

Spirituality as Consummatory Experience of Place: The Continuity Between Dewey's and Maslow's Thought

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For several decades now scholars of environmental design have engaged in a discourse on 'Genius Loci,' emphasizing the importance of reviving the historical significance and of restoring the cultural identity of place. This recognition is indebted to related ideas surrounding the notion of cultural landscape and our sense of place, ideas that are inevitably associated with our routines, rites, habits, and customs (Jackson, 1994) as well as with the qualitative identity of place (Relph, 1976). However, the notion of spirituality in design theory and criticism still seems to remain in a somewhat pretentious and noble air, subject to an individual state of mind with esoteric taste, which has little to do with our shared experience of the environment. This general (mis)conception may be traced to a long-held intellectual belief of binary "oppositions of mind and body, soul and matter, spirit and flesh, [which] all have their origin fundamentally in fear of what life may bring forth" (Dewey, 1934, p.22) and suggests a need for a re-conceptualization.

The paper attempts to "naturalize" a vague and thus a less useful concept of spirituality in its association with other domains of human experience, such as aesthetic and moral, and to identify it as a critical dimension that binds together the fullest experience of the environment. The paper will argue for three related propositions: 1) spirituality is essentially a spatial and consummatory sense of the self, 2) spirituality is inevitably associated with an aesthetic perception of the environment, and 3) spirituality ultimately transcends moral accountability of the individual toward the community and its environment. To support these propositions, the paper will construct six lines of arguments by pointing to notable similarities between John Dewey (1934) and Abraham Maslow (1954, 1968), who do not seemingly hold similar world views: Dewey is viewed as a dyed-in-the-wool pragmatist in philosophy, while Maslow is described as a naturalistic realist in psychology (Dennis, 1974), yet both deal with important phases of aesthetic as well as spiritual experience.

The first argument is that spirituality means to have both existential and psychological meaning of a whole being in space, which binds Dewey and Maslow together in terms of a common scheme for sense of the self. Both treat the concept 'the self' as the center of the human mind-and-body. Dewey (1934) writes, "Perception that occurs for its own sake is full realization of all the elements of our psychological being" (p.256), and continues that "happiness and delight...come to be through a fulfillment that reaches to the depths of our being, an adjustment of our whole being with the conditions of existence" (p.17). Maslow, on the other hand, argues that there is no distinction between the self and the ego, but that the self becomes actualized, and realizes its own identity, through the whole process of growth: self-actualization. Therefore, the self is a more mature and spiritual goal that an individual mind (ego) aims to achieve for its own healthy and balanced personality in harmony with other existences.

The second argument is that spirituality is as a state of finding self-fulfillment and of realizing one's creativity by an awareness and exposure to the experience: aesthetic experience. The aesthetic need, according to Maslow (1954), is also a truly basic need that can be identified almost universally in healthy people in every culture and in every age, and is a catalyst to activate the center of the self toward self-transcendence: the peak experiences (p.51). He continues, "Peakers seem also to live in the realm of 'Being'; of poetry, aesthetics, symbols, transcendence; and of end-experiences" (p.164-165). Dewey (1934) similarly argues that aesthetic experience is

a body of matters and meanings, not in themselves aesthetic, but 'become' aesthetic as they enter into an ordered rhythmic movement toward consummation. It is a self-becoming process of "being human—human in connection with the nature of which it is a part—is social" (p.326).

The third argument is that spirituality connects aesthetic sensibility with moral accountability by transcending the sense of self toward the community and the environment. This will be supported by two lines of premises that Dewey and Maslow share. The one premise is that a peak (i.e. spiritual) experience is the feeling of our appreciation, wonder, and mystery that are ultimate and universal biological impulses. In Maslow's terms such impulses are such moral feelings as safety, security, belongingness, love, respect, and self-esteem. Dewey also writes (p.333) that 'nature' has a meaning which includes the whole scheme of things—in which it has the force of the imaginative and emotional word 'universe,' and continues, that the emotional quality of the world in which and by which we live is a primary force to an aesthetic experience.

The other premise is that a peak (i.e. spiritual) experience tends to extend its symbolic meaning toward other organisms, animals, habitats, and nature in general. Maslow argues that a spiritual person is the morally healthy person, being critical of dogmatic Christianity that counts on the definite dichotomy of good and evil. Similarly, Dewey argues that the ideal factors of morality must be indifferent to the dichotomous judgment of the good and bad, "the ideal factors of morality are always and everywhere beyond good and evil" (p.348-349). Both attempt to interpret the essential moral nature of the human mind as the connected spirit with the cosmos, derived from holistic philosophy such as Taoism. Therefore, it is reasonable to contend that spiritual experience has necessarily a symbolic dimension that reveals, extends, and regenerates its sympathetic associations with the self, things, people, and place. These are the important traits that exist in both aesthetic sensibility and moral accountability.

In conclusion, such an expansion of the concept spirituality toward a more general concept of aesthetic experience—as a fundamental relationship between humans and the environment—suggests that it be a more descriptive and all-embracing kind of experience. This general concept of spirituality can only serve as a guide but not as a definitive standard, since it is a spatial and temporal experience, which gives individual and specific form to common principles and values. This suggests that 'Genius Loci' could be viewed as a consummatory experience of the self, and of place as an extended spirit to the world and to nature (cosmos), transcending the too narrow notion of "aesthetic delight" toward a moral fulfillment of and beyond the self to the environment.

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