WILLIAM JAMES AND JOHN DEWEY ON PRAGMATIC RELIGION

by

TAYLOR BRADFORD-DAMER STONE

(Under the Direction of Piers Stephens)

ABSTRACT

In this dissertation I compare the American Pragmatists William James and John Dewey on their respective conceptions of religion.  I examine what each philosopher takes to be the essential features of religious attitudes, as well as how these features subsequently determine the criteria for what may be counted as religious.  I look at what both James and Dewey see as philosophical problems with the traditional definition of religion and of religious institutions, as well as how their redefinition of religion may resolve those problems.  I also analyze the theoretical and pragmatic defensibility of both definitions.  I focus on the philosophical criticisms which arise both from Dewey's insistence on removing supernatural features from the conception of religion and from James's insistence on retaining them.  I argue that James's emphasis on supernaturalism in a religious attitude entails certain epistemological and ontological commitments which are difficult to defend and detract from the functionality of his definition of religion in common practice.  While Dewey's definition may be more functional, it may be more problematic in that Deweyan attitudes seem to suffer from an enthusiasm gap compared to the intensity often associated with traditional religious attitudes.

INDEX WORDS:     Dissertation, The University of Georgia, Philosophy, Religion, Pragmatism, William James, John Dewey, Epistemology, Ethics

WILLIAM JAMES AND JOHN DEWEY ON PRAGMATIC RELIGION

by

TAYLOR BRADFORD-DAMER STONE

B.A., Centre College, 2007

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial

Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

ATHENS, GEORGIA,

2016

WILLIAM JAMES AND JOHN DEWEY ON PRAGMATIC RELIGION

by

TAYLOR BRADFORD-DAMER STONE

| | |
|---|---|
| Major Professor: | Piers Stephens |
| Committee: | Yuri Balashov |
| | Sarah Wright |

Electronic Version Approved:

Suzanne Barbour
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
August 2016

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Religion is an undeniably powerful influence on the ways in which we develop and act

on our moral beliefs. Whether through one's own beliefs or through the beliefs of others, many

moral acts are to some extent colored by the presence of beliefs which we would traditionally

call "religious." In many cases this influence seems to be positive, as most religions existing

today explicitly encourage their members to engage in ethical actions, such as charity, peace and

forgiveness.  Yet many contemporary cultural critics cite "religion" as the source of socially

regressive actions and beliefs, such as opposition to scientific inquiry and discrimination against

those who do not agree with one's particular religious doctrine.

Considering that there is such a wide range of moral behaviors, both positive and

negative, which are attributed to religion, there is a strong *prima facie* case for moral philosophers

to investigate the relationship between religion and morality, as well as the role of religion in a

morally progressive society. Given the ubiquity of religion in most Western cultures, the

prospect of making moral judgments about religion on the whole may seem to be a daunting

task. As we have seen in our own country, the freedom of religion is not absolute, since we have

found questionable those religiously-motivated moral actions which are destructive or harmful to

individuals and/or society in general. Thus, moral philosophers who are concerned with the

difficulties of managing moral goods of a democratic society would be well advised to have a

good understanding of the relationship between religious beliefs and moral actions. However,

one's assessment of the moral value of religion will depend on one's idea of what qualifies

certain beliefs as "religious." It will also depend on the criteria by which a particular religious belief is determined to be aimed at progressive moral ends. Thus, before we can determine the value of religion in the context of cultural morality, we need a clear understanding of what it means to be religious.

Whatever else we might say about people who are religious, we can agree that they are often depicted as being extremely motivated in the pursuit of whatever they adhere to religiously. That is, we would traditionally expect that someone who is *religiously* motivated to pursue some moral goal will sacrifice more resources and exert more effort for a longer period of time in pursuit of that goal than someone who is not motivated in this way. If so, then an important part of understanding what it means to be religious will be to account for its capacity to motivate action. One way to accomplish this would be to look at the observable practical effects of religion, namely the actions of religiously motivated people which would not have been performed without that religiosity.

To that end, we will investigate the conceptions of religion developed by the American pragmatist philosophers William James and John Dewey. Both recognized the potential of religion to be a force for good in society by motivating people to act toward moral ends to a degree that nonreligious people would not. Furthermore, both of them sought to understand its motivational power by investigating the nature of religion and identifying those essential features of a belief that qualify it as "religious." They also recognized the ways in which religion can be harmful to society when that motivational power is directed toward regressive policies. Yet despite many similarities in their interest in and approach to the topic of religion, the features that they identify as essential to a religious belief differ significantly. This difference in turn leads to a difference between the two definitions as to what sorts of beliefs may count as

religious and how religious beliefs may be addressed in society. We should be careful to note, however, that our examination of the differences between James's and Dewey's treatments of the problems of religion should not be taken as a critique of any particular religion, nor of religion in general. Rather, it is a pragmatic analysis of some of the philosophical and psychological problems that emerge when dealing with issues related to religiously-motivated morality.

We will begin our comparison of James and Dewey in chapter 2 by examining what they identify as the problems with existing religious institutions and the ways in which religion is traditionally understood. These may be divided into "epistemological problems" and "social and moral problems." In chapters 3 and 4, we will look at the methods by which James and Dewey arrive at their respective definitions of religion and how a reconception of religion in line with each definition would theoretically resolve the problems identified earlier. In chapter 5 we will assess the pragmatic functionality of the two definitions of religion by determining what a religion under their new definitions would look like in reality and whether either of their conceptions would be feasible in practice.

## The Pragmatic Method

Before we investigate their respective religious claims, however, it may be helpful to address some of the more common misconceptions concerning pragmatism and its function in epistemology. Many of the critiques of James's and Dewey's arguments related to religion are based on what many pragmatists believe are misunderstandings about the pragmatic method which they employ. It will not be possible to address every perceived misunderstanding about pragmatism, nor should this section be taken as a comprehensive defense of pragmatism as an epistemological system. But by clearing up a few common confusions regarding pragmatism, a

reader who is unfamiliar with pragmatism will not be misled when certain epistemological terms are used in unconventional ways.

Many critics mistakenly accuse pragmatism of being relativistic and unduly reductionist, often due to their assumptions about the notion of truth.  Because they have adopted a more traditional definition of truth, they unfairly presuppose that definition when assessing the epistemological aspects of pragmatism.  Since pragmatists reject many of the beliefs generally taken for granted by conventional epistemologists, their position may seem relativistic to one who does not understand the purpose of the pragmatic method and the different way in which pragmatists define and apply the notion of truth.  If we introduce some of the basic ideas of Jamesian and Deweyan pragmatism before we see how they apply them to religion, it may help prevent some initial objections to their positions by showing that their claims about religion are less radical than they may appear.

## **Pragmatism and Respect for Truth**

Pragmatists have often been viewed by other schools of epistemology as having a lack of respect for truth and the process of truth-seeking.  Some of this questionable reputation can be attributed to misinterpretations of some of pragmatism's more colorful phrases, such as James' discussions of "truths in the plural" and the "cash-value of truth."[1]  Some of that reputation, however, stems from what appears to be a misunderstanding of pragmatists' intent in reconstructing the notion of truth.

Pragmatists begin their treatment of the concept of truth by determining what is the practical value of truth.  We might agree nominally that the "truth" of a statement refers to the

---

[1] *Pragmatism*, 67%, 62%

degree to which that statement accurately describes a state of affairs. Pragmatists do revere this facet of a true statement as a part of its value. However, contrary to more traditional epistemological views, they do not treat the simple accordance of a statement with the state of affairs as a good in and of itself. Rather, the value of a true statement is determined by the degree to which it produces measurable consequences that are useful to our lives. If we are to call a statement true, then we must at least be able to identify some practical consequences which would result from its being true rather than false. We value true statements because we can utilize their predicted results to bring about helpful consequences; that is, we value truth because it is useful.

It might be argued that this view of truth is improperly reductionist. That is, by reducing the value of truth "merely" to its useful consequences, pragmatists disregard some important aspect of truth. Surely, a traditional epistemologist might claim, there is something noteworthy about the fact that a given statement *really is true* regardless of our ability to utilize that statement for our own purposes. In his work *Pragmatism*, James imagines a rationalist's response to the pragmatic view of truth. "'Truth is not made,' he will say; 'it absolutely obtains being a unique relation that does not wait upon any process, but shoots straight over the head of experience, and hits its reality every time.'"[2]

However, James argues that this idea of truth as a "transcendent relation" between a statement and objective reality represents a misunderstanding of what is important and valuable about truth. He claims that "the great assumption of the intellectualists is that truth means essentially an inert static relation. When you've got your true idea of anything, there's an end of the matter…Pragmatism, on the other hand, asks its usual question. 'Grant an idea or belief to be

---

[2] *Pragmatism*, 67%

true,' it says, 'what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone's actual life?'"[3]  We

might grant that some statement may be true in some counterfactual sense that we *would have*

discovered that the statement matched reality if we had the capacity or inclination to verify it.

But if that were the primary value of truth, then we would not have any incentive to seek truth in

the first place.  James argues that we would never have come to value the concept of truth as

highly as we do if believing things that are true in the rationalists' sense had only resulted in

harmful consequences.  We assign value to the agreement between a statement and reality as we

understand it because belief in statements that so agree tend to be more beneficial to our

purposes than belief in statements that do not.  If a rationalist would accuse pragmatism of

demeaning truth by reducing it to its consequences, a pragmatist might argue that rationalism

oversimplifies truth by ignoring the practical considerations that go into the formation of beliefs.

Another criticism of the pragmatic view of truth may be that it appears to be dangerously

relativistic.  Critics claim that valuing truth only for its usefulness would give individuals free

rein to assign truth to whatever claim they wish so long as they find it useful to believe it.

Perhaps it should be pointed out that we have no difficulty accepting and employing false beliefs

as true due to their usefulness.  Scientists do this with theories.  Prior to Einstein, the scientific

community accepted Newton's law of gravitation as a true account of the phenomenon of

gravity, as well as a reliable method of predicting the motion of objects.  Einsteinian relativity

has replaced Newtonian mechanics as our preferred theory of gravity, but we continue to use

Newton's formula for gravitation to calculate the "force of gravity" and teach that formula in

schools despite our full acknowledgement that as an explanation of gravity it is false.  That is,

Newton's formula does not accurately describe or explain the effects of gravity in any actual

---

[3] *Pragmatism*, 62%

situation.  As Nancy Cartwright puts it, Newton's law does not "state the facts"[4]  Yet we nonetheless continue to employ Newton's *process* of calculating gravity, because despite being inaccurate when it comes to explaining and predicting gravity's effect on very large, very small, or massless phenomena, it is still useful for calculating gravity's effect at what might be called the "practical level."  Newton cannot explain why light curves in the presence of gravity, but the differences between Einsteinian predictions and Newtonian predictions are so minute that the vastly simpler Newtonian formula will suffice in most cases.  It would be very strange to decry that high school physics teachers are perpetuating falsehoods when they use Newtonian formulas to teach students how to calculate the trajectory of cannonballs fired off the edges of cliffs.

In many cases, however, the danger of allowing or encouraging individuals to believe "falsehoods" for their usefulness is less pronounced than it would seem, because false statements tend to have less than helpful consequences.  To understand this facet of truth more fully, it might help to see how James views truth.  In *Pragmatism*, he states:

> "Truth, as any dictionary will tell you, is a property of certain of our ideas.  It means their 'agreement,' as falsity means their disagreement, with 'reality.'  Pragmatists and intellectualists both accept this definition as a matter of course.  They begin to quarrel only after the question is raised as to what may precisely be meant by the term 'agreement,' and what by the term 'reality,' when reality is taken as something for our ideas to agree with."[5]

It will be important to keep this basic notion of truth as "agreement with reality" in mind since the accusation of relativism seems to stem from the false assumption that pragmatists ignore or

---

[4] *How the Laws of Physics Lie*
[5] *Pragmatism*, 61%

selectively dismiss reality.   The fact is that pragmatists agree that reality cannot be ignored, but their understanding of what constitutes "reality" more closely reflects the way in which people investigate and seek truth in practical situations than a more traditional view.

## Coherence and the "Web of Belief"

Between the two contemporary epistemological camps that we call "correspondence theory" and "coherence theory," James's pragmatic theory of truth more closely resembles a coherentist view.  He describes an individual as having a "mass of opinions" which represent the set of all the beliefs that person holds to be true.  People add new information to their mass of opinions, or what W.V. Quine might call their "web of belief," by incorporating the new belief into the existing body in such a way that it "preserves the older stock of truths with a minimum of modification..."[6]  Any inconsistencies which arise between the new belief and that existing body will be resolved so as to retain as much of "the ancient stock" as possible, particularly the beliefs one holds most firmly.  On this point, James remarks that "[T]he most violent revolutions in an individual's beliefs leave most of his old order standing. Time and space, cause and effect, nature and history, and one's own biography remain untouched."[7]

It may seem strange to permit a person to rank their beliefs by the strength with which they hold them, since such an allowance would seem to invite the kind of stubborn dogmatism which is the antithesis of truth-seeking.  If the only constraint to accepting a statement as true is that it be consistent with one's other beliefs, then people may be allowed to believe any statement as true provided they are willing to reject any statements which contradict that belief.  While it is true that it may be possible for someone to believe anything "come what may," it is unlikely that

---

[6] *Pragmatism*, 19%
[7] *Pragmatism*, 19%

such an event would happen in practice. Many of our beliefs become "firmly believed" because they are tested and verified and relied upon so often that to reject them in favor of some new claim would represent an unraveling of our entire conception of reality.

For example, if one were to see a clock whose second hand is ticking backwards, we might explain this event with either the statement "That clock is broken," or the statement "I am a time traveler." While a coherentist might admit that either of these statements *could* be incorporated into one's web of belief, the former statement is simple to incorporate, whereas the latter statement, if pursued seriously, would require the abandonment of one's entire conception of time, space, and one's relation to the world. For most level-headed individuals, this would be too great a sacrifice to legitimately consider.

Since we do place the most stock in those beliefs which have been tested most often, James says that any new proposition he may wish to believe must first "run the gauntlet of my other beliefs"[8] That is, for a person to accept a new statement as true, it must not only be consistent with every other belief that that person accepts as true, but it must also survive the selection process between itself and any current beliefs with which it would be inconsistent. If a new potential belief contradicts other threads in one's "web of belief" then the usefulness of those contradictory beliefs is lost. A rational, reflective person must then choose to abandon either the new belief or any presently held beliefs which are inconsistent with that belief. This rational sorting out of beliefs can sometimes result in the abandonment of firmly-held beliefs when the evidence for some new position is sufficient to show that one's old beliefs are no longer in accord with reality. However, the more that a potential belief clashes with more "tried and true" beliefs, the less likely it will be worth adopting.

---

[8] *Pragmatism*, 25%

James uses as an example of this adoption of belief his consideration of belief in the Absolute, by which he means something like the omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God of theologians.  Belief in such a being would have many practical benefits, the chief of which being that it would provide a justification for taking a "moral holiday;"[9] that is, one could justify taking a break from maximally moral behavior on the grounds that such a being would make sure that everything will "work out in the end."  However, James notes that the existence of such an Absolute conflicts with so much of his other beliefs that he cannot incorporate it without giving up much more valuable beliefs.  Thus, he decides to not believe in the Absolute and to justify his moral holiday by less disruptive means.[10]

**Truth and Objective Reality**

James argues that the value of truth cannot lie only in whether a statement "really does" match the facts of objective reality, because it is rare that humans ever seek the truth of a statement only for its own sake.  In fact, we gladly forego seeking the truth of statements all the time.  James gives as an example the fact that we will treat an object hanging on the wall as if it is a reliable time-keeping device without taking it apart to see if it *really is* a clock.  It is only when circumstances arise that throw into doubt its reliability as a clock, such as the object reporting a time that doesn't match our expectations, that we would be roused to investigate.

This view of the value of truth is also supported by Dewey.  In "The Pattern of Inquiry," he identifies inquiry as this type of truth-seeking, defining inquiry as "the controlled or directed transformation of an indeterminate situation into one that is so determinate in its constituent distinctions and relations as to convert the elements of the original situation into a unified

---

[9] *Pragmatism*, 25%
[10] *Pragmatism*, 26%

whole."[11] In most circumstances, we are not inclined to investigate the truth of some claim until we are given some reason to *need* to investigate. For example, in most cases it would not occur to us upon waking up to immediately doubt whether it is Wednesday morning, given that we fell asleep on Tuesday night. At that moment we usually have not yet had reason to doubt that conclusion given what we know about Wednesdays. If, however, we encounter evidence inconsistent with that conclusion, such as overhearing other people commenting on what a fine Thursday it is today, we are suddenly placed in an indeterminate situation. Our beliefs about today's Wednesday status do not "hang together" with our beliefs about other people's behavior on Wednesdays. Furthermore, the indeterminate situation is *problematic* in the sense that being wrong about what day it is will have significant practical consequences. It is at this point that we may be roused to investigate what day it is by one or more reliable methods of determining the date.

Explaining this process of inquiry is important because it further demonstrates that our concern as truth-seekers is not primarily with a given statement's veracity, or accordance with reality. In fact, such a concern would lead to unnatural or counterintuitive inquiries. We might understand if someone were to doubt the statement "Today is Wednesday," since we can imagine many ways in which a person could become confused about that claim. However, we would think it very strange for someone to also doubt the statements "The last three people I asked and my computer's clock are not mistaken about today's date," or "The world community continues to define Wednesday as the successor of Tuesday," or "It is not the case that today *really is* Wednesday *in reality* but everyone in the world mistakenly believes today to be Thursday." Even on a strictly correspondence theory of truth, these statements would have an objective truth

---

[11] "Pattern of Inquiry," p.1

value and thus would seem to be worth investigating, but from a practical standpoint it should be clear that securing the truth of those statements should not be pursued. Seeking certainty for those statements at best would be unproductive and at worst might constitute what Dewey calls the "mania of doubt."[12]

Furthermore, we can see that modern science tends to prefer an emphasis on valuable pursuits over veracity. For example, it is not possible to "see" an electron in the conventional sense, because electrons are too small to reflect photons. However, we know enough about the behavior of electrons that we can determine the presence of electrons when events that we expect to occur in the presence of electrons do occur as predicted. Put another way, a scientist performing an electron experiment may incorporate the statement "an electron passed by this way" into his or her web of belief when that statement is consistent with his or her other beliefs about electron behavior and the events observed.

It should be noted that this approach to truth-seeking does not necessarily commit the scientist to any claims about the objective reality of the events in question. It might even be the case that the scientific community is wrong about the existence or properties of electrons. In fact, a strong supporter of correspondence theory might be skeptical about scientific claims concerning electrons, saying that we ought not accept claims about electrons since we don't know electrons are there. Scientists believe electrons are there because their expectations are satisfied, but it might be the case that there is some other entity which is causing all of the behavior that we currently expect from electrons. However, a pragmatist might remind us that scientists never claim certainty for any scientific assertion. Since every conclusion in science is always open to revision, no scientific claim will ever reach the level of certainty. Furthermore, it

---

[12] Pattern, p.3

is not clear that doubting the existence of electrons is *problematic* in the Deweyan sense, since there do not seem to be any practical consequences at stake in the situation; and there does not as yet seem to be any practical method of investigating or resolving that situation.  Dewey argues that investigating such "problems" is a waste of time, saying that "to set up a problem that does not grow out of an actual situation is to start on a course of dead work, nonetheless dead because the work is 'busy work.'  Problems that are self-set are mere excuses for seeming to do something intellectual, something that has the semblance but not the substance of scientific activity."[13]

This jab against such "intellectual" activity seems to arise from Dewey's understanding of the history of philosophical thought.  In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey argues that humanity's intrinsic fear of uncertainty gave rise to a long line of thinkers who denigrated "action" and the material world and deified the immutable, and thus certain, relations of ideas.  This "effort to transcend belief" hence resulted in a complete devaluing of the material world, about which we can never have the certainty necessary for "knowledge."  It seems that this anti-empirical attitude would be unsatisfactory for any humans who live and operate in the material world, particularly since our increasingly scientific world is forging ahead to satisfy our fear of uncertainty without need or concern for the impossible standard of certainty set by rationalists.

All of this is not to say that the relation between a statement and reality is completely unimportant to its value or that we ought to abandon the process of verification.  Such a claim would indeed be an unforgivable endorsement of relativism.  No pragmatist would permit one to believe statements which are entirely incompatible with human experience.  Nor would a pragmatist allow for individuals to decide for themselves whether to count an unverified

---

[13] Pattern, p.3

statement as either true or false based only on that individual's whims. Dewey reminds us that the clinical term "insanity" applies to persons who are "removed from reality," in that they attempt to resolve indeterminate situations without reference to a reality outside themselves. The point is that the veracity of a statement is not and ought not be the necessary determinate of whether that statement, as Dewey says, is "warrantably assertible."[14]

It is important to keep in mind these pragmatic views concerning truth, since both James and Dewey employ these sorts of ideas when discussing matters of religion. Both view the pragmatic method as a means of resolving practical problems that exist in a living context, and both view the problems of religion as real-world problems that must be addressed practically by individual people. While one need not necessarily accept the pragmatic conception of truth in order to accept their arguments regarding religion, it will be helpful to understand how this conception may lead James and Dewey to conclusions which might not be possible for those who hold a more traditional epistemological view.

---

[14] Pattern, p.1

CHAPTER 2

JAMES'S AND DEWEY'S CRITIQUES OF EXISTING RELIGIONS

Most religious institutions, as they are currently understood, expect their members to hold to some set of descriptive propositions. While this expectation in itself is not necessarily objectionable, many such institutions make the additional claim that these tenets are *immutable*, that is, inherently not subject to change. An example of such institutions may be those Christian groups whose members describe themselves as "biblical literalists," because they regard the Bible as both "literally true" and not subject to error. This puts them at odds with virtually every claim made by modern science. For example, one who regards either of the two creation stories in Genesis as literally true must reject the scientific consensus in the fields of biology, chemistry, physics, geology, and astronomy, since the bodies of knowledge in each of those fields fundamentally conflict with the biblical accounts of creation.

**<u>James's Epistemological Problem With Religious Institutions</u>**

As a pragmatist, James is fundamentally opposed to the concept of immutable propositions. Even if it were the case that a descriptive proposition absolutely corresponded with reality, pragmatism requires that we allow for the possibility of later revision when we determine the truth of a proposition. We can never have, nor should we seek, a level of certainty so high that we would declare that the truth value of some proposition can never be changed for any reason.

The value of a proposition, according to the pragmatic method, is not limited merely to its veracity. As pointed out earlier, one must also consider the practical consequences which

would result from believing it.  Since the consequences which would result in any particular circumstance would depend on the particular believer in that context, the value of a given true statement might differ in each instance.  James offers an example of this sort of varying truth value:

> "If I am lost in the woods and starved, and find what looks like a cow-path, it is of the utmost importance that I should think of a human habitation at the end of it, for if I do so and follow it, I save myself. The true thought is useful here because the house which is its object is useful. The practical value of true ideas is thus primarily derived from the practical importance of their objects to us."[15]

In our normal lives we might hold to the general claim that cow-paths tend to be located near human settlements, since this fits with much of what we know or assume about cows and their movements.  For most of us, it would not be a valuable use of time to verify this claim for ourselves, just as we usually do not have any incentive to verify that the clock-looking object on the wall continues to be a clock since the last time we opened it up to check.  In James's example, however, his belief that following this cow-path will lead to civilization, and thus rescue,  is valuable because he stands to gain much from believing it.  If he believes the statement about cow-paths and follows it, and the belief turns out to be true, he will save himself from starvation.

Of course, he might be wrong about this particular cow-path, or he may have mistaken what he thinks to be a cow-path for something else.  In that case, the claim in question is not true and thus it was not useful for James to believe it.  However, if we suppose that the belief is true, then James's actions to obtain the benefits of believing it will in this case also serve to verify the truth of the proposition.

---

[15] *Pragmatism*, 63%

As suggested in the first chapter, connecting the truth of a statement to its usefulness in this way might very well appear to be question-begging or even relativistic. Hence, if we are connecting the truth of a statement with its usefulness in this way, we must be careful not to allow for a relativist to declare as "true" any statement which turns out to have been useful to believe. This allowance would be especially egregious if unchecked, since many relativists would likely find it useful to believe that a given statement is "true for them." It is for this reason that James argues that the element of *verification* is essential to the formation of belief. One may consider the potential usefulness that a claim like "I can fly by flapping my arms" would have if true, but to believe that claim and so act to utilize its benefits, one must first attempt to verify the claim in practice.

With regard to the issue of cow-paths, one is perfectly free to adopt the belief, "cow-paths are only found in distant, unoccupied wilderness." However, those who act on that belief and attempt to escape humanity by seeking out cow-paths will constantly be disappointed when they find human settlements instead. The truth of a claim, then, cannot be meaningfully separated from its usefulness, as James bluntly asserts:

> You can say of [a belief] then either that 'it is useful because it is true' or that 'it is true because it is useful.' Both these phrases mean exactly the same thing, namely that here is an idea that gets fulfilled and can be verified. True is the name for whatever idea starts the verification-process, useful is the name for its completed function in experience.[16]

As we saw in the previous chapter, "false" propositions, like Newton's law of gravitation, may still be useful to believe given the right context and understanding of its value. Though we now know that Newton's laws of motion do not accurately describe reality or the forces that govern it, we may nevertheless be sure that objects in our everyday experience will behave closely enough

---

[16] *Pragmatism*, 63%

to the way those laws predict that most of us will have no difficulty with acting *as though* they were true.  Each instance of an object behaving in accordance with Newtonian physics verifies the general accuracy of those laws when applied to objects in that context and reinforces their reliability when predicting similar phenomena in the future.

However, it is important to note that it is intellectually acceptable for us to use Newton's law of gravitation practically in this way only because we do not regard it as true according to the more traditional definition of truth.  It is "close enough" that it can be a handy tool for calculating forces at a human scale, but we acknowledge that it does not describe the actual function or measure of gravity, and we currently defer to Einstein's theory of gravitation when discrepancies between the two arise.

With this idea of pragmatist truth in mind we can see why immutable propositions would fail to serve the function of usefulness.  Suppose that we were to declare that Newton's laws are not only true but *immutably* true.  That is, we declare that those laws *must* be regarded as true descriptions of reality, and any claims or theories which contradict them must be discarded so as to preserve Newton's laws at the center of our web of belief.  While this would not be a problem for those same everyday calculations for which we use Newton's laws now, we would quickly run into insurmountable problems in areas in which Newtonian mechanics are inadequate.

To give just one example, the average hard drive in a desktop computer today uses a process called *quantum tunneling*, which assumes the truth of Einsteinian mechanics not only in order to function, but also to exist as a theoretical concept.  Given the ubiquity of modern computers in our everyday lives, we can see with the power of hindsight that had we stuck with Newton's laws "come what may," we would have lost not only the chance of achieving these incredible technological advancements, but also the ability to even conceive of them.  In this

case, then, someone who holds to the immutability of Newtonian mechanics would be effectively closing the door to an incalculable amount of human progress in an attempt to grasp hold of "truth."

We can see then why a pragmatist would be opposed to immutable truths. However, a hypothetical supporter of immutability might argue that this loss of human progress could be avoided by adopting some of the practices of pragmatism. An immutabilist might argue that one need not give up the potential gains to be had by adopting beliefs which contradict immutable beliefs so long as the believer treats them merely as "useful tools," which, despite being false, still have value in applicability. If this tactic is permitted, then a Newtonian immutabilist may wholly reject Einsteinian mechanics but still retain any benefits which might be gained by acting *as though* Einsteinianism were true. Likewise, someone who holds unwaveringly to the accounts of creation in Genesis might be able to accept some of the claims of evolutionary theory, provided that they are accepted "for practical purposes only," and that their use does not directly contradict the ultimate truth found in Genesis.

However, these cases would not be a genuine application of pragmatic principles. A person who accepts a claim as immutably true not only commits to the truth of that claim, but also to the falsity of any claim which contradicts it. That is, he or she is mentally invested in never accepting those conflicting claims as true under any circumstances. If one were to pretend as though a contradictory hypothesis were true, then to act upon any beneficial consequences that result from assuming it true would result in a logical contradiction, since according to one's actual beliefs in immutable truths, those consequences could not exist. This would mean that an immutabilist who performs such a move would be disingenuous at best, and would suffer from cognitive dissonance at worst.

A pragmatist does not suffer from cognitive dissonance of that sort, since he or she is not committed to the necessary truth of one system or another.  James would say that it is not inconsistent for a pragmatist to employ and act on some system of beliefs which contradicts some other system that he or she holds, because the pragmatist only uses a given system in the context in which it applies.  He says that

> "we have to live to-day by what truth we can get to-day, and be ready to-morrow to call it falsehood. Ptolemaic astronomy, euclidean space, aristotelian logic, scholastic metaphysics, were expedient for centuries, but human experience has boiled over those limits, and we now call these things only relatively true, or true within those borders of experience. 'Absolutely' they are false; for we know that those limits were casual, and might have been transcended by past theorists just as they are by present thinkers."[17]

Hence, the immutabilist in our example would not be able to justify adopting Einsteinianism only when it is practical or convenient, because to employ the Einsteinian model, one must acknowledge the limitations or inadequacies of the models that preceded it.  Trying to accept the Einsteinian model as "relatively true, but absolutely false," would in effect also require one to accept the Newtonian model as "relatively true," since one could not use an alternative model without acknowledging that one's own model is inadequate in some contexts.  It would seem, then, that declaring some claims to be immutable has the effect of setting a hard limit on human creativity and on what is discoverable by empirical methods.

While James does not decry religious institutions specifically for their claims to immutability, one may conclude from his general writings on pragmatism that he would object to any organization which holds to the truths they espouse so inflexibly.  In speaking of the "rationalists" and their pursuit of "absolute" truth that eternally obtains irrespective of human

---

[17] *Pragmatism*, 69%

experience or context, he warns that "whoever says that the whole world tells one story utters another of those monistic dogmas that a man believes at his risk."[18]

Though James here is referring to those who reject pragmatism's pluralistic stance regarding truth-in-context, the same sentiment would certainly apply to those who claim not only that there is absolute truth, but that they in fact *possess* absolute truth here and now. He argues that "[t]he 'absolutely' true, meaning what no farther experience will ever alter, is that ideal vanishing-point towards which we imagine all our temporary truths will some day converge."[19] The history of human inquiry and of prevailing scientific paradigms has established that inquiry is a process of incrementally improving, but never perfecting, our understanding of the world. To declare, as religious institutions which hold to immutable truths do, that the search for truth is over and that it is contained within that one organization's doctrine, seems as myopic and quaint as a follower of Ptolemy who declares the orbit of the sun to be fully understood once and for all.

**Dewey's Epistemological Objections**

Dewey also argues that claims to immutability are a problem for religious institutions. He further argues that appeals to immutability are in fact a symptom of a larger epistemological problem which stems in part from the reaction of institutional religions to the accelerating advance of scientific inquiry. According to Dewey, the intellectual content of particular religions, that is, the doctrinal propositions which are treated as knowledge or descriptive claims about reality, have often been regarded as providing explanations of phenomena in the natural world. Many such doctrines have attributed phenomena to causes which are what we would today call "supernatural." Explanations which appeal to the supernatural were more acceptable in a prescientific culture, since "in the older cultures the idea of the supernatural was 'natural,' in

---

[18] *Pragmatism*, 45%
[19] *Pragmatism*, 70%

the sense in which 'natural' signifies something customary and familiar."[20]  For example, the supernaturalist accounts of divine creation in Genesis probably were a satisfactory explanation of the origin of the world and humanity for a culture which took the existence of the god in question as a given and which lacked the intellectual tools to devise what might be called a "mechanical" explanation.

However, the advent of modern science has corresponded with a decrease in the acceptability of supernatural (i.e., unscientific) explanations.  "Science has completely transformed our beliefs about things that used to fall within the scope of religious doctrine," writes Dewey.[21]  Just as we no longer consider lightning to be "supernatural" because we can explain it "naturally," advances in the fields of astronomy, geology, and biology have revealed answers to questions which used to be within the domain of religions.

Different religions have reacted to their shrinking intellectual authority in different ways.  At the most extreme end are the biblical literalists mentioned earlier.  Their reaction to the encroachment of science on religious matters is to reject science as much as is necessary to maintain belief in those religious claims.  For example, they might reject the scientific claim that the moon reflects the light of the sun because of the line in Genesis which describes the moon as a "lesser light to govern the night."[22]  Such a rejection may seem bizarre, but it makes more sense from the perspective of a biblical literalist, who subscribes to a doctrine which states that belief in the inerrant truth of their doctrinal sourcebook is necessary to be genuinely religious.

However, such an extreme reaction is probably rare, as more liberal mainline Christian organizations place a greater emphasis on normative or value claims espoused in their religious writings rather than on the factual accuracy of descriptive claims found there.  These religious

---

[20] *A Common Faith*, p.44
[21] CF, p.31
[22] Genesis 1:11, *New International Version*

institutions have thus shown themselves to be willing to defer to science on many factual matters. Interestingly, Dewey observes that "whenever a particular outpost is surrendered it is usually met by the remark from a liberal theologian that the particular doctrine or supposed historic or literary tenet surrendered was never, after all, an intrinsic part of religious belief, and that without it the true nature of religion stands out more clearly than before"[23]

It is hard not to read Dewey as being sarcastic here, as he seems to be suggesting that a religion's adoption of scientific claims may be to some degree a kind of face-saving rationalization rather than a genuine embrace of scientific advancement. Though it is strange for a pragmatist to implicitly accuse religious institutions of insincerity on this topic, since a pragmatist certainly would not object to an institution which abandons beliefs that no longer work.

However, Dewey argues that those religious institutions which have given up intellectual territory to scientific fields have not therefore given up the methods of belief formation which produce the so-called "conflict" between science and religion. He claims that "[a]ll religions ... involve specific intellectual beliefs, and they attach ... importance to assent to these doctrines as true, true in the intellectual sense."[24] Those more liberal denominations which have relinquished authority on, for example, matters astronomical and geological, still continue to claim authority in other fields. Dewey says of those denominations that "[e]ven when they have greatly reduced the bulk of intellectual content to be accepted, they have insisted at least upon theism and the immortality of the individual."[25]

It is this insistence which leads Dewey to criticize those groups which reluctantly embrace scientific discoveries. For a religious institution to claim authority on intellectual

---

[23] CF, p.32
[24] CF, p.29
[25] CF, p.30

content, it must claim to be a source of knowledge that is acquired by a means that is completely independent from the scientific method. This independence turns to opposition whenever a particular claim that is justified on religious authority directly conflicts with a claim made by the scientific community, as it does in the case of the theory of evolution. Dewey remarks that "[p]robably most educated people thought the conception of biological evolution had been accepted as a commonplace until legislation in Tennessee and the Scopes trial brought about an acute crisis that revealed how far that was from being the case," an ironic remark considering the fact that the "debate" and the resulting crisis continue to persist over eighty years later.[26]

Those who are familiar with fundamentalist sects of Christianity are likely also aware of the ways in which those who hold firmly to a "seven day" creation theory have tried to justify their opposition to evolution. Some have attempted to construct pseudo-scientific theories to explain evolutionary events within a biblical time frame, such as the suggestion that "the dinosaurs must have died off in the Flood." Others have rejected science outright, arguing that "those fossils were put there by God to test our faith," or even going so far as to accuse the community of scientists of being "in league with the devil."

As more evidential support for evolution accrues, the intellectual contortions necessary to discount or disbelieve the scientific consensus become more implausible. Even when a particular group which holds to the truth of the biblical account of creation does embrace evolutionary theory, they often do so in such a way which they think will continue to validate the truth of their position. "Maybe the earth was formed over billions of years instead of seven days," according to one such rationalization, "but who's to say how long a 'day' is to God?"

---

[26] CF, p.64

**Institutions' Special Access to Truth**

These rationalizations and contortions reveal to Dewey the extent of the problem of treating religious institutions as intellectual authorities. Any time an existing religious institution asserts the truth of a given claim, it must at the same time claim access to knowledge by a means other than the scientific method. This opposition is always to that religion's detriment, since modern society has incorporated the best practices of science to the point that on matters concerning the natural world, the term "unscientific" has increasingly come to be associated with the term "unjustified." For example, an article from a news organization today might refer to an "unscientific poll" it conducted as part of the story, with the term "unscientific" meant to imply that the poll should not be used to support a very strong claim *because* it was not conducted with scientific rigor.

In modern society, Dewey argues, to call a particular claim "unscientific" is to call into doubt its veracity. Thus, any religious institution which claims access to knowledge by a means apart from science will necessarily associate its particular knowledge claims with the supernatural, and "this connection is the factor that has brought doubt upon them."[27] Dewey argues that the questionable nature of religious doctrine will persist for as long as institutions continue to claim special access to knowledge on factual matters and boldly declares that "[t]here is but one sure road of access to truth--the road of patient, cooperative inquiry operating by means of observation, experiment, record, and controlled reflection."[28]

This declaration may seem uncharacteristically quite strong, since philosophers are usually not so adamant in their claim to truth. However, while one cannot understate Dewey's admiration of the scientific method, his point is not simply to deny the legitimacy of other

---

[27] CF, p.30
[28] CF, p.32

avenues to truth. Rather, he is arguing that, at least among "cultivated men and women," the scientific method has proven to be so useful and reliable that a supernaturalist account is questionable simply because it lacks those attributes which make the scientific method valuable.

One problem with the method of knowledge by religious authority is that it lacks testability. One key aspect of the scientific method, or what Dewey calls more generally the "method of intelligence," is that it determines the truth of a given proposition by first finding what observable difference there would be between that proposition being true or false. By doing so we can predict what specific events must necessarily be observable for the given proposition to be true. We can then construct an experiment to check if those predicted events obtain and potentially verify or falsify the proposition in question. This method is valuable because it provides justifications for believing certain claims that are grounded in experience, and it suggests ways in which those claims can be applied to find new knowledge.

Doctrinal propositions are not testable in this way, since the requirement that a proposition be immutably true would preclude the possibility that it could be falsified by any set of events. That untestability of religious doctrine also means that doctrinal claims cannot predict new phenomena, since one cannot predict what observable events would logically follow from the truth of a claim without at the same time creating a potential scenario in which that doctrinal claim could be shown to be false.

This inapplicability of doctrine is a key point of contention in the contemporary debate in the United States over whether creationism ought to be taught in public schools alongside the theory of evolution. Anti-creationists argue that creationism is not science because creationism, unlike evolution, makes no predictions about the world. For example, evolutionary theory suggests that we will find certain connections between species, or that we should expect to find

particular properties in fossils from a certain time period, if the theory were true. This not only gives us a way to disprove the theory should it turn out to be false, but also gives us a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of genetics, fossils, and heredity. Creationism, on the other hand, does not make any predictions, since the account of creation does not provide any means by which we can confirm or disprove the claims made therein, nor does its explanation of physical events provide any insight into how that information may be applied in new contexts.

We can see, then, why Dewey might argue so adamantly against the legitimacy of religious authority as a source of knowledge. While the acceptance of supernatural explanations by religious authority has not disappeared entirely, we believe that the appreciation of science has discredited supernaturalism to the point that it makes belief in supernatural claims "increasingly onerous and even impossible for large numbers of cultivated men and women."[29]

This embedded suspicion of the supernatural presents a clear threat to the existence of any religion, or at least any institution which was classified as religious at the time of Dewey's writing. For example, someone who accepts the scientific consensus on Earth's formation is considerably less likely to adopt a religion which asserts a seven-day creation account. Converting to such a religion which so strongly rejects the most basic scientific facts would require such a fundamental rearrangement of one's beliefs as to make conversion seem extremely difficult and unrewarding.

However, while the infeasibility of young Earth creationism might seem obvious, Dewey argues that the same difficulty applies to any religion, since every religion, *qua* religion, holds to "an irreducible minimum of belief so fixed in advance that it can never be modified."[30] Since every religion holds to a number of beliefs which both distinguish that religion from others and

---

[29] CF, p.30
[30] CF, p.39

which are justified by religious authority (i.e., supernaturalism), every religion will to some degree encounter suspicion when it conflicts with scientific consensus. Thus, Dewey concludes that "the more these ideas are used as the basis and justification of a religion, the more dubious that religion becomes."[31]

It might be argued that, while religious institutions may have to concede authority on factual or empirical matters to the appropriate scientific discipline, they may still retain authority on normative matters. One of the functions of a religious institution, as we will explore further in later sections, is to provide moral guidance for its members or adherents. To that end, most religions hold to certain normative claims which are justified by the same authority as their factual claims. The Ten Commandments are perhaps the most obvious examples of such normative claims justified by religious authority. The imperatives invoked may be less specific, of course, as in the case of the so-called "Golden Rule," an imperative justified not only on the authority of Jesus but also on the authority of several other religions. However, since the scientific community, as a rule, tends to avoid normative disciplines, it is not immediately clear that religious institutions would have to relinquish authority on those subjects.

While it may be true that the reach of the sciences does not typically extend into normative realms, that is not the case for pragmatism. Pragmatists ask of a normative claim what value there is to be had in believing it true, or what difference there would be between its being true or false. These persistent "open questions," at least in the mind of the pragmatist, suggest that the normative claims of religious institutions fall prey to the same criticisms as their empirical claims.

As in the case with empirical matters, religious institutions claim authority on the normative aspects of their doctrines because they "insist that there is some special and isolated

---

[31] CF, p.30

channel of access to the truths they hold."[32]  Thus, an institution's moral claim, such as "Thou shalt not murder," is justified on the same grounds as its intellectual claims.  However, if we take that justification to be inadequate for factual matters, as Dewey does, we would also find it unacceptable for moral claims.  Moreover, if untestability and inability to reconcile new information are problems for what might be called scientific matters, they would also be problems that would plague institutional claims on moral matters.

A defender of religious authority might accuse such an argument of "poisoning the well," since it assumes that since justification of factual doctrine by religious authority is flawed, then religious justification of normative claims is flawed as well.  Indeed, one could argue that moral claims are different enough from factual claims that institutions would not be susceptible to those same criticisms.  For example, unlike the scientific method, there is no agreed upon consensus on a "normative method" for obtaining ethical truths.  Given the variety of general ethical systems, it could be argued that no one of these approaches has emerged as the proper, and certainly not the universal, method for arriving at normative truth, unlike what the scientific method employs for dealing with factual truth.  Hence, a religious institution's moral claim which contradicts another ethical theory's claims would not necessarily disqualify that institution as an authority in the way that an empirical claim might, nor would it necessarily be too "onerous" to believe in the way that Dewey claims it is onerous to believe factual claims which contradict scientific consensus.

While Dewey does not make a clear distinction between descriptive and normative claims when discussing the "intellectual content" of religious doctrine in this context, it would seem that Dewey's criticisms of doctrine in general would apply to what we could call the moral content of a given doctrine.  First, although ethicists may not have a common method of determining the

---

[32] CF, p.29

morality of an action, Dewey would argue that any ethical method that one might use would at least relate the morality of an action to its effect upon the world. It should not be controversial to declare that murder is wrong, since every ethical system worthy of the name will have some prohibition against it. A consequentialist such as J.S. Mill, for example, could explain that, aside from the immediate harm suffered by the victim, murder has a destabilizing effect on an orderly society which undermines the general goods that would not be possible in a society in which murder is an unchecked threat. Thus, murder might be declared impermissible so as to promote greater human flourishing.

The point of this example is to show that almost every ethical system will justify its moral conclusions to some extent in the context of lived experience. Most of us can see how murder relates to both our experiences and our conception of the good life, and we would probably conclude that it is wrong. Therefore, a prohibition on murder does not stand in need of a "special and isolated access" to a source outside the natural world to provide justification for it.

By itself, of course, the possibility of natural justifications of moral claims does not invalidate religious authority as an ethical system. However, it does remove from it one of its primary justifications for recognition as an ethical system, namely its claim to "special access to knowledge." If an ethical system can provide a justification for a moral claim which is both acceptable and effective to a person who does not possess special access to moral truths, then the importance of special knowledge which leads religious believers to that same conclusion is reduced considerably.

A second Deweyan criticism of the moral claims of institutions is that, like their factual claims, they are unable to incorporate new information or adapt to changing social norms. Many critics of Judeo-Christian morality have rightly ridiculed God's professed dislike of shellfish and

fiber blends in the Old Testament as a kind of *reductio ad absurdum* to demonstrate that such prohibitions reflect the moral sentiments of an earlier era and are no longer applicable to modern society.[33]  Nevertheless, it may be fruitful to view the issue of religious authority's relevance in the context of a more contemporary moral issue, namely the relation between some Christian institutions and homosexuality.

Many of the recent moral and legal arguments opposing homosexual behavior and same-sex marriage in America consist of religious objections to those practices.  These objections rely upon passages in the Old Testament that are interpreted to mean that homosexual behavior is "unnatural" and therefore immoral.  These arguments are quite common in many fundamentalist Christian communities, and it is the official position of the Catholic Church.  The Catechism presents this argument in perhaps its most explicit form:

> Homosexuality refers to relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex. It has taken a great variety of forms through the centuries and in different cultures. Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained. Basing itself on Sacred Scripture, which presents homosexual acts as acts of grave depravity, tradition has always declared that "homosexual acts are intrinsically disordered." They are contrary to the natural law. They close the sexual act to the gift of life. They do not proceed from a genuine affective and sexual complementarity. Under no circumstances can they be approved.[34]

This statement reveals what Dewey would say is one of the most serious flaws suffered by the Church's categorical statements on factual matters; namely, it does not allow for the revision of categorical statements on moral matters based upon lived experience.  For example, while one

---

[33] Leviticus. 11:12, Deuteronomy. 22:11, *New International Version*
[34] Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2357

could question the extent to which homosexual tendencies "remain largely unexplained," the fact remains that what we *do* know about that subject increases with each day.  Since the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) declassified homosexuality as a mental disorder in 1974, scientific opinion and social norms surrounding this issue have gradually changed such that there are very few today who continue to doubt that there is "genuine affection" between persons in a homosexual relationship.  Indeed, on the specific issue of same-sex marriage, one can find countless stories about persons formerly opposed to same-sex marriage who reversed their position after getting to know a same-sex couple and discovering that their relationship is not meaningfully different from their own, aside from its religious prohibition.  Furthermore, biologists have observed what may be classified as homosexual behavior in thousands of other animal species, which further weakens the claim that homosexuality is "unnatural."[35]

This apparent naturalness of homosexuality presents a problem for religious declarations opposing it.  In the case of the Catholic Catechism, not only does the Church face the familiar problem of justifying a claim on grounds that contradicts scientific consensus, but by declaring homosexuality to be "intrinsically disordered," it must run counter to the increasingly common perception in modern society that homosexuality is normal.  In both cases, the institution can only maintain its authority on a moral position by standing in contrast to lived experience in the way that Dewey describes regarding factual matters.  Interestingly, there seems to be evidence to suggest that the Catholic Church is "surrendering the outpost" on this issue.  In 2013, on the subject of homosexuality, Pope Francis was reported to have said that "[i]f a person is gay and seeks the Lord and has goodwill, who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this in such a beautiful way… 'these persons must not be marginalized because of this;

---

[35] Science Daily, 2009

they must be integrated in society.'"[36]  While this statement does not necessarily represent the Pope and the Church as condoning homosexual behaviors, it seems to indicate a desire to move away from the church's unequivocal position that "under no circumstances can they be approved."

This is not to say that a given religion's moral authority is flawed because it holds the wrong position on the morality of homosexuality.  Rather, the example illustrates how a religious institution's inability to change its moral claims without losing its special authority to make such claims renders that institution and its community to a condition of becoming increasingly divorced from changing human experience.  This further supports Dewey's claim that religious institutions ought to relinquish their claim to authority on both the descriptive and normative claims in their doctrine's intellectual content.

While James and Dewey believe that it is important to expose the epistemological flaws of systems like those employed by religious institutions, the value of such critiques may not be sufficiently appreciated when considered in the largely academic context of epistemology. Evaluating epistemological systems that are not within the borders of modern science, or which contradict modern science, might even seem to be a waste of time to most members of contemporary society.  Indeed, there are many people who might take the scientific method as a given when it pertains to beneficial technology, yet adopt an epistemological system contrary to the scientific method on matters deemed "religious."  Nevertheless, the pragmatic purpose of James and Dewey in critiquing religious doctrine as a method of knowledge was not simply to evaluate them on their epistemological merits, but also to investigate the practical consequences of using such methods.

---

[36] Zenit, 2013

## **Dewey's Moral Problems With Religious Institutions**

Dewey's concern with religious institutions' claims to intellectual authority is largely due to the amount of influence those institutions exert on the development of moral standards in a community. For example, no one can deny that Christianity has exerted immeasurable influence over American politics and culture, in ways that extend far beyond the mere profession of any Christian organization's set of beliefs. Although some Christian groups may deny direct involvement in "secular affairs," we can still see the effects of their influence in the moral actions of their believers or of organizations which subscribe to their beliefs.

Consider, for example, organizations like the Boy Scouts of America, which has clear social and moral goals that it seeks to fulfill through its efforts as an organization. The stated goals of the Boy Scouts of America are "to prepare young people to make ethical and moral choices over their lifetimes by instilling in them the values of the Scout Oath and Law," as well as to "prepare every eligible youth in America to become a responsible, participating citizen and leader who is guided by the Scout Oath and Law."[37] It accomplishes these goals, at least in theory, by means of a variety of structured mentoring and after-school programs which teach young boys to perform certain basic skills and to espouse a particular set of virtues.

However, while the goals of promoting responsible citizens is *prima facie* a laudable goal, it should be noted that the Boy Scouts of America is clearly a religious organization, and its concept of the "responsible citizen" must be understood in that context. The organization's official policy states that atheist and agnostic persons cannot be members of the organization, either as scouts or as scout leaders, since

> [t]he recognition of God as the ruling and leading power in the universe and the grateful
>
> acknowledgment of His favors and blessings are necessary to the best type of citizenship

---

[37] *scouting.org*

and are wholesome precepts in the education of the growing members. No matter what the religious faith of the members may be, this fundamental need of good citizenship should be kept before them.[38]

As the Boy Scouts of America understand it, an atheist cannot be a scout, since belief in God is a necessary condition for being a responsible citizen. This also means that the Boy Scouts of America's methods of promoting social change are in effect methods of promoting particular religious beliefs, since the mentors who culture "reverence" toward God in their charges will also be adherents to a belief in God. There is obviously nothing inherently problematic about reverence itself. But the fact that a widely influential national organization whose aim is the promotion of social goods understands "social goods" to include the imposition of religious beliefs on others raises questions about the legitimacy of that organization's method of arriving at moral rules.

It should be clear, then, that religious and even *de facto* religious institutions have a significant practical effect on society, and much in the way of contemporary social goods could be undermined if those institutions' epistemological stances suffer from the flaws that James and Dewey expose. To see the cultural influence of religious institutions, we should look into how James and Dewey view the influence that a *religious sentiment* has on an individual's morality. In criticizing existing religions, Dewey does not mean to condemn the quality of religiosity. Indeed, he is very interested in exploring the potential practical value of religiously motivated moral action considered apart from its current relation to existing religions. He begins *Common Faith* by stating that part of his mission is to separate the religious attitude from its doctrinal and supernatural "historic encumbrances," and that "what is genuinely religious will undergo an

---

[38] *Bylaws of Boy Scouts of America*

emancipation when it is relieved from them; that then, for the first time, the religious aspect of experience will be free to develop freely on its own account."[39]

Dewey defines this "religious aspect of experience" very broadly, so as to avoid associating it with any particular religion. He says that "the adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs…It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal."[40] He acknowledges that this notion of 'religious' may be difficult to grasp, particularly when separated as it is from any particular religions.

**Dewey's Theory of Morality**

It might be helpful to our understanding of Dewey's idea of the religious attitude and its connection to human experience and morality if we view it as an extension of Dewey's ideas on moral theory. In his work *Theory of the Moral Life*, part of a larger collaborative text on ethics in general, Dewey makes a distinction between *customary* and *reflective morality*. Customary morality represents those laws and rules of behavior presently held by or inherited from a community, whereas reflective morality represents the contemplation and inquiry used to determine the moral value of those rules. As Dewey explains, "[t]he essence of morals...is to know the reason for these customary instructions; to ascertain the criterion which insures their being just."[41] This notion of reflection gives us a very pragmatic understanding of morality, as it places the core function of moral decision-making in the context of lived experience. To reflect on those "customary instructions" is to *react* to a preexisting set of rules and to question their legitimacy by comparing those theoretical instructions to a particular state of affairs. As Dewey states, "Moral theory begins, in germ, when any one asks 'Why should I act thus and not

---

[39] CF, p.2
[40] CF, p.9
[41] *Theory of the Moral Life*, p.4

otherwise?  Why is this right and that wrong?  What right has any one to frown upon this way of acting and impose that other way?'"[42]  That is to say, moral theory begins for an individual when he or she discovers a conflict between his or her actions and the rules that govern those actions, or when "in the presence of a moral perplexity, of doubt as to what it is right or best to do, he attempts to find his way out through reflection which will lead him to some principle he regards as dependable."[43]

This state of "moral perplexity" and the process of resolving that doubt through reflection is very similar to Dewey's pragmatic notion of epistemological inquiry.  Just as intellectual inquiry occurs when an "indeterminate situation" raises doubt and must be made determinate via reflection and examination, reflective morality occurs "when men are confronted with situations in which different desires promise opposed goods and in which incompatible courses of action seem to be morally justified."[44]  Under normal circumstances we do not doubt that the clock on the wall shows the correct time unless we are given reason to suspect that it might be inaccurate. Likewise, we do not normally question the moral legitimacy of our rules of conduct until we experience a perplexing situation which those rules do not resolve, or which seems to result in the loss of perceived goods.  In the moment of this doubtful moral situation--or more likely, in the aftermath of the situation--we must reflect on the situation, consult available evidence and experiment to devise new rules that will govern our behavior in the future.  This process, performed by an individual in a particular situation, is simply the small-scale version of moral theory as a whole.  According to Dewey, "No fundamental difference exists between systematic

---

[42] TML, p.5
[43] TML, p.5
[44] TML, p.5

moral theory...and the reflection an individual engages in when he attempts to find general principles which shall direct and justify his conduct."[45]

At the practical level of particular moral actions performed in the real world, Dewey's notion seems quite reasonable. For example, we, both as individuals and as a society do not need a systematic moral theory to arrive at the conclusion that killing another person for one's personal gain is wrong. We have long ago established that doing so is wrong, and it is unlikely that there would be any situations which would throw that determination into serious doubt. For most of us there is no deliberation over whether one should kill this or that person in our daily interactions. Indeed, it would be quite daunting if every act in our daily life required that sort of moral deliberation. Dewey makes this point even stronger when he says that "[w]e feel that it would be rather morbid if a moral issue were raised in connection with each act; we should probably suspect some mental disorder if it were, at least some weakness in power of decision."[46]

In other circumstances, however, we might consider killing to be worthy of moral deliberation, such as an act of self-defense or participation in a war. In those cases, the basic prohibition against killing a person for personal gain does not apply, as there are different goods at stake. Therefore, we must evaluate the situation and perhaps develop a more nuanced rule that accommodates those goods. From this perspective, it seems plausible that one may understand moral theory not as the process of determining right from wrong, but as the process of resolving conflicts between, as Dewey phrases it, "competing goods."

This understanding of moral theory seems to be rather intuitive based on personal experience. Recently, I overheard a non-philosopher friend of mine attempting to describe to another person what I do as a teacher of ethics. After failing to get his idea across, he implored

---

[45] TML, p.5
[46] TML, p.10

me to explain my job to her. "Do the trolley thing," he said, referring to that classic staple of college ethics courses, the runaway trolley dilemma. That is, he wanted me to explain the job of the ethicist by way of a dilemma in which both choices seem to be right, and to show how an ethicist evaluates the situation and devises a moral system that both explains the reason for the dilemma and offers a course of action in case of similar situations in the future. It seemed to me that for my friend, the most salient practical point of systematic ethics concerns what to do when a case of opposing goods causes our generally agreed upon injunction to do the right thing and avoid the wrong thing fails. The role of ethics in this case is to resolve that moment of moral indecision so that normal life may continue.

This view of ethics and the "normal life" is consistent with that of Dewey, although he takes it an important step further. He claims that the vast majority of our daily actions are not deliberately moral. They are "not only without thought of their *moral* quality but with practically no thought of any kind." He goes on to say, however, that "these acts are preconditions of other acts having significant value. A criminal on his way to commit a crime and a benevolent person on his way to a deed of mercy both have to walk or ride."[47]

Although these normal actions may not rise to the level of moral deliberation when considered in isolation, they should not be ignored because when considered together they often aim toward some particular goal or end which does have moral quality. For example, each step one takes when descending the stairs in the morning is not itself a moral act, but together they all aim toward the goal of reaching the coffee pot in the kitchen, which itself is a step toward one's goal of fulfilling his or her moral duties. Dewey refers to these goal-driven acts as *conduct*, explaining that they are "not simply a succession of disconnected acts but each thing done carries forward an underlying tendency and intent, *conducting*, leading up, to further acts and to a final

---

[47] TML, p.10

fulfillment or consummation." "Moral development," he concludes, "consists in becoming aware that our acts are connected with one another; thereby an ideal of *conduct* is substituted for the blind and thoughtless performance of isolated acts."[48]

Given the practical unsustainability of engaging in continuous moral deliberation, Dewey argues that a full understanding of reflective morality should include its use in the development of *good conduct*. Since conduct is not merely a series of successive acts but acts aimed toward some goal, the types of conduct that a person engages in will be determined by his or her *disposition*, that is, that person's desires, intents, and attitudes toward things and ideals.

A significant part of moral theory, then, lies in the formation of right conduct, that is, the conscious decision to conduct oneself toward certain ends. This change in conduct, as Dewey describes it, often occurs in practical contexts in which one's existing modes of conduct meet with conflict. For example, small children might be shocked when they are scolded for taking too many cookies off the dessert plate, because they had previously never connected their actions with consequences outside the scope of their own gratification. They must then begin the process of comprehending how their actions led to this tragic conclusion, and how their behavior relates to their own desires and the desires of others. This process is familiar to adults as well, as Dewey says that we often "find ourselves involved in embarrassing complications and on reflection we trace the cause of our embarrassment to a deed which we performed casually, without reflection and deliberate intent. Then we reflect upon the value of the entire class of actions."[49]

There are some important things to note about this process. First, the reflective aspect of morality, the core function of moral theory for Dewey, occurs in reaction to a particular situation

---

[48] TML, p.11
[49] TML, p.14

at the level of an individual.  Second, the reflection is done not to determine the morally right action in the present dilemma, but rather to determine the right action for *similar* situations in the future.  Indeed, as Dewey describes the process, the deliberation is more likely performed too late to address the present crisis: "After we have acted and consequences which are unexpected and undesired show themselves, we begin to reflect...while the material of the judgement comes to us from the past, what really concerns us is what we shall do the next time; the function of reflection is prospective."[50]

Since the conflict in this process results from a failure of one's normal conduct, the prospective reflection one performs concerns a *change* in conduct.  It is a decision to change one's *courses* of action rather than a decision to perform one specific moral action.  As one begins to conduct oneself differently, each instance of this new conduct will reinforce the behavior in that individual until the new conduct becomes as natural as the old conduct, a phenomenon which Dewey says is "familiar to us in the existence of *habit*."[51]

It is important to note that this idea of habit is not the Aristotelian sense of habit as the perfection of particular virtues in an individual, nor is it simply a set of of automatic actions done thoughtlessly or by rote.  The development of these habits is the result of careful, conscious consideration of the moral implications of actions.  The goal of habitualizing these actions is not necessarily to develop virtuosity in one's character, but rather to immediately bring to mind a course of action to take when a moral situation occurs, as well as to save us the effort of contemplating the morality of every step we take.  Furthermore, our automatic actions are occasionally scrutinized and sometimes abandoned as new situations cause us to reevaluate their effectiveness, to be replaced with new courses of action fueled by our moral desires and intents.

---

[50] TML, p.14
[51] TML, p.13

Most of us typically act to achieve things agreeable to our disposition, but that disposition can also affect how one perceives a situation. Dewey notes that in a given set of circumstances, a "crafty character will foresee consequences which will not occur to a frank and open man; if they should happen to come to the mind of the latter, he will be repelled by the very considerations that would attract the sly and intriguing person."[52] Furthermore, just as our disposition determines what types of conduct are practically open to us, a deliberate change in conduct will lead, through habituation, to a change in disposition. This moral dynamic incidentally leads Dewey to conclude that "conduct and character are morally one and the same thing."[53]

This might seem like a pessimistic understanding of moral theory, as it seems to be built upon the notion of recovering from moral mistakes rather than actively seeking the good. However, this description does appear to be consistent with my personal experience. Some time ago I decided to adopt as a behavioral motto a kind of light-hearted variation of Occam's Razor: "Never attribute to malice what can be adequately explained by stupidity." Although the sardonic tone of that maxim suggests a dim view toward humanity, there is a useful moral kernel embedded in it, namely that one is better equipped to resolve a conflict between persons if one assumes that the conflict is caused by a misunderstanding or by ignorance rather than active opposition. On many occasions I have been in situations where I felt maligned by someone's actions, but I forced myself to "do the test" to see if those opponents had truly acted vindictively or if they or I had simply misinterpreted the situation. After some time I internalized that attitude as part of my disposition, to the point that several friends have complained that I refuse to "take their side" in that I was not sufficiently sympathetic to their feelings of being wronged when they

---

[52] TML, p.18
[53] TML, p.16

relate a story of someone who wronged them and I suggest that perhaps the perpetrator did not intend to be deliberately hurtful.  This example seems to fit the pattern that Dewey describes, in that I deliberately chose to adopt new courses of action after reflection on  problematic encounters in my personal experiences, which eventually became habitual with practice. However, this mode of conduct may require some revision on my part, as this habitual behavior has also *generated* conflict when exhibited among close friends.

While one need not necessarily embrace Dewey's moral theory, it is important to have a clear understanding of his theory of the moral life, with particular attention to his insights about how individuals and communities make moral decisions and to his conception of the crucial roles of moral reflection, disposition, and habit in the process of moral development.  It is only with a firm grasp of Dewey's notion of moral attitudes that one can fully appreciate his concerns about the questionable effects of religious institutions upon genuine morality.

**Dewey's Problem With Religious Moral Authority**

The most significant problem that Dewey has with religious institutions as moral authorities is that the very conceit of such religious authority undermines his view of the process of moral development.  Genuine morality, as we noted earlier, occurs at an individual level.  It emerges in a personal moment of reflection in reaction to existent events which throw one's customary moral beliefs into doubt.  If so understood, then neither customary moral systems nor institutions can issue claims that are morally authentic.  In any case, they cannot be absolute. Dewey expresses this idea quite succinctly:  "The difference between customary and reflective morality is precisely that definite precepts, rules, definitive injunctions and prohibitions issue from the former, while they cannot proceed from the latter."[54]  This of course does not mean that an institution cannot have rules and prohibitions which it may impose upon its members.

---

[54] TML, p.7

However, it does entail that institutions cannot make authority-based claims about the merit of moral statements without thereby subverting the deliberative aspect of morality.

To understand why this is the case, we might compare such institutional approaches to utilitarianism, which Dewey recognizes as a legitimate moral theory. In its simplest form, utilitarianism espouses the claim that the morally right action is the one which produces the greatest amount of good for the greatest number of people who might be affected by it. Yet by itself, that claim is not at all morally useful in that it does not provide an answer to any practical moral question. For the claim to have value, one must at least interpret the action chosen in the context of a given situation, determining for oneself what constitutes a 'good' in that case, who is affected, and whether the potential benefits of it outweigh the harms. It is at best not a resolution to a moral dilemma, but rather the starting premise which a utilitarian employs to determine the resolution.

From the amount of interpretation and evaluation necessary to understand the utilitarian "creed" it should be clear that one could not possibly obey it as "thoughtlessly" as one might be taught to obey the rule "Always look both ways before crossing the street." Even if a person living in a utilitarian society were to employ utilitarian morality as a customary rule, he or she as a moral agent would still have to be aware of what sorts of actions would be in accordance with that rule and make the conscious decision to develop habits which lend themselves to those actions. Thus, a customary moral rule would have no practical application without reflection. Speaking more generally on moral theory, Dewey goes on to explain that

> it is not held for a moment that moral theory can give direct and final answers to these
> questions. But it is held that they cannot be dealt with by adherence to mere tradition nor
> by trusting to casual impulse and momentary inspiration. Even if all men agreed

sincerely to act upon the principle of the Golden Rule as the supreme law of conduct, we should still need inquiry and thought to arrive at even a passable conception of what the Rule means in terms of concrete practice under mixed and changing social conditions.[55]

According to Dewey's view of the moral life, religious institutions which claim authority on moral matters and issue moral claims disregard and subvert the reflective aspect that is essential to moral theory. Although he does not explicitly state that religious institutions in particular issue moral claims in this way, the language that he uses in his explanation of moral theory suggests that he has them in mind when he argues that moral theory "does not offer a table of commandments in a catechism in which answers are as definite as are the questions which are asked."[56] The terms "commandment" and "catechism" readily call to mind the biblical Ten Commandments and the Catholic Catechism, respectively. Given that both of those documents represent (sometimes literally) the set-in-stone moral declarations that Dewey argues do not constitute genuine moral theory, it is hard to imagine that he is not referencing them.

We should therefore be able to infer, based upon Dewey's criteria for a proper moral theory, that religious institutions fail to meet those criteria. The commandments associated with the moral aspects of religious doctrine are precisely the sort of thing that Dewey argues a moral theory cannot generate. First, the moral claims of religious institutions defy the possibility of reflection. Those commandments take the form of specific rules and instructions, which are inherently non-reflective. Moral theory cannot produce such moral injunctions, since they would be issued before the context in which their value would be determined. "[T]he attempt to set up ready-made conclusions," says Dewey, "contradicts the very nature of reflective morality."[57] Second, as we mentioned earlier, the claim to "special access to truth" which religious

---

[55] TML, p.

[56] TML, p.7

[57] TML, p.8

institutions assert entails that any moral claims justified by "revealed" truth cannot be falsified by any rational or empirical means, since allowing that possibility would refute the premise that the institution has a special access to truth.

A defender of religious moral authority, however, might argue that the non-reflective nature of religious moral statements is not as problematic as Dewey claims. A person who adopts the doctrine of a particular religion most likely also accepts that religion's moral authority and thus believes the moral claims it espouses. If so, it could be argued, reflection would not be necessary to the degree that it is in Dewey's account. The rules and injunctions that a believer follows are not chosen in the wake of personal reflection, but that is not a problem since the "hard work" of determining right courses of action through reflection and inquiry has already been done by virtue of that religion's special access to moral truth. At best, believers might use reflection to "reinvent the wheel" and arrive at courses of action that they already knew to be right according to the received doctrine. At worst, they would determine a different course of action, which would be wrong by definition, since any conclusion which contradicts an immutably true claim cannot be true.

Dewey seems to have anticipated such an anti-reflective argument when he says that "[t]here are those who tend to minimize the importance of reflection in moral issues. They hold that men already know more morally than they practice and that there is general agreement among men on all moral fundamentals. Usually such persons will be found to adhere to some especial tradition in which dogmas they find final and complete authority."[58] Even if we leave aside the epistemological difficulties of accepting the legitimacy of religious doctrine, significant moral problems arise for those who do "receive" their moral instructions in this unreflective way. In his account of how people perform value judgments, Dewey describes certain forms of

---

[58] TML, p.21

valuation as "intuitive," which are our "immediate responses of approval and reprobation," and which "are not based upon any thought-out reason or ground."[59]  Some of these valuations are derived from our dispositions, just as an "expert in any field" can assess a situation relevant to that field effortlessly.

Dewey argues that these sorts of common valuations are not necessarily problematic, as they are the natural result of experience combined with habit.  However, he claims that problems can arise when *moral* valuations are made in this way, since he says that they "are often the result of an education which was misdirected."[60]  He explains that when we teach moral rules and customs to our children, we do it in such a way as to "stamp them in by impregnating the childish response with elements of awe and mystery, as well as ordinary reward and punishment."[61]  In our earlier example of the child being scolded for taking too many cookies from the dessert plate, we are not merely punishing the child's bad behavior; we are introducing new concepts like "sharing" and "fairness."  In the best case, the child will associate those concepts with his or her actions and will incorporate them in his or her overall disposition.

However, it is easy for this process to go awry.  There are a number of factors which could lead one to "learn the wrong lesson" from such teachings.  For example, a child might deduce instead that he or she is being punished for taking too many cookies because he or she was *caught*.  Even when the "right" lessons are learned, many aspects of "intuitionalism" run counter to reflective morality. The non-reflective nature of intuitive rules means that they are not adaptable to changing contexts.  Dewey notes that "[t]here is a permanent limit to the value of even the best of the intuitive appraisals of which we have been speaking," which is that those

---

[59] TML, p.124
[60] TML, p.125
[61] TML, p.125

intuitions only apply to a particular set of circumstances.[62]  The lessons that the child from the previous example learned about sharing and fairness might work well in the context of the fair distribution of dessert after dinner, but they would be simplistic and naive if applied to more complex matters, like that of fair distribution of wealth in a society.  Thus, the child must be able to develop a more nuanced conception of fairness as he or she encounters more complex social situations.  Reconsidering the value of one's intuitions ought to be a natural part of reflective morality, says Dewey, since every "intuition, even the best, is likely to become perfunctory and second-hand unless revitalized by consideration of its meaning…"[63]

Unfortunately, the method by which intuitive valuations are formed also makes them resistant to later change and reflection.  When moral ideas are deeply incorporated into one's self, Dewey says, "[i]t is almost impossible for later reflection to get at and correct…"[64]  The moral sentiments are so ingrained that any ideas or suggestions which challenge them will literally seem counterintuitive.  Indeed, when it comes to moral intuitions, Dewey says that there is a tendency towards "unquestioning dogmatism," particularly since a challenge to one's intuitive morality can often come across as an accusation of *immorality*.  This psychological defensiveness, combined with the inadaptability of moral intuitions, can lead persons to be intensely committed to moral sentiments that have no practical applicability.

For example, a person might feel very strongly about the importance of being fair in one's dealings, but if he or she retains an intuitive understanding of fairness acquired in childhood, we might reasonably say that as an adult, he or she would have a severely misguided or unhelpful conception of fairness.  Dewey seems to have this sort of thing in mind when he says that there is "no necessary connection between a conviction of right and good in general and

---

[62] TML, p.125
[63] TML, p.127
[64] TML, p.126

*what* is right and good in particular. A man may have a strong conviction of duty without enlightenment as to just where his duty lies."[65] Such a person can become, as Dewey puts it, "socially dangerous," as he or she vigorously adheres to a moral conviction which is irrelevant to a particular situation. Furthermore, Dewey adds that "if he is a person of strong will he will attempt to impose his judgments and standards upon others in a ruthless way, convinced that he is supported by the authority of Right and the Will of God."[66]

It seems clear that the religious terminology that Dewey uses in these sections suggests that he had religious institutions in mind when discussing the dangers of unreflective morality. Although these dangers are not exclusive to religious institutions, many aspects of religious doctrine encourage those dangers in believers. As we mentioned earlier, the alleged immutability of doctrinal claims implies that reflecting upon and potentially revising moral claims is either unnecessary or itself immoral. Some of the more general institutional commandments might continue to be relevant without revision, but Dewey remarks that "[t]here are periods in history when a whole community or a group in a community finds itself in the presence of new issues which its old customs do not adequately meet. The habits and beliefs which were formed in the past do not fit into the opportunities and requirements of contemporary life."[67] A community's moral beliefs must therefore occasionally be revised to adapt to changing social norms. However, since religious institutions of the sort that Dewey describes in *A Common Faith* discourage such revision, then not only the institution but the communities surrounding it can become morally "backwards" or unable to function in a morally proper way within a larger society.

---

[65] TML, p.127
[66] TML, p.127
[67] TML, p.7

**James's Treatment of Religious Institutions**

Given James's ideas regarding truth as a type of value alongside moral value, it is likely that he would agree with the majority of Dewey's moral criticisms of religious institutions. We saw in an earlier section that James was in agreement with Dewey regarding the epistemological problems of institutions which stemmed from institutions' claims to immutably true statements. Since the moral problems of immutable claims are similar to their epistemological problems, namely that immutable claims are inapplicable to changing contexts, we can infer that James would have similar criticisms of immutability on moral grounds as he does on epistemological grounds. If we are to take a given moral claim as a guide to action, it should produce the expected consequences when followed; that is, it should be useful. A guide to action will cease to be useful if it does not take into account changing contexts, and by definition an immutable guide to action cannot do so.

However, James, unlike Dewey, does not offer many criticisms which could be raised against religious institutions. In fact, he has confessed to a lack of interest in the topic of religious institutions generally. In his work *Varieties of Religious Experience,* he proposes to investigate questions significant to the field of religion. However, he begins this investigation by distinguishing between "institutional" and "personal" religion.[68] He describes institutional religion as the methods, practices and doctrines surrounding and associated with a particular religion, stating that "[w]orship and sacrifice, procedures for working on the dispositions of the deity, theology and ceremony and ecclesiastical organization, are the essentials of religion in the institutional branch."[69] Personal religion, on the other hand, focuses on the "the inner

---

[68] *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p.30
[69] VRE, p.30

dispositions of man himself," namely those dispositions, motivations and reflections which comprise a religious temperament.

He states that his work will focus exclusively on the personal aspect of religion, and that he wants to give a "descriptive survey of those religious propensities."[70]  Indeed, he explicitly dismisses institutional religion from consideration in this work, saying that he intends to "ignore the institutional branch entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple."[71]  As we will see in later sections, James believes that the value of a religious temperament lies primarily in its capacity to influence and motivate certain behaviors in an individual.  A study of religion, then, would focus primarily on that personal realm of an individual's sentiments, and "the ecclesiastical organization, with its priests and sacraments and other go-betweens, sinks to an altogether secondary place."[72]

As with Dewey, James's description of institutional religions indicates his low opinion of them.  However, his tone appears to convey more of a flippant dismissal of institutions compared to Dewey's tone of condemnation.  Dewey is clearly concerned with the capacity for religious institutions to influence the behavior of their constituents.  His descriptions of the fervor with which religious beliefs are often associated suggest that he thinks that institutional problems should be confronted because the ability of institutions to inspire action through religious belief can be harmful to society when those actions are aimed toward regressive ends.  James, however, appears not to be concerned with the potentially harmful influence of religious institutions.  This may be explained by James's primary interest in researching *personal* religion and the way in

---

[70] VRE, p.6
[71] VRE, p.31
[72] VRE, p.31

which he investigates that aspect.  In researching the effects of religious sentiment on the individual, his study focuses on examples of that attitude in historic pioneering personalities. These religious "geniuses," which we will examine at greater length in a later chapter, possess a religious sentiment to such a degree that they serve as the archetype for religiosity.  Indeed, James says that these individuals are the "pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct" exhibited by the "ordinary religious believer."[73]  These not-so-subtle claims that institutional religion is merely a derivative of the type of religion James explores suggests that he does not attribute to institutions the kind of questionable influence on individual behavior as does Dewey.

James's attitude about institutions is probably best explained by the fact that his focus on genius individuals is prevalent not only in his theory of religion but his theory of history as well. In his work "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," James subscribes to a "great-men theory" of history, which holds that momentous events in human history and social evolution can best be understood at the level of the extraordinary individuals who brought about those changes.  While environmental, physical, and social conditions might prime a region or society for a certain kind of change, that change requires the effort of one of these "great men" in order to become manifest.  For example, James asks rhetorically whether the history and development of England would have progressed differently "if a Frederic the Great had inherited her throne instead of a Victoria, and if Messrs. Bentham, Mill, Cobden, and Bright had all been born in Prussia?"[74]  Indeed, he argues that were it not for these great historical figures and their efforts, the momentous changes in history with which they are associated would likely never have occurred.  Likewise, the various religious institutions that have formed over time would

---

[73] VRE, p.9
[74] "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment," 32.5%

never have existed were it not for those pioneering religious geniuses to create something around which others could build a following.

James's belief in "the vital importance of individual initiative" in the progress of history perhaps explains why he appears less concerned with the influence of religious institutions on conduct.[75] These institutions, however influential, are still followings built upon the pivotal achievements of a great individual. And whatever influence they may have would be to set the stage for another great individual to transform history, just as we might assume, according to James's theory, that the corruption of the Catholic Church in the 16th century set the stage for a Martin Luther to appear. So while James might agree with a Deweyan critique of the moral problems of religious institutions, it could be argued that they might disagree on the severity of those problems in terms of their potential consequences, as well as the need to address those problems practically.

---

[75] GM, 74.7%

CHAPTER 3

DEWEY'S DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Now that we've identified what both James and Dewey take to be the problems with

existing religions, we will now examine how they understand or treat the concept of religion so

as to possibly resolve those problems while preserving what is valuable about religiosity.  In

doing so, both philosophers construct careful accounts of what it means to be religious without

drawing on the particular features of any existing religion.

As we pointed out earlier, Dewey makes a distinction between "religion" and "religious

aspects of experience."[76]  He does so not only because it is easier to understand the pragmatic

value of those religious aspects when considered apart from the "historic encumbrances" of the

religions with which they are associated, but also because he believes that the common

understanding of the term "religion" is too unwieldy to be useful.

In *A Common Faith*, he begins the process of showing the problems with the term

'religion' by attempting to identify the meaning of religion as it is understood generally.  The

task of giving an account of religion is difficult, however, since there is very little that is

common to all existing religions.  He remarks that the dictionary definition of religion as the

"'[r]ecognition on the part of man of some unseen higher power as having control of his destiny

and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship'" is not particularly helpful.[77]  While

this definition may touch upon some concepts indicative of religions, it is both too broad and too

narrow to provide an understanding of religion in general.  He explains that the definition is

---

[76] CF, p.9
[77] CF, p.3

broad in that the "'unseen powers' referred to have been conceived in a multitude of incompatible ways," further adding that "[t]here is no greater similarity in the ways in which obedience and reverence have been expressed."[78]  Given the great number of belief and/or behavioral systems currently regarded as religions, any more specific account of these unseen powers or the methods by which one acknowledges and/or pays service to them would inevitably exclude some of those religions.

Furthermore, Dewey warns that we should avoid the impulse to narrow the definition by modeling it after religions which are popular today.  While the idea of "unseen powers" has different connotations for a largely theistic contemporary society than it did in a time when lightning strikes came from an "unseen power," it would be a clear case of intellectual hubris to dismiss some religions as primitive or illegitimate simply because they are out of vogue.  "If so much flexibility has obtained in the past regarding an unseen power," Dewey observes, "why should it be assumed that change in conception and action has now come to an end?"[79]  Hence, we cannot leave some "primitive" religions out of our account of religion, lest our current religions be damned to a similar fate by future generations.  Moreover, we do want to say that human civilization has progressed through time, and that through better understanding of the world and our role in it we have outgrown some of the outmoded and barbaric practices of the past.  Blood sacrifices, for example, are no longer acceptable in polite society.  But as long as the definition of religion is in part modeled after existing religions, we cannot make a meaningful distinction between progressive and regressive practices among religions.

For these and other reasons, Dewey rejects the provided dictionary definition of religion.  While there seems to be some *prima facie* merit in relating religion to the notion of "unseen

---

[78] CF, p.4
[79] CF, p.6

powers", we cannot narrow the meaning of "unseen powers" based on particular religions without arbitrarily excluding others. Yet at the same time there is no value is maintaining a definition that is so broad that it "applies equally to the most savage and degraded beliefs and practices that have related to unseen powers and to noble ideals of a religion having the greatest share of moral content."[80] He therefore concludes that "there is nothing left worth preserving in the notions of unseen powers, controlling human destiny to which obedience, reverence, and worship are due" if we cannot investigate more closely the nature of these various unseen powers and the ways in which reverence toward those powers are manifested.[81]

## Distinguishing "Good" and "Bad" Religion

It may seem troubling to some, particularly those who live in a society that is grounded upon the value of freedom of religion, that Dewey is critiquing the definition of religion on the grounds that it doesn't allow for a distinction between what we might call "good" and "bad" religion. However, as a pragmatist, Dewey is interested in religion for the moral benefits that would be gained from having it compared to not having it, particularly the benefits that come in the form of improving one's personal motivation to achieve a moral goal. His investigation will therefore issue in a normative evaluation of the effects of religious beliefs on people and society and which may in turn lead to a negative evaluation of the practices and beliefs espoused by particular religions. Such evaluations, of course, may cause discomfort, especially to a member of a religion currently under scrutiny. However, condemning or commending a religion based upon the discovery of the consequences which result from it seems to be a worthwhile enterprise. Even in a society which holds freedom of religion to be paramount, we still make a practical

---

[80] CF, p.7
[81] CF, p.7

determination of what types of religious beliefs and practices are helpful and unhelpful to maintain a well-functioning society.

The followers of Christian Science, for example, eschew much of modern medical science and hold that illnesses should instead be cured by fervent prayer. These practices are permitted as an exercise of religious freedom when they apply only to the individual believer. However, the permissibility of those beliefs changes when considering children of Christian Scientists. There have been several U.S. criminal court cases in the 20th century involving Christian Scientist parents who relied upon prayer rather than seeking medical aid to treat their children's illnesses. In some of those cases, the parents were found guilty of involuntary manslaughter when the child died as a result of lack of medical care. Furthermore, the American Academy of Pediatrics has advocated that such cases be treated as instances of neglect and child endangerment, issuing several statements which argue that "[c]onstitutional guarantees of freedom of religion do not permit children to be harmed through religious practices, nor do they allow religion to be a valid legal defense when an individual harms or neglects a child."[82] It is not unthinkable, then, that an understanding of religion should take into account the consequences associated with particular religions.

**The Religious Quality**

Even though the "dictionary" definition of religion might be too broad to provide a meaningful understanding of religion, broadness by itself is not necessarily a problem for Dewey. Ultimately he argues for an understanding of religiosity that would include things that the traditional definition would reject. Indeed, the problem for Dewey is that the common definition is too narrow, in that it only permits religions which have some supernatural element. In an earlier section, we called attention to Dewey's argument that many of the problems of

---

[82] "Religious Objections to Medical Care," *Pediatrics*

existing religious institutions are due at least in part to the intimate association of religions with the supernatural. He laments that this connection is so ingrained that "there are many who hold that nothing worthy of being called religious is possible apart from the supernatural."[83]

However, these supernatural elements are only accidental features of existing religions, since no aspect of a supernatural entity referenced in a particular religion carries over to that of every other religion. The notion of "supernatural" has the same problems as that of "unseen powers" in that any attempt to refine it would only select particular religions to which it applies while excluding others. Furthermore, one could easily imagine a person who subscribes to a set of beliefs which would fit the provided definition of religion but which does not contain supernatural elements. A civil rights crusader who, for example, believes strongly in the universal human right to free speech pays reverence toward an unseen power, namely the power of the ideal of human rights to improve humanity. Yet there need not be anything supernatural about those beliefs for them to fit the necessary criteria.

Given the imprecise and uncritical nature of the definition, Dewey argues that it is unproductive to focus one's investigations on "religion." He concludes that "there is no such thing as religion in the singular. There is only a multitude of religions. 'Religion' is a strictly collective term and the collection it stands for is not even of the kind illustrated in textbooks of logic."[84] That is, the term does not entail anything about every member of its set. Indeed, it does not even stand for "the set of all religions." Rather, it is simply a collection of things we currently refer to as a religion.

Dewey therefore argues that we should focus instead on "the religious quality of experience."[85] While we cannot say much about "religion" without involving the elements of

[83] CF, p.1
[84] CF, p.8
[85] CF, p.9

particular religions, there is much that we can say about a "religious" attitude without involving the particular ends toward which that attitude is aimed or the ways in which it is expressed. Speaking generally, we describe a "religious" person, or someone who performs certain actions "religiously," as someone who does not merely hold to some set of beliefs, but one who is deeply invested in the importance of those beliefs and whose actions are structured with that importance in mind.

Absent the context of any particular religion, however, there is no restriction on what sorts of things may be believed religiously. Indeed, we sometimes say colloquially that a given person is "religiously neat," implying that the person's obsession with cleanliness is fervent enough that it resembles a religious belief. Dewey remarks that "the adjective 'religious' denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs…It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal."[86]

For example, this notion of a religious attitude can be detected in our discussion of Dewey's ideas from an earlier section, where we considered his argument that the essence of moral theory lies in the development of good conduct or habits aimed toward good ends which in turn shape one's perspective and experience in accordance with those ends. Accordingly, Dewey would claim that one's moral attitude is *religious* in nature if it is so significant that it pervades every aspect of one's life and has a profound influence on one's actions and conception of the self. Historically, we have associated attitudes with that level of profoundness with adherents of particular religions, especially those attitudes which develop as a result of a religious conversion. James in particular has much to say about what we might call the "conversion event" and its role in the development of religious sentiment in a person.

---

[86] CF, p.9

Dewey argues that if we separate this type of attitude and the events which bring it about from the context of particular religious doctrines, "many individuals would find that experiences having the force of bringing about a better, deeper, and enduring adjustment in life are not so rare and infrequent as they are commonly supposed to be. They occur frequently in connection with many significant moments of living."[87] Life abounds with examples of these "life-changing moments." Weddings, funerals, the birth of one's child, and near-death experiences are all cited by individuals as the pivotal moment which caused a transformation of their personality and behavior. These moments are often associated with the tenets of particular religions, since our understanding of life, death and marriage are strongly shaped by the religious culture in which we experience them.

But those events need not have connections or reference to any particular recognized religion, since a person who does not subscribe to a religion may find such an event to be just as momentous and may experience a change in personality as a result of it. That is, a professed non-religious person can undergo a transformation of character which has the same effects as a religious conversion but which does not have any connections to a particular religion. On this point, Dewey argues that "[t]he actual religious quality in the experience is the *effect* produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production."[88] It is misleading, then, to always associate religious experiences and the changes in attitude that may result from them only to religions, since "the doctrinal or intellectual apparatus and the institutional accretions that grow up are, in a strict sense, adventitious to the intrinsic quality of such experiences."[89]

---

[87] CF, p.14
[88] CF, p.13
[89] CF, p.17

Dewey proposes that to explore the value of religious attitudes, we must change our understanding of them by putting the primacy on the attitudes themselves, rather than on the religions to which they may be attributed. He says that "[i]t is the claim of religions that they effect this generic and enduring change in attitude. I should like to turn the statement around and say that whenever this change takes place there is a definitely religious attitude."[90] This redefinition of religious seems sensible from a pragmatist standpoint. If we are looking at religious attitudes empirically, there would be very little that is philosophically or ethically interesting about a religious conversion if that conversion did not also result in some detectable and persistent transformation of perspective and behavior.

It might be argued that Dewey is trivializing the religious experience by focusing on its effects. For example, a person who has had such an experience and undergone conversion might be offended by Dewey's description of their experience as simply a "significant moment of living." This is especially the case given the existing connotations of religious experience with the supernatural, which imply that not only was the experience a life-changing event, it was imposed upon the individual by an otherworldly power. To those people who describe their experience as "feeling the presence of God," an account of the experience which deemphasized the supernatural aspect would in turn diminish the value of the experience, since they would claim that the supernatural intervention of a higher being was a necessary component of the transformation of character that occurred as a result.

There are many ways that Dewey could respond to such a complaint. As we have said before, Dewey would assert that what is *valuable* about the religious experience is not the circumstances or causes of the experience, but rather the effects which it produces. Also, we know that people who do not believe in the supernatural have what appear to be experiences that

[90] CF, p.17

are identical to the life-changing experiences of those who do believe in the supernatural. Both experiences should therefore be called "religious experiences." To argue that such a person cannot have a religious experience simply because it did not reference some supernatural entity, or worse, a particular religion, appears to be making a distinction without a difference.

Furthermore, Dewey notes that the supernatural entity referenced in many anecdotal accounts of religious experiences can be attributed to the cultural biases of the subject. A person's account in which he or she felt "the presence of God" does not necessarily provide evidence for the existence of such an entity, but rather shows that religious experiences can "carry a superimposed load of a particular religion. For having been brought up in the Christian religion, its subject interprets it in the terms of the personal God characteristic of that religion."[91] He remarks further that people of all religions have experiences similar to the kind described in the example, but it is unlikely that a practicing Buddhist who has such an experience would feel the presence of the God of Abraham. This suggests that the experience of the supernatural can be explained by the speaker, unconsciously or not, importing religious imagery to the experience after the fact. "In reality," Dewey says, "the only thing that can be said to be "proved" is the existence of some complex of conditions that have operated to effect an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace. The particular interpretation given to this complex of conditions is not inherent in the experience itself. It is derived from the culture with which a particular person has been imbued."[92]

## Dewey's Criteria for Choosing an Appropriate Religious Attitude

It may be difficult to imagine what a Deweyan revision of traditional religion might look like, since he says that it is hard for us to separate the religious attitude from its supernatural

[91] CF, p.12
[92] CF, p.13

encumbrances. To do so while still retaining a useful understanding of religious attitude, we must be able to imagine a plausible instance of a Deweyan religious attitude which does not contain supernatural elements and which does not fall into the pitfalls which Dewey identifies in existing religions.

To begin this process of what we might call "de-mystifying" religious attitudes, we should look at Dewey's understanding of religious faith. Faith is considered an essential aspect of most creedal religions. Traditionally, it refers to belief in some set of propositions without sufficient justification, which in the case of religions are strongly tied to a given religion's doctrine. Dewey illustrates this concept by quoting Locke, who says that "faith is assent to a proposition...on the credit of its proposer."[93] For Dewey, this use of faith as a substitute for knowledge is at the heart of the problems with religions. His dissatisfaction with most religions in modern society is due to their reliance upon this sort of faith, since the requirement that an institution's members adhere to beliefs unsupported by evidence is unsustainable in a society which values the scientific method. This dissatisfaction is especially problematic for most forms of religious faith, since the propositions in question contain supernatural elements. As we pointed out in the section on the problems of religious institutions' special access to knowledge, accepting a supernatural proposition on the credit of its proposer often means not only accepting it without evidence, but also accepting it *in spite of counterevidence*. For an empirically-minded modern society, this sort of faith seems less like Locke's definition and more like that of Mark Twain, who wrote the "faith is believing what you know ain't so."

Dewey therefore rejects this notion of creedal faith as a component of the religious attitude. Instead, he proposes the concept of "moral faith," which he describes as a "conviction

---

[93] CF, p.20

that some end should be supreme over conduct."[94]  This sort of faith is not a belief in the existence of some entity or the truth of some proposition; rather, it is a committed attitude that some ideal moral end should govern one's practical behavior.  For example, when someone utters the phrase "I believe in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution," we should not take that to mean that they believe in the *existence* of an amendment to the Constitution.  Rather, it means that they believe that the rights granted to citizens by the First Amendment are morally valuable ideals that one should be committed to protect and revere.

The distinction between these two kinds of faith is crucial, since Dewey's understanding of faith does not run into the epistemological difficulties of faith in the Lockean sense.  Moral convictions do not require evidence to justify belief in the way that propositions do, since they do not make any claims about reality.  Although my claim about belief in "rights" in the earlier example certainly stands in need of justification, it would not be the sort of justification that is necessarily missing from what we might call "epistemological faith," since the statement need not reference any existing state of affairs.  Indeed, even if there were no such thing as the U.S. Constitution, the statement about believing in the ideals embodied in what we now refer to as the First Amendment would be no less justified, provided the audience understands which rights and powers being referred to with that phrase.

Dewey's view of moral faith is reflected in his notion of moral attitudes.  Recall that for Dewey, a moral attitude develops when one rationally selects some set of moral principles as good ends to be achieved and alters one's behavior and perception of moral situations so as to make progress toward fulfilling those ends.  Dewey's notion of religious attitudes carries this notion even further.  A moral attitude becomes a religious attitude when its object, the "conviction that some end should be *supreme* over conduct," is held by a believer so strongly

---

[94] CF, p.20

that he or she regards it as taking precedence over every other end.  Moreover, a religious believer places such importance on this ideal end that it shapes not only one's behavior and conduct in moral situations but also one's fundamental understanding of the universe and one's own self.

The notion of a religious attitude shaping one's view of the universe issues from Dewey's epistemological position.  As empiricists, both James and Dewey argue that our understanding of the world is based on the ways that we process and extrapolate from sense data.  We make sense of this mass of data by splitting it into a number of distinct "objects" which we can identify and refer to, and which in turn affect how we react to current and future sense data.

Since our understanding of our surroundings and our relationship to those surroundings is necessarily limited to our particular empirical perspective, any conception of the world outside that perspective can be formulated only by using imagination to extrapolate from that perspective.  Dewey writes that "[t]he idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea.  The limited world of our observation and reflection becomes the Universe only through imaginative extension.  It cannot be apprehended in knowledge nor realized in reflection."[95]  Consequently, any view of the world that we create through imagination will be colored by our experiences and attitudes.  For example, a person who holds to a geocentric view of the solar system will conceive of a different universe than one who holds a heliocentrist position, not only in terms of shape, but also in terms of the importance and role of Earth in that universe.  Moreover, this worldview would likely also affect the geocentrist's conception of him or herself, as a member of the most important species on the most important object in the universe.

---

[95] CF, p.18

Hence, when Dewey speaks of religious attitudes, he means not simply a moral conviction to which one is strongly committed, but also that that conviction shapes one's entire understanding of reality and one's own place in it. Dewey refers to this shaping of perspective as a "thoroughgoing and deep-seated harmonizing of the self with the Universe (as a name for the totality of conditions with which the self is connected)."[96]

## Potential Objects of Legitimate Religious Attitudes

If we accept Dewey's idea of moral faith and its relation to religious attitudes, we might then ask what sorts of thing would qualify as an object of moral faith. The things that could potentially arouse enough passion to be considered "religious" might be different for each person; however, it must at least be an ideal of such importance and comprehensiveness that one could conceivably center one's view of the universe and one's resulting moral obligations around it.

The God of Christians and Jews could certainly meet the criteria to qualify as an object of religious faith. Indeed, the Judeo-Christian conception of the divine has many features which would encourage a comprehensive worldview and standard of moral conduct, as well as reasons to believe it with enough intensity to motivate action. According to Jewish and Christian doctrine, God is portrayed as the direct author of all creation, which paints in the believer a view of the universe in which God is inextricably embedded in every aspect of existence. Furthermore, this God is deeply invested in the personal affairs and actions of each individual human. He assigns to humans the role of "stewards of the earth," issues moral guidelines and commandments, and metes out rewards and punishments for those who do or do not "follow his will." Given the magnitude of these rewards and punishments, one ought to expect a believer to be severely motivated.

---

[96] CF, p.18

However, Dewey would argue that there are several problems with this conception of God as a legitimate object of religious faith. First, belief in such a God as an object of moral faith seems to also necessitate belief in that being's existence. Much of the motivating power behind the conduct inspired by reverence to God depends upon the power of God to enforce that conduct. In many manifestations of Christian doctrine, the promise of Heaven for obedience and the threat of Hell for disobedience entail the existence of realms outside the natural world, along with the assumption that each person will end up in one of those places or the other. This feature of religious belief necessarily leads us back to the problem of epistemological justification. As we have noted before, the existence of these supernatural elements of Judaism and Christianity cannot be demonstrated empirically. Therefore, the primary impetus to follow the divine will loses its teeth.

Another problem with the Judeo-Christian God as an object of religious faith is that it shifts the source of the moral ideals from autonomous human experience to a heteronomous demand of an otherworldly being with no rational connection to their moral worth nor to the positive practical consequences of pursuing them. If we are going to say that we adhere to the principles provided by a religious institution *religiously*, that is, we accept them in conjunction with our acceptance of our object of religious faith, then the source of our religiousness must also be the source of the moral justification for those principles. This means that in the case of the Judeo-Christian God our moral beliefs have no justification grounded in human experience.

This lack of some moral justification for moral demands leads to many of the classic problems that ethicists have identified with the so-called "Divine Command Theory" of ethics. Chief among those problems is that arguing that a given principle is morally right "because God said so" is not a rationally acceptable justification for a principle that might be easily justified on

pragmatic grounds. Some of the moral principles or rules found in the Old and New Testament like "honor thy father and thy mother" or "treat others in the way you would wish to be treated" could be morally justified in a number of established ethical systems and would no doubt be acceptable to include in almost anyone's standard of moral conduct. However, by setting as our object of religious faith a God who is an irrefutable authority on what is good, we thereby surrender the possibility of justifying our moral principles by any means other than the "Word of God."

Dewey argues that there are several other candidates which qualify as objects of religious faith which do not suffer from the problems identified in the Judeo-Christian conception of God. For example, he proposes that "faith in the possibilities of continued and rigorous inquiry" could be such an object. That is, the optimistic belief in the ongoing progress of human understanding through directed investigation could be embraced with enough intensity that it could inspire in a believer emotions and actions on the level associated with religious beliefs. Faith in continued inquiry is certainly comprehensive in scope. Not only does the scientific method of understanding the universe necessarily color our perception of it, but the *moral* belief in the importance of humanity's ongoing and methodical pursuit of knowledge is one about which people can become very passionate.

One advantage of Deweyan religious objects is that they do not depend upon the existence of any entity for them to be worthwhile or effective. Moreover, treating the moral ideals which Dewey suggests as candidates for religious objects does not entail the existence of those ideals. For example, a person who is committed to the ideal of bringing about justice would not be committed to the actual existence of a Platonic-like form of Justice. The believer need only be committed to the possibility that the existing state of affairs could be improved in

accordance with his or her conception of a more just state of affairs. To explain this notion, Dewey cleverly draws upon the "unseen power" terminology in his rejected dictionary definition of religion, saying that if we treat moral ideals as religious objects, "[a]n unseen power controlling our destiny becomes the power of an ideal. All possibilities, as possibilities, are ideal in character. The artist, scientist, citizen, parent, as far as they are actuated by the spirit of their callings, are controlled by the unseen. For all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual."[97]

Furthermore, belief in a moral ideal does not entail the existence of any particular end goal which could be actualized in the future. For example, one could be religiously devoted to the pursuit of knowledge without believing that such a pursuit would ever be complete, or even that knowledge is possible. In *The Quest for Certainty*, Dewey explains that knowledge, in the sense of achieving certainty of the truth of a proposition, is impossible, since our empirical methods of understanding can never eliminate the possibility of error. Yet there is still undeniable value in the effort to improve our understanding, treating knowledge as the ideal vanishing point on the scale of confidence in the justification of our beliefs.

One additional advantage of Deweyan religious objects over creedal religions is that they do not stand in need of a special access to truth. This need, we will recall, arises when a particular religion's epistemological claims cannot be justified with empirical and/or rational evidence. As a result, the institution surrounding the religion must make claim to a special means of acquiring truth, often in spite of counterevidence. However, since a moral conviction does not make any particular epistemological claims, it does not require the same epistemological justification which creedal religions must provide.

---

[97] CF, p.23

## **Critique of Dewey's View of Religion**

Dewey's stance on objects of religious belief seems to address the primary objections to religion raised by a science-minded populace by resolving some of the inconsistencies between religious faith and our body of scientific knowledge. Religious commitment to a moral ideal does not represent an implicit rejection of scientific consensus in the way that a supernaturally based creedal faith does. However, by allowing for ideals to be objects of religious faith, Dewey broadens the meaning of the term "religious belief" in a way that would include beliefs that would not have been considered religious when employing the more traditional definition of religion. For example, one's political beliefs could count as religious on Dewey's account, provided they are regarded as having sufficient importance and believed with sufficient intensity.

It may seem strange that one's political agenda could count as a religious belief. However, Dewey would argue that this strangeness is due largely to the longstanding cultural connection between religion and supernaturalism. If supernatural elements were considered a necessary component of a religion, then we might agree that something so mundane as politics could not have the scope needed to inspire religious ardor. Yet if we accept Dewey's argument that the essential aspect of a religious attitude lies in its capacity to inspire passionate moral conduct in a believer, then we would likely discover that there are many of us who commit to some "secular" moral pursuit with enough intensity for it to be regarded as a religious act. For example, Carl Sagan was an accomplished astrophysicist, but much of his renown lies in his role not as a scientist but as a science advocate. His role in encouraging greater scientific education in the general populace through his books and the television series *Cosmos* reveals that the pursuit of greater human understanding was his life's passion and a comprehensive guide to action.

**Jamesian Critique of Dewey on Religion**

One might hold that Dewey's focus on the attitudinal aspects of religious belief is important, while still doubting whether his definition captures what is essential to that attitude. Indeed, a Jamesian religious pragmatist might agree with Dewey on the importance of the capacity of religious beliefs to inspire action toward ideal ends but argue that without a connection to the supernatural, a religious attitude cannot inspire action nearly as effectively. If the power to motivate action is the key aspect of a religious attitude, then adopting one of Dewey's ideal ends to pursue might not provide sufficient motivation to qualify as a religious attitude.

We can clearly see the importance of such motivation in many of James's works. In his essay "The Moral Equivalent of War," James argues that although the concept of war between nations is savage, cruel and irrational, it has incredible power to motivate action. The moral cause of assisting "the war effort" moves people to significant and enduring levels of self-sacrifice and industry that they would not subject themselves to otherwise. It does so by invoking values which our warlike species holds in high regard, such as valor, strength, bravery, and the legitimacy of one's own culture. However, James argues that in doing so we have come to associate peacetime, and the "pleasure-economy" that follows with it, with the absence of those "martial virtues." He sarcastically says of war that "[i]ts 'horrors' are a cheap price to pay for rescue from the only alternative supposed, of a world of clerks and teachers, of coeducation and zoophily, of 'consumer's leagues' and 'associated charities,' of industrialism unlimited and feminism unabashed. No scorn, no hardness, no valor any more! Fie upon such a cattleyard of a planet!"[98] The period of peace which follows war is unsustainable, because the people in a period of peace lack the motivations which brought about that peace. Hence, people will

---

[98] "Moral Equivalent of War," p.524

inevitably seek to escape this danger of "flat degeneration" by reverting to war, so much so that, according to James, "peace" has come to be simply another word for war "*in posse.*"[99]

James argues that to escape this cycle of permanent war, we must cultivate the same attitudes of enduring self-sacrifice in peacetime that prevail in wartime. He proposes that we develop what we might call a "war effort mentality" directed not against fellow humans, but rather "against *Nature*," by which he means that we associate improving the quality of life and ending social injustices with the same patriotism, hardiness and strength of character that we do with military service.

James does not argue that the development of the "martial character" requires a particular religious outlook, though he does hint that "[p]riests and medical men are in a fashion educated to it;" he also makes reference to Tolstoy, who "makes the fear of the Lord furnish the moral spur provided elsewhere by the fear of the enemy."[100] However, his essay does reveal his concern with the difficulty of motivating people to self-sacrifice in the long term. His interest in religious experiences suggests that he thinks that a religious conversion, and the transformation of character that results from it, would satisfy this need for long-term moral hardiness. Furthermore, his emphasis on the role of the *mystical* aspect of religious experience in bringing about this conversion suggests that the mystical quality is crucial for facilitating the necessary change.

Hence, a Jamesian critic of Dewey might argue that someone could be intensely motivated by a moral ideal in the way Dewey describes, but by de-emphasizing the supernatural Dewey has left out an aspect that distinguishes religious from non-religious attitudes. While both a supernaturalist and a non-supernaturalist could be inspired to action, the supernaturalist

---

[99] MEW, p.522
[100] MEW, p.531, 527

would have a stronger impetus to action through believing that his or her call to action is connected to an eternal reality.  Furthermore, a supernaturalist attitude would achieve the intended goals of a religious attitude more effectively, since a person who is concerned with "the more eternal things" would assign more importance to the value of sustained self-sacrifice, just as a person who is concerned with assisting "the war effort" will temporarily suspend his or her own comfort for the greater good.

For example, a person who believes in an afterlife, particularly an afterlife in which one is rewarded or punished, would arguably be more motivated to take on the burdens of working to achieve ideal ends than someone who believes in those same ends but thinks that the material world is "all there is."  While either believer would presumably be willing to endure hardships in the name of the cause they revere, supernaturalists would arguably be able to endure greater hardships due to their belief that there are consequences for actions that go beyond one's mortal life.  Therefore, a Jamesian might claim that a Deweyan non-supernaturalist understanding of a religious attitude describes an attitude that would be less effectual than a supernaturalist one in trying to achieve its ideal end.

## Self-Sacrifice in Dewey's Idea of Self

Dewey understands the practical need for providing methods of inspiring long-term, self-sacrificial behavior.  We will recall that on Dewey's definition, the religious aspect of a belief or attitude lies not in the properties of the particular belief involved, but rather in its capacity to motivate the believer to action aimed toward bringing about ideal ends which the believer values to a greater extent than one's self.  Implied in the definition is a commitment to self-sacrificial behavior and the motivation to follow through on that commitment.  He elaborates on this matter by saying that "any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of

threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality."[101]

Dewey's emphasis on self-sacrifice as a defining feature of religious attitudes can be seen in his notion of the self. He explains that just as our conception of the universe is an extrapolation based on our limited powers of observation, "[n]either observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection."[102] We cannot have a full understanding of ourselves, since we cannot view ourselves from outside our own limited and biased perspective. To have a full conception of one's own self, one must have an imaginative conception of the universe as well as an imaginative view of one's position in it. That is, a proper understanding of one's self requires an understanding of one's relationship with everything outside the self. The self, he says, "is always directed toward something beyond itself and so its own unification depends upon the idea of the integration of the shifting scenes of the world into that imaginative totality we call the Universe."[103]

He extends this connection between the religious and a proper understanding of the self by introducing the notion of "natural piety." He says that "[t]he 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."[104] To practice natural piety is in part the recognition of our dependence on our environment not only for our accomplishments but for a comprehensive understanding of the self.

---

[101] CF, p.27
[102] CF, p.19
[103] CF, p.19
[104] CF, p.25

On this subject, P. Eddy Wilson writes that for Dewey, a person who practices natural piety is someone who "reflectively reveres nature and who manifests that reverence for nature in practical activity."[105]  A person who reflects upon the role of nature in the success of human endeavors will understand the importance of preserving nature so that those human goals may be pursued.  Thus, acts of reverence toward nature will likely result in attitudes and conduct which aim toward preserving nature, either as the primary goal or as the means by which other human goods are attained.  It would also result in attitudes which discourage behavior that would endanger the environment, since, upon reflection, such goals would be seen as unsustainable and counterproductive.

The recognition of one's dependence on one's environment is, as Wilson puts it, "instrumentally valuable" for Dewey, since holding such a view has the practical effect of producing behavior aimed at common human ends.  Dewey's natural piety, he writes, was "a way to ennoble individuals and to ally them with the resources of the world so that they might better pursue the ideal ends of a good life, that is, a humanistically good life."[106]  However, the emphasis on one's dependence upon his or her environment also serves a grander purpose in Dewey's thought, namely that of the "reintegration of the self."[107]  Just as, on a pragmatic epistemological account, we make sense of our surroundings by splitting sense data into distinct objects, so too is the concept of self as something distinct from the rest of the world an artificial construction of the mind.  This mental distinction between subject and object, Dewey argues, leads in part to environmentally detrimental behavior by permitting a mistaken classification of the self as something above nature and thus unaffected by it.  Hence, the practical benefits of Dewey's natural piety, or of any religious attitude which "unifies the self with the Universe," are

---

[105] "Emerson and Dewey on Natural Piety," p.345
[106] EDNP, p.337
[107] EDNP, p.342

achieved not only by the development of good practices, but by a conscious humbling or diminution of the self and its ambitions by re-establishing the self's proper place as a part of a larger whole. As Wilson says, "Dewey suggested that the otherwise competitive, finite goals that we would pursue are subordinated to a primary, integrating goal--an ideal, imaginary self."[108]

We can see, then, that self-sacrifice, in the sense of the subordination of one's personal goals to greater goods, is an integral component of a Deweyan religious attitude. A Jamesian critic, of course, might still argue that although a Deweyan attitude might encourage self-sacrificial behavior, it would still not be sufficiently motivating to count as religious compared to the zeal associated with more traditional or supernaturally infused religious attitudes. For example, it would not be unfair to say that natural piety's "reflective reverence for nature" does not evoke the same level of militant fervor as James's proposal that we redirect the fire of determination associated with war effort mentality toward more progressive goals, even if the attitudes encouraged by both systems are aimed at similar progressive human ends.

However, a Deweyan might respond by saying that while the Jamesian type of militant zeal is one type of motivator, it is not a necessary condition of producing the self-sacrificial activities which are a hallmark of religious attitudes. We will recall that for Dewey, the essence of morality is not the development of good actions but rather the development of good *modes of conduct*, which are habitualized actions aimed at good ends. It could also be pointed out that James argued that the disadvantage of the self-sacrificial "war effort mentality," aside from the fact that it was aimed at destructive ends, was that it was conditional upon the existence of the war which called it forth, and would lapse unless perpetually stoked. A Deweyan religious attitude, however, would not necessarily suffer from the same tendency to wane, since the habitual behavior formed in the choice of one's conduct need not be conditional on some

---

[108] EDNP, p.342

temporal goal. Unlike sacrificing for "the war effort," which is a pain that is suffered temporarily until such time as it is no longer necessary (that is, until the end of the war), a Deweyan attitude, once formed, would not have any particular point at which it could be said that the time for sacrifice is over. While that kind of sacrifice might not be labeled "noble" or "patriotic" or call up the other "militant virtues," it could still achieve similar practical results.

## **Motivational Power in Deweyan Attitudes**

A Jamesian critic of Dewey might agree that a Deweyan attitude could inspire long-term sacrificial behavior but still note a marked difference between supernatural and non-supernatural religious attitudes. One way to address this continuing concern might be to expand on a previous example and suppose that we have two persons, one a practitioner of natural piety and the other a practitioner of Christianity who takes to heart the command from God that humans should be "stewards" of the earth. While both persons might pursue similar moral ends, the Christian, it could be argued, would be incentivized to maintain that behavior in a way that the naturally pious person would not, since the "stakes" involved in doing so are so much higher. Not only does the behavior stem from an imperative issued by an infinitely greater power, but the consequences of that behavior for the person in question are infinite and eternal. For the naturally pious person, the potential consequences are necessarily limited in scope in comparison, since the attitudes developed would not permit an accounting for "the more eternal things."[109] It could be supposed, then, that the Christian would persevere through difficult situations in a way that the naturally pious person might not, since the consequences of doing so would be of greater concern for the Christian. Given this apparent disparity in terms of motivational power, one could conclude that Dewey's concept of the religious is lacking, since it

---

[109] "Will to Believe," p.25

does not recognize the "more eternal things" as a necessary component of a Jamesian "religious zeal."

Dewey does acknowledge that the supernatural elements found in more traditional religions seem to carry a motivational power. However, he would respond to the Jamesian criticism by arguing that it is mistakenly placing the importance of religious attitudes on elements external to the beliefs and perceived goods that shape a religious attitude. He notes that for a pragmatist, the presence of supernatural elements in a religious attitude does not change the value of the ideal ends espoused by that attitude. If we suppose that the two attitudes in our example involving environmental stewardship are the same, aside from the presence or absence of supernatural elements, then the ends they encourage and the moral justification for choosing those ends would be the same for both attitudes. In that case, the only practical difference between the two attitudes might be the effectiveness with which the believer acts in accordance with that attitude.

Yet it would be strange to therefore conclude that the distinguishing feature between a religious attitude and a non-religious attitude is the degree of compliance in the adherent. On a pragmatist view, if someone is justified in holding some "conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct," then he or she is justified in pursuing that end whether it incorporates supernatural elements or not. As Dewey explains, "[t]he validity of justice, affection, and that intellectual correspondence of our ideas with realities that we call truth, is so assured in its hold upon humanity that it is unnecessary for the religious attitude to encumber itself with the apparatus of dogma and doctrine."[110] It is clear that we are moved to action by our belief in the importance of certain moral ideals, so it is reasonable to suggest that an account of religious attitudes, as with moral attitudes, should be centered primarily around the value of those ideals.

---

[110] CF, p.44

Moreover, a person who holds a supernaturally infused religious attitude would be just as morally justified in acting on the ends espoused by that attitude even if the claim about the existence of those elements turned out to be unwarranted. Thus, to argue that two attitudes can have identical moral convictions but that one of them is not sufficiently motivational to count as religious seems to regard the role of supernatural elements, and by extension the role of the quality "religious," as simply a rhetorical device applied to what is otherwise simply a moral attitude. Dewey therefore concludes that supernatural elements of an attitude are tangential to what is essentially religious, since "all that an Existence can add is force to establish, to punish, and to reward."[111]

We can see, then, that the association of the quality of religiosity with the motivational force of supernatural elements separates, in effect, the religious aspect of an attitude from its moral qualities. The actual moral ends pursued by a Jamesian religious believer become irrelevant if the primary mark of a religious attitude is simply its greater motivational power compared to one who holds a non-supernatural attitude. This is problematic for pragmatists like Dewey who wish to say that religious attitudes are valuable to the extent that they produce better long-term outcomes, since they do not want to count as religious the actions and beliefs of those who are motivated toward negative or harmful moral ends.

However, even if we stipulate that a proper religious attitude must have justifiable and recognizably moral ends, the Jamesian association of religiosity with motivational power is still problematic in that it seems to undermine the very qualities that ostensibly make a religious attitude pragmatically valuable. Let us return to our comparison between the naturally pious person and the steward of the earth. Both James and Dewey would agree that a proper moral attitude would involve a significant emphasis on self-sacrifice in furtherance of an ideal end,

---

[111] CF, p.44

which in this case is the protection of the natural environment. The Jamesian critic argues that in this example the steward of the earth, by virtue of the supernatural elements in his or her belief system, is more motivated than the naturally pious person. That is, both persons are motivated to sacrifice, but over time the steward will be pushed to sacrifice beyond the point at which the naturally pious person would have stopped due to a lack of those supernatural incentives.

When we look at those incentives, however, we see that they center primarily around matters of personal interest to the believer, namely the prospect of present and future rewards and punishments. For example, it would be inaccurate to say that a person acting with the intent to "get into Heaven" is sacrificing, since those actions are ultimately done out of self-interest. Hence, the point at which the steward's determination carries them beyond the flagging willpower of the naturally pious person would be the point at which the steward's actions are no longer self-sacrificial, and thus *no longer religious*.

Dewey seems to agree with this assessment that persons motivated by the prospect of eternal rewards are not religious. He remarks that the role of these supernatural elements in particular religious doctrines is not to motivate people who hold that religious attitude, but rather to cajole non-religious persons into acting in accordance with those ideals. If the value of supernatural elements is merely the force with which it can manipulate what he sarcastically calls the "backward masses," then the argument for pursuing those ends clearly becomes one of self-interest rather than morality. Therefore, a proper understanding of religious attitudes should not require the inclusion of supernatural elements which ultimately shift the focus of religious attitudes away from the moral purposes they are meant to serve. "Any other conception of the religious attitude," Dewey says, "when it is adequately analyzed, means that those who hold it care more for force than for ideal values…"[112]

---

[112] CF, p.44

**Religious Realists' Critique of Dewey**

In Dewey's account of religious attitudes, a "belief in" the importance of some set of ideal ends and in the desire to fulfill those ends does not commit the believer to a belief in the existence, actual or potential, of those ends. For example, one may be committed to the pursuit of justice without believing that there exists some otherworldly ideal called "justice" toward which one would aim, or that there would come a time in the future when injustice would be completely eliminated. However, traditional religionists who object to Dewey's understanding of religion might argue that belief in the "unseen reality" of one's ideals could serve as more than just a means of manipulating "the masses." These religionists, which we might call religious realists, would claim that Dewey's dismissal of supernatural elements thereby dismisses aspects of religious attitudes which gives them not only their force but also their moral legitimacy.

Religious realists, of course, could argue that one who holds a religious attitude but who does not suppose the reality of the ideals the attitude espouses is limited in the level of their conviction that those ends should be pursued. Dewey notes that one of the primary objections that these religionists have with the scientific method--and thus, the pragmatic method--is that its openness to revision means that it is also open to uncertainty. He writes that "[a]pologists for a religion often point to the shift that goes on in scientific ideas and materials as evidence of the unreliability of science as a mode of knowledge."[113] In the case of religious attitudes, a set of ideal ends adopted on Dewey's account would be necessarily tinged with uncertainty. A religious realist might ask how one can be *religiously* committed to the pursuit of justice without complete confidence that the things he or she is pursuing are in fact just. That is, it would be difficult for someone to "unify their self with the universe" around what they believe to be a supreme principle of conduct but about which they acknowledge they may be completely wrong.

---

[113] CF, p.38

Realist religionists would argue that they do not suffer from that limitation. The moral ideals they espouse are often worked into their respective doctrines and thus are not subject to uncertainty or unreliability in contrast to the pragmatists' "best guess" approach to moral ideals. Furthermore, the ideals of traditional religions are often depicted as existing independent of human perception, as part of either some future state of affairs or a particular being. For example, Christianity traditionally depicts God as an existent entity having certain moral properties, which are intrinsically valuable solely by virtue of being characteristic of God's very being. Dewey writes that in Christianity and Judaism in particular, "moral and spiritual characters are thought of as properties of a particular existence and are thought to be of religious value for us because of this embodiment in such an existence." In these religions, then, the legitimacy and value of the moral ideals it espouses are dependent on the existence of those ideals in the realist sense. Their value is derived by being properties of God, and, as Dewey puts it, "'God' designates some kind of Being having prior and therefore non-ideal existence."[114]

Dewey's term "non-ideal" here uses the more common sense of "ideal," which refers to something which is not ontologically real or does not exist materially. His intention in doing so, besides trying to be linguistically ironic in a discussion about philosophical realists, is to call attention to what he perceives to be serious flaws in the religious realist position. He rejects the claim that pragmatist ideals are somehow less justifiable or less inspiring because they are not ontologically real.

As noted in earlier sections, traditional religionists run into justification problems of their own when they attempt to establish the truth of their positions which run contrary to the scientific method and must inevitably make appeals to authority and claim special access to truth. On the question of the existence of ideals, however, Dewey's concern is that existence

---

[114] CF, p.42

seems to play no role in determining the value of ideals. The relevant question for him is: "Are the ideals that move us genuinely ideal or are they ideal only in contrast with our present estate?"[115] A pragmatist moral ideal, as with all pragmatist conceptions, is an imaginative projection based on lived experience. A person's conception of justice, for example, will be largely determined by one's society and position within that society. Furthermore, what actions or policies a society considers just or unjust will naturally change over time along with changing environmental and social conditions.

Contrary to the religious realists' claims, the notion that the ideal of justice will itself evolve over time does not show pragmatist ideals to be unreliable. Rather, it ensures that they remain relevant to human experience. Dewey argues that part of the objection realists have with pragmatist ideals is "owing to our frequent use of the word 'imagination' to denote fantasy and doubtful reality."[116] The pragmatist conception of justice, however, is not simply fantastical or "make-believe." As Dewey puts it, "[a]n ideal is not an illusion because imagination is the organ through which it is apprehended. For *all* possibilities reach us through the imagination."[117] A moral ideal is an interpretation of available evidence in just the same way that any scientific observation is an "imaginative projection" based on sense data. Someone who pursues justice does not do so because there exists a "real" and unchanging justice that humans are obligated to pursue but will never achieve. Instead, one experiences or is aware of a situation that seems to be unfair or unjust and uses reflection to imagine a scenario in which that problem is alleviated and takes actions aimed at bringing about that outcome.

Certainly the motive to alleviate a situation that seems unjust in our lived experience does not require us to have a concept of perfect justice or to believe that there already exists a perfect

---

[115] CF, p.42
[116] CF, p.43
[117] CF, p.43

manifestation of justice in an otherworldly or divine being that could be actualized through human action in our own world.  If the ideals that we pursue religiously can be developed in response to existing conditions without considering their possible objective existence, then, as Dewey asks, "[w]hat would be lost if it were also admitted that they have authoritative claim upon conduct just because they are ideal? The assumption that these objects of religion exist already in some realm of Being seems to add nothing to their force, while it weakens their claim over us as ideals, in so far as it bases that claim upon matters that are intellectually dubious."[118]

While religious realists might concede that one does not need to acknowledge the reality of an ideal in order to pursue it, they could still argue that it is worthwhile to determine the reality of the ideals one pursues.  If realists agree that moral ideals are at the center of one's religious belief, Dewey asks rhetorically on behalf of religious realists, then "why not search with the utmost eagerness and vigor for all the evidence we can find....which may lead one to the belief that the ideal is already extant in a Personality having objective existence?"[119]

There may be some *prima facie* merit to the notion of pursuing the reality of one's ideals. One could imagine some Cartesian-like doubt regarding the legitimacy of one's ideals if they are based "merely" on one's own lived experience.  How can one pursue a cause like justice or charity with the *conviction* that is characteristic of religious attitudes if what a society considers just today could become unjust later, or if what one thinks is an act of charity turns out to be harmful?  Questions like these may unfairly compare the pragmatic method to moral relativism in that they suggest that pragmatic moral ideals are so inconsistent as to be unreliable.  However, such questions should be addressed because they touch primarily on whether those ideals can be pursued with the confidence and enthusiasm necessary to be considered religious.

---

[118] CF, p.41
[119] CF, p.45

One point that religious realists might make is that there does seem to be some difference between "real" and "unreal" end goals in terms of how and to what extent those goals are pursued. For example, a personal goal of adhering to a specific dietary and exercise regimen might be easier to visualize, and thus easier to attain, than the less concrete and ultimately unending goal of "getting healthier." Likewise, moral ideals which have "objective existence" could be pursued with fewer doubts as to whether our actions would be effective, since there would be a definite end goal to which we could compare our current state of affairs.

Another point religious realists could make is that the "unreal" ideals that Dewey describes may come across as strange or difficult to accept as objects of religious belief. For example, in contrast to the Christian definition of God as an existing being with particular attributes, Dewey proposes that on a pragmatic account, "the word 'God' means the ideal ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as having authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagination, take on unity."[120] That is, a religious pragmatist might use the word "God" as a symbolic, but not materially existent, representation of those human ideals to which he or she is committed. Religious realists might argue that it would be harder for one to arouse religious passion for such a conception of God, since one would necessarily have a different conception of his or her relationship with that God as opposed to the Christian God. While a pragmatist might have reverence for Dewey's God to the extent that he or she reveres the ideals that it represents, it cannot be worshiped in the way the Christian God can be; it is not "adorable" in the theological sense. Indeed, it would seem strange and difficult to worship or pray to a God which explicitly does not exist.

---

[120] CF, p.42

**Deweyan Response to Religious Realists**

To these attacks concerning the unreality of pragmatic ideals, Dewey would respond that not only do such complaints stem from a misunderstanding of the pragmatic purpose of religious attitudes, but that the alternative would be even more problematic. He argues against pursuing the reality of religious ideals on the grounds that such a pursuit, as well as the treatment of ideals as existing things, creates several problems which are ultimately irreconcilable and counterproductive. For example, he briefly points out that treating ideals as though they exist is what gives rise to the logical conundrum known as the problem of evil, a problem that has "haunted theology in the past and that the most ingenious apologetics have not faced, much less met."[121] If the Christian God--depicted as being omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent-- exists, then evil should not exist, since such a being logically would prevent the occurrence of evil. Since evil does exist, the Christian God therefore cannot exist.

Dewey's intent in mentioning the problem of evil is not to denigrate Christianity or any other religion in which this problem cries out for solution. Rather, he is pointing out that the problem of evil only arises as a result of treating ideals as existing things. There is no inherent logical problem with conceiving of an ideal like "perfect benevolence" or "perfect knowledge." However, stipulating that those ideals also exist, or are embodied in some existing entity, entails certain circumstances which are impossible in reality. The existence of evil only stands in need of explanation if one stipulates the existence of something which is contradictory to the existence of evil. As Dewey explains, "[i]f these apologists had not identified the existence of ideal goods with that of a Person supposed to originate and support them—a Being, moreover, to whom omnipotent power is attributed—the problem of the occurrence of evil would be gratuitous."[122]

---

[121] CF, p.45
[122] CF, p.45

His more damning criticism of pursuing the reality of ideals, however, is that belief in existent ideals severs the connection between morality and human experience. Dewey agrees that if existing moral ideals could be discovered through empirical methods then we ought to do so. However, he explains that "as a matter of fact it is always undertaken in the interest of the supernatural."[123] As we saw with the claims about the properties of the Judeo-Christian God that create the problem of evil, ideals are not the sort of thing that can be observed empirically. The search for the reality of ideals, then, would take us outside the realm of human experience. As a result, it falls prey to those epistemological problems we mentioned earlier regarding clashes with the scientific method and the alleged special access to truth.

Furthermore, Dewey argues that the realist's separation of ideals from human experience also separates one from what makes those ideals valuable or worth pursuing. Since the search is directed toward something outside the realm of human experience, it lacks any reference to the context in which those ideals are relevant to our lives. Unlike pragmatic ideals, the ideals being sought and any knowledge we might glean about them play no role in resolving actual problems related to those ideals. Thus, Dewey claims, the focus on real ideals "diverts attention and energy from ideal values and from the exploration of actual conditions by means of which they may be promoted."[124]

The pursuit of real ideals would be problematic enough, simply because it distracts us from human progress by wasting effort on what Dewey would say is a fruitless endeavor. He also argues that the search would actively impede human progress by discouraging us from fulfilling those ideals in practice. Since the ideals in question are located in an otherworldly realm, there is a disconnect between those ideals and human actions by which they might be

---

[123] CF, p.46
[124] CF, p.46

applied in the world of experience.  Indeed, it seems that there would be no incentive for us to work to actualize those ideals, because if it is supposed that they "already exist" then no work need be done by us to bring them about.   Dewey claims that historically we have seen this discouraging effect of otherworldly ideals on human progress.  He writes that people "have never fully used the powers they possess to advance the good in life, because they have waited upon some power external to themselves and to nature to do the work they are responsible for doing. Dependence upon an external power is the counterpart of surrender of human endeavor."[125]

One example of this "surrender of human endeavor" might be seen in the Christian concept of millennialism.  Although millennialists only represent a small portion of Protestantism, they may provide a stark example of some of Dewey's concerns regarding existing ideals.  Millennialists hold to a belief in the Millennium, the idea that there will be a time in the future in which the paradisiacal "Kingdom of God" will be manifested on Earth, and that Christ will return to rule over that kingdom for one thousand years.  Additionally, a subset of this group, known as premillennial dispensationalists, hold that this Millennium will not occur until *after* the return of Christ.  They also hold that Christ's return will itself be preceded by the "Rapture," in which the faithful will be taken to Heaven prior to the supernatural destruction of the world.

The dispensationalist position here seems to encapsulate the exact criticisms that Dewey has with existent ideals.  The ideals that the dispensationalists value, namely those embodied by Christ and the Kingdom of God, are dependent upon a supernatural power for their realization. Thus, they have no incentive to further those ideals in practice, since that work cannot proceed until after the return of Christ, the expected date of which has historically been "soon." Furthermore, they have no incentive to improve moral conditions in the meantime, since the

---

[125] CF, p.46

world is going to end anyway.  As a result, on this belief system human progress seems to stall as dispensationalists are consigned to wait for Christ to "make the first move."

Clearly, dispensationalism is not representative of Protestant Christianity, but there are other religious practices that Dewey would call "human surrender" that apply to Christianity more broadly.  One such practice is the notion of supplication or intercessory prayer. Christianity features a God who is considered both infinitely powerful and personally relatable to individual people, and there is a common belief that Christians who are facing personal difficulties can implore God to intervene on their behalf.  Dewey argues that this sentiment, combined with the notion that God is more likely to answer the prayers of the faithful, creates a severe pessimism regarding the ability of humans to resolve problems themselves.  First, time spent praying for a solution is usually time not spent fixing the problem.  Second, when problems ultimately go unresolved, believers are left with the impression that the cause of one's problems is not lack of trying, but lack of faith, since God had the power to solve those problems but did not.  Dewey says that belief in "the objective efficacy of prayer, is too easy a way out of difficulties. It leaves matters in general just about as they were before; that is, sufficiently bad so that there is additional support for the idea that only supernatural aid can better them."[126]

With these issues plaguing existent ideals in mind, Dewey argues that in fact pragmatic ideals are more inspiring, as he puts it, "just because they are ideal."[127]  That is, they are more motivational because they are not real.  Thus, those who value *imaginative* ideals religiously are empowered to act to bring about the human goods they represent in practice, since they acknowledge that those goods cannot be accomplished without human effort.  Unlike for

---

[126] CF, p.47
[127] CF, p.41

religious realists, the Deweyan religious attitude "involves no expectation of a millennium of good."[128]

It should be noted that while Dewey attributes these problems within particular religions to the treatment of ideals as existing things, he would not argue that any belief system which incorporates supernatural realities will necessarily bring about the end of human progress.  For example, as we will see, James's interest in mystical experience is rooted in the possibility of improving natural conditions through a greater understanding of the universe as a whole, of which the material world is a necessary part.  Dewey's point in arguing against religious realism is simply to show that our valuation of ideal ends can be explained without reference to the supernatural and that one need not believe in the supernatural to be motivated to positive action.

---

[128] CF, p.46

CHAPTER 4

JAMES'S DEFINITION OF RELIGION

Like Dewey, James's interest in religion lies primarily in its power to motivate people to moral action. He also shares with Dewey a concern that the epistemological problems associated with traditional religions may hinder that power from being fully realized. However, he diverges from Dewey in that he focuses on the "mystical" experiences of individual religious figures and how those experiences relate to the development of one's religious attitude. Since these mystical experiences make reference to elements which Dewey would call "supernatural," it is likely that Dewey would level some of the same criticisms against James's account of religion as he does against supernaturally-infused religions.

James begins his account of religion in *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by explaining that it will center on the phenomenon of the religious attitude, or what he calls "religious sentiment" as experienced by individuals, rather than on the particulars of any established religion. "I am neither a theologian, nor a scholar learned in the history of religions, nor an anthropologist," James writes. He goes on to say that "[p]sychology is the only branch of learning in which I am particularly versed;"[129] and as a psychologist and pragmatist he explores the nature and value of what he calls "religious propensities," that is, the psychological qualities of an individual that we would describe as "religious." The object of James's interest is primarily the psychological state of *being religious*, as well as the means by which one might come to be in this state and in its practical effects. For him, the particular content of one's religious beliefs are not relevant to the analysis of the religious temperament as a psychological

---

[129] VRE, p.6

state.  James says of his investigation of this state that "not religious institutions, but rather religious feelings and religious impulses must be its subject, and I must confine myself to those more developed subjective phenomena recorded in literature produced by articulate and fully self-conscious men, in works of piety and autobiography."[130]

To that end, James looks primarily at documented cases of individual persons regarded as religious, especially those whom he describes as religious "pattern-setters."[131]  It is these individuals who represent what might be called the most recognizable and extreme manifestations of a religious attitude. For example, Paul, the apostle, or Francis of Assisi, along with their writings and/or actions, may serve as models for what would later become institutional religions.  James is particularly interested in these religious pioneers' accounts of the phenomena surrounding their "religious experience," which James argues is a unique kind of experience that is different from sensory or some other common experience.  He calls this experience "mystical" and describes it as subjective, indescribable feelings of great intensity which instills in the individual a sense of it being of profound importance and as having some direct connection to some supernatural or otherworldly being or reality.  Ultimately, he will argue that understanding such mystical experiences as key to understanding the nature of religious sentiment.

James is careful to explain the reasoning behind his deliberate focus on the accounts of individual religious pattern-setters, since he suspects his audience may be uncomfortable with his approach to the topic of religion, both from a religious and a scientific perspective.  First, he notes that some persons who are more versed in the theological side of religious matters may view his scientific or psychological assessment of religion as "a degradation of so sublime a subject, and may even suspect me, until my purpose gets more fully expressed, of deliberately

---

[130] VRE, p.6
[131] VRE, p.9

seeking to discredit the religious side of life."[132]  He addresses these concerns by distinguishing

his method of psychological analysis from the mindset of what he calls "medical materialism," or

what we might today call "reductive materialism."  On this account, which James describes as a

"method of discrediting states of mind for which we have an antipathy," one might attempt to

dismiss a religious attitude as illegitimate or unjustified by explaining its physical origin and thus

showing that religious attitudes in general are "'nothing but' expressions of our organic

disposition."[133]  James, however, is not trying to "explain away" the religious attitude by studying

the means of its creation from a psychological standpoint, since he holds firmly to a view that

giving a descriptive account of the origin of a given attitude has no effect on the value of holding

that attitude.  Indeed, since, as we will see later, James makes a association between mysticism

and supernaturalism, he will argue that an account of religious experience is inherently

irreducible in the materialist sense.

Another reason for James's turn away from investigating traditional religions is that he

believes that looking at the content of particular doctrines would distract from an understanding

of the value of being religious.  Recall that Dewey argues that a more scientifically-minded

public might be deterred from adopting a traditional religion due to the requirement to commit to

a doctrine which is inescapably unscientific.  James seems to agree with Dewey on this point, in

that he notes that a fixation on the epistemological problems of a religion may serve to hinder

one from discovering the value that may be obtained from having a religious attitude.  He points

to the Judeo-Christian Bible and argues that when considered as a physical and historical account

of the origin of the world and human civilization, it is demonstrably false.  Indeed, if we were to

assess the Bible solely on its historical inaccuracies, physical impossibilities, and the fact that it

---

[132] VRE, p.9
[133] VRE, p.15

was written by humans living in particular eras with particular human concerns, then, as James says, "the Bible would probably fare ill at our hands."[134]  Yet to dismiss the Bible on these grounds seems to ignore the value of the Bible from a moral and practical perspective.  Despite its inaccurate descriptive claims, the Bible may still be an influential text when understood as an account of particular cultures struggling with moral and social issues, many of which we continue to struggle with today.  As a pragmatist, James argues that the origin of a particular belief should not affect the value of holding that belief provided that it satisfies the pragmatic criteria of workability.  Hence, he says of a book like the Bible that it "may well be a revelation in spite of errors and passions and deliberate human composition, if only it be a true record of the inner experiences of great-souled persons wrestling with the crises of their fate…"[135]

James is not here advocating that the Bible, or any other particular religious document, *should* be considered influential.  He is instead arguing that we may fail to understand what influence religious beliefs have if we judge them primarily on the way in which one comes to believe them rather than on what practical effects believing them may have.  For example, we might be accused of "missing the point" of moral beliefs if we dismissed them based on the historical accuracy of their origins, just as we would be missing the point if we dismissed the moral of the parable of the Good Samaritan on the grounds that it never actually happened.

## James's Use of Individual Accounts of Mystical Experience

James might avoid accusations of irreverence regarding religious matters by distinguishing his scientific account from a reductive account, but he must also answer criticisms from the scientific side of the so-called "scientific-religious divide."  His use of subjective, anecdotal accounts as evidence may show medical materialism as inadequate, but he must also

---

[134] VRE, p.8
[135] VRE, p.8

address the fact that those accounts would not be regarded as legitimate by a modern scientific community.  To see how James's scientific account avoids the naive reductionism of medical materialism and how it is at odds with the practices of a more modern scientific community, we need to understand James's focus on individual accounts of religious or mystical experience, and particularly their descriptions of mystical experience.

Like Dewey, James recognizes that a common feature of persons who are described as religious is the enthusiastic attitude with which they view the universe and pursue moral goals. He claims that "[i]t makes a tremendous emotional and practical difference to one whether one accept the universe in the drab discolored way of stoic resignation to necessity, or with the passionate happiness of Christian saints."[136]  This optimistic attitude toward life and obstacles to one's goals is key to understanding religion.  That is, one's attitude toward the world has practical effects on one's willingness to overcome adversity to achieve a moral goal, and one identifying mark of a religious person is an especially fervent and committed attitude.  To this extent, then, James's account of religion seems to fit with that of Dewey.  We can also see some similarity between the two when James says that "[w]ere one asked to characterize the life of religion in the broadest and most general terms possible, one might say that it consists of the belief that there is an unseen order, and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude in the soul."[137]

While James's charming notion of religion here seems to dovetail with Dewey's notion of the religious attitude as "unifying the self with the Universe," he diverges from Dewey when his investigations of religion focus on the accounts and experiences of individual religious persons.  Unlike Dewey, his conclusions about the primacy of religious attitudes stem from his

---

[136] VRE, p.42
[137] VRE, p.53

observations of the reported effects of that attitude on the behavior and dispositions of religious "pattern-setters." He chooses to focus on these persons because he thinks that they represent the most extreme examples of religious sentiment. Thus, they provide the clearest understanding of the religious property by contrast with a more "normal" attitude. James says of this method that "we learn most about a thing when we view it under a microscope, as it were, or in its most exaggerated form. This is as true of religious phenomena as of any other kind of fact."[138]

Of particular interest to James in these accounts of individual religious attitudes is the descriptions of the origins of those attitudes. Many of the examples James provides recount a particular "conversion" moment or an experience which marked the beginning of what we would recognize as the religious attitude. A dramatic example of this kind of experience is the story of Paul's encounter with God on the road to Damascus. James notes that there is a common theme among these religious experiences, namely that they contain elements which seem to be inexplicable on what we would call a "strictly empirical basis." From his study of these so-called "mystical experiences," he concludes that they play a fundamental role in the formation of a religious attitude.

**The Properties of Mystical Experiences**

Mystical experiences, according to James's investigation of them, are identified by four criteria, three of which are particularly relevant to our discussion. First, mystical experiences are ineffable. Due to the subjective and qualitative nature of the experience, it is difficult or impossible for one to give a descriptive account of that experience. Just as we have difficulty giving a description of pain or color, mystical experience cannot be conveyed in words to one who has not had the experience. James says of mystical experience that "its quality must be

---

[138] VRE, p.40

directly experienced; it cannot be imparted or transferred to others. In this peculiarity mystical

states are more like states of feeling than like states of intellect."[139]

Second, mystical experiences are noetic; that is, the experiences seem to convey

information which was previously unknown to the subject.  Describing this property of mystical

experiences, James says that while they are "similar to states of feeling, mystical states seem to

those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths

of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of

significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with

them a curious sense of authority for after-time."[140]

One example which James gives that illustrates this concept is an experience of George

Fox, the founder of the Quaker movement.   James recounts an anecdote from Fox's journal in

which, upon arriving at the city of Lichfield, he experienced a hallucination of a river of blood

flowing through the streets.  This unexplained vision of blood provoked Fox to castigate the

inhabitants of the town as sinners.  Fox then noted that "afterwards I came to understand, that in

the Emperor Diocletian's time a thousand Christians were martyr'd in Lichfield,"[141] and suggests

that the hallucinations were God's way of imparting this heretofore unknown information.

Finally, mystical experiences are passive, in that they seem to be involuntary on the part

of those who experience them, and they seem to come from a source outside those individuals.

James writes that "when the characteristic sort of consciousness once has set in, the mystic feels

as if his own will were in abeyance, and indeed sometimes as if he were grasped and held by a

superior power."[142]  The passivity of mystical experience is important for James, since the

---

[139] VRE, p.370
[140] VRE, p.370
[141] VRE, p.11
[142] VRE, p.371

involuntary nature of the experience, combined with its ineffability, gives James his best argument for taking them as evidence of a supernatural source.

An example of passivity can be found in the account of Saint Augustine. In his *Confessions*, Augustine recalls his experience when, in the midst of a state of deep melancholy and despair, he:

> heard from a neighbouring house a voice, as of boy or girl, I know not, chanting, and oft repeating, 'Take up and read; Take up and read.' Instantly, my countenance altered, I began to think most intently whether children were wont in any kind of play to sing such words: nor could I remember ever to have heard the like. So checking the torrent of my tears, I arose; interpreting it to be no other than a command from God to open the book, and read the first chapter I should find.[143]

For Augustine, the implausibility that such a command would be delivered "from the mouths of babes," as well as his ineffable sensation that the message conveyed a feeling of momentous import, indicated to him that he was directed to act by a force both outside himself and outside the realm of sense experience.

Of these three criteria for mystical experiences, the noetic aspect is probably the most crucial for James, since the "otherworldly" nature of this imparted knowledge leads James to conclude that mystical states of consciousness are a unique source of knowledge which cannot be obtained by normal sensory means. Part of James's frustration with the medical materialists stems from the fact that by reducing the religious attitude to a merely materialist description they are not only dismissing the practical value of having a religious attitude but also willfully ignoring what James takes to be a potential avenue to knowledge which cannot be obtained from a purely empirical perspective.

---

[143] *Confessions*, Chapter XII

James may be justified in his criticisms of medical materialism, and indeed there are few philosophers or other intellectuals who still subscribe to the sort of naive reductionism that "medical materialism" names. The contemporary understanding of psychology and of the scientific method generally is robust enough that it can account for the psychological phenomena of so-called "mystical" experiences without "explaining away" their significance. However, the scientific community would likely take issue with James's use of anecdotal individual accounts of such experiences as evidence for what a strictly empiricist method would call "supernatural elements." As we discussed in the section on the epistemological problems of institutional religions, the body of scientific knowledge is built upon a methodology of rigorous testability, repeatability and shareability. While George Fox and Augustine may have attributed their experiences as apprehensions of or connections to God, these claims of what we might call "otherworldly influence" do not meet the criteria of scientific testability. Since these mystical experiences are ineffable, the subject of the experience cannot communicate any particular claims in a form which could be either verified or falsified. Furthermore, since the experiences are passive, they cannot be controlled or repeated, and any results derived from them could not be double-checked by peer review. Given that mystical experiences do not meet these standards of scientific rigor, we can see why a scientific population might be skeptical of James's claims about them. Indeed, in his defense of mystical experiences providing evidence of the "reality of the unseen," James might be accused of saying that subjects of mystical experience can claim a special access to truth, just as defenders of religious doctrine do when holding to the truth of their claims.

## **Justification of Mystical Experience as a Source of Knowledge**

James is certainly aware that his talk of mystical experiences may appear dubious to an audience with a strong commitment to empiricism. He anticipates accusations of hearsay and unreliability when he says that "[w]hether my treatment of mystical states will shed more light or darkness, I do not know, for my own constitution shuts me out from their enjoyment almost entirely, and I can speak of them only at second hand."[144] However, James would argue that his use of mystical experiences is not the same as defending religious doctrine "come what may," since he is not treating mystical experiences as evidence for any *particular* propositions. Although he claims the experiences are noetic, the alleged information conveyed is ineffable and thus cannot be articulated in propositional form. Rather, he is trying to give a pragmatic account of the effects of the experiences themselves, since, as James says, what determines the value of a belief should be "not its origin, but *the way in which it works on the whole*."[145] He goes on to say that it is "this criterion the stoutest insisters on supernatural origin have also been forced to use in the end."[146] While it may be the case that the content of a subject's mystical experience cannot be scientifically tested, few would be willing to doubt a subject's claims that he or she *had* such an experience. Since these experiences can have such a dramatic effect on the behaviors and personalities of those who have them, a pragmatic conception of truth demands that we consider the practical value to be gained by a subject incorporating that experience and the beliefs derived from it into his or her own own body of knowledge, even if the resulting beliefs are not shareable in the way that scientific knowledge can be shared.

---

[144] VRE, p.369
[145] VRE, p.21, emphasis his.
[146] VRE, p.22

Furthermore, although we may agree that the particular content of mystical experiences cannot be scientifically analyzed, they still might provide an insight into the nature of the universe and our place in it.  If James is correct that mystical experiences are noetic, that is, a source of information or knowledge that was heretofore unknown, then the reception of information in this way is perhaps evidence pointing to the existence of some "unseen reality."  However, because of the passive nature of the experience, wherein the subject feels a powerlessness in the presence of a "superior power," and the indescribable way in which the information is conveyed, we might be led to conclude that the experience was caused by some unseen power which cannot be described on a standard empirical model.  If the occurrence of mystical experiences entails the existence of a reality greater than what is describable in empiricist terms, then that fact by itself ought to be recognized, even if no further conclusions about that part of reality can be drawn.

James, however, does draw further conclusions about such experiences.  He argues that the recognition of the unseen is important not only because of its influence on individual behavior but because of its prevalence in society.  While admitting that such experiences are rare, he points out that most people have likely had an experience which resembles the mystical to some extent.  One example of an experience that he calls a "more pronounced step forward on the mystical ladder" is the phenomenon of *deja vu*, which James describes as "that sudden feeling, namely, which sometimes sweeps over us, of having 'been here before,' as if at some indefinite past time, in just this place, with just these people, we were already saying just these things."[147]  Someone who has experienced *deja vu* does not merely become aware of having repeated oneself.  Rather, the experience feels more like an epiphany, or a profound realization of a prophecy fulfilled.  He would not classify the *deja vu* experience as being on the same level

---

[147] VRE, p.373

of importance as mystical experience, nor would he necessarily attribute its origin to an otherworldly power. Nevertheless, those who have experienced it can recognize that such feelings can be evocative in that they can have an emotional impact in a way reminiscent of a mystical experience. As pragmatists, then, we must at least attempt to understand the role that mystical experiences play in directing one's behavior.

There will be more to say later about James's reliance on mystical experiences to form an understanding of religious attitudes, particularly when we examine the Deweyan critique of James's formulation of religion. However, we will say at this point that for the purposes of presenting his argument, James has at least given a *prima facie* case for counting mystical experiences as evidence for his position, while acknowledging the dubious status that the idea of the mystical has in the scientific community.

## **Providing a Definition of Religion**

Like Dewey, James is reluctant to give a concrete definition of "religion." He observes that the many belief systems which are called religions are so varied that "the word 'religion' cannot stand for any single principle or essence, but is rather a collective name."[148] He instead focuses on "religious sentiments," which he describes as "concrete states of mind, made up of a feeling PLUS a specific sort of object," namely an object which qualifies as religious. We can see that this understanding of religious sentiment has clear similarities to Dewey's descriptions of religious attitudes as normal attitudes to which the modifier of "religious" is applied. As examples of such attitudes, James points to notions of religious love, religious fear and religious awe, saying that, "religious love is only man's natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the

---

[148] VRE, p.28

same organic thrill which we feel in a forest at twilight, or in a mountain gorge; only this time it comes over us at the thought of our supernatural relations."[149]

A definition of religious sentiment as a sentiment with a religious object naturally demands that we also have a clear understanding of what may count as a religious object. James's use of language such as "belief in an unseen order" and "our supreme good" in describing religion resembles Dewey's notion of religious objects in the sense that Dewey's religious objects are the interpretive lens around which one builds an understanding of the universe and unifies one's self with it.  However, James seems to argue that a Deweyan notion of religious objects would be insufficient.  He appears to anticipate Dewey's treatment of religion by offering for consideration a possible definition of religion, saying that "a man's religion might thus be identified with his attitude, whatever it might be, toward what he felt to be the primal truth."[150]  He then asks with obvious skepticism, "Religion, whatever it is, is a man's total reaction upon life, so why not say that any total reaction upon life is a religion?"

Such a definition, James argues, is unacceptable.  If any total reaction upon life can count as a religion, then an attitude of pervasive cynicism and nihilism would count as religious.  But, he writes, that "would strain the ordinary use of language too much to call such attitudes religious, even though, from the point of view of an unbiased critical philosophy, they might conceivably be perfectly reasonable ways of looking upon life."[151]  Indeed, it would seem strange to say that a person could believe in the utter meaninglessness of life and the universe with religious fervor, since the intensity of that belief would itself imply that the believer thinks there is something worth believing in.  Thus, a religious attitude at least must be a positive one regarding the nature of the universe, and its object must be something which one can assign

[149] VRE, p.29
[150] VRE, p.36
[151] VRE, p.37

importance so as to inspire progressive action. On this basic notion of religion, James says that "[f]or common men 'religion,' whatever more special meanings it may have, signifies always a SERIOUS state of mind. If any one phrase could gather its universal message, that phrase would be, 'All is not vanity in this Universe, whatever the appearances may suggest.'"[152]

The definition of religion that James formulates takes these basic requirements for a proper religion into account. However, based on his investigations into mystical experiences and the profound role that they played in producing a religious attitude in their subjects, James concludes that a definition of religion should also account for those mystical aspects. With these ideas in mind, he sets forth a definition that he thinks will capture the essence of religion based upon the subjective experiences of individuals and what they interpret to be of great importance as a result of those experiences. Thus he defines religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine."[153]

## **Distinguishing James's Definition of Religion From Dewey's**

At first glance, this definition would seem to be in line with a Deweyan notion of religious attitudes. If we suppose that the phrase "whatever they consider the divine" refers to an object not unlike the life-orienting moral ideal identified in a Deweyan conception of religious attitudes, then we could imagine that the "feelings, acts, and experiences" of a Jamesian religious person as they relate to a chosen notion of the divine describes the same sort of attitude as a Deweyan religious person as they relate to a chosen unifying principle.

However, as we covered earlier in the Jamesian critique of Dewey's definition, James would not consider such a moral ideal to qualify as a religious attitude. This disqualification is

---

[152] VRE, p.38
[153] VRE, p.32

based upon what James means by the term "divine". He says that "we must interpret the term 'divine' very broadly, as denoting any object that is god-LIKE, whether it be a concrete deity or not."[154] Since the religious attitude is developed at a personal level, we may understand the quality "god-like" to be based on one's estimation of what object of belief is of sufficient sublime importance and gravity to be religious. If so, we may conclude that for James, some Deweyan attitudes might not qualify as being religious because their objects are not the sort of thing that are, or could be, believed with a sufficient level of *seriousness*. For example, recall the case of the naturally pious person versus the steward of the earth. James might argue that the naturally pious person is less motivated to pursue goals long-term because he or she does not ascribe the same level of divinity to the environmental ideals in question as does the steward of the earth. In other words, James thinks that the naturally pious person does not treat those ideals with the same seriousness as the steward believes they warrant.

Of course, it is extremely difficult to gauge the seriousness or sincerity of another's religious beliefs. James seems to recognize the problem with making such an assessment, which may be one reason why he decided to focus on religious pioneers. He says that the question of "whether a state of mind is 'religious,' or 'irreligious,' or 'moral,' or 'philosophical,' is only likely to arise when the state of mind is weakly characterized, but in that case it will be hardly worthy of our study at all."[155] There is no danger of what we might call "false positives" when assessing the states of mind of religious pioneers, since they are "cases where the religious spirit is unmistakable and extreme."[156] Since he takes pioneers as the model for religious attitudes, it would be understandable that he might regard Deweyan attitudes as being wanting in seriousness.

---

[154] VRE, p.35
[155] VRE, p.40
[156] VRE, p.40

Another note to make about James's use of "divine" is with regard to mystical experiences. Besides providing clear examples of religious attitudes, the religious pioneers that James examines share the trait of having reported having a mystical experience. While these experiences are not necessarily similar in content, they do, according to James, seem to require the existence of a world beyond that which can be described in empirical terms. Thus, he says that a view of the universe which does not take into account this greater universe evidenced by mystical experiences is incomplete. If we may say that for both Dewey and James a religious attitude represents a way of relating oneself to the universe, James would probably argue that a given attitude should not be considered religious if the universe with which one unifies the self is "too small" to account for the *whole* universe.

**Jamesian Religion Versus Traditional Religion**

Although James describes his definition of religion as being open-ended and inclusive, those who hold to a particular institutional religion may feel that their religion is excluded from this definition. For example, someone who takes Christianity and Islam to be examples of religions might understandably think that "whatever one considers the divine" is a far cry from the doctrines of these traditional religions.

James does seem to accommodate a more traditional conception of religion insofar as he accounts for the value of mystical experience, which is a component of many existing religions. However, he makes it clear throughout *Varieties* that he does not have traditional religions in mind when he investigates the nature of religion, stating that he intends to "ignore the institutional branch entirely, to say nothing of the ecclesiastical organization, to consider as little as possible the systematic theology and the ideas about the gods themselves, and to confine myself as far as I can to personal religion pure and simple."[157] He goes on to say that

---

[157] VRE, p.31

"[c]hurches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the FOUNDERS of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine."[158] Followers of an established religion, then, are likely not religious in the Jamesian sense, because the beliefs that they call religious are not developed by way of a personal relation to their own individual ideas of the divine. Rather, they are "merely" adhering to beliefs which were derived from the beliefs of someone else who *was* religious.

Indeed, it would seem that no "established religion" would count as a religion on this definition, simply by virtue of being derivative of its founder's beliefs. By basing his observations about religion primarily on religious pioneers and the mystical experiences that they reported, James seems to conclude that a given person's religion is an attitude which must be shaped and formed to a large extent *as a result of* one's mystical experience. Finally, it is not likely that a person who has such an experience will form a "notion of the divine developed in his or her solitude" which closely matches the doctrine of any already existing institutional religion.

Furthermore, the importance which James places on the mystical experience for the formation of one's religious attitude seems to suggest that someone who has not had such a mystical experience could not be "truly" religious. These factors taken together seem to lead us to conclude that traditional religions such as Christianity do not qualify as religious, according to James's definition, since the doctrine which identifies a particular religion was not developed by each follower of that religion individually, nor is it likely that those followers had a mystical experience in the process of adopting the religion.

As a pragmatist, James's interest in religion lies in its practical value, both as a source of motivation through the intensity of one's beliefs and as a potential source of truth through one's

---

[158] VRE, p.32

personal and ineffable "communion with the divine."[159]  Since both of these values are

exemplified in his chosen examples of religious pioneers, he reasonably determines that there

would be little value in studying the "ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional

observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has

been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by

imitation, and retained by habit."[160]  He therefore concludes that it would "profit us little to study

this second-hand religious life."[161]

However, such a conclusion almost certainly would not be acceptable to members of

religions like Christianity, who would probably consider themselves "first-hand" religious

believers.  Even if James describes the beliefs of a member of a traditional religion as a "dull

habit" in comparison to the "acute fever" of a religious pioneer, the definition of religion that he

derives from those pioneers appears to rule out the overwhelming majority of persons who

believe themselves religious.  Furthermore, since a person's religion is dependent upon a passive

mystical experience, the process of becoming religious would seem to be open to very few, since

most persons have never had nor never will have a mystical experience.  Given the ubiquity of

what is recognized as religion in our society, a definition of religion which makes it both

exceedingly rare and involuntary must be inadequate or at least questionable.

James likely would disagree with the assessment that his definition marginalizes the vast

majority of self-proclaimed religious believers.  Indeed, in his earlier work "The Will to Believe"

he seems much more supportive of the institutional religions that he appears to denigrate in

*Varieties*.  He describes "The Will to Believe" as "an essay in justification *of* faith, a defence of

our right to adopt a believing attitude in religious matters, in spite of the fact that our merely

---

[159] VRE, p.32
[160] VRE, p.9
[161] VRE, p.9

logical intellect may not have been coerced."[162]  Although he remains vague on what "religious"

matters" may denote, his use of Christianity, Islam and Buddhism to illustrate his points

throughout suggests that he considers such traditional religions to qualify as religious.  To see if

and/or how the quality of "religious" might be applied to the "ordinary religious believer," then,

we should investigate what James describes as a process by which a non-pattern-setting religious

person might come to adopt a religion.

## James's Criteria for Choosing a Religion

"The Will to Believe" is a component of James's epistemology which describes a general

method for justifying belief in propositions for which our usual scientific method cannot

account.  He remarks that our methods of empiricism are usually effective for avoiding

unjustified beliefs.  However, there are some situations in which strict empiricism cannot provide

us justification for otherwise acceptable beliefs, either because that justification cannot be

obtained through empirical methods alone, or because the act of believing a certain proposition is

a necessary condition for its truth.  James argues that in such situations, our rational interest in

avoiding error may go too far in that it cuts us off from important human goods out of the fear of

uncertainty; that is, the fear that we may be wrong.  Thus, he proposes that when one is presented

with a choice to either believe or disbelieve some claim, or what James calls a hypothesis, and

that decision cannot be determined solely on rational or evidential grounds, one may be justified

in making the decision on "passional" grounds, provided certain conditions are met.  First, the

hypothesis must be a *living option*; that is, a decision about a claim which the person in question

plausibly considers to be potentially true.  One of his examples is that of the decision to believe

or not believe in the Mahdi, the messianic figure in some branches of Islam.  This decision, he

says, is probably not a living option for most Americans, since people raised in America are

---

[162] "Will to Believe," p.1

unlikely to be acquainted enough with Islamic doctrine and culture that they would consider belief in the Mahdi to be even a possibility.  "To an Arab, however," says James, "the hypothesis is among the mind's possibilities: it is alive."[163]

Second, the decision must be *forced*, in that one is compelled to make a choice in the matter without deferring judgement.  For example, James says that the command "Either love me or hate me," is not a forced option, since there are alternative choices besides the two choices offered:  "You may remain indifferent to me, neither loving nor hating," and thus avoid the decision.[164]  However, the command to "love me or don't love me" *would* be forced, since even the act of deferring judgement would be a choice to not love.

Finally, the decision must be *momentous*, in that the choice is highly important and carries something valuable that stands to be gained or lost by the choice.  James suggests that an offer to join an expedition to the North Pole would be one such momentous option, both because it has the potential to be a unique, enriching experience and because it is unlikely that an offer like that will ever come again.  The momentous quality is especially important for James, since he views these moments as the most pivotal in shaping both the lives of individuals and the course of history.  Given how glad we are in retrospect that *some* people agreed to explore the North Pole even if we ourselves would not, there is much of value that could be lost if everyone were to refrain from such decisions out of an abundance of caution.  As James says, "[h]e who refuses to embrace a unique opportunity loses the prize as surely as if he tried and failed."[165]

James calls a hypothesis which meets all of these criteria a "genuine option," and says that only these options may be decided on passional grounds when the usual rational and empirical methods are not helpful or available.  An excellent analogy of a genuine option in a

---

[163] WTB, p.2
[164] WTB, p.3
[165] WTB, p.4

non-religious context is the decision whether or not to propose marriage to one's significant

other. Although someone might have some reasons to believe that a marriage between oneself

and his or her loved one would be a happy and successful one, there is ultimately no amount of

empirical evidence one could obtain which would determine with certainty that the marriage

would be successful before one "takes the plunge." Yet we would say that the question of

whether to marry is too momentous to reject outright, since the potential joy to be had from such

a life-changing arrangement would be too valuable to not at least consider. Furthermore, the

claim "Our marriage will be a happy one" cannot be true unless the proposer first believes it to

be true. This is not to say that simply believing the marriage will be happy will make it true, but

in this example the proposer's belief that the marriage will be happy is a prerequisite for there to

be any marriage at all.

## **Will to Believe Applied to Religion**

James then argues that the decision to adopt a religion can qualify as a genuine option.

The decision he has in mind is not that of choosing any particular religion, since the religion that

any individual might consider plausible to adopt will differ depending on his or her cultural

upbringing and attitude towards that religion; it might even depend upon an accident of

geography. Rather, he proposes a set of general propositions which he believes would apply to

any religion. The "religious hypothesis," as he calls it, consists of two claims. First is the claim

that ""the best things are the more eternal things, the overlapping things, the things in the

universe that throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the final word."[166] We can see some

parallels between this description of religion, or specifically the objects of religious belief, and

his later definition in *Varieties*. Since James leaves it somewhat to each individual to determine

which things are "the more eternal things," it is likely that he had in mind the same sorts of

---

[166] WTB, p.25

things as those which individuals "in their solitude… consider the divine."  The second claim, which introduces the pragmatic aspect of the hypothesis, is that "we are better off even now if we believe [the] first affirmation to be true."[167]

James argues that these claims taken together present a genuine option for those who consider it a living option.  First, the claims cannot be assessed on rational grounds alone, since their content lies outside the scope of human experience.  Second, individuals who consider them a living option must either choose to believe or not believe them (forced), and there are tangible benefits to be lost by not believing them (momentous).  James then concludes that an individual is therefore justified in believing the religious hypothesis based on the practical consequences that would result from accepting them as true.

By this method, then, James may offer a way to answer the criticism that his definition of religion in *Varieties* appears to exclude institutions like Christianity and the majority of believers from the categories of "religion" and "religious," respectively.  Defenders of James might argue that although those who use the method of deliberately willing to believe a particular religion may not have had a mystical experience which was pivotal to the development of religious belief in the pioneers that James investigates, they do assign the quality of "divine" importance to the same sorts of objects as those pioneers.  Indeed, in the case of institutions whose doctrines are derived from a religious pioneer, the objects considered divine are the same as those of the pioneer whose notion of the divine *did* develop as a result of their mystical experience.  Thus, the quality of "religious" is still accessible to these "second-hand" believers, even if it might be with a lesser degree of intensity than experienced by the religious pioneer.  As we will see later, however, this solution raises further complications when we try to understand the conflict between Dewey's and James's respective accounts of religion.

---

[167] WTB, p.26

**Critique of James's View on Religion**

One advantage of James's method of willing to believe is that it allows one to adopt a religion while avoiding the stigma of unjustified belief that can be associated with most traditional religions. Many critics of institutional religions have denigrated the so-called "leap of faith" of religious belief as an act of irresponsible belief because of insufficient evidence, or worse, because it provides a means to believe anything without any justification whatsoever. James's willing to believe, he thinks, is not such a case of unjustified belief. He is careful to note that we should follow evidence and reason as far as they will carry us, and only when our usual methods of seeking truth fail us do we consider the possibility of embracing so-called "genuine options." In the case of our earlier analog, the person considering proposing marriage to his or her loved one likely has some evidential support for the belief that their marriage would produce a good result, such as the evidence gathered during the time spent dating, their relationship compatibility, and their financial situation. While there is not enough support to decide the matter with certainty, the prospect of marrying a loved one has justification in a way that the prospect of marrying a stranger, for example, does not.

However, this solution to the problem of justification of belief creates another problem, namely that it is unlikely that most traditional religions would consider the adoption of their doctrine by this method as legitimate. They require that their adherents not only act in accordance with the propositions put forth in their respective doctrines but also that they genuinely assert the objective truth of those propositions without regard to the practical benefits of believing them. Advocates of these institutions might argue that someone who adopts a religion based on the potential good consequences which could result from doing so would be "believing for the wrong reasons," or worse, that he or she does not "really mean it."

James responds to the issue of insincere belief in his discussion of Pascal's Wager. He describes Pascal's argument for the existence of God and more particularly the Catholic faith in this way: If "there were an infinity of chances, and only one for God in this wager, still you ought to stake your all on God; for though you surely risk a finite loss by this procedure, any finite loss is reasonable, even a certain one is reasonable, if there is but the possibility of infinite gain."[168] James then sarcastically adds, "Go, then, and take holy water, and have masses said; belief will come and stupefy your scruples… Why should you not? At bottom, what have you to lose?"[169]

James notes that this argument is cold and unappealing to anyone who is not already convinced of the truth of the religion in question. To a skeptical audience, it comes across not as a reasonable consideration of probability, but as a cynical ploy to convert the unconverted with a logical trick. James says that "[s]urely Pascal's own personal belief in masses and holy water had far other springs; and this celebrated page of his is but an argument for others, a last desperate snatch at a weapon against the hardness of the unbelieving heart."[170]

Even if we leave out Pascal's intent, the Wager is still problematic as a justification of belief, since the judgement of any person who claimed to use this method to come to belief would be suspect. First, the method, to the extent that it works, would apply equally to any religion, not just Pascal's Catholicism. One who used this method to adopt a religion which just happened to fit comfortably with the religious beliefs of his or her ingrained culture would probably be accused of using it as an after-the-fact rationalization rather than as an impartial calculation. On this point James argues that "unless there be some pre-existing tendency to

---

[168] WTB, p.5
[169] WTB, p.6
[170] WTB, p.6

believe in masses and holy water, the option offered to the will by Pascal is not a living option. Certainly no Turk ever took to masses and holy water on its account."[171]

Furthermore, it is difficult to imagine that one who arbitrarily chose a religion using this method could accept the truth of that religion's doctrine, "whatever that is," with the sincerity and *universe-orienting intensity* usually associated with religious belief. Indeed, James states that "a faith in masses and holy water adopted wilfully after such a mechanical calculation would lack the inner soul of faith's reality; and if we were ourselves in the place of the Deity, we should probably take particular pleasure in cutting off believers of this pattern from their infinite reward."[172]

Even though there appears to be some parallels between the will to believe and Pascal's Wager, in that both are arguments concerning one's belief in something with consideration to the practical benefits of believing it, James would argue that his own method of justifying the adoption of a religion does not suffer from the same flaws as Pascal's. While he agrees that Pascal's method is problematic, he argues that a large part of the general rejection of Pascal by the empirical and rational community stems from a rejection of the concept of willful belief. He says that "[t]he talk of believing by our volition seems, then, from one point of view, simply silly. From another point of view it is worse than silly, it is vile."[173] Indeed, the idea that one could believe something to be true through force of will seems counterintuitive to what we know about how beliefs are formed. For example, it is unlikely that a person might thoughtfully ponder the prospect of converting to Catholicism, impartially weigh its pros and cons, and then *decide* to believe in the existence of something like transubstantiation or the divinity of Jesus.

---

[171] WTB, p.6
[172] WTB, p.6
[173] WTB, p.7

James believes that when the concept of volitional belief is framed in this way, Pascal's Catholic calculation seems outrageous and borders on the grossest kind of relativism. However, he argues that such outrage is not necessarily in reaction to the idea of volitional belief itself, since beliefs formed on passional grounds are already deeply embedded in our bodies of belief. Our upbringing in a particular culture, with its biases and values, as well as our emotional attachment to those values, has produced in us a wide-ranging belief system based on largely passional choices. James observes that "all of us believe in molecules and the conservation of energy, in democracy and necessary progress, in Protestant Christianity and the duty of fighting for 'the doctrine of the immortal Monroe,' all for no reasons worthy of the name."[174] That is, we hold to those ideas not because of our conclusions based on the available evidence, but because our culture has instilled in us a natural preference for them. The reason we might object to the adoption of any of these concepts or their alternatives on passional grounds, James says, is only because we have *already* adopted them on passional grounds in the past. He notes that it is "only our already dead hypotheses that our willing nature is unable to bring to life again. But what has made them dead for us is for the most part a previous action of our willing nature of an antagonistic kind."[175]

With this notion of volitional belief in mind, James seems to argue that Pascal's Wager is not as outrageous as it may appear. It is true that it would be strange for someone to adopt Catholicism via Pascal's Wager "sight unseen," or adopting it after having rejected it previously. But for a person with exposure to the ideas and doctrines of Catholicism and whose previous beliefs incline him or her favorably toward the possibility of believing in it, the conscious decision to adopt that religion seems more plausible. James explains that there are "passional

---

[174] WTB, p.9
[175] WTB, p.8

tendencies and volitions which run before and others which come after belief, and it is only the latter that are too late for the fair; and they are not too late when the previous passional work has been already in their own direction. Pascal's argument, instead of being powerless, then seems a regular clincher, and is the last stroke needed to make our faith in masses and holy water complete."[176]

James's explanation here need not be taken as a defense of Pascal's Wager, since to call the argument "a regular clincher" still suggests that the argument does not stand on its own. That is, it would go against the spirit of the argument to suggest that the simple mathematical conclusion to adopt Catholicism is only entailed when the audience was already on the verge of being convinced by other means. James's point, rather, is to explain why Pascal's argument might hold sway for one who considers Catholicism a genuine option. Skeptical empiricists who reject the argument do not necessarily do so because it is an example of willing to believe without evidence. "For them the evidence is absolutely sufficient," says, James, "only it makes the other way. They believe so completely in an anti-christian order of the universe that there is no living option: Christianity is a dead hypothesis from the start."[177]

James may have alleviated some of the concerns regarding volitional belief, but it is not clear that he has escaped the accusation of what institutional religions might regard as insincere belief. Even if one were to agree with second claim of the religious hypothesis which states that "we are better off even now" if we believe the first claim to be true, it is important to understand that James has in mind a different notion of beneficial consequences than Pascal. Rather than an undefinable reward in a theoretical afterlife, he is thinking of visible practical effects that adopting a religious attitude has in lived experience, both in terms of the positive disposition and

---

[176] WTB, p.11
[177] WTB, p.14

peace of mind that he observes in those with a "saintly" character and in the effects that such an attitude has on others.   However, even if we allow that these practical benefits are a plausible justification for adopting the religious hypothesis, proponents of religious institutions would probably argue that this method of belief is not sufficient for adopting *their* religion.  As we have discussed in previous sections, a core aspect of many institutional religions is that assent to the objective and immutable truth of the doctrine they espouse is of ultimate importance.  One could argue that a person who adopts a religion by rationally establishing all the criteria of a genuine option and then embracing that religious option believed to be the one which would produce the best consequences does not seem to be committed to the truth of its doctrine with the intensity expected of "religious faith."

Such accusations of insincerity on the part of religious institutions may be partially explained by the presence of incompatible conceptions of truth.  Recall that on a pragmatist conception, truth and usefulness are inextricably linked.  Pragmatists call a claim true because it is useful to act as though it were true, and they stand ready to no longer call a claim true when they discover upon further review that it is not useful to so act.  There is no stigma, then, for a pragmatist to believe something because of its beneficial consequences or usefulness, because that is simply what the term "believe" means.

Many religious institutions, however, hold a different conception of truth and belief. That is, they place an emphasis on holding to the objective truth of certain claims regardless of the practical consequences of doing so.  Moreover, a part of what it means for an institution to be "dogmatic" is that it adheres to the truth of its doctrine not only without what empiricists would call sufficient evidence but also in spite of counterevidence.  From a pragmatist standpoint, such dogmatic beliefs can be *counterproductive* and therefore must be rejected when they conflict

with our eminently useful body of scientific knowledge. From a religious institution's perspective, however, the pragmatist's version of will to believe as an explanation for one's choice of religion might be considered "believing for the wrong reasons" since one who uses this method has implicitly acknowledged that the *objective* truth of the doctrine in question is secondary to the benefits that come from believing it. This need not be seen as a problem for the will to believe as a method but rather as a fundamental disagreement between pragmatism and institutional religions about the meaning of "belief." However, since it appears that institutions in this case "set the rules" when it comes to belief, those institutions which have a definition of belief that is incompatible with pragmatism may be able to say that willing to believe does not "count."

The argument in "Will to Believe" seems to be phrased in such a way as to give a justification for people who adopt a traditional religion. But one problem that willing to believe may have when applied to institutional religions is that the generality of the religious hypothesis makes it difficult to relate to the doctrine of any particular religion. James is right that the religious hypothesis must be "very generic and broad" when discussing religion on the whole. However, that broadness also means it cannot be applied in the practical context of adopting a particular religion. For example, one's justification for James's belief that "the best things are the more eternal things" does not entail a justification for belief in "masses and holy water." Furthermore, it is not likely that a proponent of Catholicism would accept that one's professed belief that "perfection is eternal" qualifies as an adoption of the Catholic faith. This is not a problem for the religious hypothesis considered by itself, but it is a problem when an argument for James's religious hypothesis is taken as a substitute for an argument for a particular religious doctrine.

**Will to Believe and Religious Pioneers**

However, there remains the problem of the great disparity in the intensity of religious belief between these "ordinary religious believers" and religious pioneers. Recall that for James, what makes the attitudes of religious pioneers noteworthy compared to non-pioneers is the peculiar intensity with which they are devoted to their religious beliefs, as well as the transformation of character associated with that devotion. This devotion, James argues, is intimately tied to an experience which he calls "mystical." Furthermore, he suggests that ordinary religious believers, who have not had such a mystical experience and who seem "dull" and unmotivated in comparison to religious pioneers, lack such an experience, saying that "[c]hurches, when once established, live at second-hand upon tradition; but the FOUNDERS of every church owed their power originally to the fact of their direct personal communion with the divine."[178] Someone who uses the will to believe method to adopt a "second-hand" religion, according to James, will not have that transformative experience that makes the religious attitudes of pioneers psychologically interesting for James in *Varieties*. If so, then there is still a problem with classifying the majority of members of religions as "religious," since by not having a mystical experience they lack a component essential to a proper religious attitude.

One way in which defenders of James could respond to this problem would be to acknowledge that ordinary believers lack the mystical experience of religious pioneers, but argue that such believers can still claim a connection to the mystical experience from which their religion was derived. That is, even if they live "second-hand upon tradition," that tradition or doctrine was formed as a result of the founder's claims to a "divine communion." Such a mystical experience by proxy would not have the same dramatic intensity as the one experienced

---

[178] VRE, p.32

by the religious pioneer, but it would allow a Jamesian to account for the essential religious criterion of mystical experience in institutional religions.

To see how this connection between first-hand and second-hand religion could be made, it may be helpful to understand more about how knowledge is communicated in James's theory of truth. In *The Meaning of Truth*, he makes a distinction between what he calls "acquaintance knowledge" and "knowledge about." He describes "acquaintance knowledge" as sensations and information as they are directly experienced by an individual, or as "familiarity with what is known."[179] Examples of this kind of knowledge would be the knowledge of how to ride a bicycle or the experience of a toothache. "Knowledge about" is information after it has been interpreted and categorized into a form which can be communicated to others. This latter type of knowledge, James says, is "what we express in judgments or propositions."[180]

He criticizes his philosophical contemporaries for dismissing the notion of acquaintance knowledge; since it, like mystical experiences, cannot be expressed in propositions, there is a tendency to ignore it or regard it as unimportant. James notes that "[i]t is always the 'speechlessness' of sensation, its inability to make any 'statement,' that is held to make the very notion of it meaningless, and to justify the student of knowledge in scouting it out of existence."[181] Yet, acquaintance knowledge does have meaning, which we can see in the practical effects of those who have it. We can determine if a person knows how to ride a bicycle by measuring how often he or she falls off of one, and we can tell if someone has a toothache by comparing his or her behavior to our own when we have a toothache. Indeed, the only way we can make sense of the proposition "I have a toothache" is by making reference to our own acquaintance with toothaches. James says that the only way we can communicate ideas in

---

[179] *The Meaning of Truth*, p.11
[180] TMT, p.12
[181] TMT, p.13

propositions is through "nothing but the mutual resemblance of those of our perceptual feelings which have this power of modifying one another, which are mere dumb knowledges-of-acquaintance, and which must also resemble their realities or not know them aright at all. In such pieces of knowledge-of-acquaintance all our knowledge-about must end, and carry a sense of this possible termination as part of its content."[182]

This necessary reference to acquaintance knowledge explains why we cannot convey the concept of the color blue to someone born without sight, since he or she has no reference for the terms we use to describe colors.  To someone who is familiar with colors, however, we might be able to convey the unfamiliar color *gamboge* by referring to other familiar concepts, such as by describing it as "a bright orange with a hint of yellow".  Likewise, someone who has never experienced a toothache might still understand the gist of the concept if we describe it as "like an ache elsewhere on the body, but in the tooth and gums".

Defenders of James could relate his epistemological insights to his notion of second-hand religion by arguing that while members of an institutional religion do not have the mystical experience of its founder, the value of that religious pioneer's mystical experience is evidenced by the pioneer's actions.  Furthermore, a religion's doctrine, which is shaped in part by the pioneer's actions, may be a way to convey a partial understanding of that inaccessible mystical experience by describing it in terms with which others may be more familiar.  Such a description would of course lack the same intensity as the direct mystical experience, just as someone's idea of gamboge after reading a description of it is incomplete until he or she looks it up on a color table.[183]  However, a religion might still be said to provide believers with the best possible account of a mystical experience without them having one directly, provided that the religion can

---

[182] TMT, p.38
[183] http://www.colorhexa.com/e49b0f

maintain a historical connection to the original founder's mystical experience. Hence, a Jamesian could argue in this way that ordinary members of a religion count as religious on James's model, although to a lesser degree than the religious pioneers from whom they receive the mystical experience second-hand.

**Deweyan Critique of James**

While this argument might answer some criticisms of James's system of religion, new problems emerge when we compare James's notion of religious attitudes to Dewey's notion of them. Recall that in the section on Dewey, we said that the Jamesian critique of Dewey's system would be that Deweyan attitudes ought not to count as religious because they lack the intensity and persistence of those found in other religions. Furthermore, this relative lack of intensity could be explained by the absence of supernatural elements in the religious attitude, which James identifies as the mystical experience. However, on the one hand, if ordinary members of a religious institution are permitted to count as religious despite a relative lack of intensity compared to religious pioneers, then the threshold of intensity needed for a religious attitude would seem to fall short of the level set by James. Certainly some amount of intensity is required in order to qualify, since even on Dewey's account one's beliefs must be important enough that they fundamentally shape one's understanding of the universe. However, that amount of intensity seems to be a higher bar to reach than that of James's average second-hand religionist.

If, on the other hand, we say that Deweyan attitudes are not genuinely religious solely because of a lack of supernatural elements, then the question of what is religious no longer depends on the motivational power and practical effectiveness of one's attitude, but rather on the truth or falsity of particular ontological beliefs attached to those attitudes. This would mean that

an institution's status as a second-hand religion would depend on whether its doctrine is an accurate portrayal of the content of its founder's mystical experience, or even more problematic, on whether the founder had a mystical experience at all.  For example, suppose we were to discover historical evidence that the founder of a particular institutional religion was in fact a charlatan who merely pretended to have a mystical experience to attract followers.  In such a case, we might conclude, on the one hand, that the second-hand believers in what were heretofore religions were never religious in the first place, since their beliefs were not derived from a legitimate mystical experience.  On the other hand, we might conclude that those believers who deny the historical evidence of the fraud--that is, those who cling to their doctrine dogmatically--continue to be regarded as religious while those who accept the clear evidence that the so-called "pioneer" is a charlatan do not.  While situations like this might be unlikely, it suggests that a criterion for the quality of religious which is based primarily on the presence of supernatural elements, rather than on the practical effects of believing something religiously, would wholly separate religion from any *pragmatic* considerations.

Although we have here framed the hypothetical dispute between James and Dewey as being over whether mystical experience is a necessary component of religious attitudes, it should be noted that Dewey does not deny the value of the individual accounts of mystical experiences that James investigates in *Varieties*.  He agrees with James that those experiences are crucial for understanding the subsequent transformation of character and attitude in those who had them. He does argue, however, that those experiences need not be *mystical*, in the sense in which James understands that term.

Even though Dewey does not refer to James directly or use the term "mystical" when he discusses religious experience, he does seem to have James in mind when he says that "at present

there is much talk, especially in liberal circles, of religious experience as vouching for the

authenticity of certain beliefs and the desirability of certain practices, such as particular forms of

prayer and worship.  It is even asserted that religious experience is the ultimate basis of religion

itself."[184]  He further relates this line of thinking to James by noting that this interest in religious

experience is connected with the very Jamesian idea of applying empiricism and the scientific

method to matters of religion.  He says that just as empiricists "rely upon certain kinds of

experience to prove the existence of certain kinds of objects, so the religionists rely upon a

certain kind of experience to prove the existence of the object of religion, especially the supreme

object, God."[185]  If we substitute the more nuanced term "God" for James's more general notion

of "the divine," we can see that Dewey appears to be describing James's argument for taking the

passive, ineffable mystical experience as evidence for a supernatural reality.

Dewey then argues that these experiences can be understood and recognized as having

pragmatic value without necessarily positing the existence of a higher reality.  He recounts an

anecdote of an individual's claims to having a religious experience, much like the kind that

James explores throughout *Varieties*:

> I broke down from overwork and soon came to the verge of nervous prostration.  One
>
> morning after a long and sleepless night . . . I resolved to stop drawing upon myself so
>
> continuously and begin drawing upon God.  I determined to set apart a quiet time every
>
> day in which I could relate my life to its ultimate source, regain the consciousness that in
>
> God I live, move and have my being.  That was thirty years ago.  Since then I have had
>
> literally not one hour of darkness or despair.[186]

---

[184] CF, p.10

[185] CF, p.11

[186] CF. p.11

"That is an impressive record," Dewey remarks, "I do not doubt its authenticity nor that of the experience related."[187] We should take at face value the claim that the writer had this experience, and he or she clearly believes this moment of personal surrender to the will of God to be a pivotal event in shaping his or her attitude. It was certainly a religious experience on Dewey's account, yet he argues that it need not imply a supernatural reality as its source. He says that the anecdote "illustrates a religious aspect of experience. But it illustrates also the use of that quality to carry a superimposed load of a particular religion. For having been brought up in the Christian religion, its subject interprets it in the terms of the personal God characteristic of that religion."[188] Claims to experiences like this one are common across most established religions. Yet it would be very strange to hear of a Buddhist having an experience of the Christian God, just as it would be strange for a Baptist to have a vision of the Virgin Mary.

Given that these experiences are so often described in the terms of religions in which the individual relating it was already inclined to believe, it seems a more likely explanation is that the supernatural elements of those experiences were supplied by the individuals themselves. The experience itself, absent any supernatural references, can be described pragmatically as some set of circumstances and prior beliefs which produced in the individual a persistent and positive adjustment in attitude toward life. But Dewey says that "the particular interpretation given to this complex of conditions is not inherent in the experience itself. It is derived from the culture with which a particular person has been imbued."[189] But, as Dewey insists, "[t]he determining factor in the interpretation of the experience is the particular doctrinal apparatus into which a person has been inducted."[190]

---

[187] CF, p.12
[188] CF, p.12
[189] CF, p.13
[190] CF, p.13

It is important to say again that we should not take this to mean that Dewey dismisses the importance of such experiences.  Indeed, if we were to rewrite the anecdote Dewey provides in such a way as to remove its supernatural elements, we would see that the experience is no less transformative.  We are all familiar with the story of a person who, consumed by stress or some personal vice, has a "mental breakdown" in which they "realized that they needed help" and subsequently "turned to their friends and family for support."  The only difference between the experience of a person who turned his or her life around with a little help from friends and the experience of the person in Dewey's example is the explicit use of terminology from a particular religion. With regard to their practical effects they are effectively identical.  Dewey, then, would see no problem with saying that *both* of these stories describe a "religious experience."  It would be strange for us to conclude that one of these stories was "more life-changing" than the other on account of whether the outside power to which the individual turned for help was supernatural.  Thus, even if only one of the stories directly references a particular religion, Dewey explains that "[t]he actual religious quality in the experience described is the *effect* produced, the better adjustment in life and its conditions, not the manner and cause of its production."[191]

---

[191] CF, p.14

CHAPTER 5

PRACTICAL USAGE OF JAMES'S AND DEWEY'S DEFINITIONS

In previous sections we have examined how well James's and Dewey's definitions of religion capture what they each consider the essential aspects of religion and/or religious attitudes and how these aspects affect what sorts of things would consequently qualify as religious. However, the purpose of examining these definitions may not be completed until we see what practical effects may result from employing them in a real-world context. Of course, Dewey and James, like all of us, are free to define words however we wish, provided that our audience understands the meaning of them. However, the definition that one uses for a term affects the way in which one treats the objects referenced in that definition. For example, a culture which defines religion as "an opiate of the masses" will likely take a different attitude toward the promotion of religious belief than one which defines religion as "recognition on the part of man of some unseen higher power as having control of his destiny and as being entitled to obedience, reverence, and worship."[192] Therefore, it is appropriate that we examine what practical effects the adoption of James's and Dewey's definitions of religion might have on the flourishing of those aspects of religion James and Dewey find valuable.

However, such an investigation will be difficult, since neither James nor Dewey give much advice on how their proposed definitions might be implemented, either through reforms to existing religions or through the formation of new religions. We will instead look to such proposals from other thinkers who take philosophical positions similar to that of James and Dewey. We will also look for organizations, movements, or belief systems whose structure and

---

[192] CF, p.3

character seem to embody or encourage some of the features of Jamesian and Deweyan conceptions of religiosity.

## Functionality of Dewey's Definition

While Dewey does not indicate particular ways in which existing religions might be reformed through the lens of his definition of religion, he does suggest that the adoption of his conception of the religious would result in a more robust flourishing of the human values promoted by a number of existing religions. Specifically, a movement away from the supernatural aspects of religions would promote more effectively many of the values which supernaturalism paradoxically hinders. For example, he argues that it is "of the nature of a religion based on the supernatural to draw a line between the religious and the secular and profane, even when it asserts the rightful authority of the Church and its religion to dominate these other interests. The conception that 'religious' signifies a certain attitude and outlook, independent of the supernatural, necessitates no such division."[193] Supernaturalist religions, he explains, have historically tended to draw a qualitative distinction between religious and secular values by "placing" their objects of religious belief in the supernatural realm. This separation, correspondingly, degrades the value of anything deemed to be "worldly." The Christian concept of "original sin" or the Calvinist idea of "total depravity" might be extreme examples of this rejection of the worldly, but this denigration also applies to interpersonal relationships such as those between parent and child or between neighbors, since those interactions occur exclusively in the so-called "secular" realm. Dewey says that not only are these types of relationships morally underdeveloped by a culture that stigmatizes worldly associations, they "have been

---

[193] CF, p.66

regarded as dangerous rivals of higher values; as offering temptations to be resisted; as usurpations by flesh of the authority of the spirit; as revolts of the human against the divine."[194]

Dewey argues that this distinction between religious and secular values is artificial, which becomes apparent as a culture evolves and recognizes the legitimacy of those secular values. He says that in the first "stage" of a culture's religious history, "human relationships were thought to be so infected with the evils of corrupt human nature as to require redemption from external and supernatural sources. In the next stage, what is significant in these relations is found to be akin to values esteemed distinctively religious."[195] That is, a progressive culture will recognize the value of human relationships to the extent that they resemble religious values. Yet this conception of values is backwards, since those so-called "religious" values are themselves imaginative idealizations of human values. The concepts of love, justice, knowledge, forgiveness, and peace are all human goods which acquire meaning in the course of human relationships. It is only after they are defined in human contexts that they are idealized away from reality, or in the case of Christianity, personified under the title "God." Dewey concludes that to achieve the next stage of progressive evolution, a culture will need to "realize that in fact the values prized in those religions that have ideal elements are idealizations of things characteristic of natural association, which have then been projected into a supernatural realm for safe-keeping and sanction."[196] A partitioning of these ideal ends away from the realm of human experience is a distraction at best and at worst a hindrance to the flourishing of those ends in reality.

Such hindrances, Dewey notes, would not exist under a Deweyan conception of religion, since it rejects the notion of a duality of values. A Deweyan religionist would properly

---

[194] CF, p.71
[195] CF, p.72
[196] CF, p.73

recognize the origin and nature of ideal ends as being derived from lived experience and would not have to face the ontological and moral problems that come with abstracting those ideals away from experience. "What would be the consequences upon the values of human association," Dewey asks, "if intrinsic and immanent satisfactions and opportunities were clearly held to and cultivated with the ardor and the devotion that have at times marked historic religions?"[197] If we acknowledge that religious attitudes have great potential to motivate action towards moral ends, then we may suppose that the goods which could be achieved would be greater when that motivation is directed toward human ends rather than toward distracting and unproductive *supernatural abstractions* of human ends. Thus, Dewey concludes that "[w]ere men and women actuated throughout the length and breadth of human relations with the faith and ardor that have at times marked historic religions the consequences would be incalculable."[198]

However, there remains the question of how this religious fervor might be redirected. Dewey clearly recognizes this problem, as he says that "[t]o achieve this faith and élan is no easy task."[199] Indeed, we will recall that the Jamesian criticism of Dewey's position was that it would be difficult to imagine that people could "rally behind" a cause or ideal with a religious intensity without some supernatural elements to arouse that amount of fervor. Although Dewey does not offer a specific way in which attitudes could be adjusted toward a more progressive goal, he argues that we ought not to rule out of hand the possibility that it could be done. He says that "religions have attempted something similar, directed moreover toward a less promising object— the supernatural. It does not become those who hold that faith may move mountains to deny in advance the possibility of its manifestation on the basis of verifiable realities."[200] That is, those

---

197 CF, p.71
198 CF, p.80
199 CF, p.81
200 CF, p.81

who have faith in the realization of impossible or inconceivable goals should not rule out of hand the possibility of a faith in the realization of plausible goals.

One example of a Deweyan type of revision is proposed by the philosopher Frederick Ferré.  In his work *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion* he brilliantly outlines a set of criteria for evaluating a pragmatic definition of religion.  Although he does not cite or refer to Dewey in this work, the similarities between his definition and Dewey's are striking.  He then proposes a reinterpretation of the belief system of Christianity, which focuses the direction of Christian attitudes away from supernaturalism and toward human relations in a way we might expect of an application of Deweyan ideas.

Ferré identifies two main criteria for identifying religious beliefs.  First, the object of one's religious valuing must be *comprehensive*; that is, it must be something which touches upon every aspect of the religious valuer's life.  While the Christian God would certainly qualify as something which is relevant to every aspect of life, Ferré's criterion would eliminate quite a number of things from counting as religious.  He light-heartedly ponders the example of peanut butter, which, he says, "is genuinely valued by millions of persons; but most of them would consider the domain of relevance of peanut butter in their lives to be quite limited. Their valuing of peanut butter thus has a relatively narrow scope. They do not value this object (in our new vocabulary) 'comprehensively.'"[201]  Of course, the valuation of peanut butter will differ from person to person.  People who work in the peanut butter manufacturing industry, or people who are allergic to peanuts, will find peanut butter to be relevant to more aspects of their lives than most.  But it would strain credulity to suggest that someone could relate it so broadly as to treat it as one's religion.

---

[201] *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion*, p.64

The second criterion of religious valuing is that the religious object must be *intensive*; that is, it must be something which a person considers to be of extreme importance, or at the top of a theoretical ranking of his or her values. We value many types of things, though inevitably we must sacrifice the pursuit of some values for the sake of others. One's own life and those of one's family tend to be at the top of most lists, as well as one's religion. Thus, Ferré says that for an object of valuation to be considered religious, we would say "at minimum that a religious valuation must rank among the last that the valuer would be disposed to sacrifice."[202] Furthermore, he adds that "[i]deally...every other valuation, including the sum of all other valuations, will, under appropriate circumstances, be sacrificed to this one. The object of religious valuing, in other words, is 'sacred.'"[203] We will have more to say on the difference between "ideal" and "actual" intensiveness later, but it suffices for this definition that we would *expect* that someone who values something religiously would rank it especially high.

We can see, then, that Ferré's definition of the religious is very similar to that of Dewey, which we may describe as an attitude toward an object held to be of such importance as to "unify the self with the Universe." The object or ideal that one values comprehensively and intensively would certainly form the basis of one's (imaginative) comprehension of the Universe, as well as establish one's relationship within that Universe. Thus, although Ferré admits that "one's way of valuing most comprehensively and intensively" is a rather dry and dispassionate way to describe one's religion, it does seem to capture what Dewey considers to be the essential feature of the notion of the religious.

With this definition of religion in mind, Ferré then suggests some ways in which these ideas might be put into practice. He does so by attempting to reform some of the problems he

---

[202] BMPR, p.66
[203] BMPR, p.66

identifies with the "Christian model," that is, the institutions, doctrines and imagery associated with Christianity.  He points out several themes in that model which are seen in modern society as regressive and discouraging.  In addition to the resistance to change and scientific inquiry which Dewey describes, he notes the presence or advocation of moral attitudes which would be considered unacceptable today.  For example, there is a prevailing attitude of sexism throughout the Bible.  Ferré says that "[f]rom the Genesis account of their creation (2:18–25) through St. Paul's discriminatory regulations for their dress and behavior (I Corinthians 11:2–16; 14:34–36; I Timothy 2:9–15), the Christian model depicts women as inferior to men in essential ways.  Not just 'different,' women are allowed less dignity as human persons."[204]  He argues that the theme of the inferiority of women is so deeply embedded in the doctrine and imagery of Christianity that many modern Christians do not even recognize it, and that they "unreflectingly therefore share in the perpetuation of a serious violation against half the human race."[205]  While few Christians today would consider themselves sexist if asked explicitly, they may not see the discrepancy between that position and the implicit messages in Christian imagery, such as in the passage, "But I want you to realize that the head of every man is Christ, and the head of the woman is man, and the head of Christ is God."[206]

Perhaps the most egregious theme, from a pragmatist perspective, that Ferré observes in Christian imagery is that of the ephemeral or worthless nature of the material world.  He says that there is a "tendency of the Christian model of reality to depict the world and its structures as both 'fallen' and unreformable apart from final cataclysm."[207]  With this theme that the world is "unreformable" comes a message for Christians to endure hardship rather than to fix its causes.

---

[204] BMPR, p.410
[205] BMPR, p.411
[206] 1 Corinthians 11:3, *New International Version*
[207] BMPR, p.411

That is, the Christian message discourages moral progress in the material world. Ferré says that, according to Christian doctrine, the "'powers that be' are portrayed as having a death-grip on the world; they must be left to God's wrath; beyond the disciplines of personal purity and minor social arrangements among the faithful there is nothing to be done."[208]

Different branches of Christianity embrace the rejection of the worldly implied in this "interim ethic" to varying degrees. Yet throughout Christian culture is the message that some problems cannot be fixed through human action, as well as the suggestion that believers should pray for divine intervention on those matters. Ferré argues that this imagery impedes human progress, as it directs Christians to expend their collective energy on *actively waiting* for some outside force to resolve their problems rather than on fixing the problems themselves. His condemnation of prayer and of world-rejecting imagery thus fits well with the views of Dewey, who, as we recall, describes the idea of reliance on supernatural aid as the "surrender of human endeavor."[209]

### The *Agape* Reform

While we might agree that these negative themes are prevalent in Christian imagery, most modern Christians likely would deny that sexism and moral fatalism are essential aspects of Christian morality. Ferré agrees, arguing that these themes are institutional accretions carried over from earlier cultures with different moral attitudes or injected into the Christian narrative in response to modern moral issues. If so, then it may be possible to revise the Christian model so as to preserve what is most valuable about Christian ideals while removing what he calls these "eliminable scandals." Unfortunately, the very nature of religious institutions makes it difficult to alter these themes, since the "weight of the values invested in them by their adherents makes

---

[208] BMPR, p.412
[209] CF, p.46

reform difficult and slow."[210]  However, that does not mean such change is impossible.  This is true particularly in modern culture, which has shown an unprecedented willingness to adapt to changes in social norms.  Thus, Ferré concludes that "in an era of rapid change it may be that the Christian model itself may be unusually open to alterations."[211]

One way we might alter the Christian model would be to *reinterpret* Christian imagery in a way that deemphasizes the negative themes which it currently conveys.  Historically, the interpretation of religious imagery and doctrine has often changed to reflect the moral issues of a given time and culture.  For example, Christian fundamentalists did not invoke the imagery of Genesis to condemn the union of "Adam and Steve" until after the social acceptance of public same-sex relationships had become plausible in modern culture. Likewise, it was only very recently that anyone thought to consider how Jesus would weigh in on transgender politics.

If imagery and doctrine are open to reinterpretation, then we can choose to interpret the existing imagery in a way that helps to focus on the more essential aspects of Christianity, which for Ferré would be the moral ideals which Christians value most comprehensively and intensively.  Of course, we should try to avoid the charge of being arbitrary or artificial in our selection of "what Christians *really* value," but Ferré suggests that "if an essential feature or a 'dominant motif' could be identified within the model in question, selection could be carried out in terms of the model's own normative character rather than by the importation of external criteria."[212]

The example of such a dominant motif identified by Ferré is that of *agape*, which he describes as "love characterized by unconditional interest in the fullest well-being of the

---

[210] BMPR, p.412
[211] BMPR, p.412
[212] BMPR, p.413

beloved."[213] This concept appears throughout the body of Christian imagery. For example, *agape* can be read into the Christian mantra that one ought to "turn the other cheek" when attacked rather than to retaliate in kind, as well as in the Lord's Prayer, in which Christians ask for forgiveness "as we forgive those who trespass against us." To reform the Christian model around *agape* would mean making unconditional love *and all that it entails* the focal point of Christian morality, which in turn would require interpreting Christian imagery in such a way as to support and move that ideal forward. If we were to "take this proposal seriously," says Ferré, it would "result in the reformation of the Christian model, and would obtain this result by eliminating foreign accretions rather than modifying essential elements."[214]

A movement to centralize the Christian "message" around *agape* would disallow any interpretations of imagery which would not fit the theme. This would weed out those "scandalous" moral attitudes plaguing Christianity. For example, this would preclude any interpretation of the Bible which supports discrimination against another group or culture. The unconditional love represented by *agape*, by its very nature, "can never, under any conditions, be 'anti' anyone. Thus every form of discrimination, arrogance, jealousy, or resentment directed at any individual or group would lose even tacit support by the Christian model, given the rigorous application of the *agape* principle of selection."[215]

This condemnation of discrimination would of course also apply to discrimination against women. Reforming the Christian message around *agape* would therefore "remove every obstacle to the unconditional valuation of women for what they are: neither beings created for the convenience of men nor pseudo men, but female human beings."[216] This commitment

---

[213] BMPR, p.413
[214] BMPR, p.413
[215] BMPR, p.414
[216] BMPR, p.414

opposing the degradation of women would require some changes to institutional policies, such as the Catholic Church's restriction against women entering the priesthood.  It would also require alterations to some common elements of Christian imagery.  For example, the Genesis account of Eve's creation from Adam's rib would need to be reinterpreted, to the extent that such imagery symbolically represents a woman's subservience to, or ownership by, a man.  Likewise, the imagery in the account of Eve eating from the tree of knowledge of good and evil would need to be stripped of any interpretations which suggest, implicitly or explicitly, that the subsequent existence of suffering in the world is "all Eve's fault."

Ferré notes that some Christian imagery would need to be thrown out entirely.  The concept of an eternal hell, he says, would be "intolerable in a Christian model dominated by the conception of the God of sovereign *agape*.  Either God's sovereignty or his love—or both— would be violated by an endless infliction of suffering on any of his creatures."[217]  This would not, however, preclude the concept of punishment or the imagery of some temporary purgatory, since the concepts of justice and rehabilitation are not inconsistent with an attitude of unconditional love.

Perhaps the most important change to the Christian model from a Deweyan perspective would be to the "world-rejecting" imagery which perpetuates an artificial distinction between religious and secular values.  The notion that the material world is "unreformable" or "unsalvageably corrupt" would undermine an attitude of unconditional interest in the well-being of others.  Thus, the Christian model would need to include only messages and/or imagery which encourage the advancement of social goods rather than discourage them.  Such a "pro-world" theme can be found in much of the imagery surrounding the sacrifice of God, such as in the passage: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes

---

[217] BMPR, p.414

in him shall not perish but have eternal life."[218]  Historically, many branches of Christianity have

placed an emphasis on the latter part of that passage as a clue to the requirements for entry into

Heaven.  A reform around *agape* would instead require an interpretation which places the greater

emphasis on the former to convey the message that social goods are worth pursuing, because

God and/or his son consider the world valuable enough to be "worth dying for."  On that

interpretation, the Christian would become an active agent of human progress rather than

stoically accepting hardship.  Ferré says that to the extent that "the 'powers that be' conspire to

oppress and degrade those toward whom God's unconditional love—"even to the death of his

son" —is poured out, to that extent the Christian is motivated in the struggle for social

change."[219]

Ferré argues that an *agape* reform could further encourage the pursuit of social goods by

altering the imagery surrounding the nature of God.  There have been countless interpretations of

God throughout Christian history, from the Unmoved Mover of Aristotle and Aquinas to a

humanoid creature who walks in the Garden of Eden in Genesis.  If we are reforming the

Christian model around *agape*, Ferré asks, "[w]hat kind of God would be the most fitting value-

focus of a life-affirming, love-centered religion? This would surely not be a God whose primary

attributes are portrayed in the cold, remote vocabulary of immutable Being."[220]  Indeed, the

Unmoved Mover or any Deist conception of God would seem unsuitable for an *agape* theme,

since by definition they represent a *disinterest* in human affairs.  Neither do the notions of God

discussed in philosophy and theodicy as the "omnipotent, omnibenevolent, omniscient" being, or

the "fully actualized" being, seem appropriate.  The properties of those conceptions of God are

---

[218] John 3:16, *New International Version*
[219] BMPR, p.414
[220] BMPR, p.415

difficult to relate to issues and concerns at a human level and tend to be associated with ontological rather than moral issues.

Ferré argues that the conception of God most appropriate for the *agape* theme, namely the one which most fully represents "radical self-giving, utter love 'even unto death,' is what is portrayed in the Christian model as the Passion of the Christ, in which God as transcendent being (so it can be seen) becomes immanent in history and willingly dies for the sake of men."[221] On this conception, whatever other properties that might be ascribed to God are secondary to the representation of unconditional love valued so intensively as to sacrifice all other values before it. Indeed, this exhibition of love would be the primary property of God, since Ferré argues that if "*agape* really comes first in radical Christian faith, then love takes precedence even over Being, and the very meaning of God's kind of being must be defined in terms of his totally related, self-giving, creative-centered concern."[222]

While the traditional Christian model places a great deal of importance on adhering to the truth of dubious epistemological claims, such as the existence and nature of God, the existence of hell, and the historical fact of Jesus's resurrection, Ferré's proposed emphasis of love "over Being" clearly shifts the Christian model away from the supernatural elements which Dewey finds problematic. We will recall that Dewey argues that holding to the truth of such claims leads to regressive policies, since they will inevitably clash with the body of scientific knowledge and can be maintained only through dogmatism and the rejection of science. However, Ferré's reform avoids those regressive tendencies by making the truth of those supernatural claims secondary to the overarching message of love. For example, he says that the purpose of any imagery about God would not be to establish the existence of an all-powerful, all-

---

[221] BMPR, p.416
[222] BMPR, p.415

knowing being; rather, it would be to convey a moral message through the *narrative* power of imagining that such a being would love humans unconditionally.  Thus, the Christian model would not be forced into an epistemologically untenable position, since the elements in question only become supernatural, and thus problematic, when considered in a context outside their role as imagery in support of a moral theme.  Adherence to the truth of God's existence, if it is a matter of consideration at all, would be sacrificed in favor of a moral attitude of love that is valued both intensively and comprehensively.

## Critique of Ferré's Reform

The reform that Ferré is proposing seems so radical that we might ask whether it is feasible to implement such sweeping changes to the Christian model, although he insists that from a philosophical standpoint there should not be anything inherently objectionable about his reform.  Given the malleability of imagery and their interpretations, his proposed model constructed with an eye toward consistency of message and openness to revision "appears, at least, to be *prima facie* as defensible—or more defensible—than many of its modern rivals."[223]  However, he notes that it may be more difficult to gain acceptance outside the context of detached philosophical analysis.  He asks, "if it promises to be defensible by moral philosophers, is it as likely to be acceptable to Christian believers?"[224]  He suggests, for example, that many Christians would recoil from the idea of an eternal hell being discarded from the model entirely.  While the prevalence of hell is not doctrinally universal throughout Christianity, there are many branches, particularly evangelical ones, which could not bear to give up "an image so potentially gratifying and so laden with numinous authority."[225]

---

[223] BMPR, p.417
[224] BMPR, p.417
[225] BMPR, p.417

Certainly, evangelical forms of Christianity whose adherents are primarily concerned with "saving souls" would not be inclined to adopt a model of Christianity which places some other value at the forefront. However, we might ask whether Ferré's proposed reform might be acceptable to other Christians. Some Christians who embrace the primacy of *agape* might still object to the project of consciously reinterpreting imagery, because to do so seems to suggest a disregard for objective truth. At least part of the legitimacy of the value of *agape*, they might argue, comes not only from the imagery of an all-powerful being who exhibits unconditional love, but from the fact that that being actually exists and thus is authoritative about what is valuable. They might also point to the attempts of the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke to trace the lineage of Jesus to the Old Testament's David, in order to establish the eligibility of Jesus to be the promised messiah of the Old Testament prophets, which suggests that the historical truth of some of the claims in the Bible are an important part of the moral justification for the Christian model. Finally, adherents of the current model would probably say that to make the empirical truth of claims in the Bible secondary to the moral attitude espoused is to undermine the legitimacy of that attitude, since there would be no incentive to believe in Christianity if those claims "weren't true."

Ferré would likely reject on pragmatist grounds the notion that the claims in support of *agape* in the New Testament must be objectively true in order to be useful or valuable. He would also reject the notion that denying the truth of such claims would undermine the legitimacy of Christianity itself. Take, for example, the notion of "original sin," or the idea of a systemic corruption in humanity which is inherited via ancestry to Adam. This concept is derived in part from the writings of Paul in Romans: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all

sinned--"[226]  However, if we do not accept the story in Genesis as a historical account of the creation of the world, then there never was an Adam from whom to inherit sin.  Yet very few branches of Christianity would insist that one cannot believe in evolution and still be a Christian, or that there is nothing meaningful about God's sacrifice to absolve humans of sin if there was no "real" sin to absolve.  This is because Christians, who by and large have embraced evolution, can find value in interpreting the story of Genesis *metaphorically* without committing to the truth of historical claims which are untenable.  Although Ferré is hesitant to say how this reinterpretation ought to be done, one option which some have employed is to regard the imagery of original sin as an allegory for the natural human tendency toward selfishness and isolationism.  On such a view, Christians may seek "absolution from sin" without making reference to the existence of any entities outside the realm of mammalian biology.

Another criticism one might raise against Ferré's model is similar to the previously mentioned Jamesian criticism leveled at Dewey concerning the intensity of a person's religious attitude.  If a religious attitude is defined according to what one values most intensively and comprehensively, then how is it possible, James might ask, for someone to value something religiously while at the same time remaining open to revision and reinterpretation of beliefs regarding that value?  Those who value something to the point that they would sacrifice all other values before it would presumably also sacrifice their fear of uncertainty and their willingness to change their minds on the subject.  Indeed, it seems strange to even imagine the notion of a "tentative zealot," that is, someone who stands ready to sacrifice everything they love for their religion but is also willing to modify that attitude in light of further evidence.  A critic might argue, then, that one cannot adopt a revisable Christian model like Ferré's with a sufficient intensity to count as religious.

---

[226] Romans 5:12, *New International Version*

Ferré might acknowledge that those who adopt this model would exhibit less intensity as a result of remaining open to revision. However, this should not disqualify the new model from counting as religious, since that standard would also disqualify all or nearly all of the adherents of existing religions, most of which have frequently undergone revisions in the interpretation of their beliefs. Ferré clearly words his definition of religion in terms of ideal religiosity, but not in order to set that ideal as the threshold for what counts as religious. He compares his definition to the definition of "knife," which, according to the dictionary is "an instrument for cutting." Yet no knife can cut everything, and a dull knife continues to be a knife despite its inability to cut. Thus, he says that all knives are "*more or less* knives on this definition, depending on their actual capacity for cutting. But the definition is not useless on this account."[227] Likewise, the religiosity of a person's attitude can be understood not in terms of whether it meets a sufficient level of intensity, but by to what degree it approaches or resembles ideal intensity. Ferré concludes that the "'pure essence' of religion may be held to be valuing at its most comprehensive and intensive without, at the same time, erroneously assuming that such an essence is often met in its undiluted state."[228]

We should note that "openness to revision" need not necessarily be treated as inherently anti-religious or as a dampener to religious intensity, nor should we compare the openness of Christians under Ferré's model to the "dull habits" of James's "ordinary religious believers." First, as we mentioned in Dewey's criticism of existing religious institutions, a moral attitude does not stand in need of justification in the same way that empirical or ontological claims do. Adherents of the *agape* reform, then, need not necessarily be open to the possibility that unconditional love is not valuable or worth pursuing with religious fervor. Rather, they would

---

[227] BMPR, p.71
[228] BMPR, p.71

be open-minded regarding what would constitute an expression of unconditional love in practice. For example, *agape* Christians might advocate for certain welfare and tax policies as a way of promoting *agape*, but they would remain willing to change their stance on those policies should they turn out to be discriminatory or harmful in some unforeseen way. Indeed, in a case where the harm of a given policy is demonstrable, those who are unwilling to change their stance on it should be seen as *less* religious, to the extent that they value more intensively the promotion of potentially harmful policies than they value *agape*. Moreover, since a pragmatist's interest in religion lies in its practical value in reality, a notion of religion which requires intensity of belief that closes off the possibility of revision guarantees that religion will inevitably conflict with reality rather than improve it.

While we might agree that Ferré's proposed model is philosophically defensible, the biggest impediment to a practical implementation of such a model might simply be the inertia of the existing Christian model. Ferré readily admits that "religious models tend to be highly resistant to change. The weight of the values invested in them by their adherents makes reform difficult and slow."[229] While it is possible to construct a consistent interpretation of the Christian model without the imagery and supernatural elements which Ferré argues are harmful and scandalous, those elements nevertheless remain powerful motivators in Christianity at present. The promise of heaven and fear of hell, as well the security of believing in a certain type of order in the universe, are highly valued by many Christians, but the ontological commitments attached to those values might very well conflict with the aims of a Christianity that is regarded primarily as a moral system.

Ferré is also pessimistic about the prospects of his proposed model being realized, saying that "[i]n the end it must be up to 'Christendom' to determine the form of its own ultimate

---

[229] BMPR, p.412

imagery."[230]  Indeed, it does not appear that there are currently any branches of Christianity

which might be described as a manifestation of Ferré's proposed reform.  Although many of

them place a heavy emphasis on *agape* as Ferré describes it, they do not do so to the extent of

removing those supernatural elements which Ferré advises.  However, in the intervening five

decades since Ferré proposed his reform, we have seen an increase in attempts to reinterpret

much of the imagery of the Christian message that move away from the "scandalous" tendencies

that Ferré identifies.  Those branches of Christianity which hold most vehemently to the notion

of an eternal hell and to discriminatory policies are often decried as "extremist" or

"fundamentalist" to indicate that their beliefs are not the norm.

Furthermore, the popularity of writings like that of former pastor Rob Bell suggest that

there is a growing appetite for revised interpretations of Christian imagery.  In his book *Love*

*Wins*, Bell, like Ferré, argues that the concept of an eternal hell is simply incompatible with a

loving God.  He also argues that it strains credulity to imagine the existence of hell as it is

portrayed in traditional Christian imagery.  He suggests that there is a common sentiment among

Christians that such a place is implausible, saying that "I as well have a hard time believing that

somewhere down below the earth's crust is a really crafty figure in red tights holding a three-

pointed spear, playing Pink Floyd records backward, and enjoying the hidden messages."[231]  He

does not discard the notion of hell in the way that Ferré might, but he does argue that the idea of

hell better fits the theme of unconditional love in Christianity when interpreted as an allegory for

humanity's rejection of the value of unconditional love.  He says of hell, then, that "we need a

loaded, volatile, adequately violent, dramatic, serious word to describe the very real

consequences we experience when we reject the good and true and beautiful life that God has for

---

[230] BMPR, p.416

[231] *Love Wins*, Chapter 3

us."[232]  While Bell's revised interpretation of hell does not remove Christianity's traditional

supernaturalism, as Ferré would prefer, it does suggest that there is a contemporary interest in

reinterpreting the Christian model so as to eliminate those elements that Ferré and others believe

to be harmful.

We should point out here that we should not take Ferré's proposed reform to the

Christian model to mean that Ferré was concerned with defending Christianity specifically, nor

that a proper implementation of Ferré's or Dewey's notion of religion would need to be done by

revising an existing religion.  His intent in giving this example is not to advocate for a particular

interpretation of Christianity. Rather, it is to show one way in which an existing religion might

be revised both in order to emphasize its "essentially religious" aspects and to more effectively

utilize the institutional apparatus and community built around that religion toward achieving its

professed moral goal.

## Other Examples of Deweyan Religions

There are likely no organizations which would explicitly label themselves as "Deweyan

religions."  However, there are institutions which fulfill many of the social and moral functions

of a Deweyan conception of religious institutions while avoiding the epistemological and

ontological problems associated with a dogmatic doctrine.

One example of such an institution might be found in the Unitarian Universalist Church.

Although it has historical roots in Christianity, Unitarian Universalism as an organization holds

to no official creed or doctrine.  Rather, it provides an environment and community in which one

can pursue one's personal object of religious focus.  In that capacity, it provides many of the

functions and services one might expect from a church or synagogue, though without the

particular doctrines and supernatural elements associated with those more traditional religious

---

[232] *Love Wins*, Chapter 3

institutions. Furthermore, while there is no official requirement for what Unitarians should believe, particularly with regard to ontological matters, such as belief in the supernatural, there is an assumption that Unitarian Universalism's adherents share a general view on certain moral issues, such as the valuing of freedom of thought and tolerance of differing opinions, as well as social justice issues concerning equality and non-discrimination.

We might view this organization as Deweyan to the extent that it provides opportunities for persons who share common moral ideals to pursue their goals more effectively as a community. Dewey recognizes the practical value that churches ostensibly have in establishing strong moral communities and in using social pressures to organize groups of individuals to accomplish goals which would not or could not be accomplished by those individuals acting separately. The Unitarian Universalist Church performs this function in ways not unlike some Christian organizations, which raise money for and advocate for certain social causes. However, Unitarian Universalism's non-doctrinaire approach avoids many of the problems Dewey recognizes in other churches. First, one need not commit to belief in the existence of any supernatural elements in order to be considered a member of the church. Indeed, atheism and agnosticism are regarded as acceptable viewpoints. Furthermore, without a doctrine, Unitarian Universalism does not make any ontological or epistemological claims which might conflict with the body of scientific knowledge; and the moral principles which the church unofficially promotes are understood to be the product of rational inquiry rather than of supernatural authority. In this respect, then, Unitarian Universalism as an institution is not hindered from progressing toward its goals by ultimately world-rejecting ontological commitments in the way that Dewey believes other religious institutions to be.

However, while Unitarian Universalism as an organization embraces many Deweyan principles, it may not fully satisfy a Dewey conception of a *religion*. We will recall that Dewey draws a distinction between the quality of "religious," which may apply to an individual's attitude which is valued strongly enough to fundamentally shape one's conception of the universe, with "a religion," which, Dewey says, "always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight."[233] The lack of a doctrine or creed means that there is no particular religious attitude or ideal which is the focus or goal of the Unitarian Universalism organization. Since each member of the church is encouraged to explore and pursue their own conceived objects of religious belief, Unitarian Universalism *qua* religion does not represent any moral focus, which Dewey regards as an essential feature of a religious attitude. The church does openly encourage the pursuit of some commonly valued moral ideals, but the particular ideals espoused, namely freedom of thought, human equality and opposition to discrimination, seem to be valued as a means to facilitate an environment of individual religious pursuit, rather than valued in their own right. That is, the ideals themselves are not the object of *religious* focus in the way that we saw that *agape* was the focus in Ferré's proposed reform. They are not, to borrow Ferré's terminology, the things being valued "most comprehensively and intensively." Thus, while the Unitarian Universalist Church performs many of the functions of a Deweyan notion of a good religious institution, we might say that it more closely resembles an organization of religious persons than it does a religion.

Perhaps a better example of a Deweyan religious institution would be an international charity organization such as Rotary International. Rotary identifies itself as an organization built around the ideal of "service above self" and individual chapters of the organization encourage its members to build stronger relationships between local businesses and communities in the service

---

[233] CF, p.9

of promoting charitable goals in line with Rotary's principles. In practice, these local chapters serve many of the same functions and services that would be expected from a local church or synagogue. For example, they hold weekly meetings in which members listen to a speaker who usually addresses an issue involving service to the local or global community. They also ritually recite Rotary's creed in the form of the Four-Way Test, which Rotary describes as "a nonpartisan and nonsectarian ethical guide for Rotarians to use for their personal and professional relationships."[234] The test for each of a Rotarian's ethical beliefs and actions is as follows:

1. Is it the truth?

2. Is it fair to all concerned?

3. Will it build goodwill and better friendships?

4. Will it be beneficial to all concerned?

The declaration of this moral creed and the ritualistic recitation of it by its members at their local weekly meetings ensures that the *moral attitude* indicated by the creed is fundamental to one's understanding of Rotary's purpose as an organization. It also ensures that individual members of the organization recognize that moral attitude and the actions one performs in adherence to that attitude as an essential part of what it means to be a Rotarian.

We can see, then, that Rotary International satisfies most of the criteria for Dewey's conception of a proper religious institution. We will recall that for Dewey such a religion consists of an institution and community built around and in support of persons who hold a certain attitude with a universe-orienting or "religious" level of importance toward the pursuit of an ideal moral end or set of ends. To this extent, the structure, doctrine and community of Rotary International fills a role for persons with a Rotarian religious attitude in much the same way as the Methodist Church does for its members. Furthermore, the doctrine to which

---

[234] Rotary International

Rotarians hold makes no ontological claims; rather, it consists only of a declaration of what ethical ideals Rotarians value. Finally, it does not create any epistemological conflicts in the way that the doctrines of supernaturally-infused organizations do.

Some critics of Dewey's definition of religion might object to calling an explicitly nonsectarian organization like Rotary International a religion. Indeed, it would be strange to insist that the organization be reclassified as a religious institution or require that its members convert to "Rotarianism." However, Dewey would reply that the point of his definition was not to revise the list of recognized religions, but to reveal what is essential to the quality of "religious." From a pragmatist perspective, in terms of its structure, belief system, and practical results, Rotary International's institution is *functionally* in line with the institutions of traditionally recognized religions. While we should not expect every member of Rotary to hold to these ethical ideals with a fervor worthy of the title "religious," neither would we expect that level of fervor in a large portion of the "ordinary religious believers" who are adherents of traditional religions. Yet we could certainly imagine that some persons could adhere to Rotary's ethical principles of truth, fairness, service, and goodwill religiously, and thus it would not be untoward to say of such persons that "Rotary is their religion."

**Functionality of James's Definition**

Although both James and Dewey identify religious objects as values of intense personal importance for an individual, they differ in the way they focus on the pragmatic value of those objects and an individual's attitudes about them. Dewey views religious attitudes to some extent as attitudes about moral ideals which are elevated to a level of universe-defining importance. Such a view suggests that Dewey believes that religious attitudes have pragmatic value because they motivate action towards the moral ideals which are their objects. Of course, religious

attitudes are inherently subjective and personal in the sense that the value of the ideal in question is determined by the individual who holds the attitude. However, as in the case of Ferré's *agape* or the Rotary Four-Way Test, a moral ideal is sharable or something which might be held in common by many individuals. Furthermore, it may serve as a common goal which like-minded persons may coordinate efforts to achieve more effectively. Thus, a person with this understanding of religious attitudes would be naturally disposed to utilize the community-organizing infrastructure and practices that are traditionally associated with religious institutions. That is, Deweyan religious attitudes naturally lend themselves toward the formation of *religions*. We might say, then, that the Deweyan usage of the term "religious" draws upon the functional and morally-productive aspects associated with a more ordinary notion of "religious" while providing a more nuanced and insightful understanding of what makes something religious.

James's use of the term "religious" does not seem to be amenable to institutional religions. His focus regarding the objects of religious belief was on the personal experiences of individuals who hold to beliefs religiously and the transformation of character that results from them, rather than on the objects themselves. His purpose in *Varieties* was to investigate both the psychological effects of these experiences on those who had them and the epistemological implications of a possible connection between these personal experiences and a supernatural reality.

A focus on these aspects of the religious, however, seems to discourage the relationship between the religious and *a religion*, in the Deweyan sense. Recall that for James a person's object of religious belief is strongly tied to or derived from his or her so-called "mystical experience," which is inherently involuntary and inexpressible. Thus, a given religion cannot represent a coming together of people of like mind in the way it might for Dewey, since the

religious attitude around which a religion might be formed is held only by the religious pioneer, that is, the one who had the mystical experience. People might be members of a religion in so far as they imitate or agree with the sentiments of a religious pioneer, but we can infer from James's descriptions of the "dull habits" of "ordinary religious believers" that his usage of the term "religious" is not intended to refer to that sort of behavior. We can conclude, then, that James's use of "religious" lacks the functionality of Dewey's use to explain and inform the aspects suggested by the more traditional use of the term "religious" that have to do with the organizing and coordinating of communities around moral ideals.

This does not mean, however, that James's definition is not functional in other ways. The philosopher Phil Oliver, in his work *William James's "Springs of Delight,"* expounds upon James's definition of religion and how his emphasis on the subjective nature of religious experience helps to inform the personal aspects of the religious in just the way we have said Dewey's definition informs its communal aspects. He notes that James's investigations of the accounts of religious experience that he provides in *Varieties* tend to focus heavily on the "large and mysterious *something*" which is said to be the source of the experience of a higher state of reality.[235] This experience, which Oliver describes with what he admits is the vague term "transcendent," is an essential component of the transformation of character which is purported to be one of the positive effects of a religious attitude on an individual. He says that "[w]hat is supposed to be 'transcended' in such an experience is, in short, the subjectivity of the individual along with the 'false consciousness' or conceptual errors that normally accrue to finite, limited beings like ourselves and that impede our achievement of happiness or personal fulfillment."[236] What "fulfillment" means in this context and how it is manifested is just as personal and

---

[235] *William James's "Springs of Delight*," p.8
[236] SD, p.8

inexpressible as the religious experience connected to it. Nevertheless, Oliver suggests that James's definition of religion gives us language with which to discuss the aspects of the colloquial use of "religious" which relate to a person's character. He says that even if the fulfillment that comes with a religious attitude is personal, the "common denominator" of any such attitude is that it "somehow engenders happiness, personal fulfillment, or at least reconciliation to life in those who experience it, and it does so in part by radically altering the sense of self."[237]

These aspects of the religious, namely the sense of personal satisfaction connected to one's religious attitude and the process by which that attitude is formed, are comparatively downplayed in the Deweyan conception of the religious. Of course, this is not to say that Dewey's definition cannot account for those common features. It would be strange to imagine that someone could hold to an ideal religiously and yet derive no personal satisfaction from working to realize it. However, a Deweyan account would not be adequate to capture the "transcendent" nature of the *sensation* of fulfillment or explain how that sensation contributes to a transformation of character that is more than just a conscious alteration of one's habitual behaviors. Thus, when discussing those aspects of religious attitudes, the Jamesian definition may be more appropriate.

However, even if James's definition is found to be more functional in these contexts, one problem that remains is that it is not applicable to as many instances of religion as Dewey's definition. Recall that James's definition of religion in *Varieties* refers to "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine."[238] Such a definition seems at first glance to

---

[237] SD, p.9
[238] VRE, p.32

be very open-ended with regard to what may count as religious. But a closer look suggests that he seems to put a number of restrictions on what might count as religious. In an earlier section we pointed out that a Jamesian critic of Dewey would say that a Deweyan religious attitude could not be held with an intensity sufficient to count as religious. Hence, it appears that James would require that the religious attitude would have to be intense. He also seems to place restrictions on what sort of things a given person might consider divine. Oliver recognizes this when he says that James would not want his definition to count as religious "any fanatical fascination, systematic obsession, or prolonged piety that anyone may happen to profess for anything at all."[239] Given James's emphasis on mystical experience, we might interpret his definition to say that what a given person might potentially consider divine is determined in part by his or her mystical experience. Yet we have argued in previous sections that if mystical experience is an essential criterion of what counts as religious, then the quality of religious would be limited to very few people in practice. Thus, the use of James's definition would be limited in scope compared to religion as it is traditionally understood, and it may not be helpful in understanding the sense of fulfillment and change of character reported by many people who have not had a mystical experience, whose beliefs James might call merely "self-descriptions as religious."[240]

Oliver proposes that we might address problems with the scope of James's definition by reinterpreting it to be more inclusive. He points out that the definition does not include any stipulations regarding mystical experience, so the definition by itself does not place many restrictions on what people can or may consider divine. Oliver says of this definition that his "rather vague formulation ('whatever they may consider the divine') is unlikely to regulate the

---

[239] SD, p.101
[240] SD, p.101

turnstile of admission into the ranks of what counts as 'religion.'"[241]   But, he says of this lack of

regulation that "[m]aybe this is not a bad thing."[242]  We have said that James's "religious" can be

a useful term for describing those aspects of religious attitudes which pertain to the sensation of

personal fulfillment and change of character, but that the scope of the term is limited to only the

most extreme cases found in religious pioneers.  Oliver argues that we can expand the scope of

James's term by interpreting it to apply to anything which might produce a religion-like

fulfillment in a person.  The eponymous "springs of delight" is a turn of phrase from James

which Oliver says describes certain "enthusiasms."  These are things which may not reach a

"divine" level of importance but which can produce in someone a sense of overarching

satisfaction and which is meaningful to a life-orienting degree.  He suggests that baseball might

be one such "object of enthusiasm" for himself, but that anything that an individual might be

enthusiastic about could qualify.

　　Of course, Oliver is not saying that baseball ought to be considered one of the "more

eternal things" or that baseball could "say the last word, so to speak."  His point is that we can

use James's terminology to more richly discuss the ways in which our enthusiasms produce in us

those same feelings of personal fulfillment which James's definition of religion highlights.

Baseball might not plausibly be considered the "principle" around which anyone forms their

conception of the universe, but one who is enthusiastic about baseball might attribute to it more

meaning than simply the enjoyment of attending a game.  Rather, they may derive from it a sense

of long-term satisfaction at the participation in a world that is greater than themselves.  Or it may

help to shape in them a general attitude toward life that, without baseball, would be otherwise

*unenthusiastic*.  By broadening the scope of the definition, then, we can discuss more effectively

---

[241] SD, p.101
[242] SD, p.101

these common elements of human experience without restricting the discussion only to the most extreme cases. Oliver concludes that James's definition, interpreted broadly, "supplies an answer, in every case, to the question Why do you call that religious?--because, it relates the religious fruitfully to their own experience in a way which, for them, is suggestive of what they consider the divine; and it provides meaning or significance in their lives that will place them in more satisfactory relations to their experience in the future--or something of the sort."[243]

Oliver's broad interpretation of James's definition does add functionality to the term by allowing it to apply to cases which are more likely to be encountered in ordinary experience. However, this interpretation at the same time seems to undermine the Jamesian argument against Dewey's definition of religion. Recall that the Jamesian critique we discussed was that a Deweyan religious attitude without supernatural elements or a mystical experience from which those elements would be derived would not be adhered to with a sufficient level of intensity to count as religious compared to an attitude which does contain supernatural elements. But if we broaden our interpretation to allow for something like baseball to qualify for the purposes of its religion-like effects, then it would seem that the threshold for what counts as religious has been lowered even below the objects of universe-defining importance of a Deweyan-type religion. Thus, if we agree with Oliver that enthusiasms share in the most relevant qualities of Jamesian religion, then we would have to conclude that we cannot hold to an interpretation of James's definition which can be widely applicable in usage while, on the advice of James, restrict Deweyan attitudes from counting as religious.

James would probably not find Oliver's attempt to reinterpret him as being more inclusive to be an acceptable interpretation of his position. However, he might be more open to another possible way to implement his ideas on religion in practice. As we did with Dewey, let

---

[243] SD, p.104

us consider the Unitarian Universalist Church as a vehicle for James's notion of religion. It may be true that James would likely be opposed to any religious institutions insofar as he is opposed to institutionalism generally. However, James does express an interest in religious institutions as "supportive environments" for spirituality. Although he acknowledges that mystical experiences remain involuntary and personal, he notes that there are branches in each of the major religions of his time that have focused on exploring the possibilities of mysticism directly. He says of mystical experience that "Hindus, Buddhists, Mohammedans, and Christians all have cultivated it methodically."[244] On the subject of Christian mysticism, he describes the practice of "'orison' or meditation, the methodical elevation of the soul towards God."[245] He seems to approve of at least this aspect of the Christian institution in so far as it provides an organized but open-minded context in which one may develop a receptiveness to, or "prepare oneself for" mystical experience. However, he notes that this aspect of Christianity does not seem to be representative of the whole, saying that it is "odd that Protestantism, especially evangelical Protestantism, should seemingly have abandoned everything methodical in this line."[246]

We might conclude, then, that James would be more amenable to Unitarian Universalism than he would to other religious institutions, since the "methodical cultivation" of personal spirituality is a major component of Unitarian Universalism rather than a minor one. Furthermore, since Unitarian Universalism lacks a creed or doctrine, it is therefore not susceptible to James's criticism against doctrines, namely that they necessarily restrict open-mindedness and freedom of thought. Indeed, one of Unitarian Universalism's explicit goals is to provide a supportive environment in which one can explore their own understanding of

[244] VRE, p.391
[245] VRE, p.398
[246] VRE, p.398

spirituality, which is very much in keeping with James's definition of religion as "whatever they may consider the divine."

We said earlier that Unitarian Universalism may not work well as a Deweyan religious institution since its object(s) of religious belief are not focussed in a way that can be directed effectively through the mechanism of the institution. However, that same lack of focus supports a Jamesian view, since the institution instead places an emphasis on its individual members and on the fulfillment they might achieve through their relationship with their objects of religious belief. Thus, to the extent that any institution can be said to represent Jamesian ideas on religion, Unitarian Universalism seems to be better suited to James's definition of religion than to that of Dewey.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing comparison of James and Dewey on matters of religion, we have seen

that they have a similar methodology with regard to finding the essential nature of religious

attitudes, in that they both identify the quality of religious as originating not from the particular

beliefs one holds but rather in the life-orienting attitude one adopts in relation to those beliefs.

That is, the term "religious" for them does not denote a special category of attitudes; rather, it

describes a quality which might apply to any attitude that meets its criteria.  Furthermore, they

both recognize that the pragmatic value of religious attitudes can be understood in terms of the

practical consequences which result from persons who hold them.  They also make a distinction

between religious attitudes and institutions which might be built around them, and they point out

how the valuable aspects of religious attitudes can be undercut by issues stemming from their

involvement in institutional structures.

Yet despite these similarities in their methods and interests, and the similarity in the way

their definitions of "religious" are articulated, they differ significantly on what sorts of attitudes

should count as religious.  This difference, we have argued, might best be explained as a

difference in the particular aspects of religious attitudes on which James and Dewey respectively

focus.  We might describe a Deweyan religious attitude as actually a moral attitude, which one

has elevated to a universe-orienting level of importance.  This way of understanding religious

attitudes places an emphasis on the object of religious valuation, namely the particular moral

ideal ends which shape a person's perceptions and toward which one's actions are intensely

aimed. This in turn leads one to evaluate a particular religious attitude in terms of the practical consequences that might be expected from holding that attitude, as well as the effectiveness with which the ideal ends in question may be pursued.

This conception, we have seen, lends itself to the formation of *religions*, that is, institutional organizations built around particular ideal ends which individuals might value religiously. Such institutions can provide beneficial services in the pursuit of a shared moral ideal by organizing resources and coordinating the efforts of its like-minded constituents. However, they must also take care to avoid falling into dogmatism, since having an unrevisable doctrine will ultimately hinder that institution's moral efforts.

James's conception of religious attitudes, in contrast with Dewey's, places an emphasis on the personal aspects of religious attitudes. His focus is on the phenomena associated with the subjective experience of religiosity, and the involuntary and otherworldly nature of these anecdotal experiences leads James to center his conception of religious attitudes around the idea of a personal "communion" with a supernatural reality. Indeed, by defining religion as "the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they consider the divine," the object of religious valuation, unlike that of Dewey, seems to be *secondary* to the "feelings, acts, and experiences" of the individual in relation to their personal religious object.

James's conception of religion, we have seen, discourages the formation of religions just as Dewey's may encourage it. Since the primary aspect of the religious attitude is on the feeling of the person who has it rather than its object, the role of the religious institution as a facilitator of the religious object's ends is likewise downplayed. Furthermore, since the experience of the religious person is inherently subjective and ineffable, there cannot be any "like-minded"

persons with whom to form an institution; rather, an institution would be formed by non-religious people who agree with the ideas espoused by the religious pioneer.

With this difference of emphasis in mind, we can see why James and Dewey might disagree on what sorts of things would qualify as religious. For a Deweyan, that is, a consequentialist who is concerned with the power of religious attitudes to shape moral behavior and the power of religious institutions to shape public policy, an investigation of religion would understandably focus on the aspects of the topic related to what we might call its "moral output." To such a person, James's account of religion and his disregard for religious institutions would seem to have a small role to play on this "ordinary" level. Given the intensity with which most people adhere to their religious beliefs and the widespread influence of religious institutions to affect moral behavior, it is all the more important that our conception of religion allow us to address those problems of institutions which might hinder their progressive potential. This potential is further hindered by James's insistence upon supernatural elements in a proper religion, as it not only shifts the focus away from religion's moral aspects but also complicates the issue by introducing epistemological and ontological elements which stand in need of justification.

Jamesians, however, might accuse Deweyans of reducing religious attitudes to "mere morality" by focusing on the value objects rather than on the unique subjective elements associated with the formation of a religious attitude. James does recognize the moral aspects of religious attitudes, as he notes that the phenomenon of religious conversion involves a transformation of one's character, which has as one of its "fruits" an improvement of one's overall disposition and moral behavior. He also points out that the adoption of a religious attitude is a value judgment, as part of the decision to adopt it is based on whether one believes

"we are better off even now" if we accept it as true.  Furthermore, his exploration of individual

accounts of religious experience, all of which attributed that experience to some supernatural

elements, lead James to conclude that those supernatural elements are necessary to achieve the

level of intensity found in religious attitudes.  He would also note that while accounting for

supernatural elements in religion might be problematic from the standpoint of modern

epistemology, it would be a greater crime to give up the potential for a greater understanding of

the universe by dismissing evidence which, due to the circumstances of its nature and origins,

does not fit into the standard empirical model.

Based on the aspects that James and Dewey respectively emphasize, we can identify at

least two functions that a definition of religion must perform.  First, we can see in a global

society the practical necessity of institutions, be they governmental, charitable and/or religious,

to organize efforts and effect change not only locally but also outside one's immediate vicinity.

Thus, our definition of religion should allow us to address the institutional aspects of religion and

discuss how these institutions can or could relate to a progressive society.  Second, we need a

definition of religion which allows us to discuss the personal aspects of religion, since the

formation of one's attitude and the intensity of one's beliefs are closely tied to subjective

experience.  Given both of these requirements, we might conclude that while James and Dewey

each give a definition which covers one of these functions, neither of them individually does

justice to the full spectrum of personal and social aspects associated with religion.

However, we should not conclude that neither of their definitions provide an important

insight, nor they are mutually exclusive.  When formulating his own definition of religion,

Frederick Ferré says of definitions that they are "conceptual tools and, like all tools, are related

to definite purposes.  Just as there is no such thing as one carpenter's tool best suited to every

purpose, so pluralism must be admitted in the area of tools for thinking."[247]  Thus, an acceptable definition of religion need not be applicable to all cases and all aspects of religion; rather, the definition that we use at a given time will depend on the context of the discussion and our purposes in discussing it.

Of course, one might take this idea of definitions as conceptual tools to mean that we are free to define religion however we wish.  For the purposes of philosophical discussion, however, we require definitions which are relevant, coherent, and acceptable to all discussants.  It is clear that James and Dewey, in their respective definitions and investigations of religion, bring to the debate features which are crucial to a full understanding of religious attitudes.  Furthermore, they provide support for their definitions such that they withstand reasonable scrutiny in the contexts to which they apply.  Thus, by allowing both Dewey's and James's definitions as tools in our conceptual toolbox, we have been equipped with a pragmatic conception of religion that we can use to engage in a more nuanced philosophical treatment of our issue.

---

[247] BMPR, p.76

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Augustine.  Confessions of Saint Augustine.  Chapter XII.  Web.  13 July 2016.
        <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/confess.ix.xii.html>.

Bell, Rob.  *Love Wins:  A Book About Heaven, Hell, and the Fate of Every Person Who Ever*
        *Lived.*  HarperOne, 2012.  Ebook.

Boy Scouts of America.  "Mission Statement."  www.scouting.org.  Web. 13 July 2016.
        <http://www.scouting.org/scoutsource/Media/mission.aspx>.

---.  "Declaration of Religious Principle."  Charter and Bylaws of the Boy Scouts of America.
        Article IX, Section 1.  Web.  13 July 2016.
        <http://www.scouting.org/filestore/pdf/bsa_charter_and_bylaws.pdf>.

Cartwright, Nancy.  *How The Laws of Physics Lie*.  New York:  Oxford University Press, 1983.

Catholic Church. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. 2nd ed. Saint Charles Borromeo Catholic
        Church.  Web.  13 July 2016.

Committee on Bioethics.  "Religious Objections to Medical Care."  *Pediatrics*.  Web.  13 July
        2016.  <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/99/2/279>.

Dewey, John.  *A Common Faith*.  New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971.  Print.

---.  "Pattern of Inquiry."  *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry.*  New York:  Henry Holt and Company.
        1938.  Web. 13 July 2016.
        <https://archive.org/stream/JohnDeweyLogicTheTheoryOfInquiry/
        [John_Dewey]_Logic_-_The_Theory_of_Inquiry_djvu.txt>.

---.  *The Quest for Certainty: A Study of the Relation of Knowledge and Action*.  New York:
        Capricorn Books, 1960.  Print.

---.  *Theory of the Moral Life*.  New York:  Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1960.  Print.

Ferré, Frederick.  *Basic Modern Philosophy of Religion.*  Scribner, 1967.  Print.

James, William.  *Essays in Radical Empiricism.*  1912.  Project Gutenberg, 2010.  Ebook.

---.  *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*.  New York:  Dover
        Publications, 1956.  Print.

---.  "The Will to Believe."  James 1-31.  Print.

---.  "Reflex Action and Theism."  James 111-144.  Print.

---.  "The Dilemma of Determinism."  James 145-183.  Print.

---.  "The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life."  James 184-215.  Print.

---.  *The Varieties of Religious Experience:  A Study in Human Nature.*  New York:  The New
     American Library, Inc., 1958.  Print.

---.  "Great Men, Great Thoughts, and the Environment."  *Atlantic Monthly* 46.  1880.  Web.  13
     July 2016.  <https://brocku.ca/MeadProject/James/James_1880.html>.

---.  "The Moral Equivalent of War."  *Representative Essays in Modern Thought: A Basis for
     Composition.*  Ed. H. R. Steeves and F. H. Ristine.  New York:  American Book
     Company.  1913.

---.  *Pragmatism and Four Essays From The Meaning of Truth.*  New York: First Meridian
     Printing.  1955.

---.  "Pragmatism."  James 11-193.  Print.

---.  "The Meaning of Truth."  James 195-264.  Print.

Oliver, Phil.  *William James's "Springs of Delight": The Return to Life.*  Nashville:  Vanderbilt
     University Press, 2001.  Print.

Rotary International.  "Guiding Principles."  Rotary.org.  Web.  13 July 2016.
     <https://www.rotary.org/myrotary/en/learning-reference/about-rotary/guiding-
     principles>.

University of California - Riverside. "Same-sex Behavior Seen In Nearly All Animals, Review
     Finds." ScienceDaily. ScienceDaily, 17 June 2009.
     <www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2009/06/090616122106.htm>.

Wilson, P. Eddy.  "Emerson and Dewey on Natural Piety."  *The Journal of Religion*.  Vol. 75,
     No. 3.  July 1995.  <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1205376>.

Zenit.  "Francis' Press Conference on Return Flight From Brazil (Part 2)." Zenit.org. Web. 13
     July 2016. <https://zenit.org/articles/francis-press-conference-on-return-flight-from-
     brazil-part-2>.