

# Practical Expressions of Natural Piety: Emerson & Dewey

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The author explores the ways that natural piety would be expressed if one were persuaded to adopt the naturalism of Emerson or Dewey.

## Introduction

As Nietzsche observed nihilism threatens modern man. Humanity today is largely alienated from a religion with a strong textual tradition and frequently in rebellion against the idea of a transcendent other-worldly deity. Two American philosophers who have attempted to demonstrate that modern man may yet have a significant religious experience in relation to nature are Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey. Both Emerson and Dewey described forms of naturalism wherein man might pursue the ideal ends of his life in a structured, valuable pattern of practical activity as he interacts with nature. It was Dewey who made use of the term "*natural piety*", but both urge mankind to practice a form of natural piety<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> DEWEY, J.: **A Common Faith**, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1934, p. 25. Hereafter cited in the text as CF.

In this essay I want to explore the ways that natural piety would be expressed if one were persuaded to adopt the naturalism of Emerson or Dewey. Of course, Emerson was a Transcendentalist whereas Dewey was an Instrumentalist. At first glance it may appear that there is only a verbal dispute between Emerson and Dewey regarding the practice of naturalism. An argument can be made that the practical reasoning required by both for the practice of natural piety is roughly the same. However, a closer comparison may reveal that the natural piety described by each is fundamentally different. This closer comparison may also demonstrate the basic methodology that one may use to formulate some meaningful response to nihilism. I shall begin with a brief sketch of the naturalism of each of these authors.

### **I. Emerson's View of Nature and Natural Piety**

The natural piety and the relation of man to nature that Emerson would urge each of us to express must be understood in light of his view of nature. Emerson, who was influenced by eastern thought like Zoroastrianism and Hindu thought, rejected supernaturalism and abandoned Unitarianism in favor of Transcendentalism. Emerson declared his New England transcendentalism to be a form of idealism. In his address to the Masonic Temple in Boston in 1841, "*The Transcendentalist*", Emerson said, "*What is popularly called Transcendentalism among us, is Idealism; Idealism as it appears in 1842.... Mind is the only reality, of which men and all other natures are better or worse reflectors*"<sup>2</sup>. Emerson also believed in a form of intuitionism whereby man might become aware of his primordial relation to nature. In his seminal work, *Nature*, he wrote: "*Idealism sees the world in God. It beholds the whole circle of*

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<sup>2</sup> EMERSON: *The Transcendentalist*.

*persons and things, of actions and events, of country and religion, not as painfully accumulated, atom after atom, act after act, in an aged creeping Past, but as one vast picture which God paints on the instant eternity, for the contemplation of the soul. Therefore the soul holds itself off from a too trivial and microscopic study of the universal tablet.*

*The world proceeds from the same spirit as the body of man. It is a remoter and inferior incarnation of God, a projection of God in the unconscious. But it differs from the body in one important respect. It is not like that, now subjected to the human will. Its serene order is inviolable by us. It is therefore, to us, the present expositor of the Divine mind. It is a fixed point whereby we may measure our departure. As we degenerate, the contrast between us and our house is more evident. We are as much strangers in nature, as we are aliens from God”<sup>3</sup>.*

Thus, on Emerson's monistic, idealistic view of nature man could find himself to be in direct communion with nature. Emerson speaks of the direct communion of man with nature as a possibility that man may consciously abet or suppress. If man does consciously abet that relationship he may experience the influx of the divine as a reward for his self-reliance. Emerson said, “*Revelation is the disclosure of the soul*”<sup>4</sup>. Such a disclosure is described as “*an influx of the Divine mind into our mind*”<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> EMERSON: *Nature, Origin, Growth, Meaning*. 2nd. Edition, Edited by Merton M. Sealts, Jr. and Alfred R. Ferguson, Southern Illinois University Press, Carbondale, 1979. Hereafter this work shall be cited as *Nature*. Other references drawn from Emerson's essays shall be cited simply by the name of the essay and the page. References to his essays come from EMERSON R. W.: *Essays and Journals*, selected by Lewis Mumford, International Collectors Library, Garden City, New York, 1968.

<sup>4</sup> "Oversoul", p. 204.

<sup>5</sup> "Oversoul", p. 203.

Emerson's emphasis on self-reliance had a popular appeal among early nineteenth century North American culture because of the value attached to independence and the reliance upon natural resources by this culture. Yet, Emerson did not commend a form of self-reliance that would foster ungrateful, self-made men. Man's indebtedness to nature was reaffirmed in Emerson's description of self-reliance, since one's self-reliance was the occasion for the conscious influx of the Divine mind. In his essay, "Experience," Emerson said, "*Into every intelligence there is a door which is never closed, through which the creator passes*"<sup>6</sup>.

I have used the term "natural piety" in connection with Emerson to designate man's devotion to nature, i.e.; his religious response to nature. For Emerson this religious response to nature is an outgrowth of one's intuitive grasp of her relation to nature. It is not a forced or falsified relationship to nature. In addition, in this context it may best be understood descriptively, i.e., as describing a state of being that man might become reflectively aware of. Let us explore this idea at greater length.

Man, who experiences himself as a conscious being, may find himself alienated from nature, and this was a form of insanity according to Emerson. Emerson said, "*The tradesman, the attorney comes out of the din and craft of the street, and sees the sky and the woods, and is a man again*"<sup>7</sup>. The renewal that comes to one who regains a sense of his primordial relation to nature in this instance is not the result of some metaphysical transformation. Through a change of his own conscious perspective man becomes aware of his metaphysical dependence upon nature. Since this dependency is a persistent metaphysical condition it is every ready for man to experience. Emerson said, "*The simplest person who in his integrity worships God,*

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<sup>6</sup> "Experience", p. 273.

<sup>7</sup> Nature, p. 11.

*becomes God; yet for ever and ever the influx of this better and universal self is new and unsearchable*"<sup>8</sup>.

The benefits that the worshiper derives from his relation to nature take place in a state of heightened consciousness. So, we might anticipate that the worshiper would make use of some special spiritual exercise or some type of artificial inducements. However, Emerson stresses that this heightened consciousness is not something that the worshiper can force upon herself. Emerson said, "*never can any advantage be taken of nature by a trick. The spirit of the world, the great calm presence of the Creator, comes not forth to the sorceries of opium or of wine. The sublime vision comes to the pure and simple soul in a clean and chaste body*"<sup>9</sup>.

Only by quietly attuning oneself to one's relation to nature can an individual enhance her relation to nature. One must become insensitive to the hurdygurdy lifestyle of the masses so that the voice of nature is heard. Proximity to natural surroundings may become the occasion for this enhanced awareness of nature, but it is not the cause of that enhanced awareness. Through such simple, natural efforts one may become aware of a shift of perspective regarding the world. One moves out of a strictly egoistic view to a transcendental view. In a much cited passage Emerson said: "*In the woods I return to reason and faith. ...Standing on the bare ground, -my head bathed by the blithe air, and uplifted into infinite space, -all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eye-ball. I am nothing. I see all. The currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part of particle of God*"<sup>10</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> "Oversoul", p. 208.

<sup>9</sup> "The Poet", p. 260.

<sup>10</sup> Nature, p. 8.

On Emerson's view if one were to change her perspectives regarding her metaphysical relationship to nature then a change of perspectives would manifest itself in her practical expressions of natural piety. For that reason intuitionism plays a key role in Emerson's view of man's relation to nature. As one turns away from the crowd and the world toward nature the Oversoul may reveal itself to the listener.

What happens as a result of this experience of worship? First, the worshiper becomes aware of a qualitatively superior relation to nature. Emerson said, "*The soul gives itself, alone, original and pure, to the Lonely, Original and Pure, who, on that condition, gladly inhabits, leads and speaks through it*"<sup>11</sup>. So, the individual whose life was once plagued by a multitude of competing ends and motivations finds a new sense of integrated purpose and existence. Emerson said, "*He will weave no longer a spotter life of shreds and patches, but he will live with a divine unity. He will cease from what is base and frivolous in life and be content with all places and with any service he can render*"<sup>12</sup>.

Many of the competing and mutually exclusive finite ends that would otherwise distract an individual would come to be abandoned or reintegrated in a positive way in the life of one who displayed natural piety. Certainly there would be a greater sense of self-confidence in the person displaying natural piety, since he would learn not to belittle his own inner glimmer of truth. Furthermore, a person displaying natural piety might be identifiable as a nonconformist on the strength of his self reliance. Emerson said, "*Who would be a man, must be a nonconformist. Nothing is at last sacred but the integrity of your own mind.*"

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<sup>11</sup> *Nature*, p. 210.

<sup>12</sup> *Nature*, p. 212.

*Absolve you to yourself. And you shall have the suffrage of the world*"<sup>13</sup>.

Second, adherents to natural piety might also display a different relation to society. On the one hand, they would not enter society as a mere conformist. On the other hand, as they entered into social relations there would be a greater respect for the other because of the recognition of the divine element in the other. Emerson said, "*Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us*". Encountering an other as an embodiment of the divine spirit was certain to influence the social relation that those individuals shared. If the other was not himself in touch with the divine element in his own life that would limit the possible exchange between the individuals. Emerson said, "*Everywhere I am hindered of meeting god in my brother, because he has shut his own temple doors and recites fables merely of his brother, or his brother's brother's God*"<sup>14</sup>. Emerson's penetrating insight into human relations led him openly to condemn slavery. He realized that it was a petty spirited man who would campaign for world relief for some ethnic group while tolerating the enslavement and victimization of his fellow man within his own community.

Third, if a person were to display natural piety this would be evident in his relation to the world about him. He would find himself working in harmony with nature. Likewise he would find that nature was meant to be used for his purposes providing that his purposes were those of nature itself. Emerson realized that much of what passed for prayer within orthodox religious circles was cheap begging. His own view of prayer offers an alternative to that type of practice while demonstrating how a man displaying natural piety works in cooperation with the world spirit for good. He said, "*Prayer that craves a particular*

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<sup>13</sup> SR, p. 92.

<sup>14</sup> SR, p. 106.

*commodity, anything less than all good, is vicious. Prayer is the contemplation of the facts of life from the highest point of view. It is the soliloquy of a beholding and jubilant soul. It is the spirit of God pronouncing his works good. But prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard throughout nature, though for cheap ends*"<sup>15</sup>.

Emerson might be identified as a pantheist<sup>16</sup>. The Oversoul or the divine mind was identifiable in all the world. In the case of humanity the Oversoul was present to inspire the individual if she consciously attended to its prompting. Natural piety was not only a state of mind but also a state of being that might manifest itself in action as man behaved in organic harmony with the leading of nature. The person who was moved to act upon the basis of natural piety was an individualist rather than a conformist.

Briefly consider how Emerson's description of natural piety compares with William James' description of nature mysticism. In **Varieties of Religious Experience**, James described several incidents where nature awakened within some individual "*mystical moods*"<sup>17</sup>. In a footnote where James comments on an incident involving nature mysticism he said,

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<sup>15</sup> SR, p. 105.

<sup>16</sup> There is some debate whether Emerson should be labeled simply a pantheist or a panentheist. I shall not take up that discussion here. However, it can be asserted that he took a monistic, idealistic position regarding nature.

<sup>17</sup> JAMES, W.: **Varieties of Religious Experience**, New American Library, New York, 1958, p. 302.



*"The larger God may then swallow up the smaller one"*<sup>18</sup>. Thus, on this view when one encounters the divine element in nature one may experientially transcend the limitations that would surround descriptions of the divine as encountered in some traditional, objective form. Recall that Emerson himself found his own religious tradition to be stifling by comparison with his encounter with the Oversoul through nature. James might easily include Emerson within his corp of nature mystics.

## II. Dewey's View of Nature and Natural Piety

Having examined Emerson's view of nature and natural piety we are in a better position to understand Dewey's views. Dewey, an instrumentalist, was a firm critic of traditional religion and was committed to an instrumentally valuable form of religiousness that he called natural piety. Most of the observations that I shall make here about Dewey's View of nature and natural piety are drawn from a work he offered in his mature years, **A Common Faith**.

Throughout the writings of Dewey one may find an opposition to dualisms especially the dualisms of classical supernaturalism. Dewey's work, **A Common Faith**, is an attempt to show that what is genuinely religious can be emancipated when it is freed of the encumbrances of supernaturalism (CF, p. 2). As we shall see for Dewey this also meant that the emancipation of the genuinely religious lay in its being free of metaphysical commitments.

Consider Dewey's comments about mystical experience. Dewey believed that an individual who was committed to supernaturalism had a hermeneutical mind set that would exploit religious experience for self-validation. Dewey did not deny that

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<sup>18</sup> JAMES, W.: *Varieties of Religious...* fnt. 12.

one could have a mystical experience, but his criticism was directed against the circular reasoning used to analyze the experience. He said, "*This dualism as it operates in contemporary interpretation of mystic experience in order to validate certain beliefs is but a reinstatement of the old dualism between the natural and the supernatural, in terms better adapted to the cultural conditions of the present time*" (CF, p. 38). Dewey thought that a belief in supernaturalism biased our understanding of experience and interfered with our pursuit of ideal ends. He said, "*In the degree in which we cease to depend upon belief in the supernatural, selection is enlightened and choice and be made in behalf of ideals whose inherent relations to conditions and consequences are understood. Were the naturalistic foundations and bearings of religion grasped, the religious element in life would emerge from the throes of the crisis of religion*" (CF, p. 57).

Dewey's reactionary comments against supernaturalism are insufficient to determine whether Dewey's naturalism was pantheist or if it was atheistic. However, Dewey did not want to have his view of religious experience identified as an atheistic view because of the pragmatic consequences of that view. Dewey thought that if the universe were regarded atheistically it would foster the impression that man's environment is indifferent or hostile toward his presence (CF, p. 53). Dewey said, "*a religious attitude, however, needs the sense of a connection of man, in the way of both dependence and support, with the enveloping world that the imagination feels is a universe*" (CF, p. 53). So, Dewey wanted man to view the universe as being pragmatically cooperative with his projects, but he did not want to suggest that there was some personal or metaphysical basis for nature's congeniality toward or cooperativeness with humanistic projects.

We may use the term theistic naturalism to describe Dewey's viewpoint only if we give a proper account of his use of the term "God". Dewey said, "*It is the active relation between ideal and actual to which I would give the name 'God'*". He uses the term in a pragmatic sense rather than a strictly metaphysical sense. For instance, he said, "*The idea [of God] is, as I have said, one of ideal possibilities unified through imaginative realization and projection. But this idea of God, or of the divine, is also connected with all the natural forces and conditions – including man and human association– that promote the growth of the ideal and that further its realization*" (p. 50).

This usage is consistent with Dewey's instrumentalism, but it has generated considerable confusion. Part of the confusion seems to have arisen because Dewey's readers used metaphysical categories to analyze his instrumentalism. Corliss Lamont attempted to alleviate some of this confusion about Dewey's metaphysical commitments by corresponding with Dewey. The letters exchanged by Dewey and Lamont for several weeks led Lamont to the following conclusion: "*John Dewey was not, then, in any sense a theist, but an uncompromising naturalist or humanist thinker who saw the value of a shared religious faith free from outworn supernaturalism and institutional fanaticism*"<sup>19</sup>.

If one is to determine on the basis of Dewey's usage the meaning that he attaches to the term nature, then one needs to appreciate two distinct ways that the term "nature" may be used. On the one hand, one may make an undifferentiated use of the term nature. In that case one does not set nature apart as a conglomerate *per se* but refers to it as an aggregate. The parts are not taken to be distinguishable from the whole. In a similar

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<sup>19</sup> LAMONT, C.: "New Light on Dewey's Common Faith", *Journal of Philosophy* 1, 58 (1961): 27.

vein one may speak of beings while refraining from speech about Being *per se*. On the other hand, the term nature may also be used to pick out the whole as such as opposed to the parts. Something like this happens when ontologists speak of Being *per se* and juxtapose this term with beings in particular. What usage of the term "nature" do we find in Dewey's writings?

In light of Dewey's special, instrumental use of the term "God" I think we are better able to understand his view of nature. Dewey is found to have used the term "nature" in two different senses. Above Emerson makes use of the term "Nature" in a differentiated sense so that it is synonymous with God, the Divine mind, and the Oversoul. Dewey is found to have used the term in both a differentiated and a nondifferentiated sense. John Smith observed, "*By 'nature' [Dewey] did not mean a cosmic system or order of that sort envisioned by those who adhered to the classical conception of a 'Chain of Being' wherein nature stands as something distinct from man and God. ...at the same time he actually used the classical differential sense when opposing idealists, theists and others bent on denying that the cosmic system exhausts what there is*"<sup>20</sup>.

Dewey used the term nature in a differentiated sense strictly in his replies to supernaturalists, but these replies are meant to be understood only dialectically. Above it was suggested that Dewey's usage of the term God was best understood in light of his instrumentalism. It would seem inappropriate to label Dewey a naturalist in the same sense that the label is used for Emerson. Dewey's instrumentalism was opposed not only to dualisms but also to noninstrumentally valuable metaphysical dogmas like pantheism. A nondifferentiated view of nature is consistent with Dewey's

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<sup>20</sup>SMITH, J.: *Purpose and Thought: The Meaning of Pragmatism*, Yale University Press, New Haven, 1978, p. 224f., nt. 86.

instrumentalism. One might be able to substitute the term 'nature' for the term 'God' in Dewey's latter works providing that one did not misunderstand the term to be used in some metaphysical or ultimate sense.

For Dewey natural piety was a way to ennoble man and ally man with the resources of the world so that man might better pursue the ideal ends of a good life, i.e., a humanistically good life. There is a striking similarity between Emerson and Dewey regarding the effects of natural piety upon one's relations to himself and his society. First, Dewey observed that the churches of his generation addressed the particular problems of man that were merely symptoms of a more fundamental problem –the disintegration of the self; and Dewey attempted to show that a holistic solution was needed for this fundamental problem facing man. Through the practice of natural piety one's life became reintegrated with an ideal self, society, and nature. Dewey said, *"The self is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe"* (CF, p. 19). Second, Dewey's natural piety promoted social intervention rather than supernatural intervention. He said, *"The old-fashioned ideas of doing something to make the will of God prevail in the world, and of assuming the responsibility of doing the job ourselves, have more to be said for them, logically and practically"* (CF, p. 79). Third, Emerson and Dewey held very different views on the effect of natural piety upon one's relations to the world. Dewey summarized his view of natural piety as follows: *"Natural piety is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their*

*aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable*" (CF, p. 25).

### III. Practical Activity and Practical Reasoning

Recently there has been a marked return to applied ethics, and the applicability of religious thinking has been a perennial concern for religious communities. These present concerns have fostered a more thorough study of practical reasoning, since practical reasoning is goal-directed reasoning that has a performative dimension. Aristotle understood practical reasoning to be a type of reasoning that issued in practical activity, i.e., it was a type of reasoning that had a performative dimension. He said, "*Practical wisdom, then, must be a reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods*"<sup>21</sup>. In addition, he said, "*understanding and practical wisdom are not the same. For practical wisdom issues commands, since its end is what ought to be done or not to be done; but understanding only judges*" (NE 1143a 8). Consider a strikingly modern example of practical reasoning found in Aristotle: "*if a man knew that light meats are digestible and wholesome, but did not know which sorts of meat are light, he would not produce health, but the man who knows that chicken is wholesome is more likely to produce health*" (NE 1141b 18).

Perhaps the best way to examine practical reasoning is to analyze some examples of Aristotle. On the one hand, practical reasoning was thought to issue in action. On the other hand, practical reasoning as Aristotle describes it was formally similar to classic, syllogistic reasoning. It offers us a logical cross section of action that describes both the origin and end of action. If one

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<sup>21</sup> ARISTOTLE: *Ethic Nichomachea*, 1140b 20.

acts intentionally, then practical reasoning can demonstrate the origin of that action. Aristotle said, "*The origin of action –its efficient, not its final cause– is choice, and that of choice is desire and reasoning with a view to an end*". Of course the end of action is the primitive bodily movement intended to precipitate some desirable end. Consider two examples offered by Aristotle:

(PS I) I should make something good	(PS II) "I have to drink,
A house is something good.	says appetite
At once I make a house.	"Here's a drink",
	says sense perception.
	At once he drinks <sup>22</sup> .

These examples demonstrate not only the logical progression in practical reasoning but also the problems associated with it. First, consider how they exemplify practical reasoning. The conclusion of the syllogism is a performative statement reached by a process of reasoning along two lines. One premiss is a prescriptive statement of what is desirable.<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>22</sup> Here I give Walton's modernized rendition of Aristotle's syllogisms. Aristotle said, "*For the actualization of desire is a substitute for inquiry or reflection. I want to drink, says appetite; this is drink, says sense or imagination or mind: straightaway I drink. In this way living creatures are impelled to move and to act, and desire is the last or immediate cause of movement, and desire arises after perception or after imagination and conception.*" See *The Works of Aristotle*, edited by J.A. SMITH and W.D. ROSS, Vol. V Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1912, 701a 30-40.

<sup>23</sup> Some further work has been done on the analysis of practical reasoning by MICHAEL BRATMAN. In his book, *Intention, Plans, and Practical Reason*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1987, Bratman suggested that practical reasoning occurred on two levels. He said, "*prior intentions and plans pose problems and provide a filter on options that are potential solutions to those problems; desire-belief reasons enter as considerations to*

other premiss states the means for attaining that desirable end. Of course, the conclusion brings the means and the end together in the form of a plan of action. Douglas Walton said, "*Aristotle postulates practical reasoning as a linkage between appetite and sense perception.*"<sup>24</sup>

Second, these examples demonstrate some of the problems associated with practical reasoning. Aristotle said, "*no one deliberates about things that are invariable, nor about things that it is impossible for him to do*" (NE 1140a 33). It seems clear that the efficient cause of choice is both desire and reasoning with a view to an end. G.E.M. Anscombe said, "*Aristotle would seem to have held that every action done by a rational agent was capable of having its grounds set forth up to a premise containing a desirability characterisation*"<sup>25</sup>. Such declarative statements of what is desirable have proven to be notoriously suspicious though. Stating the means for practical reasoning within the intentional plan is doubly problematic. R.M. Hare has argued that we must carefully distinguish between necessary and sufficient conditions for the satisfaction of a practical syllogism.<sup>26</sup> For instance, a house may be a good thing, but it can be only a sufficient condition for the satisfaction of the premiss that a man must do something good. Furthermore, if the practical syllogism does link sense perception to appetite, then there is an implicit assumption that the judgments of sense

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*be weighted in deliberating between relevant and admissible options*" (p. 35). The prescriptive statement of what is desirable could be correlated with Bratman's first level of practical reasoning. One develops an intentional plan that designates some desirable end as its goal.

<sup>24</sup> WALTON, D.: p. 11

<sup>25</sup> ANSCOMBE, G.E.M.: *Intention*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1963, p. 72.

<sup>26</sup> HARE, R.M.: *Practical Inferences*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1972, p. 60.



perception are warranted. If one were to take action on the basis of a statement of sense perception like "this is water" whether the statement was warranted or if it was unwarranted would be of utmost importance. So, the background beliefs of an actor would play a major role in determining whether she was warranted in employing the available means to execute her intentional plan.

Practical reasoning is not inevitably doomed to failure. We do routinely engage in practical reasoning, and we do experience a high success rate. The fact that almost all of my audience is not now thirsty is ostensible proof that we are successful at practical reasoning. Nevertheless, I suspect that the practical reasoning required for an agent to perform an act of natural piety is often beset with these problems.

The examples drawn from Aristotle have been used to demonstrate the structure and logical progression employed in practical reasoning. That may now be applied to the naturalism of Emerson and Dewey. I would like to suggest that an actor who displays natural piety has engaged in some form of practical reasoning. I would suggest that the actor has reasoned along the following line:

(PS III) I ought to display natural piety, i.e., to display reverence toward nature.

This is nature.

Therefore, I should display reverence toward this.

Here one should not be misled to believe that this syllogism standardizes expressions of natural piety. Not everyone who displays natural piety will perform the same act tokens just as not everyone who sets out to do a good thing will construct a house. Suppose that someone said, "I should engage a contract with Sawz Lumber Company to erect a 34 Williamsburg house." This is a token of a type of behavior, house building behavior. To

build a house one does not merely perform a basic act, but one engages in an elaborate, intentional plan<sup>27</sup>. Likewise a practitioner of natural piety may adopt an elaborate intentional plan that will make use of act tokens different than those used by another practitioner of natural piety.

#### IV. Comparing Some Entailments of Applied Natural Piety

It may appear that the practical reasoning of a person inspired by Emerson to practice natural piety were indistinguishable from that of a person inspired by Dewey. However, there is a deep-seated difference between the natural piety inspired by Emerson and that inspired by Dewey. To explore this point I shall consider again the three areas where the practice of natural piety manifests itself—in one's self-awareness, in one's social relations, and in one's relations to the environment.

For Emerson and Dewey the practice of natural piety entails the reintegration of the self. Emerson suggested that we abandon frivolous and mean pursuits when we practice natural piety.

The ideal self envisioned by Dewey as an entailment of natural piety could not serve as a substitute for the ideal self envisioned by Emerson. For Dewey an ideal self is an ideal possibility unified through the imagination. Thus, "God" could influence the formulation of an ideal self, but that would be only an imaginative influence devoid of metaphysical implications. Dewey said, "*Suppose for the moment that the word 'God'*

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<sup>27</sup> See note 23 above. If we were to make use of Bratman's analysis of practical reasoning here, we could say that the decision to build a particular house took place on the second level of practical reasoning. At that level one could develop a sub-plan that included all the specific details of the contract with Sawz Lumber Company. Thus, the performance of basic acts would be understood to take place within an elaborately structured plan that would also include specific sub-plans such as the one described in the text.

*means the ideal ends that at a given time the place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity*" (CF, p. 42). In contrast, Emerson suggested that one obtained a vision of the ideal self under divine inspiration. The metaphysical indebtedness is clear. Emerson said, *"within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One"*<sup>28</sup>. Given the metaphysical indebtedness of man to the Oversoul it is not surprising that such pursuits must be subordinated to the ultimate will of nature. Emerson said, *"nature has higher end, in the production of new individuals, than security, namely ascension, or the passage of the soul into higher forms"*<sup>29</sup>. While Emerson and Dewey both envisioned the reintegration of the self as an entailment of natural piety, their understanding of the nature and emergence of an ideal self differed vastly.

For both Emerson and Dewey another entailment of natural piety is that one's social relations are enhanced by a sense of dignity. Natural piety does not necessarily drive man to social existence with fellow man though. For Emerson there was a heightened sense of dignity because the practitioner of natural piety recognized the same divine spirit to be in all creatures. Emerson said, *"...Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us"*<sup>30</sup>. Yet, Emerson attached a negative value to some forms of social existence with fellow man. Often social existence amounted to nothing more than conformity and herd existence. Emerson stressed that man should be related to nature even at the expense of social company. For Dewey man carried a heightened sense of

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<sup>28</sup> "Oversoul", p. 197.

<sup>29</sup> "The Poet", p. 258.

<sup>30</sup> "Oversoul", p. 202.

dignity to his social existence because of his natural piety. His natural piety liberated man from a dependence on other-worldly resources. Thus, man developed a newfound sense of dependence upon fellow man for the achievement of his ideal ends. Rather than driving man away from social existence the natural piety of Dewey turned man back to social existence with a newfound zeal for cooperation.

By comparison Emerson's naturalism might appear to be antisocial, but that would be a misreading of Emerson. According to Emerson the social company that was expendable was infected with insanity, i.e., it was mere herd existence that had forsaken its natural heritage. Emerson was quite willing encourage social relations providing that the individuals who entered into these relations could reciprocate the spirit of naturalism that he was promoting. While he might have been willing to tolerate other social relations, he found them less than edifying in those instances where the other individual had forsaken or left uncultivated his primordial relation to nature.

Perhaps the most evident difference between the natural piety of Emerson and Dewey arises in connection with the relation of the individual to the environment. To act reverentially toward nature one must successfully make the judgment, "this is nature." One of two different background beliefs about nature could be held by the practitioner of natural piety. On Emerson's account nature was described in a differentiated, pantheistic sense; but Dewey's used a nondifferentiated sense of nature. Both recognized the instrumental value of nature, and both urge man to make full use of the potential of nature rather than appealing to some other-worldly force. Emerson said, "*Nature is thoroughly mediate. It is made to serve. It receives the dominion of man as meekly as the ass on which the Savior rode*"<sup>31</sup>. Yet,

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<sup>31</sup> Nature, p. 20.

we should not overlook the fact that in Emerson's naturalism Nature itself had ultimate ends that man was meant to serve. Emerson said, "*prayer as a means to effect a private end is meanness and theft. It supposes dualism and not unity in nature and consciousness. As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg*"<sup>32</sup>. Dewey could offer his approval of the turn toward nature and away from supernaturalism, but Dewey regarded nature as something instrumentally valuable only. Since the instrumental value of nature was grounded on whatever proved to be instrumentally valuable to man, this type of natural piety could justify the displacement of not only ultimate purposes like those envisioned by Emerson but also the purpose of coexistent species. So, the natural piety of Dewey might lead to the exploitation of nature.

### Conclusion

Both Ralph Waldo Emerson and John Dewey include within their naturalism descriptions of natural piety. The person who reflectively reveres nature and who has manifest that reverence for nature in practical activity is a practitioner of natural piety. Yet, Emerson and Dewey demonstrate that there may be two vastly different forms of natural piety. Practitioners of both types of natural piety engage in a similar process of practical reasoning, but the practical activity that results differs widely; therefore, through this comparison one finds an apparently verbal dispute that is a genuine dispute. At the heart of the genuine dispute is the different attitudes of Emerson and Dewey toward religion. Emerson's description of natural piety is religious, and the reverence for nature it inspires is metaphysically grounded. Dewey's description of natural piety makes use of an

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<sup>32</sup> "Self Reliance", p. 105.

instrumental view of religiousness, and the reverence for nature it inspires is subject to an instrumental criteria.

In light of the fact that man resorts to natural piety to combat nihilism the significance of the latter observation should not be underestimated. Emerson's naturalism would combat nihilism by a return to a metaphysical commitment, whereas Dewey's naturalism would combat nihilism through a plan of action that is fundamentally self-affirmative. Within Emerson's naturalism one travels a path to meaningful existence as one reaffirms her primordial relation to the Oversoul. As she cultivates that relation and allows it to influence all other personal relations that individual reclaims for herself meaningful existence.

Within Dewey's naturalism to travel a path to meaningful existence one must disengage himself from an other-worldly religious orientation. Then by focusing upon the potentiality available within nature one may turn nature toward the service of a humanistically good life. Nature is to be respected for its potentiality and happily engaged in light of its convivial instrumentality, but nature does not become a substitute for some otherworldly diety such that one's efforts are turned toward its service *per se*. Within Dewey's natural piety one does not find any justification for Nature worship.

This essay examines two naturalistic solutions to nihilism<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, there is an important methodological point to be observed here for anyone attempting to formulate a solution to nihilism. Emerson's description of naturalism is

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<sup>33</sup> I myself am inclined to believe that an effective way to combat nihilism lies along a path similar to the one taken by Emerson though significantly different. To me it seems that the panentheistic solution to the problem that has been described by Charles Hartshorne and has been developed within process theism by thinkers like Shubert Ogden and John B. Cobb may be an effective way to combat nihilism. I leave the discussion of that line of thought to be developed elsewhere.

metaphysically grounded whereas Dewey's description of naturalism is not. Dewey's naturalistic solution to nihilism without metaphysical grounding demonstrates that we may resort to self-authenticating tactics to combat meaninglessness and that such self-centered means of combating nihilism may upon reflection prove to be ultimately self-effacing.

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