BOOK REVIEWS


The eye by which I see God is the same as the eye by which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye are one and the same. (Herlihy, p. 40).
— Meister Eckhart

How often does one hear vague references made to the idea of—‘common sense’—without any reflection as to its underlying meaning? However, an interesting point regarding the notion of a shared world of the senses is that it is all-too-often reduced to what can be empirically verified solely by the five senses, excluding a whole dimension that has been not only acknowledged but also inseparably connected to the function of the senses since time immemorial.¹ The Sufi mystical poet and metaphysician Rumi gracefully outlines the indispensable role of this mystical dimension: “Your head is but a lamp with six wicks: Without that spark, would any remain alight?” (p. 3)

This volume penned by prolific author John Herlihy² brings a double-edge to the material at hand. While he moves freely between the diverse spiritual traditions, he is also a committed practitioner of one of them. Readers will be drawn-in by the poetic prose, intermingled with illumined wisdom taken from the world’s religions, together with firsthand encounters with traditional peoples often allowing the reader rare glimpses into unknown worlds as if he or she were actually travelling along.

The work contains absorbing chapter titles serving a didactic function that lead one through the labyrinth of the world of tangible forms to the intangible world of the formless: (a) The Secret Life of the Senses, (b) The Visionary Power of Sight, (c) The Evocative Power of Scent, (d) The Resonating Power of Sound, (e) The Appreciative Power of Taste, (f) The Exploratory Power of Touch, (g) The Intuitive Power of the Sixth Sense and the Epilogue: A Crack in the Wall.

The theme of the senses requires a participatory inquiry, as they are the very instruments with which humans interpret the physical and spiritual worlds. Regardless of our unique human differences, we are all reliant upon the five senses, yet we commonly neglect to contemplate the mystery of the sixth sense—the most magisterial of all which subsumes and integrates the very doors of perception themselves. The author underscores its centrality: “The sixth sense is the apex and summit of the other five senses” (p. 3). It is often overlooked, that apart from its objective claims, the entirety of modern science could be said to be circumscribed within the domain of the five senses:

[T]he premier instruments of investigation supporting the scientific method are no one other than the five senses that on their own, or in tandem with
the recently developed rarefied pieces of scientific equipment that attempt to
document at the quantum level and through empirical evidence the true
nature of reality. In the end, we still rely on seeing, hearing, smelling,
tasting, and touching in order to declare what we believe to be an objective
reality. (p. 1)

While transpersonal psychology, like its forerunner humanistic psychology, has
responded with good intention to the so-called intellectualization or
rationalization alleged as defense mechanisms within modern psychology in
order to affirm the importance of the wisdom of the body, yet both of these
approaches are arguably rooted in one and the same organismic epistemology
that affirms the popular adage: “Lose your mind and come to your senses.”
In endorsing a way of knowing based on the sensory experience, it has gone to the
polar extreme in excluding the importance of not only the human mind, which
includes not only discursive thought or reason, but the very transcendent
faculty of the Intellect.
This organismic epistemology embedded within both
third and forth “forces” in modern psychology favors the senses and the
emotions over the mind, yet it blurs the distinction between reason and the
Intellect, which is similar to the error of confusing the ego with the Self. The
Intellect is the noetic or transcendent faculty within the human individual that
perceives Reality unmediated, whereas the other faculties perceive the physical
world through the medium of these faculties. This is not to suggest that the
mind or reason is superior to the body, on the contrary, the human microcosm
consisting of—Spirit/Intellect, soul and body—acknowledges the importance
of the faculties and their fundamental interconnected nature; however, with
this said, only the spiritual domain can truly situate the psycho-physical order.

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It would be also useful in this context to mention medieval philosopher
Boethius (480–525), who presented the human faculties in the following
ascending order: sense (sensus), imagination (imaginatis), reason (ratio),
Intellect (Intellectus), and similar interpretations can be found amongst the
other spiritual traditions of the world. The author reminds the reader of the
divide that exists between traditional modes of knowing and those of modern
science, which equally applies to humanistic and transpersonal psychology:
“Sadly, the modern mentality does not accord the intellect its true value as a
spiritual faculty capable of direct knowledge of God” (p. 192).

A paradoxical facet of the senses is that whatever sense is employed, it always
alludes to what transcends it. For example, the scent of the rose is not limited
to the rose, or the taste of sugar is not limited to sugar, as the sense experience
invokes the mystical dimension beyond form. This however does not in any
way diminish the sensory experience of the physical world, as the forms not only assist in navigating the physical world, but simultaneously point beyond it. Similarly, the human psyche is never solely satisfied with the gratification of the senses because it yearns for what is beyond itself, what is supra-sensible and equally supra-rational. The great Sufi mystic Al-Hallaj (858–922) proclaimed the inner meaning of the senses: “When I wanted to drink to quench my thirst, it is You that I saw in the shadow of the goblet” (p. 134). With this said, we cannot take it for granted that it is through the forms that the formless can be intuited, which mirrors the intersection of the horizontal or psycho-physical with the vertical or spiritual domain as the poet Awhadi Kirmani, so skillfully expresses:

I gaze upon form (surat) with the physical eye because
There is in form the trace of the Spirit (ma’na).
This is the world of form and we live in forms:
The spirit cannot be seen save by means of form. (p. 41)

Sensory deprivation as a spiritual praxis as has been applied within the diverse plenary revelations has been known to heighten the physical senses. However, these transpersonal methods were always contextualized within an authentic spiritual form and were not focused on “consciousness expansion,” “altered states of consciousness,” or “non-ordinary states of consciousness” for such experiences in and of themselves do not lead to sensory integration and are more often than not hindrances on the spiritual path.¹

At last there is a discerning and insightful work devoted to the invaluable theme of the senses which is informed by the—sacred science—of the perennial philosophy that needs to be set apart from modern science that began with the materialistic outlook of the Cartesian-Newtonian paradigm. In spite of the lack of books available on this subject, Wisdom of the Senses stands apart from others for several reasons. One is that it contextualizes the role of the five senses within the transpersonal domain, and second, it does so by acknowledging the perennial philosophy, which is neither of the East or West, but an embodiment of the timeless source of wisdom itself. The implications of this volume upon modern psychology are manifold, yet it is here where the traditional wisdom informs the reader of the inherent isthmus that exists between firsthand knowledge and that of secondhand knowledge, avowing that only those who travel the path may come to know directly for him or herself as the Sufi adage confirms: “Only the one who has tasted knows” (p. 112).

NOTES

¹ “In particular, it is ‘common sense’ that sees only the world of the senses as real, and that admits of no knowledge other than the one that comes from the senses…” [René Guénon, “A Material Civilization” in The Crisis of the Modern World, trans. Arthur Osborne, Marco Pallis and Richard C. Nicholson (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 86]; “[M]odern man has become quite impermeable to any influences other than such as impinge on his senses; not only have his faculties of comprehension become more limited, but also the field of his perception has become correspondingly restricted.” [René Guénon, “The Illusion of ‘Ordinary Life’” in The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times, trans. Lord Northbourne (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2004), p. 101].


4 This is more than apparent in the following statement: “Intelect is the whor of intelligence” [Frederick S. Perls, Gestalt Therapy Verbatim, ed. John O. Stevens (Lafayette, CA: Real People Press, 1969), p. 22]


7 The following diagram is found in William Stoddart, “What is the Intellect?” in Remembering in a World of Forgetting: Thoughts on Tradition and Postmodernism, eds. Mateus Soares de Azevedo and Alberto Vasconcellos Queiroz (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2008), p. 46. This spiritual organ, also known as the “Eye of the Heart!” is illuminated by Hēhaka Sapa or Black Elk (1863–1950), a remarkable sage of the Lakota Sioux: “I am blind and do not see the things of this world; but when the Light comes from Above, it enlightens my heart and I can see, for the Eye of my heart (Chantie Itsa) sees everything. The heart is a sanctuary at the center of which there is a little space, wherein the Great Spirit dwells, and this is the Eye (Itsa). This is the Eye of the Great Spirit by which He sees all things and through which we see Him. If the heart is not pure, the Great Spirit cannot be seen, and if you should die in this ignorance, your soul cannot return immediately to the Great Spirit, but it must be purified by wandering about in the world. In order to know the center of the heart where the Great Spirit dwells you must be pure and good, and live in the manner that the Great Spirit has taught us. The man who is thus pure contains the Universe in the pocket of his heart (Chantie Ogouka).” [Frithjof Schuon, “The Sacred Pipe,” in The Feathed Sun: Plains Indians in Art and Philosophy (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), p. 51; See also Seyyed Hossein Nasr, “The Wisdom of the Body,” in Religion and the Order of Nature (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 235–269; Frithjof Schuon, “The Message of the Human Body,” in From the Divine to the Human, trans. Gustavo Polit and Deborah Lambert (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1982), pp. 87–101; Frithjof Schuon, “Survey of Integral Anthropology,” in To Have A Center (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom Books, 1990), pp. 39–52. René Guénon, “The Limits of the Mental” in Perspectives on Initiation, trans. Henry D. Fohr, ed. Samuel D. Fohr (Hillsdale, NY: Sophia Perennis, 2001), pp. 205–210.

8 See Martin Lings, “Metaphysics and the Perennial Philosophy,” lecture delivered at the Temenos Academy.


REFERENCES


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