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Laughter as Natural Piety: John Dewey, Humor, and the Religious

Abstract: One topic frequently explored in the philosophy of humor is the relationship of comedy and laughter with other facets of human existence—including theological insight and religious experience. The aim of this essay is to employ the mature thought of John Dewey not only to illuminate the nature of humor, but also to discern the deep source and connection between the spiritually exalting and the funny from a naturalistic perspective. While a number of passages on comedy and humor from Dewey's later work are addressed, mostly from *Art as Experience*, they are synthesized with other ideas from this same text along with a few quotes from John Morreall. The focus is then shifted toward the central themes of *A Common Faith*, Dewey's proposal for a de-supernaturalized form of the religious life. It is suggested that the humorous and the religious, understood through Dewey's refined account of experience, disclose a few very important things about our place within the cosmos as a whole—that greatest of contexts in and through which laughter and the spiritual alike acquire their significance. This Deweyan vision is further clarified by way of comparison with Peter Berger's theological reflections on humor. The controversies over sin and the place of tragedy in Dewey's religious naturalism are briefly discussed in the conclusion.

Keywords: John Dewey, philosophy of humor, philosophical aesthetics, philosophy of religion, religious naturalism

1 Comedy and Tragedy

In the second chapter of *Experience and Nature*, often lauded as the central text of his mature thought, John Dewey asserts that in comparison with tragedy, comedy has often been seen as shallow: "Comedy is as genuine as tragedy. But it is traditional that comedy strikes a more superficial note than tragedy" (Dewey 1958, 45).

The context is a discussion of the arbitrariness in nature. It may be "easy and more comfortable," Dewey explains, to take the happier sorts of fortune as evidence of the uncertain. And yet, the alleged superficiality of comedy is not the only reason we should prefer tragedy as our means of recognizing the insecure

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features of the world. A better reason is this: our tendency to take for granted that goodness is an expression of how things truly are (Dewey 1958, 45). A core theme of this chapter of *Experience and Nature* is a sickness within so much metaphysics: the conviction that the stable and the secure are what is most characteristic of the nature of things, while the precarious and the contingent either belong to some derivative plane, or are an illusion.

Dewey is not recognized as a writer on the level of his fellow pragmatist William James (this is an unfair treatment: not many of us are writers in comparison with James), but he does occasionally offer a striking turn of phrase. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey argues that even the highest values found within religion originate in our individual and communal experience, but are illegitimately "projected into a supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction" (Dewey 1934b, 73). This reifying of the ideal into what is most Real—the conversion of our aspirations for the future into something already existing either beneath or above us—turns real life tragedy into a most profound conundrum. It is the reason why philosophers and theologians have had to wrestle with the task of making sense out of pain and suffering, which can only be complete mysteries in light of a universe supported by an all-perfect transcendental ground or authored by a benevolent creator deity. "The problem of evil is a well recognized problem," writes Dewey in *Experience and Nature*, "while we rarely or never hear of a problem of good" (Dewey 1958, 45).

Dewey's acknowledgement of the poor reputation of comedy in comparison with tragedy has been confirmed by many. A growing number of philosophers have observed what little place, and often a derogatory place at that, has been granted to comedy throughout the history of Western thought. In direct contrast to this tendency, a few authors have made efforts to argue that humor and laughter just might have something important to say about reality. In regard to the trivializing of comedy in much of the literary criticism of the previous centuries, Morreall writes in *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion:* "But the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and other dramatists took their comedy more seriously than that." He then adds: "They realized that comedy is not 'time out' from the world; rather it provides another perspective on the world, a perspective no less true than the tragic perspective" (Morreall 1999, 3). And a bit more dramatically, in *Redeeming Laughter* the sociologist and theologian Peter Berger confesses that he has no pretense of nailing down the essence of humor once and for all: …as will become clearer later on, I would have to be mad to hold such an expectation, for, if I'm right in my intuitions about the comic, if I could ever say, This is what it is, I would be in possession of the innermost secret of existence" (Berger 2014, Prologue).

It is not a coincidence that the last two books I have cited are as much about religion as they are about comedy. If comedy provides a kind of access to the real, as suggested by Morreall and Berger, so does religious insight—and a relationship

between religion and comedy has long been noted. The mission of this essay is to further investigate this connection with the help of the philosopher, pragmatist, and thoroughgoing naturalist, John Dewey. I aim to point out how Dewey's unique account of religious and aesthetic meaning can help shed new light upon the deep source of, and relationship between, humor and the spiritual life.

The title of Morreall's aforementioned book on *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* is a useful reference point for the most general structure of my approach, even if the order is slightly altered. Beginning with comedy (or more accurately, an aesthetics of comedy), I turn to religion, and then end with the topic of tragedy.

The first three sections unpack the relevance of John Dewey's thought—his aesthetics of experience in particular—for the philosophy of humor. Beginning with my own experience of two stand-up comics in section II, I outline Dewey's phenomenological aesthetics in section III, and then point out what it has to offer the philosophy of humor in section IV. Essentially, I argue that Dewey's account of aesthetic meaning as originating through organism-environment relations can ground the dynamics of humor upon a strong ontological realism.

The second half of the essay carries the implications of the previous sections into the topic of religion. I present a few key notions from Dewey's philosophy of *the religious* in section V, including the concepts of *moral faith* and *natural piety*. In section VI, I reveal the place of humor within a Deweyan religious vision by way of comparison with Peter Berger's theological reflections on comedy. Section VII concludes the essay by addressing a well-known criticism of Dewey's religious thought and suggests how a Deweyan vision of the religious can speak to the connection between tragedy, religion, and humor.

2 Two Comedians: A Personal Experience

There are some proverbs we dismiss as banal and prosaic—until one day the force of their truth comes crashing home. For me, one such adage is the assertion that a true professional makes something look easy because they are just so good at it.

Some years ago, a young acquaintance of mine invited me to his first stand-up gig at a comedy club. The experience was a valuable one: for this aspiring young comedian introduced me to what is really entailed in a stand-up act when it is delivered by an experienced and professional comedian. The problem is that my acquaintance taught me this by way of contrast.

The young man meandered on stage for his twenty minutes—perhaps it was ten or even thirty, I couldn't quite tell. There was a joke, then another joke, then another. Each bit succeeded the one before, without build-up from the previous one and without anticipation of the next one, like a bunch of slow-moving, disjoint-

ed moments. The jokes, taken in themselves, were not *too* bad, but this is the most I can say for the act. I do not recall how he began, but I do remember the lack of a real ending, even though it seemed as if he was kind of finished even before he walked off the stage. The routine just kind of petered out, and the small number of spectators at amateur night were looking at their watches and readying themselves for the next act even before the session was over. It is painful to add that three fourths through his routine my acquaintance even asked how much time he had left.

The more experienced comic introducing each act was a sharp contrast to my amateur friend. It was not simply the manner in which each of the veteran comic's jokes seemed to build off the last. It was in his very movements, in the cadence of his voice, in that very particular slouch as he perched on the chair, in the slow raising and quick lowering of his eyebrows between sentences. Every part of his act was cultivated to produce an effect. Each detail reflected a pattern of personal failing, resignation, and occasional undeserved good fortune that was his main shtick. But more importantly, and this part is the most difficult to describe, I did not feel like a complete spectator during the act. By the end of it, I sensed that I had somehow accompanied this comic on his many social blunders and personal crises, that I had entered his nebbishy world of daily hangovers, jilted ex-lovers, and awkward family gatherings. Even after leaving the club, at least for a while, a few of the odder details of life I had never noticed before seemed to stand out.

I now perceive comedic presentation—whether it is a scene from a humorous film, the act of a skilled stand-up comic, or even a story told by someone with a true gift of gab—as something akin to music. For no matter what the medium—and yet specifically tailored for each medium—there is usually, among many other things: build-up and release, tension and relief of tension, expectation and sudden reversal of expectation. The last line of each joke or each bit is never just slapped on the end in an external fashion, even if it's made to look like it, even if the suddenness or surprise element is essential. As with each joke or skit, so with the entire act: every element involved, in its own way, has a place in the momentum. Each bit is somehow informed by the direction and tone of the whole, from the inception of the act to its conclusion.

3 An Experience

At one point in his well-known contribution to aesthetics, Dewey outlines how an artist doesn't just create. Rather he or she takes in and undergoes the meanings of their work with every brush stroke, every written line—continually engaging with it from the standpoint of an audience. It is likewise for the spectator of the arts,

who is never, well, just a spectator. To take in and undergo the meaning of art is *also* to be creative. It is to recreate the gestures or steps the artist has taken through one's own perceptions; to align one's experiences with the work of art in such a way that our awareness reaches the kind of realization or fulfillment the artist was aiming at or embodying through their chosen medium. Such a balance and synthesis between *doing* and *undergoing*, in Dewey's words, is a condition for the kinds of profound experiences encouraged by a talented artist (Dewey 1934a, 48–56). There is unquestionably something tangible about art, something seen, heard…etc. But a genuine work of art is active in our experience, and it leads our attention somewhere. Here I am reminded of an insight of Maurice Merleau-Ponty on art: that one doesn't so much see a painting as see *with* it.[1]

That *Art as Experience* is not just a work in aesthetics is well recognized by scholars of Dewey and classical American philosophy. For Dewey, art and aesthetic experience, rightly understood, entail nothing less than a demonstration of what experience actually *is*—particularly when it is at its most developed.[2] Dewey is a phenomenologist on par with the very best of the tradition, a fact still insufficiently appreciated by much academic philosophy, and a lush and detailed analysis of experience lies at the core of his entire thought.

For Dewey, the highest reaches of aesthetic and religious intuition do not descend into the mundane world from above, but arise from our more heightened and intensified experiences. *Art as Experience* and *A Common Faith*, Dewey's most definitive reflections on art and religion, were published the same year (1934). When not exploring humor, I work in the philosophy of religion, and thus I often address both of these texts together. Needless to say, I do not intend here to even remotely exhaust either text, only to point out a few relevant themes. Here and in the next section, I concentrate mostly upon Dewey's aesthetics as found in *Art as Experience.*

Dewey's concept of experience, in *Art as Experience* and elsewhere, is not that of an occurrence within the interior of our psyche. According to the Deweyan

1 Of the animals painted on the walls of Lascaux, Merleau-Ponty writes: "I would be at great pains to say *where* is the painting I am looking at. For I do not look at it as I do at a thing; I do not fix it in its place. My gaze wanders in it as in the halos of Being. It is more accurate to say that I see according to it, or with it, than that I *see it*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964 164). The thought of Merleau-Ponty has been rightly compared with that of Dewey. One venerable work in this regard is Victor Kestenbaum's *The Phenomenological Sense of Dewey: Habit and Meaning* (1977).

2 In an advanced chapter in *Art as Experience*, Dewey states: "There is no test that so surely reveals the one-sidedness of a philosophy as its treatment of art and esthetic experience" (1934, 286). Among the most indispensable scholarship on the centrality of Dewey's aesthetics for his entire philosophical project are the works of Thomas M. Alexander (1987, 2013).

model, we are not minds observing the world from afar, but active embodied organisms intimately involved in our environment.[3] It is within the organism-environment dynamic that all meaning first emerges, even the deep roots of the loftiest kind. *Art as Experience* explores this character of experience in particularly dramatic form. According to Dewey, all integral experience includes richly felt contrasts: Suffering through tension, there is a moment of resolution; facing obstacles, there is a sudden overcoming; sensing the precarious, there is a restoring of stability. "Because experience is the fulfillment of an organism in its struggles and achievements in a world of things," Dewey states in a chapter titled "The Live Creature," "it is art in germ" (Dewey 1934a, 18–19).

Art as Experience contains a description of two kinds of experience (Dewey 1934a, Chapter 3). Much of our life is spent in experiences which fail to cohere into anything memorable. Such experiences are marked by repetition rather than culmination, abrupt or ambiguous endings rather than closure. But we also have experiences which stand out, *even in* the midst of all of our daily life; those in which each step is oriented toward, and informed by, a satisfying and meaningful sense of completion. Shaped by a "consummation" rather than a simple termination, with each moment reinforcing rather than merely succeeding the before, this latter type of experience—what Dewey calls *an* experience—is pervaded by a sort of unifying quality, however difficult this is to describe. The setting sun casts its orange hue over the completed portion of the road as a construction worker shuts off her equipment. The time leading up to the minute she wipes the sweat off her brow, indeed the entire third of her day, is pervaded by a mood of victory, a feeling discernible from the very second she returned from her break to finish the job.

Art is on a continuum with such episodes, albeit not only sharper and more refined, but more *conscious.* It is the use of materials, whether paint on a canvas, words on a page, or another medium, to embody such experiences and to take us to similar ones. Dewey illustrates his theories in *Art as Experience* with lovely and concrete examples. Let us employ a similar strategy and recall our two stand-up comics. The first delivered a flat and mechanical succession of jokes, an act which, if it didn't slowly lose steam, would have just ended as soon as he ran out of material. To call the second comic more skilled doesn't quite capture it, for what occurred was something different in principle. Each one of his jokes and antics flowed from the one before and led off onto the next, with the entire

3 For a skillful and accessible unpacking of Dewey's account of experience in light of contemporary cognitive science, see Mark Johnson's contribution to *The Cambridge Companion to Dewey* (2010).

sequence accumulating in energy and direction. Undoubtedly, the comic's material and stage antics were crafted with the potential reaction of his audience in mind. A certain perception of the world was envisioned by the comic, and each gesture, word, intonation, bodily position, use of space, pacing—including just the right amount of silence between the jokes—were employed not only to express it, but to actively lead us there. For both the comedian and ourselves, there was that union of doing and undergoing which, as we have seen, Dewey takes to be an important constituent of *an* experience.

4 Dewey, Comedy, and Aesthetics

In one early essay ("The Theory of Emotion"), Dewey explains the act of laughing as possessing only a "secondary" relationship to humor, and as the product of a "sudden relaxation of strain" (Dewey, 1894, 558–89). These passages are duly recognized by John Morreall as a version of what is called relief theory, which I will outline succinctly below (Morreall,1983, 24).[4] *How We Think* and *Democracy and Education* argue that play and playfulness (phenomena arguably related to humor) are an essential component of education. A passage in *How We Think* suggests that the unity of playfulness and seriousness is the proper mind-set of the artist.[5]

Rather than combing through Dewey's extensive authorship to search for each and every place where comedy or humor is mentioned, I will briefly address a number of passages from his mature philosophy.

One passage of *Experience and Nature* includes the "swapping of jokes" along with casual activities like the "relaxation of the limbs after effort" and the "blowing of tin whistles" as examples of consummatory experiences. Dewey argues that to dismiss such pastimes as "perverted art" or an "unworthy indulgence," in con-

4 In this early work Dewey suggests that humor, along with a few of the main theories surrounding it, are but sophisticated variations/interpretations of what is involved in the more basic phenomenon of laughter: essentially the letting go of pent-up energy. After outlining the similarities and differences between laughter and a sigh of relief, Dewey writes: "The connection of humor with the laugh, and the ideas of relative superiority– triviality, and of incongruity, involved in humor, etc., seem to be simply more complex, and more intellectually loaded, differentiations of this general principle" (Dewey 1894, 559).

5 Adrian Skilbeck's "Dewey on Seriousness, Playfulness and the Role of the Teacher" (2017) led me to the passages on play and playfulness in Dewey's *How We Think* (1910, 161–67, 220), and *Democracy and Education* (2012, 327–47). Skilbeck aptly points out a relevant difference between these two works: In *How We Think*, playfulness is distinguished from mere play, as the former is a state of mind instead of a mere outward activity. Dewey also engages the theme of play in *Art as Experience* (1943a, 289–91).

trast with the fine arts, is to overlook their role as *ends* or fulfillments in the lives of the general public (Dewey 1958, 80).

Early on in *Art as Experience,* Dewey lists comic strips along with jazz music, and newspaper coverage of scandal, murder, and bandits as the "casual recreations" of the common person (Dewey 1934a, 4). Dewey suggests that it is because of the removing of the fine arts from the worldly plane that the man and woman of the street would not only fail to recognize the aesthetic quality of their entertainments, but would even be offended if it were brought to their attention. States Dewey: "When, because of their remoteness, the objects acknowledged by the cultivated to be works of fine art seem anemic to the mass of people, esthetic hunger is likely to seek the cheap and the vulgar" (Dewey 1934a, 4).

Evidence that Dewey did consider comedy worthy of serious consideration is found sporadically throughout the rest of *Art as Experience.* At one point, Dewey employs the comedic image of a man "laying bricks while dressed in evening clothes" as an example of where *form*—the features of an artwork which bring our experience to a consummation—is properly fitted to the other elements in the work of art. "The same subject-matter," Dewey writes, "would bring the movement of another experience to disaster" (Dewey 1934a, 142–43). Later, in a chapter titled "The Varied Substance of the Arts," Dewey suggests that the written word possesses the unique ability convey what is not immediately present. He asserts that comedy, equally with tragedy, therefore exemplifies how literature incorporates the ideal as well as the actual: "What might be or might have been stands always in contrast with what is and has been in a way only words are capable of conveying" (Dewey 1934a, 252).

A far more extended treatment of comedy and humor is found earlier in this same chapter. Dewey here outlines the possible dangers of classifying the different "species of beauty," a discussion immediately following a similar warning about categorizing the arts. He suggests that when taken only as tendencies within our experience, notions like "the sublime, grotesque, tragic, comic, poetic, and so on" may help to deepen our perception of aesthetic qualities. When reified into fixed realities, however, they inhibit rather than sharpen our experiences with art (Dewey 1934a, 232). The "comic and humorous" are used specifically by Dewey to further articulate these points. Concerning the attempt to conceive of all humorous experiences as the expression a single and definitive essence, it is worthwhile quoting him at length:

> How can any classification of genus and species reduce to conceptual unity such a variety of tendencies as are indicated by even a few of the terms in use: Laughable, ridiculous, ribald, amusing, funny, mirthful, farcical, diverting, witty, hilarious; joking, fooling, making fun of, making sport of, mocking, letting-down? Of course with sufficient ingenuity one may start

> from a definition, like incongruity, or from a sense of logic and proportion working in reverse, and then find a specific differentia for each variety. But it should be evident that we are then attending a dialectical game.
>
> If we confine ourselves to one aspect alone, the ridiculous, *le rire*, the comic is what we laugh at. But we also laugh with; we laugh from elation, sheer high spirits, geniality, conviviality, from scorn and from embarrassment. Why confine all these variations of tendency in a single hard and fast concept? Not that conceptions are not the heart of thinking, but that their real office is as instruments of approach to the changing play of concrete material, not to tie that material down into rigid immobility (Dewey 1934a, 234).

A danger of such hard categorization, pointed out by Dewey, is that it encourages artists to obey set and *a priori* rules for what their art is supposed to be about instead of experimenting creatively with their medium. He writes: "For new works, in the degree in which they are new, do not fit into pigeonholes already provided. They are in the arts what heresies are in theology" (Dewey 1934a, 235).

For my own illustration: I have always found the 90's television show Seinfeld to be knee-slapping, over-the-top funny, with its neurotic and self-obsessed characters and their awkward misadventures in New York City. And yet, had the creators of Seinfeld sought to fit their writing and directing under some general *idea* of comedy the result would not only be less extravagant: it would also be less distinctive from other expressions of humor both on television and elsewhere.

In regard to the philosophy of humor, as in all things relating theory to life, it is wise to heed Dewey's caution. There is no pretense here to address or exhaust all forms of humor and comedy, and still less to account for the innumerable reasons that we laugh. Incongruity, to be explained shortly, is certainly a central component of the ensuing discussion. But we certainly do not begin with this or any other definition or theory of humor, and then proceed to treat all cases of funny as its instantiations. Our direction of inquiry, informed by Dewey, works instead from the ground up, and begins with a careful attentiveness to the underlying features of our worldly experience.

Let us return to the theme from *Experience and Nature* I discussed in the introduction. The cosmos, as we perceive it, is a mixture of stable and precarious. Experience—the core of Dewey's thought—involves an active and mobile organism enmeshed within its surroundings. We have seen that aesthetic meaning, for Dewey, arises from the rich contrasts of the organism-environment dynamic, the felt passage from unstable to grounded, etc.

It is upon this experiential basis that we may now appreciate two of the most important theories of laughter and humor: laughter/humor as a form of catharsis or relief, and humor as a product of *incongruity*. The former entails an increasing

build-up of tension followed by its release.[6] There are many variants of relief theory, and it is often interpreted biologically—for instance, defining laughter "a venting of nervous energy" (Morreall 1983, 20). As I have noted above, Dewey's account of laughter in his "Theory of Emotion" is included under this theory. From a purely phenomenological point of view, many of us recall being on edge while listening to what seems like a very serious story, only for the narrative to suddenly end with something completely silly or innocuous. As a sense of heaviness seems to slide right off our back, we explode with laugher. Incongruity theory involves the confounding of our expectations or the apprehension of contrary features or elements (Morreall 1983, 15–19).[7] Before it became a familiar sight during the pandemic, for instance, we could giggle at the image of a man in a formal and well-ironed shirt and tie but in boxer shorts from the waist down.[8]

In *Taking Laughter Seriously,* Morreall argues that incongruity theory speaks to our cognitive and thinking side, while the relief and superiority theories (the last of these is where laughter comes from looking down upon others) are primarily "affective" (Morreall 1983, 15, 4–14, 38). Both thought and emotion are integral parts of experience for Dewey, and a Deweyan approach to humor, understood in light of his philosophical aesthetics, would address the patterns we live through with our entire being in addition to what we hold in thought.[9] Just as angst and

6 For a good summary of this theory, including the rather complex form of it argued by Sigmund Freud, see John Morreall (1983, 20–37).

7 In his M.A. thesis titled "An Aesthetic Experience of Comedy: Dewey and Incongruity Theory," Jacob W. Coleman explores the centrality of incongruity for a Deweyan account of stand-up. In articulating how Dewey's aesthetics can account for the experience of a comedian, Coleman skillfully compares the crafting of a joke to the building of a skyscraper. He focuses particularly on a subgenre of comedy he labels dark humor. Among other insights, Coleman suggests that comedians whose material engages unsettling and controversial topics, thereby bringing to light the incongruities of their culture, assist in pushing society toward greater harmony and stability (Coleman 2021).

8 In *Experience and Nature* Dewey offers an example of incongruity while addressing how something in the far margins of our awareness can force itself onto our ever-shifting focus of attention, or consciousness. He writes: "The power of a momentary annoyance or flitting amusement to distract a personage from an enduringly serious question is a familiar theme of comedy; a glass of wine or the whine of a mosquito may exclude issues of life and death. Any trivial thing may swell and swell, if it bothers us." (Dewey 1958, 312). I have previously mentioned Dewey's example of a man in evening clothes laying bricks in *Art as Experience* (Dewey 1934a, 142–43). Elsewhere in this same text, Dewey recalls an artist causing his audience to laugh by labeling his cubist painting: "The obvious disparity between the title and the visible picture was somehow a reflection on the esthetic qualities of the latter" (Dewey 1934a, 116).

9 Mark Johnson describes Dewey's notion of primary experience as "an ongoing process of feeling-saturated awareness and thinking that has physical, emotional, intellectual, social, and cultural di-

dread possess revelatory status for the existentialists, so the dynamics which provoke us to laugh may disclose our inherence within a cosmos of which they are a fundamental feature. The rest of this section will suggest how a Deweyan phenomenology and metaphysics of experience can provide something of a strong ontological grounding for the philosophy of humor.

In *Experience and Nature* Dewey affirms that the humorous, along with other qualities ("poignant, tragic, beautiful…") are characteristics of objects as we directly experience them. Due to a misguided metaphysics, such features have been set apart into some other world—leaving generations of philosophers with the insurmountable puzzle of relating the realm of value with that of fact (Dewey 1958, 96, 394). Here I am reminded of a concept from the work of Dewey's fellow pragmatist, William James. For James, "affectional facts"—qualitative and value-laden traits like frightening, sad, and yes, "comicality"—demonstrate how arbitrary subject/object demarcations can be (James 1996, 137–54). Many of us know what it's like to walk into a party seconds after a heated and hurtful argument had just taken place. It would be equally valid, James teaches us, to say that we had just "stepped into a tension-filled room" as "the room made us feel tense." Likewise, it can be said that humor does not fall so conveniently on one side of the subject/object divide, and discloses as much about the world as about ourselves.[10]

For Dewey, works of art, whether a performance delivered by a comic or an ancient and decorated urn, exhibit specific factors which lead our experience to a consummation. Conditions such as "continuity, cumulation, conservation, tension and anticipation" constitute what Dewey calls the *form* of an artwork (Dewey 1934a, 143). Probing further into the origin of this facet of art, Dewey asks: "What, then, are those formal conditions of artistic form that are rooted deep in the world itself?" Dewey affirms that the answer has already been provided: the complex dynamics—"those checks, resistances, furtherances, equilibria"—founded upon organism-environment relations (Dewey 1934a, 153).

Among the most descriptive passages in *Art as Experience* concern the "ultimate conditions of form": the rhythms coursing through both nature and ourselves (Dewey 1934a, 153–56). Dewey explains that human beings then take up these rhythms and add to them: "Thus, sooner or later, the participation of man in na-

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mensions inextricably woven together" (2010, 126). For a strong critique of the compartmentalization of abstract thought from feeling, among other artificial divisions, see Dewey's essay "Affective Thought" (1931, 117–25).

10 In a chapter on the history of philosophical reflection on humor, Peter Berger distills two insights about the comic. The first of these is that "the experience of the comic is the perception of something objectively out there in the world, and not simply (though it is also that) a subjective experience determined by the relativities of history and sociology" (Berger 2014, 33).

ture's rhythms, a partnership much more intimate than is any observation of them for purposes of knowledge, induced him to impose rhythm on changes where they did not appear" (Dewey 1934a, 154). Dewey in fact uses comedy as one example of how rhythm is consciously exploited by the artist. Shakespeare, Dewey explains, inserts comedy within tragedy for more than a momentary reprieve from the intensity of the drama. "It has a more intrinsic office in that it punctuates tragic quality," thus adding to the contrasts so essential to a work of art (Dewey 1934a, 180).

Comedians write their skits, thus adding something to the cosmos that was not there before. But the dynamics at work in their jokes along with their delivery—dynamics such as catharsis/release, incongruity, and others—are continuous with and made possible by those rhythms issuing from, as Dewey states, "deep in the world itself." I do not think this is too much of a shock in light of our ordinary response to certain kinds of jokes and other forms of comedic expression—"oh my god, that is so true!" It is this sensitivity required of the comic to the nature of things which makes the task of the comic such "a challenging one," as Morreall points out. "He or she must have a solid grasp of reality in its manifold patterns, and at the same time be constantly looking at things from new and unusual perspectives" (Morreall 1983, 84). In a chapter titled "Humor as Aesthetic Experience," Morreall takes on a teacher from his youth who, embodying convention, "emphasized that even the best comedies were somehow frivolous and not to be compared in value with tragedies" (Morreall 1983, 89). On the contrary, Morreall insists that the humorist resembles the artist in, among other things, their ability to achieve a kind of liberation from "well-worn mental paths of attention and thought," a condition for seeing reality from multiple and unexpected angles (Morreall 1983, 91).

The "manifold patterns" Morreall refers to could very well include the experiential contrasts and transitions of the organism-environment dynamic as articulated in *Art as Experience.* Such a picture can do justice to the varying degrees of profundity in humor, and to the capacity of comics to illuminate deeper and broader cross-sections of such patterns—thus drawing out larger truths of our predicament. Examples of the latter may include the smart and wry observations of George Carlin, or those passages from Frederick Nietzsche and Stephen Leacock, quoted by Morreall, on that great incongruity between human aspirations and the sheer vastness and indifference of the cosmos—including the final disappearance of all of us, along with our accomplishments, into the void (Morreall 1983, 124).[11]

11 Morreall quotes a sardonic passage of Nietzsche's concerning the "clever animals" who "invented cognition." "There were eternities during which this intellect did not exist, and when it has once

As previously stated, comedy has more than one form, and laughter is brought about by many things. Let us address the honest fact that the great bulk of what makes us laugh is not quite of the same caliber as what Morreall draws from Nietzsche and Leacock. We find humor in the sarcastic remark, the ethnic joke, the cruel commentary on someone's appearance or outfit, and harmless but shallow things like clever wordplay and a photo of a dog wearing socks. And yet, in all these examples, someone has arranged materials to evoke in themselves and others an experience of *some* kind. Each may entail incongruity, release, or a similar dynamic in one form or another, perhaps with a sprinkling of what can also be best understood with the help of superiority theory. A Deweyan perspective can simply claim that some forms of humor either wean far more trivial cross-sections from the manifold patterns underlying and constituting our experience, or they are products of novel invention in the fashioning of fresh incongruities in the interests of making us laugh.

5 Dewey and the Religious

In a personal statement looking over his intellectual history, Dewey writes of the agonizing spiritual condition of his youth: "divisions by way of isolation of self from the world, of soul from body, of nature from God, brought a painful oppression—or, rather, they were an inward laceration" (Dewey 1930, 153). His embracing of Hegelian idealism, a system based upon synthesizing such contrasts, was an emancipation from these painful rifts, and a promise of their reconciliation. Even after departing from idealism to embrace instrumentalism and pragmatism, something of Hegel "left a permanent deposit" in Dewey's thought (Dewey 1930, 154). We have seen in some detail the continuity between our ordinary life and the heights of artistic intuition in Dewey's aesthetics. This kind of approach is equally evident in his philosophy of religion. I will not attempt to exhaust Dewey's religious thought any more than his aesthetics, but will only highlight a number of essential themes.

Dewey's goal in *A Common Faith* is to show that one need not choose between a meaningful religious sensibility and modernity. He argues that what is most vital in religious life can be freed from the sectarian divisions of dogma and revelation, and made more amenable to the methods of the empirical sciences, social progress, and democracy. As a quality accompanying many integral and fulfilling

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more passed away there will be nothing to show that it has existed" (Morreall 1983, 124). The quote by Leacock is included below.

forms of experience, *the religious* can be, in fact *must* be, distinguished from the hard convictions and absolutist claims of the great historical religions. As Dewey suggests in his third chapter (or lecture) from *A Common Faith*, this does not have to entail a complete abandoning of the world's religious institutions, but their re-envisioning.[12]

More relevant for our purposes, however, are Dewey's naturalistic reconstructions of several aspects found throughout the world's religions. Some spiritual traditions stress the necessity of our fidelity to a miraculous historical event or a non-empirically-verifiable belief: the Law was delivered to Moses at Sinai, there is one God in three persons, all sentient beings are stuck in the endless cycles of birth and death…etc. Against this traditional sort of faith, Dewey argues for a *moral faith:* the unifying of the entire person in our direct and ethical engagements with the world (Dewey 1934b, 19–23). Dewey's phenomenology here is often rightly compared with the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber's concept of an I-Thou relationship—a non-objectifying orientation toward the other in which our whole being is brought to bear.[13]

This reorientation of our being is not entirely a consequence of our own efforts. In regard to our relationship to a changing and frequently difficult environment, Dewey writes of our strategies of *accommodation* (altering our attitude and behavior) and *adaptation* (re-shaping the world to fit our needs). Different from both these is an *adjustment:* a complete recalibration of our existence, "a change *of* will conceived as the organic plentitude of our being, rather than any special change *in* will" (Dewey 1934b, 17). This unifying of our inner selves, along with a feeling of the "thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe"—discussed immediately below—comes about by way of our imagination, and from far beneath the volitional and purposeful parts of the psyche (Dewey 1934b, 19). Despite their reliance upon the supernatural, Dewey explains that the traditionally religious are therefore vindicated in attributing this inward transformation to a source beyond ourselves.

Many religions also speak of our sense of an intimate connection and even a unity with the cosmos rather than a devotion to something transcendent. Dewey champions just such an insight as a healthy component of the religious life, and

12 In the third chapter/lecture of *A Common Faith* Dewey argues that his program "would not signify the destruction of churches that now exist. It would rather offer the means for a recovery of vitality" (Dewey 1934b, 82).

13 Buber's most definitive statement on the fullness of *I-Thou* relationships, as opposed to the more calculative and objectifying *I-it* relations, is found in his masterpiece *I and Thou* (Buber 1970). The similarity between Dewey and Buber in this regard is pointed out by Steven C. Rockefeller (Rockefeller 1991, 528–59).

calls it *natural piety* (Dewey 1934b, 2–6). Natural piety speaks not only for those moments where we feel at one with the universe, but also serves as a reminder that none of our accomplishments occur within a vacuum: "The essentially unreligious attitude is that which attributes human achievement and purpose to man in isolation from the world of physical nature and his fellows" (Dewey 1934b, 25). It is essential to notice a balance here between the ecstatic and the active. As we have seen, Dewey rejects the concept of some transcendental realm, free of blemish, and more real than the world we observe in our daily lives. Thus, Dewey's religious naturalism entails a recognition of our responsibility over the development of the cosmos, and advocates neither an otherworldly quietism nor a denial of evil.

It is in this same spirit that Dewey offers a naturalistic concept of what *God* can mean for those who require it. There is a hidden connection, Dewey argues, between a militant humanism/atheism and supernaturalistic religion: namely, an arrogant and self-important preoccupation with humankind. Whereas supernatural religion focuses on the "drama of sin and redemption" and with "man as the apex of the whole scheme of things," militant atheism depicts us as "living in an indifferent and hostile world" (Dewey 1934b, 53). Both perspectives, seeming opposites, display a disregard for the broader context in which all culture and value have their origin. Dewey's defines God as the perpetual but never completed merging of imagined ideals into concrete actualities. It is important to add that these ideals are not contrived from within our minds, but "are made out of the hard stuff of the world of physical and social experience" (Dewey 1934b, 49).

The dynamic element of this picture is not to be glossed over. So much theistic religion perceives the ideal as something already existing: whether as a personal and all-powerful deity situated above us or a transpersonal cosmic ground lying beneath. Since a synthesis of the ideal with the real, for Dewey, is not something already accomplished, it requires a progressive and ceaseless realization. Such a union "is active and practical; it is a *uniting,* not something given" (Dewey 1934b, 52).

There are lines in *Art as Experience* on the realization of our inherence within and belonging to nature which make *A Common Faith* appear tepid by comparison. Concerning the unity underlying any integral experience, or *an* experience, Dewey writes: "…through the phases of perturbation and conflict, there abides the deep-seated memory of an underlying harmony, the sense of which haunts life like the sense of being founded on a rock" (Dewey 1934a, 16). In perhaps his most arresting passage, Dewey suggests how art can lead our attention to "a world beyond this world which is nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences" (Dewey 1934a, 202). A page earlier than this, Dewey describes the impact of art on our awareness of the broader context accompanying every explicit focus of perception: "There is something mystical associated with the

word intuition, and any experience becomes mystical in the degree in which the sense, the feeling, of the unlimited envelope becomes intense—as it may do in experience of an object of art" (Dewey 1934a, 201). It cannot be affirmed enough that in passages such as these Dewey is writing about recollections of our equilibrium with the environment and the feeling of an expansive whole lying beneath our everyday experience, and not some escape into a higher plane or communion with an ultimate reality.

In order to appreciate a Deweyan account of the relationship between the comical and religious, we must first meet two theologians who have contributed to the philosophy of humor, and neither of whom can be labeled even remotely as a religious naturalist.

6 Incongruity, Humor, and Religion

In *Redeeming Laughter* Peter Berger distinguishes between the *comic* and *humor*. While the former is a genuine feature of reality, an objective fact experienced as incongruity, the latter is our "subjective capacity" to receive and respond to the comic in all its forms (Berger 2014, Prefatory Remarks). Even considering the important differences between cultures and historical periods, Berger claims that two incongruities seem persistent (Berger 2014, 193). One of these pertains to the divided character of our species: we are biological entities subject to the laws and limitations of nature and yet we possess complex and purpose-driven inner lives. The consequences of this *anthropological* incongruity are regularly displayed in comedy, but Berger's own examples are useful here: "the professor lecturing on some profound topic while trying to hide his erection, the politician whose fervent speech is interrupted by an unstoppable sneezing fit…" (Berger 2014, Prologue). Another basic incongruity involves our position within a cosmos which so vastly exceeds us in all directions, one frustrating our yearning for any final understanding or sense of security. For the purposes of illustrating this *ontological* incongruity, Berger repeatedly cites Blaise Pascal's well-known 72nd entry from the *Pensées* in which the human being is depicted as "absurdly located" (Berger's words) between the infinite above and the nothing beneath (Berger 2013, Preface, 27, 194).[14] Berger writes: "All human pretensions to wisdom and power are comically debunked as this fundamental incongruence is perceived" (Berger 2014, 194).

Berger has a great sense of humor and affords us plenty of examples of his ideas. But I cannot resist including a story told by the anthropologist, essayist,

14 For the original: Pascal 1958, 16–21.

and poet Loren Eiseley. Although Eiseley takes this narrative from real life, it illustrates the kinds of incongruities Berger means by the comic—and is both eerie and amusing in just the right way. A smug and successful novelist at a posh dinner party toasts the human ability to transform the planet into a "garden for his own enjoyment," all the while oblivious to a giant rat perched up on its hind legs, just beneath the man's chair. Just after the novelist's boastful speech ends, Eiseley writes: "I felt for an uneasy moment that the creature might ironically applaud" (Eiseley 1997, 34–35).

In regard to its ability to apprehend an incongruity of this scale, Berger tells us that "comic perception has a cosmic dimension" (Berger 2014, Preface). The comic, in fact, is a "signal of transcendence," and points toward yet another incongruity: namely, that between our mundane world and a "world that has been made whole and in which the miseries of the human condition have been abolished" (Berger 2014, 190). This is an incongruity envisioned by religion, and the switch toward it can only be accomplished through faith—since it can never be coerced through logic or justified by reason. Without this step toward faith, the comic—in its depiction of our condition as poised between two realms—is merely an "antechamber" to the religious form of existence (Berger 2014, 27).

Humorists concoct scenarios, jokes, narratives—mini-worlds of meaning which are run by a different set of rules than the ordinary one in which we spend the greater bulk of our time (Berger 2014, 190).[15] Even "black humor," though alluding to difficult and macabre subjects, is composed and delivered to make us laugh, and therefore operates as a sort of reprieve from the banality of our regular routine. Berger calls this a form of transcendence in a "lower key" (Berger 2014, 190). He explains that while such mini-worlds provide insight into the ordinary world, they are only temporary. In the end, we must come down from the joke or the skit and return to this banal world with all its shortcomings and frustrations. This situation, particularly for the most idealistic and the spiritually inclined among us, is therefore one of tragedy (Berger 2014, 195).[16] But religious faith brings about what Berger calls an "epistemological reversal" (Berger 2014, 179). Here, the concrete realm of our everyday life is now grasped as merely relative and temporary, while the anticipated and redemptive world is made absolute. "One result of

15 Much of Berger's analysis here is influenced by the phenomenologist, philosopher, and sociologist Alfred Schutz. Berger outlines Schutz's distinction between "finite provinces of meaning," which for Berger includes the world of the humorist, and the more stable meanings of our ordinary life, or "the paramount reality" (Berger 2014, 6–7).

16 A supreme example of this is Don Quixote. Berger not only addresses this character more than once, he also explores the relevance of Quixote for Henri Bergson, Helmut Thielicke, Miguel de Unamuno, and Alfred Schutz (Berger 2014, 29–30, 33–34, 74, 111, 179–82, 190).

such reflection," Berger triumphantly asserts, "is the intuition that comedy is more profound than tragedy" (Berger 2014, 197).[17] This is transcendence in a "higher key" (Berger 2014, 190).

Berger does not hide his influence from the theologian, philosopher, and anti-Hegelian polemicist, Søren Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard places humor within his stages of existence, and its most well-known treatment is found in the writing of Johannes Climacus, one of the Danish thinker's most astute pseudonymous voices. For Kierkegaard/Climacus: just as irony marks the "border territory" between the aesthetic and ethical stage (the former is where we live in the satisfactions of the moment, while the latter is wherein we take responsibility over ourselves and/or conform to the universal laws of morality), so humor marks the border territory between the ethical and the religious stage of selfhood (Kierkegaard 1992, 501). It is the religious stage, after all, which perceives what is perhaps the grandest incongruity: our finitude as pitted against the infinite nature of the divine. Humor, for Kierkegaard/Climacus, *may* be a sign of one who has made the leap to faith. But we cannot be certain of this. One may be a mere humorist, joyfully creating and pointing out incongruities just for the pleasure of it, or one may be a person who genuinely lives in a state of faith *incognito* (Kierkegaard 1992, 500–5).[18]

Berger and Kierkegaard are Lutheran Protestant authors (Berger "of a rather heterodox sort"), and both uphold a non-coercive leap toward faith and the incongruous relationship between the individual and the transcendent as core to their version of the religious life (Berger 2014, Prefatory Remarks). There are, however, many ways to divide up the major religious sensibilities of the globe East and West. At the risk of committing a vulgar generalization—a risk I would argue is inevitable—here is one: there are spiritualities of redemption and those of enlightenment. The mainstream and non-contemplative forms of the Abrahamic religions, along with a few other faith traditions, orient us toward a deity for our salvation, a being who will bring history, along with human destiny, to its end and culmination. Enlightenment forms of the religious, from the poetic insights of the American Transcendentalists to the rigorous techniques of Zen Buddhism, are more about a kind of awakening, a sharpening of our perceptions to what exists just beneath our focus of attention. There is no inherent reason why the experience of humor and laughter must vindicate one form of spirit over another. Berger appre-

17 Earlier in *Reedeming Laughter*, Berger attributes this idea to a work by Enid Welsford on the history of the clown (Berger 2014, Preface).

18 While Kierkegaard's pseudonym Climacus uses the term "contradiction" in his discussion of humor and the comic, Merold Westphal explains that "formal, logical contradiction is not what he has in mind. It is rather *incongruity*, the *tension* that arises from perceiving elements that do not fit each other and that is released in laughter" (Westphal 1996, 165–66).

ciates this, and he includes an extremely brief and clever "interlude" on the comedy of East-Asian religions. One Taoist master's idiosyncratic humor, according to Berger, "demolishes taken-for-granted reality, disclosing its fragility, and thus liberates the mind to take a fresh look at the world" (Berger 2014, 37–41). There is similar purpose for the Ch'an (Zen) koan, many of which "can be described as jokes" (Berger 2014, 38).[19] Morreall's work on *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* points out the comic as well as the tragic elements found within both Eastern and Abrahamic religions (Morreall 1999, 49–71, 103–11, 117–23).

Towards the end of his exhaustive and sympathetic work on Dewey's philosophy of religion, Steven C. Rockefeller claims that Dewey's naturalism, finally, cannot account for the sense of peace some may feel when confronting the harsh realities of suffering and death (Rockefeller 1991, 532–40). Rockefeller argues that a deeper ontological grounding is required to make sense of such a religious experience, one which envisions an "ultimate meaning" that is not touched by the painful contingencies of this fleeting and transient empirical world. In articulating such an ultimate, one that is both immanent and transcendent ("the beyond in the midst"), Rockefeller even conscripts non-theistic religions like Mahayana Buddhism with its notion of *sunyata* or the interdependent nature of all things (Rockefeller 1991, 537). It is far beyond the scope of this essay to dispute the accuracy of Rockefeller's interpretation of the spiritual traditions he uses as examples. Here I can only suggest that facing up to our finitude and the problems of life, all of the ugly cracks which run to the heart of the cosmos, may be seen as a kind of spiritual experience of its own. In his chapter on "Humor and Life" in *Taking Laughter Seriously*, Morreall twice quotes Stephen Leacock on how the "ultimate humor" arises from "the incongruous contrast between the eager fret of our life and its final nothingness" (Morreall 1983, 124, 128).

We have seen that Dewey's robustly non-reductionistic naturalism perceives the aesthetic, along with other intense forms of meaning, as not descending from some higher realm—but as arising from the felt contrasts and tensions of our concrete experiences as thoroughly bodily and environmentally embedded agents. We have also learned that at their most profound, humorists skillfully employ the same invariants as any other artist, and in doing so, relate us back to the common world existing beneath our feet—albeit granting us the ability to witness it from an alternative perspective. From a Deweyan point of view, we can therefore say that the comedian, as an artist, evokes "a world beyond this world which is

19 For more on Zen and Asian religion on humor, see chapter 6 of Morreall's *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion* (Morreall 1999, 49–71), and Ishwar C. Harris's *The Laughing Buddha of Tofukuji: The Life of Zen Master Keido Fukushima* (2004).

nevertheless the deeper reality of the world in which we live in our ordinary experiences" (Dewey 1934a, 202). Although Berger distinguishes between comedic and aesthetic experience, holding that it is meaningless "to ask whether a joke is beautiful or ugly," he also affirms that the comic discloses many previously unnoticed layers of the mundane world and that humor can be a true act of perception (Berger 2014, Prologue). From Berger's theological perspective, however, the comic, when not informed by faith, merely heralds transcendence in a "lower key." Dewey's religious naturalism, by contrast, aims at nothing but enhancing our sense of belonging and inclusion within this natural universe. To the extent that a comedian affords us novel and broader angles of vision on the gradients of meaning underlying the cosmos and ourselves, a Deweyan is justified in seeing the more refined forms of comedy not as mere gestures toward the religious, but as full partners from the beginning. In this regard, laughter is a form of natural piety.

The present author has sympathies which run in two directions. I am not deaf to theological sensibilities which call for a higher world to serve as a correction or completion to this veil of tears—perhaps a deity, a sacred future, an ultimate reality. And yet, I am not secure in the belief of such a higher world or an Absolute. I suspect, along with Dewey, that the very inspiration and appeal fueling such a yearning derives from our experiences within this allegedly mundane world in which, to borrow from Saint Paul (very likely against his wishes), we live, move, and have our being. In the first chapter of *Art as Experience*, Dewey writes: "We envisage with pleasure Nirvana and a uniform heavenly bliss only because they are projected upon the background of our present world of stress and conflict" (Dewey 1934a, 16). In the interests of humility, a compromise might be in order. Even if we cannot prove or disprove the accuracy of Berger's incongruity in a "higher key," or some supernal plane beyond this one: what we have here, seen through the right angle of vision—whether this is gained through Zen *satori*, Dewey's exquisite aesthetics, or the very greatest of comedians—may be spiritually fulfilling enough for some. That is, even if it fails to offer us what William James calls a *moral holiday* from the grittier facets of life (James 1975, 41).

"The mystery is that the world is as it is," Dewey writes in one of his later essays, "a mystery that is the source of all joy and all sorrow, of all hope and fear, and the source of development both creative and degenerative." He continues: "The contingency of all into which time enters is the source of pathos, comedy, and tragedy" (Dewey 1940, 106). Here, comedy, no less than tragedy and pathos, reveals temporality as a condition for all novelty in the universe. "Time and Individuality" therefore highlights another element which, in addition to rhythm and the general dynamism of the organism-environment relationship, gives birth to so many of our higher forms of meaning.

To summarize the preceding pages: The joke and the skit draw upon dynamics which, rooted in nature, are worked over and crafted by the comic. Recognizable by incongruity, relief, and other theories of humor, these dynamics lead us toward a particular kind of consummation, one often accompanied by laughter. The religious, in Dewey's naturalistic version, involves two core intuitions which arise by way of the imagination: a unifying of the self in the midst of our moral engagements with others, and the realization of our place within the cosmos as a whole. In short, comedy and spirituality, from our expanded Deweyean perspective, direct our attention toward a greater apprehension of this one world "as it is," mystery or not.

The Deweyan cosmos is not a perfect one, even when approached through the awe and reverence of natural piety—a reason that even the darkest forms of humor have their revelatory function. Invoking a specific example of tragedy, one involving a major incongruity within human experience, our conclusion will uncover yet one more connection between humor and the religious.

7 Conclusion: Not Your Responsibility to Finish the Work

One charge against Dewey's philosophy of religion is its failure to take into account the depths of human depravity, or its excessive optimism in regard to our capacity for the improvement of social conditions. In the minds of a number of Dewey's contemporaries, the horrors of the Second World War and other political calamities seemed almost to confirm the insistence of Neo-Orthodox theologies on the idea of original sin. One figure who criticized Dewey quite forcefully on this topic was the theologian Reinhold Niebuhr. While defending Dewey from Niebuhr on a number of points—affirming, among other things, the unprovable character of dogmas like original sin—Rockefeller does concede that concerning the malevolent and puzzling sides of human nature, "Dewey might have acknowledged this more explicitly than he did" (1991, 486–87). Along similar lines as his rejection of our dependence upon a supernatural deity, Dewey perceived the Christian doctrine of sin as a diversion from the individual and collective effort required for genuine social progress (Dewey 1934b, 74–79).

Rockefeller is correct, however, in pointing out Dewey's own naturalistic version of grace. As we have seen above, this is the *adjustment* or deep unifying of the self toward an ideal which seems to overtake us from beyond our will (Rockefeller 1991, 487; Dewey 1934b, 19). Such an idea assumes our former complacency and self-

centeredness—that for which an adjustment, bubbling up from our unconscious, serves as the sudden and dramatic correction.

Regardless of the question of sin, the thought of Dewey certainly has a place for tragedy. We have seen that in Dewey's mature philosophy, the whole of which we are a part is not some supernal plane of perfection, but only this fractured and imperfect world we see around us. Even while "human hopes and purposes find a basis and support in nature," our environment is "sometimes a stepmother and an unfriendly home" (Dewey 1934a, 28). Dewey teaches us that the heights of culture and social progress bring to fruition what is originally found in nature, but we must refrain from the old metaphysical habit of reading the hard-won and perpetually fragile results of our progress into something already achieved behind the scenes.

So far, these somber reflections must seem like an odd ending to an essay in the philosophy of humor. However, placing together Dewey's naturalistic reconstructions of two central spiritual concepts—his notions of natural piety and moral faith—I perceive one final incongruity. No individual human being will ever complete the task of fixing this imperfect cosmos of which we are a part. And yet, whether the cruelties inflicted upon us issue from society or nature, improving our lot, and perhaps that of all sentient life, remains our primary duty.

From a comedic perspective, we must look a little ridiculous cleaning up our small corner of the world against the great and messy extent of things. Here I am reminded of what is arguably the most iconic scene in the classic television show, *I Love Lucy*.

Lucy and her best friend Ethel have found a job in a candy factory. Having failed at their previous tasks, they are given one more chance: packaging the candies rolling down a conveyer belt. They are strictly warned by a humorless supervisor that if even one candy makes it to its destination without a wrapper, they are to be fired. As the process begins, Lucy and Ethel's initial confidence quickly turns to frustration as they begin to lose control of the situation: the conveyer belt speeds up and they find it impossible to keep up with the ceaseless flow of candies down the conveyer belt. In an act of desperation, they begin stuffing the candies they fail to wrap in their mouths—and, as they hear the supervisor returning, into their uniforms. Like much high comedy, the image of their anxiously wide-open eyes and bulging cheeks as they sit up to attention has to be seen to be fully appreciated. Pleased with what seems like a successful first round, the supervisor now yells to the operator in the other room to "speed it up a little!"[20]

20 "I love Lucy Candy Factory Video wmv." https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HnbNcQlzV-4 Published October 17, 2010.

I might justly be accused of trying to read a little too much into what is merely designed to make us laugh, but I cannot help but see this scene as a kind of metaphor for life. It is as if the unremitting train of candies is a modern comedic version of a lesson expressed by numerous figures, from Heraclitus to Buddha, on the unending flow of existence. The impossibility of fulfilling our assigned projects feels like something out of Kafka, and I frequently have anxiety dreams which resemble this. Ridiculous as it sounds, as I re-watch the video on YouTube for this essay, Lucy's words to Ethel still hit home: "I think we're fighting a losing game." But as usual, I find myself laughing.

Returning to a religious worldview: I recall a beloved quote from the Talmud concerning our moral obligations: "It is not your responsibility to finish the work, but neither are you free to desist from it." Taking this passage by itself, we are left with a partly tragic picture: none of us will live to see a fully redeemed world. But the sheer incongruity between our own efforts and the task at hand, let us be honest, is kind of funny too.

As the oldest of the Abrahamic family of religions, Judaism possesses an eschatology. It is therefore little surprise that Rabbi Tarfon follows this famous passage with a few lines on the expected redemption, one in which "the giving of reward to the righteous is in the future to come."[21] The *Pierkei Avot* or "Sayings of the Father" here aligns with Berger's transcendence in "a higher key," for the tragic, from this perspective, will not have the last laugh. But Dewey's religious naturalism will not have it: for such consolation from above distracts us from the hard work needed to make this world a better place. Against those who see such an endeavor as either "egoistical" or overly optimistic, Dewey responds:

> It is not the first, for it does not isolate man, either individually or collectively, from nature. It is not the second, because it makes no assumption beyond that of the need and responsibility for human endeavor, and beyond the conviction that, if human desire and endeavor were enlisted in behalf of natural ends, conditions would be bettered. It involves no expectation of a millennium of good. (Dewey 1934b, 46)

Between Berger's Kierkegaardian leap of faith and our enriched version of Dewey's moral faith, the reader will make his or her own decision. Whether it is a question of a future world to correct the shortcomings of this one or our own continual striving within a difficult universe: either way, an incongruity of some kind is on display to make us laugh. I think, right here, I have given at least one answer

21 *Pirkei Avot* (Sayings of the Fathers) 2: 16. This translation is from S*efaria:* https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_Avot.2.16?ven=Open_Mishnah&lang=en&with=Translations&lang2=en, taken August 27, 2021

to a question posed by John Morreall at the very beginning of *Comedy, Tragedy, and Religion:* "Is there some special affinity between both tragedy and comedy, and religion?" (Morreall 1999, 1).[22]

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