

THE CRITIQUE OF NATURALISM IN PĀLĪ BUDDHISM AND DEWEYAN PRAGMATISM

In 1934, the American pragmatist philosopher John Dewey explained the main thesis of his Terry Lectures at Yale University (later published as *A Common Faith*) in the following way:

Today there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural....[but]....I shall develop another conception of the nature of the religious phase of experience, one that separates it from the supernatural and the things that have grown up about it. I shall try to show that these derivations are encumbrances and that what is genuinely religious will undergo an emancipation when it is relieved from them.... When the vital factors attain the religious force that has been drafted into supernatural religions, the resulting reinforcement will be incalculable.¹

There have been many attacks on supernaturalism, especially in the last three hundred years with the rise of the modern physical sciences. A prominent example that comes easily to mind is the withering attack of the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume. What makes Dewey's attack on supernaturalism distinctive, however, is the fact that, unlike Hume (and the numerous other critics of supernaturalist religion), Dewey did not reject religious experience and religious meaning. In fact, Dewey's efforts in *A Common Faith*, and in his more substantial works like *Art as Experience* and *Experience and Nature*, may be seen as attempts to reconstruct religious meaning without its traditional supernatural foundations. Avoiding both extremes (supernaturalism, on the one hand, and reductive forms of materialism that dismiss everything religious, on the other hand), Dewey attempted to chart a middle way.² This is precisely what the Buddha had attempted to do more than two millennia before Dewey. And among all the numerous world religions, only Buddhism in the tradition of the Pāli Nikāyas has taken the same middle path, explicitly eschewing supernatural foundations and at the same time rejecting reductive materialism at the other extreme. So while both the Buddha and Dewey rejected supernaturalism as a foundation for religious experience, they emphatically did

¹ John Dewey, *A Common Faith*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934) pp. 1, 2, 50.

² *Ibid.*, p. 1.

not reject religious experience. This fact alone holds tantalizing prospects for the comparative study of Pāḷi Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism.

It is an interesting point--but hardly controversial--to note the absence of supernatural foundations in the religious paths espoused by the Buddha and Dewey. The quote above from Dewey's *A Common Faith* is sufficient to substantiate the claim in regard to Dewey's philosophy of religion. But that supernatural foundations are not essential to Pāḷi Buddhism is equally evident. None of the essential elements in Pāḷi Buddhism refer to a supernatural agent or reality. These include the Four Noble Truths, the doctrine of dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), the doctrine no-self (*anatta*), the cultivation of moral conduct (*sīla*), concentration (*samādhi*) and wisdom (*paññā*). Even the supersensory powers (*abhinnā*) do not reveal a supernatural reality. The Pāḷi Nikāyas make it abundantly clear that the essence of the path is the cultivation of moral habits and insight. Through this cultivation, a person is radically transformed and achieves religious freedom (*nibbāna*). In this quest for religious meaning, a Buddhist expects no external help from gods or other supernatural beings. There is no supplication of a creator-God; no salvation by the saving grace of an *avatār*.

All this so far is commonplace to the student of Pāḷi Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism. However, I want to explore a stronger and thereby more controversial claim which is that both the Buddha and Dewey held that dependence on supernatural agencies or realities is not merely inessential, but poses a serious obstacle to the achievement of religious meaning. I will show that both traditions develop the critique of supernaturalism around the same major themes--even though the methods of argumentation employed to make a similar point often differ in substantial (and interesting) ways.

Before taking up the critique of supernaturalism, it is necessary to identify two points that situate this inquiry in wider contexts. First, the present study is preliminary to a comparative study of the *naturalistic* reconstruction of religious experience in Pāḷi Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism. In this essay, I shall focus on the negative, "deconstructive," or critical phase of the comparative study (i.e., the rejection of supernatural foundations). Except for some brief comments along the way, the study of the naturalistic reconstruction, which is an immense topic, must be left for another occasion. Second, the timeliness of studies that relate Dewey and Pāḷi Buddhism is worth a brief comment. In the past twenty years, Deweyan pragmatism has had a resurgence in the West and is arguably the most influential philosophical tradition in Western intellectual circles at present.

I. Some Preliminaries: Defining Key Terms

As the meaning and reference of the terms "supernaturalism" and "naturalism" are crucial to this study, a few words about the definition of these terms is required. So what is "supernatural?" Etymologically, of course, "supernatural" refers to agents or realities that are "above" or "outside" the natural world. Supernaturalism typically refers to agents, entities or realities that have some or all of the following attributes: eternal, immaterial, unchanging, having mysterious powers, atemporal, non-spatial. What is most important to realize, however, is that the supernatural is *discontinuous* with the natural (causal, spatial and temporal) order. That is, the supernatural represents a break, a gap or a rupture in nature--it falls totally, or in part, outside the natural world. Examples of the supernatural in world religions are easily found. In Christianity, God, angels, the soul, heaven, hell and the devil qualify as supernatural. In the Brahmanical (Hindu) tradition, God (*Īśvara*), Brahmā, the gods (*devas*), the impersonal world-ground (*Brahman*), and the eternal self (*ātman*) are all conceived as supernatural agencies or realities that are essential to the religious endeavor.

The term "naturalism" has many meanings, but as it is used here (in contrast to supernaturalism) it means that there is no break of continuity between religious meanings and the natural world (which is comprised of physical, biological and psychological processes).³ What is excluded by naturalism--but which is the cornerstone of supernaturalism--is the explanation of changes that occur in the world by a totally new force, entity or reality that is outside the natural world. Moreover, "naturalism" means that even higher order phenomena (e.g., consciousness, language, art) are emergent from and continuous with other parts of the natural world, without being reducible to material or physical processes. For example, music is emergent from natural processes (strings creating vibrations in the air), but its meaning (which is still natural) is not explicable simply in terms of the physics of vibrating air. Hence "naturalism" stands as a middle position between supernaturalism and reductive materialism (physicalism).⁴

³ The term "naturalism" as used here receives a brief but helpful discussion in Dewey's *Logic: the Theory of Inquiry* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1938) pp. 18-19.

⁴ "Reductive materialism" (also called "physicalism") is the position that all phenomena are ultimately physical matter controlled by physical forces. "Materialism" implies that all higher order phenomena are

II. The Critique of Supernaturalism: Key Themes Shared by Pāli Buddhism and Deweyan Pragmatism.

From a study of the *nikāyas* of the *Sutta Piṭaka* and the later works of John Dewey, I have found that both traditions share the following eight themes which criticize supernaturalism as an obstacle to the religious life.

(1) supernaturalism is the source of the false dualism that views religious experience as radically distinct from other modes of experience--with the effect that religious experience becomes irrelevant to, and divorced from, life generally.

Supernaturalism implies the existence of a realm or being that is significantly more perfect than the human world or human beings. For supernaturalist religions, such a realm or being serves as a standard of religious value. Typically, knowledge of or communion with the supernatural becomes the goal of religious life. But the subject of religious awe and veneration must be elevated to such an extent that it can have none of the taint or limitations associated with mundane existence. These differences have led supernaturalists to posit that religious meaning requires a realm that is completely separated from the natural order. According to supernaturalist traditions, therefore, religion's distinctive experience must refer to a non-natural source.

Both Dewey and the Buddha grant that there are extraordinary differences that distinguish the kinds of experience and the ideals of religious life from those of other modes of living. But both traditions also hold that any difference is one of degree, not a difference in kind. Dewey referred explicitly to this dualistic aspect of supernaturalism in several of his major writings. The degree of perfection claimed for the supernatural exaggerates the discontinuity of the religious and the mundane creating an unbridgeable gulf. As Dewey puts it, "it is of the nature of a religion based on the supernatural to draw a line between the religious and the secular and profane" and this has the negative effect of shutting "religious values up within a particular compartment."⁵ Hence, the claim to radical separation of the human and the religious has the profoundly negative effect of making the supernatural altogether irrelevant to human life. What is "... absolutely' stable and unchangeable would be out of

nothing but processes on the atomic or molecular levels, hence the term is often qualified as "eliminative" materialism.

⁵ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 66.

the range of the principle of action and reaction, of resistance and leverage as well as of friction. Here it would have no applicability, no potentiality of use as measure and control of other events."⁶ The "eternal," Dewey said, denotes something that is entirely irrelevant to temporal existence.⁷ As Dewey concludes in *Experience and Nature*:

...an ideal realm that has no roots in existence has no efficacy nor relevancy. It is a light which is darkness, for shining in the void it illumines nothing and cannot reveal even itself. It gives no instruction, for it cannot be translated into the meaning and import of what actually happens, and hence it is barren; it cannot mitigate the bleakness of existence nor modify its brutalities. It thus abnegates itself in abjuring footing in natural events, and ceases to be ideal, to become whimsical fantasy or linguistic sophistication.⁸

Dewey expands on this criticism in *A Common Faith*, where he laments the fact that this radical separation of the mundane and the religious guarantees the failure of religious meaning to become pervasive of life in all respects. Religious experience is not a completely distinct kind of experience; it is continuous with and emergent from normal kinds of experience. He continues: "...'religious' as a quality of experience signifies something that may belong to all these experiences. It is the polar opposite of some type of experience that can exist by itself."⁹ In *Art as Experience*, Dewey connects religious experience with art and aesthetic experience,¹⁰ and art in turn is shown to be emergent from the biological rhythms of the human organism.

⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover Publications, 2nd ed., 1958) p. 71.

⁷ *ibid.*, p. 148.

⁸ *ibid.*, p. 146.

⁹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ See John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, published as Volume 10 of *The Later Works of John Dewey, 1925-1953* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987) p. 199.

Both Dewey and the Buddha, in fact, offer a detailed description of experience at the mundane levels, showing how meaning (religious meaning) is latent in and emergent from such experiences. In the Pāli Nikāyas, the Buddha describes the gradual transformation of experience from that of the suffering worldling to the highest levels of religious meaning represented by the life of the *arahant*--all the while maintaining the continuity of emancipation and normal modes of experience. The Buddha appears to have assumed that a radically dualistic view of religious and mundane experience would make the religious path impossible, as such would imply an unbridgeable breach on the path to religious freedom.

Because of this radical split between the "highest truth" and the mundane, supernaturalism has a lamentable social impact. Supernaturalism gives rise to a class of people who claim special powers, who claim a special relation and a special access to religious reality. This point opens up very large social issues that deserve treatment in another study. Let it suffice here to say that neither the Buddha nor Dewey countenanced class distinctions in society generally, let alone based on religious access to the supernatural. For example, in the *Soṇadaṇḍa-sutta*, when the Buddha was asked about what makes one a Brahman, he said it has nothing to do with being born from a certain family background, beings versed in the scriptures and rites--the traditional view of the essential traits of being a Brahman. Rather, the Buddha tells Soṇadaṇḍa that one can be declared a Brahman only if one is "virtuous and wise."¹¹ And in the *Aggañña-sutta*, the Buddha ridicules the idea that Brahmans have a special relation to God (Brahmā) based on their claim to being born of his mouth. But Brahmans are born to Brahman mothers in the usual way, the Buddha points out. Hence, the Brahman's arrogant assertion of a special relationship to the divine is shown, in his own terms, to defile the very *Brahmā* he should venerate.¹²

Dewey, the consummate democrat in matters religious as well as political, argued that the supernatural has been a major factor in the emergence

¹¹ *Dīgha-nikāya* 1.123. References to the *Dīgha-nikāya* are to the editions published by the Pali Text Society, ed. T.W. Rhys Davids and J.E. Carpenter, 3 vols., (London: PTS, 1890-1911).

¹² *taggha vo Vāseṭṭhā brāhmaṇā porāṇaṃ assarantā evaṃ āhaṃsu. dissanti kho pana Vāseṭṭhā brāhmaṇānaṃ brāhmaṇiyo gabbhiniyo pi vijāyamānāpi, te ca brāhmaṇā yonijā va samānā evaṃ āhaṃsu. te brāhmānañ c' eva abbhācikkhanti musā ca bhāsanti bahuṇaṃ ca apuññ pasavanti. (Dīgha-nikāya 3.81-82.)*

of institutionalized social forms, which have, aside from their political and economic functions, obscured religious experience. Dewey argued that because of the claims regarding special powers and access to religious reality, religions now prevent "the religious quality of experience from coming to consciousness and finding the expression that is appropriate to present conditions, intellectual and moral."¹³ The institutionalization of religious meaning, and the consequent divorce of the religious from daily life, is the effect of the split between religious and mundane experience wrought by supernaturalism. Dewey writes, "the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths."¹⁴ Hence the word "common" in the title of the book *A Common Faith* refers to Dewey's hope for a religious faith that is "widely accessible and more generously shared" and one that "shall not be confined to sect, class, or race."¹⁵

(2) supernaturalism is based on speculative and dogmatic views that are unverifiable and thereby lead to anxiety and vexation.

Supernaturalism typically requires belief in such things as an unseen and unknown God (gods), an unseen and unknown self (soul) and a whole host of other beings and places that have no direct empirical verification. All this makes supernaturalism a highly speculative view that is open to attack on epistemological grounds. Neither Dewey nor the Buddha missed the opportunity to criticize supernaturalism on epistemological grounds; both are justly famous for their attacks on speculative and dogmatic views. In numerous places the Pali Nikāyas record the Buddha's critique of the cosmological and eschatological theories of the *Brāhmaṇas* and the early Upaniṣads for epistemological reasons.

Revelation of the Ultimate Reality or God to the seers is a favorite claim of the Vedas and Upaniṣads. In famous passages of the *Caṅkī-sutta*, the Buddha criticized both the initial revelation and the tradition that was begun by

¹³ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.33.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p. 87.

passing down the claims of revelatory knowledge.¹⁶ Here the Buddha says that "even if I hear of something on the profoundest revelation (*svānussutaṃ*), that may be empty, hollow and false." The Buddha adds that this is not the proper way to "safeguard" truth.

The authority of "seers" also comes in for severe criticism in the *Tevijja-sutta*. Regarding the authority of tradition, the Buddha criticized those Brahmans who held a view of the supernatural that was based on "knowing and seeing" but in fact their teachers and the teachers of the teachers (going back many generations) had not themselves "known and seen" for themselves the supernatural reality they taught.¹⁷ None could claim a "direct vision of *Brahmā*" (*Brahmā sakkhidiṭṭho*).¹⁸ And yet "they claim to teach a path to the companionship of Him whom they have not seen or known."¹⁹

Even going to the gods provides no better answers to metaphysical questions, as the *Kevaddha-sutta* makes clear. In this *sutta* a monk is depicted as looking for an answer to the question "where do the four elements cease without remainder?" but finds out that the gods at each level do not know the answer.²⁰ Finally, the question is put to *Brahmā*, the highest, most powerful and sublime of all the gods, the purported creator of the universe. And after a somewhat humorous exchange between the monk and *Brahmā*, in which the bluster of *Brahmā*'s claims to power are shown to be beside the point, *Brahmā* takes the monk aside and admits his ignorance regarding the question. He sends the monk back to the Buddha for an answer (no doubt indicating the religious precedence of the Buddha over even the highest among the gods). Having approached the Buddha regarding his question, the monk is told by the Buddha

¹⁶ *Majjhima-nikāya* 2.170. References to the *Majjhima-nikāya* are to the editions published by the Pali Text Society, ed. V. Trenckner and R. Chalmers, 3 vols., (London: PTS, 1887-1901).

¹⁷ "This is the straight path, this is the direct way which makes for salvation and leads him who acts according to it to a state of companionship with *Brahmā*" (*Dīgha-nikāya* 1.241).

¹⁸ *Dīgha-nikāya* 1.241.

¹⁹ *Te...yaṃ na jānanti yaṃ na passanti tassa saḥavyatāya maggaṃ desessanti.* (*Dīgha-nikāya* 1.241).

²⁰ *Dīgha-nikāya* 1.215-223.

that the question is improperly formed because of its metaphysical nature (the kind of speculation the Buddha was at great pains to avoid). In typical fashion, the Buddha reformulates the question by changing the point of the question from one of metaphysics to that of ethics--where do the four elements cease to be an obstacle to the achievement of religious liberation?²¹ This allegory shows the impropriety of depending on "divine knowledge" and metaphysical speculation in seeking the religious path.

In a well-known analogy, the Buddha compares the claims to knowledge of the supernatural to a man who claims to be deeply in love with a certain beauty queen, but when questioned further cannot say what her name is, what family or village she comes from, nor even what she looks like.²² The point of this and the other stories is not merely to show up the ignorance of those who claim to know supernatural reality, but to show just how harmful this could be to the person involved. As David Kalupahana remarks:

The search for mystery, the hidden something (*kiñci*), is looked upon as a major cause of anxiety and frustration (*dukkha*). Therefore the one who does not look for any mystery (*akiñcana*), and who perceives things "as they have come to be" (*yathābhūta*), is said to enjoy peace of mind that elevates him intellectually as well as morally.²³

The Buddhist path, it is claimed, is personally verifiable in this life (*diṭṭho dhamme viditvā*).²⁴ Only by keeping religious meaning tethered to what is verifiable and avoiding the speculative and mysterious nature of the supernatural can one avoid the trap of "wrong views" and come to "right understanding" (*sammādiṭṭhi*).

As empiricists, the Buddha and Dewey took a "fallibilist" view of human knowledge. Hence it is not altogether surprising that supernatural agencies and

²¹ *ibid.*, 1.223

²² *Majjhima-nikāya* 2.32-33.

²³ David Kalupahana, *A History of Buddhist Philosophy* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992) p. 59.

²⁴ *Sutta-nipāta* 1053. Reference is to the Pali Text Society edition, ed H. Smith (London: PTS, 1913).

phenomena would be considered unwarranted speculation in both traditions. The Buddha rejected numerous speculative theories in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*. And in the *Aggivacchagotta-sutta*, the Buddha left undeclared (*avyākata*) a number of questions for which answers were not forthcoming by empirical methods and for which any attempted speculation would not conduce to happiness, but only vexation and anxiety.²⁵ This is the reason both the Buddha and Dewey rejected the supernatural on epistemological grounds: such claims to knowledge become serious obstacles to religious development because they arise in and reinforce minds defiled by avarice, hatred and delusion, thus preventing the person from cultivating the moral and intellectual habits that are the genuine route to religious meaning. And because of such limitations in human knowledge (especially regarding speculative questions), Dewey warned against taking atheism too far. In criticizing what he termed "aggressive atheism," Dewey was concerned that his position would not be construed as claiming certain knowledge that there are no gods or God. "Aggressive atheism" commits the same mistake as the theism--it makes a speculative claim that is not empirically warranted.

(3) belief in supernatural agents or realities can be traced to the false sense of security that derives from supernaturalism's promise of permanence and them misinterpretation of the relatively permanent in experience as eternal.

Both the Buddha and Dewey describe human existence as precarious and unstable. In terms quite familiar to Buddhists, Dewey wrote that "the world is a scene of risk; it is uncertain, unstable, uncannily unstable. Its dangers are irregular, inconstant, not be counted upon as to their times and seasons."²⁶ Because humans live with little security regarding the meanings and values they so desperately seek, it is little wonder that supernaturalism's promise of security through attachment to a permanent being or realm is so attractive. This grasping for security in a changing world accounts for the "the hypnotic influence exercised by the conception of the eternal."²⁷

From the Buddhist point of view, the precarious nature of the world and human life is the source of the most notorious of supernaturalist doctrines, the belief in a permanent or eternal self (*ātman*). The Buddha's numerous

²⁵ *Majjhima-nikāya* 1.484-487.

²⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

arguments against views that claim a supernatural self are collectively referred to as the "*anatta* doctrine."²⁸ The essence of these arguments is that the postulation of a permanent or eternal self has no empirical justification whatsoever, but in fact derives from the crude ego grasping after personal security in light of suffering and death.

Another source of the belief in a permanent, supernatural reality, according to Buddhist tradition, is the confused identification of what is perceived as relatively more permanent with the truly permanent and eternal. In an unusual account in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, it is suggested that god *Brahmā* holds the false view that he is the eternal creator of the universe based on the mere fact that he shows up at a certain level of existence before other beings.²⁹

Those beings who show up after him confirm his conceited opinion and pass the view on to humans to be taught as religious truth (a clear reference to the Brahmanical traditions).

(4) supernaturalism contradicts the causal (naturalistic) explanation of phenomena at the heart of the Buddhist and Deweyan conception of reality.

Pāli Buddhism and Deweyan pragmatism both analyze reality as a causal order of phenomena. In Dewey's terminology, causality is a "generic trait of existence." There is no room in either tradition for the intervention of either a supernatural deity or a supernatural self.

In regard to Pāli Buddhist analysis of the universe, A.K. Warder has written:

Its evolution is natural evolution according to laws of causation, natural laws. It has not been created by God, and if God (*Brahmā*) so called, thinks He is God and has created living beings He is in reality only an ordinary person suffering from

²⁸ The Buddha's attacks on the supernaturalist (eternalist) view of the self recur throughout the *Sutta piṭaka*. Representative passages can be found in the *Brahmajāla-sutta*, the *Poṭṭhapāda-sutta*, the *Mahānidāna-sutta* and the *Khandha-saṃyutta*.

²⁹ *Dīgha-nikāya* 1.18-19.

a delusion.³⁰

Belief in, or dependence on, a metaphysical supernaturalism contradicts the central insight and teaching of the Buddha: dependent arising (*paṭiccasamuppāda*). And it is particularly important to recall that the doctrine of dependent arising is not simply the Buddha's description of existence, of the arising of suffering, but is more crucially the essence of the prescription for achieving religious liberation through taking control over those causal factors that give rise to suffering. The causal analysis of the world and the self is just what provides the opportunity (the way into the causal nexus of events) to take hold over those factors which produce suffering, to change them by putting them on a course towards freedom and happiness. As K.N. Jayatilleke notes, "the knowledge and insight of emancipation (*vimuttiñ-āṇadassana-*) is considered to be a natural, causal occurrence.³¹ Hence, the Buddha's recipe for religious transformation falls entirely within the causal framework--this, in fact, was his revolutionary idea. But supernaturalism plays havoc with the causal understanding of phenomena--as noted in the definition above, supernaturalism indicates a rupture or break in nature and as such makes nonsense of the causal order. Therefore, from the Buddha's point of view, supernaturalism is a very dangerous view indeed.

Dewey agreed completely with the Buddhist view of this matter. "This human situation falls wholly within nature," wrote Dewey.³² And since "man is within nature, not a little god outside, and is within as a mode of energy inseparably connected with other modes, interaction is the one unescapable trait of every human concern..."³³ Mastery or control over the human situation is therefore one with taking control of causal processes, which means intervening between the beginning and the end of such processes. Hence, the development of meaning in human life "depends upon seeing and using these specifiable

³⁰ A.K. Warder, *Indian Buddhism* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1970) p. 152.

³¹ K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1963) p. 421.

³² Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 421.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 434.

things as links functionally significant in a process."³⁴ Supernaturalism, as has been noted above, forces the abandonment of causal analysis and with it goes the chance to take control of our situation.

Given the naturalistic interpretation of the Pāḷi Buddhist doctrine discussed to this point, it must surely have occurred to the reader that the status of a number of prominent beings in the Pāḷi Canon has been ignored; namely, the *devas*, *Brahmā*, *Māra*, etc. This topic is a very large and controversial one, but to give a short answer, let it be said that the Buddha apparently did admit the *devas* and other such beings into his scheme of the universe, but they are, as Warder also argues, "natural" (not supernatural) because they fall within the realm of change and are subject to the laws of causality.³⁵ Even the claim of *Brahmā* to be the creator of the universe is shown in the *Brahmajāla-sutta* to be based on fallacious reasoning. So, insofar as the Buddha accepts the existence of the *devas* etc., he stretched the concept of what is "natural," but did not recognize the break in the causal order essential to what is properly termed "supernatural." Moreover, should one be surprised that the Buddha held that the universe is far richer than the one presented to us by the reductive materialism of modern science?

(5) supernaturalism makes knowing or dogmatic belief in supernatural reality (i.e., metaphysics) the key to religious development—but the ethical transformation of the person, which is only instrumentally related to metaphysics, is the key to religious development.

Throughout his philosophical works, Dewey criticized the idea that human beings are essentially "knowers." Knowing is but one kind--and an untypical one at that--of experience. Experience is far richer than cognition. Dewey made a career out of showing how we human beings inhabit the world primarily through emotions, feelings, imagination, habits--all non-cognitive elements of experience. But the supernaturalist typically makes cognitive assent to propositions that have metaphysical import (such as "God exists." or "Jesus is God and Saviour.") the essential factor in religious life. Dewey, however, held that cognitive assent alone is superficial or meaningless unless it is the sign

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 295.

³⁵ In reference to the status of the *devas* and *Brahmā*, Warder writes: "They may exist, but they are as subject to the laws of nature as men are." *Indian Buddhism*, p. 155.

of the transformation of the person at deeper levels of his or her being. He offered that "religious qualities and values if they are real at all are not bound up with any single item of intellectual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism..."³⁶ What is demanded in genuine religious experience, according to Dewey, is a transformation that is pervasive, "pertains to our being in its entirety," involves "a change in will," which through imagination "harmonizes the self" toward a "reconstruction in the direction of the good." This makes religious experience not cognitive assent to the supernatural or mystical, but an ethical transformation of the person that is both "natural and moral."

The Buddha likewise understood religious experience as a matter of personal transformation at both cognitive and noncognitive levels. The essence of the Buddhist path is the abandoning of unwholesome mental states and the development of wholesome mental states. It is primarily ethical, not metaphysical. As Warder puts it: "standards of conduct in Buddhism have nothing to do with theology."³⁷ And for this reason, the Buddha took the metaphysical terminology of the Brahmanical tradition and turned those concepts into standards of ethical conduct and religious achievement. For example, in the *Kandaraka-sutta*, the Buddha refers to *Brahmā* as a level religious attainment rather than a supernatural being: "He who neither torments himself nor another, who is here and now allayed, gone out, became cool, an experience of bliss, lives with a self become *Brahmā*."³⁸ "*Brahmā*" is probably best translated in these contexts as "highest" or "supreme" in the ethical sense-- supernormal perhaps, but not supernatural. In the *Tevijja-sutta*, the Buddha, asked to describe the Upaniṣadic notion of "union with *Brahmā*" reconstructs the metaphysical concept as an religious and ethical one--"union with *Brahmā*" refers to loving kindness (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*mudithā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*), that is, the so-called four "*Brahma vihāras*."³⁹ Everywhere in the Pāli Canon we find the Buddha substituting *sīla*, *samādhi* and *paññā* for attachment to the supernatural.

³⁶ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 32.

³⁷ Warder, *Indian Buddhism*, p. 155.

³⁸ *Majjhima-nikāya* 1.342.

³⁹ *Dīgha-nikāya* 1.241.

(6) supernaturalism undermines moral and religious development--it makes a person overly dependent on external agencies, pessimistic and fatalistic regarding the human capacity to develop religious meaning.

In *A Common Faith*, Dewey gave his most scathing attack on the impact of supernaturalism on religious meaning in the following remarks:

Men have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor.⁴⁰

He laid the blame squarely on supernaturalism:

Belief in the supernatural as a necessary power for apprehension of the ideal and for practical attachment to it has for its counterpart a pessimistic belief in the corruption and impotency of natural means. This is axiomatic in Christian dogma.⁴¹

Dewey's words need little explanation. Supernaturalism has sapped our human ability to take care of matters for ourselves; it has made us unduly pessimistic about our nature.

The Buddha took care to make sure his disciples did not fall into the trap of dependency ... on the supernatural or anything else. His parting remarks to the bhikkhus was his exhortation that they "should live as lights for yourselves, as a refuge for yourselves, taking no other refuge."⁴² In the context of the time, the Buddha's remarks were surely a response to the *Upaniṣadic* tradition wherein salvation through knowledge is not due to one's own efforts, but dependent on the grace or intervention of *Ātman* or God. This view gained plausibility among the sages of the *Upaniṣads* because the emergence of this profound knowledge was deemed inexplicable and mysterious. On the Buddha's

⁴⁰ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 46.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁴² *tasmāt ih' Ānanda attadīpā viharatha attasaraṇā anaññasaraṇa...* (*Dīgha-nikāya* 2.100.)

account, there is no mystery in the suggested training of the person in moral conduct, concentration and wisdom.

Theism, as a particular form of supernaturalism, has special problems that are worth noting. From the Buddhist point of view, the existence of Creator God (*issara-kāraṇa-vādi*) implies that man is not responsible for his actions. In a famous passage in the *Jātakas*, it is written that: "If God designs the life of the entire world--the glory and the misery, the good and the evil acts--man is but an instrument of his will and God (alone) is responsible."⁴³ Similarly, in the *Aṅguttara-nikāya*, it is argued that "if everything is created by a supreme God (*issaranimmāṇa hetu*), then the responsibility for the wickedness of people is his--and recluseship, or any action, would be useless and futile."⁴⁴

Gunapala Dharmasiri has summed up this point nicely: When one thinks about the grounds on which the Buddha criticized theism one can see that he was not merely arguing against the existence of God. He had much more in mind. He meant that the idea of an omniscient creator God was essentially harmful for the facts of morality in the world. The ideas of morality and morally responsible beings could not, according to him, at all be made meaningful in a world created by an omniscient creator God.⁴⁵

(7) supernaturalism promises a way that is too "easy," forsaking the effort required to cultivate religious meanings in experience.

In *Experience and Nature*, Dewey remarked that "there are a multitude of recipes for obtaining a vicarious possession of the stable and final without getting involved in the labor and pain of intellectual effort attending regulation of the conditions upon which these fruits depend."⁴⁶ Dewey knew well that the

⁴³ *issaro sabbalokassa sace kappeti jīvitaṃ iddhivyāsanabhāvañca kammaṃ kalyāna pāpakaṃ niddesakāri puriso issaro tena lippati.* (*Jātaka*, vol. V, ed. V. Fausboll, (London: PTS 1891, p. 238.)

⁴⁴ *Aṅguttara-nikāya* 1.174. References to the *Aṅguttara-nikāya* are to the editions published by the Pali Text Society, ed. R. Morris and E. Hardy, 6 vols., (London: PTS, 1885-1910).

⁴⁵ Gunapala Dharmasiri, *A Buddhist Critique of the Christian Concept of God* (Singapore: The Buddhist Research Society, 2nd ed., n.d.) p. 69.

⁴⁶ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 56.

impetus to supernaturalism was the difficulty of efforts required to create religious meaning. Promises of shortcuts are sure to be attractive to the majority of humankind. But these should be avoided for the following reason:

Belief in a sudden and complete transmutation through conversion and in the objective efficacy of prayer, is too easy a way out of difficulties. It leaves matters in general just about as they were before; that is, sufficiently bad so that there is additional support for the idea that only supernatural aid can better them.⁴⁷

Supernaturalism promises religious achievement "by means of dogma and cult, rather than in regulation of the events of life by understanding of actual conditions."⁴⁸ But this way is too "easy" and is unlikely to achieve the desired results, despite the short term benefits that derive from the sense of security. Put bluntly, one cannot hope for any religious meaning that one does not make for oneself--there are no shortcuts. This is a harsh, but honest, truth.

The Buddha denounced the supplication of gods through ritual and sacrifice as detrimental. In the *Kūṭadanta-sutta*, the Buddha explains that the perfect sacrifice is not the propitiation of the gods, but that the truly perfect sacrifice consists in the keeping of the moral precepts, attaining concentration, and the destroying of the defilements (*āsavas*) through wisdom. Here the Buddha emphasizes the hard work involved in cultivating moral habits--a process that must be accomplished by the individual without outside help.

(8) supernaturalism denigrates the application of a rational intelligence to the development of religious meaning--for intelligent methods, it substitutes a groundless "faith".

Supernaturalist religions are bound to conceive "faith" as the holding of belief in a supernatural reality without empirical evidence--a groundless faith. But such faith is usually antagonistic towards the application of rational intelligence to religious life. Dewey wrote that

...there is such a thing as faith in intelligence becoming religious in quality--a fact that perhaps explains the efforts of some

⁴⁷ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 47.

⁴⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, p. 55.

religionists to disparage the possibilities of intelligence as a force. They properly feel such faith to be a dangerous rival.⁴⁹

Both Dewey and the Buddha reconstruct faith as confidence in and commitment to realizing religious levels of meaning in human experience. It is a commitment or resolve to complete the process of personal transformation. As Jayatilleke says, "This rational faith which is a product of critical examination and partial verification is apparently contrasted with the 'baseless faith' (*amūlikā saddhā*, M II. 170) which the brahmins have towards the Vedas and which the Buddha shows does not bear critical examination."⁵⁰ It is a faith in possibilities, without guarantees.

On the positive side, Dewey asserted that "if human desire and endeavor were enlisted in behalf of natural ends, conditions would be bettered."⁵¹ Of course, Dewey does not claim to know how far intelligence may and will develop in respect to religious meaning. But he asserts this much: "... one thing I think I do know. The needed understanding will not develop unless we strive for it. The assumption that only supernatural agencies can give control is a sure method of retarding this effort."⁵² Thus, in the end, the objection to supernaturalism--from both a Buddhist and Deweyan point of view--is that it stands in the way of an effective application of human intelligence (individually and collectively) to the development of religious meaning.

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⁴⁹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ *op.cit.*, p. 393.

⁵¹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, p. 46.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 76.