

flesh of his body; life above life, in infinite degrees." Far from saying that the body is central to human being, Emerson here seems to be presenting a standard Neoplatonic image in which the body, although "life," is not the highest life, precisely not what Jacobson calls "the ineffable cause" of the world. When considering this passage note Emerson's strong embrace of traditional metaphysical categories, e.g. "Being," "First Cause," etc., and consider the question: even if this is all a perspective on things, why should one believe it is an illusory perspective?

Finally, a word about pragmatism in the book. Jacobson refers to Dewey on two occasions, making the interesting point that Dewey's "Copernican Revolution" offers a picture of things like that of the later Emerson: "neither self nor world, neither soul nor nature, is the centre" (pp. 124, 5)<sup>6</sup>. There are no references to Peirce or James, or to any other pragmatist writers or commentators, and the use of the word "pragmatism" throughout the book is rather loose. When Jacobson claims that in "Experience," Emerson provides an "essentially pragmatic revaluation of causality" in describing "the dispersal of the principle of causality in its effects" (p. 139), one wants to ask whether this "dispersal" had not been originally accomplished by David Hume. Jacobson does not usually tie his characterizations of allegedly pragmatic elements in Emerson's thought to any standard pragmatist texts.

In conclusion, this is a serious book from which students of Emerson can learn. There is enough gold in these hills to make the march through the sometimes overly Heideggerized exegesis worth the effort.

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## NOTES

1. *The Collected Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Robert Spiller, et al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1971—), I, 103.

Intertextual references are to the book under review.

2. Emerson, II, p.29.
3. Emerson, III, p.43.
4. Emerson, I, p.10.
5. Emerson, III, p.42.
6. *The Later Works of John Dewey*, Vol. 4 (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press), 232.

*Pragmatism and Pluralism: John Dewey's Significance for Theology*

Jerome Paul Soneson

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xvii + 198 pp.

Jerome Paul Soneson has undertaken a task in this volume that many, including this reviewer, would consider at the outset to be profoundly misguided. How does one reconcile Dewey's descriptive naturalism, a naturalism that, as noted by Santayana, concentrates on the instrumental foreground, with a theological method that can shed light on the elusive nature of the divine, a divine that can only be partially confined to the finite goods of emergent community? It is the merit of this work that some genuine progress is made in the direction of showing how a transformed Deweyian anthropology, attuned to the norms of healthy communal life, can bring religious norms and values into the context of pragmatism and the concept of social problem solving. As is well known to any serious student of Dewey, the one place where religious values might find some purchase is in the domain of art and a deepened anthropology. Yet these gains, to be discussed below, come at a high price, a price that many may not be willing to pay.

Soneson begins his analysis of the problematic of pluralism with the recognition that we are indeed in a period of profound theologi-

cal flux. In the small world of Protestant Christianity, to cite only one example, it makes no sense to argue for one binding method or perspective that can unify the thought patterns of even one confessional community, no matter how historically embedded that community might be. Race, class, and gender analyses have each moved toward the divine, not to mention religious experience, with distinctive methods and aspirations. Norms are held to be so context dependent that it is impossible to find or shape any categorial structure that can transcend its finite conditions of origin in some base of power, a base that is presumably corrupt in some respect. Put in metaphorical terms: theology is now constituted by the war of the powers. Any notion of God's self-disclosure is held to be deeply suspect by a corroding hermeneutics of suspicion that can barely conceive of anything extra-human on the edges of our meaning horizons.

For Sonesson, this situation, which is ambiguous in its riches and its demons, calls for a renewed understanding of pragmatism as the only method available that can shed light on pluralism, in both its religious and non-religious forms. He sees a direct link between Dewey's analysis of the conflict of cultural norms and the current conflict of religious norms. That is, one can take the instruments that Dewey developed for ameliorating cultural clashes and apply them to the most recalcitrant and dangerous clashes within culture, those of finite religious communities. There is a sense in which Dewey belongs to the camp that insists that culture is the genus of which religion is the species. From this it seems to follow that what is good for the genus is good for the subaltern configuration.

Sonesson's procedure is to move from Dewey's anthropology, toward an analysis of value as embedded within historical horizons, toward a deepened understanding of communication within normative and self-critical community. He engages in a detailed and sensitive analysis of many key texts, refusing to confine himself to Dewey's slim volume *A Common Faith* (a volume which has little to offer to the theologian). His hermeneutic strategy, which is both daring and refreshing, is to assume that Dewey is a religious thinker throughout:

Although Dewey did not focus his thought upon religion

until late in life and even then only briefly, it is possible to argue that he is fundamentally a religious thinker, since what informs and motivates all his thinking is his abiding concern for meaningful orientation and human fulfillment. (pp. 126-127)

This conception of religion, namely, that it is concerned with a deepened anthropology of human fulfillment, is certainly debatable. From a theological perspective, it is always difficult to find the religious heart in a perspective that does not understand at least natural grace, let alone a deep sense of estrangement. One is reminded of the oft cited debate between Paul Tillich and John Herman Randall Jr., during their jointly taught seminar at Columbia. Randall referred to the "fix" that humans find themselves in, while Tillich, in evident irritation, referred to the more basic estrangement from the ground of Being that enveloped all that we say, make, or enact. The Deweyan side of this debate assumed that instrumental forms of control could ameliorate such 'fixes' and reconcile the conflicting norms that were momentarily at odds. The Tillichian side, which is for me the more profound, understood that no 'fix' would hold steady that was not empowered from a source outside of the self.

Of course, Soneson is very much aware of this type of debate and cites Karl Barth as someone who would be profoundly nervous about Dewey's idea that the norms pertaining to God could be brought into 'horizontal' intersection with reigning cultural norms (cf. p. 89n & p.192n). Yet he quickly moves away from such critiques, siding with a kind of neo-Kantianism as expressed by the Harvard theologian Gordon Kaufman. I am not at all surprised to see the wedding of neo-Kantianism with a revisionist understanding of Dewey. In both cases, the God problematic becomes narrowed down to an analysis of how humans shape their values (ideas of God) outside of the power of the divine itself.

Put differently, what we get from both Soneson and Dewey is a *functional* analysis of religion whose primary concern is with welding all human functions to the ultimate ideal(s) of religion. The most

compelling analogue to the ultimacy of religion is, as noted, in the sphere of art. In great art we have the consummatory phase of human experience in which qualities emerge to shape present immediacies into what religion would call an epiphany. Like Schleiermacher before him, Dewey comes closest to the religious sphere when he sees the function of art in liberating and transforming human experience. In the world of art, which is not, of course, a separate sphere so much as a potential *within* experience, we encounter something that is not a strictly instrumental value. Sonesson beautifully expresses this constellation:

According to Dewey, art is that dynamic process by which established normative interests are subject to continual growth and transformation so that human beings are able to respond more appropriately to the increasingly complex, ambiguous, and novel contexts of their lives. This means that art is capable of functioning as the formal norm for judgment of interests and their development. (p.52)

Art, more properly, the aesthetic quality of experience, is actually part of the evolutionary growth of value and meaning within communities. Aesthetic interests are preliminary rather than ultimate, although Dewey remained confused on the issue. In the transition from a preliminary to an ultimate norm aesthetic quality becomes religious quality, itself still subject to communal critique and evolution.

Sonesson highlights Dewey's commitment to novelty and growth within both nature and human horizons. Even though he distances himself from Rorty's failure to understand the role of both metaphysics and nature in Dewey (cf. pp. 162-163), he privileges the role of human horizons over nature in his understanding of the role of religious values within the world. That is, religious values are in and of human selves and their communities, rather than emergent products of nature (the latter position is at least hinted at by Henry Nelson Wieman in his *The Source of Human Good*— a text noted by Sonesson).

The positive focus of Sonesson's analysis is on the emergence of language, not as subjective expression but as communal connection, in shaping values and norms around a transformed self that is open to the depths (however shallow they might be!) of religious value in an evolutionary context. His ultimate goal in this work is with showing how Dewey's instrumentalism can actually become a (the?) theological method for bringing religious communities into creative intersection. Citing the Methodist theologian John Cobb Jr., Sonesson argues that such intersection must be one in which each dialogue partner is ready to experience a change in her or his *own* horizon of meaning. He makes the sociological claim that we are now in a position, at least in the world of 'liberal' religion, to become more and more open to such risks and possible transformations of normative communities. Insofar as we are changed anthropologically, we can become changed in the religious sphere.

Our current situation, then, is one that involves "...a conflict among the comprehensive, normative interests of religious traditions" (p. 182). This is also wedded to "...a lack of communication and community" (p. 182). Dewey's theological method, if this phrase is not too jarring, enables us to overcome such conflicts by enhancing the role of communication in life. Sonesson is aware of the underlying semiotic in Dewey that argues that we move from events and powers to meaning when we attribute a sign or symbol to something within nature. Religious signs are those that open us to a sense of mystery that does not otherwise emerge within communal life. Sonesson reminds us that the concept of "mystery" does function in Dewey's perspective in a muted way, and that this concept/experience can be quickened to serve more genuine religious interests.

Where aesthetic experience does give way to religious experience is in the latter's sense of an intra-worldly totality that is not a product of given finite experiences. Religious experience forms a kind of horizon of horizons within which all other experiences can find their finite location within a self-corrective community. Not only does religious experience unify all other norms and values, it serves to reinforce the concept of growth *per se*. Religion must struggle to free

itself from antecedent conditions, such as those of text, founder, or sacred history, so that it can enter into the sheer power of the growth of novelty on the edges of attained communal life. This view of religion intensifies Dewey's implicit eschatological sensibility by showing us a view of religious value in the not yet. Of course, a Deweyian eschatology is one that remains firmly embedded in the world of human agents/recipients. Insofar as any religion embraces supernaturalism it utterly fails to understand how religious experience actually obtains within the self and its interpretive communities. Insofar as there is anything akin to the Spirit here, it is little more than the kind of watered down spirit of Santayana's domain of the human imagination.

The pluralism issue, resolved for Soneson by Dewey's understanding of enhanced communication within self-critical communities, opens to the more difficult issue of God itself. Soneson, in keeping with what I have called his implicit neo-Kantianism, relegates God to the status of a human idea or ideal that has a certain function within the community. This idea is both functional and regulative, yet it remains astonishingly thin. We are not so much grasped by God as we shape an idea that can do certain types of work within an instrumental context. Even though this context is one that remains sensitive to quality, both aesthetic, and religious, its God is little more than a contrivance that serves to bring unity to warring norms. Soneson lists two functions for the idea of God. The first is that it gives us a sense of the infinite, which in turn helps us to finitize our own lives. The second is that it can humanize our lives by showing us what is most important in terms of *our* fulfillment (cf. pp. 191-192). Here we see how Dewey's omnivorous anthropology conquers the ontological dimensions of the divine by shrinking them into finite human need. God, as that than which nothing greater can be conceived, makes me feel properly finite. Also, God, that is, my *idea* of God, can help me find value within my community so that my various ideals have some kind of orderly arrangement.

At least with Peirce we can enter into active communion with a God that we did not make, while with Dewey/Soneson we get an

instrumental projection that fulfills certain humanly defined needs. It is at this point that the crunch comes in Soneson's project. There are two argumentative strategies that one can take. Either one can say that Soneson succeeds very well in a project that is from the start doomed to failure, or one can say that there are other possibilities within Dewey that might move the problematic in a different direction. In my concluding remarks I will say something about each of these possibilities.

There has long been a need to explore as fully as possible the potential 'theological' dimensions of Dewey's work. His later reflections on religion, as truncated and inconclusive as they are, are part of a much larger enterprise that points in the direction of religious experience, often without being aware that it is doing so. Soneson works through many of the appropriate texts with some care to mine them for their proleptic hints of a post-aesthetic domain. At its best this book assembles a series of reminders (to use Wittgenstein's phrase) that show us a possible inner trajectory for Dewey's project. Put in stark terms: if one wants to find the religious Dewey, this book is necessary reading. What one finds, is, of course, a function of how deeply one understands religious experience. For many, the conclusion of the search is not fool's gold, but a renewed understanding of the possibilities for community in a pluralistic horizon.

In spite of the care with which Soneson undertakes his project, he does give us a certain kind of Dewey. The irony is that we do get a religious Dewey, but one who has been filtered through neo-Kantianism and, in spite of protests to the contrary, neopragmatism. Neither Kant (and his heirs) nor Rorty understand much of religion. To work within such a hermeneutic horizon is to create an artificially shrunken work in which values, in spite of their alleged numinous and consummatory quality, remain human projections on a backdrop that merely serves as a place holder.

Is there another Dewey waiting in the wings that can be freed from such a narrow horizon? Needless to say, this is a difficult question. I suspect that there are two places to look for a "theonomous" (i.e., autonomy open to its depths) Dewey. The first is in Soneson's



