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Origins of Religion According to John Dewey

RALPH B. GEHRING

FILIPINO students have heard much of that Admiral Dewey under whose command an American fleet first entered Manila Bay. It has been reserved for their teachers to make the acquaintance of John Dewey, educator and philosopher, and the Admiral's fellow countryman. This, perhaps, is as it should be, though it may be doubted whether the influence of the naval officer upon this country has equaled that of the Vermont professor.

John Dewey never came to the Philippines; the Philippines, so to speak, went to him. *Pensionados* learned from him while he lectured at Chicago and Columbia Universities in his heyday. Others, far more numerous, have been taught by Filipinos and Americans influenced by his ideas, for Dewey was perhaps the most influential of American philosophers and educators, and his influence, though diminishing, still continues.

Without denying the merits of a man of talent, this article is concerned with demerits. It is natural for a young and ambitious nation to drink avidly at the springs of knowledge of loftiest repute in other lands. The United States did the same, and does still. The most famous sources, however, may be polluted, and one must not swallow everything. Neither in his own country nor in the Philippines has Dewey's influence been entirely beneficial either to education or to philosophy.

I. Dewey's Doctrines

HIS GENERAL POSITIONS

According to Dewey, religion was and is an obstacle to human progress. He thought and wrote a great deal about this 'obstacle.' He tried to separate religion, the obstacle, from what he called "the religious." He offered new faiths for old: science was the prophet, progress was the revelation, an idealized humanity was to be the new God. Notions such as these have often been discredited, but they retain their seductiveness, even for talented minds. Dewey made himself their oracle.

The reader might expect a man, writing as much and as categorically as Dewey did about the origins of religion, to be well-versed in their history and in cultural anthropology. Dewey was neither in any scholarly way. He was early attracted to the Darwinian theory of transition and based his experimental philosophy on this hypothesis of human origins. Taking man as perfectly continuous with the rest of matter, Dewey accorded him a particular stage of material development but denied him any truly spiritual element. Reason and will, as faculties distinct from the bodily organism, he rejected. Absolute truths and values he condemned as such, and affected a disdain for metaphysics while effectively constructing one of his own. He was a proponent of pragmatism, inventing a form of it which he labeled Instrumentalism. Knowledge, according to Instrumentalism, was a mere tool with which to reconstruct past experiences in order to modify the surrounding world. Within this world was the end and aim of human endeavor, religious and other, and beyond it lay nothing. Dewey's justification of this last opinion was the usual illogical argument that man has no experience of extramundane being.

The naturalism described above was enhanced with impressive erudition culled from Dewey's self-education in the natural sciences. Over fifty prolific years, during which he published some thirty books and more numerous articles, he tried to keep abreast of every current of secular thought. He made his influence felt especially in the field of education, placing here

his hopes for social betterment and for the development of the "religious values" inherent in experience. Both Catholic and sectarian church groups look pessimistically on the results in American public-school education but the naturalistic spirit Dewey so well expressed—even to its contradictions—lives on as the religious philosophy of millions of Americans and of an ever-growing number of Filipinos.

FEAR, RELIGION'S FIRST PARENT

Dewey did not approach religion by a frontal attack on the existence of God. Although he thought that philosophical arguments were unable to prove God's existence, he was keen enough to see, and probably did see, that exposing the alleged deficiencies of these arguments for existence could never prove God's non-existence. He preferred to attack religion in its historical rear, and he thought that modern research had provided him with overwhelming weapons. Anthropology seemed to him an arsenal.

Anthropologists have shown incontrovertibly the part played by the precarious aspect of the world in generating religion with its ceremonies, rites, cults, myths, magic...¹

As a drowning man is said to grasp at a straw, so man who lacked the instruments and skills developed in later days, snatched at whatever, by any stretch of imagination, could be regarded as a source of help in time of trouble. The attention, interest and care which now go to acquiring skill in the use of appliances . . . were devoted to noting omens. . . . In such an atmosphere primitive religion was born and fostered. Rather this atmosphere was the religious disposition.²

Primitive man was so impotent in the face of these forces [of nature beyond his control] that, especially in an unfavorable natural environment, fear became a dominant attitude, and, as the old saying goes, fear created the gods.³

In a fear of natural forces Dewey thus discovered religion's first parent. An evaluation of this discovery is left for the second section of this article, in which Dewey's various positions will be criticized. His method of reasoning, however, should be noted. Briefly, he argued that human life was precarious in the midst of uncontrollable natural forces and that only a fool

would neglect any possible method of control; hence primitive man, though he was not sure that God or gods existed, tried the first system of insurance, namely, superstition.

For if the life of early man is filled with expiations and propitiations... it is not because a belief in supernatural powers created a need for expiatory, propitiatory and communal offerings. Everything that man achieves and possesses is got by actions that may involve him in other and obnoxious consequences in addition to those wanted and enjoyed. His acts are trespasses on the domain of the unknown; and hence atonement, if offered in season, may ward off direful consequences If unknown forces that decide future destiny can be placated, the man who will not study the methods of securing their favor is incredibly flippant....⁴

THE UNIVERSALITY OF RELIGION

The fact that men in all ages and places seem to have had a religion is discounted by Dewey in the following terms: "It is probable that religions have been universal in the sense that all the peoples we know anything about have had a religion. But the differences among them are so great and so shocking that any common element that can be extracted is meaningless."⁵ Always excepting, however, the fear motive, "the bare reference to something unseen and powerful,"⁶ common to all religions.

Nevertheless, Dewey felt that what universality there was, demanded further explanation. Religion's attraction to the primitive he thought he found, first of all, in his desire for immediate action. "Uncertainty is primarily a practical matter. . . . The natural tendency of man is to do something at once; there is impatience with suspense, and lust for immediate action. When action lacks means for control of external conditions, it takes the form of acts which are the prototypes of rite and cult."⁷

This explanation he apparently saw was insufficient. If God or gods were non-existent, their worship could have effected no betterment of physical conditions and would not have taken permanent forms, such as ritual and cult exhibit every-

where, unless some other reason had existed for their continuance. This supplementary motive Dewey discovered in play and the drama. Men do not like work. If possible, they make a game of its more pleasurable features, re-enacting them in their leisure. The rest of Dewey's argument is as follows:

The pressure of necessity is, however, never wholly lost, and the sense of it led men, as if with uneasy conscience at their respite from work, to impute practical efficacy to play and rites, endowing them with power to coerce events and to purchase the favor of the rulers of events. But it is possible to magnify the place of magical exercise and superstitious legend. The primary interest lies in staging the show and enjoying the spectacle, in giving play to the ineradicable interest in stories which illustrate the contingencies of existence combined with happier endings for emergencies than surrounding conditions often permit. It was not conscience that kept men loyal to cults and rites, and faithful to tribal myths. So far as it was not routine, it was enjoyment of the drama of life without the latter's liabilities that kept piety from decay.⁸

It should be noted that Dewey, evolutionist though he was, imputed no greater fallibility to the primitive intellect than he did to modern man's. If primitive man concluded from fear to the possible existence of supernatural beings, from an emotional release experienced in rite and ceremony to an intrinsic, quasi-sacramental efficacy of the objects of cult, it was simply because he could not have done better in his circumstances: he lacked, not intelligence, but the instruments and skills of later days.

Magic and superstition could never have dominated human culture... if ends and means were empirically marked off from each other.... Lack of instrumentalities and of skill by which to analyze and follow the particular efficacies of the immediately enjoyed object lead to imputation to it of wholesale efficacy.... [Such an object's] share in a consummatory experience is translated into a mysterious inner sacred power....⁹

What else than what we find [on the darker side of the history of religions] could be expected, in the case of people having little knowledge and no secure method of knowing; with primitive institutions, and with so little control of natural forces that they lived in a constant state of fear?¹⁰

THE CONTRIBUTION OF PHILOSOPHY

Dewey found new origins of religion in the rise of the "traditional philosophies." Though man had erred when he imputed personality to natural forces, he had not erred about the precariousness of existence and ". . . it is submitted that just this predicament of the inextricable mixture of stability and uncertainty gives rise to philosophy, and that it is reflected in all its recurrent problems and issues."¹¹ Like primitive men of action, however, the early thinkers went astray. They too were seekers after certainty, enamoured of security, and the wish was father to their thoughts. They became "concerned with imputing complete, finished and sure character to the world of real existence, even if things have to be broken into two disconnected pieces in order to accomplish the result."¹² Classificatory devices, "based on desire and elaborated in reflective imagination," were introduced, while

the genuinely moral problem of mitigating and regulating the troublesome factor by active employment of the stable factor drops out of sight. The dialectical problem of logical reconciliation of two notions has taken its place. The most widespread of these classificatory devices, the one of greatest popular appeal, is that which divided existence into the supernatural and the natural.¹³

This natural-supernatural division, according to Dewey, is the most baneful aspect of the separation which the traditional philosophies placed between knowledge and action. By introducing it philosophers obstructed the course of progress until, only in modern times, experimental science broke it down.

II. *A Criticism of Dewey's Doctrines*

The evaluation of Dewey's doctrines concerning the origin of religion is not a difficult task in itself. Filipino students, however, as American students before them, will find it difficult, and not a few of their instructors will likewise grope in the dark for answers. On the one hand, they have not been sufficiently well trained in sound philosophy and science, nor in critical thinking. On the other, Dewey's literary style is

often obscure, while his message is one that appeals to man's revolt against the fundamental responsibility of his nature. Added to these obstacles is the natural reluctance of most persons to pit their intelligence against that of an internationally known author, philosopher and educator. One may not agree with him, but one is loath to disagree openly with him.

The writer of the present article does not accept, as Dewey did, the validity of Kant's "refutation" of the traditional arguments for the existence of God, nor does he think, as Dewey did, that the traditional arguments "are too formal to offer any support to religion in action."¹⁴ These Deweyan opinions are mentioned here to complete the picture of the philosopher's prejudices, and are only incidental to the main topic of this article, namely, his allegedly historical account of the influences which originated religion. Moreover, to criticize Dewey's account there is little need of recourse to works of cultural anthropology or of the history of religions. The weakness of Dewey's positions should be evident to anyone who carefully studies his own expression of them in the quotations already adduced from his writings, for these quotations are a very fair sampling of their author's views on the first stages of religion's development.*

THE DERIVATION FROM FEAR

Although the old saying that fear created the gods seems to date from Epicurus and does, like all apothegms, contain a grain of truth, Dewey's position here is almost devoid of originality: it is essentially that of Auguste Comte, and it labors under the same defects. Religion, moreover, in Dewey's account of its early stages, seems frequently confused with religious experience or sentiment, understood in a sense which Dewey himself disapproves of.¹⁵ Such confusion is understandable in one who took the German Idealists as his first tutors and never completely freed himself from their influence.

Primitive man undoubtedly feared for his existence when his natural environment was unfavorable, and feared still more

* A future article will examine Dewey's doctrines concerning Christianity's contribution to the later growth of religion, as well as outline and criticize Dewey's proposed substitute for all religions.

when he encountered Nature in some of its catastrophic operations. Nature and its mighty forces, however, evoke other and less servile emotions also, and one may legitimately doubt that fear always dominated them. Have anthropologists found no beneficent gods?

A radical defect of Dewey's initial argument is its assumption that man knew nothing about supra-natural Being until he met with adversity, and would have thought nothing about such Being unless he had met with adversity. This assumption has to be proven, if a case is to be made out against Jewish and Christian revelation. Dewey did not prove it, nor Comte; nor does anthropological evidence prove it. Rather, Christian and non-Christian scientists find much in their investigations of early man to support the fact of a primitive revelation which, in process of time, was obscured by such alien and inferior ideas as that of a multiplicity of degenerate gods.

Not all anthropologists read the facts as Dewey did. Even Alexander A. Goldenweiser, from whose *Early Civilization* Dewey borrowed and who shared with him an enmity for "supernaturalism," does not seem in perfect agreement. Discussing the All-Father idea, Goldenweiser says: "It is, after all, not psychologically impossible that a more or less vague idea of a superior being should have developed among primitive tribes fairly early *on a par* with animism, magic and other forms of early belief. *The entire problem awaits further investigation.*"¹⁶ This is a crucial point in the argument for the genesis of gods from fear. Ethnological evidence gives neither magic nor animism a certain priority of origin over a belief in a supreme being, though many persons, like Dewey, have interpreted the findings to suit such a theory.

Man, Dewey says, was not sure about the existence of God or gods, but he did not want to take unnecessary chances. Such incertitude, however, is not supported by evidence. It is true that there are cases of primitives who doubt about the existence of this or that particular god, this or that particular spirit, but pay indeed the worship of insurance. To extend

this incertitude to the existence of any and all divine beings is unwarranted. The facts that we possess show rather that early man was very sure about the existence of gods. Studies of the most primitive pigmy peoples reveal their belief not only in gods but in a superior being among gods, and, unless this article's author is mistaken, of primitive tribes confessing only one God.

Sacrifice and propitiation are not a necessary conclusion from the mere precarious aspect of human life, from "trespasses upon the domain of the unknown." The Unknown must first be conceived as personal before it can be conceived as offended and appeasable, and this is already "a belief in supernatural powers." Then, granted a trespass, expiation and propitiatory sacrifice are possible.

THE EXPLANATION OF UNIVERSALITY

Dewey's explanation of the universality of religion and of its perseverance among primitives does not convince. Great and indeed shocking differences there have been and still are among religions, but the common element that can be extracted from them is not meaningless, nor is it a "bare reference to something unseen and powerful," made by instinctive fear. There is deep meaning in a conviction of dependence on higher powers, however defectively such beings may be conceived, and "the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

The argument that primitive rite and cult perdured because of their pleasurable, "consummatory" qualities, is ingenious. There is an emotional catharsis in religious rite, as in all drama, and obviously early man could not go to the movies. But were primitive ceremonials so entertaining that, even with the precarious aspect of existence, they adequately explain the age-long and world-wide dissemination of primitive religion? The psychological power of rite and ceremony to keep the loyalty of some believers can readily be admitted, but they "keep piety from decay:" they do not explain so vigorous a growth. Moreover, they suppose a determining number of believers already within the social fabric. If rite and cult

as such are baseless, except upon a fear of the natural unknown and of a supernatural really non-existent as Dewey held, why did not the dramatic interest earlier separate from the religious? How did Dewey know that it was not conscience which kept men loyal to tribal myth and rite and cult? Does not conscience keep men loyal to rite and cult today?

The enjoyment explanation of the attraction of religious rite is not a mere construct of Dewey's mind, but it is an inadequate explanation. Ritual is not merely cathartic, though it does have that quality, and it should. Ritual may be better explained as a mobilization of the whole man, religion demanding the submission of body as well as of soul. There is a darker side of the history of religions, but to speak of one is to admit a brighter side also. Dewey might have looked more closely at it.

NATURAL AND SUPERNATURAL

The primitive genesis of religion which Dewey proposed, parallels the first or "theological" stage in the evolution of the human mind according to Auguste Comte. In this so-called theological stage, man is alleged to solve all or most of his problems by appeal to transcendental agencies. The new origins of religion which Dewey found in the rise of the traditional philosophies, parallel Comte's second stage, the "metaphysical," which is a rationalization of the former, according to the French philosopher.

This is not the place to examine the traditional philosophies. Our concern will be with the strictures Dewey put upon the "classificatory device" of supernatural and natural. Philosophers have not ceased to be led at times by wishful thinking and an instrumentalist such as Dewey was as liable to this failing as any other. Consider the logic of his handling of these concepts in *The Quest for Certainty*. He wrote: "While it is difficult to avoid the use of the word supernatural [in speaking of primitive religion], we must avoid the meaning the word has for us. As long as there was no defined area of the natural, that which is over and beyond the natural can have no significance."¹⁷ The second sentence, giving an ex-

planation of the first, contains two assertions: 1) a defined area of the natural is necessary before that which is over and beyond the natural can have significance; 2) there was no defined area of the natural in primitive times. Can these statements stand? Are they compatible with Dewey's position?

In the passage quoted Dewey admits that the word supernatural has a meaning for us; it is precisely this meaning that we are advised to beware of applying to primitive religion. It may be concluded, therefore, that there is today a defined area of the natural, for "that which is over and above the natural can have no significance as long as there was no defined area of the natural." What, however, defines the area of the natural today? There can be no question of human definition of the natural except in the logical order, the order of classificatory devices. The present defined area of the natural, moreover, can only be the present definite knowledge of the natural.

Consider the second assertion, namely, that there was no defined area of the natural in primitive times. Since a definite area of the natural means merely definite knowledge of the natural, Dewey really says, either 1) that primitive man had no definite knowledge of nature, or 2) that such knowledge must embrace all of nature before man can know what is beyond nature, and embrace it exhaustively. The first alternative can not be defended. There is a broad area of the natural which comes under common observation and which, to be known, needs the help of science as little today as it did millenia ago. In this area scientific knowledge differs from the vulgar and the primitive in degree rather than in kind, in technique of verification rather than in certitude. If it were not so, where would the knowledge of the natural begin? As for the second alternative, it has already been excluded by Dewey's admission that we have an idea of the supernatural today, for we do not yet have definite knowledge of all of nature scientifically, nor exhaustive knowledge philosophically. To say, therefore, that there was no defined area of the natural in primitive times, is simply false, and it has not been

shown why the word supernatural, in its present sense, should be avoided when speaking of primitive religion.

But if, as a concession to Dewey, an attempt be made to avoid the present meaning of supernatural in speaking of primitive religion, in what sense should its opposition to the word natural be understood?

The distinction, as anthropological students have pointed out, was between ordinary and extraordinary.¹⁸

In earlier times, what we now call the supernatural hardly meant anything more definite than the extraordinary. Probably even today the commonest conception of the natural is that which is usual, customary and familiar. When there is no insight into the cause of natural events, belief in the supernatural is itself 'natural'—in this sense of natural.¹⁹

Very likely Dewey's students of anthropology (whose names he neglected to mention in this connection) were saying that primitive man attributed to the supernatural many extraordinary events that had natural explanations. This may readily be admitted, but it is quite different from saying that primitive man meant hardly anything more definite than extraordinary when he said supernatural. It is to substitute a derived for the original meaning of a word, and Dewey did the same when he spoke of the present-day use of the word natural. His "commonest conception" of the natural as the "usual, customary and familiar" is none the less the secondary meaning, even though our knowledge of the natural takes its rise from our experience of things' ordinary actions. Is there anything in the notion of the natural or of a nature, understood as the intrinsic principle of a thing's operations, which anthropology proves primitive man incapable of? Could not his mind rise from ordinary effects to ordinary intrinsic cause? This, at least, is the present-day reaction, even "when there is no insight into the cause of natural events," and such insight is still lacking in a multitude of cases. Until anthropologists or others show that the primitive mind differed from the modern mind in this respect, one can only say that findings in primitive man's religion show no warrant for equating his supernatural with our extraordinary, or for abandoning the

supernatural-natural classification when his religion is spoken of.

And granting that primitive man did attribute many extraordinary events to the supernatural whereas they had natural causes, was he entirely wrong in doing so? If there is a God (and Dewey did not show there is not), did not primitive man err merely by mistaking His mediate operations for immediate ones, that is, by attributing to the First Cause alone what It had effected through the instrumentality of secondary causes? Primitive man was not mistaken in seeking a sufficient reason for events. In his ignorance of proximate and secondary being, he merely jumped too quickly to the Ultimate. The question of religion is: Was not his direction correct?

¹ John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1929), p. 41.

² John Dewey, *The Quest for Certainty* (New York: Milton Balch & Co., 1929), p. 10.

³ John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934), p. 24.

⁴ *Experience and Nature*, pp. 42-43.

⁵ *A Common Faith*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁷ *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 223.

⁸ *Experience and Nature*, p. 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 384.

¹⁰ *A Common Faith*, p. 6.

¹¹ *Experience and Nature*, p. 45.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 54.

¹⁴ *A Common Faith*, p. 11.

¹⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 11 ff.

¹⁶ Alexander A. Goldenweiser, *Early Civilization* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1922), p. 214. Italics added.

¹⁷ *The Quest for Certainty*, p. 11.

¹⁸ *Loc. cit.*

¹⁹ *A Common Faith*, p. 69.