileging the propositional is to claim a rigid dichotomy between two fundamentally different kinds of meaning: (1) descriptive (cognitive) meaning, and (2) emotive (noncognitive) meaning. Once this illusory demarcation was made, it was easy for philosophers of language like A. J. Ayer (1936) and Charles Stevenson (1944) to retain an exclusive focus on the conceptual/propositional as the only meaning that mattered for our knowledge of the world. So-called emotive meaning had no place in science or any allegedly rigorous, empirically testable modes of knowing.

I am going to argue that the cognitive/emotive dichotomy does more harm than good. It is a mistake to banish emotional aspects of meaning to the nether land of the merely emotive and then to claim that *real* meaning is cognitive meaning of the conceptual/propositional sort. Instead, I will be arguing for the central role of emotion in how we make sense of our world. There is no cognition without emotion, even though we are often unaware of the emotional aspects of our thinking.

The idea that meaning and understanding are based solely on propositional structures is problematic because it excludes (or at least hides) most of what goes into the ways we make sense of our experience. In striking contrast to this conceptual-propositional view of meaning and knowledge, a substantial body of evidence from the cognitive sciences supports the hypothesis that meaning is shaped by the nature of our bodies, especially our sensorimotor capacities and our ability to experience feelings and emotions. If we look at prelinguistic infants and at children who are learning how their world works and what things mean to them, we will find vast stretches of embodied meaning that are not conceptual and propositional in character, even though they will later make propositional thinking possible.

In the account of embodied meaning that I am developing in this book, I am using the term *meaning* in a broader sense than is typical in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of language and mind. I seek to recover most of the resources for meaning-making that are ignored in the writings of influential philosophers such as Quine, Searle, Davidson, Fodor, Rorty, and many others. In addition to the standard notion that meaning involves

the conscious entertaining of concepts and propositions, I am focusing on mostly nonconscious aspects of a person's ability to meaningfully engage their past, present, and future environments. I am proposing what I call

THE EMBODIED THEORY OF MEANING

Human meaning concerns the character and significance of a person's interactions with their environments. The meaning of a specific aspect or dimension of some ongoing experience is that aspect's connections to other parts of past, present, or future (possible) experiences. Meaning is relational. It is about how one thing relates to or connects with other things. This pragmatist view of meaning says that the meaning of a thing is its consequences for experience—how it “cashes out” by way of experience, either actual or possible experience. Sometimes our meanings are conceptually and propositionally coded, but that is merely the more conscious, selective dimension of a vast, continuous process of immanent meanings that involve structures, patterns, qualities, feelings, and emotions. An embodied view is naturalistic, insofar as it situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment. Meanings emerge “from the bottom up” through increasingly complex levels of organic activity; they are not the constructions of a disembodied mind.

The semantics of embodied meaning that is supported by recent research in the cognitive sciences provides a naturalistic perspective, one that makes no explanatory use of any alleged disembodied or “purely rational” capacities. A naturalistic theory of meaning takes as its working hypothesis the idea that all of our so-called higher cognitive faculties (e.g., of conceptualization and reasoning) recruit cognitive resources that operate in our sensorimotor experience and our monitoring of our emotions. The guiding assumption for such a naturalistic semantics is what John Dewey called a “principle of continuity.”

DEWEY'S PRINCIPLE OF CONTINUITY

The primary postulate of a naturalistic theory of logic is continuity of the lower (less complex) and the higher (more complex) activities and forms. The idea of continuity is not self-explanatory. But its meaning excludes complete rupture on one side and mere repetition of identities on the other; it precludes reduction of the “higher” to the “lower” just as it precludes complete breaks and gaps. . . . What is excluded by the postulate of continuity is the appearance upon the scene of a totally new outside force as a cause of changes that occur. (Dewey 1938/1991, 30–31)

An embodied view of meaning looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied creatures in interaction with their changing environments. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies in space, and evaluate our situation. Its principle of continuity is that the “higher” develops from the “lower,” without introducing from the outside any new metaphysical kinds.

I will be using the terms *embodied meaning* and *immanent meaning* to emphasize those deep-seated bodily sources of human meaning that go beyond the merely conceptual and propositional. Structures and dimensions of this immanent meaning are what make it possible for us to do propositional thinking. But if we reduce meaning to words and sentences (or to concepts and propositions), we miss or leave out where meaning really comes from. We end up intellectualizing human experience, understanding, and thinking, and we turn processes into static entities or properties. I will therefore be suggesting that any philosophy that ignores embodied meaning is going to generate a host of extremely problematic views about mind, thought, and language. I want to suggest, in anticipation of my arguments to come, some of the more important consequences of taking seriously a nondualistic account of mind and personal identity and recognizing the bodily basis of human meaning.

PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE BODY-MIND AND OF BODY-BASED MEANING

This fact of embodied mind has several profound consequences for who you are and how you should live your life: it denies a radical mind/body separation, sees meaning, imagination, and reason as embodied, denies radical freedom, ties reason to emotion, and requires an embodied spirituality. Here are some of the more striking implications of taking our embodiment seriously:

1. *There is no radical mind/body separation.* A person is not a mind and a body. There are not two “things” somehow mysteriously yoked together. What we call a “person” is a certain kind of bodily organism that has a brain operating within its body, a body that is continually interacting with aspects of its environments (material and social) in an ever-changing process of experience. As I will explain later, we designate certain dimensions of these ongoing experiential processes “mind” and other dimensions “body,” but we do this only reflectively and for very specific purposes that we have in trying to make sense of our experience. In short,

“mind” and “body” are merely abstracted aspects of the flow of organism-environment interactions that constitutes what we call experience. When your “body” ceases to function as a living, organic whole of coordinated activities and processes, you lose your “mind.” It doesn’t just go away somewhere and hide. Rather, it ceases to exist. If there is life after death, we can’t know what it is like, but strong neuroscientific evidence suggests that it could not involve the kind of conscious experience and meaning-making that is so distinctive of humans—unless, of course, this life after death involved the resuscitation of our human brains, bodies, and physical and social environments.

This claim is based on the idea that we are beginning to understand how our consciousness and our experience depend on our brain operating within our body and our body operating within our world, so that when our bodies cease to function, in a global, devastating fashion, we lose the capacity for experience. This realization has led many people to reject the idea of disembodied soul and life after death, and to focus instead on the importance of living rightly and well in the world as we know it.

Of course, no one could ever disprove (or prove, for that matter) the existence of a disembodied soul, which must always remain a possible hypothesis. William James, who was a pioneer in the scientific study of mind and is famous for revealing the workings of the body within our thinking and feeling, always insisted that disembodied soul must remain a real possibility. And so it must. However, such a supposition is clearly at odds with virtually all contemporary biology, neuroscience, and cognitive science. My point is that if such a soul exists, it is hard to see any way in which it could be me, or you, as we exist in our present incarnation.

2. *Meaning is grounded in our bodily experience.* If there is no disembodied mind—no transcendent soul or ego—to be the source of meaning, then what things are meaningful to us and how they are meaningful must be a result of the nature of our brains, our bodies, our environments, and our social interactions, institutions, and practices. This fact gives rise to a major problem: how does meaning emerge from a continuous process of organism-environment interactions, bottom-up, if it can’t issue top-down from some alleged pure ego? The answer to this is a story based on recent empirical research in the cognitive sciences concerning the nature of meaning and thought. I will try to tell part of this story in part 2 of this book. The core idea is that our experience of meaning is based, first, on our sensorimotor experience, our feelings, and our visceral connections to our world; and, second, on various imaginative capacities for using sensorimotor processes to understand abstract concepts. Any adequate explana-

tion of meaning must avoid attributing it to either “body” or “mind,” for then we simply reproduce the dualism that is the source of the problem in the first place.

3. *Reason is an embodied process.* Our “body” and “mind” are dimensions of the primordial, ongoing organism-environment transactions that are the locus of who and what we are. Consequently, there is no mind entity to serve as the locus of reason. What we call “reason” is neither a concrete nor an abstract *thing*, but only embodied *processes* by which our experience is explored, criticized, and transformed in inquiry. Reason is more an accomplishment of inquiry than a pre-given fact or capacity. If there is no “pure” reason, then it is necessary to explain how reason and logic grow out of our transactions in and with our environment. This, again, is a huge problem for any naturalistic account of mind. I will present evidence from the cognitive sciences that reason is tied to structures of our perceptual and motor capacities and that it is inextricably linked to feeling.

4. *Imagination is tied to our bodily processes and can also be creative and transformative of experience.* Our ability to make new meaning, to enlarge our concepts, and to arrive at new ways of making sense of things must be explained without reference to miracles, irrational leaps of thought, or blind impulse. We have to explain how our experience can grow and how the new can emerge from the old, yet without merely replicating what has gone before.

As it turns out, this may be one of the most difficult problems in all of philosophy, psychology, and science: how is novelty possible? As far as I can see, nobody has yet been able to explain how new experience emerges. The problem is that if we try to give a causal explanation of novel experience or novel thought, these come out looking causally determined, rather than creative and imaginative. An embodied theory of meaning will suggest only that new meaning is not a miracle but rather arises from, and remains connected to, preexisting patterns, qualities, and feelings.

5. *There is no radical freedom.* Most people believe that human will possesses absolute freedom, which is why we think we can hold people responsible for their actions. But if there is no transcendent self, no disembodied ego, to serve as the agent of free choice, then what sense can we make of real choice, or of moral responsibility for our actions? This problem has plagued all naturalistic accounts of mind, from David Hume to William James to Antonio Damasio. We need a view of choice that is consistent with cognitive neuroscience and its insistence on the embodiment of mind and yet which doesn’t make a shambles of our notions of moral responsibility.

6. *Reason and emotion are inextricably intertwined.* This claim directly challenges the received wisdom that reason and emotion are separate, independent capacities, one disembodied (i.e., reason) and the other embodied (i.e., emotion). The reason/emotion dichotomy is as basic a metaphysical dualism as you will find anywhere, and it has profound consequences for our view of thought and knowledge. It fosters the illusion of dispassionate reason—reason purified of any bodily contamination by feelings. It is extremely difficult to rethink this pernicious dichotomy, because our own experience appears to tell us that reason and emotion are distinct. I will present empirical evidence that emotions lie at the heart of our capacity to conceptualize, reason, and imagine.

7. *Human spirituality is embodied.* For many people, their sense of spirituality is tied to notions of transcendence—of the soul, of spirit, of value, of God. The traditional notion of transcendence is what I call “vertical transcendence,” because it requires rising above one’s embodied situation in the world to engage a higher realm that is assumed to have a radically different character from that of the world in which we normally dwell. This other world has to be *radically* other (i.e., nonphysical, infinite, trans-temporal), because otherwise it would not solve the basic human problems that stem from the fact of human finiteness—problems that the existentialist theologian Paul Tillich (1957) identified as those of meaninglessness, alienation, injustice, sickness, and ultimately death. If, as the traditional view asserts, our body is the locus of our dwelling in this world and thus the locus of our finiteness, then our body must somehow be transcended if there are to be any satisfactory answers to the human condition of limitation, helplessness, and finiteness.

By contrast, if we are inescapably and gloriously embodied, then our spirituality cannot be grounded in otherworldliness. It must be grounded in our relation to the human and more-than-human world that we inhabit. It must involve a capacity for horizontal (as opposed to vertical) transcendence, namely, our ability both to transform experience and to be transformed ourselves by something that transcends us: the whole ongoing, ever-developing natural process of which we are a part. Such a view of embodied spirituality may well support an environmental, ecological spirituality, but it is hardly likely to satisfy anyone for whom the only acceptable answer to our finiteness is the infinite.

What these seven consequences reveal is that acknowledging the profound truth of our embodiment calls into question several key components of what many people think it means to be a person. It is not surprising, therefore, that once most people really come to understand what an

embodied conception of mind entails, they are going to be upset about it. Much of what they hold dear is at stake—their view of mind, meaning, thought, knowledge, science, morality, religion, and politics. That is why it is not easy to work out the details of an alternative view in a way that is existentially satisfying to most people.

In this book, I focus mostly on exploring the aesthetics of the body-mind—how meaning grows out of our organic transactions with our environment. I try to show why disembodiment is *not* purity of thought but would, in fact, amount to the loss of all the means we possess for making sense of things. As the Collins poem suggests, our bodies are the very condition of our meaning-making and creativity. If a man were reduced to only a skeleton with a penis at a typewriter, then he would, of course, write poems only about sex and death. Remove his penis, and the remaining skeleton can imagine only death, like the air passing through its bare ribs. Our task is not to supersede the body but to embrace it, to learn how it allows us to have meaning, and to nurture it as the locus of our world. We need an aesthetics of embodied meaning. We need to face the tough questions about where meaning comes from, how abstract concepts are possible, what mind is, and whether we have free choice. Such questions define our task, which is to plumb the meaning of the body—both how the body means and what embodiment means for our lives.

ment with the world, and they are not merely noncognitive approvals or disapprovals, as the logical empiricists and emotivists asserted. Emotions are key components of complex processes of assessment, evaluation, and transformation. As such, they are integral to our ability to grasp the meaning of a situation and to act appropriately in response to it. Most of this ongoing processing and action is never consciously entertained, but it is nonetheless *meaningful* to us, insofar as it constitutes an important part of our maintaining a workable relation to our surroundings.

The long-standing prejudice in Western philosophy against granting cognitive meaning to emotional experience is due primarily to the widespread belief that emotions are not conceptual. However, once we stop thinking of concepts as abstract, disembodied entities and see them rather as bodily processes of discrimination and relation, we can recognize the crucial role of emotions in the meaning of situations, persons, objects, and events. The fact that our current vocabulary is notoriously inadequate to the complexities and nuances of emotional life is not a sufficient reason for denying that emotions give us meaning. As we will see in chapter 5, emotions even play a crucial role in our reasoning.

The Grounding of Meaning in the Qualities of Life

Our world is a world of qualities—qualities of things, people, situations, and relationships. Before and beneath reflective thinking and inquiry, our world stands forth qualitatively. I know my world by the distinctive light, warmth, and fragrant breeze of a spring day, just as much as I know it by the driving rain, cold winds, and pervading darkness of a stormy winter afternoon. I know you by the qualities of your distinctive eyes, your mouth, your voice, your smell, the character of your walk, and how you hold yourself. All of my thinking emerges within this qualitative world, to which it must return if it is to have any effect on my life.

The first stanza of William Stafford's poem "You Reading This, Be Ready" calls us to an awareness of the qualities that constitute our world:

Starting here, what do you want to remember?
How sunlight creeps along a shining floor?
What scent of old wood hovers, what softened
sound from outside fills the air?¹

Can you smell the scent of old wood or see (and feel) the sunlight creeping along the floor? Qualities like these make up the fabric of our everyday experience. Unfortunately, most of us are notoriously bad at thinking about, and thinking by means of, these qualities. We have hundreds of

1. I am indebted to Vincent Colapietro for bringing this beautiful poem to my attention.

words for them, such as *blue*, *warm*, *silky*, *abrupt*, *tense*, *fearful*, *flowing*, and *bright*, and we have many metaphorical extensions of these terms, such as *sharp* cheese, a *high* note, and a *murky* argument. But if someone asked us what such terms really mean, we probably couldn't tell them in any clear manner. How is a "sharp" note sharp? What makes a "bright" trumpet blare sound bright? Most of us don't have a clue how to answer such a question, and yet we more or less successfully manage to communicate with others and to interact cooperatively with them using a vast vocabulary of such quality terms.

The problem with qualities is that they are about how something shows itself to us, about how something *feels* to us, and they seem to involve more than can be structurally discriminated by concepts. Qualities are not reducible to the abstractions by which we try to distinguish them. Consequently, to the extent that philosophies of mind and language focus only on conceptual and propositional structures and the inferences supported by those structures, they lack an adequate way to investigate the role of qualities in meaning and thought. It is no surprise, therefore, that qualities, just like emotions, are typically underappreciated in philosophical theories of meaning. Because we cannot capture qualitative experience in propositions with subject-predicate structure, we tend to downplay the importance of qualities as part of meaning. We mistakenly regard something that is only a conceptual limitation (i.e., our inability to adequately conceptualize qualities) as though it were actually a limitation on our experience of meaning itself. Many recent philosophical discussions of cognitive science make reference to the problem of *qualia*, which are felt qualities, like the blueness of a blue sky or the silkiness of a silk dress or the smell of summer lilacs. The problem is that qualia cannot be reduced to conceptual structures or to functional states of an organism. This fact is supposed to be a showstopper for any attempt to give a naturalistic account of concepts, meaning, and experience.

According to the view I am developing, meaning is grounded in bodily experience; it arises from our feeling of qualities, sensory patterns, movements, changes, and emotional contours. Meaning is not limited only to those bodily engagements, but it always starts with and leads back to them. Meaning depends on our experiencing and assessing the qualities of situations.

It is frustrating, therefore, that we have almost no adequate way to describe and explain what qualities are or how they shape our lives. Phenomenology sought to remedy this grave defect by taking as its chief task the articulation of the character of so-called lived experience. But even

phenomenology has a hard time with the qualitative dimension, for it is easier to describe the *structural* aspects of experience than it is to describe felt qualities. The tendency is thus always to look for the constituting structures of experience, at the expense of the actual experience of qualities. After all, what can you possibly *say* philosophically about the quality of a red wheelbarrow covered with rain?

so much depends
upon

a red wheel
barrow

glazed with rain
water

beside the white
chickens.

Any experience will be an ongoing flow of qualities and qualitative changes. In this chapter, I want to focus on the nature of qualities and how they situate, give meaning to, and guide the development of our experience and thought.

THE "OH" OF WONDER AND THE "GOOD" OF ORGANIZATION: DEWEY'S PERVASIVE QUALITIES OF EXPERIENCES

Two of the greatest monuments to a philosophical appreciation of felt qualities are William James's *Principles of Psychology* (1890/1950) and John Dewey's several treatments in various books and articles of what he called the "pervasive" or "tertiary" qualities of situations. Even though James's work preceded Dewey's, and even though Dewey saw himself as building on James, I want to begin with Dewey in this chapter and then, in the next chapter, work back to parts of James's view that lead us to the emergence of thought in felt qualities. I do this in pursuit of resources for developing a deeper appreciation of how felt qualities lie at the core of our meaning, conceptualization, and reasoning.

Dewey opens his profound 1930 article "Qualitative Thought" with the bold thesis that quality lies at the heart of human experience: "The world in which we immediately live, that in which we strive, succeed, and are defeated is preeminently a qualitative world. What we act for, suffer,

and enjoy are things in their qualitative determinations. This world forms the field of characteristic modes of thinking, characteristic in that thought is definitely regulated by qualitative considerations" (Dewey 1930/1988, 243). The truth of this thesis is so obvious that were it not for the fact that philosophers have notoriously overlooked and even denied it, it would hardly seem necessary to elaborate and defend it. But you would be extremely hard put to cite any treatment of mind, thought, logic, or reasoning that is founded on an account of qualities. Traditional logic treats of concepts (i.e., concepts of objects, properties, and relations), propositions, and formal relations. Qualities, if they are mentioned at all, are represented by symbolic placeholders, such as $F(x)$, which is read as "object x has property (here a quality) F ." Even worse, properties are often regarded as fixed structures "possessed" by objects, independent of thought.

Dewey takes great pains to remind us that the primary locus of human experience is not atomistic sense impressions, but rather what he called a "situation." By this he meant not just our physical setting, but the whole complex of physical, biological, social, and cultural conditions that constitute any given experience—experience taken in its fullest, deepest, richest, broadest sense: "By the term situation in this connection is signified the fact that the subject-matter ultimately referred to in existential propositions is a complex existence that is held together in spite of its internal complexity by the fact that it is dominated and characterized throughout by a single quality" (Dewey 1930/1988, 246).

When I look out my office window, I have the gift of experiencing an oak tree, massive almost beyond imagination, whose branches overwhelm my entire visual expanse. In spring and summer, I see virtually nothing but literally hundreds of branches covered in an explosion of leaves, through which I occasionally glimpse a campus sidewalk flanked by grass, with students hustling along to classes or strolling hand in hand. In this moment there is only the situation, not as a mere visual scene, but as an experience with a pervasive unifying quality that is at once visual, auditory, tactile, social, and cultural. The pervasive quality changes as the day passes, and it changes also from day to day and season to season.

Dewey emphasizes that *pervasive qualities are not properties of objects*. Instead, entire situations are characterized by pervasive qualities, and we pick out particular qualities for discrimination within this unified situational whole. Dewey often used artworks as a way of elaborating his conception of a pervasive quality. Artworks are physical objects, in one sense of that term; but when Dewey speaks about their unifying qualities, he is treating them not as objects, but rather as experiences that define

the whole situation of our being absorbed in the world of the painting. Consider, for example, how the pervasive quality of a painting by Picasso (say, his *Guernica*) is different from that of a sunset by Emil Nolde or an interior scene by Vermeer. Nobody could mistake a Nolde for a Picasso or a Vermeer. There is no single property or set of properties that makes something a Picasso, but rather "the quality of the whole [that] permeates, affects, and controls every detail" (Dewey 1930/1988, 247). One of the things that first alerts an art expert to the possibility that some painting publicized as a newly discovered Vermeer, for example, might be a forgery is her dim awareness that the painting lacks the pervasive "Vermeer" quality that she has encountered in his authenticated works.

The idea of a pervasive quality of a situation is not a commonplace in our ordinary understanding of experience. We learn to understand and to experience our world as consisting of pre-given, mind-independent objects that have discrete properties and that stand in various external relations to each other. Or, even worse, if we have been infected by an associationist philosophical virus, we think that our world is given to us as a massive set of discrete perceptual inputs (sensations or percepts) that we then have to put together or synthesize into the objects that populate our perceptual world.

Dewey showed why this was all wrong. If you pay attention to how your world shows itself, you will indeed see that the flow of experience comes to us as unified wholes (gestalts) that are pervaded by an all-encompassing quality that makes the present situation what and how it is. My wife, an artist, recently remarked how much she loves a certain kind of April light that pervades the forested valley near our home in Oregon. Toward sunset on what has typically been an overcast spring day, perhaps one punctuated by rain showers, it often happens that the late-day sun breaks through the low clouds and bathes the valley with an indescribable light. Before you perceive *this* or *that* tree, bush, rock, pond, stream, tree trunk, or deer path, you are caught up in the pervading spring-light-bathing-the-valley quality of the *entire situation*. Before you take note of those unique shades of green of the new spring leaves (as opposed to the hard greens of summer, or the tired greens progressing into yellows and browns of early fall), you encounter the whole felt expanse of April greens together. It is out of this pervasive quality of the early-evening situation, here and now, that we *then* begin to discriminate the compressed, intense green of the newly leafed oak from the translucent pale green of the vine maple or the rain-rejuvenated, shiny-tough green of the rhododendron.

In his later book *Art as Experience* (1934), Dewey describes the qualitative unity that marks off "an experience" from encounters that are disjointed, slack, undirected, or overly restricted: "An experience has a unity that gives it its name, *that* meal, that storm, that rupture of friendship. The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it" (Dewey 1934/1987, 37). An identifiable, meaningful experience is neither *merely* emotional, nor *merely* practical, nor *merely* intellectual. Rather, it is all of these at once and together. We call it *emotional*, after the fact, when we wish to stress the felt quality of its emotional valence. We call it *practical* when we wish to profile its outcome and the interests it might serve. We call it *intellectual* when we are interested primarily in the distinctions, associations, and connections of thoughts that arise through the course of the experience.

Our tendency to separate experiences and judgments into kinds—scientific, technical, moral, aesthetic—has its roots deep in Enlightenment views of mind and knowledge. For example, we have learned to think of art as the basis for an "aesthetic" experience, and theorists from Immanuel Kant through Edward Bullough and Clive Bell have insisted that in experiencing and judging art, one must always abstract from any practical engagement the work has with our everyday lives. They believed that only this kind of "disinterested" apprehension of an object would permit that object to shine forth with its distinctive character and beauty.

However, as Dewey argued, such an abstractive, disengaging move is entirely artificial from the point of view of the qualitative situation we encounter. The fact that we can try to suspend our practical concerns just means that we will grasp only part of the meaning of the artwork—indeed, the part that may be least connected to what matters in our lives. This is a disservice to art and to ourselves, for it impoverishes art's potential to transform our experience and understanding. It is one thing to try to forget that the van Gogh you are seeing is worth \$24 million, but quite another to think that the aesthetic value of the painting shows itself only if the painting is divorced from the human concerns of our everyday lives. The former idea—distancing ourselves from the objectification of the artwork as a commodity—actually lets the work reveal its depth and significance, but the latter idea—that in order to fully experience the artwork we should suspend our practical concerns—is just nonsense. The extent to which we do suspend those practical engagements is directly

proportional to the extent to which the artwork will cease to speak to our human situation—to who we are, how our world shows itself, and how we might grow and be transformed.

The point I am making is that experiences come whole, pervaded by unifying qualities that demarcate them within the flux of our lives. If we want to find meaning, or the basis for meaning, we must therefore start with the qualitative unity that Dewey describes. The demarcating pervasive quality is, at first, unanalyzed, but it is the basis for subsequent analysis, thought, and development. Thought *starts* from this experienced whole, and only then does it introduce distinctions that carry it forward as inquiry: "All thought in every subject begins with just such an unanalyzed whole. When the subject-matter is reasonably familiar, relevant distinctions speedily offer themselves, and sheer qualitiveness may not remain long enough to be readily recalled" (Dewey 1934/1987, 249).

It is not wrong to say that we experience objects, properties, and relations, but it *is* wrong to say that these are primary in experience. What *are* primary are pervasive qualities of situations, within which we subsequently discriminate objects, properties, and relations: "The total overwhelming impression comes first, perhaps in a seizure by a sudden glory of the landscape, or by the effect upon us of entrance into a cathedral when dim light, incense, stained glass and majestic proportions fuse in one indistinguishable whole. We say with truth that a painting strikes us. There is an impact that precedes all definite recognition of what it is about" (Dewey 1934/1987, 150).

Once we are struck, caught up, seized, only then can we discriminate elements within our present situation. At this point, we may not always understand those April greens as the greens of spring oaks versus vine maples versus rhododendrons, though we understand that they are green leaves. Rather, we are simply able to differentiate colors, forms, and structures. When we see the oak-leaf green, as distinguished from the vine-maple green, we are *not* engaging in acts of synthesizing atomistic sense impressions into complex sensations, or even objects. No! We are *discriminating* within a situation that was given to us whole. All of those qualities were potentially available in the situation together, and we selectively grasp some of them as salient, focal, differentiated. We are not *making* our world of objects, but we are instead *taking up* these objects in experience. In other words, objects are not so much *givens* as they are *takings*.

Dewey claims that objects emerge in an experience out of the back-

ground of a pervasive qualitative whole. Objects emerge because of our perceptual and motor capacities, our interests, our history, and our values. Those objects are saturated with the meaning present in the whole situation. Dewey explains that an "object" is "some element in the complex whole that is defined in abstraction from the whole of which it is a distinction. The special point made is that the selective determination and relation of objects in thought is controlled by reference to a situation—to that which is constituted by a pervasive and internally integrating quality" (Dewey 1930/1988, 246). So, yes, I do see trees, but I see them as focal objects within the horizon of my current situation. It is by virtue of everything my situation affords me, emerging out of its pervasive unity, that I encounter objects, people, and events: "Things, objects, are only focal points of a here and now in a whole that stretches out indefinitely. This is the qualitative 'background' which is defined and made definitely conscious in particular objects and specified properties and qualities" (Dewey 1934/1987, 197).

Now, the problem for this kind of naturalistic, holistic account is how to avoid having to postulate a homunculus or a disembodied ego that does the "selecting" or "discriminating" of objects, properties, and relations. There is no single mental entity or agent that somehow picks and chooses what it wants from experience, any more than it synthesizes experience into unified wholes. Objects simply stand forth in our experience—are disclosed—because creatures like us are able to perceive certain light-wave frequencies, can move our bodies and hands within a certain range of motions, and need certain things to survive and flourish. Our brains and bodies have specific neural networks whose function is edge detection. Other neural assemblies compute orientation, such as whether a particular edge is oriented vertically, horizontally, or at a forty-five-degree angle; still others detect motion or play a role in color perception. These various functional neural assemblies determine what stands out, for us, from a situation or scene. Therefore, how we "take" objects would change if our bodies, brains, or environments changed in some radical way. So, saying that "we" select objects is just shorthand for the focal emergence of objects within a horizon of possible experience. I will attempt later to explain how we can avoid letting the homunculus creep back in, but for now let us just remember that the emergence of objects, properties, and relations is not an act of pure thought, will, reason, or understanding. Mind, on this view, is neither a willful creator of experience nor a mere window to an objective, mind-independent reality. Mind is a functional aspect of experience that emerges when it

becomes possible for us to share meanings, to inquire into the meaning of a situation, and to initiate action that transforms, or remakes, that situation.

Robert Innis has highlighted Dewey's emphasis on the aesthetic dimensions of human meaning-making as being the key to an adequate understanding of experience, which is neither merely given nor merely made:

Integral experience, in Dewey's sense of the term, obtains form through dynamic organization (1934:62) in as much as the perceiver is caught up in and solicited by the emerging experiential whole. Even while experiencing the perceptual whole as an *outcome* over which it has no explicit control, the perceiver is *creating* its own experience through continuous participation (1934:60). . . .

The philosophical pivot of Dewey's pragmatist aesthetic is likewise, as in his epistemology as a whole, the picture of the organism as a force rather than a transparency (1934:246). This is certainly a counterpole to all 'mirror' epistemologies with their attendant desire to become a pure 'reflection' of the world already in existence. With a Deweyan perspective we are neither mirror, nor carbon paper, nor Kodak fixation. We are systems of mediations of immediacy, fusions of actions, feeling, and meaning (1934:22). (Innis 1994, 62)

In sum, Dewey is trying to remind us that experienced situations are the soil from which the objects, properties, and relations of our world grow. Moreover, the properties or definite qualities that we experience in objects are richly cross-modal. The red of a ripe Bing cherry is not just the result of visual processing. It is not a single-channel visual percept. Rather, our various sensory and motor modalities interfuse, via cross-domain neural connections, to produce the qualities that objects manifest for us.² Dewey describes this interfusing of perceptions:

When we perceive, by means of the eyes as causal aids, the liquidity of water, the coldness of ice, the solidity of rocks, the bareness of trees in winter, it is certain that other qualities than those of the eye are conspicuous and controlling in perception. And it is as certain as anything can be that optical qualities do not stand out by themselves with tactual and emotive qualities clinging to their skirts. (Dewey 1934/1987, 129)

2. The neural basis of these cross-modal co-activations is briefly discussed in chapter 8, under the topic of canonical neurons.

The pervasive quality of a situation is not limited merely to sensible perception or motor interactions. Thinking is action, and so “acts of thought” also constitute situations that must have pervasive qualities. Even our best scientific thinking stems from the grasp of qualities. It arises from the feeling that a situation is problematic or that it calls out for interpretation and explanation. This initiates a process of intellectual inquiry in search of generalizations that help us understand the phenomena—phenomena that are identified and known *only* in the context of the inquiry itself, which introduces distinctions, carves out objects and their properties, and seeks a way to explain their behavior. About scientific investigations, Dewey says: “These open with the ‘Oh’ of wonder and terminate with the ‘Good’ of a rounded-out and organized situation. Neither the ‘Oh’ nor the ‘Good’ expresses a mere state of personal feeling. Each characterizes a subject-matter” (Dewey 1930/1988, 250). The “Oh” and the “Good” are not subjective feelings, nor are they mere properties of things. Rather, they are qualities that characterize the situation as it moves from the start of scientific investigation to its temporary completion in some theory, explanation, or experiment. The “Good” is merely our way of recognizing that something has been more or less satisfactorily resolved through our inquiry, at least for the time being.

The crux of Dewey’s entire argument is that what we call thinking, or reasoning, or logical inference, *could not even exist* without the felt qualities of situations: “The underlying unity of qualitiveness regulates pertinence or relevancy and force of every distinction and relation; it guides selection and rejection and the manner of utilization of all explicit terms” (Dewey 1934, 247–48). This is a startling claim: *Insofar as logic pertains to real human inquiry, logic can’t do anything without feeling.* Logic alone—pure formal logic—cannot circumscribe the phenomena under discussion. Logic alone cannot define the problem you are trying to solve by inquiry. Logic cannot tell you what should count as relevant to your argument. Logic can only work because we take for granted the prior working of qualities in experienced situations.

We are thus confronted with the question of how thought and symbolic interaction can arise in experience. How, out of the encompassing qualitative horizon of a situation, does thinking emerge, with all of its symbolic structures, forms, and principles? I will take up this deep issue of the nature of logic and rational thought in the next chapter, but first I want to examine more closely the intimate blending of structural and qualitative aspects of experience. This question has been a pivotal focus of the work of the psychotherapist and phenomenologist Eugene Gendlin.

GENDLIN’S FELT SITUATIONS AS A KEY TO MEANING

Ask yourself how it is possible for you to write a letter and know what to say next; or how you can start a sentence in anything you are uttering or writing and suddenly realize that what you’ve just said or written wasn’t what you wanted to say, or should have said. What tells you how to go on with your thoughts? What stops you in the middle of writing a sentence and tells you to try again with different words?

The answer is that your flow of thought just stops, or else when you try to say what you meant, it doesn’t feel right. You feel a sort of frustration, tension, and disruption that is stressful. The words were flowing out just fine, and then all of a sudden they stumble or stop. The “stopping” feels a certain way, and it feels very different from the flow of thought that went before. The arrested motion of your thought, or the tension that pervades your thinking, is an unpleasant perturbation within you. Only if you find words that carry forward the meaning you are trying to articulate will you feel the relief that results when you overcome the obstruction and your streaming thought moves along with a renewed flow of meaning. You will then feel the changed and changing quality of your experience as it moves from frustration and blockage to a more harmonious, flowing state. You will have a sense that somehow, you are “getting things right,” more or less.

But again, *where* exactly is this so-called meaning that you are trying to express? It is not merely in the words themselves, although it is not wholly independent of them, either. The words help carry it forward, and make it present.³ But the meaning is in what you think and feel and do, and it lies in recurring qualities, patterns, and structures of experience that are, for the most part, unconsciously and automatically shaping how you understand, how you choose, and how you express yourself. You *have* meaning, or are *caught up* in meaning, before you actually experience meaning reflectively.

Eugene Gendlin has devoted much of his career to helping us recover this vast lost continent of feeling that underlies all our meaning, thought,

3. What Maurice Merleau-Ponty says about how an artwork makes meaning real and present holds also for language: “Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all. . . . No one will deny that here the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it” (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 183).

CHAPTER 5

Feeling William James's "But"

The Aesthetics of Reasoning and Logic

If thinking—conceptualizing, imagining, and reasoning—isn't an activity of disembodied mind, a product of the workings of a nonbodily ego, then where does it come from? Following Dewey, I have so far claimed that it arises within and emerges out of the pervasive qualitative situations that make up the moments of our lives. If thought doesn't drop down from the realm of pure spirit, then it must arise from bodily perception, feeling, and action.

But how do we move from the feeling of a situation all the way to thought, including abstract conceptualization and inference? This is a long and complicated story, but I hope to begin it in this chapter and carry it forward in succeeding chapters, all the way up to the highest levels of abstract thinking.

THE EMERGENCE OF CONCEPTS: THE INTERTWINING OF PERCEPT AND CONCEPT

Let us begin with a particular situation, say, eating a meal together with one's family. From the point of view of ourselves as embodied neural organisms, an experience of a meal is one vast, continuous flow of neuronal activations, serially and in parallel, that give rise to neural and chemical activities in our bodies that result in our perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and movements. These bodily processes never cease so long as we are alive, and their result is our rich experience of a complex physical, social, and cultural experience of having a meal, with objects (food, dishes, uten-

sils, furniture), people (family members), and actions (of cooperative food sharing, social communication, planning, arguing, playing, etc.). How, out of this incessant flow of our perceptions, feelings, thoughts, and actions, does our conceptual understanding of the situation arise?

One traditional way of thinking about this process, a way shared by our commonsense theories of mind and many revered philosophical theories alike, is that *percepts* and *concepts* are two radically different kinds of things. This is a foundational part of an objectivist theory of cognition. Percepts, on this view, are the result of our body's capacity to have our sensory receptors affected by things both external and internal to our bodies, thereby giving rise to sense impressions (or sensations). Concepts, on the other hand, are taken to be forms by which we organize our experience by unifying our atomic sense impressions into qualities, objects, people, motions, etc. According to the objectivist view, then, sensations are perceptual givens that arise when the outside world impinges on our sense organs, whereas concepts are supplied by the mind to allow us to recognize what is given in sensation.

What this objectivist view of cognition gets right is that concepts do indeed help us understand, or make sense of, our sensory experience. But what's wrong about this view is the way it treats concepts either as discrete mental entities ("representations") or as abstract entities—in either case, as something *different in kind* from sensations, perceptions, and feelings. To accept this traditional objectivist view of concepts, along with its attendant representationalist theory of mind, is to presuppose an absolute ontological and epistemological gap between percepts and concepts—a gap that parallels the alleged separation between body and mind. As the history of Western philosophy has amply—and tediously—documented, once you assume such a gap, there is no way to bridge it.

In his amazing two-volume work *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) and in his later essay "Percept and Concept" (1911), William James explored a way to conceive of concepts without succumbing to the dualistic ways of thinking that underlie the objectivist view of cognition. The key, he realized, was to not fall into the dualistic trap of thinking of percepts and concepts as different in kind and to see them, rather, as two aspects of a continuous flow of feeling-thinking.

The great difference between percepts and concepts is that percepts are continuous and concepts are discrete. Not discrete in their *being*, for conception as an *act* is part of the flux of feeling, but discrete from each other in their several *meanings*. Each concept means just what it singly means, and nothing

else; and if the conceiver does not know whether he means this or means that, it shows that his concept is imperfectly formed. The perceptual flux as such, on the contrary, *means* nothing, and is but what it immediately is. No matter how small a tract of it be taken, it is always a much-at-once, and contains innumerable aspects and characters which conception can pick out, isolate, and thereafter always intend. It shows duration, intensity, complexity or simplicity, interestingness, excitingness, pleasantness or their opposites. (James 1911/1979, 32)

As I sit at the dining table, I am engaging a situation that, at any given moment, has a pervasive qualitative unity that marks it off in my experience. Tonight's dinner situation is characterized by our quiet conversation over a light meal, very different from last night's raucous, humor-filled free-for-all of everyone in the family talking at once and reaching for food. It is within, or from, this pervasive quality that discrete things and substances emerge—silverware, tomatoes, bread and butter, balsamic vinegar, olive oil. These things are what stand forth, for a creature like me, out of the background of the whole situation of the meal. They are affordances for a creature with my perceptual makeup, with my capacities for moving my body and manipulating objects, and with my physical and social environments. We say that we have “concepts” for each of these things and substances that populate my dinner table—and so we do. We also have concepts for the physical actions we perform and the social interactions that are occurring as we eat and converse. However, concepts are not themselves things or quasi-things. They are not mysterious abstract entities with a special ontological significance that sets them over against sensations or percepts. Our language of “concepts” is just our way of saying that we are able to mark various meaningful qualities and patterns within our experience, and we are able to mark these distinctions in a way that permits us to recognize something that is *the same* over and over across different experiences and thoughts.

James cautions us in *The Principles of Psychology* not to hypostatize these discriminations within our experience into ethereal entities called “concepts.” We should speak of conceptualizing (as an act), rather than of concepts (as quasi-things). Conceptualizing is one of the things we *do* in and with our experience, which is just another way of saying that conceptualizing makes it possible for us to make sense of and to manage our experience. Conceptualizing involves recognizing distinctions within the flow of our experience. From the perceptual continuum, we select an aspect, typically an aspect that recurs across many experiences and many

types of experience. We select things that matter for us, things that have value, meaning, and significance, such as various qualities, shapes, and relations. James says that our experience is rich and deep, characterized by “much at once” blending together in a continuous flow. We identify parts of the “much-at-onceness” of our perceptual experience and mark them for use in understanding and transforming our past, present, and future experience: “Out of this aboriginal sensible muchness, attention carves out objects, which conception then names and identifies forever—in the sky ‘constellations,’ on the earth ‘beach,’ ‘sea,’ ‘cliff,’ ‘bushes,’ ‘grass.’ Out of time we cut ‘days’ and ‘nights,’ ‘summers’ and ‘winters.’ We say *what* each part of the sensible continuum is, and all these abstracted *whats* are concepts” (James 1911/1979, 32–33).

When you “select” some quality or aspect from a much-at-onceness, there is inevitably a great deal that is not selected in that moment. That is precisely what abstraction consists in, namely, attending to some aspect of a continuous situation in such a way that a quality or pattern stands out as distinguished from other patterns or aspects of the situation. James says that these concepts are discrete, but he takes great pains to remind us that percepts and concepts are intermixed and interfuse in our actual thinking. The very notion *concept*, in other words, is itself an abstraction, since it leaves behind the interfusing of feeling and thought that goes on when we conceptualize.

The chief difference between James's naturalistic view and traditional dualistic views is that James denies any ontological separation between feeling, sensation, and perception on the one hand and conceptualization and thought on the other. For James, we must always begin with the full richness of an experience (Dewey's pervasive qualitative unity), out of which arise whatever differentiations are salient for us.

The principal problem with James's account is his use of agency terms, such as “selects,” “cuts,” and “carves.” Though James does not intend this, these terms suggest the need for a mental homunculus (a mini-conceptualizer in the “mind”) who does the selecting, cutting, and carving from experience. From the perspective of cognitive neuroscience, we know that there is no single neural ensemble, network, or system that conceptualizes, decides, chooses, or acts, and there is certainly no single locus of any faculty of thinking or willing. Thus, it would be more accurate to say, for example, that at the dinner table we don't “select” or “carve up” the situation into *bread* and *butter* and *conversation* (or any of the other concepts we have for what is going on over dinner). Instead, our situation affords us *bread*, just as it affords us various aromas, tastes, sights, textures, and

possibilities for interaction and engagement. We are creatures with neural capacities for discriminating various qualities within our situation, and the qualities for which we have so-called concepts are those important enough to us to merit being marked for use.

The hard problem here is how to explain perception and conceptualization without resorting to a homunculus within the mind that does the perceiving and conceptualizing. These processes are neither entirely passive nor entirely active; rather, they are a blending of passivity and activity in an organism-environment transaction. To avoid the error of treating perception as mere passive reception of sensations, we focus on the active engagement of the organism with its surroundings, but this then tempts us to employ the language of human agency in describing how we think. Once we are on this path, we end up replacing thoughtful activity with some "thing" that thinks—that is, with an inner source of spontaneity and activity. Dewey's solution is to grant that activity is a fundamental capacity of certain types of living creatures, but without positing a conscious inner, agent-like source of that activity. This requires us to think of conceptualization as a process of discrimination within an ongoing flow of experience.

Talk about "concepts" has sometimes done far more harm than good to our understanding of mind, thought, and language. No sooner does *concept* (used as a noun) make concepts into things than we must find a *place* for concepts to exist or be. Either they get housed in some mysterious thing we call "the mind," or they are billeted in a Platonic realm of ideas. Even worse, concepts then achieve the exalted status of independently existing entities, and we have in full swing the dualism of concept versus percept, thought versus feeling, and mind versus body. We are seduced into the illusion that concepts are fixed entities—universals—that stand apart from and above the vicissitudes of bodily perceptual experience.¹ James sums up this transcendent view of concepts:

1. I remember quite well my embarrassing experience as a graduate student in a seminar on Frege's philosophy taught by a distinguished philosopher of language. One day I naively expressed my puzzlement at the Fregean notion of "sense," which Frege claimed existed neither in the physical realm nor the mental realm, but in some third realm, along with other entities like numbers, functions, propositions, and thoughts. When I expressed skepticism over the existence of such a realm, the professor accused me of succumbing to "that creeping disease of Midwestern empiricism—if you can't see or touch something, then it doesn't exist!" That, of course, silenced me for the rest of the term. But to this day, I still cannot make any sense of a transcendent realm of concepts, functions, or senses that just *have to be real* if we are to make sense of the universality of shared meanings.

Greek philosophers soon formed the notion that a knowledge of so-called 'universals,' consisting of concepts of abstract forms, qualities, numbers, and relations was the only knowledge worthy of the truly philosophic mind. Particular facts decay and our perceptions of them vary. A concept never varies; and between such unvarying terms the relations must be constant and express eternal verities. Hence there arose a tendency, which has lasted all through philosophy, to contrast the knowledge of universals and intelligibles, as god-like, dignified, and honorable to the knower, with that of particulars and sensibles as something relatively base which more allies us with the beasts. (James 1911/1979, 34)

To counteract this transcendent, disembodied, objectivist view of concepts, we need to bring concepts back into the body-mind. We need to understand *cognition as action* and conceptualizing as a continuous process of attending to various aspects of our experience and putting them to use as part of inquiry. Toward this end, James distinguished what he called the "substantive" aspects of a concept from its "functional" aspects, as follows:

A. *Substantive part*

1. Sign or symbolic expression (a word or other symbolic form)
2. Image or sensory presentation (the image called up by the sign)

B. *Functional part*: what the concept leads to by way of thought or action

To illustrate these distinctions, consider our human concept of a dog. The substantive part includes the word or sign (e.g., *dog* in English, *Hund* in German) and a more or less rich image or sense presentation (either a concrete or schematic image) of a dog. The functional part is what dogs afford us by way of possible interactions with them, such as that they can be petted, will greet us cheerfully when we arrive home, can be operated on surgically to repair certain injuries or illnesses they might have, will mate with other members of their species, etc. These interactions are both physical and intellectual.

In what we call "concrete" concepts, the substantive dimension is typically quite vivid and immediately evoked, whereas for "abstract" concepts the functional connections dominate, often almost exclusively. In humans, it is our capacity for abstract thought—for discerning functional relations and implications—that permits us to plan, reason, and theorize. Herein lies a certain evolutionary advantage that we have accrued when it comes to our ability to identify and solve certain highly complex prob-

lems (physical, social, moral, spiritual) that we encounter. James explains, "Now however beautiful or otherwise worthy of stationary contemplation the substantive part of a concept may be, the more important part of its significance may naturally be held to be the consequences to which it leads. These may lie either in the way of making us think, or in the way of making us act" (1911/1979, 37).

It is our ability to abstract a quality or structure from the continuous flow of our experience and then to discern its relations to other concepts and its implications for action that makes possible the highest forms of inquiry, of which humans are uniquely capable. My dog, Lucy, has concepts and solves problems, but she lacks the full abstractive capacities that open up the possibility of discovering general explanations of phenomena in the ways we humans do.

At the heart of all pragmatist philosophy is the fundamental understanding that thinking is doing, and that cognition is action. Pragmatism recognizes that thought can be transformative of our experience precisely because thought is embodied and interfused with feeling. Thinking is not something humans "bring" to their experience from the outside; rather, it is *in* and *of* experience—an embodied dimension of those experiences in which abstraction is occurring. Our ability to conceptualize is our chief means for being able to respond to the problems we encounter, to adapt to situations, and to change them when it is possible and desirable, via the use of human intelligence. This conception of mind and thought is the basis for James's famous pragmatic rule of meaning, which states that the meaning of a concept is a matter of its consequences for our present and future thought and action.

JAMES'S PRAGMATIC RULE OF MEANING

The pragmatic rule is that the meaning of a concept may always be found, if not in some sensible particular which it directly designates, then in some particular difference in the course of human experience which its being true will make. Test every concept by the question, "What sensible difference to anybody will its truth make?" and you are in the best possible position for understanding what it means and for discussing its importance. (James 1911/1979, 37)

There are far-reaching implications of this pragmatist view of meaning, one of the most stunning of which is that even our most abstract concepts will have a meaning grounded in perception and bodily experience. This is the only way it can be, if concepts are not disembodied.

Our capacity to abstract farther and farther away from the concrete richness of felt experience is still always and only *abstraction* and selection from the flow of perception. The more we abstract, the more we are left only with perceived relations among qualities or shapes or internal structures of things. We pay the price of losing connection to the specific felt qualities of things, in order to gain the reward of generalization over aspects of experience: "The substitution of concepts and their connections, of a whole conceptual order, in short, for the immediate perceptual flow, thus widens enormously our mental panorama. Had we no concepts we should live simply 'getting' each successive moment of experience, as the sessile sea-anemone on its rock receives whatever nourishment the wash of the waves may bring" (James 1911/1979, 39).

Our human glory—abstract thinking and the possibility for enhanced inquiry and creativity that comes with it—involves our ability to select aspects of our experience in so many different ways, from so many different perspectives, for so many different purposes. When we do this, we de-emphasize our perceptual experience, but we *never* leave it wholly behind. Even our most abstract concepts (such as *cause*, *necessity*, *freedom*, and *God*) have no meaning without some connection to felt experience. In a remarkable passage, James follows his pragmatic rule of meaning in tracing some of our most abstract and formal concepts back to possible perceived situations, operations, and consequences.

That A and B are 'equal,' for example, means either that 'you will find no difference' when you pass from one to the other, or that in substituting one for the other in certain operations 'you will get the same result both times.' 'Substance' means that 'a definite group of sensations will recur.' 'Incommensurable' means that 'you are always confronted with a remainder.' 'Infinite' means either that, or that 'you can count as many units in a part as you can in the whole.' 'More' and 'less' mean certain sensations, varying according to the matter. 'Freedom' means 'no feeling of sensible restraint.' 'Necessity' means that 'your way is blocked in all directions save one.' 'God' means that 'you can dismiss certain kinds of fear,' 'cause' that 'you may expect certain sequences,' etc. etc. (James 1911/1979, 38)

These "meanings" that James gives of some of our most abstract concepts are not intended by him to be exhaustive (e.g., "God," of course, means far more than "Have no fear"!). He presents these meanings to give examples of how terms (or concepts) have meanings only insofar as they make some perceivable difference (either now or possibly in the fu-

ture) in how and what we think or do. James is thus claiming that what we tend to regard as purely formal structures are *not* purely formal, but rather are patterns of embodied interactions. On this view, the logical principle known as transitivity (as in "All *A* are *B*; all *B* are *C*; therefore, all *A* are *C*") is not a law of allegedly "pure thought," but rather a principle of embodied experience. If my car keys are in my hand, and my hand is in my pocket, then my keys are in my pocket. James characterizes this as "what contains the container contains the contained of whatever material either be made" (1911/1979, 41). In chapter 7, I will describe such patterns of conceptualization and reasoning based on image schemas, showing their indispensable role in our ability to grasp the meaning of situations and to reason about them. For now, it is enough to see that these patterns are experiential, existing at the level of feeling and thinking interfused.



JAMES AND THE GROUNDING OF LOGIC IN FEELING

In his justly famous chapter from *The Principles of Psychology* titled "The Stream of Thought," James pushes his theory of the embodiment of conceptualization and reasoning to its limits when he stresses that even logical relations are *felt* and not just *thought*. He moves from the bodily nature of conceptualization to the embodiment of consciousness and thought. Human thinking is an embodied, continuous flow, and what we call our "ideas" are phases of that ongoing flow. The idea that thinking is embodied is not the relatively obvious claim that in order to think, one needs a body and a brain. Instead, it entails that the nature of our embodiment shapes both what and how we think, and that every thought implicates a certain bodily awareness.

Our own bodily position, attitude, condition, is one of the things of which *some* awareness, however inattentive, invariably accompanies the knowledge of whatever else we know. We think; and as we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking. If the thinking be *our* thinking, it must be suffused through all its parts with that peculiar warmth and intimacy that make it come as ours. (James 1890/1950, 1:241-42).

Take note of James's radical thesis: "As we think we feel our bodily selves as the seat of the thinking." He is not merely asserting that bodily states must accompany and be the basis for all of our thinking; rather, he is asserting that in all thinking, we are in some degree aware, however

vaguely, of our bodily states, as they result from our interactions in the world.

If James is right, then as you read these very words, there should be a way it feels to think the thoughts they express. What could he possibly mean by this? His answer is that since *thought flows*, there must be a quality of this flow that we can experience. James's metaphor is that thought has the structure of the flightings and perchings of birds. Thought moves *from* one temporary "resting place" (one substantive image or idea) *to* another. In between, there is the feeling of the direction, rhythms, and pulses of our transition from one "place" (stable image or idea) to another. *What we feel are the patterns and qualities of this transitional flow of thought*, even though most of the time we have lost the habit of noticing these feelings.

As an example, consider your own process of writing something. Whenever your writing is going well, there is a certain direction, force, and momentum established by your first thoughts. The words pour out, as we say, and your thinking flows too, moving from one thought to the next in smooth transition. But then you get stuck for a moment. You are not sure what to say next, what comes next. Notice the arrested development of your thinking and the accompanying bodily-mental tension. Things were going swimmingly, then you got stopped, and now you need to figure out how to carry on with a new train of thoughts that resolve the felt tension in the situation. Your problem is how to reestablish fluid thought that will run its course to some resolution or fulfillment (when you have "expressed your idea"). As you try out various ways to carry the thought forward, you start and stop, trying first one thought and then another, seeking to realize the felt tendencies of what you are thinking, in just the way described by Eugene Gendlin in his account of the felt sense of thinking (in chapter 4). If you start out with an *if*-thought, then a *then*-thought must soon follow, completing the passage from one place to another on the metaphorical path of your thinking. The *if* aspect of your thought (as in the previous sentence) creates a felt anticipation of something that follows, in a way that moves you to a new thought-location. You move in thinking from the *if* location toward some other place (the *then* location), along a narrow mental path that you must traverse. The feeling of *if* is a feeling of expectancy of something to come, taken in light of the character of a present situation. The expectancy is not just a feeling that you *may* move from the *if*-thought to the *then*-thought, but rather that you *must* make this movement in thinking. It is important to keep in mind that our metaphorical description of this *movement* of thought is not merely a fictional description. It is trying to capture an embodied process of the felt movement (change) of our thinking.

There are, then, feelings of the developing processes of thinking, or rather there are ways it feels to think different thoughts and their relation in a process of inquiry. Thinking is a process, and since it occurs over time, it involves the felt experience of the forward motion from one stage of the process to another. Logical relations are felt as transitions from one thought to another. James thus boldly asserts:

If there be such things as feelings at all, *then so surely as relations between objects exist in rerum natura, so surely, and more surely, do feelings exist to which these relations are known.* There is not a conjunction or a preposition, and hardly an adverbial phrase, syntactic form, or inflection of voice, in human speech, that does not express some shading or other of relation which we at some moment actually feel to exist between the larger objects of our thought. . . .

We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. (James 1890/1950, 1:245-46)

Can you feel William James's "but"? If you can't, then there is something wrong with you, something repressed or submerged in your understanding. To feel James's "but" is to feel the quality of a situation as a kind of hesitancy or qualification of something asserted or proposed. When you think "I may go to the party, but I won't have fun," you are expressing some unsatisfactory qualification of your anticipated situation. You are feeling that if your situation should develop in a certain way (i.e., if you go to the party), then there will follow a certain unresolved quality of your situation as it has developed to that point in time (i.e., you feel the dis-ease of not having fun). In addition to this feeling of hesitancy, "but" also marks a feeling of conjunction. In the example above, the not-having-fun is tightly connected to having attended the party. To say "*x* but *y*" asserts that both *x* and *y* are taken together, but *y* is taken (or given) with some hesitancy.² Notice how this explains why most contemporary logicians usually translate *but* with *and*—they strip away the peculiar felt quality in order to focus only on the relation of connection between *x* and *y*. Since modern logic does not and cannot recognize a role for feeling, it must ignore anything but "pure" formal relation. Consequently, it interprets logical relations as empty formal relations lacking any felt connection or direction in our thinking.

2. I am indebted to Scott Pratt for this analysis and its connection to uses of *but* in modern logic.

Because most of us are not in the habit of attending to these subtle, nuanced feelings of direction and relation in our thinking, we are inclined to deny that they play any serious role in logic. However, once you grant that logic is grounded in human inquiry (as James and Dewey insisted), and once you start to pay attention to how you feel as you think, you will notice an entire submerged continent of feeling that supports, and is part of, your thoughts. You will begin to notice "that . . ."—the felt sense—that Gendlin describes as supporting and carrying the meaning of our forms, concepts, and logical relations. Reasoning is not the manipulation of abstract, meaningless symbols according to purely formal syntactic and logical rules. Rather, reasoning is our intelligent-animal way of working through the implications of situations in pursuit of an embodied understanding that allows us to function successfully, more or less, within the problematic situations that we inhabit. Feelings of "furtherance" and "hindrance" of our thinking play a key role in how we know *what follows from what* in our thinking. Thinking moves in a direction, *from* one thought *to* another, and we have corresponding feelings of how this movement is going: we feel the halt to our thinking, we feel the tension as we entertain possible ways to *go on* thinking, and we feel the consummation when a line of thought runs its course to satisfactory conclusion. Such are the aesthetic dimensions of our thinking.

James makes exploratory forays into the vast, uncharted territory of qualitative experience. Logical relations, he explains, are denoted by mere logical skeletons, such as verbal formulas or written symbols, but the relations themselves are *in* experience and *in* the situation. "*A is B, but . . .*" has a "difference in felt meaning" from "either *A* or *B*." James summarizes:

The truth is that large tracts of human speech are nothing but *signs of direction* in thought, of which direction we nevertheless have an acutely discriminative sense, though no definite sensorial image plays any part in it whatsoever. . . . These bare images of logical movement . . . are psychic transitions, always on the wing, so to speak, and not to be glimpsed except in flight. Their function is to lead from one set of images to another. (James 1890/1950, 1:252-53)

Once again, just as Gendlin argued, the feeling of relation is not a mere accompaniment of thought. There are not two things—the abstract, logical thought and an attendant feeling—but only one continuous stream of thought that is at once formal, qualitative, and emotional. "If *X*, then *Y*" doesn't *mean* anything by itself. It only means something as a tendency

of an embodied, continuous process of thought. It means that when the antecedent is thought, then something more, and something connected to the antecedent, is anticipated as forthcoming.

LOGIC AND THE FEELING BRAIN

I suspect that most logicians, as well as most philosophers of mind and language, will find these claims about the relation of logic to feeling ludicrous. They will protest that logic has nothing to do with feelings, because it is about pure formal relations and algorithms that can be run on computing machines. True as this might be for the so-called logic of computers, it is utterly false as a statement about human logical inference. Human thinking is a continuous feeling-thinking process that is forever tied to our body's monitoring of its own states. One way to see this is to examine the cognitive neuroscience of the brain. In the very same chapter in which James is describing the feeling of logical relations, he turns to the brain science of his day for confirmation of his claim that we sometimes feel the flow of thought:

We believe the brain to be an organ whose internal equilibrium is always in a state of change—the change affecting every part. The pulses of change are doubtless more violent in one place than in another, their rhythm more rapid at this time than at that. . . . In the brain the perpetual rearrangement must result in some forms of tension lingering relatively long, whilst others simply come and pass. . . . The lingering consciousnesses, if of simple objects, we call 'sensations' or 'images,' according as they are vivid or faint; if of complex objects, we call them 'percepts' when vivid, 'concepts' or 'thoughts' when faint. For the swift consciousnesses we have only those names of 'transitive states,' or 'feelings of relation,' which we have used. (James 1890/1950, 1:246–47)

James is here trying to connect his view of the flow of thought—which consists of points of relative stasis (images, percepts, concepts) alternating with felt transitional motions (logical relations)—with the brain's monitoring of its processes and internal equilibrium. Today, we have more detailed and well-supported neuroscience accounts of the brain's monitoring of the body's equilibrium. In chapter 3 we considered Damasio's argument that emotions result from the body's monitoring of changes in its states in response to our interactions with our environment. In our systems for monitoring changes in bodily equilibrium, emotions (and subsequent

feelings) initiate internal changes in our bodies that sometimes lead us to bodily movements in the world. Damasio's basic hypothesis is that

the body, as represented in the brain, may constitute the indispensable frame of reference for neural processes that we experience as the mind; that our very organism rather than some absolute external reality is used as the ground reference for the constructions we make of the world around us and for the construction of the ever-present sense of subjectivity that is part and parcel of experiences; that our most refined thoughts and best actions, our greatest joys and deepest sorrows, use the body as a yardstick. (Damasio 1994, xvi)

Don Tucker, a psychologist and cognitive neuroscientist who studies the role of various brain structures in processes of feeling, perception, thought, motivation, and action, has even more forcefully affirmed the grounding of abstract thinking in sensorimotor processes:

The brain evolved to regulate the motivational control of actions, carried out by the motor system, guided by sensory evaluation of ongoing environmental events. There are no "faculties"—of memory, conscious perception, or music appreciation—that float in the mental ether, separate from the bodily functions. If we accept that the mind comes from the brain, then our behavior and experience must be understood to be elaborations of primordial systems for perceiving, evaluating, and acting. When we study the brain to look for the networks controlling cognition, we find that all of the networks that have been implicated in cognition are linked in one way or the other to sensory systems, to motor systems, or to motivational systems. There are no brain parts for disembodied cognition. (Tucker, forthcoming, 58)

In *Mind from Body: Experience from Neural Structure*, Tucker focuses on the basic architecture of the brain as the key to the nature of our cognitive abilities, and he is especially interested in the role of feelings and emotions in all aspects of cognition. He explores the parallel processing that results from three general architectural features of the brain: front-back orientation, hemispheric laterality (right-left organization), and core-shell relationships. I want to focus on just one part of Tucker's account—the core-shell structure—because it reveals possible neural bases for Dewey's notion of a pervasive quality, and it also suggests that both James and Dewey were correct when they argued that concepts arise from a global grasp of a situation that leads to processes of discrimination and differentiation.

Consequently, when you investigate the workings of various arts, you are investigating what meaning is, where it comes from, and how it can grow. In this chapter and the previous one, I have offered brief glimpses of some of the ways that various arts have meaning, and I have emphasized the nonconceptual, mostly unconscious, and embodied way that meaning arises in our experience. Even in poetry and prose, we saw how meaning exceeds conceptual form and expression. In music this is even more obvious, since we leave the realm of linguistic meaning when we focus exclusively on the music itself.

The reason that so many philosophers are unwilling to call these embodied structures part of meaning is that images, image schemas, affect contours, and metaphors cannot be satisfactorily put in propositional form. However, instead of concluding that music must therefore not have meaning in the proper sense, we ought rather to conclude that meaning, in the proper sense, goes far beyond conceptual and propositional content. We ought to realize that our human capacities for discerning meaning operate pervasively in all our experience, artistic and non-artistic alike, but in good art those capacities operate in an exemplary fashion, showing us how experience can be significant and meaningful. Art—at least art that is not overly enamored with postmodernism—is not an escape from meaning, but rather a pursuit of consummated meaning. That is part of what Dewey meant when he insisted that art is a condition of life.

The Meaning of the Body

I fell for philosophy as an undergraduate student in the late 1960s because I believed that philosophy was about our human quest for meaning. This still seems right to me today, and if I ceased to believe it, philosophy would lose its relevance to my life. When philosophy fails to address our most basic existential concerns, it becomes merely an intellectual game, or an exercise of an eviscerated intelligence in solving narrowly defined, highly technical problems within specialized subfields. Such a conception of philosophy is not worthy of its calling. Therefore, it is time for me to tie together the threads of the previous chapters in order to say what meaning is, what the body is, and what the bodily basis of meaning entails for the nature of philosophy and for human wisdom.

The central theme of this book is that philosophy becomes relevant to human life only by reconnecting with, and grounding itself in, bodily dimensions of human meaning and value. Philosophy needs a visceral connection to lived experience. Unfortunately, much of the philosophy of mind and language of the past century lost this visceral engagement, chiefly because it focused on only a small and highly intellectualized part of meaning, leaving out much of what goes into actual human meaning-making. It is not the rigor of its methods that makes certain parts of Anglo-American analytic philosophy sterile; that rigor is a fine and important contribution to philosophical reflection. Rather, it is what that rigor is applied to (namely, conceptual and propositional structures alone) that leads people to overlook the visceral depths of meaning.

The necessary remedy for our current problematic state must be a non-dualistic, embodied view of meaning, concepts, mind, thought, language, and values. A new philosophy of this sort cannot emerge directly from mainstream analytic philosophy, because it is precisely some of the founding assumptions of that tradition that are the problem. We must challenge the assumptions of what Lakoff and I (1999) have called first-generation cognitive science, that is, cognitive science based on information-processing psychology, artificial intelligence, model theory, and analytic philosophy of mind and language.

We have seen that over the past two decades, many important developments have emerged that show promise for repairing the previous neglect of embodied human meaning. The new account of embodied meaning is developing in recent work coming from several sources: (1) the re-birth of interest in pragmatist views of experience, meaning, and value (e.g., present-day pragmatists);¹ (2) the phenomenology of the embodied mind, especially in the style of Merleau-Ponty and, to a lesser extent, parts of Heidegger and Husserl that focus on the lifeworld²; (3) second-generation cognitive science, which pursues empirical studies of embodied cognition (in psychology, neuroscience, linguistics, and anthropology); and (4) ecological philosophies that emphasize organism-environment processes of meaning-making and that acknowledge the human connection to other animal species and to the more-than-human world. Currently, we are just at the dawn of what might someday become a serious reconstruction of philosophy, but nobody can say for sure where this will ultimately lead.

In this final chapter, I want to summarize what I have been trying to say about the nature of meaning in light of the role of the body in its construction. A key part of this new view of meaning must necessarily be a revised view of what "the body" means. Finally, we need to ask what

1. Much exciting work is being carried out by many present-day pragmatist philosophers, such as John McDermott, John Lachs, Hilary Putnam, Tom Alexander, Charlene Haddock Siegfried, Richard Shusterman, Scott Pratt, Robert Innis, Douglas Anderson, and a host of others. A full listing would end up including a large proportion of the current membership of the Society for the Advancement of American Philosophy. I offer my apologies to the scores of people working out of the pragmatist tradition whom I have not mentioned.

2. Here I should mention a large number of contemporaries who focus on the bodily, intersubjective dimensions of our lived experience. I would note especially the work of Shaun Gallagher, Francisco Varela, Hubert Dreyfus, Beata Stawarska, David Levin, Eugene Gendlin, David Abrams, and most members of the Merleau-Ponty Circle.

the task of philosophy becomes once embodied meaning is restored to its rightful place at the center of human experience, thought, and practice.

THE MEANING OF MEANING

The view I have been developing in the previous chapters is that meaning is a matter of relations and connections grounded in bodily organism-environment coupling, or interaction. The meaning of something is its relations, actual and potential, to other qualities, things, events, and experiences. In pragmatist lingo, the meaning of something is a matter of how it connects to what has gone before and what it entails for present or future experiences and actions. Dewey expressed this conception of meaning as follows:

A thing is more significantly what it makes possible than what it immediately is. The very conception of cognitive meaning, intellectual significance, is that things in their immediacy are subordinated to what they portend and give evidence of. An intellectual sign denotes that a thing is not taken immediately but is referred to something that may come in consequence of it. (Dewey 1925/1981, 105)

Things are felt or experienced in their immediate qualities. For instance, your whole present situation might be frightful, or anxious, or joyful, or doubtful. These objective qualities of situations are at first only minimally meaningful. If a situation is frightful, then minimally it means that danger is actually or potentially at hand. Something might hurt you and overpower you; or it might just reduce you to quivering pudding. If, on the other hand, a situation is joyful, it is expansive and vitalizing, opening out upon many possibilities for growth, enhancement of meaning, and fluid development. It is a situation in which your whole being wants to "affirm the Eternal Yes" (to steal a line from a love-smitten young man in the film *A Room with a View* who is shouting out his happiness from his perch in the boughs of an olive tree). The threatening or joyful characteristic of your situation takes on new meaning as the situation develops and as you engage in thought and action. Each stage of that situation's development opens up possibilities for further exploration of its fuller meaning. That will come only as you mark more distinctions, recognize more relations and connections, and take action. Your threatening situation becomes more meaningful when you notice *that desperate man with that gun pointed at you*, barking his demand for you to turn over your money.

Each new marking of connections and relations increases the meaning of the threatening situation. *Now* you see how the frightful, threatening, and doubtful dimensions of your situation are intimately connected—and so the meaning of what is happening emerges. Dewey emphasizes the role of qualities and consequences in this process of meaning-making:

This state of things in which qualitatively different feelings are not just had but are significant of objective differences, is mind. Feelings are no longer just felt. They have and they make *sense*; record and prophesy.

That is to say, difference in qualities (feelings) of acts when employed as indications of acts performed and to be performed and as signs of their consequences, *mean* something. And they mean it directly; the meaning is had as their own character. . . . Without language, the qualities or organic action that are feelings are pains, pleasures, odors, colors, noises, tones, only potentially and proleptically. With language they are discriminated and identified. They are then “objectified”; they are immediate traits of things. . . . The qualities were never “in” the organism; they always were qualities of interactions in which both extra-organic things and organisms partake. When named, they enable identification and discrimination of things to take place as means in a further course of inclusive interaction. (Dewey 1925/1981, 198)

Although I will not develop these themes here, Dewey proceeds to connect the emergence of meaning with the communicative use of language (symbolic interaction), and he regards this process as leading to the emergence of “mind” via shared meaning. Dewey observes that it is language and other forms of symbolic interaction that allow us to grasp most fully the meaning of things and to employ that meaning for inquiry and deliberation. It is crucial to recognize that the term *language*, as Dewey uses it, does not merely consist of spoken or written words; rather, it includes all forms of symbolic interaction by means of which we indicate significant qualities, patterns, and structures. Language in this rich sense is the basis of our ability to communicate with others, to coordinate actions, and to engage in fruitful inquiry through the employment of meaningful signs. Meaning is thus both (1) grounded in our bodily interactions—in the qualities and structures of objective situations; and (2) always social, because it would not exist in its fullness without communicative interactions and shared language, which give us the means of exploring the meaning of things.

Dewey notes the profound irony that language (in the broadest sense of symbolic communication in general) is both our great vehicle for the

growth of meaning, inquiry, and knowledge and simultaneously the source of our all-too-frequent failure to capture the depth and richness of our experience, thereby limiting our ability to understand and reconstruct our experience. Language both enriches meaning and at the same time, as a result of its selective character, ensures that we are forever doomed to overlook large and important parts of meaning. This fact, as we saw, is the basis for Gendlin’s entire project of recovering the deep processes of meaning, by looking beyond and beneath the formal, structural, conceptual, propositional, representational dimensions of meaning. It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the fundamental problems with traditional analytic philosophy of language is that it typically tries to account for all meaning in terms of just one very limited type of meaning relation—usually that of “reference” or, correspondingly, “truth conditions”—as if that single relation alone could embrace all of the ways in which something, even a word, can have meaning.

So-called truth-conditional semantics, made popular over the past thirty years especially by the writings of Donald Davidson (1967), assumes that only statements or utterances have meaning and that their meaning “cashes out” in terms of the conditions under which they would be true (or false). With meaning so narrowly and shallowly defined, most of what goes into human meaning is left out, typically by relegating it to background conditions, feelings, emotional coloring, or pragmatics. It was Dewey, once again, who presciently observed that meaning is a far broader notion than truth:

But the realm of meanings is wider than that of true-and-false meanings; it is more urgent and more fertile. . . . Poetic meanings, moral meanings, a large part of the goods of life are matters of richness and freedom of meanings, rather than of truth; a large part of our life is carried on in a realm of meanings to which truth and falsity as such are irrelevant. And the claim of philosophy to rival or displace science as a purveyor of truth seems to be mostly a compensatory gesture for failure to perform its proper task of liberating and clarifying meanings, including those scientifically authenticated. (Dewey 1925/1981, 307)

In a similar vein, J. L. Austin famously observed that the philosophy of his own day had been etiolated, as he liked to say, by its slavish insistence that “the sole business, the sole interesting business, of any utterance—that is, of anything we say—is to be true or at least false” (Austin 1970, 233).

In the more expansive and comprehensive sense of meaning that I have

been developing, meaning includes qualities, emotions, percepts, concepts, images, image schemas, metaphors, metonymies, and various other imaginative structures. Learning the meaning of something would thus include a growing sense of all the qualities, percepts, distinctions, recollections of what has gone before, and anticipations of possible future experience that follow from it. No isolated thing, percept, or quality has any meaning in itself. Things, qualities, events, and symbols have meaning *for us* because of how they connect with other aspects of our actual or possible experience. Meaning is relational and instrumental. According to the view I am developing, mere "redness" has no intrinsic meaning, no meaning in its immediacy and in itself, whereas the redness of blood, the redness of a swollen wound, the redness of a ripe bing cherry, the redness of my lover's lips, and the redness of an Oregon-coast sunset all have plenty of meaning, with each red having a different meaning, but one related in certain specific ways to the other reds. Another way of making this point is to say that the quality of redness means different things in different experienced situations. The redness of blood means life (or loss of life), the redness of a ripe bing cherry means the possibility of a certain exquisite taste and texture available to me if I eat that cherry, and the redness of a swollen wound means bodily insult, infection, danger, suffering, and the need for remedial therapeutic action. Any meaning that an isolated patch of red has for me will be parasitic on these other meanings of red—red lips, wounds, cherries, and sunsets.

Aspects of our experience take on meaning, then, insofar as they activate for us their relations to other actual or possible aspects of our experience. The redness of a wound becomes a sign of infection or inflammatory reaction. It portends pain and suffering and sometimes healing. It points to possible future medical complications if it is not treated. For those with medical knowledge, it might signify any of a number of possible causes and suggest any of a number of possible medical treatments. James and Dewey observed that once we recognize that one thing can point beyond itself and its immanent qualities to other qualities, structures, or experiences, our whole world is transformed from one in which we are mostly passive recipients of what happens to a quite different world, in which we can inquire, communicate with others, and coordinate our actions. Grasping meaning becomes a matter of selecting one or more qualities or patterns within a situation as pointing toward some different qualities or patterns, either in that same situation or in some other situation. For example, in Camus' *The Stranger*, there is a haunting image that is redolent with meaning precisely through its vast fund of connections to

other scenes, images, qualities, and ideas in the world evoked within the novel. Having returned from his mother's funeral, Meursault goes to the beach, meets a woman he had earlier known at his office, and brings her back to his nearly empty flat to spend the night. After she leaves the next morning, a Sunday morning, Meursault spends the entire day observing the passing of life in the streets below his balcony, mostly disengaged from the lives of those people—young and old, alone and in groups, with families or friends—who bustle about to their various Sunday events, each of them carrying on with their own sense of purpose. Meursault is but a detached observer of this play of life, unable to engage the meaning of what is passing before his eyes. As evening falls, after an entire day of detached observation of life, he finally rises from his chair on the balcony and eats his dinner of spaghetti and bread, standing up, alone in the growing darkness.

I wanted to smoke a cigarette at the window, but the air was getting colder and I felt a little chilled. I shut my windows, and as I was coming back I glanced at the mirror and saw a corner of my table with my alcohol lamp next to some pieces of bread. It occurred to me that anyway one more Sunday was over, that Maman was buried now, that I was going back to work, and that, really, nothing had changed. (Camus 1942/1988, 24)

Here is Meursault, alone in a mostly empty room, surrounded by the darkness. He sees, not directly but only in the mirror reflection, that haunting, sad, lonely image of a part of his table with only the dim light of a lamp and a few pieces of bread; these are images of alienation, loneliness, and emptiness. Meursault's situation reaches, via a wealth of both immediate and symbolic connections, back into the events of the burial of his mother and forward into the events about to unfold, in which his existence as a stranger—an alien in an alien world—leads to his undoing. But the power of this small scene is only an intensification of the way in which virtually any image or event we encounter can have meaning for us. Things and events have meaning by virtue of the way they call up something beyond them to which they are connected.

This "selection" or partial "taking" from the continuous flow of experience that lies at the heart of meaning is, on the one hand, the means of the very possibility of fruitful investigation, symbolic interaction, and communication; on the other hand, it simultaneously requires us to ignore the nonselected aspects of a situation. What we emphasize and, conversely, what we ignore will make all the difference in what "things" mean to us.

Abstraction is a great tool for the furtherance of human inquiry, but it is also responsible for much of the loss of meaning that is available to us in any given situation. As Dewey says,

Enter upon this road (of abstraction) and the time is sure to come when the appropriate object-of-knowledge is stripped of all that is immediate and qualitative, of all that is final, self-sufficient. Then it becomes an anatomized epitome of just and only those traits which are of indicative and instrumental import. (Dewey 1925/1981, 106; parentheses added)

In other words, continued processes of abstraction—however well they serve various purposes of inquiry, and however revealing and necessary they may be—do not always bring us closer to the fullness of a situation; they may take us farther from its full meaning. Hence, our individual and collective habits of grasping the meaning of anything via abstraction will fatefully determine how our world stands forth for us. And if our philosophies—our most comprehensive accounts of the meaning of things—are grounded on the most partial or superficial aspects of experience, then our entire understanding of life will be drastically impoverished.

It thus makes all the difference whether we take experience in the limited sense, as meaning “things as known or conceptualized,” or whether we take it in its fullness, as redolent with meaning that surpasses our undoubtedly useful abstractions from it. Part of philosophy’s job is to help us recover the fullest possible meaning of our experience—the pulsating, lived world that transcends any conceptual specification of it.

Philosophy of language, the principal repository of the theory of meaning in contemporary analytic philosophy, cannot provide an adequate theory of meaning, because it has selected for its “objects” of study only concepts, sentences, propositions, and words. Influenced by a pervasive behaviorism and positivism that eschewed “meanings,” “experiences,” and “mental states,” the philosophers who created the new field of “philosophy of language” during the 1940s and 1950s were restricted to taking only observable things, such as words and sentences (or utterances of them), to be the sole proper bearers of meaning. They treated words and sentences as quasi-objects that could be analyzed into their constituent parts. Even worse, they frequently accepted the logical empiricist division of utterances into those that were descriptive versus those that were expressive. The descriptive, truth-stating sentences were declared to be the rightful purveyors of cognitive meaning, their proper function being to make truth

claims. The expressive function of language was just that—expressive, and supposedly lacking significant cognitive content. The rest is old, tired history, a history of propositional, truth-conditional theories of language and their correlative views of mind, thought, and knowledge. The capacity of a “sign” to point beyond itself to actual or potential experiences got reduced to the thin notion of reference. And so John Searle, whose clear writing has helped make the technical aspects of the philosophy of language available to a broader audience, confidently asserts that the fundamental question of the philosophy of language is how words can relate to the world (Searle 1969, 3). Philosophy of language was built around the questions of how words refer and how sentences can be true or false. For non-truth-stating speech acts, this became the question of what conditions must be satisfied to successfully carry off the particular speech act being performed.

It is not my intention to underestimate the many contributions to our understanding of language and meaning that have come out of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. The philosophical work that has emerged from this orientation has given us many insights into reference, truth, and speech-act structure. But the chief mistake that many philosophers have made, and that has virtually defined contemporary philosophy of language, is the assumption that this approach to language can provide the basis for understanding meaning in general. The real problem is this: more often than not, the aspects of meaning that I have been surveying here—such as image schemas, qualities, emotions, affect contours, and conceptual metaphor—are dismissed as falling outside the domain of meaning proper. This dismissal is catastrophic from the perspective of an adequate account of meaning, because it peremptorily eliminates from consideration most of what goes into human meaning-making, particularly all of the body-based dimensions. It radically distinguishes linguistic meaning from all other types of symbolic interaction, and it assumes that if any of these forms of expression (e.g., painting, music, sculpture, architecture, dance, sign languages) have meaning, then it must be in some second-rate sense, as being parasitic on linguistic meaning (where “linguistic” is already a severely limited selection from the full scope of actual linguistic meaning).

What follows from this is that the philosophies of mind and theories of knowledge that are based on these versions of analytic philosophy of language inherit (and then reinforce) all of the ontological and epistemological dualisms (e.g., mind/body, cognitive/emotive, fact/value, knowledge/imagination) that give us a picture of human thought as cut off from the world, thereby requiring criteria for determining whether and how sen-

tences can be connected to things in the world. With this view, skepticism is never far behind, precisely because the meanings seem to get locked up within "mind" and then need to somehow get back in touch with "the world" from which they were originally separated.

Let me be more specific about the nature of the problem that I am claiming to identify in most mainstream, contemporary Anglo-American philosophy. It is the problem of the objectivist theory of meaning.

THE OBJECTIVIST THEORY OF MEANING

1. Words and sentences are the proper bearers of meaning.
2. The words from which meaningful sentences are built are regarded as conventional signs (which indeed they are).
3. We must then ask how those meaningless, conventional sign entities can ever come to acquire meaning. The answer is that they can be placed in relation to things, persons, and events in the world. So, we have words on the one hand and "the world" on the other, and the problem is how certain sequences of the first type of object (words) connect with certain sequences or concatenations of the second kind of objects (world). The meaning relation thus gets defined without any connection to the experience of the creature (i.e., the human) for whom the words are meaningful. Meanings end up being either "senses" grasped (Frege) or truth conditions (Davidson).
4. And if knowledge is to be objective, we will need literal terms (or literal concepts, in some versions) mapping directly onto parts of the world, at least at some points that will ground the web of belief. Otherwise, all our language could be an empty, meaningless tissue of mere sounds, signifying nothing. As Searle (1969) notes, since we "just know" that our language is meaningful and can sometimes give us knowledge of the world, then we'd better construct a theory of speech acts and reference that explains under what conditions this is possible.

What if, in direct opposition to the objectivist theory of meaning, we were to start (as I have in this book) with a mind that is not separate from, or out of ongoing contact with, its body and its world? What if we do not begin with arbitrary signs as exemplars of meaning, and what if we don't simply assume that truth conditions more or less roughly capture the full extent of meaning? The answer is that we get a very different conception of meaning—meaning as embodied—and, correspondingly, we get a very different conception of human thought and of the nature and purpose of philosophy.

AN EMBODIED, EXPERIENTIALIST VIEW OF MEANING

1. Meaning is embodied. It arises through embodied organism-environment interactions in which significant patterns are marked within the flow of experience. Meaning emerges as we engage the pervasive qualities of situations and note distinctions that make sense of our experience and carry it forward. The meaning of something is its connections to past, present, and future experiences, actual or possible.
2. The distinctions that we mark can be among qualities, affect contours, images, image schemas, or various kinds of connections within or across domains.
3. None of these aspects of meaning are necessarily conceptual or propositional in any traditional sense; so, as we saw in Gendlin's argument (in chapter 4), meaning involves the blending of the structural, formal, and conceptual dimensions on the one hand and the preconceptual, nonformal, felt dimensions on the other. Meaning resides in neither of these dimensions of experience alone, but only in their ongoing connectedness and interanimation.
4. The more cuts, or selections, we make within what we might call the flow of our thought-feeling, the greater the number of explicit connections we can make with other aspects of our experience. This is one type of growth of meaning, the growth that, according to Dewey, is made possible by language and all other types of symbolic communication.
5. What we call our "highest," or most abstract, concepts may not seem to be based on aspects of our sensorimotor experience, *but this is an illusion*. Concepts that we think of as utterly divorced from physical things and sensorimotor experiences (concepts such as justice, mind, knowledge, truth, and democracy) are never really independent of our embodiment, because the semantic and inferential structure of these abstract concepts is drawn from our sensorimotor interactions, typically by cross-domain mappings (conceptual metaphors). *This is the only way it could be for a creature with a body-mind who has neither a disembodied ego nor an eternal soul, for there is no nonbodily entity or process to perform the abstraction*. Our understanding of abstract notions is thus pervasively structured via systematic connections (neurally realized) among sensorimotor meanings and other, "higher" aspects of thought. Because these reentrant neural connections are activated automatically for us and operate for the most part beneath the level of our conscious awareness, we are fooled into believing that our abstract thoughts have nothing to do with our embodiment. However, it is precisely our embodiment that supports this illusion of disembodied thought.

6. The reason that the meaning of certain things can be so rich for us is that so many parts of our bodily experience are neurally connected and continually interact. Our sense of meanings that transcend the words available to us is nothing more than the richness and depth of connections that transcend any formalization, abstraction, or selection that we are able to make in a given situation.
7. The greatest mystery that remains for an embodied, experientialist theory of meaning is how creative imagination works—that is, how new meanings and new connections emerge. We have a partial understanding of some of the elements and processes involved here, such as Vittorio Gallese and George Lakoff's notion (2005) of cogs as the basic structures for extending sensorimotor meaning and inferences into abstract domains. Don Tucker (forthcoming) speculates on some of the neural architecture that makes imagining possible. We also have Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner's taxonomy (2002) of general patterns and strategies for conceptual blending. But we are really only beginning to see how something new can emerge that transcends and transforms what has gone before.

THE MEANING OF "THE BODY"

Up to this point, I have been focusing primarily on the *meaning* of the body—that is, on how meaning is grounded in the body. But what about the meaning of the term *body*? Just what do we mean by the idea of "body" when we say that meaning, thought, and mind are embodied? Any naturalistic view like the one I am developing cannot speak of "the body" and "the mind," for that would simply reinstate the mind/body dualism that I am going to such great lengths to deny. Hence, I have often used Dewey's term, "the body-mind," which is intended to capture the fact that what we call "mind" and "body" are not two separate and ontologically distinct entities or processes, but instead are aspects or abstractable dimensions of an interactive—or "transactive" (Dewey 1938/1991) or "enactive" (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 1991)—process.

The chief problem with our commonsense notion of the body is that it makes the body out to be a *thing*. It seems so obvious to most people that the body must be just an organized collection of skin, bones, blood, organs, nerves, and fluids, made up of various chemicals, all interacting together. We have natural sciences for studying these physical things and processes, and so it would seem that the story of the body can be told, more or less re-

ductively, by science. This makes it very difficult for most people to think of their mind (and identity) as thoroughly embodied, since they conceive of the body as a material thing—and they are utterly convinced that they most certainly cannot be a mere thing! Each of us believes, correctly, that he or she is surely *more than* a lump of pulsating flesh that will someday stop pulsating. Consequently, our commonsense view of the body as an object among other objects in the world leads many people to dismiss the idea that meaning, thought, and mind can be understood as inextricably tied to our bodies.

The challenge, of course, is to stop thinking of a human body as merely a thing. It was Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* that helped us see why our bodies cannot be understood merely as objects interacting with other objects: "My body appears to me as an attitude directed towards a certain existing or possible task. And indeed its spatiality is not, like that of external objects or like that of 'spatial sensations', a *spatiality of position*, but a *spatiality of situation*" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 100).

My body is never merely a thing; it is a *lived* body—what Merleau-Ponty called the "phenomenal body," the situation from which our world and experience flows: "It is never our objective body that we move, but our phenomenal body, and there is no mystery in that, since our body, as the potentiality of this or that part of the world, surges towards objects to be grasped and perceives them" (Merleau-Ponty 1962, 106).

Once we learn to give up our reductive, hypostatizing concepts of the body, we get a very much richer and more complex picture of how we are at once always embodied and yet also always more than a thing. In *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), George Lakoff and I expressed this by saying that any account of embodied mind that is even remotely adequate to the complexity of human nature will require multiple nonreductive levels of explanation. Meaning and mind are embodied at the very least at the following levels, without which there could not be a human body in its fullest manifestation.³

1. *The body as biological organism.* The principal physical locus of my being-in-the-world is the living, flesh-and-blood creature that I call "my body." My world extends out from and is oriented in relation to this body of mine. This body is a functioning biological organism that can perceive, move, respond to, and transform its environment. It is this whole body, with its various systems working in marvelous coordination, that makes

3. For other ways of carving up the levels or aspects of embodiment, see Rohrer, forthcoming; Gallagher 2005; and Anderson 2003.

possible the qualities, images, feelings, emotions, and thought patterns that constitute the ground of our meaning and understanding. It requires at least a minimally functioning brain and nervous system, which is a necessary condition of any living human body-mind. However, my body is quite obviously far more than just my brain and central nervous system. It includes the preconscious capacities for bodily posture and movement that Shaun Gallagher (2005) names the *body schema*. Nor is my body merely a representation in my brain. No human is, or could ever be, merely a “brain-in-a-vat.” The extensive philosophical literature on the so-called brain-in-a-vat thought experiment, made famous by Putnam (1981), is interesting only insofar as it provides a way of thinking about what goes into meaning and selfhood. Otherwise, the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis is laughable, as Putnam showed, because it leaves out the critical role of our body-in-interaction-with-our-world that defines human meaning, reference, and truth.

2. *The ecological body.* There is no body without an environment, no body without the ongoing flow of organism-environment interaction that defines our realities. Once again, the trick is to avoid the dualism of organism and environment, a dualism that falsely assumes the existence of two independent entities, each bringing its own structure and preestablished identity into the interactions. Instead, we must think of organism (or body) and environment in the same way that we must think of mind and body, as aspects of one continuous process. As Gerald Edelman (1992) has shown, both the brain and its body develop into human corporeality only by virtue of the precise kinds of organism-environment couplings, with their precise temporal sequencing, that mold the neural development of our species. We are thus left with the somewhat counterintuitive idea that the body is not separate from its environment and that any boundaries we choose to mark between them are merely artifacts of our interests and forms of inquiry.

3. *The phenomenological body.* This is our body as we live it and experience it. There is a way that it feels to be embodied in the way that I am embodied. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1999) rightly calls this the “tactile-kinaesthetic body”—the living, moving, feeling, pulsing body of our being-in-the-world. We are aware of our own bodies through proprioception (our feeling of our bodily posture and orientation), through our kinesthetic sensations of bodily movement, and through our awareness of our internal bodily states via feeling and emotion, which constitute our felt sense of ourselves. Gallagher’s term *body image* (2005) is meant to capture our reflexive and self-referential perceptions, attitudes, and beliefs about our bodies at this phenomenological level.

4. *The social body.* The human environment of which the body partakes is not just physical or biological. It is also composed of intersubjective relations and coordinations of experience. This was a central theme of chapter 2, in which I argued that we are all “big babies” and that this is not a bad thing at all. We are what we are only in and through others and by virtue of our intersubjective capacity to communicate shared meanings (Trevathan 1993; Stern 1985; Stawarska 2003). Some of our bodily capacities are either evolutionarily selected for or merely adapted to the forms of social interactions that make us who we are.

5. *The cultural body.* Our environments are not only physical and social. They are constituted also by cultural artifacts, practices, institutions, rituals, and modes of interaction that transcend and shape any particular body and any particular bodily action. These cultural dimensions include gender, race, class (socioeconomic status), aesthetic values, and various modes of bodily posture and movement. There may well be commonalities of bodily comportment across cultures, but cultural differences in the shaping and understanding of the body are real and significant. If there is a way to “throw like a girl” (Young 1980), that is certainly not a biological or physiological essence, but rather a consequence of social and cultural conditioning. That is why it can change as attitudes and practices surrounding women change (an example is the recent dramatic increase in girls’ and women’s participation in sports). The ways people stand, walk, and hold themselves often vary noticeably across cultures and subcultures and at different times in history. Cultural institutions, practices, and values provide shared (“external”) structures that influence the development of our bodily way of engaging our world. It is popular today in various circles to speak of culture as autonomous and independent of individual bodies. Culture has a *relative* stability and independence. But there is no culture without embodied creatures who enact it through customs, practices, actions, and rituals. Even though aspects of culture obviously transcend and outlive particular individuals, those artifacts and practices have *no* meaning without people who use the artifacts while engaging in complex social practices.

The principal problem with our commonsense or folk-theoretical concept of the body is that it is limited almost exclusively to the biological body. We see the body as that physical “thing,” and we see everything else (environment, social relations, and culture) as standing outside of our bodies. This is the mistake that leads many to assume that “body” and “mind” must obviously be two different kinds of things. However, *the reduction of the body to the mere physical organism is just as misguided as the opposite*

error of claiming that the body is nothing but a cultural construction. They are both reductions; the first leaves out large parts of what makes meaning and mind possible, and the second leaves out many of the sources of, and constraints on, meaning and mind that come from the character of our corporeal rootedness in the biological-ecological processes of life.

The human body has all five of the dimensions outlined above, and it cannot be reduced to any one (or two or three) of them. I do not object to colloquial uses of "my body," "the body," and "your body" to refer to an individual fleshy creature when we are talking about ourselves and others. Clearly, our most central sense of the term *human body* is the living, biological body, typically correlated with our felt sense of our phenomenological body. What I am objecting to, and where the danger arises, is when we take our commonsense or folk-theoretical notion of the body as the basis for our entire philosophical, psychological, and religious view of the body. The problem, to repeat, is that our simplistic, commonsense view tends to land us in a philosophically and scientifically untenable dualism of body and mind. It also tends to reduce the body to a mere object.

This complex view of multiple aspects of our embodiment thus requires us to always entertain multiple methods of inquiry and levels of explanation for anything pertaining to our body-mind. No single method of inquiry could ever capture everything we need to help us understand the tightly interwoven phenomena of body, meaning, and mind. For example, unless human beings as a species someday lose their capacity for consciousness, we are never going to give up the phenomenological level of explanation. At the very least, we are going to define many of the primary phenomena of mind on the basis of our felt experience of our bodies and our world. Consequently, the adequacy of explanations at other levels (such as accounts from cognitive neuroscience) is going to be judged, in part, by how well they help us understand the phenomena so described (i.e., the phenomenological body). What else could we expect, since all explanations are explanations *to* and *for* ourselves, geared to helping *us* understand our world? They are necessarily going to be evaluated by us relative to our body-based capacities for meaning-making, inquiry, and thought.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE EMBODIED MIND

In the preface and introduction to this book, I suggested that a full appreciation of the aesthetics of meaning and thought as being tied to the body would require us to reconsider some of our most dearly held views

about what it means to be human. We can now revisit some of those key implications with a greater appreciation of their significance. We can suggest why it should matter whether we take seriously the embodiment of mind and meaning.

1. *Mind and body are not two things.* A human being is not two ontologically different kinds of thing joined together. Mind is not a mysterious metaphysical guest that just happens to drop in for a temporary visit at the home of the body. The human mind is not contained in the body, but emerges from and co-evolves with the body. The language I have been using throughout this book to sum up this point is this: A human being is a body-mind, that is, an organic, continually developing process of events. Human mind and meaning require at least a partially functioning human brain within at least a partially functioning human body that is in ongoing interaction with complex environments that are at once physical, social, and cultural. These environments both *shape* and *are shaped by* the humans who inhabit them.

2. *Human meaning is embodied.* From the moment of our entrance into the world, and apparently even in the womb, we begin to learn the meaning of things at the most primordial bodily level. Things are meaningful by virtue of their relations to other actual or possible qualities, feelings, emotions, images, image schemas, and concepts. We begin our lives mostly by feeling or sensing this vast complex of meaning, and we never cease to access it *via* feeling, even when we make use of our culture's most remarkable tools of symbolic expression and interaction.

3. *Understanding and reasoning are embodied.* Our understanding, which is our way of making sense of our world, is embodied, precisely because our meaning-making capacities are embodied. Our resources for making sense of our world are based primarily on our sensorimotor capacities, which have neural connections to other parts of the brain responsible for planning, deliberating, and reasoning. Our brains recruit patterns of sensorimotor inference for the performance of what we regard as abstract inference, that is, reasoning about abstract entities and events. At present, the thesis of the embodiment of meaning and reason is only an explanatory hypothesis. There is so far only a modest amount of evidence for the embodiment-of-reason aspect of the hypothesis, but it is currently the most strongly supported hypothesis I am aware of that would articulate a nondualistic, naturalistic view of mind, thought, and language.

4. *Human beings are metaphorical creatures.* Conceptual metaphor is a nearly omnipresent part of the human capacity for abstract conceptualization and reasoning. There are other imaginative structures involved in

abstraction, but conceptual metaphor shows up in virtually all of our abstract thinking. The power of conceptual metaphor is that it permits us to use the semantics and inferential structure of our bodily experience as a primary way of making sense of abstract entities, relations, and events. It follows from this that literalism, which claims that all of our meaningful concepts can be spelled out literally, is false, misleading, and very dangerous. Literalism is false because you cannot find an adequate literal core for each abstract concept that can account for the semantics and inference structure of the concept. Literalism is misleading because it tempts you back into the traditional narrow focus on reference and truth conditions as the sole bases for meaning. Literalism is dangerous because it leads to the misguided quest for certainty and for absolute truth. Literalism lies at the heart of fundamentalism.

5. *There is no absolute truth, but there are plenty of human truths.* I have not argued this point in the present book, but it is elaborated by Lakoff and me in *Philosophy in the Flesh* (1999), and it is too important to overlook. I want only to point out here that *human life does not require absolute truths*. Neither science, nor morality, nor philosophy, nor politics, nor spirituality really need absolute truths, even though most of our traditional theories in these areas assume that they are founded on absolute (disembodied, universal, eternal) truths. Human truth, by contrast, arises in the context of human inquiry, relies on embodied meaning, and is relative to our values and interests. Finite, fallible, human truth is all the truth we have, and all we need. As Hilary Putnam is so fond of observing, the trail of the human serpent is everywhere.

6. *Human freedom.* In this book, I have provided no explicit arguments about the nature of freedom. However, the view that is most clearly at odds with the account of human nature developed here is the Kantian idea of radical freedom. This is the view that we are, or possess, a transcendent ego that is the locus of our capacity to negate any bodily, social, or cultural influence, habit, or tendency. This is the idea that we are forever free to choose who and what we shall become. The popularity of the idea of radical freedom no doubt stems from its compatibility with our cultural notions of moral responsibility and our religious aspirations for eternal life. By contrast, the concept of freedom that is supported by the naturalistic idea of the body-mind is a modest freedom to contribute to transformations of our situation, and thereby to self-transformations.

7. *The person you are cannot survive the death of your body.* As controversial and distressing as this claim might be, it follows directly from the embodiment of mind. Let us be quite clear about what precisely my claim

is: If there is anything that survives the death of your body, it could not be the *you* that we know and love. For *your* experience is made possible by the working of your (human) brain, within the workings of your (human) body, as it engages its (human-related) environments. Any *you* that survived bodily death would lack your memories, your experience, your emotions, and your grasp of the meaning of things. Notice that even popular films like *Heaven Can Wait*, *Ghost*, and *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers* are all predicated on some spirit's finding the requisite human body to inhabit so that it can be a person, whether for good or evil purposes.

8. *Embodied spirituality.* Spirituality has always been connected to the idea that we are either part of, or can stand in relation to, something that transcends our limited situation, perspective, or embodiment. But there are at least two plausible conceptions of transcendence. One is what I call *vertical transcendence*, the alleged capacity to rise above and shed our finite human form and to "plug into" the infinite. Throughout virtually all of human history, humanity's plight has been tied to our finiteness, which each of us experiences as limitation, weakness, dependence, alienation, loss of meaning, absence of love, and anxiety over sickness and death. If there were such a thing as vertical transcendence, it would indeed answer the dilemma of human finitude, at least if our identity could be carried over into the infinite. But there is a different notion of transcendence, which we might call *horizontal transcendence*, that recognizes the inescapability of human finitude and is compatible with the embodiment of meaning, mind, and personal identity. From this human perspective, transcendence consists in our happy ability to sometimes "go beyond" our present situation in transformative acts that change both our world and ourselves. This is tied to a sense of ourselves as part of a broader human and more-than-human ongoing process in which change, creativity, and growth of meaning are possible. Faith thus becomes faith in the possibility of genuine, positive transformation that increases richness of meanings, harmony among species, and flourishing, not just at the human level, but in the world as an ongoing creative development. Hope is commitment to the possibility of realizing some of this growth—not in some final eschatological transformation of the world, but rather *locally*, in our day-to-day struggles and joys. Grace is the undeserved experience of transformative growth even in spite of your individual or communal failures to do what would make things better. Love is a commitment to the well-being of others in a way that takes you at least partly beyond your ego-centered needs and desires and opens up your potential to respect and care for others and for your world. None of this is grounded in the infinite, but rather in the

creative possibilities of finite human experience. It gives each of us more good work to do than we can possibly realize within our lifetime.

9. *Philosophy as a search for meaning.* Finally, given the limitations of embodied human understanding, philosophy cannot be properly construed in the traditional ways—as, for instance, a quest for certain knowledge, the search for absolute truth, the pursuit of supreme moral principles, or the discovery of Being-Itself. Instead, as Dewey argued, philosophy is reflective inquiry into the fullest, richest, deepest meaning of experience, as a way of helping us deal with the real problems of human existence that define our existential condition. Philosophy needs to help us reestablish our visceral connection to ourselves, to other people, and to the world. It should help us rediscover the experiential depth of the situations we find ourselves in, so that we can base our inquiry and decisions on an appropriately complex understanding of the meaning of what we are encountering. And then philosophy must employ the capacities and tools of the embodied mind in an attempt to transform our situation for the better.

Critics of pragmatist philosophy have infamously, and mistakenly, claimed that pragmatism reduces to the view that what is true, good, and right is nothing more than whatever permits us to achieve our goals or to satisfy any interests we might have. This mischaracterization draws on our commonsense use of the term *pragmatic* to mean “practical”—conducive to problem-solving. By contrast, when genuine pragmatist philosophy talks about remaking experience, it recognizes that our concern must be not only determining the best means to some end, but also assessing the nature, the long-term adequacy, and the general appropriateness of the ends themselves. In light of this ongoing reflection, it recognizes that we may need to revise and reform those ends as experience develops. Pragmatism is about discerning the full meaning of experience and transforming experience for the better. What “the better” is must be the focus of careful reflection, and it is seldom either utterly clear, unproblematically given in advance, or monolithic in nature. Pragmatism’s methods for transforming situations are modeled more on the creation and judging of the arts than on simplistic means-ends reasoning. So understood—as critical, constructive, and expansive inquiry—philosophy is the most meaningful and powerful way we have of trying to live rightly and well.

THE ART OF LIFE

The view I have been exploring in this book amounts, in its essentials, to this: We humans live in a human-related world, for even the more-than-

human world can only be understood and engaged by us via the structures and processes of human understanding and action. Our meaning is human meaning—meaning grounded in our human bodies, in their humanly encountered environments. All of the meaning we can make and all of the values we hold grow out of our humanity-interacting-with-our-world.

Our humanity encompasses our animal needs, our personal relationships, our need and capacity for love, our social relations, our cultural institutions and practices, and our spirituality. We make sense of all of these dimensions of our being by means of body-based feeling, conceptualization, reasoning, and symbolic expressions. Our aspirations for transcendence must be realized not in attempts to escape our bodily habitation, but rather by employing it in our ongoing efforts to transform ourselves and our world for the better.

We are born into this world, make of it what we can while we live, and return to its earthiness when, at last, our functional integrity disintegrates forever. The art of our lives is the art of the meaning of the body. In some people, it is beautiful art.

MARK JOHNSON

The Meaning of the Body

AEStHETICS OF HUMAN UNDERSTANDING

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FOR MY CHILDREN:

Paul, who is joyful and kind of heart, and

Sarah, who has a poet's imagination

CONTENTS

<i>Preface: The Need for an Aesthetics of Human Meaning</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xv
Introduction: Meaning Is More Than Words and Deeper Than Concepts	I
PART I: <i>Bodily Meaning and Felt Sense</i>	17
1 The Movement of Life	19
2 Big Babies	33
3 "Since Feeling Is First": Emotional Dimensions of Meaning	52
4 The Grounding of Meaning in the Qualities of Life	69
5 Feeling William James's "But": The Aesthetics of Reasoning and Logic	86
PART II: <i>Embodied Meaning and the Sciences of Mind</i>	111
6 The Origin of Meaning in Organism-Environment Coupling: A Nonrepresentational View of Mind	113
7 The Corporeal Roots of Symbolic Meaning	135
8 The Brain's Role in Meaning	155
9 From Embodied Meaning to Abstract Thought	176

PART III: <i>Embodied Meaning, Aesthetics, and Art</i>	207
10 Art as an Exemplar of Meaning-Making	209
11 Music and the Flow of Meaning	235
12 The Meaning of the Body	263
<i>References</i>	285
<i>Index</i>	297

Color plates follow page 206

PREFACE

The Need for an Aesthetics of Human Meaning

People want their lives to be meaningful. This desire—this *eros*—for meaning is so strong in us that we are sometimes even willing to risk death in our pursuit of meaning and fulfillment. It is our need to make sense of our experience and to inquire into its overall meaning and significance that has kept philosophy alive since the dawn of reflective thinking in our species. When philosophy ceases to further our quest for meaning—when it stops addressing the recurring problems that define the human condition—it loses its relevance to human existence.

Unfortunately, meaning is a big, messy, multidimensional concept that is applied to everything from grandiose notions like the meaning of life all the way down to the specific meanings of single words or even morphemes. This book is about meaning—what it is, where it comes from, and how it is made. The guiding theme is that meaning grows from our visceral connections to life and the bodily conditions of life. We are born into the world as creatures of the flesh, and it is through our bodily perceptions, movements, emotions, and feelings that meaning becomes possible and takes the forms it does. From the day we are brought kicking and screaming into the world, what and how anything is meaningful to us is shaped by our specific form of incarnation.

My work over the past three decades has focused primarily on the bodily sources of meaning, imagination, and reasoning. I drew from phenomenology, linguistics, and the newly emerging cognitive sciences to explain how aspects of our bodily experience give rise to our conceptualization and reasoning. However, I have come to realize that, even