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Oriental Meliorism, Pragmatist Aesthetics, and the *Bhagavad Gita*

SCOTT R. STROUD

The Range of Aesthetic Experience

John Dewey's aesthetic theory takes a self-consciously normative approach to art and its relation to our experience. Instead of attempting to describe how art is used in some cultural practice, Dewey attempts to argue for a certain way that art *can* be experienced. Thus, in *Art as Experience* (1934, *AE*) he decries the "museum conception" of art that sequesters art objects away from the everyday world in museums.¹ Some of the key points he makes involve the integration of art into the experience of everyday life (say, through public sculpture) or by making everyday objects in an artful manner (say, hand-crafted utensils). Dewey justifies this move by pointing out that what we note as so moving about good art objects—what one could call "aesthetic experience"—is not radically different in kind from "everyday" experience. Both experiences in front of art objects and in the activities of everyday life can reach that level of enjoyment, unity, and absorption that characterize what one can call an "aesthetic experience." If a certain unity, individualizing quality, and individuation from surrounding experiences can mark off an experience due to a finely crafted art object, Dewey asks, why can't we admit that such experiences occur with respect to meals we have had, skilled activities we have participated in, and so on? This gestures to what I think is the largest question that Dewey's *AE* poses: Can more of life's activities be aesthetic? This is a fundamentally important question for Dewey, as aesthetic experience epitomizes the quality of experience that we ought to aim for, if given the option. Let us push the point further: Can one render all of life's activities aesthetic?

In *AE* Dewey appears to give a tentative "no" in response to this question, as he indicates that the objective features of society are such that aesthetic

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experience is not encouraged, nor is it easy to have in such situations as those presented by the occupations of most. Indeed, he points to how our society is organized and its displacement of fine art from the everyday as one of the main reasons more of life cannot reach the heights of aesthetic experience.² Recent commentators follow this line; for instance, Aaron Smuts claims that "Dewey's analysis of the sickness of most practical activity is simultaneously an account of anesthetic environments, conditions, and behaviors."³ The point here is half right, but the emphasis is misleading. The external environment (including the conditions and behaviors of agents) is important for Dewey because it leads to the formation of certain habits of action and thought, which in turn form the environment through activity. However, this is far from a unidirectional causal circuit, and it often happens that changes in standing human habits affect the environment that humans are resident in, and thereby alter the quality of an individual's experience in that environment. We can find clues concerning this matter in Dewey's *AE* and begin to see a less obvious answer to the question of whether more of life's activities can be aesthetic in quality.

This clue that much more of life can be aesthetic comes in the form of two seemingly innocuous examples. The first example comes at an overlooked part of *AE* where Dewey (elaborating on an example from Max Eastman) notes the difference in the experience of different men crossing the Hudson River into New York City by ferryboat. One man sees this portion of his commute as drudgery and cannot wait for it to end; he notes "landmarks by which to judge progress toward his destination."⁴ The other man sees "the scene formed by the buildings . . . as colored and lighted volumes in relation to one another, to the sky and to the river. He is now seeing esthetically."⁵ This person perceives an interconnected whole, a "perceptual whole, constituted by related parts. No one single figure, aspect, or quality is picked out as a means to some further external result which is desired, nor as a sign of an inference that may be drawn."⁶ The second example comes when Dewey discusses the difference between mechanized, blindly habitual activity and aesthetic, integrated activity. Two students taking a test are described, each with different attitudes toward that activity: "One student studies to pass an examination, to get promotion. To another, the means, the activity of learning, is completely one with what results from it. The consequence, instruction, illumination, is one with the process."⁷ The experience of the second test-taker exemplifies what Dewey identifies as aesthetic experience.

Why are these two examples so vital for understanding Dewey's aesthetic theory? Two important points emerge that illustrate Dewey's project. First, both of these cases show that in the presence of the same environment or activity, one's experience can be *either* aesthetic or nonaesthetic. If the "objective" conditions are identical, the only variable left must be the attitude of the individual approaching and participating in that activity. I call this

an individual's *orientation* to the world and activity in it. Second, these examples highlight the point that such attitudes focus an individual's attention on the present activity or situation. In both the case of the students and that of the ferryboat passengers, the individual can focus on part of the activity/environment as important only insofar as it helps in reaching some distant goal, or she can disavow any disjunction between means/end in the doing of the activity. In the second example, the latter sort of individual sees the activity of studying and taking a test as part of the goal of becoming educated; in the first example, one sees the journey to work as absorbing and as important as reaching the place of work.

This leads me to the point of this essay. I want to develop an understanding of Dewey's aesthetics by connecting it to a project I see as emerging from his overall pragmatist approach—what I have called elsewhere *orientational meliorism*.⁸ As I have illustrated, Dewey emphasizes the effect that one's mental habits or orientations toward experience and activity (and the world of objects that occasion/constitute them) has on the quality of one's experience. For example, depending on the orientation that one has (which is also related, of course, to the objective conditions in one's environment), an activity can be mere drudgery or absorbing, rewarding work. Orientational meliorism takes its lead from Dewey's aesthetics and his religious writing in *A Common Faith* that hint at the power of improving or meliorating the quality of experience by altering one's orientation toward activity in general. In this article I want to expand on this theme by looking at how orientational meliorism plays into Dewey's quest to render more of life aesthetic and consummatory. My approach will not emphasize the objective conditions of experience (say, socioeconomic factors in art or work), as these are largely beyond an individual's control (although they are important, nonetheless). What I will focus on, rather, is the way that experience can be more aesthetic or consummatory. In order to do so, the next section will describe what would make "everyday" activity aesthetic according to such a Deweyan scheme. I will then supplement this Deweyan account of making more of life aesthetic with a method drawn from a tradition that is removed from Dewey but that shares his commitment to meliorating personal experience—that of ancient Hinduism. Specifically, I will argue that "karma yoga"—the path or discipline of action in the *Bhagavad Gita*—can be seen as a method for creating more experiences that can be classed in Deweyan terms as "aesthetic."

How Activity Can Be Aesthetic

I believe that instances of the sort captured in the examples noted above can convince one that Dewey's aesthetics holds a high regard for the orientations that individuals bring to the same object, environment, or activity. The

question about the endpoint of aesthetic experience still remains, however. What makes experience (of test-taking or of a fine painting in a museum) “aesthetic”? The answer that Dewey gives in chapter 3 of *AE* is threefold: it is both integrated with and demarcated from surrounding experiences, it has a unique individualizing quality, and it possesses a sort of meaningful unity among its parts. These can be possessed by one’s enraptured experience of a Monet or by one’s involvement in a particularly vivid journey by foot along a beach to a restaurant with a significant other. In these situations, like each of the second individual’s experiences of taking the test and riding the ferry in the previous examples, the experience has a sort of internal unity and cohesion among its parts. The point I would like to add to this is simple—one can “miss” these aesthetic qualities of the experience through the effects of the orientation she brings to the experience. Thus, the student focused on the grade and the job waiting for her after law school misses the integration of the journey (studying) with the end (succeeding and earning the difficult grade); likewise, the worker that sees work as merely something to “get through” as quickly as possible will not experience the commute to the place of drudgery as inherently absorbing. It, like the eight hours on the job, are to be rushed through as quickly as possible so that one can start living life—at least those parts of it that one’s orientation inclines one to (leisure time, hobbies, familial relations, etc.). Thus, the question of what makes experience aesthetic leads to another question: What sort of orientation toward activity makes experience aesthetic?

One finds a starting point for answering this question in Dewey’s analysis of a key part of artistic activity—the employment of media.⁹ “Media” are contrasted to “mere means” as the former “sum up” preceding elements of experience and to a real extent *compose* the effect that is desired. Thus, paint *is* the painting in a real way, as opposed to being the means of painting. As for mere means, these typically are identified by their ability to be replaced and their externality to the effect desired. Gasoline can be replaced by ethanol, and such a switch is motivated largely by external concerns—pollution, efficiency, availability, and so forth. If one changes the writing, phrasing, and so on of Wordsworth’s “Goody Blake,” one has changed the artwork. The experience of those words by a subject *is* the aesthetic experience; thus, in a real way, the materials of the art object both cause the aesthetic experience and constitute it as instantiated. The medium is the end desired, and not a mere means to an external end. Thus, experience that is aesthetic can be said to involve an internality of means and ends: “all the cases in which means and ends are external to one another are non-esthetic. This externality may even be regarded as a definition of the non-esthetic.”¹⁰ What is important to remember from the two examples in the earlier part of this study is that it is one’s orientation that determines the status of means and ends. Is the studying and test-taking external to the gaining of a grade and an education? Is

the ferry ride a mere means to reach work (which is then externally related to the goal of earning a paycheck)? Thus, experience is aesthetic insofar as it has an integrated quality among its parts that gives meaning to them in a way that is related to, but not identical with, the meaning of other sets of events (other experiences). The morning journey to work and back home is, in an important regard, a separate “experience” from that of the evening’s preparation and consumption of a meal. Both can be aesthetic or nonaesthetic, however, depending on the orientation of the subject that affects whether activity is seen as valuable as mere means (to an external end) or as integrally important as part of the end desired. Dewey’s point about the material of art objects leads us to this crucial realization about everyday life: those orientations that make the activity of the present integrated and important in its role and connection to other states of affairs (not by subordination) are the sorts of orientations that render experience aesthetic. The orientations that encourage one to rush through a given activity of the present do not lead to that experience being meaningfully integrated with other events; instead, such an orientation subordinates that activity and its value to the value of the remote end that is to be achieved. As Dewey puts it, “In all ranges of experience, externality of means defines the mechanical,”¹¹ and the mechanical is not characterized by the attentive and absorptive focus on the present that seeing one’s activity as integrally connected to one’s end (in other words, like media) offers.

At this point, I propose the following division. “Objectively” (in terms of the individual’s interaction with a specific environment) the aesthetic is characterized by media instead of means. “Subjectively” (viz., in terms of a subject’s orientation) the aesthetic is characterized by an agent’s focus on the activity at hand as equal to any states or results that are desired. In other words, the latter division notes the subject’s prizing of the present activity enough to devote attention to it qua activity, not merely as a necessary step to gain some nonpresent end or goal. The individual’s attention is focused on the present activity and not on the nonpresent goal. This characterizes an experience as “aesthetic” insofar as it gives it a heightened quality of uniqueness and meaningful interconnection of parts. One can just move through the work day’s activities as a necessary but grudging means to some end (say, a paycheck), in which case each day of work seems the same (and all seem equally replaceable). Alternatively, one could see that day’s work as characterized by the specific and concrete details that mark that day’s activities and consider the interconnection among those activities and specific details on which one has focused her attention. The lived present of the latter sort of work day would seem to be more enjoyable and meaningful, and it is so because it has those features that Dewey notes as key to the aesthetic.

It seems to come down to the *way* that the agent goes about her activities that is so important to rendering them mechanical or aesthetic.¹² One key

feature of this orientation to activity is that it focuses attention on the present activity by valuing it as much as any end to be attained by it. Part of the problem is the subjugating of specific activities as “mere means,” which then focuses one’s attention away from the present and on what is putatively “important” (the future desired state). Dewey notes the deleterious effects of this orientation on the quality of our lived experience—“Every divorce of end from means diminishes by that much the significance of the activity and tends to reduce it to a drudgery from which one would escape if he could.”¹³ This is harmful because any goal of activity must occupy some present, lived situation, and the above orientation sets one up to always ruin the quality of the very location for what one is questing. Dewey picks up on this point in his *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922, *HNC*):

What sense is there in increased external control except to increase the intrinsic significance of living? The future that is foreseen is a future that is sometime to be a present. Is the value of *that* present also to be postponed to a future date, and so on indefinitely? Or, if the food we are struggling to attain in the future is one to be actually realized when that future becomes present, why should not the food of *this* present be equally precious?¹⁴

Goals always occupy some (remote) present, and in pursuing a remote ideal the tendency is to ignore the present here and now. The sort of orientation that could render ferryboat rides and educational strivings as aesthetic is one that would focus attention on the present, which would in turn further strengthen the mental habit of valuing and savoring the present in the future. Dewey notes just this point in his *HNC*: “Control of future living, such as it may turn out to be, is wholly dependent upon taking his present activity, seriously and devotedly, as an end, not a means.”¹⁵ What is needed is an orientation that focuses on the present activity as valuable and not as externally valuable to that which is truly sought after (that is, some external goal). All in all, more of such a present-focused individual’s life would be pleasurable, meaningful, and valuable than if she chased after ends that always lay one step out of her grasp in experience.

Of course, one may criticize the sort of view I am drawing out of Dewey by highlighting his respect for science and reflective method. Such a perspective, one may claim, would never leave one with the mere admonishment to “focus on the present.” The meliorist position I have been developing can meet such a challenge, however, by noting that in Dewey’s view reflective thinking is most meaningful when it is grounded in the needs and materials of the concrete situation in which one is placed. Think here of Dewey’s take on ends or ideals. Such goals to activities are not remote ends that transcend the present activity in value but instead are best thought of as a way of approaching and focusing attention *on* and *in* the present situation. Thus, in *HNC* Dewey describes “ends-in-view” by pointing out that “Ends are

foreseen consequences which arise in the course of activity and which are employed to give activity added meaning and to direct its further course. They are in no sense ends *of* action. In being ends *of deliberation* they are redirecting pivots *in* action.”¹⁶ One’s attention ought to be focused on the present activity and situation, even if one is concerned with escaping or fixing that situation. In regard to the aesthetic project I have been discussing above, the challenge, then, is not to fall into the trap of seeing certain activities as inherently menial or as inherently anesthetic. One can address the specifics of the situation, but such melioration comes from how one focuses her attention *in* that situation.

Another (related) criticism of my take on aesthetic experience and its relation to attention is a version of the hedonist’s paradox. Such a critique would charge that focus on the present would lead to disjointed experience and an overall decrease in present and future satisfaction. Such a critique argues that attending to the present at the expense of attention to future goals is a mistaken strategy. I’ve responded to such an objection in the context of Dewey’s early ethical thought,¹⁷ but I think it is valuable to sketch the ways to answer such an objection here. First, I believe the critique missteps in its assumption that this is an either-or choice between the present and future. What my argument hinges on is the *focus* or *emphasis* in one’s attention; what is harmful is a certain level or fixation of attention on the future that does certain things to the experienced quality of the present. Second, another response to such a challenge is to point out that the resources for purposive activity are *in* the situation (that is, the desires, stations, expectations, and so on of the situation and its participants). Focusing on the mere sensory immediacy of the present is not what my reading advocates—this is the sort of take that Dewey himself maligns as “impressionistic criticism” in *AE*.¹⁸ Instead, one ought to attend to the rich present, and not just what is “flashing” in front of one’s eyes right now. This is the true middle path between focusing on whatever flits in front of one (say, passing desires, one aspect of the situation, and so on) and the opposite extreme discussed in this article—a focus on that which is not present (that is, the objects of one’s desire) with its consequent mechanization and devaluing of the present activity as mere means. Thus, I believe that one can focus on the present and still have meaningful, purposive, and directed activity—much like the painter or baseball player absorbed in their work still exhibit rationality and purpose in their endeavors. Valuing and attending to the means of the present does not logically or practically exclude intelligent action; it does, however, exclude a one-sided focus on what is not present.

Dreaming of far-off states of affairs decreases the meaning of the present situation and also impedes one’s ability to better address its particulars. In the case of aesthetics, one is tasked with how to change his orientation such that more of experience can be classed as “aesthetic.” Such an orientation

involves, as I have analyzed it, (1) a focusing of attention on the present in its meaning as an activity with connections to past and future experiences, and (2) a valuing of the present such that it is no different in kind from the value attached to what one hopes to attain with that activity's successful completion. The question now becomes, How can one cultivate such an orientation? It is to the resources available in the *Bhagavad Gita* that I will now turn to suggest an answer.

Karma Yoga and Orientational Meliorism

The *Bhagavad Gita* would seem to be an odd place to seek answers to questions that Dewey, an American who espoused little interest in ancient Hinduism, raised. A fundamental premise of pragmatism, however, is that new situations and new juxtapositions of information create the impetus for new thought. Thus, I would like to approach the problem of *AE* and the aestheticization of life not as Dewey historically approached it but in a new manner. I will suggest, then, that Dewey's quest for the sort of orientation that would render more of everyday activity aesthetic can be fruitfully expanded by examining what the *Bhagavad Gita* says about how activity should proceed.¹⁹ This section will argue that there are two common and accessible readings of "karma yoga" in the *Bhagavad Gita* and that both of these can provide what I call a "mental/cognitive" means of meliorating one's orientation.²⁰ In other words, the discipline of karma yoga turns out to be a mental way to "rethink" activity and hence change its effects on one's experience (as well as on succeeding habits and orientations).

The *Bhagavad Gita* recounts a discussion (situated in the epic *Mahabharata*) between a famed Indian warrior, Arjuna, and his friend Krishna. The discussion focuses on Krishna's efforts to convince Arjuna to fight a war that seems righteous but that pits him against his own teachers and kin. Through all of his efforts to explain why Arjuna ought to participate in this battle, the audience eventually learns that Krishna is the human incarnation of the divine. This short but complex work is enmeshed in the soteriological and religious concerns of ancient Indian civilization, but I believe it can be appropriated for the discussion Dewey wants to have with respect to making activity more aesthetic. The key point is the *Gita*'s discussion of the path of action, or karma yoga. How this can be used to meet the two characteristics of aesthetic experience enunciated in the previous section of this article will be explored in two ways.

Karma yoga is one of the best ways (according to Krishna) to reach release from the sufferings of the world caused by ignorance of the nature of the world and the Self. It is by no means the only way, of course; traditionally, jnana yoga and bhakti yoga are included to account for the means of knowledge and devotion. The message of the *Gita* is fairly simple: instead

of withdrawing from activity (such as Arjuna's duty as a warrior), one ought to go about his activity in a certain way so as to dispel the illusions that cause suffering and that fuel the cycles of karma. Thus, one can avoid, through a certain approach to activity, the delusion of egoism—the thought that “I [the agent] am the doer.”²¹ My overall claim will be that the *Gita* gives one a method by which the value in present activity can be upheld. This is, I believe, the sort of answer that Dewey was looking for in *AE* when he explored whether more of life could be aesthetic. The interesting point to draw out, however, is how much of the *Gita*'s metaphysics should be dragged into such a meliorating orientation. I will consider two sorts of accounts of what the *Gita* says concerning activity, what I will call the *minimalist* and the *full* accounts due to their differences in incorporating metaphysical elements from the *Gita*. I will not argue that the first is insufficient, incorrect, or wrong; instead, I want to explore the contribution that the latter, richer account can add to Dewey's quest to increase the focus and value we place on the activities we undergo.

Any account that focuses on Krishna's command for Arjuna to practice karma yoga starts from a basic story. According to the *Gita*, Arjuna is faced with the type of situation we all are confronted with at times—situations necessitating action. Krishna points this out toward the beginning of the *Gita*, claiming that “No one can remain, even for a moment, without performing some action.”²² Arjuna's strategy of throwing down his bow and refusing to fight the war *is* an action and, therefore, does not represent an avoidance of action. The same holds true of the yogi retreating from civilization to the forest to meditate and “escape” from action. The seed of all problems remains—that of the illusion of doership that clings to the yogi as well as to the warrior engaged in battle. Both are acting insofar as they are clinging to the objects of the senses, things to which they either are drawn or repelled from in the course of activity. Krishna follows this line of thinking and argues that “He who controls his organs of action, but dwells in his mind on the objects of the senses, that man is deluded.”²³ Running from action because of some “object of the senses” (say, the avoidance of pain or suffering) is just as harmful in the larger sense as is acting to procure some desired end (say, making money to buy a new car) because both are focused on some future state (the object of desire), which entails a certain orientation to activity in the present. The *Gita* highlights the particularly troublesome part of the orientation—its implication of an individuated, ultimately real “self” that uniquely identifies me and that is the source of action and the locus of rewards (pain and pleasure). This orientation is committed to the belief that what matters is relative to the objects of my desires and that I am in a deep sense the accumulator of those rewards or sought-after states. The *Gita* wants to push the larger point that the problem to be solved is the suffering caused by desire and ignorance and that orientations that continue

the illusion of an individuated, empirical self only feed the sources of desire (which is always experienced as relative to *that* self). It is not activity per se that is harmful to enlightenment; instead, it is the mindset or quality of mind (both the faculty of discrimination and its present state are implied by the Sanskrit term *manas*) that is key. Thus, Krishna gives Arjuna a formula to follow in order to expunge the illusions that trap him in the cycle of birth and rebirth, pain and loss—karma yoga. This path of action is fairly simple; one should “always perform the work that has to be done without attachment, for man attains the Supreme [enlightenment] by performing work without attachment.”²⁴ Early on in the *Gita*, Krishna advises Arjuna of this point in an equally blunt manner: “In action only hast thou a right and never in its fruits [results]. Let not thy motive be the fruits of action; nor let thy attachment be to inaction” and to “perform actions, abandoning attachment and remaining evenminded in success and failure.”²⁵ It is when one gets too focused on achieving success in her activity that she becomes further entrenched in the idea that *she* qua empirical self is ultimately real; instead, certain ways of dealing with action (namely, nonattached action) can confront the challenges of the world while teaching the individual something about the true Self (the Self of all things, Krishna in his universal form according to the *Gita*). The dialectic that exists between desires and a postulated individual self that suffers or gains based upon those desires is vicious and must be dissolved; the task of the *Gita* is to use activity to accomplish such an important goal.

The minimalist reading will take from this account a general *way* to go about activity. Thus, it will emphasize Krishna’s advice to go about one’s duty (something largely given to one from her cultural placement) without focusing on the outcomes—good or bad—that may result. This has two consequences: first, one is free to focus more attention and energy on the present activity (as the focus and worry about nonpresent states of affairs have been removed), and second, the habits of how to deal with desires are altered (since one is decreasing the importance of the implicated self that is the receiver of the fruits of activity and desire). A good representative of this way of taking the *Gita* is given by Crispin Sartwell. Sartwell, seeing the value in a Deweyan take on aesthetics as well as the value of the *Gita* in this project, points out the importance of Krishna’s advocated doctrine of karma yoga: “it is not that we act wholly and always without ends; that would make human action impossible. Rather, we ought to reconstrue the *relation* of means to ends in our actions . . . our action should not be performed *merely* for the sake of the end; the end must not absorb or expunge the means in our deliberation.”²⁶ The protagonist in the *Gita*, Arjuna, is advised not to value the fruits of action but to care only about the (duty bound) action itself. This, according to Sartwell, is a corrective to our normal and exclusive focus on ends or goals in action:

If we could achieve the end by sheer force of will, if we could realize it without performing the means, we would. Kṛṣṇa [Krishna] asks us, not to renounce all desire and thus all action, but to desire the means as intrinsically valuable as *well* as valuable in service of the end. The means are not to be absorbed in the end; the time and energy devoted to the means are not wasted. Rather, this time and energy are to be consecrated.²⁷

Thus, the means (that is, the present activity) are to be seen as an intrinsically valuable experience and not merely valuable insofar as they reach a desired end. Thus, the minimalist account offers the following mental/cognitive orientation for an individual to take toward her activity: one should focus on what the situation asks of her (such as the duties that her station or relational placement expects) and do this activity with as much absorption in the present as possible (and without worrying about or focusing on the nonpresent—namely, the desired ends). This would fulfill the requirements, mentioned in the previous section, for what it takes for an individual to experience activity as aesthetic (namely, attention to the present, valuing the means as much as the ends, and so on).

Such an account, however, is minimal in what it appropriates from the *Gita*. Is there a useful reading of orientation from the *Gita* that includes the metaphysical notions involved in the original story? Indeed, the minimalist account may be right that consecrating the means improves experience, but this is only part of the material of the *Gita*. Krishna wants to improve experience by *enlightening* the subject (Arjuna) about some key facets of the world. Illusion is said to be dispelled through the practice of karma yoga, so one is tempted to look for a full account that includes more of the material available in the *Gita*. I would like to start down such a road as it seems to dovetail nicely with the relationship Dewey hints at between aesthetic and religious experience. Thus, I will conclude this article by noting some additions to the minimalist account that can yield another answer to Dewey's question of how one can make more of life aesthetic. While the core of nonattached action will remain from the minimalist account, what will be added concerns *how* exactly to instantiate this meliorative strategy.

What I would like to suggest in the remaining portion of this essay is that the *Gita* provides a fuller account of how one can productively change her orientation to the world through the inclusion of religious concepts. Some believe the minimal account of the *Gita* is ultimately problematic because it does not utilize the materials that are there—for instance, Aurobindo Ghose notes that the “do one's duty” interpretation is troublesome largely because of the conflict of duties that Arjuna is faced with and that necessitate Krishna's teaching.²⁸ Some wonder if this conflict of duties can ever be overcome in a satisfactory manner.²⁹ What I believe is useful to add to the minimalist account is the concept of Krishna as divine and the idea of sacrifice. These

theological elements will add something to what karma yoga does to an individual's orientation toward activity that goes further in fulfilling the goals of the minimal account—that of sanctifying activity and making the present valuably free of illusion.

At this point, one may challenge this sort of account and argue that Dewey's take on religion is radically different from anything stemming from the *Gita*. Of course, this is the case in a literal sense due to the different cultural backgrounds of each of these parties, but this is not fatal on Deweyan grounds. What Dewey faulted with "traditional" accounts of religion is that they (along with their critics) emphasize the *supernatural* element resident in their doctrines. In *A Common Faith* (1934, ACF), Dewey starts out with just this point and proceeds to show the harm in assuming that religious experience cannot incorporate natural elements of lived experience.³⁰ It seems that the harmful aspect of the supernatural, much like his critique of removed ideals or notions of "self" in his early work,³¹ is that it draws our attention away from the details of the here and now, the concrete situation confronting us. Indeed, commentators such as Van Meter Ames trace this problem back to Calvinism in America, which "relegated enjoyment to a remote future, demanding that the present be filled with work and emptied of pleasure."³² Regardless of the cause, the problem of disintegration and distracted attention to the demands of the here and now remain. In terms of solving this problem, Deweyan moral theory asks individuals to reach a growing, living equilibrium with their environment; one can see this in aesthetic terms as living through more integrated, meaningful, and consummatory experiences than not. The supernatural in religion, like the ideas of moral ends that transcend the details of the situation one is in now, fractures our attention and consequently ruptures the unity that we so desperately seek between self and environment as well as within one's self. Indeed, Dewey argues just this point in ACF; discussing in unusually clear terms what the "unreligious attitude" is, he explains:

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. Our successes are dependent upon the cooperation of nature. The sense of the dignity of human nature is as religious as is the sense of awe and reverence when it rests upon a sense of human nature as a cooperating part of a larger whole.³³

Thus, one can infer that the religious attitude will lend a certain unity to an individual and her environment (including those natural forces that help or hinder our projects). This unity of self and world is not something that can be literally explored like the workings of gravity; instead, it requires the capacity of imagination to see the ideal and the possible meanings inherent in the present. The ideal in Dewey is a complex topic, and one that others have explored, so I will leave it at this: what he seems to be pointing

to is that concepts like “God” and other such theological notions are not strictly true as referential concepts (such as those employed in “intellectual faith”) but instead are ways to bring out a certain *meaning* in the present situation. Dewey’s theory of meaning makes room for immediacy of experience and meaning, as well as for reflective change.³⁴ I would also like to point out that in places such as *ACF* he is noting the ability to change our general ways of apprehending meanings (our orientation) from our contact with a given situation/environment. Religious experience, like aesthetic experience, is characterized by a heightened unity and integration among its parts. The way that experience becomes “religious” in quality is by instantiating habits of approaching the world that imaginatively see this unity and meaning among seemingly disparate parts. Thus, after defending his take on God as ideal, Dewey notes the source of the idealization of values in such a personified figure: “the ideal itself has its roots in natural conditions; it emerges when the imagination idealizes existence by laying hold of the possibilities offered to thought and action. There are values, goods, actually realized upon a natural basis—the goods of human association, of art and knowledge.”³⁵ God, in whatever religious language it is contextualized in, arises from the lived experience of some culture, and it is from this source that it gets its motive force in shaping our experience. This is what Dewey is after when he seeks a “moral faith,” or as I would put it, a faith that is useful in productively shaping our experience through an intelligent alteration of our habits or orientations toward the world, self, and activity.

The *Gita*’s inclusion of devotional elements—Krishna as the personified form of the divine Self (Brahman)—is one such way to expand the meaning of the present to render activity aesthetic. Commentators such as Robert L. Minor and Eliot Deutsch note the integration of karma yoga with bhakti (devotional) yoga, as well as with jnana yoga, so it seems reasonable to expand our account beyond the minimalist one.³⁶ The way that the *Gita*’s discipline of karma yoga “teaches” one about the true nature of the Self (as all-inclusive, as not really confined to the individuated empirical ego) is through nonattached action. Action, however, is purposeful and directed, so the secret to the *Gita*’s teaching is that one can hold an orientation that gets rid of the harmful component to action—a focus on desire and its objects. Such a focus is not only connected to the reified empirical self but also draws one’s attention away from the resources and demands of the present. Desire is said to be the root of suffering and illusion,³⁷ and its grasp on how we approach the activity of the present must be relaxed. Krishna advises Arjuna (and by implication the reader) to think of and approach action as a *sacrifice*, since “The action of a man who is rid of attachment, who is liberated, whose mind is firmly established in knowledge, who performs action as a sacrifice, is completely dissolved.”³⁸ The *Gita* is distinguishing itself from the Vedic tradition, which largely saw ritual action as a means of procuring favor and rewards from the gods. According to Krishna, this is merely another way

of further reifying the illusion that the ritually acting self is real and that its desires ought to be followed wherever they lead. The *Gita's* notion of sacrifice is radical given the context—one is to adopt the orientation that sees her actions, especially everyday ones that usually are separated from “ritual actions,” as valuable and as sacrifice. What occurs in sacrifice? It is usually the giving up of something literally or symbolically important to something or someone who is more important. In the *Gita's* elaboration of karma yoga, one is to perform her duty without attachment to the results; one way of doing this is to approach the activity as if one were offering it and its results as an offering to Krishna: “Whatever thou doest, whatever thou eatest, whatever thou offerest, whatever thou givest, whatever austerities thou performest, do that, O son of Kunti, as an offering to Me [Krishna].”³⁹ The action is done with this mindset that frees one “from the bonds of action”⁴⁰—that of attachment to the self and the results it supposedly accrues through action. Just as the fire burns the literal ritual offering, doing action saturated with the meaning of it as sacrifice to the divine burns the ignorance that leads to illusion and suffering.⁴¹

It is in Krishna that we see an equivalent to Dewey's notion of “God” as an ideal unity of value. Krishna is portrayed as the ideal or perfect renouncer—there is nothing that he *has* to do in terms of accruing benefits for his own desires, but he continues to act to support the world.⁴² This highlights the point that I believe is important for Dewey's aesthetic project. The theological backdrop of Krishna as an ideal nonattached agent and as permeating all of the world—for instance, he is said to be all parts of ritual and action, from agent to result⁴³—provides an enhanced, imaginative meaning to one's actions that not only focuses attention on the present (and not on the desired fruits in a remote state) but that also integrates the present's meaning in a heightened way with surrounding events and entities. Action is said to be undertaken by Krishna, as well as by the karma yogin, in support of the activity of the world. The meaning of the action is thereby enlarged from a close tethering to one's idiosyncratic desires and their objects to a larger sense of the impact and importance of action on self and other. The notion of action as sacrifice to the divine also lends the sort of temporal development and unity that Dewey saw in the aesthetic. Action can now be experienced not as mechanical or as a mere means to what is really important but instead as an equally vital part to the media of life (present activities). Seeing activity as sacrifice dovetails nicely with Dewey's refusal to speak of an end to activity in his moral work.

Both the *Gita* and Deweyan pragmatism see the present as the locus of value and as the worthy recipient of our attention and focus. The karma yoga of the *Gita*, with the addition of the theological content, thus becomes an imaginative way to engage activity and to orient one's self to it in a productive fashion. Paul Mundschenk, speaking independently of such a Deweyan project, nonetheless notes the integrative function that the

doctrine of karma yoga has—it resists the tendency to “think ahead” driven by the objects of desire, rendering our life “disjointed and out of harmony with the actual matrix of manifest reality. What we need to do, then, is be fully absorbed in *this* moment’s unfolding reality, to be centered in the present, and, hence, to be fully human, fully alive.”⁴⁴ The ideal, imaginative elements that karma yoga, with its theological elements, adds to experience leads to this integration. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan illustrates this value in the *Gita*’s method of karma yoga, pointing out that it uses the figure of Krishna as encompassing all things and activities as a way of getting “The finite centers [to] look upon themselves as members of an organism and work for the sake of the whole.”⁴⁵ Thus, the conceptual apparatus of Krishna, Brahman as the Self of all, and action as sacrifice is merely a mental/cognitive method of changing one’s orientation toward the activity of the present. The results of this method, if pursued with diligence, are to render one’s present experience more aesthetic—a distinct, yet integrated part of a continuing line of activity, with each part being as valuable and worthy of attention as the surrounding portions.

In the strategy of orientational meliorism proposed in the *Bhagavad Gita*, the quests of Dewey’s *AE* and *ACF* meet—one makes more of life’s activity consummatory and aesthetic through the use of religious and imaginative resources to recast the value and purpose of that activity. This does not seem to be a move that Dewey would resist. In the conclusion to his study of Dewey’s aesthetic theory, Thomas Alexander notes the crescendo to which Dewey was building: “The tremendous task to be undertaken is to grasp the present—not as immediate, isolated bare occurrence, as an indefinitely fleeting ‘now,’ but as the dynamically insistent occasion for establishing continuity or growth of meaning.”⁴⁶ The point of the *Gita* and of its proffered karma yoga is just this—not to see the present as the only thing of importance, but to see the present in such a way that is free from those illusions that bind us and inevitably drag us down. More of life can be aesthetic if one stops individuating selves and experiences and subordinating them in value to one’s self and future states. One way of doing this is by engaging the concrete situation with all of its resources and demands, and by not getting caught in the propulsive web that a focus on certain remote states weaves. This, I believe, is the goal of Dewey’s aesthetics as well as the main thrust of the *Bhagavad Gita*.

NOTES

A previous version of this article—as well as the following three pieces—was presented at the 2006 American Society for Aesthetics Annual Conference.

1. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1934), vol. 10 of the *Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989).
2. *Ibid.*, 87.

3. Aaron Smuts, "Anesthetic Experience," *Philosophy and Literature* 29, no. 1 (2005): 101.
4. *AE*, 140.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 140-41.
7. *Ibid.*, 201.
8. At the most general level, an "orientation" can be seen as a mental habit that establishes what is in the world and what is of value; both of these come together in certain action strategies. This is a mental habit that *orients* one toward the world, self, others, and activity in general. Thus, an extreme egoist sees a world of individuated objects that have different values to him (as sources of pleasure, say), which leads to certain strategies of action or response (those actions that maximize his pleasure, minimize his pain). Another orientation will be evident in the *Bhagavad Gita*. For a general discussion of orientational meliorism, see Scott R. Stroud, "Pragmatist Aesthetics and Film: *The Thin Red Line* and Orientational Meliorism," *Film and Philosophy* 10, no. 1 (2006): 67-83; Scott R. Stroud, "John Dewey and the Question of Artful Communication," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 41, no. 2 (2008): 153-83; and Scott R. Stroud, "Pragmatism and Orientation," *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 20, no. 4 (2006): 287-307.
9. *AE*, 100-2.
10. *Ibid.*, 202.
11. *Ibid.*
12. This is as specific as Dewey got about virtue in his early work on ethics; for instance, he talks about moral growth as the "development of character, a certain spirit and method in all conduct" in "The Study of Ethics," in vol. 4 of the *Early Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), 307.
13. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, vol. 9, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 113.
14. John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), vol. 14, *The Middle Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1988), 183.
15. *Ibid.*, 184.
16. *Ibid.*, 155.
17. Scott R. Stroud, "Constructing a Deweyan Theory of Moral Cultivation," *Contemporary Pragmatism* 3, no. 2 (2006): 99-116.
18. *AE*, 308-13.
19. Of course, one must note that this is an *appropriation* of select themes and points from the *Gita*. A standard reaction to a project such as this is to argue that there are large cultural and theological differences between the *Gita* and Dewey's aesthetics. I grant this point. What I want to explore assumes a pragmatist approach to comparative philosophy. What *useful* comparisons and appropriations can be made when selected portions of these two texts/traditions are brought into contact? My reading, while it does try to give a richer account of the theological elements of the *Gita* and how they can elucidate a theme in Dewey's aesthetics, does not exhaust or comprehensively cover all that can be said about the *Gita*. Instead, I offer my "full" account of karma yoga as one (useful) way of adding to American thought with resources from India. For more on such a general sort of method in comparative philosophy, see Robert E. Allinson, "The Myth of Comparative Philosophy or the Comparative Philosophy *Magré Lui*," in *Two Roads to Wisdom? Chinese and Analytic Philosophical Traditions*, ed. Bo Mou (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 269-92.
20. I discuss this division in Scott R. Stroud, "Orientational Meliorism in Dewey and Dögen," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society* 43, no. 1 (2007): 185-215. "Mental/cognitive" means of improving or meliorating our experiences can be said to be ways of approaching action that rely most heavily on the mental constructs around the embodied activity—for instance, Seligman's notions of learned pessimism and how one can fix it through approaching one's activities

with a different mental way of judging success or failure. For more on this sort of example, consult Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (New York: Free Press, 2002); Martin E. P. Seligman, *Learned Optimism* (New York: Vintage, 2006). On the other hand, "mental/somatic" means of meliorating experience can be said to be those initiated by mental effort and that rely heavily on doing novel activities with the body to create or reform one's orientation toward activity in general. Examples of this sort of orientational meliorism would be the effortful practicing of Zen meditation or somatic educational techniques such as those discussed in Richard Shusterman, *Pragmatist Aesthetics: Living Beauty, Rethinking Art*, 2nd ed. (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2000); and Richard Shusterman, *Performing Live: Aesthetic Alternatives to the Ends of Art* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000).

21. *The Bhagavad Gita: Translated, with Introduction and Critical Essays*, trans. Eliot Deutsch (New York: University Press of America, 1968), 3:27.
22. *Ibid.*, 3:5.
23. *Ibid.*, 3:6.
24. *Ibid.*, 3:19.
25. *Ibid.*, 2:47, 48.
26. Crispin Sartwell, *The Art of Living: Aesthetics of the Ordinary in World Spiritual Traditions* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 97.
27. *Ibid.*, 97-98.
28. Aurobindo Ghose, *Essays on the Gita* (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970).
29. Richard A. Berg, "The Bhagavad Gita on War: The Argument from Literature," in *New Essays in the Bhagavadgita: Philosophical, Methodological and Cultural Approaches*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New Delhi: Books and Books Publishers, 1987), 25-35.
30. John Dewey, "A Common Faith" (1934), in *The Later Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1989), 9:3-4.
31. John Dewey, "Green's Theory of the Moral Motive," in *The Early Works of John Dewey*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1969), 3:155-73.
32. Van Meter Ames, "Business and Art," *International Journal of Ethics* 41, no. 1 (1930): 87.
33. *ACF*, 18.
34. For a good discussion of Dewey on ideals and meaning, see Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art, Experience and Nature: The Horizons of Feeling* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987).
35. *ACF*, 33.
36. Robert N. Minor, *Bhagavad-gita: An Exegetical Commentary* (New Delhi: Heritage, 1982), 112-14; Eliot Deutsch, "The Nature of Karma Yoga," in *The Bhagavad Gita: Translated, with Introduction and Critical Essays* (New York: University Press of America, 1968), 161-69.
37. *Bhagavad Gita*, 2:62, 3:37.
38. *Ibid.*, 4:23.
39. *Ibid.*, 9:27.
40. *Ibid.*, 9:28.
41. *Ibid.*, 4:37.
42. *Ibid.*, 3:22-25.
43. *Ibid.*, 9:16-19.
44. Paul Mundschenk, "The Psychology of the Bhagavad-Gita: Non-Attachment in the Modern World," in *New Essays in the Bhagavadgita: Philosophical, Methodological and Cultural Approaches*, ed. Arvind Sharma (New Delhi: Books and Books Publishers, 1987), 18.
45. Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, *Indian Philosophy*, vol. 1 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 567.
46. Thomas M. Alexander, *John Dewey's Theory of Art*, 269.