

Supernaturalism: What's a Deweyan to Do?

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Think of fairies. Do images of voting booths, protest marches, and town squares come to mind? Likely not. Those are images from the realm of the republic, not the Otherworld. According to an influential theory of democracy, the supernatural incites antidemocratic urges by isolating human interests. Democracy means light: science, rational discourse, the give-and-take of freedom. Miracles and ghosts and mystical encounters sever us from social encounter, serving to undermine citizenship. Democracy dies in the mist. Supernaturalism is thus rendered political. To think of fairies is, in the words of the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, to retreat from “this century of great engines and spinning-jinnies” and return to the “the old dead beautiful world of romance.”²

My experience teaching an undergraduate course, “The History of the Supernatural,” has led me to rethink the causal link between supernaturalism and cultural withdrawal. This course, whose subject matter ranges from zombies and vampires to Reformation-era Antichrist broadsides, has drawn my attention to the capacity of the supernatural to induce curiosity and compassion for fellow citizens. Rather than insulating us

from our strange neighbors via “metaphysical terror,”³ supernatural beliefs can operate as a catalyst for civic imagination. Education is necessary to democracy, but education need not be the unenchanted type dreaded by Yeats, where “lecturers with their black coats and tumblers of water, have driven away the goblin kingdom and made silent the feet of the little dancers.”⁴

In the middle of this paper are two sections. The first section concerns theory: an (alleged) link between supernaturalism and the erosion of democracy is analyzed. The second section concerns pedagogy: the (potential) contribution of teaching supernaturalism to intercultural knowledge and social empathy is described. The paper is structured in this way to demonstrate the idea that pedagogy tests, critiques, and generates theory. The way religions are taught in the university influences how we think about religion. The classroom does more than inform individuals—it forms public and political consciousness. Influential scholars of religion, such as Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Jonathan Z. Smith, were thus keenly interested in pedagogics of religious studies—given the larger implications of education for human life. The latter thought a PhD should not be conferred until one had studied pedagogics. Why? Teaching is an integral way religion scholarship remains connected to the public.⁵ The former wrote, “if as a teacher and scholar one does not enable one’s students and readers to see and to feel it”—and by “it,” W. C. Smith means the dreaming-exulting-fearing religiosity of human beings— “then one has failed ... to arrive at knowledge.”⁶

¹ An earlier version of this paper was published as Aaron J. Ghiloni, “Teaching Democracy by Teaching Supernaturalism,” *Religions* 10, no. 8 (2019). Copyright is retained by the author.

² William Butler Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1892), 1.

³ Peter Berger, *A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1970), 3.

⁴ Yeats, *Irish Fairy Tales*, 1.

⁵ Jonathan Z. Smith, *On Teaching Religion* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 41, also see chapter five.

⁶ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Towards a World Theology: Faith and the Comparative History of Religion* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 65.

Knowledge of the paranormal is human and humanizing. By treating mythologies and magic as seriously as subjects of human consciousness, the classroom creates communities.

John Dewey's Critique of the Supernatural

John Dewey is one of the great American philosophers of democracy. Dewey's noteworthy contribution was to associate the creation of a free and democratic society with public education. A citizenry educated is prerequisite to a citizenry democratic. But for the same reason, Dewey was an adversary of supernaturalism. "Laissez-faire individualism," he wrote, "is a secularized version of the doctrine of a supernatural soul."⁷

Dewey opposed "unseen powers" for a mixture of reasons.⁸ He was a naturalist, so he rejected supernaturalism on scientific grounds. Dewey saw "natural experience" as the origin of religious values and resisted ecclesiastical attempts to regulate religion to a higher sphere of

experience.⁹ He was an instrumentalist, so he sought to retain values associated with religion while emptying religion of doctrinal substance, especially belief in otherworldly beings. By identifying religion with practical morality, Dewey emphasized the "irrelevancy of 'supernormal' phenomena, even if genuine."¹⁰ But Dewey's theological argument against supernaturalism is neither his most innovative nor his most pragmatic.¹¹ Dewey's larger reason for opposing the supernatural is political—Dewey rejected the supernatural because he was a democrat.

Dewey viewed democracy as part of a divine plan, as revelation, as incarnation.¹² Early in adult life, he swapped supernaturalism for democracy in his construal of Christianity. This tradeoff is expressed most vociferously in Dewey's little book on religion, *A Common Faith*. This publication of his 1934 Terry Lectures describes the ideals and values that give "stability and peace" to human community as located in interhuman relationships such as that "of husband and wife, of parent and child, friend and

⁷ John Dewey, "Anti-Naturalism in Extremis," in *The Later Works of John Dewey: 15*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 61.

⁸ Reference to "unseen powers" is made throughout John Dewey's *A Common Faith* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1934). It is a term he borrowed from the *Oxford Dictionary* (p. 3). Citations from *A Common Faith* are from the Yale University Press edition as it is more widely available than the critical edition by Southern Illinois University Press which is published in Volume 9 of *The Later Works of John Dewey*, edited by Jo Ann Boydston (1986).

⁹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 6.

¹⁰ John Dewey, "Syllabus: The Pragmatic Movement of Contemporary Thought," in *The Middle Works of John Dewey: 4*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1977), 257.

¹¹ Critiques of Dewey's position by those who are otherwise sympathetic to his pragmatism are common. For example, Nel Noddings says, "*A Common Faith* is arguably

one of John Dewey's least effective books," in "Looking Forward from *A Common Faith*," *Education and Culture* 25, no. 2 (2009), 12. Richard Rorty calls *A Common Faith* "unambitious and half-hearted," in *Philosophy as Cultural Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 36. Reinhold Niebuhr described *A Common Faith* as a "footnote on religion" in "A Footnote on Religion," *Nation*, no. 139 (1934).

¹² In an early essay, "Christianity and Democracy" (originally a Sunday morning address delivered at a service of the Students' Christian Association at the University of Michigan), Dewey writes, "Democracy thus appears as the means by which the revelation of truth is carried on. It is in democracy . . . that the incarnation of God in man . . . becomes a living, present thing, having its ordinary and natural sense. This truth is brought down to life; its segregation removed: it is made a common truth enacted in all departments of action, not in one isolated sphere called religious." John Dewey, "Christianity and Democracy," in *The Early Works of John Dewey: 4*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 9.

friend, neighbor and neighbor.”¹³ To locate these ideals, instead, in a “supernatural and other-worldly locus,” is to dilute their power.¹⁴ He wrote, “the objection to supernaturalism is that it stands in the way of an effective realization of the sweep and depth of the implications of natural human relations.”¹⁵

“One Thing” may exist independent of all other things, naturalists presume that a single “Total Event” comprises all things. Lewis thus portrays naturalism as assigning democratic equality to every existent thing: a system in which all things are “all equally dependent” is likened to “democratic sovereignty.” In reverse, the image of a

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Dewey’s argument against the supernatural is a form of guilt by association—or rather, guilt by lack of association. The problem is not simply that believers in pre-modern cosmology are ill-informed. A flat earth never tripped anybody. The problem is the real-world political effects of supernatural claims. Religions that depend “upon the supernatural,” Dewey wrote in his ninth decade, “have been . . . the source of violent conflict, and destructive of basic human values.”¹⁶ Belief in real demons precedes demonization of rivals.¹⁷ A claim to “supernatural guidance” undergirds “fanaticism” in wiping out “heresies.”¹⁸ The netherworld undermines the neighborhood.

Reader, kindly permit a parenthesis. Dewey’s coupling of naturalism and democracy is echoed by an unlikely peer—C. S. Lewis. While Lewis’ fame is as Narnia’s creator, he is also the writer of influential apologetic works. Lewis’ *Miracles* explains that supernaturalists and naturalists differ on basic but key issues, such as the meaning of “nature.” Where supernaturalists accept that

“king who has sovereignty and the people have not” describes how supernaturalists privilege the One Thing which exists outside the system. “Naturalism gives us a democratic, Supernaturalism a monarchical, picture of reality.”¹⁹ A world with Deeper Magic is world with a king.

Dewey and Lewis would come to much different conclusions, but they agree on this: the truth difference between naturalism and supernaturalism is (at least) a socio-historical difference. Dewey acknowledged that supernaturalism was once “natural”—humanity’s established way for explaining and coping with extraordinary forces.²⁰ Lewis, too, notes that the social order creates metaphysical expectations: “Supernaturalism first arose from reading into the universe the structure of monarchical societies,” while “naturalism has arisen from reading into it the structure of modern democracies.”²¹ Dewey thought this was no longer true. Lewis agreed:

Supernaturalism is the characteristic philosophy of a monarchical age and Naturalism of a

¹³ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 70, 71.

¹⁴ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 71.

¹⁵ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 80.

¹⁶ John Dewey, “Contribution to ‘Religion and the Intellectuals,’” in *The Later Works of John Dewey: 16*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1991), 394. Brought to my attention by Steven Rockefeller, *John Dewey: Religious*

Faith and Democratic Humanism (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 378.

¹⁷ See Philip Almond, *The Devil: A New Biography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 11, 38.

¹⁸ Dewey, “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis,” 58.

¹⁹ C. S. Lewis, *Miracles: A Preliminary Study* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1947), 14-16.

²⁰ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 69.

²¹ Lewis, *Miracles*, 15-16.

democratic, in the sense that Supernaturalism, even if false, would have been believed by the great mass of unthinking people four hundred years ago, just as Naturalism, even if false, will be believed by the great mass of unthinking people today.²²

Although Lewis associated naturalism with a “great mass” of un-thinkers, Dewey worried that naturalism would not so easily gain consensus. Dewey diagnosed a modern “anti-naturalism” which appeals to an authority outside of nature and thus “outside men’s connections with one another in society.”²³ Persistent reference to the supernatural in an era of science undermines the very communal ideals it once sustained. Supernaturalism does not just skirt science, it compromises community: “depreciation of natural social values has resulted . . . from reference of their origin and significance to supernatural sources.”²⁴ If enchantment requires a king, his stratagem is divide and conquer.

Mysticism was explained in a similar way. Dewey acknowledged that mysticism is natural—mystical experiences are so common that Dewey describes them as “normal manifestations” occurring rhythmically throughout life.²⁵ But Dewey laicizes mysticism: no divine–human encounter is necessary to have religious feeling. He thus objects to using mysticism as a religious apologetic, a common move by liberal theologians to validate doctrine. By clothing itself in the hooded cloak of numinousness, religion turns away from the common person and encourages sectarianism: “Religion has lost itself in cults, dogmas, and myths. Consequently, the office of

religion as a sense of community and one’s place in it has been lost.”²⁶

This is not the space for a full analysis of Dewey’s religious views, but two contextual matters stand out for their relevance to democracy. First, Dewey’s critique of mysticism and the supernatural issues from his longstanding opposition to dualism. *A Common Faith* addresses the problem of “two minds” and “two camps” from its very first sentence.²⁷ A “two realms” outlook—one religious, one scientific—protects appeals to the paranormal from examination.²⁸ Contrasting forms of intellectual authority sit side by side like an awkward seating arrangement at a dinner party.

While such a dualism might be justified by insisting that religion is a matter of private belief, religion is more than belief. Religion impacts on law, family, marriage, ethics, ecology—life. Theology walks with a large social footprint. Dewey believed that the dualism implied by supernaturalism wrought social losses which weakened democracy. Thus, his attack on supernaturalism doubles as an attack on Christian anti-sociality. A truly “catholic” church is one fully engaged in the social ferments of “war, economic injustice, political corruption.”²⁹ But this was impossible, or at least intellectually inconsistent, “as long as social values are related a supernatural.”³⁰ “I cannot understand how any realization of the democratic ideal as a vital moral and spiritual ideal in human affairs is possible without surrender of the conception of the basic division to which supernatural Christianity is committed.”³¹

Second, Dewey’s book is religiously optimistic. By linking “the democratic ideal” with a

²² Lewis, *Miracles*, 16.

²³ Dewey, “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis,” 54.

²⁴ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 71.

²⁵ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 37.

²⁶ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct. The Middle Works of John Dewey: 14*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 226. For a discussion of

mysticism across the work of Dewey, see Rockefeller, *John Dewey*, 501-512.

²⁷ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 1.

²⁸ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 38, 73.

²⁹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 82.

³⁰ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 83.

³¹ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 84.

“spiritual ideal,” he indicates positive hopes for the future of faith. The flipside of rejecting supernaturalism is not rejecting religion, but rather, embracing civic religion. Though Dewey polemicized against supernatural Christianity, he evangelized for a scientifically-oriented ecumenism. After exorcising ghosts from the temple, Dewey invites the people back in. By describing religion in democratic terms, Dewey hopes to reclaim religion’s emotional power on behalf of the public. He is anticlerical, not atheistic.³² Dewey calls shared life a “miracle,” and communication a “mystic force.”³³ Religion is feeling, created by and for humans—not vampires, revenants, or fairies.

Teaching the Supernatural

How does a Deweyan educator teach the supernatural? The Deweyan is me—I have written two monographs interpreting Dewey’s thought, I have paid dues to the John Dewey Society since 2011, and, of the thirty-seven volumes of Dewey’s collected works, I own thirty-eight. I keep two copies of *Middle Works*, Volume 10. What can I say? I’m a fan.

Although I have been discussing Dewey’s religious and metaphysical views, Dewey’s philosophy of education is much more well-regarded, even among Dewey’s followers. Dewey saw the school as a “social institution” and education as a process of inheriting the “funded capital of civilization.”³⁴ While a society-focused pedagogy is

readily applied to liberal arts subjects, it often must be made explicit in a religious studies context, when historical beliefs seem fanciful or obsolete to undergraduates. And so, when I was scheduled to teach “The History of the Supernatural” in a public university, my reaction was twofold. First, I questioned what counted as evidence in this context. This epistemological question was intertwined with a second quandary: what public good does studying the supernatural serve? Are there positive social outcomes from learning about leprechauns?

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The History of the Supernatural is a first-year course with a large enrollment. Students are curious—especially about whether I think demons and angels are real. Course content focuses on the early modern era, and I emphasize the historiographical task of looking for *effects* of supernatural stories on people rather than superimposing a method of verification that was not utilized by them.³⁵ Even our common definition of the term “supernatural” is superimposed—early moderns tended to think of paranormal

³² On these terms as applied to *A Common Faith*, see Richard Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth Century America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 142n8.

³³ See John Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy. The Middle Works of John Dewey: 12*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 201.

³⁴ John Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” in *The Early Works of John Dewey: 5*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale

and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1972).

³⁵ On this approach, see Brad S. Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” *History and Theory* 45, no. 4 (2006). While Gregory’s “What did it mean to them?” approach may be a “holding position” (as Darren Oldridge says in *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England* (London: Routledge, 2016), 12) it takes seriously the role of ideas in shaping historical events and provides sufficient content for a first-year course.

marvels as intermixed with natural processes.³⁶ Sixteenth-century witches used “vncouthe poysons,” King James VI and I explained in his *Daemonologie* (1597), but these were “composed of thinges naturall.” Just as divine sacraments are “earthlie,” but have a “heavenlie effect,” the Devil works in physical realm. Satan was said to afflict humans by increasing the production of the *melaina khole* (black bile) already present in the body—the Prince of the Air trades in human fluids.³⁷ So when Dewey speculates that a *diabolus ex machina* mentality characterizes supernaturalism, this is too simplistic: early modern characterizations of the underworld double as political punditry.³⁸ For example, a Reformation illustrator depicts two six-breasted demons pulling priests and Turks into hell (Figure 1). One demon wears a tiara, the other wears a turban, signifying a pope and a sultan—the Prince of Darkness wears human hats.³⁹

A Deweyan educational approach is to teach historical subjects for their value in addressing

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present life—doing so sharpens history’s “ethical value” and “moral significance.”⁴⁰ Thus, my supernaturalism course sets evidential questions to the side, not in the name of relativism, but so that we can focus on how ideas of the extraordinary served practical purposes. For example, rather than following the lead of the Fairy Investigation Society and collecting modern proofs of fairy sightings and angelic encounters, I emphasize how fairy tales spoke to the real emotional world of early modern Irish and Celtic civilizations. Or, in explaining *Día de los Muertos*, I show how mortuary ceremonies and *calaveras* not only honor the dead, but also serve as a form of political resistance (such as defying the Americanization of Mexico).

This does not mean that I insist that otherworldly encounters are *not* historical—for example, we discuss how the Satanic Verses incident has been treated by Muslims as both historically factual and as a forgery—only that the question of meaning enables social contextualization of ideas.⁴¹

³⁶ See Oldridge, *The Supernatural in Tudor and Stuart England*, 12. Dewey acknowledges something similar in *A Common Faith*, 69.

³⁷ Referring to the four humors in the body, King James VI and I says the Devil “knowes well inough what humor domines most in anie of vs, and as a spirite hee can sub-tillie walken vp the same, making it peccant, or to abounde, as he thinkes meete for troubling of vs, when God will so permit him.” See King James VI and I, *Daemonologie: In Forme of a Dialogie, Diuided into Three Bookes* (Edinburgh: Printed by Robert Walde-graue, Printer to the Kings Majestie, 1597). Also see Brian Levack, *The Devil Within: Possession and Exorcism in the Christian West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 118.

³⁸ James VI and I’s *Daemonologie* is not only a theological tract, but also James’ attempt to consolidate “his kingship with his position as the head of the Church of England,”

notes Katherine Howe, ed. in *The Penguin Book of Witches* (Penguin: New York, 2014), 30. Writing at the time of the Second World War, Dewey refers to *diabolus ex machina* as a non-naturalistic device used to explain the presence of evil. See Dewey, “Anti-Naturalism in Extremis,” 61.

³⁹ Print by Matthias Gerung (c. 1546). Available at The British Museum, item number 1895,0122.45, and online at www.britishmuseum.org.

⁴⁰ John Dewey, *Democracy and Education. The Middle Works of John Dewey: 9*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 221–222, 225. For an earlier development of this point, see Dewey, “Moral Significance of Common School Studies.”

⁴¹ Various stances on the historicity of the Satanic verses have been held by Muslims: see Shahab Ahmed, *Before*

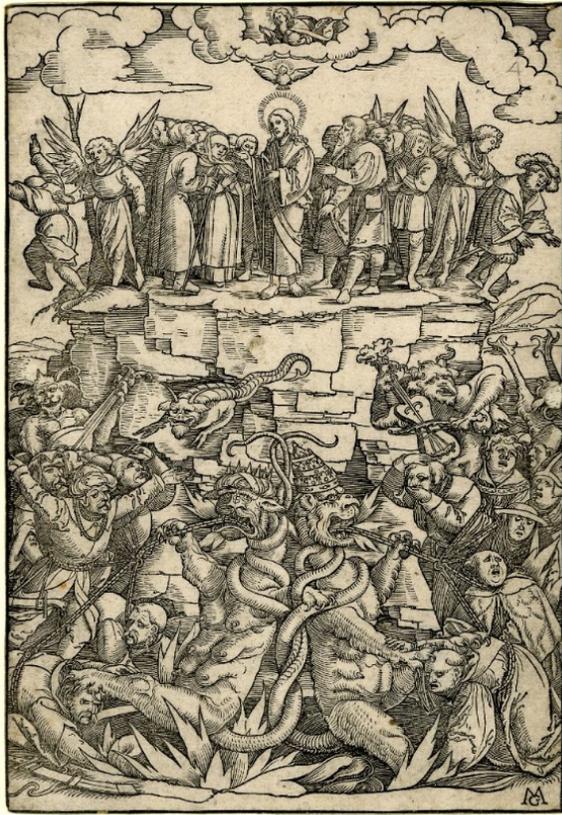


Figure 1: “Apocalypse” by Matthias Gerung (c. 1546)

This is a simple methodological distinction, but it makes a great deal of difference in ensuring

that course content remains focused on what Dewey calls “the social consciousness.”⁴² Dewey said schooling is moral when it enables a student to “sympathetically and imaginatively to appreciate the social scene in which he is a partaker; to realize his own indebtedness.”⁴³ From the point of view of democratic educational theory, debating whether fairy stories are corroborable is less important than addressing how these tales addressed real-world issues such as gender, patriarchy, desire, and agency. This distinction is itself a part of the history of the supernatural. Early modern concerns about witchcraft were approached by writers such as George Gifford as a pastoral matter rather than a scientific or apologetic issue. Less important than whether or not there “be no witches” was the matter of how wiccaphobia—manifesting in contentious witch trials—was misplaced. A Christian should fear the Devil rather than “an old woman in the parish.”⁴⁴ Here is the pedagogical effect of this distinction: by focusing on belief’s practical effects, we can vitiate modernity’s Science vs. Religion dead-end, situating the supernatural within the rumble of communal life. Rationality is calibrated socially.

This seems to work. At the end of my first semester teaching this subject, students were invited to complete surveys gauging how they interpreted the course content.⁴⁵ Student

Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 3. Also see Gregory, “The Other Confessional History: On Secular Bias in the Study of Religion,” 148.

⁴² Dewey, “My Pedagogic Creed,” 84.

⁴³ Dewey, “Moral Significance of Common School Studies,” 213.

⁴⁴ George Gifford, *A Dialogue Concerning Witches and Witchcraftes: In Which is Laide Open How Craftely the Diuell Deceineth Not Onely the Witches but Many Otber and So Leadeth Them Awrie Into Many Great Errors* (London: Printed by John Windet for Tobie Cooke and Mihil Hart, 1593). For this translation, as well as helpful commentary on the pastoral nature of Gifford’s account, see Howe, ed. *The Penguin Book of Witches*, 22-29, 241-243.

⁴⁵ Four open-ended questions were asked, with students invited to interpret the questions however they saw fit and to feel free to use non-academic language. The questions were: Do you personally think believing in the supernatural is connected to being religious? Is it reasonable to believe in the supernatural? Does the supernatural have a connection with spirituality? How has your view of the supernatural changed over the course of the semester? The methodology used to gather and interpret these responses was a form of action–reflection educational research, an approach used widely in adult education and teacher education. Action-reflection research puts teachers in the position of investigators, asking questions about their own classrooms and pedagogies. The form of action-reflection used here was adapted

responses suggest that the supernatural may not be as anti-democratic as my Deweyan mind had supposed. For example, students were asked whether it was reasonable to believe in the supernatural. Their responses reveal that, whether or not they personally believed paranormal phenomena to be possible, they were able to see how supernatural belief had a positive social function. One student wrote:

I believe it is rational to believe in the supernatural, whether it's believing in ghosts as form of coping and understanding death, or using the explanation of elves and fairies to come to terms with how things occur in the natural world, or explaining odd behavior.

This was a highly-affirmative response—the same student spoke of already having a strong interest in the topic before taking the course—and should be taken with a grain of salt. It is more interesting to look at skeptical responses. When asked if it was reasonable to believe in the supernatural, one undergraduate replied, “Yes.

from the critical incident approach developed by Stephen Brookfield. Brookfield's *The Skillful Teacher: On Technique, Trust, and Responsiveness in the Classroom* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), describes “brief written reports compiled by students about their experience of learning” (31). Rather than asking students to rate a teacher or the course content on a numerical scale, a critical incident report asks students to explain their own learning. The idea is that this will increase awareness (of teachers and students alike) of how learning is being experienced. Brookfield's most known version of this approach is the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ)—an anonymous, five-question survey that invites students to express when they were most engaged, distanced, affirmed, puzzled, and surprised in the classroom. To gather my students' perspectives, I used a modified form of the CIQ: questionnaires were anonymous and ungraded; participation was voluntary; students were informed that their responses would be used for research purposes; and, most significantly, the questions sought to reveal “a content analysis of major themes that emerged [for students] over the semester” (see Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995),

Why not? Who cares?” Another reckoned that belief in vampires was an explanation for a person having rabies. Another student described the supernatural as a useful fiction:

It is understandable, but I don't believe it is reasonable. The supernatural is a sort of explanation for the unknown, but to me it seems rooted more in tradition than reason. Religion to me is similar—more a tradition in which one is raised than a belief reached from reasoning. It's an explanation and comfort.

Believing and non-believing students alike described the therapeutic benefit of supernatural belief. By identifying a practical function of ghosts and goblins, studying the supernatural serves as a way of turning attention squarely towards—not away from—history. This is what Horkheimer and Adorno's “Theory of Ghosts” anticipates. “Only when the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness are we placed in the proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them.”⁴⁶ Thus, in explaining

115). The CIQ stands out for its autobiographical nature—it asks learners to reflect on their own understanding of the learning phenomenon, rather than quantitatively rank what they “liked or didn't like about the class” (Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, 114). The “soft” nature of autobiographical data has limitations: as an n-of-1 sample, these responses reflect the experiences of one group of students with one teacher. No claim to generalizability is made. Even given this limitation, action research was chosen because of how the practice of teaching is employed to test and generate theory—what McNiff and Whitehead, *Action Research: Principles and Practice*, 2 ed. (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2002), call “a logic of practice” (4). As indicated at the end of Section 1, a goal of this paper is to describe how teaching about religion informs thinking about religion.

⁴⁶ Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 178-179. This essay was brought to my attention by Richard Callahan Jr, “Haunting the Religious Studies Classroom,” *Religious Studies News* (2017).

how their view of the supernatural has changed over the 13-week semester, the “Yes. Why not? Who cares?” student said,

I have learned a lot about not dismissing the beliefs of people of the past. It’s more useful to discuss why they were that way, not just say “people back then were dumb.” I also have more an idea of how the supernatural and supernatural belief is integrated into our daily lives, whether we realise it or not.

The student who said the supernatural was understandable but not reasonable, also indicated that the course had changed their views: “I have more understanding and respect for religious and supernatural beliefs than I did at the start of the course. I also have a stronger interest in mythologies and pagan beliefs.” This same dynamic was expressed by a classmate who said:

Within this age of science, we tend to lean towards a scientific depiction/explanation for events, HOWEVER, I believe that through certain experiences we can be involved in things that could not be experienced in everyday life → for example, communication with the dead as a form of grieving.

These students were not gullible or anti-scientific. They are not pious seminarians tendering theological justifications for the inexplicable. They are not magicians. However, even as these undergraduates are aware that the supernatural

does not meet certain empirical criteria, they learned (at least) to recognize its emotional payoff and thus to appreciate its social reality. Thus, the social contextualization of religious ideas can do more than “deromanticize and debunk”—it can dignify.⁴⁷ The student who spoke of the “age of science” also said:

I came into this course with a rather closed mind, viewing a lot of these concepts as weird/crazy, however after seeing other peoples’ unwavering belief and deep history in many cultures, my opinion has become a lot more accepting, and whilst I may not have the same beliefs, I have a newfound respect for those who believe in these things.

The Civic Function of Wonder

Dewey imagined Western society as Religious But Not Supernatural—but something more enchanting has emerged. In the eight decades since *A Common Faith* was published, paranormal experiences have become normalized even as religious disaffiliation mounts. 24% of Australians report having a mystical or supernatural encounter—a segment that rises to 58% when it includes believing such things are possible or knowing someone else who has had such an experience.⁴⁸ 37% of Swedes say they believe in paranormal phenomena and 23% in telepathy; of the same group, only 21% believe in God.⁴⁹ 65%

imagination, patience, and humility if a reader is to understand more than basic facts and figures of another civilization.

⁴⁸ Miriam Pepper and Ruth Powell, “2016 Australian Community Survey” (Sydney: NCLS Research, 2016). The number of interviewees = 1,258.

⁴⁹ The Swedish Skeptics Association (Föreningen Vetenskap och Folkbildning), *The Vof-Study 2015*, trans. Pontus Böckman (Stockholm: The Swedish Skeptics Association, 2015), 42-43. The Swedish Skeptics Association’s poll was conducted by Demoskop; the number of interviewees = 1,113.

⁴⁷ The phrase is from Richard Rorty who says, “A humanistic discipline is in good shape only when it produces both inspiring works and works which contextualize, and thereby deromanticize and debunk, those inspiring works” (*Achieving Our Country*, 134). In a way, Rorty is right: higher criticism of biblical texts has undermined some people’s faith. But literary contextualization can serve ends beyond debunking; understanding a text in its historical context need not be a dry procedure. Grasping the emotional world of people from different eras and cultures requires considerable doses of

of US adults report having experienced at least one kind of supernatural phenomena—from a list that included reincarnation, ghostly encounter, consulting a psychic, etc. What is more

Dewey's claim against supernaturalism suffers from just the kind of dualism he wanted to avoid.

significant is that these numbers are ascending: in 1962, 22% of Americans said they had a “religious or mystical experience.” By 2009, this had grown to nearly half (49%).⁵⁰ This data is numerous, leading some to wonder whether supernatural belief is natural.⁵¹

In this persistently-enchanted world, Dewey's anti-supernaturalism is not pragmatic. Fear about supernaturalism eroding democracy is as old-fashioned as mid-nineteenth century concerns that unmarried “old maids” were undermining the English economy.⁵² Dewey's claim against supernaturalism suffers from just the kind of dualism he wanted to avoid—setting up absolutist criteria to norm a pluralistic society. Dewey wanted to return to a time when “the temple was a public institution,” a time before a modern sacred/secular dichotomy.⁵³ But, Dewey's big temple had only one door. He introduces another dichotomy by insisting that “one has to choose” between “dependence on

the supernatural” and “the use of natural agencies.”⁵⁴ Dewey is uncharacteristically dogmatic in defining the orthodoxies of common faith. He seems to attribute characteristics to religion—

e.g. religion is necessarily anti-science and violent—that are not borne out by the actual practice or beliefs of religious adherents.⁵⁵

Against Dewey's view, it can be argued that anti-supernaturalism itself may tend to anti-sociality due to the racialized tone of some naturalistic reasoning. For example, David Hume's famous takedown of miracles includes the claim that belief in supernatural phenomena can be presumed to be false because “they are observed chiefly to abound among ignorant and barbarous nations,” or because they were transmitted “from ignorant and barbarous ancestors.”⁵⁶ Hume's *Natural History of Religion* likewise claims that miracle-believing religious people “sink . . . to the level of beasts.” He calls them “vulgar” and “irrational.” “Superstitious” types get all stirred-up—with madness, rage, flaming fury.⁵⁷ Attributing savagery to supernaturalists is not just ethnocentric, it is unpragmatic. Naturalists should understand that, historically speaking,

⁵⁰ Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, “Many Americans Mix Multiple Faiths” (Washington DC: Pew Research Center, 2009). The number of interviewees = 4,013.

⁵¹ This view is expressed by social psychologist Clay Routledge who interprets the prevalence of supernaturalism through the perspective of existential motivation rather than ontological reality or theological significance. Routledge suggests that “supernatural interests are a natural part of the human condition,” common to many people including atheists, in *Supernatural: Death, Meaning, and the Power of the Invisible World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 172.

⁵² On this view, see Sarah Ellis, *The Women of England: Their Social Duties and Domestic Habits* (London: Fisher, Son & Co, 1839).

⁵³ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 60.

⁵⁴ Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 81.

⁵⁵ For a statistical rebuttal of common critiques against religion and supernaturalism, see Routledge, *Supernatural*, 177-184.

⁵⁶ David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), 90.

⁵⁷ David Hume, *A Dissertation on the Passions & The Natural History of Religion: A Critical Edition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 2007), 53. Earlier in *The Natural History of Religion* Hume says “barbarous nations” still exist, and explains that, “The savage tribes of AMERICA, AFRICA, and ASIA are all idolaters” (34).

imps, elves, and other such bugs have effectively served humans' natural needs. And, in reverse, demythologization projects have not been useful to all religious adherents everywhere, especially in the global south.⁵⁸

It is reasonable for a religious naturalist to remain unconvinced by phenomena that are “shadowy and wavering,” but it is unjustified and unpragmatic to insist that all fellow citizens love broad daylight.⁵⁹ Some magic only happens at night.

But the argument for the place of supernaturalism in the liberal arts curriculum is more than demographical. A more significant reason, democratically, is that “fancy and wonder” (to use Martha Nussbaum’s term for the revelatory effect of literature) enable us to enter new emotional worlds, enhancing sensitivity to other people’s lives. Imagination of things-not-seen has a “civic function.” The compassion fostered through “narrative imagination” is politically resourceful. Awe does not require metaphysical consensus in order to yield appreciation.⁶⁰

Even as our disagreements are spirited, it is the ability to see through walls—if never finally disassembling them—that nurtures the moral awareness necessary to democratic engagement. For a naturalist to fancy the world as a supernaturalist does requires the intellectual openness and flexibility necessary to keep democracy gleaming.

It is unjustified and unpragmatic to insist that all fellow citizens love broad daylight.

Enchanted subjects can be taught pragmatically if we recognize that what William James called “overbeliefs” are a kind of evidence gathering, a hypothesizing of many possible *what ifs*.⁶¹ Overbeliefs are appropriate for the religion classroom as they “postpone dogmatic answer,” not on behalf of relativism, but in order to bear witness to humans’ experience of dependence in a world of monsters.

⁵⁸ For example, the “biblical realism” of Ghanaian theologian Esther Ascolatse “provide[s] an alternative to demythologization that serves the interpretive and ecclesial needs of a global church,” in *Powers, Principalities, and the Spirit: Biblical Realism in Africa and the West* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

⁵⁹ Jeffrey Stout writes about how supernatural belief is pragmatically and civically defensible: “if being justified in believing something depends on contextual factors that vary from one person to another, and if the relevant standards of justification are as permissive as pragmatism makes them out to be, then Dewey is not in a position to declare supernaturalism beyond the pale of justified belief. According to pragmatic scruples, this is not something that can be determined in abstraction from the lives of particular human beings. It is therefore unwise to decide the issue between supernaturalism and naturalism on an official basis. Dewey might well be justified in accepting naturalism as his own view. This question is whether his denial of supernaturalism can be an essential component of the *common* faith he proposes for democratic citizens. Why suppose that naturalism can play the role he

envision for it in public culture when most citizens reject it?” Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 32. The phrase “shadowy and wavering” is from Dewey, *A Common Faith*, 87.

⁶⁰ See Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), chapter 3. “To allow inside one’s mind people who seem alien and frightening is to show a capacity for openness and responsiveness that goes against the grain of many cultural stereotypes of self-sufficiency” (98). Nussbaum’s “narrative imagination” is cited by the American Association of Colleges and Universities as a type of “learning . . . needed for knowledgeable and responsible citizenship,” in their “College Learning for the New Global Century: A Report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America’s Promise” (Washington DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007), 22.

⁶¹ William James, *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975), 144.

Democracy is one such overbelief—not the naturally-necessary way humans relate across difference, but a risk, a romance, an absurdity loved into actuality. Just think of fairies.

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