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BOOK REVIEW


The guiding theme of this rich and subtle study is the intimacy of sensory experience and the pursuit of a spiritual life. Wynn argues that religious thoughts can inform and enrich our experience of the sensory world in a way that is both practically and ethically transformative. Such sensory and spiritual renewal can be guided by the doctrinal and practical structures of religious life and, in its more advanced stages, is a component of a wider metaphysical vision of the integrated place of human beings in the wider order of things. Wynn’s focus on the place of the sensory in the spiritual is both apt and attractive and amply sustains an illuminating discussion of a wide range of topics, including, but not limited to, conversion experience, sacred sites, religious architecture, emotion, beauty, ritual, bodily practices, and the theological and ethical virtues. Moreover, Wynn engages with a wide constituency of authors that includes philosophers, phenomenologists, and theologians, including especially insightful discussions of figures such as Erazim Kohak, William James, Douglas Alexander, and David E. Cooper. This book ought to have a wide and grateful audience both within and beyond philosophical theology and the philosophy of religion.

Wynn opens his account by challenging a set of existentially motivated objections to Christian and Platonic forms of thought, familiar from Nietzsche, among others. Those traditions, so the objections go, are wedded to a ‘two-worlds’ picture of reality that sharply separates the sensory world from the divine world, and then locates all value in the latter to the derogation of the former. On this picture, the sensuous is sinful—or illusory, ‘fallen’, or mundane—such that radical practical and affective disengagement from it appears as our path to the divine. This imposes upon us an intolerable imperative to ‘endorse a conception of human life which is . . . ethically and spiritually ruinous’ (p. 14). The classic statement is, perhaps, Plotinus’s castigation of life in the sensuous world as akin to ‘immersion in filth’, but very many other complaints about the ‘life-denying’ tendencies of many religions, including but not only the theistic, are easily available. The British Humanist Association, for instance, urges us to ‘find meaning, beauty, and joy in the one life we have’, rather than waste it awaiting escape to a fictitious transcendent.

Wynn replies that such objections ignore the possibility that religious thoughts, feelings, and practices can contribute, both positively and profoundly, to the character of the sensory world. If so, the relationship between the sensory and the spiritual is, or at least can be, one of enrichment and not erosion, and this point is illustrated...
by acute discussions of conversion experiences. Such conversions typically involve a radical transformation of the sensory world—of the ‘glorification’ of ‘natural objects’, or the ‘irradiation’ of the world with ‘new beauty and radiance’ (pp. 29, 26). But they also typically both require and sustain a profound personal transformation, a point that Wynn makes by drawing upon remarks, by Iris Murdoch and Erazim Kohak, on the morally and spiritually edifying quality of experiences of natural places and creatures. To achieve a ‘mode of attention to the world’ that is ‘vacant of egocentric concern’ demands that we embark upon a process of ‘liberation’ from fixed, myopic evaluative schemes that gradually enable us to ‘appreciate the world for itself’ rather than in the narrower terms of ‘our limited projects’ (p. 133). Murdoch calls this process ‘unselfing’, and this points to rich parallels with Buddhist and Daoist thought, which emphasize the importance of ethical and spiritual discipline and the purgation of the distorting egocentric desires that—on their accounts—narrow and distort our sensory and spiritual vision. It would be intriguing to consider how Wynn’s insights might apply to these (largely) atheistic Asian spiritual dispensations. Certainly, those traditions share Wynn’s sense of the intimacy of the sensory and the spiritual, and the aesthetic and the ethical, and also his sensitivity to the ways in which our sensibilities may be cultivated through bodily disciplines, place-specific practices, and through edifying engagement with natural places and creatures.

Wynn then adds the further idea of ‘epiphanic experiences’. During a process of disciplined sensory and spiritual renewal, a person can, gradually, achieve ‘a condition of contemplative absorption in things’ (p. 138). Such a state is, of course, familiar from the world’s mystical traditions—one of which, after all, gifted us the term ‘epiphanic’—but Wynn identifies other alternative accounts of epiphanic experience that are independent of the doctrinal and practical structures of theistic religion, especially those of David E. Cooper and Douglas Alexander. Common to these different conceptions of epiphanic experience is the core claim that a person can come to experience places—indeed, the entire sensory world—in ways that spontaneously prompt a recognition of their ‘absolute value’ in a way that deeply renews both ‘our sense of the world, and . . . our sense of self’ (p. 198).

A puzzle that emerges from Wynn’s appeal to these different accounts is whether there is some procedure for identifying the practical and experiential conditions that are prerequisite for the reliable cultivation of optimal receptivity to epiphanic experience. Certainly there is no shortage of candidates—ranging from scriptural study to meditative reverie and ascetic practice—but, given this diversity, how can one determine how best to pursue (if that is the right term) epiphanic experience? Clearly enough, not everyone has such experiences, and though some find this a source of despair, others, it seems, do not, and self-report a cheerful obliviousness to the very idea of ‘epiphanies’ so conceived. Kohak regards the adoption of ways of life inclusive of epiphanic experience as ‘the task of the human’, and later in the book Wynn similarly proposes that human beings are truly distinctive in virtue of their ‘conjoined’ capacity to both experience the sensory world and also to evaluate it (p. 195–6). We alone, in the order of things, enjoy this privilege (one is reminded, here, of Pico della Mirandola’s Oration on the Dignity of Man). Specifically, only human beings can both experience the sensory world and transform and also actively enrich that experience by infusing it with religious and ethical values and thoughts—this being, suggests Wynn, ‘a uniquely human contribution to the wider economy of reality’ (p. 197). But the normative content of
such claims might disturb readers who want to resist the equation of the ‘task of the human’ with epiphanic experiences which are—if history is any guide—the preserve of a spiritual elite.

The final vision that Wynn presents offers a stirring challenge to many prevalent ideas about the nature of a spiritual life—such as its alleged incompatibility with aesthetic delight in sensory experience of earthly things—and it offers a welcome alternative to narrowly ‘cognitivist’ accounts of morality and religion. Certainly Wynn offers both critics and sympathizers a rich set of phenomenologically sensitive reflections on a range of central philosophical and theological issues—ranging from the nature of belief to the experience of value—while also helping to restore to contemporary attention a conception of spirituality that is faithful to the lived experience of those who pursue it.

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