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JOHN DEWEY'S SENSIBLE MYSTICISM

In discussing Dewey's consideration of practical wisdom, I noted the critiques of his work that suggested he did not pay enough attention to the receptive side of the intellect. Yet I believe he *did* attend to receptivity, even to the point of defining a religious dimension of human experience. Dewey notoriously rejected *religions* and their dogmatic attachment to the supernatural. Nevertheless, like James, he notably defended *the religious* as an important feature of our natural, human condition. Furthermore, as Kestenbaum convincingly argues, Dewey retained a naturalized view of transcendence in which our ideals and meanings stand beyond us:

> The transcendent for Dewey is no metaphysical sedative; neither is it a metaphysical justification to keep things moving and growing. What the transcendental ideal *is*—specifically, what he called "the grace and the severity of the ideal"—was the most consistent background and stimulus for Dewey's philosophical work.[1]

Operating in the spirit of James's radical empiricism, Dewey found a place for religiosity in human experience. Here I hope to mark out his description of what I call Dewey's "sensible mysticism" in what I might call a "reconstructed" way.

What I have to say in this connection about Dewey's work is not radically new. I simply want to bring attention to what for Dewey was commonplace in his own work. Henry James, Sr., said of Emerson that he had two silhouettes—one, that of a mystic; the other, that of a down-to-earth and practical Yankee. Dewey, who was fonder of Emerson than is sometimes acknowledged, displays a similar complexity of character. He is often portrayed as a quiet, dry, and functional New Englander whose aims are practical in a narrow sense; but Dewey's work discloses another dimension of Dewey: a wilder, richer, quasi–Emersonian figure. In his book *The Horizons of Feeling*, Tom Alexander provides insight into this side of Dewey. Nevertheless, Dewey's wilder side is still often ignored, marginalized, or misread, leading to two related, problematic interpretations of Deweyan pragmatism: (1) that it is a mechanical instrumentalism whose disciples are intended to tinker with the pragmatic ideas from a Deweyan toolbox, and (2) that it is uninteresting at best and reductionist at worst. These are issues we raised earlier in discussing working certainty and wisdom. In response, I want to suggest a locus for the "immediacy" and receptivity that seem absent when we study Dewey too narrowly through his instrumentalism. Because Dewey's influence has already been extensive in American culture and because his work continues to inform current debates, it is important to remind ourselves of this other dimension of Dewey's thought. The last thing we need is another generation of educational theorists who misread and misemploy Dewey's thought. To speak in old-fashioned terms, the "real" John Dewey was a thoroughgoing renegade, who in *A Common Faith* used the word "God" when he knew it would offend believers and nonbelievers alike. To provoke our remembrance of this Dewey, I would like to say a few words about Dewey's sensible mysticism.

In light of Dewey's overt resistance to traditional mysticism as an access to knowledge, it seems out of place to identify Dewey with any

sort of mysticism. But I have in mind William Ernest Hocking's pragmatically revised conception of mysticism expressed in his seminal work *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*. Hocking focused on two elements that lend themselves to my naming Dewey a mystic. The first is the fallibility of mystical experiences: "The mystic himself knows that his insight is unfinished and unsatisfactory, even while he declares his experience to be one of perfect satisfaction."[2] The second is that this "unfinishedness" requires that the mystic develop her or his insight in thought. As Hocking put it, "the art of the mystic is closely allied with the art of thinking" and "we may yet find that thinking is definable as a partial worship."[3] The upshot is that mysticism, as understood by Hocking, is an experience that is at once immediately satisfying *and* open to reflective thinking in its wake. Mysticism is defined "not by its doctrine but by its deed, the deed of worship in its fully developed form"—that is, the deed of thinking.[4] In Dewey's world, the qualitative immediacy of *an* experience provides the initial satisfying experience, and "thinking" that grows out of this experience plays the role of worship.

The theme of qualitative immediacy ranges across the whole of Dewey's corpus, making featured appearances in *Psychology*, *The Reconstruction of Philosophy, Experience and Nature, Ethics*, and *Art as Experience,* among other texts. His biographer Dykhuizen tells us that Dewey was initially taken with what he called "intuitionalism." Gradually, Dewey gave up intuitionalism as a mode of cognition in favor of the more pragmatic belief that all cognition—and all experience—is mediated. Another way to look at this transition is that Dewey, like Peirce, transformed what "intuition" might mean. For Dewey, intuition came to mean a specific feature of the transaction between a living organism and its environment. All experiences, he maintained, involve "the interaction of the live creature and environing conditions," but some experiences set themselves apart because of their qualitative unity or integrity (LW, 10:42). Such experiences might be called "intuitive" under Dewey's revised conception of intuition or "mystical" under Hocking's revised notion of mysticism.

To concretize Dewey's meaning, we can begin with his notion of a "situation" as a complex affair that is qualitatively integrated: "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" (LW, 5:246). A few years later, Dewey characterized "*an* experience" in similar fashion: "*an* experience . . . has its own esthetic quality" (LW, 10:45). The point is that some of our experience identifies itself in this qualitative fashion and thus attains a greater significance in our memory and reflection. It is sensibly heightened experience.

Dewey, however, is careful to distinguish our role in a situation or *an* experience from that of an absolute knower. In his terms, this is experience "had," not experience "known." In terms of descriptive psychology we might accurately say that it is "felt." The distinction is a bit subtle, because these experiences do constitute what Dewey calls "qualitative thought." But qualitative thought is not marked by direct, propositional, and unconditional knowledge, as are traditional intuition and mystical experience. What is had in this case is more like what Peirce calls a perceptual judgment, in which the various modes of nature's being are brought to our attention; we experience qualities, relations, and facts. It is more like a naturalized mysticism. Moreover, the qualitative immediacy of these situations or experiences does not belong either to the live creature or to the environment by itself—it emerges in the transaction between the two. Dewey's synechistic understanding of experience and nature entails that a had quality pervades or saturates a situation, one feature of which is the experiencer.[5]

With these distinctions in hand, Dewey, in his essay "Qualitative Thought," rehabilitates "intuition" in a transformed condition to describe how the experiencer experiences this qualitative immediacy. And in *Art as Experience* he identifies aesthetic experience as akin to intuitive experience. In describing one's immediate response to a work of art, he says, "The experience itself has a satisfying emotional

quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement. This artistic structure may be immediately felt" (LW, 10:45). Art becomes exemplary for Dewey, as religiosity did for James. In both artistic creativity and aesthetic appreciation we find ourselves immersed in a situation reminiscent of Thoreau's descriptions of his own immersion in swamps to get acquainted with *their* way of being. We indeed "lose" ourselves in the experiences. Ironically, such loss of self, as more traditional mystics have wanted to assert, is a finding or realizing of the self at the same time. What's lost is a self located by constraints; what's realized is a self growing and transforming itself and its environment.

Thus, "losing" ourselves in artistic or aesthetic experience is not an exercise in passivity. As Dewey repeatedly notes, receptivity is active—it is something "done" as well as undergone. What's important is that we can make a difference in our own acts of sensing, perceiving, or experiencing. At one level, *all* experience is "had." But what Dewey offers us is a level of "hadness" that approaches the intuitive and the mystical. Its possibility depends on our actively bearing an attitude toward our experience; we must bring a heightened attentiveness with us. "Perception," Dewey says, "is an act of the going-out of energy in order to receive. . . . There is an act of reconstructive doing, and consciousness becomes fresh and alive. *This* act of seeing involves the co-operation of motor elements even though they remain implicit and do not become overt, as well as co-operation of all funded ideas that may serve to complete the new picture that is forming" (LW, 10:59). At the same time, we cannot be overbearing; if we dominate our perception with cognitive or practical interests, or if we are simply uninterested and inattentive, we may lose receptivity. Thus, not unlike traditional mystical experiences from Orphic practices to Lakota vision quests, Dewey's aesthetic perception or rehabilitated intuition requires an initiation or preparation of sorts.

To be clear again, Dewey does not believe that these experiences are mystical in the sense of being supernatural or transcendent of nature; for him, they certainly do not "yield consciousness of the pres-

ence of God" (LW, 9:28). They are *functionally* mystical and intuitive in being "immediate" and "transformative," but unlike their traditional counterparts they don't draw on supernatural powers. As Kestenbaum suggests, they literally grow out of experience. This is why, so long as the meanings are clear, Dewey himself does not shy completely from using "intuitive" or "mystical" as descriptors of these seminal experiences.

The traits that mark such experiences as intuitive or mystical are several. We have already mentioned the lostness of the person in the experience and the fact that one can attitudinally prepare for such experiences. Moreover, we have noted—and will return to—the transformative powers of Dewey's *an* experience. Together with noting these traits, we need to pay attention to the fact that there is an immediate satisfaction or consummation in the receptivity of *an* experience, and that these kinds of experiences maintain their down-to-earthness by being "sensible" in two distinct but related ways.

It is not accidental that throughout his career Dewey comes at his descriptions of these experiences with an array of related terms: felt, aesthetic, sensed, sensitivity, intuition, and sympathy. Our experiences of qualitative immediacy are, as Dewey sees it, a function of our immersion in nature. They are instances of sense perception. However, Dewey, like Peirce, James, and Bergson before him, must fend off the barrenness of the "sense perception" of British empiricism, in which the impressions that cause our senses to react are atomized, fragmented, and deadened.

Dewey's empiricism is nearly as radical as the empiricisms of James and Peirce. He notes his debt to the earlier pragmatists in general and to Peirce in particular: "I am quite sure that he [Peirce], above all modern philosophers, has opened the road which permits a truly experiential philosophy to be developed which does not, like traditional empirical philosophies, cut experience off from nature" (LW, 11:94). As organisms in nature, we engage the full range of reality in perception and sensation: disjunctive and conjunctive relations, meanings, and qualitative richness. Dewey is especially keen to move beyond the materialism of nineteenth-century empiricism: "If experience actu-

ally presents esthetic and moral traits, then these traits may also be supposed to reach down into nature" (LW, 1:13). Dewey's conception of "*an* experience" lays out this richness of the transaction between perceiver and perceived: "In such experiences, every successive part flows freely, without seam and without unfilled blanks, into what ensues. At the same time there is no sacrifice of the self-identity of the parts. . . . The enduring whole is diversified by successive phases that are emphases of its varied colors" (LW, 10:43). This whole is experienced immediately: "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" (LW, 10:44). The grasp or apprehension of the unifying quality was not a feature of traditional empiricisms, and it is here that Dewey suggests the mysticlike cast of the heightened sensibility of the perceiver in and the aesthetic richness of *an* experience.

As in traditional mystical experiences, this sensing, perceptual moment can be described as "immediate" and as being "immediately satisfying." "Immediacy," like "intuition" and "mysticism," seems at best ironically employed in Dewey's vocabulary. However, Dewey is intent on retaining the felt quality and power of such experiences, and the language of immediacy is helpful in this endeavor. As does Peirce, Dewey employs "immediacy" in a transformed way. Alexander points out that for Dewey "There is no such thing as brute, hard, unmediated experience or sense data, though there is a qualitative 'had' or 'undergone' aspect which can also be described as immediate."[6] We sense or experience the world through a continuous moment whose "immediacy" is marked by a felt or sensed unity and continuity, a "had" qualitativeness. It is thoroughly mediated, but its characterizing of the ongoing present moment metaphorically suggests the power of immediacy. Such immediacies pervade our lives—listening to music, engaging in an intense discussion, losing ourselves in a film or a novel. They are extraordinary experiences but occur in the context of ordinary lives. This sort of sensible immediacy is the focus of any number of artists and thinkers from Wordsworth to Faulkner, from John Muir to Annie Dillard.

In the heightened sense experiences to which Dewey refers there is not only qualitative immediacy but also a felt satisfaction. We sense a consummatory quality in them, and the consummation satisfies the entire perceptual situation—perceiver and perceived: "The experience itself has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organized movement" (LW, 10:45). However, Dewey is quick to point out that such satisfaction is not final—it is not an experiential cul-de-sac, but a transitional moment in the ebb and flow of an ongoing life. Its consummatory nature makes us wary of reductive analyses, but it does not preclude reflective development of the qualitative immediacy. As in Hocking's account of mysticism, the felt satisfaction is accompanied by an awareness of the "unfinishedness" of the experience in the wider scope of experience and history. It is at this juncture that we meet the traditional bind of aesthetic judgment—either we stand pat with our immediate experience or we accept that the satisfying experience in all its richness can be reduced to a set of articulate propositions. Dewey seems not to buy into the dilemma. Rather, the sensible/perceptual immediate satisfaction leads to the second "sensible" feature of these experiences: their meanings.

In attributing to these experiences an intuitive or mystical dimension, Dewey says that they "may be relatively dumb and inarticulate and yet penetrating; unexpressed in definite ideas which form reasons and justifications and yet profoundly right. To my mind," he adds, "Bergson's contention that intuition precedes conception and goes deeper is correct" (LW, 5:249). It is just such "dumbness" and "inarticulateness," combined with "depth" and perceptual penetratingness, that leads Dewey to the remarkable claim that our "ejaculatory judgments" of such situations or experiences may "supply perhaps the simplest example of qualitative thought in its purity. While they are primitive," he says, "it does not follow that they are always superficial and immature" (LW, 5:250). What could be more appropriate to finding the extraordinary in the ordinary? We can listen to the range of our own cultural responses: "Ahhh!," "Good," "Wow," "Awesome," "Cool," "Far Out," "Phat," "Sweet." The simplicity of

these responses is initial in the sense of opening things up and directs us to the second dimension of sensibility. Our experiences of qualitative immediacy, though not dominated by cognitive interests, do bear and have meaning and significance—they "make sense" to us. Indeed, Dewey says, "There is no limit to the capacity of immediate sensuous experience to absorb into itself meanings and values that in and of themselves—that is, in the abstract—would be designated 'ideal' and 'spiritual'" (LW, 10:36).

Dewey uses phrases such as "qualitative thought" and "the immediate perception of meaning" to disclose this dimension. Again, this is not surprising for a radical empiricism, but it is perplexing to a traditional empiricist to say that one perceives meaning. In short, then, for Dewey these experiences, like traditional intuitive and mystical experiences, in a general and vernacular way "make sense" or are "sensible." To recall Hocking's version of mystical experience, a meaning emerges, but it is neither an absolute, final, or freestanding truth nor even fully articulate. It is a meaning whose qualitative richness is in some way "ineffable" or, as Dewey puts it, "irrecoverable in distinct and intellectual consciousness" (LW, 10:35). But at the same time, it is a meaning that develops as it enters into other modes of inquiry, communication, and conduct.

Dewey is suspicious—rightly, I believe—of the thorough ineffability that is often claimed for mystical, intuitive, and aesthetic experiences. If ineffability were the case, we should have a lot less talk of such experiences than we do—we would require only silent indexical signs in the presence of such experiences. For Dewey, the sensed meaning demands some interpretive, public, experimental, and reflective response. The ineffability is functional, not absolute. That is, the felt meaning of such experiences is too rich to be reduced to conventional verbal symbols: "Language fails not because thought fails, but because no verbal symbols can do justice to the fullness and richness of [qualitative] thought" (LW, 5:250). Just as for Peirce the inherent fallibility of perceptual judgment calls forth inquiry, so for Dewey the sensed meaning of *an* experience calls forth reflective consideration—consummation does not entail closure. This is the sort of re-

sponse Hocking has in mind when saying that mysticism in human experience is fulfilled only when a practice of thinking grows from it.

Because of the inadequacy of verbal symbols, the aim of our reflection on qualitative thought cannot be reductive analysis. We aren't trying to kill off the qualitative immediacy. Rather, the aim, from a Deweyan perspective, is to bring the felt meaning into a community of inquiry, to test its tensile strength, to see what it might bear in the rest of our cultural interactions and life. "The value of any such translation in esthetic criticism," says Dewey, "is measured . . . by the extent to which the propositional statements return to effect a heightening and deepening of a qualitative apprehension" (LW, 5:251). Or, as he puts it in *Experience and Nature*, the test of our experiences and our reflections on them will be whether they lead to conclusions "which, when they are referred back to ordinary life-experiences and their predicaments, render them more significant, more luminous to us, and make our dealings with them more fruitful" (LW, 1: 18). Does listening to Robert Johnson, for example, make my listening to Eric Clapton more luminous and fruitful? In my terms, does a sensibly mystical experience of a Monet painting deepen and broaden my later encounter with Cézanne's work? These do not seem to me to be radical claims: Dewey is simply attentive to what is commonsensical to experience itself. For Dewey, a sensible mystical experience sustains its significance by illuminating and transforming future experience. Experience, he suggests, is elastic: "It stretches. That stretch constitutes inference" (LW, 1:13). Qualitative thought is both means and end. This is the very same demand James places on mysticism proper in the *Varieties,* and it is this transformative power that leads Hocking to reconsider the meaning of mysticism in human experience.

The leading out of sensible mystical experience into a community of inquiry, experiment, and shared experience indicates its primordial importance in Dewey's thought. In *Art as Experience* he carefully works out the centrality of this sort of aesthetic experience for artistic creativity and for aesthetic appreciation. "An artist," Dewey says, "in comparison with his fellows, is one who is not only especially gifted

in powers of execution but in unusual sensitivity to the qualities of things'' (LW, 10:56). But as Alexander and others point out, the story does not end here. *Every* feature of human existence is pervaded by the importance of qualitative thought. As Bernstein suggests, ''Esthetic quality can and ought to be characteristic of all experience.''[7]

If we pay close attention, we see the importance of qualitative thought in Dewey's discussions of morality, politics, teaching, learning, and science. Our moral life begins, he argues, with our attentiveness to the perception of the moral situations in which we find ourselves. As we noted earlier, it requires a sensitivity to the whole situation and a sympathetic apprehension of others' feelings and perspectives in the situation. ''Nothing,'' Dewey says, ''can make up for the absence of immediate sensitiveness'' (LW, 7:268). Moral intuition or moral sense, for Dewey, is not a cognition of abstract moral truths or laws, but a felt qualitative immediacy of a moral situation. Such intuitions then lead out to the reflective sympathy that Dewey believes enables moral behavior: ''Sympathy is the animating mold of moral judgment not because its dictates take precedence in action over those other impulses . . . but because it furnishes the most efficacious *intellectual* standpoint'' (LW, 7:270). In simple fashion, he argued in *Art as Experience* that ''our great defect in what passes as morality is its anesthetic quality'' (LW, 10:46).

In his defense of democracy, Dewey turns to the community and social dimensions of experience. He looks at public consequences and at institutional reform. But in doing so he does not reduce democracy or politics to a mechanical program of institutional revision. Rather, he points to the democratic ''attitudes, forming personal character and determining desire and purpose in all the relations of life'' that should inform our experiences and help us attend perceptually to our political situations: ''Democracy is a way of life controlled by a working faith in the possibilities of human nature. Belief in the Common Man is a familiar article in the democratic creed'' (LW, 14: 226).

Again, in various discussions of education, Dewey invariably returns us to the qualitative immediacies of good teaching and learning. His resistance to the ''progressivism'' that followed his own early

writings in education arose from its programmatic and dogmatic nature; it theorized experience but forgot to attend to its sensual immediacy for teachers and learners. Not only does teaching begin in a sensitivity to students, materials, and meanings, but its aim remains the illumination and enhancement of future experience. For Dewey, it is those teachers who try "to use the unspiritualized agencies of today as a means of effecting the perception of a human meaning yet to be realized" who are "sharing in the act of creation" of our culture (MW, 10:200–201).

Finally, even in scientific inquiry, which is an ongoing historical process of teaching and learning, aesthetic or qualitative thought plays a leading role: "Scientific thought is, in its turn, a specialized form of art, with its own qualitative control" (LW, 5: 252). The aesthetic and the scientific do not constitute a fundamental opposition. Science, too, must launch its inquiries from had experiences, and, as the idea of experiment suggests, return to some form of primary experience in its conclusions. Science is not only a form of understanding, it illuminates and enriches. Thus it, too, may benefit from Dewey's sensible mysticism: "When there is genuine artistry in scientific inquiry and philosophical speculation, a thinker proceeds neither by rule nor yet blindly, but by means of meanings that exist immediately as feelings having qualitative color" (LW, 10: 126).

The upshot is that if we read Dewey's work in neglect of this pervasive feature, we see only one side of his character—the mechanical, tinkering, quasi-scientistic Dewey of whom Stanley Cavell paints a deadened portrait: "Dewey's picture of thinking as moving in action from a problematic situation to its solution, as by the removal of an obstacle, more or less difficult to recognize as such, by the least costly means, is, of course, one picture of intelligence."[8] This is the Dewey about whom Hocking and Bugbee, in a more nuanced way, worried. That he might be overlooking something doesn't seem to occur to Cavell. This portrait is an unbalanced and, I think, largely unfruitful image of Dewey and his pragmatism, but one Dewey himself occasionally helped foster. We need, therefore, to attend to Dewey's plea:

> The neglect of qualitative objects and consideration leaves thought in certain subjects without any logical status and control. In esthetic matters, in morals and politics, the effect of this neglect is either to deny (implicitly at least) that they have logical foundations or else, in order to bring them under received logical categories, to evacuate them of their distinctive meanings—a procedure which produces the myth of "economic man" and the reduction of esthetics and morals, as far as they can receive any intellectual treatment at all, to quasi-mathematical subjects. [LW, 5:245]

For Dewey, our contemporary scientization of economics, political science, and education is not accidental, but a direct result of a logic and science left uninformed by qualitative thought and sensible mysticism.

In dealing with the work of Dewey, it feels fitting to end with neither a bang nor a whimper but to round out my tale of his sensible mysticism in sermonesque fashion. In 1879 Dewey moved from Burlington, Vermont, to teach high school for three years in the wilds of Oil City, Pennsylvania. He later recalled to his friend Max Eastman a transitional experience he had while there: "There was no vision," Eastman reported, "not even a definable emotion—just a supremely blissful feeling that his worries were over." Dewey described a "oneness with the universe" and a feeling that "everything that's here is here, and you can just lie back on it."[9] Consequently Dewey claimed, "I've never had any doubts since then, nor any beliefs. To me faith means not worrying."[10] It is not merely coincidental that Dewey's philosophical career was launched during his stay in Oil City. He moved directly to a life of thinking—with emphasis on the gerund—and of ongoing experiential engagement in the world through teaching, art, and politics. Indeed, his actions well meet Hocking's criteria for the worship of the pragmatic mystic: a mystic's worship "takes on the aspect of a more deliberate, intense, and thorough thinking."[11] Dewey, the Clark Kentish figure of our didactic histories, was living on the edge, though we may fail to see it. It is important to the pragmatic meaning of Dewey's thought that we not forget it.