

## Democracy, Piety, and Faith

*A Reading of Dewey's Religious Naturalism*MELVIN ROGERS

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FEW DENY JOHN DEWEY'S belief in the power of human beings to change their circumstances for the better. But this view is often seen as blinding Dewey to (1) the inability of human beings to completely control their environment, and therefore (2) the necessity of cultivating an orientation of responsiveness to the recalcitrant dimensions of the modern world. As Patrick Deneen explains of this position, and the larger strain of American political thought to which Dewey belongs: Dewey believes in "amelioration without limit . . . of progress without boundary."<sup>1</sup> In embracing Promethean optimism, Deneen maintains, Dewey, like Ralph Waldo Emerson before him, shun humility and deny human limitations. Of course, when this view is accepted it distorts Dewey's understanding of the relationship between human agency and democratic practice, since the latter now appears to be the framework for asserting the former without restriction. But this view also obscures Dewey's *religious naturalism*, his attempt to make both our pious relationship to the traditions we inhabit and faith in the future answerable to the social and natural world. In this essay, I seek to correct this reading of Dewey.

At the core of Dewey's *religious naturalism* that we find in his Terry Lectures, *A Common Faith*, is the following belief: nature—broadly conceived—can generate a sense of piety and guiding faith in life without requiring a supernatural source for its intelligibility, and without placing

1. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 5; cf. chapters 1, 2, and 9.

our commitments beyond the reach of inquiry. By inquiry, Dewey means a critical assessment of the beliefs we hold that is responsive not simply to the world we inhabit, but to our fellows in response to a demanding or problematic environment.<sup>2</sup> In this regard, Dewey never rejects religious experience, he only seeks to place it within a democratic practice of giving and asking for reasons for the commitments we hold and the actions we undertake.<sup>3</sup>

In part I, I argue that Dewey is not new in making our beliefs, religious or otherwise, answerable to life. Ralph Waldo Emerson is most clearly his model. Emerson's goal is to defend a picture of the individual that exalts our everyday transactions with nature. This is what Emerson calls self-reliance; but the self-reliant individual, on Emerson's view, is both supported and constrained by a kinship with nature, and therefore guards against a false notion of independence and control. Similarly, Dewey's philosophy of human action emphasizes the importance of the *ordinary*, where that term denotes the everyday space of shared currency—a site of transactions and interactions among others where our lives unfold. In keeping with Emerson, Dewey wants to cultivate a more reflective sense of dependence—that is, to give an account of the democratic core of self-reliance—that chastens both a mythical view of self-sufficiency and a Promethean vision of self-assertion. Moving between Dewey's and Emerson's writings highlights that both encourage human intervention, but caution humility. This forms the backdrop of religious experience we find in Dewey's *A Common Faith*.

In part II, I move through *A Common Faith* in a more systematic fashion, and I explore two important themes of that work—namely, piety and faith. Because Dewey seeks to develop an account of democratic self-reliance, piety cannot mean blind deference as we traditionally understand the term. Rather, piety is a critical but retrospective assessment of the past; it allows us to deepen our apprehension of the present. Dewey refers to this with his term *habit*. For him, habits denote the layered dimension of experience that underwrites identity and which

2. See Rogers, *Undiscovered Dewey*, chapter 2.

3. For views that de-emphasize the importance of religion in Dewey's philosophy see Eldridge, *Transforming Experience*, 168; Soneson, *Pragmatism and Pluralism*, 127; cf. Friess, "Dewey's Philosophy of Religion," 202. For a contrasting view with which I agree see Rockefeller, *John Dewey*.

provide entry points into the future.<sup>4</sup> To speak of habits as constituting a narrative of experience is to see them in the form of traditions, which we come to assess, employ, and honor. Jeffrey Stout refers to this conception of piety as a “just or appropriate response to the sources of one’s existence and progress through life.”<sup>5</sup> What makes piety a “just or appropriate” response in Dewey’s philosophy is its connection to inquiry.

For Dewey, if piety is a virtue where the posture of reflection is retrospective, faith is primarily forward-looking. This explains the distinction he makes in *A Common Faith* between “Religion” and “the Religious.”<sup>6</sup> For him, the category of “Religion[s],” that is, the institutions, practices and beliefs that comprise them, can no longer lay claim to absolute certainty, and so leaves individuals without certain answers to questions about life’s ultimate meaning. But because of this, Dewey argues, individuals are opened to the possibility of ideals being continuous with, rather than external to, actual existence. This is Emerson’s point in his provocative 1838 “Divinity School Address”: “[L]et the breadth of new life be breathed by you through the forms already existing.”<sup>7</sup> The metabolic imagery denotes, in Dewey’s language, the transformation of experience into a vision of the ideal through the imagination.<sup>8</sup> Yet the emphasis Dewey places on the imagination at the core of faith underscores an inescapable fact: *Faith commits us to act in the world, even as the success of acting is denied to us.* I thus disagree with Deneen’s claim that, “Dewey seeks to reject at every turn the notion that faith somehow implies a loss of human control, a surrendering to real or potentially intractable forces, or an admission of human sufficiency.”<sup>9</sup> In contrast, I argue that uncertainty and the necessity of caution that define Emerson’s and Dewey’s view of democracy in part one, inform Dewey’s view of religion pursued in part two.

4. Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct*, 21; cf. 31.

5. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 20; cf. Eddy, *Rites of Identity*, chapter 1; Dewey, *Common Faith*, 18.

6. Dewey, *Common Faith*, chapter 1.

7. Emerson, “Divinity School Address,” 91 (emphasis added).

8. Cf. Alexander, *John Dewey’s Theory of Art*, 260–66; Campbell, *Understanding John Dewey*, 152–55.

9. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, 182.

DEWEY AND EMERSON: ON THE MEANING  
OF SELF-RELIANCE

*A Common Faith* is an exhortation to become a self-reliant individual. The use of self-reliance to describe Dewey's project may seem odd. In what sense is this implied by his vision? On my reading, he means to capture the revolutionary orientation at the core of self-reliance. As Emerson says of self-reliance, it works "in all offices and relations of men; in their religion; in their education; in their pursuits; their modes of living; their association; in their property; in their speculative views."<sup>10</sup> Self-reliance is meant to bring into view two aspects of our existential condition. First, that the absence of permanence in life requires courage, a willingness to abandon the seductive illusion of certainty for the insecurity that comes with critically engaging the social and democratic space we inhabit. Two, there is no way for the absence of permanence to emerge as an object of reflection without implying that we are dependent creatures. As we will see, the relationship between courage and dependence as well as between self-reliance and democracy stimulates action in the world, but also tempers its reach.

*Dewey and Emerson*

We might begin with an observation. In *Individualism: Old and New* of 1930, Dewey argues for "a new psychological and moral type" that reconfigures character in a democratic idiom.<sup>11</sup> In this work, Dewey articulates a vision of individual identity that is accountable to the social world, as did Emerson almost a century earlier in response to the moral crisis that crass individualism posed to democracy. Responding to and participating in the epistemological and social transformations in American society that weakened the hold of traditional religious and communal commitments on individuals, both Emerson and Dewey attempt to rethink the meaning of the self under modern conditions. Although Emerson and Dewey do not want identity exhausted by any one set of commitments, they do not wish for individuals to run headlong into the opposite direction of the unencumbered self that would most cer-

10. Emerson, "Self-Reliance," 275; cf. "American Scholar," 53–71. Dewey himself invokes the term in precisely this way in several contexts ("Construction and Criticism," 139; *Ethics*, 327; cf. 377).

11. Dewey, *Individualism*, 67; cf. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 27; Alexander, "John Dewey," 131–54.

tainly render individuals unresponsive to each other. Their contention is that the response to these two options—the exhaustion of identity or the unencumbered self—must begin with a mood shift, the articulation of which, they believe, is one step towards bringing it to fruition. This middle ground both vivifies and constrains modern identity; in fact, it parts ways from the view of these two thinkers we find in Deneen.

This new psychological type is grounded in an appreciation of the ordinary that connects Dewey to Emerson. This much Dewey explains in his 1903 essay, “Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy”:

[Emerson’s] ideas are not fixed upon any Reality that is beyond or behind or in any way apart, and hence they do not have to be bent. They are versions of the Here and the Now, and flow freely. The reputed transcendental worth of an overweening Beyond and Away, Emerson, jealous for spiritual democracy, finds to be the possession of the unquestionable Present. When Emerson . . . designated the There and Then as “wild, savage and preposterous,” he also drew the line which marks him off from transcendentalism—which is the idealism of a Class. . . . It is such disinherited of the earth that Emerson summons to their own. “If man is sick, is unable, is mean-spirited and odious, it is because there is so much of his nature which is unlawfully withholden from him.”<sup>12</sup>

If the identity of individuals no longer centers on nor is *wholly* directed by tradition, class, or eschatological understandings of the world, then they may be able to lay claim to that part of their nature which is “unlawfully withholden” from them, and which, once active, can creatively reinvigorate and socially bind. But how so? Is this what Dewey is trying to describe with the term “spiritual democracy”? Consider the classic passage from Emerson’s 1836 *Nature*, where he waxes lyrical on precisely this point:

Crossing a bare common, in snow puddles, at twilight, under a clouded sky . . . I have enjoyed a perfect exhilaration. Standing on the bare ground—my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space—all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me; I am part or parcel of God.<sup>13</sup>

12. Dewey, “Emerson—The Philosopher of Democracy,” 190.

13. Emerson, *Nature*, 10.

Emerson's poetic renderings yield an important claim about our shared lives to which Dewey is attentive. By "Universal Being" Emerson does not mean traditional Christianity's God. Universal Being is the nature that is at once "NOT ME," that is "all other men and my own body," but of which I am a part.<sup>14</sup> The self is not extinguished in this passage, although Emerson does mean to underscore the partiality that selfhood can display. Hence the individual that vanishes is not the expression of *egotism* properly speaking, the other part of the Universal Being that Emerson calls "the Soul," but of a "mean egotism."<sup>15</sup> Mean egotism emanates from shallow impulses and desires and seduces us into believing that we are truly self-sufficient.

Although the term "egotism" is liable to confuse, Emerson is referring to a form of self-regard that implicitly acknowledges dependence on social practices, what Dewey calls the "complicated arts of associated living."<sup>16</sup> As Lawrence Buell explains, for Emerson, "beneath and within the 'private' is a 'public' power on which anyone can potentially draw."<sup>17</sup> Focusing on the normative character of this public power, Dewey maintains that "conduct is always shared . . . It is not an ethical 'ought' that conduct *should* be social. It *is* social, whether bad or good."<sup>18</sup> Dewey's point is that our entrance into social life implicates us in a normative world and thus contains liberating and constraining aspects. This world is liberating in that it provides us with conceptual and material resources that enable us to manage life and enlarge our freedom. But it is constraining because we are all members of a community and are *understood* as belonging to that community by its members. In this context of an implicit solidarity the partiality of selfhood—the mean egotism—is made possible as well as circumscribed.

I do not mean to suggest that for Emerson and Dewey this solidarity is not forged and discursively negotiated throughout social life. Hence Emerson says of the developmental character of life:

What else seeks he in the deep instinct of society, from his first fellow-ship—a child with children at play, up to the heroic cravings of friendship and love—but to find himself in another mind,

14. *Ibid.*, 8.

15. *Ibid.*

16. Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 3.

17. Buell, *Emerson*, 65.

18. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 16 (original emphasis).

to confess himself, to make a clean breast, to be searched and known, because such is the law of his being that only can he find out his own secret through the instrumentality of another mind?<sup>19</sup>

Dewey echoes the point, drawing out more forcefully the communicative aspect upon which one's distinctiveness relies: "To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individually distinctive member of a community."<sup>20</sup> The point here is that both he and Emerson are attempting to make *explicit* the social-psychological standpoint democratic life uncovers and relies upon. Making explicit this solidarity allows the mean egotism to be challenged—that is to say, one's actions become something for which it is proper to offer and inquire after reasons, thus making our actions answerable on ground that is shared. We make explicit, says Dewey, "some more comprehensive point of view from which the divergence may be brought together"—that is, where conflicting outlooks may be assessed and resolved from the critical dimension of shared perspectives.<sup>21</sup> This is precisely why humans, Emerson believes, are capable of being "enlarged" when they are together.<sup>22</sup> This comprehensive point of view—the site for enlargement—is possible because the forms of life we pursue are not wholly independent from the practices in which we pursue them.

Notice that Emerson, and Dewey more emphatically, want the fact of social existence to register appropriately in one's life. They want to address the following observation that Stout has recently captured—namely, that human "pride being what it is, it will not be easy to think for oneself, in the pursuit of self-critical but genuine piety, without succumbing to the temptation of denying the very conditions of one's own existence or otherwise masking from oneself the sources on which critical thinking depends."<sup>23</sup> But it is precisely this view of pride that Emerson and Dewey want to constrain. Consider Emerson's reflections in his 1841 essay "Man the Reformer"; it nicely extends the implication of *Nature* while simultaneously approximating the language Dewey's comes to use:

19. Emerson, "Address on Education," 200.

20. Dewey, *Public and Its Problems*, 332.

21. Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 336.

22. Emerson, *Society and Solitude*, 228.

23. Stout, *Democracy and Tradition*, 31.

And further, I will not dissemble my hope, that each person whom I address has felt his own call to cast aside all evil customs, timidities, and limitations, and to be in his place a free and helpful man, a reformer . . . who must find or cut a straight road to everything excellent in the earth, and not only go honorably himself, but make it easier for all who follow him, to go in honor and with benefit.<sup>24</sup>

One's status as an honorable human being, for Emerson, is partly tied to the fact that one creates a road for others to travel with ease. But this also requires that we do not lose sight of the fact that our own success will often be dependent on someone creating a path for us. Unfortunately, the narrower understanding of the self that we often associate with liberalism mistakenly reads the liberation of the individual from traditional moorings back into its philosophy as an *ontological* claim about subjectivity.<sup>25</sup> This leads to mistaken and romantic beliefs about individual sovereignty, self-sufficiency, and self-made human beings. But this account is unable to make the enlargement and curtailment of freedom or authority an emergent issue within a practice of giving and asking for reasons.

This need not be the only implication of modern selfhood, however. The vision of self-reliance Emerson and Dewey have in mind is responsive to the larger world. It begins with a critical posture toward the world on which one depends, even as the self-reliant individual takes for granted the fact of dependence. The point is that in acknowledging dependence we must also realize that without self-reliance, all allegiances may become invitations to epistemic blindness, or worse, injustice and

24. Emerson, "Man the Reformer," 135; cf. "The American Scholar," 63.

25. Thus Dewey writes of liberalism: "Born in revolt against established forms of government and the state, the events which finally culminated in democratic political forms were deeply tinged by fear of government, and were actuated by a desire to reduce it to a minimum so as to limit the evil it could do. Since established political forms were tied up with other institutions, especially ecclesiastical, and with a solid body of tradition and inherited belief, the revolt also extended to the latter. Thus it happened that the intellectual terms in which the movement expressed itself had a negative import even when they seemed to be positive. Freedom presented itself as an end in itself, though it signified in fact liberation from oppression and tradition. . . . Thus 'individualism' was born, a theory which endowed singular persons in isolation from any associations, except those which they deliberately formed for their own ends" (*Public and Its Problems*, 288–89).

cruelty.<sup>26</sup> But in order to enlarge our identities—to find the road that allows us to go in honor and with benefit—we cannot deny our condition of dependence.

Emerson and Dewey do not deny that theological frameworks, traditions, or even class identifications may psychologically integrate the individual. But for them without being able to critically say what our relationship is to these powerful identity-spheres, how they allow us to move fluidly within the flowing stream of life, the result is either “dogmatic fundamentalism . . . or private estheticism.”<sup>27</sup> The former often translates into a strong and blinding sense of belonging and devotion that blocks from view a critical piety. The latter view—private estheticism—confuses self-reliance with a lust for originality or novelty. It makes self-creation an ethical goal but obscures the relevance and demand of the context in which such an aspiration is rendered intelligible and sustained.

Emerson and Dewey discourage the inclination in either direction, and in doing so crystallize their understanding of self-reliance. First consider Dewey’s view on the matter:

The new centre is indefinite interactions taking place within a course of nature which is not fixed and complete, but which is capable of direction to new and different results through the mediation of intentional operations. Neither self nor world, neither soul nor nature (in the sense of something isolated and finished in its isolation) is the centre, any more than either earth or sun is the absolute centre of a single universe and necessary frame of reference.<sup>28</sup>

The context of this passage is the emergence of knowledge, including self-understanding, as the result of transactions in and through experience. Dewey’s point is that precisely because the center is shifting under the conditions of modernity, we must be careful before moving too quickly in assuming that our frame of reference is the *necessary* starting point. This point echoes Emerson’s remark in “Circles” that there “are no fixtures in nature. The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence

26. Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” 273; Cf. Kateb, *Emerson and Self-Reliance*, 171. For a powerful description of this theme in Emerson that guards against complicity see Turner, “Emerson, Slavery, and Citizenship.”

27. Dewey, *Individualism*, 72.

28. Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 232.

is but a word of degrees.”<sup>29</sup> We must not assume that our reference point exists at the level of phenomenological fact, untouched by the contingency that is part of its development. To be a self-reliant individual is to be a person who can engage in communal- and self-criticism without believing (wrongly) to have transcended the practices in which one is located and to which one is answerable.

*Humility and Courage: The Ethos of Self-Reliance*

This view of Dewey and Emerson departs from the description of these thinkers we find in Deneen’s book *Democratic Faith*. Deneen’s Dewey is gripped by the power of the modern scientific method and sees no limit to its applicability in ameliorating our condition.<sup>30</sup> Deneen’s Emerson elevates humanity and sees America as a divinely anointed site for human development.<sup>31</sup> In sum, says Deneen: “Like Dewey . . . Emerson chastised his countrymen for seeking God in the Heavens, and sought to bring their eyes down . . . upon the world. In doing so, the will of God and the will of man were combined, leading to the possibility of a sense of national righteousness and even providential fate.”<sup>32</sup> This is a damning indictment not simply of Emerson’s and Dewey’s outlook, but in Deneen’s estimation, the American psyche as well.

But Deneen’s reading obscures the fundamental proposition that orients both thinkers—namely, that human agency does not presume to imitate the creative production once attributed to God precisely because contingency is more thoroughly embedded within human life. It is telling that Deneen says very little about this dimension of both Emerson’s and Dewey’s philosophy, an aspect that constrains the hubris Deneen otherwise attributes to them. He misses the deeper vision they sought to impart to their fellows that never abandoned the frailty of human agency, even as they encouraged an activist will.

To acknowledge contingency simply means, says Dewey, we accept that we “live forward . . . we live in a world where changes are going on whose issue means our weal or woe.”<sup>33</sup> He repeats the point elsewhere

29. Emerson, “Circles,” 403.

30. Deneen, *Democratic Faith*, chapter 2.

31. *Ibid.*, 273.

32. *Ibid.*

33. Dewey, “Recovery of Philosophy,” 9; cf. *Experience and Nature*, 18; *Democracy and Education*, 146.

when he explains that “the visible is set in the invisible, and in the end what is unseen decides what happens in the seen.”<sup>34</sup> The claim is that we can never know in some final sense that we have outstripped the complexity of the world we engage, and therefore we must always proceed from a position of humility. This is precisely why both Dewey and Emerson reject, as indicated above, private aestheticism and dogmatic fundamentalism. Each of these positions exaggerates life and the epistemic status that we can attach to it, denying the inescapable moments of disappointment. To guard against such a denial, Emerson reminds us in *The Conduct of Life* of 1860 that “nature is no sentimentalist,—[it] does not cosset or pamper us. We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman.”<sup>35</sup> But just as the unpredictability of nature threatens the goods of life, so, too, does it position us for settling needs and enlarging the value of life. In this regard, human action and the absence of complete mastery are coextensive. Consider Dewey’s meliorism, “the belief that the specific conditions which exist at one moment, be they comparatively bad or comparatively good, in any event *may* be bettered.”<sup>36</sup> Dewey’s use of the word “may” implies caution; he seeks to circumscribe our actions and to prevent us from inflating what human reflection can achieve. As he says, “humility is more demanded at our moments of triumph than at those of failure. . . . It is the sense of our slight inability even with our best intelligence and effort to command events; a sense of our dependence upon forces that go their way without our wish and plan.”<sup>37</sup> The claim encompasses not simply the wrath of physical nature, but the individuals that are part and parcel of nature. Noting the latter point, Emerson writes: “You have

34. Dewey, *Experience and Nature*, 44; *Human Nature*, 145; *Quest for Certainty*, 6.

35. Emerson, *Conduct of Life*, 945.

36. Dewey, *Reconstruction in Philosophy*, 181–82 (emphasis added).

37. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 200. Additionally, compare Dewey’s self description in the 1930s after confronting his own disappointments as a reformer. It carries more than a hint of caution: “Forty years spent wandering in a wilderness like that of the present is not a sad fate unless one attempts to make himself believe that the wilderness is after all itself the promised land” (Dewey, “Absolutism to Experimentalism,” 160). As Robert Westbrook rightly notes in this regard: “Dewey never believed that American democracy was out of the woods” (Westbrook, *John Dewey*, 462). Stanley Cavell thus misses the Emersonian voice in Dewey, reducing his understanding of inquiry to scientism (Cavell, *Conditions Handsome*, Intro). For several good responses to Cavell with which I agree see Shusterman, *Practicing Philosophy*; Jackson, *John Dewey and the Philosopher’s Task*, chapter 5.

just dined, and, however scrupulously the slaughter-house is concealed in the graceful distance of miles, there is complicity . . . race living at the expense of race.”<sup>38</sup>

There is a positive upshot here, however. Emerson articulates a richer vision of life, as does Dewey, which generates hope from the fact of social existence. As such, commitment to a redeeming intelligence for Emerson and Dewey has something more at its core than mere human volition. This much Emerson explains:

We have all a certain intellection or presentiment of reform existing in the mind, which does not yet descend into the character, and those who throw themselves blindly on this lose themselves. Whatever they attempt in that direction, fails, and reacts suicidally on the actor himself. This is the penalty of having transcended nature. For the existing world is not a dream, and cannot with impunity be treated as a dream; neither is it a disease; but it is the ground on which you stand, it is the mother of whom you were born. Reform converses with possibilities, perchance with impossibilities; but here is sacred fact. *This also was true, or it could not be: it had life in it, or it could not have existed; it has life in it, or it could not continue.*<sup>39</sup>

Choosing to orient ourselves to the world in the way Emerson suggests is not based on “moral magic” says Dewey, but rather a “humbler exercise of will to *observe* existing social realities and to *direct* them according to their own potentialities.”<sup>40</sup> This is Emerson’s point in the passage: the existing world is not a disease, and should not be treated as such. There are, as Dewey says, existing social realities on which we rely, however unstable and contingent. There is a refined materialism to their account that encourages humility, lest we suffer the penalty of trying to transcend the uncertainty of nature. The position they recommend demands courage, but nothing less. To invoke Paul, we may well be “perplexed” by human frustrations, “but not unto despair.” Dewey echoes this point with religious faith specifically in view, preparing us for what he will say more forcefully in *A Common Faith*:

Religious faith which attaches itself to the possibilities of nature and associated living would, with its devotion to the ideal,

38. Emerson, *Conduct of Life*, 945.

39. Emerson, “The Conservative,” 177 (emphasis added).

40. Dewey, *Individualism*, 49.

manifest piety toward the actual. . . . Respect and esteem would be given to that which is the means of realization of possibilities, and to that in which the ideal is embodied if it ever finds embodiment. Aspiration and endeavor are not ends in themselves; value is not in them in isolation but in them as means to that reorganization of the existent in which approved meanings are attained. Nature and society include within themselves projection of ideal possibilities and contain the operations by which they are actualized. *Nature may not be worshipped as divine. . . . But nature, including humanity, with all its defects and imperfections, may evoke heartfelt piety as the source of ideals, of possibilities, of aspiration in their behalf, and as the eventual abode of all attained goods and excellences.*<sup>41</sup>

Note the use of nature in this passage. In its *undifferentiated* form, nature denotes the whole, the totality of that which exists. But I take the passage also to mean, indicated by the claim that nature may be the “eventual abode of all attained goods and excellences,” that the whole does not exhaust what may exist. As such, the *differentiated* form of nature is the result of treating it as a testing-ground—that is, allowing one’s naturalism to run all the way down without a note of pessimism or exaggeration about what the encounter with nature will produce.<sup>42</sup> As Dewey is aware, our tendency to move in either direction conspires against our best wishes to be realistic and measured in our valuations.

#### READING A COMMON FAITH

Thus far we have considered the relationship between democracy and self-reliance in Emerson and Dewey that circumscribes what we can attribute to human action. There are several conclusions we must now keep in mind as we make the transition to *A Common Faith*. First, self-reliance stands in between a vision of identity that is exhausted by any one object of allegiance and a vision of identity that denies the hold of allegiances altogether. Second, this middle position evokes both courage and dependence, since the care of the self is dependent both prospectively and retrospectively on the seen and unseen of nature. Third, the result is a vision of religious experience that is plural,

41. Dewey, *Quest for Certainty*, 244 (emphasis added); cf. *Experience and Nature*, 312–15.

42. On this distinction see Smith, *Purpose and Thought*, 224–25, n. 86; cf. Wilson, “Emerson and Dewey,” 336.

but which always must square itself with democratic life. The issue to which we must now turn is the precise way these considerations animate the themes of that work. We must turn to piety, to faith, and to faith's relationship to imagination and ideals. Although I will explicate *A Common Faith*, the aim is to show how the account of part I is reflected in this important text by Dewey.

### *Piety*

Before Dewey addresses the issue of piety in chapter one, "Religion Versus the Religious," he begins with a discussion of religious pluralism. This is part of Dewey's rejoinder to the definition of religion that he cites from the *Oxford English Dictionary* which reads: "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."<sup>43</sup> The definition is important for putting in place several features to which we will return, including the character of the unseen, the meaning of having our destiny controlled, and the sense in which an object is entitled to obedience. After cataloguing a multitude of ways historic religions have defined the unseen he remarks: "There is no greater similarity in the ways in which obedience and reverence have been expressed."<sup>44</sup> If this is so why believe that choice and diversity in matters regarding the object of people's piety and faith has stopped?<sup>45</sup> In highlighting the fact of pluralism, his point is not to reject the definition, but to reconstruct its content so that it can potentially be reflected throughout the various domains of life.

But Dewey's emphasis on pluralism does not intend for individuals to abandon, as some believe, specific religious institutions, beliefs, and rituals.<sup>46</sup> Instead, he focuses our attention on the absence of a *necessary* connection between specific beliefs and pious allegiance or faith. Every instance in which Dewey discusses institutions as being an encumbrance to religious experience, he is speaking of the configuration that imposes a necessary connection. Thus he writes: "I am not proposing a religion . . . For the moment we have a religion, whether that of the Sioux Indian

43. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 4.

44. *Ibid.*, 5.

45. *Ibid.*, 6.

46. For this claim see Schaub, "Dewey's Interpretation of Religion," at 398–99; cf. Friess, "Dewey's Philosophy of Religion," 209–10; Randall Jr., *Philosophy After Darwin*, 261; Arnett, "Critique of Dewey's Anticlerical Religious Philosophy," 256–66.

or of Judaism or of Christianity, that moment the ideal factors in experience that may be called religious take on a load that is not inherent in them.”<sup>47</sup>

Admittedly, this suggests that he wants us to rely as little as possible on the institutions of religion. But Dewey writes in this categorical way because he does not want to confuse the stance or attitude that he is describing with a specific tradition, leading to the conclusion that *one* religion exhausts the meaning of piety or faith. This is especially important given that in the West most traditional religions, on his view, identify the unseen with a supernatural being.<sup>48</sup> For Dewey, the result of this identification is that the description of what counts as religious experience falls to the level of unquestioned fact, cutting individuals off from the possibility that beliefs, institutions, objects, etc. that do not receive supernatural warrant may still invoke pious allegiance or faith. His point is simply to say that there is a distinction between piety and faith as virtues, on the one hand, and the object to which these virtues are attached, on the other. For him, we should not conflate the two, lest we find our common lives divided into religious factions.

To understand piety and faith as virtues means something very specific that Dewey describes two years earlier in his *Ethics* of 1932 where he discusses the difference between *customary* and *reflective* morality. The latter, we can say, is the property of a self-reliant individual. The distinction between customary and reflective morality fits appropriately with an account of identity formation that was once exhausted by a relatively static set of commitments and institutions, and one that now emerges across a wider and more contingent range of practices and obligations.

In customary morality it is possible to draw up a list or catalogue of vices and virtues. For the latter reflect some definite existing custom, and the former some deviation from or violation of custom. . . . In reflective morality, a list of virtues has much more tentative status. Chastity, kindness, patriotism, modesty, toleration, bravery, etc., cannot be given a fixed meaning, because each expresses an interest in objects and institutions which are changing. In form, *as* interests, they may be permanent, since no community could endure in which there were not, say, fair dealing, public spirit, regard for life, faithfulness. But no two communities conceive the objects to which these qualities attach in quite iden-

47. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 7; cf. 8.

48. *Ibid.*, 19–20.

tical ways. They can be defined, therefore, only on the basis of *qualities characteristic of interest*, not on the basis of permanent and uniform objects in which interest is taken.<sup>49</sup>

As moral virtues, then, piety and faith can only be understood on the basis of the traits constitutive of the interest, rather than on the permanent existence of some object in which the interest lies. In one sense, this makes any account of piety and faith formal. But this formal description, on Dewey's view, can only be accepted under the qualification that faith and piety must always be embodied. In other words, individuals show pious allegiance to *x* and they have faith in *y*; filling out what *x* or *y* means will most certainly require more details and a narrative about specific individuals and communities under question, but piety and faith in life would be incomplete without some articulation of the objects to which they refer. In *A Common Faith*, Dewey intends to warn us against inscribing the emblem of sacredness on existing beliefs, institutions, and traditions, because to do this undermines pluralism and critical revision, distorting the character of piety and faith under modern conditions. Once piety and faith are distorted in this way, we are not too far from antidemocratic politics.

In light of what Dewey says in *A Common Faith*, piety serves an integrative function between self and world that deepens our sense of the actual. Faith extends that function to the very contours of identity, unifying the self in relation to an ideal. As we shall see in a moment, for Dewey faith is belief that *x* should be in existence, where *x* is so inclusive as to harmonize the disparate features of the self and its context. This unification of the self, unlike the mere integration with the larger horizon that is made possible by the actual, is the result of the imaginative function of inquiry. Faith is not only a projection of possibilities; it is a utopian vision that unifies the self psychologically and orients the self forward in action. This difference between piety and faith is one of degree. The latter is primarily where Dewey locates religious experience.

We should keep in mind then that the concern about piety, as Dewey understands, is a more general argument about the *past*, the ground upon which we stand as it has been built up by previous generations, in which institutions of religion are but one part. The concept "past" is another way of speaking of what Dewey refers to in another context as

49. Dewey, *Ethics*, 255–56 (original emphasis).

“the actual”; it has a temporal quality denoted by past experiences which are funneled directly into the present.<sup>50</sup> To speak of the actuality of a tradition, relationship, belief, etc. is also implicitly to refer to its historical career. But, also, a past that infuses and aids one in negotiating the present is no past where that means historically antecedent and substantively irrelevant. For Dewey, a past that aids is what we call a living tradition or a habit. It means that the tradition, though antecedent in its temporal formation, is still substantively relevant in the present. Hence he says that the logic of piety “compels us to inquire how much in religions now accepted are survivals from outgrown culture,” where outgrown means that the “conception of the unseen powers and our relations to them” is not “consonant with the best achievements and aspirations of the present.”<sup>51</sup>

All of this helps us make sense of the precise language Dewey’s uses in defining piety.

The fact that human destiny is so interwoven with forces beyond human control renders it unnecessary to suppose that dependence and the humility that accompanies it have to find the particular channel that is prescribed by traditional doctrines. . . . For our dependence is manifest in those relations to the environment that support our undertakings and aspirations as much as it is in the defeats inflicted upon us. . . . Natural piety is not of necessity either a fatalistic acquiescence in natural happenings or a romantic idealization of the world. It may rest upon a just sense of nature as the whole of which we are parts, while it also recognizes that we are parts that are marked by intelligence and purpose, having the capacity to strive by their aid to bring conditions into greater consonance with what is humanly desirable.<sup>52</sup>

What this passage indicates is that a tradition or authority is often a conversation across time that has at its core the following question: How are we to understand this thing which partly makes us? Our reliance on it helps us negotiate, manage, and cope—to fashion the kinds of people we wish to become and the world we long to inhabit. It steadies our life. Intelligence and purpose works in conjunction with nature, or, as Dewey

50. See passage cited from Dewey on page 14.

51. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 6. This theme figures prominently in Eddie Glaude’s skillful application of pragmatism to the contemporary problems of black politics. See Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, especially chap. 3.

52. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 18.

says, in our specific relationships with the environment. Piety may thus have as its object an undifferentiated but grand appreciation for nature or a more sober differentiated reverence for specific relationships and institutions that comprise nature.

In whatever garb it is wrapped, tradition provides a narrative of experience which controls our destiny by virtue of giving us resources to frame ideas of what makes something an appropriate object of allegiance.<sup>53</sup> The source of control is the interpenetration between the background—that is, the narrative of experience—and the present. Indeed, the background helps illuminate the present. This suggests, at least as Dewey understands the matter, that what we are to make of our inheritance is intimately bound up with how it functions in living one's life. But when our past collides with the inescapable present, when it no longer flows fluidly into the movement of life signaled by the problems we confront, we must then ask the difficult but necessary question: Is such a past still a live option? The initiation of critical reflection indicates that there is some *part* of our past that is no longer *living*.

Defined this way, Dewey infuses piety with the critical power of inquiry that is coextensive with self-reliance. Inquiry's functioning is therefore defined by the way in which piety orients individuals to the past. Piety is thus the kind of moral virtue that is attentive to relationships of dependence; it involves an evaluative moment of attunement, a linking of the past to the present to extend reception and meaningful content of the present. If faith "looks to the end toward which we move," remarks George Santayana, "piety looks to the conditions and the sources of life."<sup>54</sup> This means that individuals live with the past, but not in it; traditions aid them on their journey, but never wholly determine their destination point. Such individuals agree with "Emerson . . . that consistency should be thrown to the winds when it stands between us and the opportunities of present life."<sup>55</sup> Dewey is clear that the authority of the past is necessary to life, but our traditions must also be answerable to life's demands. Those who part company with Dewey would have to believe that blind deference is healthy. But if we are going to make arguments in favor of blind deference, Dewey contends, we will have to do so without lapsing into dogmatic fundamentalism or private estheticism.

53. *Ibid.*, 6; cf. 10.

54. Santayana, *Life of Reason*, 264.

55. Dewey, *Human Nature*, 72.

But if Dewey is attempting to recast the meaning of religion he cites from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, it is unclear what exactly the unseen can mean on his naturalistic account. He gives us a clear idea of what he means with the following remark: "The idea of invisible powers would take on the meaning of all the conditions of nature and human association that support and deepen the sense of values which carry on through periods of darkness and despair to such an extent that they lose their usual depressive character."<sup>56</sup> What allows the periods of darkness and despair to lose their depressive character are the experiences and resources that feed directly into and are continuous with those moments. Dewey is referring to funded experiences that infuses and underwrites identity, but which are not an object of reflection. We do not think about these experiences, and yet they help us form a more complete self-description of ourselves as particular individuals or they give us a language to define and understand the objects of our piety. Articulation of the values that carry on through darkness and despair, then, can only take place through self-description and the defining of specific objects of piety, even as we acknowledge that no one condition of nature or human association falls to the level of an unquestioned fact.

*Faith, Imagination, and the Ideal*

Having considered at some length Dewey's view on piety, we are now prepared to examine the other central virtue in that work, namely, faith. When Dewey takes up this topic he discusses two different things: first, faith's psychological function, and second, its moral dimension vis-à-vis the external environment. Regarding the first of these, Dewey remarks that its religious impact signifies:

[C]hanges in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are much more inclusive and deep seated. They relate not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety. . . . There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that . . . it is a change *of* will conceived as the organic plentitude of our being, rather than any special change *in* will. It 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 re-

56. *Ibid.*, 11.

ligious attitude. . . . The 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.<sup>57</sup>

Precisely because individuals develop amid the on-going changes of life, they remain psychologically incomplete. After all, to speak of the primacy of habits in the life of the self only signifies the self's relative stability over time, but this in no way constitutes, in Dewey's view, a unified or fixed identity. A unified self implies a comprehensive picture of the whole of reality and one's life therein undistorted. The "organic plentitude" of our being is an appropriate phrase in this instance; it implies that the teleological structure of human action is continuous with the environment. "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."<sup>58</sup> Hence the last sentence speaks of the imagination as extending current observation and reflection so as to project what the unknown might be were it present.

Dewey does not explain precisely how the imagination works in *A Common Faith*, and so we must look elsewhere. In his major work on aesthetics, *Art as Experience*, which he publishes during the same year of *A Common Faith*, he writes the following: "Art is thus prefigured in the very process of living."<sup>59</sup> For him, we confront our lives in the way an artist confronts a canvas stained with ink. There is a picture of life to complete, ends and purposes to be stipulated, sought after, and reached, that makes the life we live our own. The simple point is that the process of socialization does not exhaust identity formation. But the ends, as Dewey says, are "presented only imaginatively."<sup>60</sup> What exactly this means he suggests in his account of the conflict that the artist undergoes, although this claim is not confined to this example:

One way of stating it concerns the opposition between inner and outer vision. There is a stage in which the inner vision seems much richer and finer than any outer manifestation. It has a vast and enticing aura of implications that are lacking in the object of

57. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 12–13 (original emphasis).

58. *Ibid.*, 14.

59. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 30.

60. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 14.

external vision . . . the matter of the inner vision seems wraith-like compared with the solidity and energy of the presented scene. The object is felt to say something succinctly and forcibly that the inner vision reports vaguely, in diffuse feeling rather than organically. The artist is driven to submit himself in humility to the discipline of the objective vision. But the inner vision is not cast out. It remains as the organ by which the outer vision is controlled, and it takes on structure as the latter is absorbed within it. The interaction of the two modes of vision is imagination; as imagination takes form the work of art is born . . . [the artist] finds himself obliged to go back to objects if his speculations are to have body, weight, and perspective.<sup>61</sup>

Here he captures the dialectical relationship between vision and context, in which the end or ideal to be reached is the result of the imagination reconstructing and extending experience. The imagination provides a more complete representation of ends than we find in our environments. The reconstruction is not merely of discreet happenings—the present situation—but more dramatically, the funded nature of the present so that the end-product of the imagination has a career both in the present and in what precedes it. As Dewey remarks: “For while the roots of every experience are found in the interaction of a live creature with its environment, that experience becomes conscious, a matter of perception, only when meanings enter it that are derived from prior experiences. Imagination is the only gateway through which these meanings find their way into [the] present.”<sup>62</sup> Through the use of the imagination, we simultaneously acknowledge that the possibilities of self and world are “unrealized in fact [but] come home to us [imaginatively] and have power to stir us [practically].”<sup>63</sup> “The experience enacted,” he continues in *Art as Experience*, “is human and conscious only as that which is given here and now is extended by meanings and values drawn from what is absent in fact and present only imaginatively.”<sup>64</sup> This makes the suggested telos an object for testing.

As these various passages indicate, Dewey applies the imagination to the psychological composition of the self. The implication is that the existing contours of identity and context and its transmutation by the

61. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 273.

62. *Ibid.*, 276; cf. *Common Faith*, 33–34.

63. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 30.

64. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 276.

imagination vividly displays departure and destination points which control action. “[I]maginative experience,” he says, “is what happens when varied materials of sense, quality, emotion, and meaning come together in a union that marks a new birth in the world.”<sup>65</sup> This new birth is not the realization of the ideal end or whole self as such, but that which results in pursuit of such ends.

But why make harmony, complete psychological integration, a goal at all? In answering this question we should keep in mind that religious faith functions to create transformation between self and its context, and to create a pervasive imaginative harmony that affects the contours of identity and directs actions. This means that the particular ideals that Dewey has in mind which animate us are of such a nature that they render us harmonious and integrate us with the environment. “I should describe this faith,” he says, “as the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.”<sup>66</sup> So the formal account of faith that he offers conditions the objects to which it attaches in a very specific way. He amplifies the remark several pages later: “The unity signifies not a single Being, but the unity of loyalty and effort evoked by the fact that many ends are one in the power of their ideal, or imaginative, quality to stir and hold us.”<sup>67</sup>

In light of the question above this means that the commitment to harmony flows from a vision of the self, whose complete unfolding in time would settle the existential and practical demand of action. “The religious attitude signifies something that is bound through imagination to a *general* attitude. This comprehensive attitude, moreover, is much broader than anything indicated by ‘moral’ in its usual sense” precisely because it completes the demands of the moral life.<sup>68</sup> I say “completes” in this context for several reasons. First, the social world gives our actions moral import. The extent to which we are agents and patients implies a constant attempt to manage the world. Second, the religious attitude, as Dewey describes it, thus stipulates ideals by virtue of which the moral life is fulfilled. In other words, the far reaching character of the religious

65. *Ibid.*, 272.

66. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 23.

67. *Ibid.*, 30.

68. *Ibid.*, 17 (original emphasis).

attitude outstrips the term moral in its usual sense, which, as I read Dewey, seeks to settle this or that specific problematic.

We can deepen this account by turning to the second of the two themes, namely, the moral dimension of religious faith.

The intimate connection of imagination with the ideal elements in experience is generally recognized. Such is not the case with respect to its connection with faith. The latter has been regarded as a substitute for knowledge, for sight. It is defined, in the Christian religion, as *evidence* of things not seen. The implication is that faith is a kind of anticipatory vision of things that are now invisible because of the limitation of our finite and erring natures.<sup>69</sup>

From Dewey's perspective, however, faith is not, as traditionally conceived, about the immanence of an ideal, whose realization is hampered by our natures. On that account, the ideal becomes reified and the meaning of faith is obscured. The ideal is reified in the sense that it cannot undergo revision in light of new experiences. Questions about how an ideal conditions action, why some ideal as opposed to another ought to guide conduct is cordoned-off from the practice of giving and asking for reasons.

In linking inquiry to faith in this way, Dewey's claim is that even as ideals are stipulated on which our faith hinges and as something toward which we strive, they are revisable by virtue of their impact on action. This is why our relationship to ideals need not be idolatrous. An appropriate stipulation of ideals never loses sight of the reflexive dimension of action—that is, the sense in which secondary actions retrospectively inform commitment to ideals, disclosing the fallibilistic and experimental quality of the entire project of ideal formation. So even as ideals work to effect a transformation in action, the resulting change in experience becomes an evaluative moment to assess the viability of and warrant for those ideals as worthy of guiding life. This dynamism gives the teleological character of life a flexible and revisable character.

Insofar as we understand these claims, especially the role accorded the imagination, they signal the radical character of the relationship between inquiry and faith and highlight the uncertainty attached to faith. This latter point is important, since Deneen maintains that Dewey's view of faith seems un-tinged by danger. And yet genuine inquiry involves, on Dewey's view, both risk and courage—an existential imprimatur. When

69. *Ibid.*, 14–15 (original emphasis).

inquiry is connected to faith, the latter involves a leap into the unknown. So while the warrant for the leap is grounded in an existing state-of-affairs and evidence, the reason for taking the leap is not exhausted by evidence presented for its accuracy. There is little doubt that this is what Dewey means:

But belief or faith has also a moral and practical import. . . . Apart from any theological context, there is a difference between belief that is a conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct and belief that some object or being exists as a truth for the intellect. . . . Reflection, often long and arduous, may be involved in arriving at the conviction, but the import of thought is not exhausted in discovery of evidence that can justify intellectual assent. The authority of an ideal over choice and conduct is the authority of an ideal, not of a fact, of a truth guaranteed to intellect, not of the status of the one who propounds the truth. Such moral faith is not easy. . . . Moral faith has been bolstered by all sorts of arguments intended to prove that its object is not ideal and that its claim upon us is not primarily moral or practical, since the ideal in question is already embedded in the existent frame of things. . . . They have failed to see that in converting moral realities into matters of intellectual assent they have evinced lack of *moral* faith.<sup>70</sup>

In this passage, Dewey separates the claim that we have faith in an ideal because of evidence of its existence from the claim that our faith in an ideal should have command over our conduct and beliefs despite evidence needed to justify our devotion. To be sure, the existing state-of-affairs is important, for our faith is liable to become fantasy if not tempered by experience. This is precisely why reflection may be involved in arriving at ideals. But in making faith rely on evidence we obscure the work imagination effects, since the ideal longed for is not in existence. More critically, it undermines the courage that faith in the ideal demands, since, in being realizable through imagination its specific impact on action is most uncertain.

What Dewey is drawing our attention to is that the traditional account merely begs the question for which the test of an ideal in experience seeks to answer—namely, why this ideal ought to command our attention. So, on his view, the weight we accord ideals, the authority they exercise over us, is not exhausted in discovery of evidence that may

70. *Ibid.*, 15–16 (original emphasis).

underwrite intellectual assent. This is simply to say that while ideals are emergent from experience via the imagination, their authoritative role in action *ultimately* runs ahead of evidentiary support into “a world of surmise, of mystery, [and] of uncertainties.”<sup>71</sup> As he says, the “imaginative presentation of ideals . . . has been the means of keeping alive the sense of purposes that outrun evidence and of meanings that transcend indurated habit.”<sup>72</sup> This is precisely what makes faith difficult and courage necessary. As William James says on precisely this point: “[F]aith is the readiness to act in a cause the prosperous issue of which is not certified to us in advance. It is in fact the same moral quality which we call courage in practical affairs.”<sup>73</sup>

If we apply once more the foregoing discussion to the definition cited from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, we hit upon Dewey’s reconstruction. We have already considered the way in which an ideal commands allegiance and guides our action. But we have said very little explicitly about Dewey’s reconstruction of the unseen. He provides this description with his account of the ideal: “An unseen power controlling our destiny becomes the power of an ideal . . . For all endeavor for the better is moved by faith in what is possible, not by adherence to the actual. The outcome, given our best endeavor, is not with us.”<sup>74</sup> The controlling factor, unlike with piety, is not the past as such, but the uncertain future. This means we can only wait patiently, with humble expectations that because our judgments have been fortified by critical reflection and the resources of the communities to which we belong, our effort will be rewarded in experience. But beyond this, the rest belongs to fate.

71. Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 41.

72. *Ibid.*, 350.

73. James, *Will to Believe*, 90.

74. Dewey, *Common Faith*, 17.

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