Faith and Habit:
Emersonian Themes in the Ethics of James and Dewey

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ABSTRACT

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Most contemporary commentaries on the ethical thought of William James and John Dewey attempt to fit them into the framework of contemporary ethics. On such readings, many of James and Dewey’s most distinctive ethical concerns fade away so that they seem interested, above all, in meta-ethical questions about the nature of moral judgment and in normative questions about moral deliberation. Foregrounding the influence of Ralph Waldo Emerson on both these thinkers, this dissertation attempts to provide fresh interpretations of the ethical thought of James and Dewey. The locus of James’ most important ethical thought, I argue, comes in his religious writings, where he attempts to find ethical resources in religious belief that help us respond to the problems of suffering and uncertainty: the problem of how to acknowledge the suffering of others, and the problem of how to act with ethical conviction in the absence of social approval for one’s actions. Dewey’s most important work in ethics, I argue, is located in his rich and sophisticated theory of habit, where he reworks the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics to emphasize the contingency of our habitual systems and the importance of the ideal of growth.
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List of Abbreviations

Emerson

NAL: Nature; Essays, and Lectures
EFS: Essays: First Series
ESS: Essays: Second Series
COL: The Conduct of Life

James

PP: Principles of Psychology
WTB: The Will to Believe and Other Essays
VRE: Varieties of Religious Experience

Dewey

QFC: The Quest for Certainty
HNC: Human Nature and Conduct
DE: Democracy and Education
EN: Experience and Nature
TIFM: “Three Independent Factors in Morals”
Acknowledgments

It is difficult to know, at the end of a project that has taken the better part of a decade, all the individuals to whom one is in debt. Certain people, though, stand out in my mind as being central to my life and work in the past few years, and though verbal acknowledgment can only express the most nominal kind of gratitude, nevertheless it must be made.

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Introduction:

Emerson and the Pragmatists

After several decades of relative obscurity, there has in recent years been an increasing amount of interest in the early twentieth century American philosophical movement known as pragmatism. This renewed attention has largely been in response to work done by philosophers like Richard Rorty and Hilary Putnam in convincingly calling attention to the ways in which many of the central themes of late twentieth century epistemology and metaphysics had already been anticipated, even systematically worked out, by Peirce, James, and Dewey.\(^1\) While Rorty himself was deeply invested in pragmatist thought outside the domain of purely theoretical philosophy, the renewal of interest in pragmatism in contemporary philosophy has, ironically, seemed relatively unconcerned with their practical philosophy and especially with their ethical thought.\(^2\) While there have been a few recent commentaries on the ethical thought of the pragmatists, most commentators have tended to read their ethical writings from within the framework of contemporary ethics, focusing on metaethical questions about the nature of moral judgment and normative questions about whether an abstract system of rules or principles can be provided to guide moral deliberation.\(^3\) It

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1 See, for example, Rorty’s *Consequences of Pragmatism* and *Philosophy and Social Hope*, and Putnam’s *Pragmatism*. For a more recent account of the influence of the classical pragmatists that builds on these works, see Robert Brandom’s *Perspectives on Pragmatism*.

2 For a recent history of pragmatism that primarily understands the contributions of pragmatism to be in the domain of theoretical philosophy, see Cheryl Misak’s *The American Pragmatists*. Richard Bernstein’s *The Pragmatist Turn* similarly privileges the pragmatists’ work in theoretical philosophy, though it does give some prominence to James’ ethics and Dewey’s social philosophy.

3 The most significant departures from this prevailing trend are Michael Slater’s *William James on Ethics and Faith*, Steven Fesmire’s *John Dewey and the Moral Imagination*, and Gregory Pappas’ *John Dewey’s Ethics: Democracy as Experience*. Each of these three texts views James and Dewey’s ethical thought in conjunction with their work in religion, psychology, and social philosophy respectively, and in doing so give readings that see their ethical concerns as lying outside the narrow framework of contemporary ethics.
would appear, according to most of these commentaries, that pragmatist ethical thought has nothing exceptionally new or interesting to contribute to ethics, or not at least in the radical way that their work in theoretical philosophy does. On my view, such readings are misleading. While the pragmatists are indeed concerned with questions about the nature of moral judgment and moral deliberation, interpretive approaches that focus primarily on these questions blind us to what is most novel and challenging about the ethical thought of the pragmatists. This is true especially of William James and John Dewey. Both James and Dewey bring to their work in ethics a vast range of interests, considerations, and insights, and their work in ethics presents a challenge not only to the particular views in vogue in mainstream ethics but also, on my view, to the very framework of ethical theorizing itself. The most significant and penetrating part of James’ work in ethics, we shall see, is framed not in the vocabulary of traditional moral philosophy but rather in terms of religious experience, which he does not attempt to reduce to those of moral philosophy. Similarly, Dewey’s work in ethics, though it engages far more explicitly with the ethical tradition, substantially reshapes the meaning and scope of traditional philosophical questions about ethical life. It is to the task of presenting interpretations of these two writers that do justice to their radical and innovative approaches to ethics that this dissertation will be devoted.

Part of what is distinctive about James and Dewey’s approach to ethics comes, no doubt, from their emphasis on the primacy of lived experience and practical activity, from their skepticism about the role that moral theory can usefully play in our ethical lives. While commentators have generally acknowledged the distinctiveness of this approach to ethics, though, they have neglected another influence that has played a pivotal role in shaping the ethical thought of James and Dewey, one that is as significant as the pragmatist commitment to the primacy of practice over theory: the profound but often invisible influence of the great nineteenth century essayist Ralph Waldo
Emerson. That there are important connections between Emerson, on the one hand, and James and Dewey, on the other, has been acknowledged by the latter two philosophers as well as by various commentators. As Stanley Cavell has rightfully complained, though, most commentators have focused on reading various pragmatist concerns back into Emerson, arguing that Emerson should be considered a kind of forerunner to the more philosophically sophisticated pragmatists that came after him. There is substance of course to the claim that Emerson is concerned to emphasize the primacy of practice over theory. Action, Emerson writes after all in the “The American Scholar,” “is the raw material out of which the intellect moulds her splendid products.” [NAL 60]“Colleges and books,” he goes on, “only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.” [NAL 62] Yet there is much in Emerson that cannot be reduced to the well-worn pragmatist maxim that practice precedes theory, Cavell argues, much that would become invisible if Emerson was seen only as a prelude to the more philosophically sophisticated pragmatists that come after him. Cavell’s own path-breaking readings of Emerson are intended to show how themes like mourning, self-trust, patience, and transfiguration – themes which seem to have little or no place in the pragmatists – are central to Emerson’s writing.

While Cavell is surely right in suggesting that much more is going on in Emerson than the literary elaboration of themes to be developed more rigorously by the pragmatists, his tacit assumption that there are no deeper threads tying Emerson to James and Dewey must itself be rejected. The ethical thought of James and Dewey in particular has been substantially shaped by Emerson’s writing on topics like contingency, growth, genius, and suffering, and if philosophers

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4 For the pragmatists’ own acknowledgment of the significance of Emerson to their thought, see especially James’s 1903 address at the centenary of Emerson’s birth and Dewey’s essay of the same year, “Emerson – The Philosopher of Democracy.”

5 See especially “What’s the Use of Calling Emerson a Pragmatist?” in Cavell (2003).
as sensitive and attentive as Cavell have failed to see these connections it is due, I think, to the highly reductive prevailing conception of pragmatism as exhausted by its methodological commitment to the primacy of practice over theory. Reading James and Dewey in the company of Emerson can, in this context, contra Cavell, be an enriching and invigorating endeavor. Instead of reducing Emerson’s thought to a purely anticipatory position within American intellectual history we might, starting off with a broad and undomesticated Emerson, begin to see James and Dewey in ways we have become blinded to because of how their thought has been subsumed under the narrow and constraining rubric of pragmatism. Such a project would of course be both interpretively and philosophically demanding, and though I will, in what follows, provide readings of the ethical thought of James and Dewey that are influenced by Emerson, this dissertation will not be able to discuss Emerson directly or in detail. The readings of James and Dewey that follow are meant to be independent of any interpretation of Emerson, and more important to my purposes here than a historical claim about the intellectual trajectory of American philosophy is a revaluation of James and Dewey as ethical thinkers in their own terms. My remarks on the relationship between Emerson and these two thinkers will be limited therefore to the introductory pages that follow, where I will try to indicate in a broad way the specific Emersonian themes that James and Dewey take up and elaborate in their own ethical work.

James’ most explicit discussion of ethical questions comes in his early essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” and many commentators have focused their discussion of James’ ethical thought on this text. As I have mentioned, though, on my reading James’ most insightful and penetrating thought on ethical questions comes, somewhat surprisingly, in his work on religion. Religious belief, for James, is constituted primarily by a constellation of practical attitudes that shape our habitual orientation to the world, above all the attitudes of solemnity, trust,
and strenuousness. For James these attitudes provide us with the resources to respond to two significant ethical problems, what I call the problems of suffering and uncertainty, both of which are profoundly inspired by Emerson. James acknowledges this debt to Emerson in his religious thought not only in all the many passages he quotes from Emerson in *Varieties of Religious Experience*, but even in his attempts to demarcate religion early on in the text, where he claims that Emersonianism, as he calls it, counts for him as a kind of religious stance. [VRE 38] It is Emerson, on my reading, who guides James towards religion as a source that might help us in addressing the problems of suffering and uncertainty. That Emerson is concerned with the question of suffering might seem counterintuitive at first, for he has often been dismissed for his seemingly uncompromising optimism about transcending the difficulties and banalities of ordinary life, as well as for his seemingly aloof attitude towards the pressing social and political questions of his time.⁶ As Cavell has convincingly shown, however, buried in the apparent optimism of many of Emerson’s early speeches and essays is a deep appreciation of pain and tragedy. This engagement is most visible in “Experience,” written in the wake of the death of Emerson’s young son Waldo, an essay which deals extensively with the question of grief and which Cavell reads as an account of the intrinsically mournful nature of existence, of how living in general involves continual loss, and how grief therefore must be encountered in every passing moment.⁷ Emerson’s treatment of suffering becomes more explicit and more central to his concerns in his later works, above all in

⁶ Harold Bloom (1984), for example, writes: “Self-reliance translated out of the inner life and into the marketplace is difficult to distinguish from our current religion of selfishness…” Even James, in his address at the centenary of Emerson’s birth, feels the need to justify the seeming self-involvedness of Emerson’s response to social and political issues.

The Conduct of Life, which opens with a moving, extended account of the ways in which life can go irreparably wrong:

We must see that the world is rough and surly, and will not mind drowning a man or a woman; but swallows your ship like a grain of dust. The cold, inconsiderate of persons, tingles your blood, benumbs your feet, freezes a man like an apple. The diseases, the elements, fortune, gravity, lightning, respect no persons… The planet is liable to shocks from comets, perturbations from planets, rendings from earthquake and volcano, alterations of climate, precessions of equinoxes. Rivers dry up by opening of the forest. The sea changes its bed. Towns and counties fall into it. At Lisbon, an earthquake killed men like flies. At Naples, three years ago, ten thousand persons were crushed in a few minutes. [COL 945]

These later discussions of the pervasiveness of suffering are by no means limited to the random incursions of nature onto human society. They are the result not only of nature’s accidents but also a consequence of the forms in which human societies are organized, their tendencies to repress our desires and needs, to lead out of lack of forethought, conscious indifference, or wilful malice to catastrophes like famine and war. “And not less work the laws of repression, the penalties of violated functions. Famine, typhus, frost, war, suicide… must be reckoned calculable parts of the system of the world.” [COL 945] Emerson makes it clear in The Conduct of Life that such facts should not merely be noted intellectually, but that they should be acknowledged in some deeper, more vital way. Recognizing such facts should bring about some change in our stances towards our own lives, as well as towards the world more generally. “We cannot trifle with this reality, this cropping out in our planted gardens of the core of the world. No picture of life can have any veracity that does not admit the odious facts.” [COL 952]

It is clear from such passages that despite his often overwhelming exuberance and his often cool attitude towards the pain of other people, suffering for Emerson is an essential, non-negotiable aspect of reality, part of “the core of the world” that any account which aims to do justice to reality
must incorporate somehow. The expectation that we must account in some way for the existence of suffering is taken up systematically by James in his religious works. For James religious belief is partly defined by its solemnity, by its privileging of what he calls the sick-souled attitude over the healthy minded. “It is precisely as being solemn experiences,” he writes at the beginning of Varieties, “that I wish to interest you in religious experiences…” [VRE 42] James prefers the sick-souled attitude, we shall see, for one of the same reasons that suffering seems to become so important to Emerson in his later writings: because it “opens up the best key to life’s significance, and is possibly the only opener of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.” [VRE 152] For James there is an ethical obligation to respond to the fact of suffering, and religious belief offers us the resources to make this response. The sick-souled attitude is the ethically most appropriate way of acknowledging the fact of suffering, while the strenuousness that is also constitutive of religious belief allows us to psychologically cope with the difficulty of making this constant acknowledgment. The attitudes of sick-souledness and strenuousness taken together constitute what James refers to as solemnity, and it is for this reason that James takes religion to be a guide on how best to acknowledge the existence of pervasive suffering in the world around us.

Emerson’s insistence on acknowledging suffering is not the only way in which he influences James’ ethical thinking. There appears in Emerson’s writing, both early and late, a profound distaste for society, for the ways in which its rituals, rites, customs, and conventions, by embodying themselves in the habits of individuals, alienate people from who they really are. This opposition to social mores is vital to how James too understands ethical life. Emerson’s contempt extends to everybody who participates in and identifies with society, which is to say, naturally, most people. “Men in history,” Emerson writes, “men in the world of today are bugs, are spawn,
and are called ‘the mass’ and ‘the herd.’” [NAL 66] This anti-social stance comes together in Emerson with an idealization of individuals who have strong aversion to the strictures of society:

Society everywhere is in conspiracy against the manhood of every one of its members. Society is a joint-stock company, in which the members agree, for the better securing of his bread to each shareholder, to surrender the liberty and culture of the eater. The virtue in most request is conformity. Self-reliance is its aversion. It loves not realities and creators, but names and customs.

Whosoever would be a man, would be a nonconformist. [EFS 261]

Having aversion, for Emerson, being a non-conformist, means being able to understand the ways in which one has been smothered by habit and custom, and in so understanding to become one’s own person. “These are the voices which we hear in solitude,” he writes, “but they grow faint and inaudible as we enter into the world.” [EFS 261] The ability to listen to and act upon these voices, which Emerson calls self-trust or genius, is the virtue in which “all the virtues are comprehended.” [NAL 65] Doing so, for Emerson, requires living in radical opposition to society. Despite the exuberant and uncompromising rhetoric in which passages expressing this fact are often expressed, Emerson is well aware that living with self-trust is a difficult and wearying thing to do. “For the ease and pleasure of treading the old road,” he writes in “The American Scholar,” “accepting the fashions, the education, the religion of society, [the scholar] takes the cross of making his own, and, of course, the self-accusation, the faint heart, the frequent uncertainty and loss of time, which are the nettles and tangling vines in the way of the self-relying and self-directed; and the state of virtual hostility in which he seems to stand to society, and especially to educated society.” [NAL 63] Yet such a life is possible, Emerson thinks, and it is the only way forward for those who want to cultivate their genius. “To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your heart is true for all men, – that is genius.” It is because what is true in one’s personal heart is true for all others that in works of genius “we recognize our own rejected thoughts.” [EFS 259]
For Emerson, seemingly, the courage required to trust one’s own convictions is grounded by a religiously inflected metaphysics that sees all individuals as sharing some kind of core self. What this position amounts to is difficult to say, mainly because it is characterized differently in different texts. In “Nature” this self appears as a Platonic soul, metaphysically distinct from nature, while in “Circles” it appears as the “eternal generator” of circles, the source of all individual growth. In “The American Scholar” and “The Over-Soul,” on the other hand, this self looks very similar to the notion of the universal soul described in many Vedic texts.8

For this self-trust, the reason is deeper than can be fathomed, – darker than can be enlightened. I might not carry with me the feeling of my audience in stating my own belief. But I have already shown the ground of my hope, in adverting that man is one. [NAL 66]

On my view it is partly a similar interest in the possibilities of genius or self-trust that leads James to religious belief. As we will see, moral progress for James is impossible without the actions of oppressed individuals who have the conviction and the courage necessary for self-trust, without individuals who are willing to defy society in order to compel it to meet the demands of themselves and others like them. Such individuals are willing to stake themselves and their relationships to society in order to morally reshape their society, and it is through such individuals, James thinks, that the direction not only of our individual lives but also of our societies is decided. It is here that the “highest ethical life” [WTB 209] takes place, the life that shapes the ethical future of society by making it more amenable to the desires of those who have been marginalized.9 Acting with

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8 As Lawrence Buell’s Emerson notes, Emerson had early on read and been greatly impressed by English translations of the Bhagavad Gita and several of the Upanishads.

9 This interest in self-trust or genius as part of the highest ethical life leads Emerson to dwell continuously on individuals who embody it in texts like Representative Men, and a similar interest in James, clearly traceable back to Emerson, is manifest in essays like “Great Men and Their Environment” and “The Importance of Individuals,” as well as in the two chapters of saintliness in Varieties.
conviction in such situations is important, therefore, and it is partly to find a source for such conviction that James looks to religious belief. As James puts it, “[it] is only in the lonely emergencies of life” – “lonely,” because the kinds of emergency James has in mind require us to act in defiance of society – “that our creed is tested: then routine maxims fail, and we fall back on our gods.” [WTB 105] It is partly because of the possibilities that religion offers for Emersonian self-trust, I will argue, that James is so interested in rationally legitimizing religious belief. For James religious belief involves belief in an unseen order that is in some way continuous with our own beliefs and ideals, and this sense of continuity with something higher furnishes us with the kind of trust we need to have in our own beliefs and ideals (as well as the necessary strenuousness) to act upon them even against the pressures of society.

One must have the conviction required to give due consideration to one’s suppressed thoughts and desires, and then the courage to act on them. Acting on these received thoughts means, as Branka Arsic puts it in her persuasive (2010) reading of Emerson, leaving oneself. Leaving oneself means, among other things, abandoning the habits and the character that have come to constitute oneself. This brings us to the theme in Emerson that Cavell calls transfiguration, the process of crafting a new self out of new habits, of creating a character that allows the self to be more fully expressed even if it involves resisting the demands of others. Transfiguration is different, importantly, from self-realization. Emerson does not accept the idea that there is some final and perfect self that each person must attempt to reach:

The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end. The extent to which this generation of circles, wheel without wheel, will go, depends on the force or truth of the individual soul. For it is the inert effort of each thought, having formed itself into a circular wave of circumstance, -- as, for instance, an
empire, rules of an art, a local usage, a religious rite, -- to heap itself on that ridge, and to solidify and hem in the life. But if the soul is quick and strong, it bursts over that boundary on all sides, and expands another orbit on the great deep, which also runs up into a high wave, with attempt again to stop and to bind. But the heart refuses to be imprisoned; in its first and narrowest pulses, it already tends outward with a vast force, and to immense and innumerable expansions. [EFS 404-5]

Transfiguration, which Emerson sometimes also describes as “growth,” is a continual process, and the value of transfiguration for Emerson lies in the transfiguring rather than in any final transfiguration. Every transfiguration results in a new self, in a new set of habits, and these habits, like the previous ones, limit and constrain. As the point is put in “Circles,” “the eye soon gets wonted to it, for the eye and it are effects of one cause; then its innocency and benefit appear, and presently, all its energy spent, it pales and dwindles before the revelation of the new hour.” [EFS 405] Our habits constantly constrain us and growth, therefore, must be incessant, according to Emerson, even if only those of “happier mind,” those with a “quick and strong soul,” are capable of breaking continuously through old circles of habit.

Emerson’s skepticism about the rigidity and fixity of habit and his consequent avowal of growth as a central ideal of “living” is the aspect of Emerson that most profoundly shapes Dewey’s ethical thought. Dewey’s ethical system comes in the form of a theory of habit, since for Dewey it is our habits that constitute our characters and which govern, more than anything else, our movement through the world. One of the central distinctions that Dewey makes in Human Nature and Conduct is between habits that are routine – which circumscribe our movements and blind our perception to what exists outside them – and habits that are intelligent, habits which allow for the free play of impulse and which are amenable to constant growth. The cultivation of intelligent habits is important, on Dewey’s account, for two reasons, both of which are recognizably Emersonian. The first is the fact that the world intrinsically lacks stability; our social and physical
environments are constantly in flux, and therefore our system of habits must always be ready to change in response to them. “There are,” as Emerson writes in “Circles,” “no fixtures in nature.”

The universe is fluid and volatile. Permanence is but a word of degrees… The new continents are built out of the ruins of an old planet; the new races fed out of the decomposition of the foregoing. New arts destroy the old. See the investment of capital in aqueducts, made useless by hydraulics; fortifications, by gunpowder; roads and canals, by railways, sails, by steam; steam by electricity. [EFS 403]

It is partly because of the constant fluctuation of our environments that Emerson points to, for Dewey, that we must strive to cultivate habits that are flexible and open.\(^{10}\) Dewey also takes intelligent habits to be worthy of adoption independently of this consideration, however, because of the particular quality they bestow on our lives. Citing Emerson, Dewey claims that individuals with intelligent habits, individuals who have the capacity for growth, are able to live a life that much more closely approximates the romanticism and zeal of childhood than the stiff and mechanical life characteristic of adulthood. Growth, for this second Emersonian reason, is an intrinsic end in ethical life. The centrality of growth in Dewey’s thought has been mostly ignored by philosophical commentators, but it is vital not only in Dewey’s ethics but also, as we shall see, in his philosophy of education, where he makes the claim, reminiscent of Emerson’s claim in “Circles,” that the aim of education is not to inculcate fixed skills and abilities in children but rather to furnish them with the capacity for continual growth, with the means of continually breaking out of the circles that hem and restrict us. The notion of growth is so important to Dewey’s ethical thought, indeed, that he even appeals to it when trying to delimit the scope of ethics. What makes any question about what we should do a distinctively ethical question, he argues, is that it has some bearing on our growth, on who we become or what kind of character we end up having.

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\(^{10}\) For a persuasive account of the role of contingency or instability in Emerson’s writing, especially in relation to the themes of transfiguration, see Branka Arsic’s *On Leaving.*
Dewey incorporates these characteristically Emersonian insights about environmental contingency, the fixity of habit, and value of growth into a broadly Aristotelian account of habit. In doing so, he presents what might be seen as a kind of Emersonian reworking of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, one in which the notions of vice and virtue are replaced by the more context-dependent notion of habit, and the justificatory work played by the notion of eudaimonia is played, albeit in a less ambitious way, by the notion of growth. Ethical deliberation, on Dewey’s account, is the kind of thinking that takes place when a disparity between our impulses, habits, and environment necessitates some kind of change in our habitual system, and is therefore the kind of thinking that shapes the ways in which we grow. Like Emerson, who is throughout his writing skeptical about philosophical theory as it is traditionally pursued, Dewey is clear that traditional moral theory, which attempts to delineate general rules, principles, or virtues that are meant to determine the outcome of deliberation, cannot be a practically useful guide to deliberation in the concrete situations we find ourselves in. For Dewey ethical deliberation consists not in the consideration of rules, principles, or virtues but rather in the imaginative rehearsal of the different possible responses to an ethically problematic situation, which allows us to arrive at a view of the consequences that would arise from each path of action so that we can, provisionally, endorse a moral judgment that favors one of these paths of action. Though we will not be able to consider Dewey’s account of deliberation in detail in what follows, it is worth noting the similarity it bears to Emerson’s conception of thinking as a kind of patience. “Patience and patience,” Emerson writes at the end of “Experience,” “and we shall win at the last.” [ESS 492] On Cavell’s reading, Emerson conceives of thinking in direct opposition to the Kantian understanding of deliberation

11 Briefly, just as eudaimonia is supposed to ground the virtues for Aristotle, growth for Dewey grounds, in a more limited way, certain second-order habits that taken together approximate the Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom.
as an active employment of concepts, rules, and principles, taking it to consist, somewhat counter-intuitively, in a kind of passivity.\(^\text{12}\) Patience is vital, on this reading, because thinking is receptive – a kind of passive state that involves waiting until a solution is received as if from without. In this sense Dewey’s account of ethical deliberation as the passive consideration of different lines of action until one of them “occurs” to us as the right thing to do involves precisely the same kind of patience that is so important to Emerson.

These remarks on the relationship between the Emersonian themes of suffering, self-trust, contingency, and growth, on the one hand, and the ethical thought of James and Dewey, on the other, are not meant to be complete or exhaustive. There is clearly much more to be said on the philosophical trajectory that leads from Emerson to the pragmatists, but my purpose here has been simply to indicate certain aspects of this trajectory and how it helps shape the ethical thought of James and Dewey. My motive in pointing to these threads of influence is, as I have already said, to suggest a slightly different entry point into the ethics of James and Dewey than is common, one that takes seriously the intellectual context in which these two philosophers were working so that the mistake is not made of assuming that their ethical concerns are identical to ours. James and Dewey do of course speak to many of the concerns of contemporary ethics – they are writing, after all, within the same canon of Western philosophy – but they depart from this tradition in radical ways, James in his search for particular religious ideals that help constitute an ethical response to life, and Dewey, despite the systematic nature of his views in ethics, in his anti-theoretical and growth-oriented approach to the subject. In approaching James and Dewey by way of these Emersonian themes my hope is to make visible certain ethical concerns and lines of thought that have, until now, been ignored by commentators who are keen on emphasizing the ways James and

\(^{12}\) See especially the essay “Aversive Thinking” in Cavell (2003).
Dewey can be understood from within the framework that currently dominates mainstream ethics. The interpretations that I present in what follows are intended to show, by contrast, how much of what is significant in pragmatist ethics operates outside this narrow framework, to suggest the possibility therefore that we might look to James and Dewey for new directions in ethical thought.

The dissertation is organized into two parts, one on James and one of Dewey, each part consisting of two chapters. The first chapter on James begins with a consideration of how James’ religious writings are usually read by philosophical commentators, namely as presenting a sophisticated kind of argument for the rational legitimacy of belief in God or, as James puts it, the unseen order. I argue, in contrast, that what James has in mind by the unseen order is very different from the Abrahamic God, and that James understands by religious belief or, as he puts it, the religious hypothesis, not so much a metaphysical as a moral claim. To have religious belief in this sense is to have internalized a pattern of practical attitudes, the most important of which are the attitudes of trust, strenuousness, and solemnity. James’ interest in the rational legitimacy of the religious hypothesis is not to create space for conventional religious belief but rather to create space for the cultivation of these practical attitudes, which on his view provide us, as I have said, with the resources to respond to the problems of suffering and uncertainty. The second chapter begins with an account of the problem of uncertainty, interpreting it as a problem faced above all by individuals whose beliefs and ideals are repressed by society. By acting on their repressed beliefs and desires such individuals are engaging in a kind of political action that is necessary to for the moral progress of society. It is the attitudes of trust and strenuousness, I will argue, that give such individuals the conviction and strength necessary to pursue the actions that compel society to become more accommodating of the demands of the oppressed. The second part of the chapter discusses the problem of suffering, the problem of how to ethically acknowledge the
pervasive existence of suffering in the world. I argue that James’ discussion of the healthy-minded and sick-souled attitudes in Varieties is an attempt to answer this question, and that he finds in the sick-souled attitude the most “philosophically” appropriate response to suffering. When taken together with the attitude of strenuousness, which is necessary to prevent the sick-souled attitude from degenerating into melancholy or paralysis, the attitude that results is what James calls solemnity. Insofar as solemnity is constitutive of religious belief, religious belief on James’ view provides us with an ethically and psychologically viable means of acknowledging suffering.

The second part of the dissertation gives an interpretation of Dewey’s theory of habit and the ethical system that is based on it. The third chapter begins with an account of the roles of uncertainty and contingency in Dewey’s thought and how they shape his critique of traditional approaches to moral philosophy. I then give an interpretation of Dewey’s theory of habit, focusing on two distinctive features that Dewey attributes to habit, contingency and propulsiveness. These two features taken together motivate a central problem for ethical life: the problem of negotiating between the inertia of our habitual systems, on the one hand, and the constant tendency of our environments to change in ways that are relevant to these systems on the other. The fourth and final chapter begins with a presentation of Dewey’s solution to this problem, the cultivation of intelligent habit as a way of negotiating a constantly changing environment. Intelligent habit is what allows for the capacity for continuous growth, and the rest of the chapter gives an interpretation both of what it means to cultivate intelligent habits and of the status of growth as an intrinsic end in Dewey’s ethical thought. The result is a reading that sees Dewey as working within or, more accurately, reworking the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition. The chapter ends with a discussion of what exactly it means to make such a claim, identifying Dewey not with the increasingly prominent understanding of virtue ethics as offering a theoretical alternative to
consequentialist and deontological approaches to ethical theory, but rather with the radically anti-theoretic understanding of virtue ethics that was put forward by conventionally acknowledged pioneers of this approach in the twentieth century like Elizabeth Anscombe and Alisdair MacIntyre. If the reading put forward is plausible then it suggests not only a new reading of Dewey but also of the historiography of modern ethics, since Dewey will be seen, on this interpretation, as taking up Aristotelian themes in ethics decades before Anscombe and MacIntyre purportedly reintroduced them into the conversation of modern ethics.
Chapter One:
The Religious Hypothesis

The issue of whether religious belief is rationally obligatory or permissible occurs throughout William James’ writing on religion, and most philosophical evaluations of his work have, unsurprisingly, revolved around the question of whether James is able to establish this obligation or permissibility. James’ work on religion is almost invariably said to fail according to these interpretations, lacking the philosophical rigor, it is usually charged, necessary for such an ambitious goal. Taking it for granted that nothing else of philosophical significance remains to be explored once the project of defending faith in an Abrahamic God has been seen to fail, such interpretations usually go no further in their engagement with James. To any sensitive reader of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and *The Will to Believe*, though, it is obvious that much more than a justificatory project is at stake in James’ writing on religion, even if it is hard to articulate exactly what that something is. It is clear from the outset that James’ interest in religion is highly idiosyncratic in relation to the modern tradition of philosophical engagement with religion. In his later works especially he is concerned less with the question of justification than with describing and evaluating the many different facets of personal religious experience. He explicitly ignores, too, many of the more obviously central parts of religious life, completely

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13 I use the term “Abrahamic God” rather than simply “God” intentionally, for despite the fact that James typically seems to be speaking of religion in general, he is concerned mainly with the Abrahamic religions, and specifically with the Christian religious tradition. His claims for religion in general are heavily biased towards this tradition. It is clear, in fact, as Charles Taylor points out, that by “religion” James mainly has in mind the various broadly North Atlantic traditions of Protestant Christianity. It shouldn’t be surprising, therefore, that the ethical orientation to the world that we find in James’ religious texts and which we will be discussing in these two chapters is of a specifically North Atlantic Protestant origin. Insofar as the orientation is a sensitive and persuasive one in and of itself, though, the parochialism implicit in James’ conception of religion is not one that we need to address in detail.
passing over institutional religion, collective religious experience, as well as theology and the other more discursive articulations of religion. Faith is, of course, one of the central moments in personal religious experience (at least in proselytizing religions such as Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism), and James does spend much time devoted to the task of justifying it, especially in his early work. The subtle phenomenological observations and penetrating assessments found in his writings span the gamut of personal religious experience, though, and suggest that if James is indeed interested primarily in faith then is he interested in something more than the mere rational legitimacy of faith conventionally understood.

Just what this further thing is has proved difficult to say, however, and it is for this reason, I think, that readings taking James to be engaged in a primarily justificatory project have held strong sway among commentators. Reading James with our discussion of the relationship between Emerson and pragmatism in the background, this first part of my dissertation will attempt, by articulating just what his fundamental concern is, to counter this dominant reading of James. In the two chapters that follow I will argue that at the heart of James’ work on religion is an ethical project. James is not interested in religious experience so much in order to rationally legitimize any aspect of religious belief, I will try to show, but because rather of the rich ethical resources that he finds in popular American religious traditions and wants to think through and make available to his secular contemporaries.14 Tying together many of the seemingly disparate threads

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14 Some excellent commentators who do touch upon the relationship between ethics and religion in James’ thought, but without giving it sufficient and sustained attention, are Ellen Suckiel (1982), Richard Gale (1999) and Wesley Cooper (2002). It is only in the work of Michael Slater (2009) that a thoughtful and systematic account is given of the relationship between the two in James’ thought, though my own interpretation differs markedly in emphasis from Slater’s. While Slater emphasizes that James’ religious writings have several important ethical implications, he does not discuss James’ response to what I have called the problem of suffering nor the problem of uncertainty, which I take to be the most important part of James’ ethical views.
running through Varieties and Will to Believe is a concern to explore and understand a constellation of moods and attitudes that James finds in religious life and which constitute, in his eyes, a sensitive and forceful ethical orientation to the world. James takes this ethical orientation to be a response to two seemingly inescapable ethical problems, I will argue, the first of which I call the problem of uncertainty, and the second of which I call the problem of suffering, and it is only when James’ religious writing is understood fundamentally as a response to these ethical problems, I will suggest, that we can fully appreciate its richness and scope.

What I call the problem of uncertainty is the problem of not knowing what to do and, when one has settled on a course of action, of not knowing how it will turn out. The problem is common enough. One is uncertain whether to stay or leave, uncertain whether to stand up or remain silent, whether to love or remain at a remove, uncertain, in short, about whether to say yes or no to the multifarious questions that life, at each and every stage of existence, gives one the privilege or burden of addressing. What is right, what is wrong, which choices will one regret, and which will make one want to turn back time? The uncertainty is perhaps not so great when one takes the paths through crisis that convention favors, since there comes a certain kind of confidence when one is doing what one is expected to do, when one is responding to problems in the way that others in one’s society habitually respond. There are inevitably situations that arise over the course of a lifetime, though, especially the lifetimes of individuals who have what Emerson calls “self-trust” or “genius,” in which one does not have this security to fall back on. It is in such moments, James thinks, that the direction not only of our individual lives but also of our societies is decided. It is here that the “highest ethical life” [WTB 209] takes place, as he writes in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” the life that shapes the ethical future of society by making it more amenable to the desires of those who have been marginalized. Acting with conviction in such situations is
important, therefore, and it is partly to find a source for such conviction that James looks to religious experience. As James puts it in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” “[it] is only in the lonely emergencies of life” – “lonely,” because the kinds of emergency James has in mind require us to act in defiance of society – “that our creed is tested: then routine maxims fail, and we fall back on our gods.” [WTB 105] It is partly because it allows for this sense of having something to fall back on that James is so interested in religious faith, I will argue, not because he wants to defend belief in an Abrahamic God.

James’ interest in the second ethical problem, the problem of suffering, comes, like his interest in the problem of uncertainty, from a desire to think about the ethical texture of lived human life. The text in which James’ concern with suffering first surfaces – the early essay “Is Life Worth Living?” – is usually read as attempting to defend belief in an Abrahamic God by suggesting that only through such belief can individuals obtain the moral energy required to overcome despair and sadness. This is indeed part of what James is trying to do in this early essay, but paying attention to the text shows that there is also a deeper undercurrent present that never becomes fully explicit. This undercurrent becomes stronger in the two important chapters in Varieties on the healthy-minded and sick-souled attitudes, where James argues that the sick-souled attitude is superior to the healthy-minded attitude because the former recognizes certain features of the world – its evil and tragedy – that may turn out to be “the best key to life’s significance, and possibly the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth.” [VRE 152] Rather than being philosophically irrelevant or uninteresting, as most commentators take it to be, James’ discussion of these two contrasting attitudes, I will show, actually constitutes a response to the problem of suffering – to the question of how the fact of suffering affects how we must live and compose our lives. James provides sensitive and convincing reasons to think that a particular kind of faith is a
necessary part of an ethical response to suffering. As we shall see, James’ recognition of the problem of suffering and his way of addressing it, much like his articulation and response to the question of uncertainty, are profoundly influenced by Emerson. The fact that James turns on his head a traditional philosophical problem for belief in God, the existence of suffering, reconceptualizing instead it as a problem about what attitude ordinary individuals should take towards a world in which suffering exists, is one significant way that James takes seriously Emerson’s exhortation in “The American Scholar” that we should “ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic; what is doing in Italy or Arabia; what is Greek art, or Provencal minstrelsy,” but that we should rather “embrace the common… explore and sit at the feet of the familiar, the low.” [NAL 68-9]

Before we can look at the significance of the problems of uncertainty and suffering in James’ religious writing we must, of course, first look at what James’ account of religious belief says, at the particular form of faith that he seeks to defend. It is to this task that we shall turn to in this first chapter, where we will begin by looking at James’ early writings on religion in *The Will to Believe*, where he does seem explicitly concerned with showing that religious belief is rationally permissible. I said earlier that interpretive approaches emphasizing only the issue of rational obligation and permissibility fail to see the full ethical significance of James’ work on religion, but while this is true, it would be foolish to claim that the question of justification has no importance for James, or that we can understand without it what James has in mind when he speaks of religious belief. Paying careful attention to *The Will to Believe*, I will argue, shows that James is not trying to establish the permissibility of belief in anything like an Abrahamic God. What James calls the religious hypothesis, I will argue, is not so much a metaphysical hypothesis as an *moral* hypothesis, a hypothesis about what we should value. While this moral hypothesis does
contain implicit metaphysical commitments, it does not involve commitment to an Abrahamic God. Taking James to be interested in conventional religious belief, several commentators incorrectly make this assumption and come, as a result, to the conclusion that James fails to achieve what he sets out to do in *The Will to Believe*. As I will show, though, James is successful in defending the more specific conception of religious belief as moral belief that he adopts, and while this belief is metaphysically far more modest than conventional religious belief, it is a belief that can bear the burden of the ethical work James wants it to do in addressing the problems of suffering and uncertainty. It allows him to resuscitate from conventional religious belief the ethical core that he values in it and wants to preserve.

Taken together these readings motivate a significant reorientation towards James’ religious writings, which, as I have said, most commentators have seen as an attempt to rationally resuscitate the possibility of believing in an Abrahamic God rather than as an ethical inquiry that looks to traditionally religious attitudes and practices for inspiration. On the conventional view, James’ only sustained treatment of ethics is to be found in his essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” where he defends something like a consequentialist ethical theory. In this very essay, though, James insists that ethics cannot be decided in advance, arguing that ethicists, “so far as they truly touch the moral life, must more and more ally themselves with a literature which is confessedly tentative and suggestive rather than dogmatic… with novels and dramas of the deeper sort, with sermons, with books on statecraft and philanthropy and social and economic reform.”

[WTB 210] Reading *Will to Believe* and *Varieties* in the way that I have suggested allows us to take James at his word about the tentative and suggestive nature of ethics and about the importance of looking to sources outside philosophy for ethical guidance. Rather than seeing James as having written only one ethical text, as most commentators do, my reading sees James as engaged in
substantive ethical questions throughout his work on religion. Sensitive textual attention to James’ work shows this kind of approach to James to be well-founded, as we will see, but it is also sanctioned by an attitude towards interpretation that I think James himself, on the basis of his pragmatic theory of truth, would have endorsed, one in which the truth or falsity of an interpretation is understood no more in terms of its accurate representation of the letter of a text than in terms of whether it allows for a mode of textual engagement that provides fruit for the life of the reader. In this more significant sense too, I think, the interpretation that follows is truer than others that have come before.

1. Clifford on Believing Without Evidence

The best entry into James’ religious writing is his well-known early essay “The Will to Believe,” first read as lectures given at Yale and Brown in 1896, then published in the collection of the same name in 1897. James’ essay was a response to the arguments directed against religious belief by his contemporary W. K. Clifford, who questioned the legitimacy of believing in God without evidence by arguing, more generally, that it is never legitimate to believe anything without decisive evidence. Though James is primarily interested in showing that it is rationally permissible to believe in the existence of something beyond the bounds of the natural world, what he calls an unseen order, his strategy in the essay is to first defend the more general claim that we can, under certain conditions, legitimately have beliefs while lacking decisive evidence. “The thesis I defend,” he writes, “is this: Our passional nature not only lawfully may but must, decide an option between propositions, whenever it is a genuine option that cannot by its nature be decided on intellectual grounds…” [WTB 11] Having made this broader claim, James then moves on to showing that the more specific case he is interested in – belief in an unseen order, or what he calls the religious
hypothesis – satisfies these conditions, and is therefore rationally legitimate. Now one instinctive reaction to James’ broader thesis has been to assume that it gives individuals virtual autonomy in matters of belief, thereby licensing self-deception, and for this reason it is important to keep in mind from the outset that James’ claim is in fact far more sober. The disagreement between James and Clifford is not about whether evidence should play a decisive role in matters of belief – both are in agreement that it should. The issue rather is whether, in the absence of evidence, we can be free to believe.15 Because what we usually refer to as self-deception concerns cases in which individuals believe something they want to be true despite available evidence to the contrary, James’ thesis in “The Will to Believe” will never make self-deception a rationally legitimate epistemic strategy.

The notion of being free or permitted to believe something we don’t have evidence for does sound, of course, from a certain point of view, naïve, especially when James puts his point in terms of phrases like believing by “effort of our will” or “strength of wish.” [WTB 5] Most if not all of our beliefs, that fire burns, for example, or that glass will shatter when dropped from a height, are formed independently of what we will or wish, in response to evidence in their favor, and try as we might we are helpless to believe otherwise. Even if we had no decisive evidence for or against these beliefs, it seems absurd to think we could simply will ourselves to believe such things. James himself acknowledges the prima facie psychological implausibility of coming to believe in such a way, writing that “of just such things is the whole fabric of the truths that we do believe in made up, – matters of fact, immediate or remote, as Hume said, and relations between ideas, which are either there or not there for us if we see them so, and which if not there cannot be put there by any

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15 As Richard Gale points out in The Divided Self of William James, many commentators, including Dickinson Miller, A. J. Ayer, Marcus Peter Ford, Arthur Murphy, and Giles Gunn, have completely ignored James’ condition that no decisive evidence be available.
For James, then, the claim that we are free to believe when we don’t have decisive evidence is not intended to apply across the board, but only to a specific class of epistemic choices that he refers to as genuine options. The notion of a genuine option is central to James’ argument in “The Will to Believe,” and we will need to spend some time trying to understand what exactly it means.

A genuine option, according to James, is a choice between two hypotheses that is live, forced, and momentous. A live option, for James, as opposed to a dead one, is an option in which each hypothesis “appeals as a real possibility to him to whom it is proposed.” There are two important consequences that follow from this definition. First, liveness is not an intrinsic property of the hypothesis, but depends rather on the particular individual who is considering it. Speaking to his late nineteenth century American university audience, James uses the example of belief in the existence of the Mahdi – a spiritual leader who, according to popular Muslim belief, will restore religion and justice before the end of the world – to show how certain beliefs can be live for some individuals and dead for others:

If I ask you to believe in the Mahdi, the notion makes no electric connection with your nature, – it refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all. As an hypothesis it is completely dead. To an Arab, however (even if he be not one of the Mahdi’s followers), the hypothesis is among the mind’s possibilities: it is alive. What makes a hypothesis alive or dead, according to James, depends on the specific individual, not just on previous “deliberate volitions as may have set up habits of belief that we cannot now escape from,” but also on all the things that constitute our passional nature, “fear and hope, prejudice and passion, imitation and partisanship, the circumpressure of our caste and sect.” This is an important point to appreciate, since in contrast to the common perception that James, unlike Dewey, fails to acknowledge the ways in which individuals are socially constituted, these
remarks show clearly that James is aware of how social and historical factors shape individuals, at least when it comes to matters of belief. The second consequence of how James distinguishes between liveness and deadness is that it provides a way for us to make sense of uncertainty or indecisiveness. As James writes:

[Liveness and deadness] are measured by… willingness to act. The maximum of liveness in an hypothesis means willingness to act irrevocably. Practically, that means belief; but there is some believing tendency wherever there is willingness to act at all. [WTB 3]

Insofar as an option is live for James, both hypotheses to some degree impel the individual to act in certain ways. Insofar as the option of deciding between believing and disbelieving that I should marry a partner of mine is a live option for me, for example, I will be pulled to act in some cases as if I believe this is true – in moments, for example, in which I find myself acting as if I have a future with this person – and in some cases as if it were not – in moments, for example, when I find myself making plans that exclude my partner. On James’ understanding of liveness, any individual entertaining a live option feels a certain kind of contradiction in their impulses, a certain kind of division in their being about how to act in certain situations.

James spends less time discussing the notions of forcedness and momentousness, largely because they are more easily understood and less central to his purposes.16 James writes that the choice between going out of the house with an umbrella or going out of the house without an umbrella, that is, between believing it would be best to take an umbrella and believing it would be best to leave it behind, is not a forced option, because we have the choice of not going out at all,

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16 Slater (2009; pp. 21, 31-35) argues, correctly it seems to me, that an option’s being forced and momentous are not, strictly speaking, necessary conditions for believing without evidence on James’ account – it is sufficient that an option be live.
that is, of believing it would be best just to stay at home. On the other hand, choosing whether or not to accept a job, that is, deciding between whether to believe it would be good to accept a job or whether it would be better to decline it, would be a forced option, because there is no alternative to accepting the job except declining it. “Every dilemma based on a complete logical disjunction, with no possibility of not choosing, is an option of this forced kind.” [WTB 3] An option is momentous, on the other hand, as opposed to trivial, when the stakes are significant, or when it is unique, or irreversible if one should want to change one’s mind later. James uses as an example the decision that must be made upon being invited on a scientific expedition to the North Pole: the option is momentous, he says, “for this would probably be your only similar opportunity, and your choice now would either exclude you from the North Pole sort of immortality altogether or put at least the chance of it into your hands.” [WTB 4] On the other hand, a researcher choosing whether or not to spend a few months trying to show that some modest hypothesis is true or false, where the researcher’s job and reputation is secure either way, is dealing with a trivial option, because nothing very significant is at stake for them.

James’ thesis, then, is that we are only rationally permitted to believe without evidence when we are faced with an option that is live, forced, and momentous. These restrictions make it clear why talk about willing oneself to believe need not sound naïve or psychologically implausible. Discussing Pascal’s Wager, James points out that the wager makes no sense when there exists no pre-existing tendency to believe. If the hypothesis that God exists is completely

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17 It is interesting and worth noting that, despite how he defines the notion of option, many of James’ illustrations here are phrased as decisions about what to do rather than as beliefs about some hypothesis. There is nothing problematic with this, because not only can decisions about what to do can be put in doxastic form by interpreting them as choices between hypotheses about what it is best to do, but also because, on James’ view, beliefs only have content insofar as they bear on action, and therefore any decision about what to believe also affects our decisions about what to do.
dead for an individual, he writes, then there would indeed be something absurd about expecting the wager to bring about belief from the top down. “We feel 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.” [WTB 6] If, on the other hand, according to James, the hypothesis is live, if, that is to say, there is some pre-existing tendency in the individual to act as if it were true, then there is nothing psychologically impossible or implausible in the claim that one can will oneself to believe. As he makes clear in the “Will” chapter of *Principles of Psychology*, believing a live hypothesis “at will,” for James, does not mean trying to believe something consciously, as the result of purely intellectual considerations, but is a matter rather simply of giving full sway to the part of our passional nature that impels us in its direction.¹⁸ As James puts it towards the end of “The Will to Believe,” “the freedom to believe can only cover living options which the intellect of the individual cannot by itself resolve; and living options never seem absurdities to him who has them to consider.” [WTB 28]

This brings us to the objection to his thesis that James spends most time considering, this one moral rather than psychological. This is the argument, forcefully articulated by Clifford, that there is something immoral or otherwise inappropriate about believing something without decisive evidence in its favor. James acknowledges that there is some intuitive appeal to this argument. “When one turns to the magnificent edifice of the physical sciences,” he writes, “and sees how it

¹⁸ For James, deciding what to do or what to will when one is faced with a dilemma is a matter of deciding which of two already existing and incompatible impulses to act one should give full credence to. Because this need not be a conscious or active process at all, “willing” oneself to believe a hypothesis one has no evidence for need not be a conscious or active process either. It can, like many of the things we will, be simply a matter of allowing one of the impulses in question to come to predominate in all of the situations in which it applies. (Cf. the “Five types of Decisions” section of the Will chapter in *PP.*)
was reared; what thousands of disinterested moral lives of men lie buried in its mere foundations; what patience and postponement, what submission to the icy laws of outer fact... then how besotted and contemptible seems every little sentimentalist who comes blowing his voluntary smoke-wreaths and pretending to decide things from out of his private dream.” [WTB 7] James sympathizes with this attitude, but rejects Clifford’s principle that we should never believe unless we have decisive evidence. In response to this line of argument, to which he devotes most of his essay, James begins by pointing out that most of what we believe we believe not because we have reasons or evidence to believe, but because of the pressure of our passional natures, which, as we saw above, is constituted by our habits, temperaments, social position, and various other non-evidential factors. “As a matter of fact we find ourselves believing,” James writes, “we hardly know how or why.” [WTB 9] Even those beliefs that we come to form by explicitly weighing the evidence for and against, he argues, depend on our passional natures, for the very partition between live and dead hypotheses, that is, the very partition in virtue of which a hypothesis comes to seem a living possibility at all, one that needs to be reflected upon or considered, is a partition made by our passional natures, so that much of what conflicts with our held beliefs is in fact always already ruled out without explicit consideration.19 Clifford’s principle that it is immoral to believe something without decisive evidence is, therefore, James argues, in fact a maxim that is wildly at odds with our actual doxastic lives.

James buttresses these psychological considerations with a more philosophical point. We must distinguish, he argues, between two different and potentially conflicting norms of belief

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19 James writes: “Why do so few ‘scientists’ even look at the evidence for telepathy, so called? Because they think, as a leading biologist, now dead, once said to me, that even if such a thing were true, scientists ought to band together to keep it suppressed and concealed. It would undo the uniformity of Nature and all sorts of things without which scientists cannot carry on their pursuits.” [WTB 10]
acquisition, one instructing us to seek truth, and the other instructing us to avoid error. There are situations in which the two norms would lead us to do different things – in which giving precedence to the former would lead us for example to adopting a belief for which we had significant but not conclusive evidence, while the latter would counsel us to remain neutral. Crucially, which one of these norms an individual holds in most esteem depends on their passional nature, James argues, and no reason can be given for privileging one over the other. “We must remember that these feelings of duty about either truth or error are in any case only expressions of our passional life.” [WTB 18] James himself thinks Clifford’s stubborn insistence on avoiding error is an expression of fear of being wrong or “becoming a dupe,” and feels that for himself the “blessings of truth” are often enough to persuade him to take risks and believe. He does agree that when the option one is faced with is not forced there is no issue in giving precedence to the avoidance of error: “In scientific questions, this is almost always the case; and even in human affairs in general, the need of acting is seldom so urgent that a false belief to act on is better than no belief at all.” [WTB 20]

There are, though, on James’ view, at least two kinds of situation in which it is irrational or impossible to privilege the norm of avoiding error, in which the option is logically or practically forced, and we must privilege the norm of seeking truth.20 The first kind of situation is when the truth of one of the hypotheses in question depends on the actions of the believer, and the second when the hypotheses in question are moral hypotheses. In both situations we are compelled, James argues, to abandon Clifford’s principle.

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20 Throughout this discussion, James runs together the notions of forcedness and momentousness. There are moments at which he suggests that it is because of the momentousness of an option that we have to seek truth before the evidence is in, and moments at which he suggests it is because the option is forced. I take forcedness to be the notion of relevance here.
Let us begin by considering those cases in which the possession of a belief itself plays a role in making the belief true. To make his point James uses the example of whether or not to believe we are loved by another person. Believing that another person loves me, he argues, changes my orientation to that person, makes me willing to meet the other halfway, and to show them trust and expectation. “The previous faith on my part in your liking’s existence is in such cases what makes your liking come.” [WTB 24] On the other hand, he argues, standing aloof, acting as though the other person had no inclination towards you, is often likely to make the other reciprocate, so that it comes in fact to be the case that the other person will not love you:

The desire for a certain kind of truth here brings about that special truth’s existence; and so it is in innumerable cases of other sorts. Who gains promotions, boons, appointments, but the man in whose life they are seen to play the part of live hypotheses, who [sic] discounts them, sacrifices other things for their sake before they have come, and takes risks for them in advance? His faith acts on the powers above him as a claim, and creates its own verification. [WTB 24]

In a similar way, James argues, belief in the efficacy of different forms of social organization, such as the stock market or the road system, is often vital to making those forms of social organization successful. Given that we often don’t have decisive evidence for these kinds of belief in advance of believing them, they too count as examples of the inappropriateness of refraining from belief without evidence. “[W]here faith in a fact can help create the fact,” James writes, “that would be an insane logic which should say that faith running ahead of scientific evidence is the ‘lowest kind of immorality’ in which a thinking being can fall.” [WTB 25] Because, in such situations, the decision to abstain from belief takes away a contribution from the believer without which the belief would be false, the decision to abstain from belief itself leads the belief to become false, so that the option is for all intents and purposes forced. When the belief in question is one the individual wants to be true such an abstention, James thinks, is irrational.
The second kind of situation in which Clifford’s principle must be rejected, those in which we are faced with moral dilemmas, is a little less straightforward. “Moral questions,” James begins, “immediately present themselves as questions whose solution cannot wait for sensible proof.” They cannot wait, presumably, because moral questions, as they are lived and experienced, as opposed to when they are discussed abstractly in universities and seminaries, are pressing questions about what is the right thing to do in a particular situation, questions in which individuals are forced to make a choice between one good and another, about which they cannot remain neutral. Living moral questions are, therefore, forced options. But in addition to being forced, moral questions can also never be resolved by appeal to decisive evidence, James thinks. This point is related to James’ general skepticism about the practical significance of moral theory. In his 1891 essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James writes:

> Abstract rules indeed can help; but they help the less in proportion as our intuitions are more piercing, and our vocation is the stronger for the moral life. For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists.” [WTB 208]

According to James we are forced, at least in “real” moral dilemmas, to abandon moral theory. Because real dilemmas are unique in the sense that the goods at stake depend on that particular individual and because the choice must be made in a specific and unique situation, we cannot expect an abstract system of rules to resolve them. Insofar as moral theory is the only real candidate

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21 For James, moral questions are never between good and bad, but rather between two goods. “In point of fact,” he writes in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” “there are no absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods…” [209] This is a consequence of his view that the source of moral obligation is in the demands that sentient creatures make, and that all demands are equal in this sense. It is a stance that, as we shall see, Dewey takes up in his own ethical writings.
for a source of objective evidence in the realm of moral hypothesis-making we cannot, therefore, obtain objective evidence about what the best thing is to do in such situations.

This is not to say, of course, that we cannot answer find a non-arbitrary way to answer moral questions. We can, James thinks, but it must come from a very different kind of source than the black and white dictates of moral theory. “Science can tell us what exists,” as James writes in “The Will to Believe,” “but to compare the worths, both of what exists and of what does not exist, we must consult not science, but what Pascal calls our heart.” [WTB 22] If, then, we understand the notion of evidence broadly enough to include subjective reasons for action, James’ point is not that we don’t have evidence for moral beliefs, but rather that our best available evidence comes from a source, the heart, whose pronouncements often have a great degree of uncertainty, a source that often changes and, even when it doesn’t, we often do not understand it until it is too late. As we shall see in the next chapter, James also thinks that social convention can be a source of guidance for moral action, though social convention too, for James, can at best be a fallible and often misleading guide. Social convention too is unable to provide objective evidence for what is good and what is bad, and when the two are in conflict, James thinks, social convention should generally give way to the pronouncements of the heart.22 These are our only sources of guidance in the actual moral situations we find ourselves faced with in ordinary life, for James, and they

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22 The importance of the notion of regret for James’ understanding of morality is, I think, a result of his view that we do not have a decisive or reliable source of evidence to appeal to when it comes to moral questions. Far from merely being part of the psychology of moral deliberation, James argues, we cannot even make sense of the notions of good or bad action without the notion of regret. Arguing in his 1884 essay “The Dilemma of Determinism” that determinism is a view that is incompatible with our moral practices and therefore must be rejected, he writes: “I cannot understand the belief that an act is bad, without regret at its happening. I cannot understand regret without the admission of real, genuine possibilities in the world. Only then is it other than a mockery to feel, after we have failed to do our best, that an irreparable opportunity is gone from the universe, the loss of which it must forever after mourn.” [WTB 176] Regret is constitutive of the notion of good and bad action, for James, because a bad action is one that causes regret, while a good action, by implication, is one that doesn’t.
cannot provide objective evidence about how we should respond to these situations. Because, however, moral questions as they are lived and experienced are forced options which present themselves for immediate consideration, we must nevertheless choose one course of action over others. When it comes to real moral dilemmas, then, Clifford’s principle simply cannot be applied: we have no choice but to privilege the norm that counsels us to seek truth over the norm that tells us to avoid error, and in doing so we must make choices about what is the best course of action without decisive evidence.23

2. Religious Faith as a Moral Belief

We have seen, thus far, that Clifford’s principle is at odds with the actual psychological facts about our doxastic lives, and that there are at least two significant classes of option in which we should (or must) privilege the norm of trying for truth rather than avoiding error, in which we should follow the lead of our passional natures in what we believe, despite lacking decisive evidence in either direction. James can be said, at this point, to have established the more general thesis that there are situations in which it is legitimate to will oneself to believe something where no decisive evidence is available. As we saw earlier, though, James is primarily interested in establishing the more specific claim that it is permissible to will oneself to believe the religious hypothesis. His argument thus far has left this specific claim untouched, for it might be the case that it is permissible to believe without evidence in some or even many cases, without it being the

23 Often one does come retrospectively to be certain about what the right thing was to do in a situation, of course, when one realizes one regrets one’s actions or when one sees that one did the right thing. James’ point, however, is that an important part of moral dilemmas is that this kind of decisive evidence only comes after one has made one’s decision, not before. Sometimes, as James suggests in “The Sentiment of Rationality,” the decisive evidence comes not after the action, or even later in the life of the individual, but only at the end of human civilization. [cf. WTB 95 fn.]
case that we can ever believe the religious hypothesis without evidence. Given his argument so far, it is natural to assume that his argument for this more specific claim would take the form of showing either that the religious hypothesis is a belief that confirms itself, or that it is a moral belief. A careful reading of the early essays collected in *Will to Believe* clearly shows that James vacillates between both strategies in these essays, evidently unsure which of the two to take in his attempt to vindicate the religious hypothesis. Though ultimately we will only follow one of these strategies, it will be useful to begin by briefly considering the other.

The strategy of arguing the religious hypothesis to be a self-confirming belief is taken at various points in “The Sentiment of Rationality” (cf. WTB 96-107) and “The Will to Believe” (cf. WTB 27-9), but it is most explicitly discussed towards the end of James’ 1895 essay “Is Life Worth Living?” Writing there that “often enough our faith beforehand in an uncertified result is the only thing that makes the result come true,” James presents an analogy that suggests we should understand the religious hypothesis as a belief that makes itself true:

> Suppose, for instance, that you are climbing a mountain, and have worked yourself into a position from which the only escape is by a terrible leap. Have faith that you can successfully make it, and your feet are nerved to its accomplishment. But mistrust yourself, and think of all the sweet things you have heard the scientists say of *maybes*, and you will hesitate so long that, at last, all unstrung and trembling, and launching yourself in a moment of despair, you will roll in the abyss. In such a case (and it belongs to an enormous class), the part of wisdom as well as of courage is to believe what is in the line of your needs, for only by such belief is the need fulfilled [WTB 59]

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24 In “The Will to Believe,” for example, James writes that “We feel, too, as if the appeal of religion to us were made to our own active good-will, as if evidence might forever be withheld from us unless we met the hypothesis halfway… one who should shut himself up in snarling logicality and try to make the gods exert his recognition willy-nilly, or not get it at all, might cut himself off forever from his only opportunity of making the gods’ acquaintance.” [WTB 28]
For the mountaineer, having faith that the leap one is about to make will be successful can itself make the difference between it succeeding and failing. The clear implication, in the case of religious faith, is that believing in the existence of an unseen order, despite having no evidence for this belief, can in fact make this belief true. “I confess,” as James goes on to say explicitly, “that I do not see why the very existence of an invisible world may not in part depend on the personal response which any of us may make to the religious appeal.” [WTB 61]

As I have indicated James’ argumentative strategy in “The Will to Believe” also suggests, though, that he wants to interpret the religious hypothesis as a moral belief. He makes several significant parallels between moral beliefs and the religious hypothesis. First, he argues that the decision between atheism and theism, understood here as the belief and denial respectively of the religious hypothesis, is, like all real and lived moral dilemmas, a forced option. There is no possibility, James argues, of abstaining from the issue. “We cannot escape the issue by remaining sceptical and waiting for more evidence, because, although we do avoid error in that way if religion be untrue, we lose the good, if it be true, just as certainly as if we positively choose to disbelieve.” [WTB 26] Agnosticism leads one to act as if there were no unseen order, since practically speaking belief in an unseen order is an all or nothing thing, and because the significance of a belief lies in its practical consequences, according to James, agnosticism is for all practical purposes equivalent to atheism.25 For this reason, one must effectively either accept the religious hypothesis or deny it: the option between the two, as in all real, live moral dilemmas, is forced. The second parallel between the religious hypothesis and moral hypotheses is that the choice between theism and agnosticism, for which no objective evidence can be found, must, like moral hypotheses, be made

25 Just what the practical goods are that make the avowal of agnosticism practically equivalent to the avowal of atheism we will see towards the end of this chapter and in the next.
by looking inwards into ourselves. “If religion be true and the evidence for it be still insufficient, I do not wish, by putting your extinguisher upon my nature (which feels to me as if it had after all some business in this matter), to forfeit my sole chance of getting upon the winning side, – that chance depending, of course, on my willingness to run the risk of acting as if my passional need for taking the world religiously might be prophetic and right.” [WTB 27] The “nature” and “passional need” inside him that James refers to here seem to play a role very similar to that played by “the heart” in his account of moral deliberation, and this parallel too suggests a reading of the religious hypothesis as a moral hypothesis.

The most important indication that James takes the religious hypothesis to be a moral belief, though, is that he explicitly takes the religious hypothesis to be connected with the valuation of goods. This comes out most clearly in his definition of the religious hypothesis in “The Will to Believe,” which consists, he writes there, of two components:

First, she says 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. “Perfection is eternal” – this phrase of Charles Secretan seems a good way of putting this first affirmation of religion, an affirmation which obviously cannot be verified scientifically at all. The second affirmation of religion is that we are better off even now if we believe her first affirmation to be true. [WTB 26]

On James’ definition, the religious hypothesis explicitly includes the claim that we should value certain goods – the “eternal things,” which are the “best things” – over and above all others. Leaving aside for the moment the question of what the eternal things are, and how valuing them over all other things makes us better off in the present, it is clear from this passage that the option of believing or not believing the religious hypothesis is for James an option between valuing
certain things above others, between pursuing certain goods over certain other goods. The religious hypothesis, on this definition, is clearly a moral hypothesis. Now to make this claim, it is important to note, is not to say that the religious hypothesis contains no implicit metaphysical claims. Just as the moral claim “Homer is the single best poet in the so-called Western canon” implicitly assumes that there exists a discrete historical entity by the name of “Homer,” so the religious hypothesis assumes that there exists an entity that is referred to by the term “the unseen order.” The point however is that because the moral question posed by the religious hypothesis is forced and therefore has to be answered, and that because we have no objective evidence that allows us to answer the question by appealing to the existence or absence of an unseen order, the choice has to be made in the same way that all moral choices are made: not by looking for objective evidence, but by looking to the heart.

It is this latter interpretation of the religious hypothesis that I want to explore in the rest of this chapter, not just because the first line of argument, which takes the religious hypothesis to be self-confirming, seems to me more difficult to make sense of, but also because James himself seemed to place less and less emphasis on it in his later writings on religion, especially in Varieties, where it finds hardly any mention at all. The claim that the religious hypothesis put forward in “The Will to Believe” is a moral claim, however, requires more scrutiny before it can become a convincing interpretation. We must ask, first, what exactly it means to say that the best things are the eternal things, the things that “throw the last stone, so to speak, and say the last word.” Where

26 Note that the good to be pursued according to the religious hypothesis is the unseen order, not the goods that this pursuit brings us in the present. Those latter goods do not come because we value and pursue them but because we value and pursue the unseen order.

27 James does claim in Varieties and in Pragmatism that belief in the unseen order can make at least a partial salvation come about, but this is significantly different of course from claiming that belief in the unseen order makes the unseen order itself exist.
can these things be found, and in what sense are they eternal? James gives very little specification of what these eternal things are and what it means to value them, and many commentators have taken this first part of the religious hypothesis to be vacuous. Having answered these questions we must ask, then, why it is that believing this first part of the hypothesis will make us better off in the present – what goods do we actually receive by believing that the best things are the eternal things? “The Will to Believe” claims by definitional fiat that belief in the religious hypothesis is beneficial for us, but makes no attempt to substantiate this claim by discussing these benefits. The rest of this chapter will be devoted to exploring these questions.

3. The Religious Hypothesis

The first part of the religious hypothesis that James outlines in “The Will to Believe,” that the eternal things are the best things, that “perfection is eternal,” is, as I have intimated, difficult to immediately make sense of. This has led commentators to dismiss the religious hypothesis as trivial or vacuous, though this cannot be true, we know, since James does tell us that the objects of religious belief are, in some sense, perfect.28 This idea of perfection is something we will come back to later. To begin with, since nothing more is said about “the eternal things” in the “The Will to Believe,” we must look elsewhere to get a sense of what James has in mind. In the contemporaneously written “Is Life Worth Living?” James provides a different and less sketchy

28 This claim that the religious hypothesis is either trivial or vacuous can be found in both Richard Rorty (1997; p. 132) and Philip Kitcher (2013). Wayne Proudfoot (2004), however, rejects this interpretation. Noting that in the nineteenth century the question of God was often taken to be equivalent to the question of purpose or a moral order in the universe, Proudfoot suggests that the first part of the religious hypothesis – that the eternal things are the best things, that “perfection is eternal” – should be understood as saying that perfection is eternally guaranteed, an idea he sees James abandoning hesitantly in Varieties and then more completely in Pragmatism.
account of the religious hypothesis, and insofar as we can assume that James meant the two definitions to be compatible with each other, the latter can help shed light on what James takes to be the objects of religious belief. He writes there:

Religion has meant many things in human history; but when from now onward I use the word I mean to use it in the supernaturalist sense, as declaring that the so-called order of nature, which constitutes this world’s experience, is only one portion of the total universe, and that there stretches beyond this visible world an unseen world of which we now know nothing positive, but in its relation to which the true significance of our present mundane life consists. A man’s religious faith (whatever more special items of doctrine it may involve) means for me essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained. [WTB 51]

It is clear from this passage, I think, that the “eternal things” James has in mind in “The Will to Believe” is or are the same thing or things referred to in this passage as an “unseen world” or “unseen order,” which James describes a few pages later as also being eternal. We can infer, then, several things about the intended object of religious belief from this passage, which I will refer to henceforth as the unseen order. First, the unseen order cannot be found in the visible universe in which we move and breathe; second, it must explain or give significance to our ordinary lives; and third, nothing positive can be said in the way of description of it (in addition, presumably, to what is said in the second qualification). The first point, about the unseen order existing outside the visible world, is easy to understand. It coheres well with the claim in “The Will to Believe” that the objects of religious belief are eternal (since eternal things presumably cannot be found in the ever-changing mundane world), and more importantly it fits in intuitively with our general sense that religious belief involves belief in another world. The second and third qualifications, though, require more discussion, not just because the notion of significance in the second is in need of clarification and because the third seems at odds with our ordinary conception of religious belief,
but also because on the face of it the two claims seem to be in tension with each other – how can something about which we can say nothing positive at the same time give significance to our lives?

It will be useful to begin by looking more closely at James’ motivation for making the third point, that nothing positive can be said about the unseen order. The first thing to notice is that adherents of most mainstream religions, because they would claim that detailed positive accounts can be provided of the unseen order that their religions postulate, would not actually be likely to fully accept James’ religious hypothesis. James is aware of this: unlike in Varieties, providing empirically sensitive accounts of the inner lives of religious people is not even partly his goal in Will to Believe. We must understand James’ condition that nothing positive can be said about the hypothesis not as a claim about what attitude believers do have towards the unseen order they believe in but rather what attitude they should have towards it, insofar as they want their faith to be rationally permissible. But why does James think that rational permissibility can be extended to only this more minimal conception of religious belief? Several considerations motivate him in this direction, but the most important of these is spelled out fairly early on in his writings on religion, in the essay “Is Life Worth Living?:”

Now, when I speak of trusting our religious demands, just what do I mean by “trusting?” Is the word to carry with it license to define in detail an invisible world, and to anathematize and excommunicate those whose trust is different? Certainly not! Our faculties of belief were not primarily given to us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given to us to live by. And to trust our religious demands means first of all to live in the light of them, and to act as if the invisible world which they suggest were real. It is a fact of human nature, that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition. The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal, – this bare assurance is to
such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane. [WTB 56-7]

As this passage makes clear, the restriction on describing the unseen order in positive detail stems largely from a desire to avoid accounts of the unseen order that lead, in James’ view, to the more unsavory aspects of institutionalized religions, to the violence that has often historically been associated with them and which results from their “corporate ambitions” and “the spirit of politics and the lust of dogmatic rule” [VRE 305-6]. James’ motivation here, naturally, is to anticipate and avoid the objection that acceptance of the religious hypothesis will inevitably lead to this kind of violence, and that therefore the hypothesis must be rejected on consequentialist grounds. Since it is only on the basis of some specific idea about what the unseen order is like and what it demands of us that religions are able to justify violence of various kinds against various groups, James’ condition prevents this kind of misuse of religious belief. The exclusion of what James calls overbeliefs from the definition of religious belief allows him to avoid the evils of faith while retaining its goods, since, on his view, we need only believe in the bare existence of an unseen order to receive the goods that faith promises.29

29 The other likely motivation for James’s refusal to allow the unseen order to be positively characterized has to do with the idea, articulated throughout Varieties, that “feeling” or “experience” is more central to religion than “intellect” or “theory,” where by the latter James means not just theology but the entire complex of myths, superstitions, dogmas, creeds, and metaphysical views that we associate with religion. “I do believe,” he writes, “that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue.” [VRE 387] It is not surprising, given this view of derivative role of the discursive products of religion, that James would seek to rule out the possibility of any positive specification of the unseen order. This position has been forcefully criticized. Wayne Proudfoot (1985), in particular, has argued persuasively that accepting the notion of conceptually unmediated religious experience is tantamount to accepting the myth of the given. It is important to note, then, that being very cognizant of Hegel, James should not be read as suggesting that religious belief and religious experience more generally are completely conceptually unmediated. This reading is tempting when looking at Varieties, especially the lecture on mysticism, but a charitable interpretation would take such claims to be claims James attributes to mystics, rather than his own considered view. His considered view, as our reading of “The Will to Believe” makes clear, is not that religious experience is conceptually unmediated but that it need only be very minimally conceptually mediated; to say that nothing positive can be said of the unseen order is not to say nothing can be said about
This minimalist conception of the religious hypothesis has attracted much criticism from commentators on James’ religious writing. As we shall see in the next chapter, James’ position will in fact change significantly in Varieties, where he concedes the legitimacy of overbeliefs so long as they satisfy our other moral commitments. Because James takes the minimalist conception of religious belief to be a legitimate form of faith even in Varieties, though, one that can perform much of the ethical work he wants faith to perform even despite being unsupplemented by overbeliefs, it will be worthwhile discussing these criticisms anyway. The most common charge is that in requiring that nothing positive be attributable to the unseen order, James has weakened the notion of religious belief or of the divine so much as to have made it uninteresting or irrelevant. If what James means by the unseen order is so weak as to exclude even some of the most basic attributes of what most people mean by the term “God,” this objection goes, then his religious writings would seem to be of little interest to most ordinary religious people. Describing James’ conception of the religious hypothesis as “wimpy,” Richard Rorty makes precisely this charge:

Once ‘the religious hypothesis’ is disengaged from the opportunity to inflict humiliation and pain on people who do not profess the correct creed, it loses interest for many people. It loses interest for many more once it is disengaged from the promise that we shall see our loved ones after death. [1997; 132]

The parochialism of Rorty’s objection should be clear from the fact that the opportunity to see our loved ones after death are mainstays only of the Abrahamic religions, being conspicuously absent from, say, Hinduism, Buddhism, or Jainism. What Rorty understands by religion is, evidently, limited to the Abrahamic religious traditions. If, however, one wants to define religion in a way that incorporates most of the major religious traditions, it is hard to imagine doing so without it at all, for on James’ view we still need the negative points found in his statement of the religious hypothesis.
abstracting from the content of particular traditions in significant ways. Though, as I have said earlier, James’ commitment to religious pluralism is necessarily limited, since most of what he hopes to get out of the religious hypothesis turn out to be ethical ideals and attitudes rooted in American Protestantism, he can at least be commended for his effort to come up with a broad and inclusive definition of the religious hypothesis.

Its parochialism aside, Rorty’s objection is misguided for a more fundamental reason: it completely misconceives the interests and motivations with which James undertakes his writing on religion. If James’ project is not to satisfy the conventional religious believer, as I have already tried to suggest, but rather to explore the ethical resources in what he conceives of as mainstream American religion, then the charge that his conception of the religious hypothesis is irrelevant or uninteresting to ordinary believers is completely out of place. James’ definition of the religious hypothesis is not meant to capture everything that ordinary adherents would identify as their belief, but only that part of ordinary religious belief that he takes to be most congenial to and most worthy of a sensitive ethical life.\(^{30}\) To take philosophical approaches towards religion to be answerable to all the requirements of everyday believers is to forever condemn such approaches to dealing with the tired and well-worn themes of Western and Middle Eastern philosophy of religion – the question of whether God exists, the problem of evil, the ways in which religious doctrine can be misused, and so on – aspects of religion that have been discussed again and again ad nauseam. It

\(^{30}\) It becomes clear on a careful reading of *Varieties* that he is interested, there, in more conventional religions only insofar as they are the most well-documented instances of belief in an unseen order. Writing of the nature of the unseen order in the “Postscript,” for example, James writes: “… the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals. All that the facts require is that the power should be both other and larger than our conscious selves. Anything larger will do, if only it be large enough to trust for the next step. It need not be infinite, it need not be solitary. It might conceivably be only a larger and more godlike self, of which the present self would then be but the mutilated expression, and the universe might conceivably be a collection of such selves, of different degrees of inclusiveness, with not absolute unity realized in it at all.” \([VRE\ 468]\)
is precisely because he refuses to employ a conception of religion that answers completely to the expectations of the ordinary believer, on my view, that James’ religious writing is so rich and refreshing, for it is only in this way that he frees himself to dwell on the more intimate and vital aspects of personal religion, aspects of religion that have generally been ignored in philosophical discussions of the subject.

A related but different charge to James’ minimalist conception of religious belief is that by refusing to admit positive content into the description of the unseen order, James has left the religious hypothesis radically undescribed. The issue of whether the ordinary believer would be satisfied notwithstanding, what force is there, the objection goes, in showing that it is permissible to believe a hypothesis that lacks definite content? In response to this it is necessary to point out that James’ account in Will to Believe is not so minimal as to allow just any belief system that postulates a world outside the natural order to count as religious. To see this we must look more closely at the second qualification James gives in his account of the religious hypothesis, the claim that it is in relation to the unseen order that “the true significance of our present mundane life consists.” Not just any system that postulates a world outside the visible world can count as religious, on James’ view, because in order for a system to be religious, the world it postulates must also be able to give significance to our mundane lives. Now there are obviously many senses in which things can be of significance to us, and we must take care to understand exactly what James means by significance here. The most natural suggestion here is that we should understand “significance” as referring to the kind of meaning that can be provided by narratives that explain the course of the visible world. Islam and Christianity provide significance in this sense by providing us with narratives that explain and justify what happens in ordinary life, good and bad, in terms of a cosmic story whose main characters are God, Satan, the angels, and so on, a story
which, through Heaven and Hell, provides goals that give ordinary life purpose. Hinduism, Jainism, and Buddhism, similarly, explain and justify what happens in ordinary life by means of a story about endless rebirth and the sins of previous lives, imbuing ordinary life with purpose by giving us the goals of having better karma and ultimately escaping the cycle of rebirth. It is difficult, however, to square this kind of interpretation of “significance” with the fact that on James’ view nothing positive can be said about the unseen order. If we can say nothing at all about what constitutes the unseen order and how it is related to the visible world, how can the former explain, justify, or provide purpose to the latter? If the unseen world is supposed to provide significance to the visible world, it must, therefore, be a different kind of significance altogether.

On my reading, the kind of significance James has in mind is, above all, a practical one. Belief in the unseen order, on my view, gives our lives significance in the sense that it compels us to practically orient ourselves around it in certain specific ways. This is not a suggestion that has been made by commentators on “The Will to Believe,” but it is a natural way of understanding what James means by “significance.” For James, after all, the content of belief lies above all in how it contributes to action: if we know of a specific belief that it leads to certain kinds of action then we have, to a good degree, an understanding of the content of that belief. James makes this point in “Sentiment of Rationality” in the context of discussing the desiderata than any reasonable philosophical system must satisfy:

… however vaguely a philosopher may define the ultimate universal datum, he cannot be said to leave it unknown to us so long as he in the slightest degree pretends that our emotional or active attitude toward it should be of one sort rather than another. He who says “life is real, life is earnest,” however much he may speak of the fundamental mysteriousness of things, gives a distinct definition to that mysteriousness by ascribing to it the right to claim from us the particular mood called seriousness, – which means the willingness to live with energy, though
energy bring pain. The same is true of him who says all is vanity. For indefinable as the predicate ‘vanity’ may be, it is clearly something that permits anaesthesia, mere escape from suffering, to be our rule of life. [WTB 86]

The suggestion James makes here is that however vaguely a notion be verbally articulated, that notion has definite content so long as that notion makes it the case that certain emotional and practical attitudes are appropriate and certain others inappropriate. In an important footnote in “The Will to Believe” James discusses the more general theory of belief that underlies this view:

Since belief is measured by action, he who forbids us to believe religion to be true, necessarily also forbids us to act as we should if we did believe it to be true. The whole defence of religious faith hinges upon action. If the action required or inspired by the religious hypothesis is in no way different from that dictated by the naturalistic hypothesis, then religious faith is a pure superfluity, better pruned away, and controversy about its legitimacy is a piece of idle trifling, unworthy of serious minds. I myself believe, of course, that the religious hypothesis gives to the world an expression which specifically determines our reactions, and makes them in a large part unlike what they might be on a purely naturalistic scheme of belief. [WTB fn. 29-30]

Since, for James, to believe something is to be prepared to act on it, the content of the religious hypothesis is to be found not just in what it says, but also in the ways in which we would act if we believed in it. A belief counts as a belief in the unseen order just in case it generates a specific pattern of response to the world, just in case it impels us to build our active lives around it in specific ways, and it is for this reason that James refers to the unseen order as having “significance.” The charge that the very austere conception of the unseen order that is at the heart of the religious hypothesis is vague or undescribed is misplaced, therefore, for it fails to recognize that for James the practical significance of a belief makes a vital contribution to its content.
These points also help us see how to dissolve the tension alluded to above between the claim that nothing positive can be said about the unseen order, on the one hand, and the claim that the unseen order gives significance to our mundane lives, on the other. If the significance James had in mind was the kind of significance that could be conferred only by a kind of narrative of the cosmos, then it is clear that we would need to know something positive about the unseen order in order to have this significance. Because the significance James has in mind is a general pattern of emotional and practical attitudes, however, we do not actually need to be told much about the unseen order in order to receive this significance. “The bare assurance that this natural order is not ultimate but a many-storied universe, in which spiritual forces have the last word and are eternal, – this bare assurance is to such men enough to make life seem worth living in spite of every contrary presumption suggested by its circumstances on the natural plane” [WTB 56-7]. For James, the practical significance that belief in the unseen order bestows on our lives – what makes “life seem worth living” – can be generated even when there is nothing positive we know about this unseen order. These are, of course, empirical claims, and though James takes it to be introspectively true, he does not provide any empirical evidence for them in Will to Believe. It is to Varieties that we must turn to study the particular pattern of responses that James takes to be generated by religious belief and to see why he thinks it can provide our lives with significance. Though James doesn’t offer anything that is likely to satisfy contemporary standards of scientific evidence, he does offer a vast amount of empirical data in the form of first-hand accounts of religious experience, together with his own interpretations of these accounts. This might be taken as sufficient grounds for dismissing James’ elaboration and analysis of this pattern of responses, but in what follows I take it for granted that it will be rewarding to go along with James’ analyses.
James is, after all, the author of *The Principles of Psychology*, and if there is any philosopher whose claims about human psychology are worth paying attention to, it is him.

4. The Practical Significance of Religious Belief

Much of James’ religious writing, especially in the *Varieties*, is focused on the rich constellation of practical and emotional attitudes that religious belief involves: solemnity, communion, joy, the sense of an unseen order, healthy-mindedness, morbidity, self-surrender, trust, strenuousness, love, charitableness, the drive to purity, and many others. Part of the interpretive challenge of reading the *Varieties* is to understand how these attitudes relate to each other and to religious life in general. Are some of these attitudes more central than others, in the sense of being definitive or constitutive of religious life, and if so, is this because the other, less central attitudes can be derived from them in some way? James suggests more than once that we must view the practical and emotional attitudes that he distinguishes as part of a “composite photograph” [VRE 249] in which the different attitudes are woven into each other and cannot, when they occur in living individuals, really be sharply separated from each other. At the same time, however, he distinguishes certain attitudes that he claims are more fundamental to religious life than others. Of these more central attitudes, three are especially constitutive of the significance that religious belief bestows on our lives: the sense of an unseen order, trust, and strenuousness. It is the latter two attitudes of trust and strenuousness, above all, that we will be concerned with in the rest of this chapter and the following chapter, but the sense of an unseen order is in a certain way more basic than either of them, and it will be helpful in understanding James to briefly consider it first.²¹

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²¹ There is, in addition to these three attitudes, one other attitude that will turn out to be significant for understanding James’ ethical interest in religion. This is the attitude of solemnity, which James takes to be
What does it mean, we might ask, to believe in the existence of something we cannot see, hear, taste, or touch, and which we do not know what it would be like to see, hear, taste, or touch? James begins to answer this question by describing what he calls “a sense of reality,” something that attaches to all the ideas we have of objects whose existence we believe in, whether these objects be available to the senses, like the chair one is sitting on, or objects we have heard being referred to but haven’t ever seen or touched:

It is as if there were in the human consciousness a *sense of reality, a feeling of objective presence, a perception* of what we may call ‘*something there,*’ more deep and more general than any of the special and particular ‘senses’ by which the current psychology supposes existent realities to be originally revealed. If this were so, we might suppose the senses to waken our attitudes and conduct as they habitually do, by first exciting this sense of reality; but anything else, any idea, for example, that might similarly excite it, would have that same prerogative of appearing real which objects of sense normally possess. [VRE 59]

We never actually perceive many of the objects we believe in, but we nevertheless take our ideas of them to be real, James argues, because a vivid and almost physical sense of reality attaches itself to these ideas. In the case of people with religious inclinations a similar phenomenon occurs, he suggests, except that in this case the sense of reality does not attach to the idea of an object located in a specific space and time, as a result of which the object cannot be found and acted upon in any practical way, cannot be verified:

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32 This is true, James thinks, even of abstract ideas like beauty and goodness. To use beauty as an example, we never actually see or hear beauty – we perceive only the things in which beauty inheres. When we see a beautiful thing, James suggests, we do not see or hear its beauty so much as have a sense of its presence, as if beauty was present in the atmosphere of the beautiful thing.
The sentiment of reality can indeed attach itself so strongly to our object of belief that our whole life is polarized through and through, so to speak, by its sense of the existence of the thing believed in, and yet that thing, for purpose of definite description, can hardly be said to be present to our mind at all. It is as if a bar of iron, without touch or sight, with no representative faculty whatever, might nevertheless be strongly endowed with an inner capacity for magnetic feeling; and as if, through the various arousals of its magnetism by magnets coming and going in its neighborhood, it might be consciously determined to different attitudes and tendencies. Such a bar of iron could never give you an outward description of the agencies that had the power of stirring it so strongly; yet of their presence, and of their significance for its life, it would be intensely aware through every fibre of its being. [VRE 57]

Though we cannot perceive the unseen order, as we might the chair we are sitting on, and though we have no conception of any specific time and place in which it might be located, as we might do of the Dalai Lama, those of us who have a religious sensibility do have the sense that such a thing exists, and it is this sense that James calls the sense of an unseen order. This sense, which James says probably has a discernible physiological basis, can vary in strength at different times in life – it is those periods in which this sense diminishes, he writes, that are commonly referred to as crises of faith. Of all the attitudes James describes the sense of an unseen order is probably the most fundamental, then, because it is this attitude that is responsible for the elemental conviction that an unseen order exists.

33 James suggests that the sense of reality is probably closely connected to the feeling of the muscles innervating themselves for action. “For the psychologists the tracing of the organic seat of such a feeling would form a pretty problem – nothing could be more natural than to connect it with the muscular sense, with the feeling that our muscles were innervating themselves for action. Whatevsoever thus innervated our activity,” he writes, “or ‘made our flesh creep,’ – our senses are what do so oftenest, – might then appear real and present, even though it were but an abstract idea.” [VRE 63]
The sense of an unseen order is closely related to the second attitude distinguished above, that of trust, for the sense we have that such a thing exists also involves, according to James, the conviction that this thing is friendly in some way to us, amenable in some way to our values and our desires. We have a “sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life,” [VRE 250] James writes, and this gives us the reassurance that if, trusting it, we abandon our fates to it, then things will be well no matter what happens:

…” how can it possibly fail to steady the nerves, to cool the fever, and appease the fret, if one be sensibly conscious that, no matter what one’s difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one’s life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust? In deeply religious men the abandonment of self to this power is passionate. Whoever not only says, but feels, “God’s will be done,” is mailed against every weakness; and the whole historic array of martyrs, missionaries, and religious reformers is there to prove the tranquil-mindedness, under naturally agitating or distressing circumstances, which self-surrender brings. [VRE 261]

This feeling of trust is perhaps best described as the sense of something the believer can fall back on, something that guarantees that whatever happens, at the end of the day things will be well, and that through it salvation, understood as the total fulfilment of one’s desires and values, will eventually be had. Having made this point, we are finally able to understand James’ claim in “The Will to Believe” that “perfection is eternal.” It is this quality of seeming to guarantee us salvation, above all, that is captured by James’ use of the phrase “perfection is eternal” in his definition of the religious hypothesis.

As Wayne Proudfoot points out, James seems to abandon the requirement that the unseen order must guarantee us salvation in his later religious writings. We must of course still be able to trust the unseen order, he thinks, but to trust the unseen order does not require that it will guarantee us salvation, only that it will provide us with the possibility of salvation. This possibility is one we
then have to work towards practically in order to actualize, so that salvation depends as much upon ourselves as on the existence of the unseen order. This change of heart begins to appear first in James’ “Postscript” to the Varieties, where he notes that a possible salvation can for practical purposes be as good as a certain salvation:

Common sense is less sweeping in its demand than philosophy or mysticism have been wont to be, and can suffer the notion of this world being partly saved and partly lost… For practical life at any rate, the chance of salvation is enough. No fact in human nature is more characteristic than its willingness to live on a chance. [VRE 469]

This change of position is then elaborated upon in Pragmatism, where James claims that the salvation he has in mind is not a total salvation – not a fulfilment of all one’s desires and values – but rather only an incomplete salvation:

May not the notion of a world already saved in toto anyhow, be too saccharine to stand? May not religious optimism be too idyllic? Must all be saved? Is no price to be paid in the work of salvation? Is the last word sweet? Is all ‘yes, yes’ in the universe? Doesn’t the fact of ‘no’ stand at the very core of life? Doesn’t the very ‘seriousness’ that we attribute to life mean that ineluctable losses form a part of it, that there are genuine sacrifices somewhere, and that something permanently drastic and bitter always remains at the bottom of its cup? [VRE 616-7]

It seems, then, that for the later James the trust inspired in us by the unseen order does not come from its guarantee of total salvation, but rather from the more modest guarantee, if we ourselves work toward it, of something that only approximates total salvation.34 It is important to recognize

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34 It is difficult to know whether the unseen order James is recommending is one that can’t guarantee a total salvation but makes a total salvation possible, or whether it cannot make total salvation possible but can guarantee partial salvation. In Varieties he seems to focus on the possibility of total salvation, and in Pragmatism on the guarantee of partial salvation. Clearly, in any case, the unseen order must do something more than make partial salvation possible, since that possibility presumably already exists, however faintly, in the lives of most ordinary people.
that James’ recommendation here is a personal one that does not affect the broader argument for the permissibility of the religious hypothesis made in “The Will to Believe.” James emphasizes throughout the Varieties that we must reject the assumption “that in all men the mixture of religion with other elements should be identical” or “that the lives of all men should show identical religious elements,” [VRE 436], claiming instead that whatever religion an individual should choose depends on their temperament. For James, both belief in an unseen order that guarantees total salvation and belief in an unseen order that only guarantees the possibility of a less-than-complete salvation are legitimate and permissible. The latter is the one that he personally chooses, but the important point is that in either case the unseen order will inspire our trust.

The attitude of trust is closely related to the third attitude mentioned above, strenuousness, which is first discussed at length in the early essay “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.”35 As I mentioned earlier, it is to this essay that commentators most frequently turn when looking to discuss James’ ethical views, and in the first four sections of the essay James does indeed make important clarifications of his conception of ethics and ethical progress. We will turn to these clarifications in the next chapter, but for now will focus on the essay’s fifth and seemingly disconnected final section, where James turns to the relationship between belief in an unseen order and strenuousness:

The deepest difference, practically, in the moral life of man is the difference between the easy-going and the strenuous mood. When in the easy-going mood the shrinking from present ill is our ruling consideration. The strenuous mood, on the contrary, makes us quite indifferent to present ill, if only the greater ideal be attained. The capacity for the strenuous mood probably lies slumbering in every

35 The term strenuousness is actually first mentioned, albeit only in passing, in the chapter on the will in the Principles of Psychology, where it is described as arising in the fourth of the five kinds of decision that James identifies there.
man but it has more difficulty in some than in others in waking up. It needs the wilder passions to arouse it, the big fears, loves, and indignations or else the deeply penetrating appeal of some of the higher fidelities, like justice, truth, or freedom. [WTB 211]

Strenuousness, then, which James also sometimes refers to as “moral energy,” is an attitude or state characterized by indifference to pain and suffering that is experienced in the present for the sake of some “greater ideal,” which may be one of the “wilder passions” or one of the “higher fidelities.” Of these greater ideals that arouse the strenuous mood, James writes, there is one that generates it to a greater degree than any other:

… in a merely human world without a God, the appeal to our moral energy falls short of its maximal stimulating power. Life, to be sure, is even in such a world a genuinely ethical symphony; but it is played in the compass of a couple of poor octaves, and the infinite scale of values fails to open up… When however, we believe that a God is there, and that he is one of the claimants, the infinite perspective opens out. The scale of the symphony is incalculably prolonged. The more imperative ideals now begin to speak with an altogether new objectivity and significance, and to utter the penetrating, shattering, tragically challenging note of appeal. [WTB 212-3]

Believing in God or the unseen order, according to James here, opens up an “infinite scale of values” or an “infinite perspective.” While it is tempting to read this passage as claiming that by believing in an unseen order a person begins to be moved by values they did not have before, it is important to recognize that for James – consistent with his position in “Is Life Worth Living?” that we cannot know anything positive about the unseen order – the unseen order can’t provide us with

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36 It is important to note that while James does use the term “God” in this passage, rather than “unseen order” or “the divine,” his usage of the term is consistent with the usage of the latter terms in the later essays of *Will to Believe* and in *Varieties*, especially as regards the key claim that nothing positive can be said of God: “exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence.” [MPML 214]
specific values for life. As he puts it a few paragraphs later, “exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence…” [WTB 214]. The sense in which belief in an unseen order opens up an “infinite scale of values,” then, is not by providing us with ideals from without, but by allowing us to be moved by our existing values and desires in a more intense and penetrating way, such that we become indifferent to pain and struggle in our pursuit of them. This brings up the question of whether the unseen order is any way related to our choice of particular values, obviously, but serious consideration of this question will have to be postponed to the next chapter.

In Varieties James develops the idea of strenuousness by distinguishing the indifference to difficulty and struggle characteristic of the believer from the kind of attitude towards difficulty and struggle belonging to the “mere moralist” – the moralist who doesn’t believe in an unseen order. The latter too can “train himself to indifference to his present drawbacks,” James writes, can “cultivate cheerful manners, and be silent about his miseries.” [VRE 48-9] The difference, however, is that whereas the believer needs no effort to deal with pain and suffering, and in fact sometimes even welcomes it, the merely moralistic individual can deal with pain and suffering only by steadfast effort of will:

… whereas the merely moralistic spurning takes an effort of volition, the Christian spurning is the result of the excitement of a higher kind of emotion, in the presence of which no exertion of volition is required. The moralist must hold his breath and keep his muscles tense; and so long as this athletic attitude is possible all goes well – morality suffices. But the athletic attitude tends ever to break down even in the most stalwart when the organism begins to decay, or when morbid fears invade the mind. [VRE 49]

It is in these situations, according to James, when the athleticism of morality pure and simple breaks down, that the moral energy of the religious believer allows them to continue with ease:
There is a state of mind, known to religious men, but to no others, in which the will to assert ourselves and hold our own has been displaced by a willingness to close our mouths and be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God. In this state of mind, what we most dreaded has become the habitation of our safety, and the hour of our moral death has turned into our spiritual birthday. The time for tension in our soul is over, and that of happy relaxation, of calm deep breathing, of an eternal present, with no discordant future to be anxious about, has arrived. Fear is not held in abeyance as it is by mere morality, it is positively expunged and washed away. [VRE 49-50]

In line with his more general methodology in Varieties of focusing on the extremes of religious feeling rather than the averages, James is describing here a more extreme or radical manifestation of the attitude of strenuousness than that described in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” one that involves what seems like complete calm and even joy in the face of difficulty and pain. It is important to note, however, that the two texts are in fact describing the same kind of attitude. Though a sense of complete calm and joy is absent in the characterization of strenuousness in Will to Believe, there is still the idea of the strenuous person as someone who takes a certain amount of satisfaction in struggle and toil, which is why such people are described there as seeing struggle and toil as a “solemn feast” [WTB 105] or a “stern joy” [WTB 203]. 37 For James, strenuousness is to be distinguished both from the “easy-going” attitude that seeks to avoid present ill, as well as from the “mere moralism” that tolerates pain, but only by means of great effort and without any kind of satisfaction or pleasure.

37 It is plausible that the difference in the intensity of the moral energy has to do with whether or not the believer takes the unseen order to guarantee salvation or to guarantee only the possibility of an approximate salvation. So, for example, the believer who takes salvation to be a given would be more likely to display the more intense form of moral energy – “to be as nothing in the floods and waterspouts of God” – while the believer who takes the unseen order only to help bring about an approximate salvation is likely to display the slightly less intense kind of moral energy, which sees pain and difficult as a “stern joy” or “solemn feast.”
5. Faith and the Saving Remnant

We began this chapter by looking at “The Will to Believe,” at James’ argument for the permissibility of letting our passional natures dictate our belief in a hypothesis, so long as the option containing it is genuine, that is, a live, forced, and momentous option, and so long as we do not have decisive evidence against the favored hypothesis. We saw that there are two kinds of hypothesis for which this kind of permissibility intuitively makes sense, self-confirming hypotheses and moral hypotheses, and that the most plausible strategy for claiming that belief in the religious hypothesis is permissible is to interpret the religious hypothesis as a moral hypothesis. The religious hypothesis, on this view, involves the claim that an unseen order exists and that we should value it above all things. The next section of the chapter was devoted to understanding what exactly the unseen order amounts to, on James’ view. We saw that according to Will to Believe it is a kind of order of existence that exists outside the visible world, of which nothing positive can be said, and, most importantly, that belief in it gives our lives what James refers to as “significance.” Significance, we saw, should be understood in a practical sense, and is constituted above all by the three emotional and practical attitudes discussed in the previous section, the sense of an unseen order, strenuousness, and trust. Given James’ general claim then that it is rationally permissible, indeed necessary, to accept (or reject) moral hypotheses without decisive evidence when the option is forced, and given also his claim that the religious question is a forced moral option, it follows, we saw, that acceptance (or rejection) of the religious hypothesis, even if we lack decisive evidence for it, must also be rationally permissible.

It is one thing of course to show that the religious hypothesis is a forced moral hypothesis and therefore rationally permissible, and another thing to show that it is a moral hypothesis worth
accepting. Though it is easy enough to see how the trust and strenuousness that are constitutive of
James’ conception of religious belief could broaden and deepen the lives of most humans,
consistent with his position that real, living moral dilemmas must be decided upon by our passional
natures, James does not attempt in “The Will to Believe” to provide a universal argument for
religious belief. James acknowledges that many people are not in need of the benefits that might
be conferred by the attitudes of trust and strenuousness, and in a parenthetical note in “The Will
to Believe” he makes it clear that his discussion is intended for only a particular subset of humanity,
that subset of people for whom, because of how they are constituted, the religious hypothesis would
be worth adopting:

If we are to discuss the question [of religion] at all, it must involve a living option.
If for any of you religion be a hypothesis that cannot, by any living possibility be
true, then you need go no farther. I speak to the ‘saving remnant’ alone. [WTB 26]

James’ target audience in *The Will to Believe* are those for whom religious belief is a living option
– those individuals, that is, whose passional natures already incline them in its direction. Because
this “saving remnant” don’t need any external motivation or argument to accept the religious
hypothesis, James’ goal in his early essays on religion is only to address what he takes to be certain
intellectual inhibitions preventing such people from adopting the hypothesis. These inhibitions are
due, in part, to the overreaching scientism of James’ milieu, whose primary expression, in this
context, is the prohibition on accepting any hypothesis without decisive objective empirical
evidence. By blocking what is demanded by the passional natures of those in the “saving remnant,”
this prohibition (together with the other main intellectual inhibition that James identifies) cause
such people to fall prey to the “religious disease” of pessimism, a disease that occurs, James writes,
when there is “a religious demand to which there comes no normal religious reply” [39]. It is to
cure this disease that James seeks in *The Will to Believe* to argue against the prohibition on believing even in the absence of decisive evidence.\textsuperscript{38}

It is worthwhile noting that for James the “saving remnant” is not a temperamentally uniform class. As we have already seen, the argument for the permissibility of religious belief in *The Will to Believe* applies both to those who believe in an unseen order that guarantees total salvation and to those who believe in an unseen order that guarantees only the possibility of salvation. Both these kinds of believers belong to the saving remnant, but it is their slight temperamental difference that leads to them believing in different versions of the unseen order. In *Varieties*, as we shall see in the next chapter, James goes on to suggest that the “saving remnant” is actually a lot larger than he claims in *Will to Believe*, and that in fact very few people are completely lacking in religious needs:

> There are men anesthetic on the religious side, deficient in that category of sensibility. Just as a bloodless organism can never, in spite of all its goodwill, attain to the reckless “animal spirits” enjoyed by those of sanguine temperament; so the nature which is spiritually barren may admire and envy faith in others, but can never compass the enthusiasm and peace which those who are temperamentally qualified for faith enjoy. All this may, however, turn out eventually to have been a matter of temporary inhibition. Even late in life some thaw, some release may take place, some bolt be shot back in the barrenest breast, and the man's hard heart may soften and break into religious feeling. [VRE 191]

Departing from his position in *Will to Believe*, in *Varieties* James counts any number of different overbeliefs as legitimate, each difference in overbelief corresponding to a difference in the religious sensibility of the believer. We will discuss these changes in detail in the next chapter, but

\textsuperscript{38} The other main intellectual inhibition to religious belief that James identifies in *The Will to Believe* is the problem of evil or suffering. In the next chapter we will examine at how James resolves this problem in some detail, as well as how he addresses the existence of suffering more generally.
for now it will suffice simply to register how diverse the saving remnant is on James’ considered view. Not all individuals within the saving remnant would suffer from what James calls the “religious disease” if faith was barred to them on intellectual grounds. Presumably only those people whose passional natures push them so strongly in the direction of faith that they would find living without it agonizing could properly be said to suffer from a disease. The rest of the saving remnant would presumably be in less severe a condition without faith, perhaps feeling an ennui, or an alienation, or a sadness, perhaps just a vague longing for something more.

It would be easy at this point to end our reading of James’ writing on religion. Having seen that James’ argument for the permissibility of the religious hypothesis is successful if we interpret the religious hypothesis as a moral hypothesis, we can happily conclude that James achieves what he sets out to do in *The Will to Believe*. I suggested at the beginning of this chapter, though, that the assumption that James is concerned solely with the question of rational permissibility leads to a highly limited understanding of his writing on religion, that a more careful and sustained reading of these texts show him to be concerned with questions that are above all ethical. Profoundly influenced by his personal and literary contact with Emerson, James’ interest in religion comes, as I have suggested, from a desire above all to think about how the ethical resources available in popular American religion can help address the ethical questions of suffering and uncertainty. Insofar as these problems are significant issues in the ethical life of most sensitive and thoughtful people, we can even see James’ deployment of his particular notion of faith to address them as providing, indirectly, considerations in favor of the kind of faith he seeks to defend. Insofar as we are persuaded by James’ recommendation of faith as the best and most appropriate response to the fact of other people’s suffering and to the need of acting without certainty, we can see James not only as showing that his notion of religious belief is permissible but as putting forward reasons in
favor of adopting it. It is to these vivid and novel considerations that we will turn in the next chapter.
Chapter Two:
The Ethical Significance of Faith

It is not difficult to see, as was intimated towards the end of the previous chapter, how religious belief, insofar as it is constituted by the attitudes of trust and strenuousness, could have great practical benefits or “fruits,” as James sometimes puts it in *Varieties*, for the lives of believers. Trusting in an unseen order that guarantees at least the possibility of salvation allows one to live with conviction, without fear or anxiety, while strenuousness allows one to live through pain and struggle with vitality, zest, and even pleasure. Most commentators have been happy to summarize these practical benefits quickly and move on, focusing on the question of whether, given the pragmatist theory of truth, these benefits allow James to justify belief in something like the Abrahamic God. My reading of James, though, as I have made clear, seeks to focus on the ways in which James’ religious writing engages with specifically ethical questions, dwelling above all on the ethical significance of the practical attitudes that James identifies with religion. It is worth mentioning here that mine is not the only interpretation that emphasizes the ethical dimensions of James’ work on religion. Michael Slater, in particular, has recently given a thoughtful and carefully argued account of the interconnection between James’s ethical and religious views, arguing that for James religious faith affects not just what one believes but how one lives, and that the highest levels of moral ability and human flourishing are available only through the trust and strenuousness generated by belief in the unseen order. For Slater, religious belief is ethically significant for two reasons. The first is that it generates strenuousness, which is necessary for an ethical life because it provides us with the motivation needed to fully realize our moral agency. It “functions as something like a kick in the pants when we fail to feel what we ought to feel with respect to our moral obligations.” [2009; p. 83] The second, as James writes in “Is Life Worth Living?” and *Varieties*, is that religious belief is necessary for a fully flourishing human life, that it allows for levels of happiness that are simply not available to the non-believer. These two claims are

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however, is how James’ interest in religion involves the two very specific ethical problems that I have identified, the problems of uncertainty and suffering. These ethical problems, as we shall see in this chapter, though never quite the explicitly stated subjects of James’ inquiry, are present as strong undercurrents throughout his work on religion and constitute, in my view, the profounder aspects of his ethical thinking.

The importance of the problem of uncertainty, the problem of how to go forward when one is torn in different ways about what to do, first surfaces in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” and it is primarily on this essay that the first part of this chapter will focus. Rather than seeing this text as merely providing arguments for James’ naturalistic meta-ethical and utilitarian moral-theoretic views, I will give a reading of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” that focuses on the importance of deliberation in what James calls “concrete moral dilemmas.” The primary way by which actual moral deliberation takes place, for James, is with the help of social convention, but there are situations in which social convention seems to conflict with our felt demands and ideals, and in such situations we are left anxious and uncertain about what to do. It is to this kind of situation, I will argue, that James thinks religious belief allows us to respond, providing us with the trust required to fall back on our own ideals and demands, and with the strenuousness required to live a life structured by decisions made against the wishes of society. Religious belief is important because it lets us follow the lead of our hearts, however difficult they may be to follow, against the strictures of society. Since, for James, as we shall see, neither moral nor political progress is possible without the constant insistence and agitation of oppressed individuals and groups who are striving to have their demands and ideals met, religious belief, true as far as they go but, as my reading of James will show, they are part of a far deeper engagement with ethical questions that Slater fails to capture.
because it gives us the conviction and strength necessary to pursue such actions, is vital to both moral and political progress. There is, then, as we shall see, behind James’ argument, a remarkably Emersonian ideal of non-conformism at play, an ideal that is present throughout *The Will to Believe* as well as in *Varieties*.

After looking at the problem of uncertainty, we will move, in the second part of the chapter, to what I have called the problem of suffering. James’ concern with this problem is most clearly seen in *Varieties*, in the two chapters on the healthy minded and sick-souled mood, and looking carefully at these two chapters in conjunction with his often neglected early essay, “Is Life Worth Living?”, we will see just how much of James’ concern with religion is motivated by this problem. Most commentators have understood the concern with suffering in “Is Life Worth Living?” as arising merely out of James’ desire to show how his own conception of religious belief is not, like conventional belief in an Abrahamic God, incompatible with the existence of evil. Far from simply wanting to avoid incompatibility with the existence of evil, though, I will argue that James’ conception of religious belief is shaped by a conscious, wilful desire to practically acknowledge the fact of suffering in our day to day lives. James is concerned throughout much of his religious work with the fact that suffering exists and how, ethically, its existence demands that we live and breathe. Part of the reason that he is so interested in religion, particularly in the North Atlantic strains of Protestantism that form much of his personal experience with religion, is the way in which the attitudes that characterize it seem so consonant with suffering. We should see James’ demarcation of religion by means of the attitude of solemnity, I will argue, as being motivated by his belief that this attitude forms part of the most ethically sensitive response to the widespread existence of suffering in this world.
The reading of James I provide here is, as I have suggested, heterodox in its emphasis not only on the ethical significance of James’ religious writing, but also in the two specific ethical concerns that it reads into this body of work. Since these two concerns never become quite fully explicit in James’ writing on religion, it is important before we begin addressing them to say something about my interpretive methodology in this chapter. A throwaway remark is often made about William James and his brother Henry, that Henry was really the psychologist, while William was in fact the writer. Though this remark is in a sense too reductive – each was obviously a psychologist and writer in his own right – it does capture something important about William that is worth making explicit. There is of course a very obvious sense in which William James is a writer: he takes care to write well, with careful attention to the words he uses, varying the syntax and rhythm of his prose with the valence of his subject matter, making use of analogy and metaphor with a skill rarely seen in philosophical writing. James is also a writer, however, in a more profound sense of the word. One often gets the sense, in reading him, that he is, in what he writes, often reaching out for something, trying to find a way to articulate thoughts and feelings that have not been well put into words before him. One of the reasons indeed that James’ work is so full of internal tensions, not to say contradictions, is that he is so often willing to sacrifice a strict and limiting logical rigor for the sake of the elusive states and conditions that he is striving half-blindly to articulate in his writing, thus eschewing the “foolish consistency” that Emerson describes as “the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines.” [EFS 265] Moral conviction and the acknowledgment of suffering are, I think, foremost among these states and conditions that James wishes to understand in his religious writing, and no understanding of this work can be adequate without coming to terms with them. Precisely because they are themes that he is reaching out towards, though, themes that he is trying to give expression to without being
fully conscious or explicit about them, it is only by reading James not merely as a philosopher or a psychologist but as a writer that we can do them full justice. It is such a reading that I propose to undertake in this chapter.

What does it mean, we might ask, to read James as not merely a philosopher and a psychologist but as a writer? First of all, it is to take into consideration not only James’ philosophical and psychological influences, not only J. S. Mill and Alexander Bain, but also James’ literary influences, the most important of whom, as I have suggested, is Emerson. It is in the writings and perhaps also the person of his godfather Emerson that James most fully comes into contact with the problems of uncertainty and suffering, and it is the influence of Emerson’s own particular religiosity that leads James to find responses to them in popular American religion. Secondly, to read James as a writer is also, quite simply, to pay attention to the subtleties and surprises of his writing, to all the half-finished thoughts and seemingly unrelated insertions, to the various tropes and topics that surface across his texts without ever becoming their primary subject. This is not to say that we shouldn’t take seriously James’s stated aims or his more thought out arguments – taking these aspects of his work seriously is part of what I have tried to do in examining, in the previous chapter, James’ argument for the permissibility of the religious hypothesis and his account of the fruits for life that he takes faith to bring in train. To say that we must give careful attention to James’ language is to say, rather, that James approaches much of what is most important to him in religion only obliquely, and that much is lost therefore when, like the large majority of philosophical commentators on James, we latch onto only those parts of his writing that are easily identified as philosophical argumentation or psychological description. Only when we pay attention to his literary influences and to the less philosophically and psychologically obvious parts of his writing does what James is reaching or striving for in his religious work begin
to surface, I think, and it is with this in mind that I attempt, in what follows, to bring out the ethical considerations that I think are most central to James’ religious thought.

1. Moral Theory and Religion

“The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” is, unsurprisingly, frequently taken to be James’ definitive statement of his ethical views. It is the only place in his corpus where he provides a sustained articulation and defense of his views on a number of traditional questions in ethics, developing a broadly consequentialist moral theory along with a naturalistic account of the meaning of moral concepts such as goodness, badness, and obligation. The details of these views are in several places obscure or problematic, and most commentators have devoted themselves to trying to iron out the inconsistencies and fill in the gaps of the views that are presented in the essay. With the notable exceptions of Richard Gale and Michael Slater, very few commentators have dwelled on the difficult and somewhat unexpected claims that James makes at various points in the text when he claims that religious belief is necessary for ethics. As if embarrassed by the tension between such claims and the otherwise proudly naturalistic tone of the essay, most commentators have either ignored them entirely or dismissed them as sentimental additions to an otherwise powerful and persuasive work on ethical theory. In contrast to such views, the first part of this chapter will begin by providing a rereading of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” that takes the connection James makes between religion and ethics to be not extraneous or unnecessary but rather central to his ethical outlook. In doing this we will see, as Michael Slater points out, that James distinguishes between two senses in which religion is necessary for ethics, claiming that religious belief is both theoretically necessary, if we desire an ethical theory that preserves the objectivity of moral judgments, as well as practically necessary, if we desire to live
moral lives in the fullest and most significant sense. Paying attention especially to his argument for the latter claim, I will try to show how James articulates the stakes of what I have called the problem of uncertainty. What emerges from his discussion, as we shall see, is a vision of social protest as a kind of ideal ethical life, a life that is impossible without the trust and strenuousness provided by religious belief.

James’ argument in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” begins by distinguishing three different questions that face the moral philosopher: the psychological question (which asks about the history and psychology of moral attitudes and judgments), the metaphysical question (which asks meta-ethical questions relating to the meaning of moral concepts and judgments), and the casuistic question (which asks normative ethical questions about how we should act in morally significant situations). James does not spend much time on the psychological question, and the remarks he makes in response to it can be put aside for our purposes. More significant are his responses to the metaphysical and casuistic questions, especially the latter, for it is here that his claims about the connections between morality and religion most clearly come out. James’ answer to the metaphysical question begins with the insight that moral concepts such as goodness, badness, and obligation can have no application in a world devoid of sentient life. “Imagine an absolutely material world,” he writes, “containing only physical and chemical facts, and existing from eternity without a God, without even an interested spectator: would there be any sense in saying of that world that one of its states is better than another?” [WTB 189] The answer, he thinks, is no, for nothing can make one configuration of a world better or worse than any other if there are no sentient beings involved in any way.

Goodness, badness, and obligation must be realized somewhere in order really to exist; and the first step in ethical philosophy is to see that no merely inorganic ‘nature of things’ can realize them. Neither moral relations nor the moral law can
swing in vacuo. Their only habitat can be a mind which feels them; and no world composed of merely physical facts can possibly be a world to which ethical propositions apply. [WTB 190]

Goodness, badness, and obligation can exist then, for James, only in situations involving sentient beings that make actual, concrete demands. The existence of sentient minds, on his view, is a necessary condition for the applicability (and perhaps intelligibility) of moral judgments. James makes this point by considering what he calls a moral solitude, a world in which only one sentient being exists. Simply the fact that the sole individual in such a world desires or spurns something, he argues, is sufficient to make some states good and other states bad. “So far as he feels anything to be good, he makes it good.” [WTB 190] While we can make sense of goodness and badness in a moral solitude, though, James thinks that the concepts of an objective moral fact and of an objective moral obligation have no applicability in such a world:

In such a universe as that it would of course be absurd to raise the question of whether the solitary thinker’s judgments of good and ill are true or not. Truth supposes a standard outside of the thinker to which he must conform; but here the thinker is a sort of divinity, subject to no higher judge... In such a moral solitude it is clear that there can be no outward obligation, and that the only trouble the god-like thinker is liable to have will be over the consistency of his own several ideas over one another. [WTB 190]

The sole sentient being may have to order their demands into a kind of hierarchy if some of their demands are incompatible with others, according to James, but this hierarchy will have its source solely in the varying strengths of their different demands, not in anything above or outside the individual. There can, therefore, be no objective moral facts or obligations in such a world.

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40 James usage of the term “obligation” is somewhat confusing, because on some occasions he uses the term to mean an external, mind-independent obligation, while in some places he uses the term coextensively with his notion of demand. In what follows, I will use the qualifier “objective” to mark out the former sense.
James next considers a world with two or more sentient beings, each with their own various desires and aversions. Such a world, which is intuitively much closer to ours, would be different from a moral solitude in several ways. If we suppose that the sentient beings of such a world had significant interaction with each other – if they did not, such a world would be closer to the original moral solitude, except it would contain multiple moral solitudes – then the most significant difference would be the existence of obligations upon individuals that had their source outside the individual. This is because, according to James, an obligation exists if and only if a demand or claim is made.

But the moment we take a steady look at the question, we see not only that without a claim actually made by some concrete person there can be no obligation, but that there is some obligation wherever there is a claim. Claim and obligation are, in fact, coextensive terms; they cover each other exactly. [WTB 194]

This claim seems counter-intuitive when taken at face value, for there are many demands or claims that we would be inclined to say exert no obligation on others whatsoever. Think, for example, of the demands made by an individual in another part of the city or country, privileged and unprivileged in the same ways we are – the fact that such an unknown, arbitrarily chosen individual demands something does not, we are wont to think, create any obligation for us. Such examples, however, for James, do not show that demands do not coincide with obligations:

Take any demand, however slight, which any creature, however weak, may make. Ought it not, for its own sake, to be satisfied? If not, prove why not? The only possible kind of proof you could adduce would be the exhibition of another creature who should make a demand that ran the other way. [WTB 195]

The fact that we do not take this faraway individual’s demands to oblige us, James thinks, is not because demands are not coextensive with obligations, but rather because we have limited time and resources, and the demands of the faraway individual (and the obligations they impose on us)
are trumped by our own demands and the demands of those who are closer at hand (and the obligations they impose on us).\textsuperscript{41} It might be true that in everyday life we do not feel such obligations \textit{as} obligations, but on James’ view if all the other obligations upon us were somehow silenced, we would feel such demands to be obligating because of the constitutively empathetic nature of human beings.\textsuperscript{42}

The view that all demands impose obligations brings with it another, more pressing problem. The world that James is envisioning is one in which there are potentially hundreds of conflicting obligations, created by the conflicting demands of its various inhabitants. If this is the case can there be room, in such a world, for some fact of the matter about what an individual should do in situations where obligations conflict? Can there be room, in other words, for objective moral facts in such a world? There are, according to James, two possible sources for such facts. We might, to begin with, postulate some abstract moral order according to which the various conflicting obligations are ordered, thus providing us with objective facts about what we should do. This is, according to James, the intuitive or subconscious attitude that most individuals have

\textsuperscript{41} The argument applies even to those demands made by others which we are likely to see as morally abhorrent. The demand of a sadist for the humiliation or suffering of another individual does not, we are wont to think, create any obligation to help them humiliate that individual or cause that individual any suffering. James would explain such a situation by continuing to maintain that the sadist’s demand imposes an obligation on us, but pointing out that the obligation is defeated immediately, as soon as it arises, by the obligation arising from the simultaneous demand of the sadist’s potential victim that they not be humiliated or made to suffer.

\textsuperscript{42} The importance of some kind of basic sympathy or altruism to James’ views on morality is indicated not only by his claim, gestured at above, that a world where multiple sentient creatures existed and were not indifferent to each other would be close to our own world (cf. \textit{WTB} 191-2), but also by his claim, later, that “… were there left but one rock with two loving souls upon it, that rock would have as thoroughly moral a constitution as any possible world which the eternities and immensities could harbor.” The emphasis on not being indifferent and on loving souls suggests that for James some kind of innate or instinctive altruism is necessary for morality. Ruth Anna Putnam (1993; p. 82) makes a similar point: “James regards compassion as one of the basic emotions without which morality cannot gain a foothold. (In his notes for lectures on ethics he asks himself repeatedly whether one could persuade a person who lacks the altruistic impulse to act morally…).”
when attempting to resolve moral disputes. “They imagine an abstract moral order in which objective truth resides; and each tries to prove that this pre-existing order is more accurately reflected in his ideas than in those of his adversary.” [WTB 194] As appealing as such a strategy might be, however, James rejects it as “an out and out superstition.” [WTB 194] His particular version of moral naturalism – his commitment, specifically, to the position that only the desires and aversions of sentient beings can make something good or bad – leads him to rule out the possibility of grounding objective moral facts in this way. “If one ideal judgment must be objectively better than another, betterness must be made flesh by being lodged completely in some one’s actual perception.” [WTB 193] If this is the case, then the possibility of objective moral facts must be located in the demands of some sentient creature.

The only possible candidate for such a creature, James thinks, is God. If a supremely benevolent and powerful God existed then the facts about what is morally best to do in a particular situation would be determined by the desires and aversions of that God, which would create obligations that would trump the conflicting obligations set up by the desires and aversions of sentient life on Earth. These moral facts and obligations would be objective in the sense that they have their source in something outside not only the individual who has to deliberate about what to do, but also outside the society which, together with that individual, is the source of that individual’s various conflicting obligations. As James points out, though, appealing to God to safeguard the objectivity of moral judgments only solves the practical question of what to do:

If there be such consciousness, then its demands carry the most of obligation simply because they are the greatest in amount. But it even then is not abstractly right that we should respect them. It is only concretely right – or right after the fact, and by virtue of the fact, that they are actually made. [WTB 196]
According to James, such a strategy would leave the theoretical question of why God’s demands should form the basis of all moral action unanswered, especially since God, with their various desires and aversions, is just another concrete, sentient being. If God’s demands are the demands of a concrete, sentient being no different in kind than us, then the moral truths for which these demands are the basis are moral truths only because of the contingent fact that certain demands were made by a certain very powerful individual. There would be nothing necessary about such moral truths – they could easily have been different, if God had made different demands. It is worth noting that James doesn’t think this contingency means that the strategy of grounding objective moral facts in God should be abandoned. There is nothing wrong, he thinks, with having this kind of contingency associated with moral facts, even though historically most moral philosophers have felt uncomfortable with it. If all that we want is an external source of moral obligation that applies equally to all humans, then a sentient but benevolent and powerful God gives us all that we need.43

James ultimately leaves his conclusion about the theoretical connection between religion and morality in the form of a conditional statement. “It would seem,” he writes, “that the stable and systematic moral universe for which they ethical philosopher asks is fully possible only in a world where there is a divine thinker with all-enveloping demands.” [WTB 213-4] James’ claim that belief in God is necessary for objective moral truths does not, importantly, lead him to claim

43 It is only in order to hide or cover up the absence of necessity in a morality based on God’s demands, James claims, that philosophers have generally been inclined to postulate the existence of an abstract moral order. “Do we, perhaps, think,” James writes, “we cover God and protect him and make his impotence over us less ultimate, when we back him up with this a priori blanket from which he may draw some warmth of further appeal? But the only force of appeal to us,” he goes on, “which either a living God or an abstract ideal order can wield, is found in the ‘everlasting ruby vaults’ of our own human hearts, as they happen to beat responsive and not irresponsible to the claim. So far as they do feel it when made by a living consciousness, it is life answering to life.” [WTB 196]
that morality is impossible without God. He is careful to point out that a fully-fledged moral life is possible even without the postulation of a God, even without, that is to say, the existence of objective moral facts:

Whether a God exist, or whether no God exist, in yon blue heaven above us bent, we form at any rate an ethical republic here below. And the first reflection which this leads to is that ethics have as genuine and real a foothold in a universe where the highest consciousness is human, as in a universe where there is a God as well. [WTB 198]

Whether or not a God exists, according to James, whether or not there are objective moral facts, our lives are full of moral significance. The various obligations that human beings impose on one another by making demands, the moral conflicts created by these incompatible demands and obligations, the various means by which humans attempt to resolve them – all these things show, for James, that for better or worse the only thing needed for ethical life is the existence of sympathetic human beings living together and making demands upon one another.

2. Moral Progress and the Highest Ethical Life

It is with this somewhat indefinite conclusion to the metaphysical question that James turns to what he calls the casuistic question. The casuistic question asks, as James puts it, “what is the measure of the various goods and ills which men recognize, so that the philosopher may settle the true order of human obligations.” [WTB 185] It is different from the metaphysical question in that it concerns not the meaning of moral judgments – what the conditions are for their intelligibility or applicability, whether they represent objective matters of fact, whether they are necessary or contingent, etc. – but rather the question of finding a principle or criterion by which to decide between competing moral judgments. Though this question is by and large a theoretical one, James points out that it is borne of a fundamentally practical problem, namely the fact that so many of
the demands and obligations we are confronted with in our everyday lives are mutually incompatible, and we are compelled to choose between different them.\textsuperscript{44} James’ response to the casuistic question, most commentators agree, is broadly utilitarian. While, however, it is clear that James rejects classical Benthamite utilitarianism – he rejects hedonism and, indeed, any attempt to reduce human activity to a single motive or goal (cf. \textit{WTB} 186, 201) – most commentators are in disagreement about just what kind of utilitarianism he endorses. In his clearest statement of his utilitarianism, James writes:

\begin{quote}
Since everything which is demanded is by that fact a good, must not the guiding principle for ethical philosophy (since all demands conjointly cannot be satisfied in this poor world) be simply to satisfy at all time \textit{as many demands as we can}? That act must be best, accordingly, which makes for the \textit{best whole}, in the sense of awakening the least sum of dissatisfactions. In the casuistic scale, therefore, those ideals must be written highest which \textit{prevail at least cost}, or by whose realization the least possible number of other ideals are destroyed. [\textit{WTB} 205]
\end{quote}

It is difficult to know, reading this passage, whether James’ utilitarianism takes as primary the concept of a \textit{demand} (hence emphasizing the maximization of \textit{demand}-satisfaction and the minimization of \textit{demand}-dissatisfaction), or the concept of an \textit{ideal} (hence emphasizing the maximization of \textit{ideal}-satisfaction or the minimization of \textit{ideal}-dissatisfaction). The question is important because in contrast to demands, which can often be fleeting and far removed from our identities, ideals, for James, function as higher order rules or principles that govern our choices and activity over significant lengths of time, shaping the kind of people we become. As Ruth Anna Putnam (1993) points out, if James’ utilitarianism centered on the concept of demand, as the first

\textsuperscript{44} In making this point James anticipates what will become a major part of Dewey’s understanding not just of ethical theory but of philosophy more generally, namely that the highly abstract and intellectual doctrines that have come to characterize European and American philosophy are at bottom simply a response to practical uncertainty.
and second sentences of the above passage seem to suggest, then it would be a kind of act-utilitarianism, while if it was centered on the concept of ideal, as the third sentence above seems to suggest, then it would be a kind of rule-utilitarianism.\(^{45}\)

As I have indicated, my interest in James’ ethical and religious writings has to do with the new and fresh directions he takes, not in his contributions to traditional philosophical problems, and in what follows I will leave questions about the specific nature of James’ utilitarianism aside. My goal, rather, will be to inquire more closely into what James calls concrete moral life. Because of his constant emphasis on “real moral dilemmas” and “concrete emergencies,” it is natural to assume, as Michael Slater for example does, that James intends his casuistic principle to provide a decision procedure that we can actually use during morally problematic situations. It is fairly clear from what he writes, though, that James introduces his casuistic principle only to provide a criterion or principle for what counts as morally good action, not as a guide to actual deliberation. He distinguishes again and again between between moral questions as they are seen by philosophers and moral questions as they are seen by ordinary individuals. The casuistic question (along with the metaphysical question), he is clear, is a question posed only in the philosophical mood, even if it arises in response to certain facts and experiences that are recognizable from ordinary life. James is aware, moreover, of the obvious problem with taking utilitarianism to provide a decision procedure, the difficulty, namely, of actually calculating the net satisfactions and dissatisfactions of any given act:

\(^{45}\) Richard Gale and Michael Slater interpret James as an act-utilitarian (Slater taking the concept of demand to be primary and Gale the slightly different and more unsatisfactory notion of desire), while Ruth Anna Putnam (1997) interprets James to be a rule-utilitarian, taking the concept of ideal to be primary. Putnam argues, persuasively I think, that her reading fits in more closely with the more general importance to ideals that James gives in his writings.
For every real dilemma is in literal strictness a unique situation; and the exact combination of ideals realized and ideals disappointed which each decision creates is always a universe without precedent, and for which no adequate previous rule exists. The philosopher, then, *qua* philosopher, is no better able to determine the best universe in the concrete emergency than other men... He knows that he must vote always for the richer universe, for the good which seems most organisable, most fit to enter into complex combinations, most apt to be a member of a more inclusive whole. But which particular universe this is he cannot know for certain in advance... [WTB 209-10]

It is clear from such passages that James does not think his utilitarianism, nor indeed any moral system constructed by philosophers, can function as a guide to situations of actual moral difficulty. The casuistic problem is one that philosophers have to answer as part of their specifically philosophical ideal of finding a way to bring the various competing obligations we find around us into the “unity of a stable system,” [WTB 185] he thinks, and it is not a problem that has to do with actual moral deliberation.

This is not to say, of course, that James isn’t interested in concrete moral life. On the contrary, James is interested in describing and explaining concrete moral decision-making throughout “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life.” One of his central points about the irrelevance of moral theory to actual moral deliberation, indeed, is his claim that in real life we already have a means by which to resolve moral dilemmas. When faced with conflicting demands in our actual lives, according to James, our general practice is to choose the resolution that is most approved by our society or community, abandoning the demand that is not:

> Now *we* are blinded to the real difficulty of the philosopher’s task by the fact that we are born into a society whose ideals are largely ordered already. If we follow the ideal which is conventionally highest, the others which we butcher either die and do not return to haunt us; or if they come back and accuse us of murder, every
one applauds us for turning to them a deaf ear. In other words, our environment encourages us not to be philosophers but to be partisans. [WTB 203]

James doesn’t stop with this merely empirical point about the role of social convention in moral deliberation. He argues, further, that we are in most cases even obligated to let social convention guide our moral deliberation. James’ argument for this normative claim is based on a somewhat optimistic vision of social progress in matters of morality. “The course of history,” he writes, “is nothing but the story of men’s struggles from generation to generation to find the more and more inclusive social order.” [WTB 205]

An experiment of the most searching kind has proved that the laws and usages of the land are what yield the maximum of satisfaction to the thinkers taken all together. The presumption in cases of conflict must always be in favour of the conventionally recognized good. [WTB 206]

We must assume that social convention provides the most reliable guide for morally good action, according to James, because the “line of least resistance” [WTB 208] is for societies to become more and more accommodating when oppressed groups agitate to have their demands met. Conventional morality should be thought of, in other words, as the product of a long historical process by which more and more demands are accommodated. If this is the case, James argues, then given his utilitarian principle that the best action is that which minimizes the violation of our own and other people’s demands or ideals, it follows that we should rely on social convention as the best accessible guide to morally sound decision-making.

It is important to recognize that James’ argument, which is somewhat unconvincing in virtue of its naive belief in the certainty of moral progress over time, attempts only to show that individuals are generally obliged to follow social convention. James clearly recognizes, partly because it is a consequence of his theory of moral progress, that we need not always respect the dictates of social convention. Since the process by which social conventions become more
accommodating depends, if we accept the view he outlines, on the insistence and agitation of individuals and groups whose demands go unheard, it follows that the actions that lead to more inclusive social conventions – actions, needless to say, of great ethical significance – must involve not following social convention, but rather breaking with it.

“Rules are made for man. not man for rules” – that one sentence is enough to immortalize Green’s Prolegomena to Ethics. And although a man always risks much, he writes, when he breaks away from established rules and strives to realize a larger ideal whole than they permit, yet the philosopher must allow that it is at all times open to any one to make the experiment, provided he fear not to take his life and character upon the throw.” [WTB 206]

James’ suggestion here is that even though people are in general obligated to follow conventional morality for the reasons outlined above, there are certain kinds of people who in certain kinds of situation are permitted to break with it. In a passage whose rhetoric is clearly intended to recall Dostoevsky, Nietzsche, and, above all, Emerson, James goes on to describe these individuals in a little more detail:

Every now and then, however, some one is born with the right to be original, and his revolutionary thought or action may bear prosperous fruit. He may replace old ‘laws of nature’ by better ones; he may, by breaking old moral rules in a certain place, bring in a total condition of things more ideal than would have followed had the rules been kept. [WTB 208]

These individuals who are “born with the right to be original” should not, according to James, be understood as violating conventional morality in the sense that ordinary people do. Normal people, when they violate conventional morality, have behaved immorally. The “revolutionary” individuals James has in mind, on the other hand, are beyond conventional morality, in the sense that when they violate it they should be interpreted not as behaving immorally but rather as disagreeing with the moral standards of their time. By powerfully and charismatically making a
case for their unrecognized demands and ideals they in effect make it possible for prevailing moral standards to become less oppressive and more accommodating of people’s demands and ideals, thus allowing for the possibility of moral progress.

James’ account leaves unanswered a very natural question, namely, how we should distinguish between those who have the right to violate social conventions and those who, when they violate social conventions, do so because they are weak-willed or because they are simply bad people. One natural suggestion would be that we can only tell retrospectively who has the right to violate social conventions, once history has played itself out to some degree and we’ve obtained some sense of whether the anti-conventional demands put forward by the individual in question have successfully become incorporated into the conventional morality, in which case we would be entitled to say retrospectively that the individual did have the right. Another suggestion that James seems to support is that a person has the right to break social convention simply if they are willing to stake their “life and character on the throw,” [WTB 206] though how we would be able to determine whether this is the case, for those individuals who for whatever reason don’t end up martyrs, is difficult to say.\(^{46}\) The question is worth spending more time on, but what I want to focus on for the time being is a further claim that James makes about the revolutionary individual. Not content to limit himself to the claim that breaking with conventional morality is morally

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\(^{46}\) It makes sense in this context, I think, to look at Emerson’s development of his own notion of the genius or great man for guidance. “There is somewhat in great actions,” Emerson writes in “Heroism,” “which does not allow us to go behind them. Heroism feels and never reasons, and therefore is always right; and although a different breeding, different religion, and greater intellectual activity would have modified or even reversed the particular action, yet for the hero that thing he does is the highest deed, and is not open to the censure of philosophers or divines. It is the avowal of the unschooled man, that he finds a quality in him that is negligent of expense, of health, of life, of danger, of hatred, of reproach, and knows that his will is higher and more excellent than all actual and all possible antagonists.” [EFS 374] For Emerson, something about the way the great person acts compels us to interpret them not as moral failures but rather as moral dissenters. There is something in the great individual’s willingness to give themselves up for their cause, some confidence or entitlement in their gaze and bearing, some charisma that makes us view them as truly believing that social conventions should bend around their demands.
permissible for such a person, in another strikingly Emersonian passage James goes on to suggest that this breakage actually constitutes the “highest ethical life.”

In point of fact, there are no absolute evils, and there are no non-moral goods; and the highest ethical life – however few may be called to bear its burdens – consists at all times in the breaking of rules which have grown too narrow for the actual case. There is but one unconditional statement, which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see. [WTB 209]

James’ identification here of the “highest ethical life” with what might be called socially subversive action is very evocative of Emerson, who not just in essays like “Self-Reliance” and “Heroism” but throughout his work continually idealizes various forms of non-conformism. The identification also constitutes a significant part of what I referred to earlier as the practical necessity of religion to ethics, though, and for this reason it is vital to understanding James’ religious and ethical thought. The subject has been given surprisingly little attention in the secondary literature on James, but its significance cannot be understated, and it on this subject that we must for some time dwell.

The obvious debt that James owes to Emerson’s conception of genius or greatness might seem troubling, given Emerson’s own development of this concept, so it will be worthwhile at the outset at least to briefly address this concern. Emerson’s characterization of genius often seems to contain a kind of self-involvedness or selfishness that is difficult to sympathize with; his great man sometimes seems so unbound by the laws of society and so obsessed with his own desires that we sometimes feel he is liable to commit all sorts of morally egregious actions in order to get what he wants. It is important to note then that this interpretation is somewhat unfair, and is probably overly-influenced by the way in which Emerson’s notion of genius was subsequently developed by Nietzsche. Far from having concerns that are far removed from the rest of society, part of what
makes up the significance of the great man, for Emerson, is the fact that his ideals are in fact possessed in silence by many other people. It is this point that is being made in the famous opening lines of “Self Reliance”:

To believe your own thought, to believe that what is true for you in your private heart is true for all men, — that is genius. Speak your latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for the inmost in due time becomes the outmost, – and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment. Familiar as the voice of the mind is to each, the highest merit we ascribe to Moses, Plato, and Milton is, that they set at naught books and traditions, and spoke not what men but what they thought. A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the luster of the firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his. In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty. Great works of art have no more affecting lesson for us than this. They teach us to abide by our spontaneous impression with good-humored inflexibility then most when the whole cry of voices is on the other side. Else, to-morrow a stranger will say with masterly good sense precisely what we have thought and felt all the time, and we shall be forced to take with shame our own opinion from another. [EFS 259]

What separates the genius from the ordinary person, as Emerson makes clear here, is simply that the genius has the self-trust and the courage required to voice his intimate, unrecognized thoughts and feelings, whereas as the ordinary person lives with these same thoughts and feelings in silent turmoil. The individual of genius, in a sense, then, represents the ordinary person. This idea is taken up by James in “Great Men and their Environment,” where it is developed into a kind of constraint on the great man. No matter how forcefully such an individual pursues his own demands and ideals, James argues there, he will fail to change society unless society itself is receptive to the demands he puts forward:
Thus social evolution is a resultant of two wholly distinct factors, – the individual, deriving his peculiar gifts from the play of physiological and infra-social forces, but bearing all the power of initiative and origination in his hands; and, second, the social environment, with its power of adopting or rejecting both him and his gifts. Both facts are essential to change. The community stagnates without the impulse of the individual. The impulse dies away without the sympathy of the community.

[WTB 232]

If this is the case, then not all individuals who have the right to violate social conventions need to consciously be in sympathy with or fighting for other people; they can be just as self-obsessed as Emerson’s heroes seem in their worst moments. The only ones who end up transforming society, though, for James, are the ones whose demands, consciously or not, are shared widely and intensely by other members of society, which means that not just anything that the great man says or does will be significant or lasting.\(^47\) This is not to say, naturally, that James’ revolutionary individual cannot change a society for the worse – it has often happened that morally abhorrent demands voiced by an ideologue have been shared by large or powerful sections of a society, leading to violence against weaker groups. This is an important issue, one that we will have to take up again, but for now it is important to discuss another important aspect of James’ account.

The considerations discussed above make it clear how James’ notion of the highest ethical life effectively *politicizes* the moral. It is surprising how many commentators have failed to see just how politically engaged “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” is. “Polyandry and

\(^47\) One of the virtues of my reading of James is that it makes sense of how the later essays of *Will to Believe* fit in with the earlier ones. Most commentators have ignored both “Great Men and their Environment” and its sequel “The Importance of Individuals,” for example, which give a kind of defence of the great man theory of social history against a Darwinian view that sees the individual as much less significant in the history of a species. On my view, both essays relate to the concerns of the earlier essays insofar as part of James’ motivation for religious belief is the moral and psychological support it gives to the non-conformist. The penultimate essay, “On Some Hegelisms,” too seems to gain relevance when we see it as as a critique of kind of teleological account of history that seems to take away the possibility of the individual’s actions being of historical significance.
polygamy and slavery,” James writes, “private warfare and liberty to kill, judicial torture and arbitrary royal power have slowly succumbed to actually aroused complaints; and though some one’s ideals are unquestionably the worse off for each improvement, yet a vastly greater total number of them find shelter in our civilized society than in the older savage ways.” [WTB 205-6] The reference here to prima facie political issues like polygamy, torture, and slavery is not accidental; in a passage so striking it is worth quoting in full, James makes it clear that moral progress, for him, is tantamount to political progress:

Pent in under every system of moral rules are innumerable persons whom it weighs upon, and goods which it represses; and these are always rumbling and grumbling in the background, and ready for any issue by which they may get free. See the abuses which the institution of private property covers, so that even today it is shamelessly asserted among us that one of the prime functions of the national government is to help the adroiter citizens to grow rich. See the unnamed and unnamable sorrows which the tyranny, on the whole so beneficent, of the marriage-institution brings to so many, both of the married and the unwed. See the wholesale loss of opportunity under our regime of so-called equality and industrialism, with the drummer and the counter-jumper in the saddle, for so many faculties and graces which could flourish in the feudal world. See our kindliness for the humble and the outcast, how it wars with that stern weeding-out which until now has been the condition of every perfection in the breed. See everywhere the struggle and the squeeze; and everlastingly the problem how to make them less. The anarchists, nihilists, and free-lovers; the free-silverites, socialists, and single-tax men; the free-traders and civil-service reformers; the prohibitionists and antivivisectionists; the radical darwinians with their idea of the suppression of the weak – these and all the conservative sentiments of society arrayed against them, are simply deciding through actual experiment by what sort of conduct the maximum amount of good can be gained and kept in this world. [WTB 206-7]
It is clear, from this passage, that the moral questions James is most concerned with are in fact ones that embody or reflect larger political problems. This is not to say, of course, that James isn’t concerned with ethical questions which do not have any significant bearing on one’s society, or to which social convention is completely indifferent. What kind of work an average university student wants to go into, for example, can still be an ethically significant question even if it lacks social consequence, for it is, after all, a question about how one is to live and who one is to become. All decisions in which one’s character is at stake are ethical questions, for James, but the most important ethical questions for James are ones in which the ethical and the political coincide, ones in which questions about who one wants to become are, at the same time, questions about what kind of society one wants to live in. It is for this reason that for James the highest ethical life consists in affirming the legitimacy of one’s suppressed ideals, for only by challenging social convention can one potentially bring about a more equitable and accommodating society.

This suggestion seems to conflict with a common view that takes moral deliberation to be an inherently private or personal act, one that is ultimately borne in solitude by the moral agent, so it is important to see that nothing in what James says is incompatible with the intimacy or isolation sometimes associated with moral deliberation. The most intimate and personal decisions – whether to leave an abusive relationship, for example, or whether to identify as queer or gender non-conforming – are questions that can be of political importance even when they are not conceived of as such by the individuals making them. Insofar as a private moral dilemma is one that arises for many different people – insofar as the social convention and the demand that are jointly the source of the dilemma can be found coexisting uneasily in many other individuals – the

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48 In an excellent essay on James’ ethical outlook, Ruth Anna Putnam (1993; p. 74) points out that for James, as for Dewey, ethical questions, which are questions about which demands and ideals to privilege, are questions about what kind of character one will have, about what kind of person one will become.
The dilemma is one of political significance. The fact that the social convention, and therefore the society, prevents a whole group of individuals from satisfying the demand gives political significance to any attempt by a member of this group to resist such a convention. No matter how private and personal such questions seem, a decision in one direction will reinforce the present arrangement of society, while a decision in the other will add to the pressure against it. Even if the moral dilemma is dealt with alone and in solitude, therefore, even if it is not conceived in political or even in more broadly social terms, James’ characterization of the highest ethical life makes it necessarily political.\(^4^9\)

Now when it comes to choosing the socially-favored way out of a moral dilemma, there is, of course, a certain amount of confidence that one can have in one’s decision. “If we follow the ideal which is conventionally highest,” as James says, “the others which we butcher either die and do not return to haunt us; or if they come back and accuse us of murder, every one applauds us for turning to them a deaf ear.” [\textit{WTB} 203] This does not hold true, though, when one chooses the path out of a dilemma that is rejected by society.\(^5^0\) If, in feeling the tension between a demand

\(^{49}\) In a significance sense James’ characterization of the highest ethical life makes it almost a \textit{necessarily} alienating or isolated life. Precisely the fact that one leans towards a choice that is not sanctioned by one’s community or society is often responsible for the sense of isolation in making such decisions. This holds true even of those who end up making conformist decisions but who, at least in the deliberation process, consider a choice that is non-conformist; merely the possibility of choosing a path that would lead to ostracism often results in a feeling of isolation or alienation during deliberation. It is this, I think, that James has in mind when he writes in “The Sentiment of Rationality” that it is “only in the lonely emergencies of life that our creed is tested: then routine maxims fail, and we fall back on our gods.” [\textit{WTB} 105] Such emergencies are “lonely,” for James, because we cannot appeal to members of our community or society for help or support.

\(^{50}\) I have been writing as if one must, in moral deliberation, either choose an ideal that is favored by society or one that is rejected by society. This is not strictly speaking true, of course, for sometimes a question might be ethically significant in the sense of being determinative of one’s character while at the same time being neutral as to social convention. If one is choosing between whether to become a lawyer or an engineer, for example, this is a question that has significance of one’s life and character, and is therefore ethical, but it might not have much social significance. For the purposes of this chapter I have largely ignored such questions, though they are clearly ethical questions for James.
sanctioned by society and a demand that is not, one chooses the latter, one’s choice is made with far more hesitation and uncertainty, for the chances of failure are far greater. One may fail, first, in the sense that one subsequently wishes one had chosen otherwise. If one chooses to live an openly queer life, the health risks, social ostracism, and general prejudice one faces as a consequence of this decision might make one regret one’s decision later or at least wish that one was constituted differently. If one chooses to enter a profession in which one does not belong – if a woman of color tries to enter American politics, or a differently abled person to enter film – the difficulties of pursuing one’s goals within these fields might make one wish one had chosen less boldly. In making a nonconformist choice between two opposing demands, one is confronted again and again with difficulties that constantly make one reconsider one’s choice, so that unlike those who make conventional decisions, each and every day for such people seems to require a reaffirmation of their choice. Even if one doesn’t regret one’s choice, moreover, one may still fail in the sense that one does not get what one hopes for in making the choice one makes. One may choose a queer life, hoping for a life in which one’s intimate needs and desires are satisfied, but one may end up with a life marred by the bitterness of social prejudice and violence. One may choose a profession one doesn’t belong in, hoping for intellectual and moral fulfilment, but one may end up with a stalled career or a job that doesn’t provide basic securities. It is because of the specter of these different kinds of failure that James again and again in his religious work emphasizes the importance of risking oneself. “It only by risking our persons from one hour to another we live at all,” he writes in “Is Life Worth Living?” [WTB 59] The person who lives the highest ethical life, he writes in “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” must above all be willing “to stake his life and character upon the throw.” [WTB 206]
What gives such people the ability to make the choices they make and live the lives those choices shape? It is true that in making such choices we often find the support of small and invisible communities around us who have made similar choices, but even the support of these communities is often not enough to provide us with the strength needed to make the choices we want to make and to face the constant and wearying hardships that result from these choices. Where then, does the non-conformist find their strength? Where does the conviction come from that makes the highest ethical life possible at all? It is at this point, I think, that one of the connections between ethics and religion in James’ work most clearly comes into view. “There is but one unconditional statement,” James writes after making his claim about the highest ethical life, “which is that we should seek incessantly, with fear and trembling, so to vote and to act as to bring about the very largest total universe of good which we can see.” [WTB 209] The Biblical (and Kierkergaardian) undertones of this statement are not accidental. James wants, on the one hand, to acknowledge the uncertainty and anxiety that accompany the choices of those who fight for suppressed demands, and he wants, on the other, to suggest that it is in religious belief that such individuals can find the conviction and the courage required to live out their lives. We saw, in the previous chapter, that religious belief for James is characterized by a complex constellation of practical attitudes, among which the attitudes of trust and strenuousness are central. We looked at these two attitudes in some detail in the previous chapter, and I will not go over them in detail again here, but it should be clear, given the reading of James’ “highest ethical life” that I have outlined here, how these two attitudes are vital to this life. Trust, as we saw, is characterized by a sense that there is some higher power that is continuous with one’s own self, a power which guarantees at least the possibility of salvation for us, and it is easy to see how it might provide the nonconformist with the conviction necessary for articulating and endorsing a demand that the non-conformist’s society rejects.
Strenuousness, as we saw, is characterized by a kind of indifference and even pleasure in response to the pain and suffering one is confronted with, and similarly, it isn’t hard to see how it could provide the nonconformist with the strength required to live with the decision they have made in spite of the constant difficulties they are wont to face from a society that rejects one’s decision.51

3. The Highest Ethical Life and the Unseen Order

If my reading of James is correct then James has given us a kind of argument in favor of his conception of religious belief, on the grounds that it is necessary for the highest ethical life to be possible, and therefore for moral and political progress to be possible. A potentially troubling question arises here, however, about how belief in the kind of unseen order James has in mind can provide the trust and strenuousness necessary for the kinds of non-conformist decisions we have been discussing. According to the minimalist conception of religious belief that James wants to defend in The Will to Believe, recall, nothing positive can be said about the unseen order. As he puts it himself at the end of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” “exactly what the thought of the infinite thinker may be is hidden from us even were we sure of his existence; so that our postulation of him after all serves only to let loose in us the strenuous mood.” [WTB 214] But if we can’t say anything concrete about the unseen order then how, it might be asked, could religious belief provide us with the trust and strenuousness required to pursue some presumably very

51 Emerson doesn’t recommend religious belief as a way of making his hero or man of genius possible, but it is striking that it is precisely James’ religious attitudes of trust and strenuousness that he identifies as essential to non-conformism. As he writes in “Heroism,” “Towards all this external evil, the man within the breast assumes a warlike attitude, and affirms his ability to cope single-handed with the infinite army of enemies. To this military attitude of the soul we give the name of Heroism. Its rudest form is the contempt for safety and ease, which makes the attractiveness of war. It is a self-trust which slights the restraints of prudence, in the plenitude of its energy and power to repair the harms it may suffer. The hero is a mind of such balance that no disturbances can shake his will, but pleasantly, and, as it were, merrily, he advances to his own music, alike in frightful alarms and in the tipsy mirth of universal dissoluteness.” [EFS 374]
particular non-conformist path? How can belief in an unseen order help us in the highest ethical life, in our articulation and pursuit of a demand that is suppressed by society, when we cannot even attribute to the unseen order any particular ideal?

The question is important, for it marks out an important tension and change in James’ religious thought. In the *Will to Believe*, as we saw in the previous chapter, James is indeed clear that the conception of religious belief he wants to defend as permissible can involve no positive claims about the unseen order. The primary motivation for this minimalism about religious belief, it was suggested there, was James’ desire to avoid the consequentialist objection that religious groups might misuse their power in various ways by ascribing various hateful or harmful claims to God. The minimalist proviso allowed James to avoid the deleterious effects of religious belief by preventing descriptions of the unseen order, while still allowing us access to the resources for life that James finds in religious belief:

Now, when I speak of trusting our religious demands, just what do I mean by “trusting?” Is the word to carry with it license to define in detail an invisible world, and to anathematize and excommunicate those whose trust is different? Certainly not! Our faculties of belief were not primarily given to us to make orthodoxies and heresies withal; they were given to us to live by… It is a fact of human nature that men can live and die by the help of a sort of faith that goes without a single dogma or definition. [*WTB 56*]

By the time James is writing *Varieties*, however, his attitude towards this issue has changed. This comes out most clearly in his repeated statements of a *continuity* that must exist between the believer and the unseen order. There must be, he writes in the chapter on Saintliness, a “sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.” [*VRE 250*] He writes again, in the Postscript, that “the practical needs and experiences of religion seem to me sufficiently met by the belief that beyond each man and in a fashion continuous
with him there exists a larger power which is friendly to him and to his ideals.” [VRE 468] This claim of a shared set of values between believer and unseen order potentially opens up James to the consequentialist objection once more, but before we address this issue it will be important first to look more closely at what motivates James’ change of position in Varieties.

James’ change in position is a response, I think, to his appreciation in Varieties of the fact that two of the practical attitudes he takes to be constitutive of religious belief, trust and strenuousness, are not in fact possible without the existence of at least some ideals that are shared between believer and unseen order. To see why this is so, we must go back to our previous discussion of these two attitudes, noting that the attitude of trusting in the unseen order, together with the strenuousness this organically gives rise to, is possible only because of a sense that the unseen order is on our side. As James writes in Varieties:

… how can it possibly fail to steady the nerves, to cool the fever, and appease the fret, if one be sensibly conscious that, no matter what one’s difficulties for the moment may appear to be, one’s life as a whole is in the keeping of a power whom one can absolutely trust? In deeply religious men the abandonment of self to this power is passionate. Whoever not only says, but feels, “God’s will be done,” is mailed against every weakness; and the whole historic array martyrs, missionaries, and religious reformers is there to prove the tranquil-mindedness, under naturally agitating or distressing circumstances, which self-surrender brings. [VRE 261]

This feeling of trust, as was mentioned in the previous chapter, is best understood as the sense the believer has that there is something they can fall back on, something that guarantees, whatever happens, that at the end of the day things will be well, and that salvation of some kind will eventually be had:

Most religious men believe (or ‘know,’ if they be mystical) that not only they themselves, but the whole universe of beings to whom the God is present, are secure in his parental hands. There is a sense, a dimension, they are sure, in which we are
all saved, in spite of the gates of hell and all adverse terrestrial appearances. God’s existence is the guarantee of an ideal order that shall be permanently preserved. This world may indeed, as science assures us, some day burn up or freeze; but if it is part of his order, the old ideals are sure to be brought elsewhere to fruition, so that where God is, tragedy is only provisional and partial, and shipwreck and dissolution are not the absolutely final things. [VRE 462]

What does it mean, however, to say that the unseen order is on our side in this sense, that it is working towards our salvation, except that it shares our deepest and most considered desires and values and is in some way working towards their satisfaction? Our salvation must include, if it is to be meaningful to us, the total or at least partial fulfilment of our most important ideals, and in order for the unseen order to be working towards our salvation it must, therefore, share at least some of these ideals. Without this sharing of values, the unseen order would not generate the trust and strenuousness so important to religious life. Appreciating this point in Varieties, James abandons his earlier claim that we can say nothing positive about the unseen order.

It is important to see that this claim of continuity between believer and unseen order does not mean that the believer obtains their demands or ideals from the unseen order. James is very clear in Varieties that any specific ideals one finds in the unseen order are projected upon it or attributed to it; they have their source, ultimately, in us. The ideals the individual reads into the unseen order do not, moreover, necessarily pre-exist the individual’s belief in the unseen order. Believing in the unseen order doesn’t mean our ideals have been fixed, and we can engage in long and serious moral deliberation about our actions and ideals even when our belief in the unseen order is already firmly in place. On this point Varieties is in agreement with Will to Believe. As James puts it in the last paragraph of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” discussing the difficult and often lonely process of moral deliberation:
From this unsparing practical ordeal no professors’ lectures and no array of books can save us. The solving word, for the learned and the unlearned man alike, lies in the last resort in the dumb willingnesses and unwillingnesses of their interior characters, and nowhere else. It is not in heaven, neither is it beyond the sea; but the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth and in thy heart, that thy may do it. [WTB 214-5]

Even though we subsequently see our ideals in the unseen order, even though we often have the impression these ideals come to us from the ideal order, in fact these ideals come to us, according to James, from our hearts. We may, after all, believe that the unseen order is working towards our salvation without knowing what that salvation consists in. We learn what our salvation consists in only when we know what our ideals are, and we learn what our ideals are only through the long and often lonely process of ethical deliberation. It is for this reason indeed that belief in the unseen order is so important for the non-conformist, on James’ view, for it is only by belief in its saving qualities that the non-conformist can acquire the trust and the strenuousness necessary even to articulate and pursue their radical ideals.\(^52\)

There are several important consequences of James’ account of the relationship between believer and unseen order. It should be clear, first, that for James the relationship between believer and unseen order is, in a significant sense, complexly interactional. We lean on something outside us, the unseen order, but only in order to be able acquire the trust and strength needed to articulate and follow our own demands and ideals. James provides a psychological explanation of this complex two-way dynamic by appealing to the role of the subconscious in deliberation about

\(^52\) This is not to say that belief in a redemptory unseen order whose ideals we do not know must always precede the non-conformist’s ideals. It is very possible, for example, to imagine that both the belief and the ideal come simultaneously. We might, in the course of deliberating some difficult non-conformist action, come to believe in a redemptory unseen order that promises us the fulfillment of the very ideal we will end up endorsing after deliberation.
ideals. The source of our ideals is (at least proximally) actually our subconscious, he suggests, and the strange sense that believers have of their ideals having an external source is (at least proximally) a result of the fact that we experience incursions from the subconscious as entering our minds from the outside. A second consequence of James’ account is that there can be as many legitimate conceptions of the unseen order as there are believers. This pluralism is very much explicit from the beginning of Varieties. In the second lecture of Varieties, James writes that “of the individual’s relation to ‘what he considers the divine,’ we must interpret the term ‘divine’ very broadly, as denoting any object that is godlike, whether it be a concrete deity or not.” [VRE 38]

We escape much controversial matter by this arbitrary definition of our field. But, still, a chance of controversy comes up over the word ‘divine,’ if we take it in the definition in too narrow a sense. There are systems of thought which the world usually calls religious, and yet which do not positively assume a God. Buddhism is in this case. Popularly, of course, the Buddha himself stands in place of a God; but in strictness the Buddhistic system is atheistic. Modern transcendental idealism, Emersonianism, for instance, also seems to let God evaporate into abstract Ideality. Not a deity in concreto, not a superhuman person, but the immanent divinity in things, the essentially spiritual structure of the universe, is the object of the transcendentalist cult. [VRE 36]

Describing both Buddhism and transcendentalism as systems that postulate unseen orders which make appeals to individuals and to which individuals respond in ways that “are in fact indistinguishable from, and in many respects identical with, the best Christian appeal and

53 “Let me propose then, as a hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its farther side, the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its hither side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life…. the theologian’s contention that the religious man is moved by an external power is vindicated, for it is one of the peculiarities of invasions from the subconscious region to take on objective appearances, and to suggest to the Subject an external control. In the religious life the control is felt as ‘higher’; but since on our hypothesis it is primarily the higher faculties of our own hidden mind which are controlling, the sense of union with the power beyond us is a sense of something, not merely apparently, but literally true.” [VRE 457-8] This hypothesis is expounded at length in the two chapters on conversion.
response,” James claims that both these belief systems must be understood as religions. The “appeal and response” described here refers, of course, to the practical attitudes that all these different belief systems share: the sense of an unseen order, trust, and strenuousness. Any belief in an unseen order must be such as to generate these attitudes if is to count as religious. At the same time, however, overbeliefs that attribute specific ideals to the unseen order are now legitimate, so that each believer’s version of the unseen order will differ somewhat from that of others. “The divine can mean no single quality,” as James writes in the Conclusions chapter, “it must mean a group of qualities, by being champions of which in alternation, different men may all find worthy missions”:

So a ‘god of battles’ must be allowed to be the god for one kind of person, a god of peace and heaven and home, the god for another. We must frankly recognize the fact that we live in partial systems, and that parts are not interchangeable in the spiritual life. If we are peevish and jealous, destruction of the self must be an element of our religion; why need it be one if we are good and sympathetic from the outset? [VRE 437]

The fact that in Varieties James thinks these other ideals, these overbeliefs, can legitimately be attributed to the unseen order suggests that we should reread the conclusion of James’ argument in The Will to Believe in a significant way. There, as we saw in the previous chapter, James defends the possibility of a very minimalist conception of religious belief. In light of his rejection in Varieties, though, of the stipulation that we cannot say anything positive about the unseen order, we can reread James’ earlier argument as claiming not the permissibility of one very specific and austere kind of religious hypothesis, but rather the permissibility of a potentially infinite number of religious hypotheses, each of which takes for granted that the unseen order is not part of the visible world and that it gives significance to our day to day lives, but which differ from each other
in terms of the ideals whose eventual fulfilment, in this world or elsewhere, the unseen order is understood as actively working towards.

As I have said, this revision of James’ argument potentially opens it up to the consequentialist objection mentioned above, that by claiming that all and sundry religious beliefs are permissible James is creating room for the kind of institutionalized religious violence of which there are so many historical examples. There are several responses to make to this charge, the most obvious of which, I think, is to point out that this kind of institutionalized religious violence would have happened and will continue to happen regardless of the claims philosophers make about the rational permissibility or impermissibility of the beliefs that purport to justify this violence. Religious groups that inflict violence on other groups are known generally not to hold themselves accountable to many of the norms of rational permissibility. It is also important to point out that the kind of institutionalized violence that is often associated with religious beliefs in the eyes of the contemporary Western secularist is, in fact, very much essential to secular beliefs systems as well. It is not hard to see that in the twentieth century many more people have died at the hands of state institutions enshrining secular notions such as democracy (the numerous American massacres in Vietnam), liberalism (the British holocausts in colonized India), racial supremacy (the German holocaust of European Jews), and communism (the famines in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China) than as the result of religious beliefs. People have always seen the injustice of such violence, and it is not necessary to build moral limits into theories of rational permissibility for resistance to be possible. The fact is that ideology of all kinds, religious, racial, and political, has always been used for violent ends, and we already have the moral resources necessary to object to such violence. An argument to the effect that some belief or action is generally rationally permissible is not thereby
an argument that it is morally permissible, and does not imply that our other moral commitments cannot be used to oppose the belief or action.

This brings up a related and more pertinent objection, that just as religious belief might give those from oppressed groups the trust and strenuousness necessary to articulate and pursue their suppressed demands and ideals, so it might also give those who have morally abhorrent demands and ideals the trust and strenuousness necessary to articulate and pursue their demands. It is important to acknowledge that this objection does in fact seem to capture the tenor of much of James’ rhetoric, especially in Will to Believe, where there is a strange obsession, throughout many of the different essays, on war. In “Is Life Worth Living?” James claims that “the most optimistic and idealistic literature the world has ever seen” [WTB 47] was produced in Germany when it was being crushed by Napoleon. He talks of the Vaudois’ strength and conviction against the attacks of vastly more powerful Catholic forces. “For my own part,” he writes, “I do not know what the sweat and blood and tragedy of this life mean, if they mean anything short of this,” referring to the fact that life feels like a “real fight.” [WTB 61] Discussing strenuousness towards the end of “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” James writes that “the strenuous character will on the battlefield of human history always outwear the easy going type, and religion will drive irreligion to the wall.” [WTB 212] This obsession with battle comes up again in later work too, as in “The Moral Energies of Men,” where James talks about the vast quantities of moral energy that are released in an individual in wartime situations, and in “The Moral Equivalent of War,” where James looks for a constructive means by which the impulses expressed in war can be expressed in ordinary life. Whatever the motivation for this rhetoric – it is very likely, I think, that it has something to do with James’ guilt about the fact that he never fought or suffered in the great
American war of his time – it is important to accept that James does, in certain moods, almost seem to relish the idea of different parties engaging in conflict for the sake of their ideals.

James does though, I think, have two significant responses to the charge that religious belief in the sense he has in mind could allow the forceful pursuit of morally abhorrent demands. The first point, which we have already discussed, is that the demands of other people can pose a significant limitation to the religiously inspired pursuit of morally abhorrent demands. Since, for James, no matter how forcefully a demand or ideal is pursued it will not lead to social transformation unless it resonates widely and intensely enough among other members of one’s community, it is plausible that only (or mainly) demands and ideals that are genuinely suppressed are likely to become recognized as a result of the religious non-conformist’s actions. As was pointed out earlier this consideration only goes so far, however, for it is possible that abhorrent demands might be shared in a suppressed form by powerful segments of society, in which case a non-conformist with such demands might succeed in transforming a society into a radically more violent and harmful one. Here I think it is worth mentioning one other profound aspect of James’ concern with religion, one that we will look at in more detail in the final section of this chapter – its relationship, that is, to suffering. Religious belief for James, I think, is fundamentally a resource for those who lack security and fulfilment in the visible world. It is the promise of salvation, as we saw, that allows the believer to trust the unseen order and gives the believer the strenuousness needed to live, and it is obvious that the more one suffers in the present and the more one lacks in security and fulfilment, the more one is in need of this promise of salvation. The already privileged and the already powerful, those who already have much in the visible world, are less in need of salvation, and therefore less in need of religious belief. Even if they profess it, and even if they appeal to it in their defense of violence against the marginalized, they are less likely, I think, to
possess the kind of strong, living religious belief that allows for trust and strenuousness of the kind James has in mind. A case might be made that they are less likely, therefore, to benefit from the ethical resources of religion that James is interested in.\footnote{These considerations are not meant as an out and out response to the objection outlined above, of course, but only to suggest the line of response that James would have been most likely to take. James again and again emphasizes in Varieties, as we have seen, that he personally does not take the unseen order to guarantee complete salvation, that there is always “the possibility of there being portions of the universe that may irretrievably lost.” [\textit{VRE} 469] It would be uncharitable to expect of him to provide us, through religious belief, a guarantee of a better world, a world without great loss and great suffering, and so the expectation that the objection be answered completely is, I think, misguided.}

It is worthwhile, perhaps, taking stock of our discussion so far before moving onto the next and final section of this chapter. We began by looking at “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life,” outlining James’ response to what he calls the metaphysical and casuistic problems. In response to the former, we saw, he gives a naturalistic account of the meaning of moral terms and moral judgments, arguing that moral judgments can be objectively true only on the assumption of an unseen order that imposes its demands and obligations on others. In response to the latter problem he gives a broadly utilitarian moral principle, one that takes either the notion of demand or ideal as central. This principle, we saw, is not intended to aid individuals in actual deliberation, for actual deliberation, James thinks, is generally guided by social convention. Moral progress in social conventions, however, depends on social conventions becoming more and more accommodating to the demands and ideals of others, and therefore depends on non-conformist actions that articulate and defend the suppressed demands and ideals of the marginalized. It is for this reason, we saw, that James thinks that the highest ethical life consists in breaking with social convention for the sake of one’s suppressed demands and ideals. Insofar as religious belief provides non-conformists with the trust necessary to articulate these demands and the strenuousness necessary to pursue them, it was argued, we can see James as providing a kind of
ethical argument in favor of religious belief, the argument that religious belief is important, if not vital, to moral and political progress. This, as I have said, is only the first ethical resource that James wants us to be able to access in religious belief, and it is to the second such ethical resource that we must now turn.

4. Religious Belief and the Suffering of Others

The centrality of suffering to James’ religious thought has often been passed over by philosophical commentators, but sensitive attention to his writing shows it, I think, to be pervaded by a deep and penetrating consciousness of suffering. The best place to approach James’ thinking on the matter is Varieties, specifically the two middle chapters on healthy-mindedness and the sick soul, and it is here, with the attitude of healthy-mindedness, that we will begin our reading. The attitude of healthy-mindedness, according to James, is a perspective from which the world and all that happens in it is devoid of any kind of taint. Those who have this attitude, he writes, “when unhappiness is offered or proposed to them, positively refuse to feel it, as if it were something mean and wrong.” [VRE 78] It is an attitude colored overwhelmingly by joy and optimism: “It is to be hoped,” as James writes, “that we all have some friend, perhaps more often feminine than masculine, and young than old, whose soul is of this sky-blue tint, whose affinities are rather with flowers and birds and all enchanting innocencies than with dark human passions, who can think no ill of man or God, and in whom religious gladness, being in possession from the outset, needs no deliverance from any antecedent burden.” [VRE 79] James goes on to distinguish between those for whom healthy-mindedness is so intense as to seem a totally organic and involuntary condition,

55 The notable exception to this is Charles Taylor (2002), who clearly sees that the notions of healthy-mindedness and the sick-soul are central to James’ religious project. Taylor, however, is more concerned with the relationship of these notions, especially the latter, to a specifically modern predicament.
and those for whom it is present at a more moderate level. His paradigm of the intensely healthy-minded individual is Walt Whitman, whose incapacity for recognizing evil or tragedy is so strong, James claims, as to seem almost pathological. This is in contrast to those who, because of some (less than completely overwhelming) natural disposition, or due to exposure to certain kinds of social or religious environments, have a more moderate healthy-minded point of view, one that “deliberately excludes evil from its field of vision” [VRE 86] without at the same time completely failing to recognize it. For James, the paradigm of this more moderate kind of healthy-mindedness is to be found in the adherents of the mind-cure movement, whose popular success during the time of his lectures confirms for him the fact that healthy-mindedness, when intentionally cultivated, can have significant positive effects on a large portion of human minds.

How, according to James, do healthy-minded individuals of the less pathological stripe “exclude” evil or tragedy from the world? James isn’t clear how exactly this exclusion works, but there are seemingly two kinds of epistemic strategy the healthy-minded person can adopt. On the one hand they might simply ignore or deny the existence of facts that are commonly deemed evil or tragic, and on the other they might acknowledge the existence of such facts while simply refusing to see them as evil or tragic. For example, I can ignore the war in Syria by not reading the news and avoiding conversations about current global affairs, and this is a way of refusing to acknowledge certain painful facts. This kind of strategy is less useful however when it comes to facts that are part of my immediate life. If my partner’s mother dies, for example, this is not the kind of fact I can usually ignore in my personal life, since part of being a caring partner is to help one’s partners through their bereavements. But I can, if I have a tendency towards healthy-

56 There may, of course, be no sharp distinction between these alternatives, insofar as certain consequences of a claim may be taken to be so constitutive of that claim that failing to recognize the consequence as following from the claim would be ipso facto to fail to understand or endorse that claim.
mindedness, try to persuade myself and my partner that in certain ways what has happened is not altogether a bad thing, that their mother was sick and suffering, that it was for the best, etc. Which strategy one uses depends, presumably, on the specific fact in question, on the epistemic and social context, and the degree of healthy-mindedness of the individual concerned. James does accept the possibility of employing the more totalizing strategy of ignoring evil facts altogether, but because this strategy can sometimes be so manifestly self-deceptive as to seem psychologically impossible, 57 James seems to have mainly the other strategy in mind, noting that many prima facie negative facts do not seem so negative when they are faced with a person who refuses to see them as such. “Refuse to admit their badness; despise their power, ignore their presence; turn your attention the other way; and so far as you yourself are concerned at any rate, though the facts may still exist, their evil character exists no longer.” [VRE 86] In either case, and this is the important point, unlike the more intense brand of healthy-mindedness described above, the moderately healthy-minded attitude does not need to completely refuse to acknowledge that there is any evil or tragedy in the world – this is what makes the more intense brand seem pathological – it needs only to refuse to acknowledge enough of it so that the positive aspects of the world seem central to it while the evil or tragic aspects seem only minor and practically negotiable.

In contrast to healthy-mindedness, what James calls morbidity or the sick-souled attitude involves a stance that emphasizes the evil aspects of life so that they seem much more central to life than the positive aspects. “Just as we saw that in healthy-mindedness there are shallower and profounder levels,” James writes, “happiness like that of the mere animal, and more regenerate sorts of happiness, so also are there different levels of the morbid mind, and the one is much more

57 This is not to say the method of completely denying facts usually thought to be evil is not possible for some groups. “Christian Science so-called, the sect of Mrs. Eddy, is the most radical branch of mind-cure in its dealings with evil. For it evil is simply a lie, and any one who mentions it is a liar.” [VRE 103]
formidable than the other.” [VRE 126-7] There are, on the one hand, the moderately sick-souled, those “people for whom evil means only a mal-adjustment with things, a wrong correspondence of one’s life with the environment.” [VRE 127] Since it is prima facie unlikely that any kind of morbidity would be cultivated in the same way that one would cultivate moderate healthy-mindedness, James associates moderate morbidity with people whose circumstances put them more in the presence of the evil and tragic than of the good and who come, as a result of these circumstances, to see the evil aspects of the world as more central than the good aspects, without necessarily denying the latter. In contrast to these people, however, there are “those for whom evil is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy.” [VRE 127] It is easy to see how this more severe kind of morbidity corresponds to the intense brand of healthy-mindedness discussed above, since, as James points out, the more severe cases, which are unable to see any good whatsoever in the world, most likely result from some kind of nervous pathology. In contrast to those with moderately sick-souls, for whom the centrality of evil can in principle be practically worked against, the more intensely morbid see the evil of the world as intrinsic and ineradicable.

Towards the end of the lecture on the sick-souledness, James abandons the primarily descriptive stance that he has adopted towards the two attitudes we have been discussing and attempts to judge between them. It would seem, as Charles Taylor (2002) points out, that having labelled the first attitude “healthy” and the second “sick,” James would have an inclination towards

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58 As we shall see, in fact, on my interpretation James does think that we have an ethical responsibility to cultivate if not morbidity then something that is very similar to it.
the first, but with typical irony James goes on to claim that it is the second attitude which is superior. The passage in which he makes his final evaluation is worth quoting in full:

In our own attitude, not yet abandoned, of impartial on-lookers, what are we to say of this quarrel? It seems to me that we are bound to say that morbid-mindedness ranges over the wider scale of experience, and that its survey is the one that overlaps. The method of averting one’s attention from evil, and living simply in the light of good is splendid as long as it will work. It will work with many persons; it will work far more generally than most of us are ready to suppose; and within the sphere of its successful operation there is nothing to be said against it as a religious solution. But it breaks down impotently as soon as melancholy comes; and even though one be quite free from melancholy one’s self, there is no doubt that healthy-mindedness is inadequate as a philosophical doctrine, because the evil facts which it refuses positively to account for are a genuine portion of reality; and they may after all be the best key to life’s significance, and possible the only openers of our eyes to the deepest levels of truth. [VRE 152]

“The completest religions,” James goes on a few paragraphs later, “would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed.” [VRE 154] Now there is in this passage the recognition that healthy-mindedness is a legitimate and useful means by which to live, even if there are times in which it becomes impossible and gives way to melancholy. What I want to focus on in what follows, though, is James’ pregnant and suggestive claim that regardless of its usefulness as a mode of life, healthy-mindedness must give way to the sick-souled attitude because the latter is more satisfactory as a “philosophical doctrine.”

James’ suggestion here is that suffering is part of reality, and that healthy-mindedness fails to reflect it. It is difficult to overstate how unexpected such a claim is in Varieties, for in making it James seems to move directly away from his pragmatist emphasis on understanding the acceptability of belief in terms of its usefulness or fruitfulness for life. This counter-intuitiveness aside, the claim seems problematic or unclear in more than one philosophical respect. First, how
can presumably attitudes such as healthy-mindedness and morbidity, which have been characterized as primarily affective attitudes, be evaluated as “philosophical doctrines?” How can they capture or fail to capture the world? Second, even if we can provide an answer to this question, how can philosophical adequacy be the prevailing consideration when morbidity, at least as James has described for it, is such a seemingly oppressive condition? We can temporarily allay the urgency of this second question by looking more carefully at James’ comparison of healthy-mindedness and the sick-souled attitude. In a passage occurring a few pages before the passage quoted in the previous paragraph, there is an indication that James’ endorsement of morbidity is not completely unequivocal:

To this latter way, the morbid-minded way, as we might call it, healthy-mindedness pure and simple seems unspeakably blind and shallow. To the healthy-minded way, on the other hand, the way of the sick soul seems unmanly and diseased. [VRE 151-2]

Here James notes that while the morbid-minded attitude towards the world accounts for an aspect of reality which failure to account for would be blind and shallow, there is a different perspective from which it can be seen as “unmanly and diseased.” The point is elaborated in a passage from the previous lecture in which James is praising healthy-mindedness for avoiding this failing:

Not only does the human instinct for self-happiness, bent on self-protection by ignoring, keep working in its favor, but higher ideals have weighty words to say. The attitude of unhappiness is not only painful, it is mean and ugly. What can be more base and unworthy than the pining, puling, mumping mood, no matter by what outward ills it may have been engendered? [VRE 87]

Underlying James’ stoical rhetoric here is an objection to giving up or complaining where concrete action might better a bad situation. The problem with the morbid-minded attitude, it appears, is
that it can lead to a kind of practical paralysis. It is unclear whether James is referring here to only the severer form of morbidity, which sees evil as so intrinsic to the world that any kind of remedial action seems impossible, or whether he also has in mind the more moderate form morbidity, which sees evil as a concrete and even central part of the world but at the same time contingent and therefore potentially negotiable. Though the latter form of sick-souledness too would likely be a painful stance to adopt, it would intuitively seem less likely to lead to a complete practical paralysis. Why James thinks such an attitude would be worthy of taking up regardless of its difficulties is a question that will have to be addressed in more detail, but in order to do so we must look at the first problem mentioned above; for the time being it is sufficient simply to register that James’ endorsement of the sick-souled attitude is not unequivocal.

The other problem with James’ suggestion centers, as was indicated, around the sense in which attitudes such as healthy-mindedness and morbidity, which as James has characterized them are primarily affective attitudes, can be said to “account” or “fail to account” for reality at all. Such a claim would make sense if we were talking about beliefs with representational content, but what would it mean for a primarily affective attitude to “account for” the world in the way James is suggesting? If the kind of attitudes under discussion were occurrent affective states like anger, jealousy, or fear, then one suggestion might be to appeal to the object-directedness of such states in explaining James’ claim. We get angry towards specific people, for example, or fear specific events, and we take these feelings to be appropriate or inappropriate depending on the nature of those people or events. We might say, for example, that my fear of death on learning that I have

59 A similar objection is echoed in the First Lecture in about Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. “The mood of a Schopenhauer or a Nietzsche, - and in a less degree our own sad Carlyle, - though often an ennobling sadness, is almost as often only peevishness running away with the bit between its teeth. The sallies of the two German authors remind one, half the time, of the sick shriekings of two dying rats.” [VRE 42]
been conscripted into military service is appropriate given the danger that combat represents to my life – my feeling of fear, we might say, captures or accounts for something specific about my situation. The attitudes of healthy-mindedness and sick-souledness, though, are not quite identifiable with episodic affective states like anger or fear. They are, to begin with, more temporally persistent that such states, and they are also not caused by or directed towards objects in our immediate environment, and so we cannot appeal to such objects in making claims about their accounting or failing to account for anything. Healthy-mindedness and sick-souledness as James has characterized them are closer to what we refer to as moods or temperaments, in others words, than feelings. In what sense though could a mood or a temperament be said to capture or fail to capture the world? Early on in Varieties James introduces a notion that can help orient our approach to the question, the notion of a total reaction:

Total reactions are different from causal reactions, and total attitudes are different from usual or professional attitudes. To get at them you must go behind the foreground of existence and reach down to that curious sense of the whole residual cosmos as an everlasting presence, intimate or alien, terrible or amusing, lovable or odious, which in some degree everyone possesses. This sense of the world’s presence, appealing as it does to our peculiar individual temperament, makes us either strenuous or careless, devout or blasphemous, gloomy or exultant, about life at large; and our reaction, involuntary and inarticulate and often half unconscious as it is, is the completest of all our answers to the question, “What is the character of this universe in which we dwell?” It expresses our individual sense of it in the most definite way. [VRE 39]

James goes on to claim that we cannot say that all “total reactions” are religious, because religion is incompatible with some of the attitudes that constitute such reactions. A total reaction that is heavily ironical or complaining cannot, for example, be a religious attitude on James’ view. For our purposes, the important point is that a person’s total reaction, even if it is involuntary and
inarticulate and half-unconscious, expresses certain views about what the world, taken as a whole, is like. If we understand the practical attitudes of healthy-mindedness and sick-souledness as part of a person’s total reaction in this sense, then these attitudes can be understood as object-directed even if they are not a response to specific objects in our immediate environments – they are directed, we might say, towards the world as a whole. Interestingly, it is in precisely this sense of the specificity of the objects towards which they are directed that many philosophers in the literature on emotion make the distinction between feelings and moods.\(^{60}\) In this sense, healthy-mindedness and sick-souledness can be said to account for reality insofar as they fit or fail to fit with, insofar as they are appropriate or inappropriate with respect to what James calls the total character of the world. When James claims, then, that sick-souledness is a better philosophical doctrine than healthy-mindedness, what he means on my reading is that it is more appropriate than healthy-mindedness as an affective response to what the world, taken as a whole, is like. What kind of appropriateness or inappropriateness, though, could James exactly have in mind here? In what way might we say that these practical attitudes fit or fail to fit in with the world as a whole? And, importantly, is this sense of fitting with or accounting for the world’s total character strong enough to justify not just the abandonment of healthy-mindedness but also the adoption of the sick-souled attitude? To show this is to show why morbid-mindedness would be worth cultivating in spite of the obvious difficulties and distress it would bring. James doesn’t give an explicit answer to either explanatory demand in Varieties, but I believe the direction his answers would take are indicated in his early essay, “Is Life Worth Living?,” and it is to this text that we must now turn.

Sick-souledness on James’ view, I want to suggest, captures what the world is like and is appropriate as an affective response to it in a very specifically ethical sense.

\(^{60}\) See for example the sixth chapter of Peter Goldie’s (2000) The Emotions: A Philosophical Exploration.
5. Ruskin’s Thought Experiment

“Is Life Worth Living?” is a text that has been notably neglected in discussions of James’ views on religion, despite its obvious continuity with “The Will to Believe.” Of the commentators who have given the essay substantial attention, moreover, most have neglected to appreciate the way in which the theme of suffering is so tightly woven through it, choosing to limit the significance of suffering in the text to its role in the problem of evil. The best of these interpretations is provided by Michael Slater (2009), and though in my view he ultimately falls short of an adequate interpretation, it will be useful to use his reading as a platform from which to think about the way suffering is present as a theme in the text. Slater’s reading begins by noting, correctly, that James is concerned with two different ways in which the demands made by those with religious tendencies are intellectually obstructed, leading to a kind of melancholy or pessimism. “My task,” James writes early on, “let me say now, is practically narrow, and my words are to deal only with that metaphysical tedium vitae which is peculiar to reflecting men.” [WTB 38-9] The first source of intellectual frustration that James identifies involves the scientific worldview that we inherit from contemporary society, a worldview incompatible with the postulation of an unseen order that is an essential part of religious belief. It is this problem that he has in mind when he writes “how desperately difficult it is to construe the scientific order of nature either theologically or poetically.” [WTB 41] The most significant challenge that the scientific worldview poses to religious belief, according to James, arises in the prohibition on believing without sufficient evidence. As we saw in the first chapter, much of Will to Believe, especially the title essay, is devoted to challenging this prohibition and to showing that it shouldn’t be applied to certain beliefs, one of which is religious belief.
The second source of intellectual obstruction for those with religious tendencies, the source that is discussed primarily in “Is Life Worth Living?” and which will be our main subject in this chapter, is the existence of suffering. The problem here, as Slater points out, is the problem of evil, the fact that the widespread existence of terrible suffering seems incompatible with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent God. Given this incompatibility, the person with religious tendencies is compelled either to believe that the tragic and evil nature of the visible world is actually a faithful expression of a cruel and indifferent God, or simply to cease understanding the visible world as the expression of any kind of benevolent divine entity, to give up the desire to “read the facts religiously.” [WTB 41] The second of these strategies is superior to the first, James thinks, since believing the suffering around us to be contingent and negotiable releases a kind of instinctive vitality in most people. It is still unsatisfactory, though, he argues, since it does not allow our religious demands to be fulfilled. The solution that James recommends to the problem of evil, which is the “completer and more joyful” solution, is not that we infer the existence of a cruel and indifferent God nor that we give up our religious demands, but rather that we find a form of religious belief that is not incompatible with the existence of suffering and yet allows us to satisfy our religious demands.

As Slater correctly points out, the form of religious belief James has in mind in this early essay is the minimalist conception of the religious hypothesis that we looked at in the previous chapter. Because James’ conception of religious belief doesn’t require the omnipotence, omniscience, or even the benevolence of the unseen order, and because the problem of evil depends on the Abrahamic God being good, powerful, and knowledgeable enough to eliminate suffering from the world, there is actually no compatibility between the unseen order and the existence of evil or suffering. Now as we noted earlier, in Varieties James rejects the minimalist requirement
given in his earlier conception of religious belief, so that any belief in an unseen order that exists outside the visible world and generates the necessary practical attitudes (the sense of an unseen order, trust, and strenuousness) counts as a religious belief. Given his response to the problem of evil in *Will to Believe*, it is safe to assume that in his considered view James would see the problem of evil as providing an additional condition that any kind of belief in the unseen order would need to satisfy in order to be rationally permissible, so that a belief in the unseen order would count as rationally permissible only so long as it exists outside the visible world, generates the necessary practical attitudes, and also does not include any overbeliefs (such as the claim that the unseen order is omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent at the same time) that are incompatible with the existence of widespread suffering. Such belief would allow us to obtain the most significant practical fruits of conventional religious belief – it would allow us to satisfy our religious demands – and would also allow us to live in a world that contains pervasive suffering.

As I have intimated, I agree in large part with this interpretation, and disagree only insofar as it claims to capture the whole of James’ interest in suffering. On my view it excludes precisely the most interesting aspect of James’ concern with suffering in his religious work, namely the specifically ethical resources he takes religious belief to provide us with in our response to suffering. Slater and other commentators are aware, it is true, that belief in the unseen order

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61 Slater also goes on to construct a dilemma for James that is aimed at showing that no such form of religious belief exists. This dilemma, which he takes to be the most significant problem facing James’ response to the problem of evil, is as follows: either God is powerful enough to worship, in which case God must have enough power to eliminate at least significant suffering, or he is not, in which case he doesn’t deserve to be worshipped and is too thin to count as a replacement for the Abrahamic God. Slater’s dilemma is misguided, though, for it makes the highly problematic assumption that only something with power to effect change or at least influence the world is worth of being worshipped. It is very easy to see, though, that much of what we revere or worship does not have this quality: the highly moral, for example, or the extremely beautiful. We might think of the unseen order, for example, on the model what an enfeebled monarch in a time in which monarchy is on the wane might mean to a nostalgic monarch – the monarchist would in a sense worship his monarch, even though the latter increasingly lacks power and influence.
provides us with strength to deal with suffering, with the ability to go on living with vitality despite our own suffering and that of others. They don’t however say anything about whether there is any reason that we should deal with suffering, other than the fact that often we are simply compelled to. On my view, James doesn’t merely think that religious belief is important because it helps us deal with suffering in a practically efficacious way – he thinks that dealing with suffering, in the sense of acknowledging it in our day to day lives, is an ethical responsibility, and that religion provides us with the best way to discharge this responsibility. To articulate James’ argument we must begin by reading “Is Life Worth Living?” a little more carefully, taking seriously the way in which the essay is framed, and paying attention to certain undertones that are present throughout the essay which connect to the discussion in Varieties about the healthy-minded and sick-souled. Reading the essay this way will help us see, I think, why it is that in Varieties James claims that the sick-souled attitude holds “the best key to life’s deepest significance.”

“Is Life Worth Living?” begins with one of most moving passages in James’ writings, one that marks out sadness as having pride of place in James’ view of the world. “In the deepest heart of all of us,” James writes, “there is a corner in which the ultimate mystery of things works sadly; and I know not what such an association as yours intends, nor what you ask of those whom you invite to address you, unless it be to lead you from the surface-glamour of existence, and for an hour at least to make you heedless to the buzzing and jigging and vibration of small interests and excitements that form the tissue of our ordinary consciousness.” [WTB 32] The mood of sadness, James seems to suggest with this opening remark, is in some way more fundamental than other moods, which come and go at a surface level in response to events in the world, and which eventually always give way, when things quieten once more, to the sadness that exists in “the
deepest heart of us all.” James goes on to frame the entire essay as a kind of response to suicide. According to statistics that James cites, there are more than three thousand annual suicides:

That life is not worth living the whole army of suicides declare – an army whose role-call, like the famous evening gun of the British army, follows the sun round the world and never terminates. We, too, as we sit here in our comfort, must ‘ponder these things’ also, for we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share. The plainest intellectual integrity, – nay, more, the simplest manliness and honour, forbid us to forget their case. [WTB 37]

James’s question is whether there is some way to persuade would-be suicides to change their minds. He is aware from the beginning, of course, that his considerations will not work for many people who want to commit suicide. Most suicidal people, he writes, are what he calls temperamental pessimists, people who are tempted to end their lives because of organic conditions to which no intellectual response can be a therapy. (That this categorization seems to map perfectly with what James describes as the more severe or pathological version of the sick-soul in Varieties is the first sign that the two discussions are intimately connected.) The considerations James tries to provide are meant not for temperamental pessimists, then, but rather for those suffering from a less severe kind of pessimism that has its source in a “metaphysical tedium vitae” rather than in any physical or organic condition.

We have already examined the two reflective sources of the melancholy or pessimism that James is concerned with, and what I want to focus on now is why James thinks that we must focus on suicides – why he thinks this is a worthwhile topic to consider at all. There are two reasons James gives in the passage quoted above. First, he suggests, we cannot understand ourselves without understanding the state of mind of suicides – “we are of one substance with these suicides, and their life is the life we share.” [WTB 37] This idea makes sense, insofar as James’ claim that sadness is the “deepest” part of ourselves resonates with us. If this is true then paying attention to
the suicidal individual of either variety might help bring a mirror and a microscope to certain
deep parts ourselves. The second reason James gives, though, is a little more difficult to
understand. We have a kind of duty, James seems to suggest, coming from the “simplest manliness
and honour,” to pay attention to the melancholy of the suicide, a duty that “forbids us to forget
their case.” What is the source of this duty? James does not say explicitly, but the best
way to understand what he has in mind, I think, is to read carefully the passage from the English
art critic John Ruskin that James quotes immediately afterwards:

If suddenly in the midst of the enjoyments of the palate and lightness of heart of a
London dinner-party, the walls of the chamber were parted, and through their gap
the nearest human beings who were famishing and in misery were borne into the
midst of the company feasting and fancy free; if, pale from death, horrible in
destitution, broken by despair, body by body they were laid upon the soft carpet,
one beside the chair of every guest, – would only the crumbs of the dainties be cast
to them; would only a passing glance, a passing thought, be vouchsafed to them?
Yet the actual facts, the real relation of each Dives and Lazarus, are not altered by
the intervention of the house-wall between the table and the sick-bed, – by the few
feet of ground (how few!) which are, indeed, all that separate the merriment from
the misery. [WTB 37-8]

Ruskin asks us to consider the difference between two different dinner-party scenarios, one in
which well-off diners are eating among themselves, and another in which the walls separating the

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62 In “The Moral Philosopher and the Moral Life” James makes a similar suggestion about a duty to pay
attention to the suffering of others: “The sentiment of honour is a very penetrating thing. When you and I,
for instance, realize how many innocent beasts have had to suffer in cattle-cars and slaughter-pens and lay
down their lives that we might grow up, all fattened and clad, to sit together here in comfort and carry on
this discourse, it does, indeed, put our relation to the Universe in a more solemn light. ‘Does not,’ as a
young Amherst philosopher (Xenos Clark, now dead) once wrote, “the acceptance of a happy life upon
such terms involve a point of honour?” Are we not bound to do some self-denying service with our lives in
return for all those lives upon which ours are built? To hear this question is to answer it in only one possible
way, if one have a normally constituted heart!” [WTB 206] As this passage and my reading will go on to
show, for James paying attention to the suffering of others must have some significant effect on how one’s
own life is lived.
room from the outside world are removed and the ragged and homeless come in and watch the same diners eat from besides their chairs. The significant facts known about the world by the diners does not vary: in both cases they know they are enjoying a well-prepared meal and relaxing liqueurs in a warm room, and in both cases they know that a significant number of people in this world are destitute and hungry. And yet, we must presume, the attitude of the diners is significantly different in the two situations. In the first they eat heartily and with good cheer, whereas in the second they would clearly feel some discomfort about continuing to eat as they did before. There would be something morally inappropriate, we feel, about continuing to laugh, banter, and eat as the newcomers look on in hunger. Although what the diners know about suffering – in the sense of being willing to *avow* – is the same in both cases, the vivid presence of suffering in the second case forces them to *acknowledge* in a way that they do not in the first scenario, in their affective states and presumably also in their behavior, the fact that suffering exists.\(^{63}\)

The important point is that since, as Ruskin notes, nothing essential about the world changes from one case to the other – in both cases there are hungry people, whether or not the walls separate them from the diners, and in both cases the diners are aware of this fact – the inappropriateness of continuing to eat with mirth and light-heartedness in the second case extends also to the first. The real moral force of the thought-experiment is to show that the diners’ affective states in the *first* situation are morally inappropriate.\(^{64}\) Generalizing the moral – since in similar

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\(^{63}\) To fully acknowledge a fact in this sense, as opposed to merely avowing it, is to have a certain affect and for one’s actions to be shaped by this affect. The diners in the second case acknowledge that the world is full of cold and hungry insofar as they realize that something about the mirth and self-satisfaction with which they were conducting themselves – something about their prior affective state – was morally inappropriate.

\(^{64}\) Unless, of course, it can be shown that the felt inappropriateness in the second case is not due to doing something intrinsically inappropriate but rather due to the inappropriateness of flaunting something in a way that could cause those close by to become sad or upset. If this was the case then presumably it would be morally fine for the diners to continue eating once the hungry have been herded out of the dining room. But most people will agree, I think, that the diners are likely to feel, or at least *should* feel, too uncomfortable
situations we would cease doing or at least do in a different manner many of the things we ordinarily would do without hesitating – we can say that the affective quality of our ordinary lives are ethically inappropriate in same the ways that the diners’ affective states are. The thought-experiment also shows why James thinks that morbid-mindedness may hold “the best key to life’s deepest significance.” Most people, like Ruskin’s diners, would only affectively acknowledge the fact of suffering if they were directly presented with it. This is better than the healthy-minded, of course, who would continue acting as though there was no suffering even when vividly confronted with it, but it is not as good as the sick-souled, who would continue to affectively acknowledge the fact of suffering even when far away from their own and other people’s pain. If, in the course of their daily life, a sick-souled person was to be confronted suddenly with the presence of people suffering, they would not feel the shudder of moral embarrassment or discomfort that we or Ruskin’s diners would immediately feel in such a situation.

One way to phrase the challenge the thought experiment puts to us is as follows: is there a way of continuing to live that is compatible with a sustained affective acknowledgment of the tragedy and evil that exist in this world? Is it possible, that is, to live in such a way that if, at any given moment, such facts were vividly and forcefully presented to us, as it was to the diners at Ruskin’s dinner party, we would not feel embarrassed and uncomfortable, we would immediately feel we were doing something seriously morally inappropriate? One response might be simply to stop eating. If the diners were not eating, and their room was not heated, and there was no witty banter, then perhaps they would feel no embarrassment or discomfort when the walls were parted. But as a response to the challenge this suggestion is unsatisfactory, I think, because

and embarrassed to continue eating for a significant time after the hungry are gone. That this is the case suggests that the inappropriateness comes solely from the fact that the diners are being merry and light-hearted while elsewhere, albeit far away, people are suffering.
it assumes that the only appropriate response when faced with other people’s suffering is to force oneself to suffer likewise, which is a response which, though in a sense noble, in many cases would be practically impossible as well as unwise. James’ position, I believe, is different. He believes we can continue eating, for there is a way of eating that is not inappropriate even when the starved and homeless are looking on. More generally, he thinks, we can continue talking, joking, gossiping, and complaining, continue, that is to say, doing most of the things that constitute living our lives, so long as we do them in a certain manner. There is a certain attitude with which we are forced to do these things, if we want at the same time to acknowledge the facts, an attitude that James takes to be a vital part of morbid-mindedness. It is an attitude that would result in a certain kind of gravity that accompanies all our activities, a kind of seriousness that would weigh down even our most light-hearted indulgences. It is an attitude that can be cultivated only by internalizing the fact that suffering in the world is widespread, by keeping it always on the horizon of consciousness, in the back of our minds, so that everything we do is done in light of this fact.65

The name James gives to this attitude in Varieties is solemnity, and, not coincidentally, it plays a vital role in how he delimits the notion of religious experience in Varieties. James begins his second lecture noting that he is interested in personal religion rather than institutional religion, claiming that a feeling, act, or experience is religious in this way insofar as it stands the individual

65 I don’t mean to deny that there are other responses available to Ruskin’s thought experiment, of course. Perhaps the most attractive alternative is a political response that aims to reduce or eliminate the evil and tragedy in the world. But note, first, that not all suffering can obviously be eliminated through political (or any other kind of) action. Note, second, that James’ strategy is not incompatible with political action. Not only is it not incompatible with it, it might be considered in a certain way a necessary condition for a politically oriented response. For it is unlikely that truly living with the facts of tragedy and evil in view won’t in the end lead to a response that is political. Moreover, the absence of such an attitude in those who do seek political solutions to such problems is what often seems so morally objectionable about them; for many such people dealing with other people’s suffering seems to be just a matter of advancing one’s career or a way to feel good about oneself.
in some kind of relationship to the divine. It is in order to characterize more fully the nature of this relationship that James appeals first to the notion of solemnity:

There must be something solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude we denominate religious. If glad, it must not grin or snicker; if sad, it must not scream or curse. It is precisely as being solemn experiences that I wish to interest you in religious experiences… The divine shall mean for us only such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest. [VRE 42]

It should be clear from the characterization of solemnity here that it is an attitude that lies somewhere between healthy-mindedness and morbidity. The reason James prefers sick-souledness to healthy-mindedness, as our discussion above of “Is Life Worth Living?” makes clear, is that the former does more affective justice to the fact that we live in a world where suffering is widespread. The attitude of solemnity is similar to the attitude of morbidity in this sense, for it too seems to involve an affective acknowledgment of the existence of suffering. Solemnity as James characterizes it is not, however, completely identical with morbidity. Recall that James’ endorsement of the morbid-minded attitude was not completely unequivocal, for aware that morbidity, especially in its severer forms, is likely to lead to a kind of practical paralysis, he criticizes it as a “diseased and unmanly” [WTB 106] attitude. Insofar as solemnity is an attitude that does not “scream or curse,” it is clear that solemnity, for James, unlike morbidity, is not supposed to lead to such a practical paralysis.

How, though, we might ask, can we properly acknowledge suffering in our day to day lives without giving way to the kind of hopelessness or paralysis that characterizes the morbid-minded attitude? Constant recognition of the fact that the world involves intense suffering, even when this recognition is not pathological, even when it is not the result of being born or forced into miserable circumstances, is a difficult thing to live with. Even when it is the result of an intentional
cultivation that seeks to do justice to what the world is really like, it is an acknowledgment that can lead to disillusion and melancholy, to an inability to participate fully in the world. How, then, is an attitude such as solemnity even possible? The answer, I think, is that solemnity is possible because it is part of religious belief. In his lecture on sick-souledness, James argues that it is religious belief that provides the sick-souled with the trust and strenuousness necessary to participate in the world, to live happy and flourishing lives. It is on account of their religious conversions that such individuals can be said to be “twice-born,” as James describes them throughout Varieties, dying to the visible world while being born again to another. James makes this point regarding individuals who are morbid-minded on account of their constitutions or their environments, but it is clear that it applies also to those who have wilfully cultivated a sick-souled attitude out of a sense of ethical responsibility, out of a desire to acknowledge the existence of suffering in their day to day lives. For such people too, it is only through the trust and strenuousness that religious belief provides that a full and vital participation in this world, a life without paralysis or hopelessness, is possible at all.66

Very few commentators have dwelled on the attitude of solemnity, perhaps because after James deploys it, in the beginning of Varieties, to demarcate religion from other “total reactions” to the world, the notion is hardly discussed again. Whereas such readings fail to explain why James attaches so much importance to solemnity, my reading makes James’ motivations clear. Even if he never makes his considerations fully explicit, James attaches so much importance to solemnity, on my reading, because solemnity is simply the name he gives to a living and vital

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66 In a sense the help of religious belief might be even more important to the individual who cultivates morbid-mindedness than it is to the one who has it organically and sees it as essential and ineradicable, for in a sense seeing suffering as ineradicable is liable to provide some comfort, since the fact that there is nothing that can be done about it provides a kind of unburdening of our spirits.
acknowledgment of suffering, a living and vital acknowledgment that James sees in many of the Protestant traditions of America and finds great value in. If this is right, then far from merely responding to the problem of evil, far from merely showing that belief in an unseen order is not incompatible with the existence of suffering, James has actually turned the problem of evil on its head. Instead of viewing the existence of suffering merely as a philosophical problem for religious belief, James shows suffering to be a fact that only religion, or at least only his particular conception of religion, is able to acknowledge in a practically efficacious way. Such an acknowledgment, as we have seen in our reading of “Is Life Worth Living?,” is for James an ethical responsibility even for those who are not instinctively or circumstantially inclined to morbidity. What other commentators have taken to simply be an argument for the benefits that religious belief might provide for some specific subset of individuals – those who make religious demands, those who are to some degree sick-souled – turns out, then, on my reading, to be an argument that religious belief is of significance for almost everyone, insofar as there exists a general ethical responsibility, if we accept the argument implicit in Ruskin’s thought experiment, to acknowledge in our manner of life the fact of suffering in this world.

In proposing this reading of James I have considered only the essay “Is Life Worth Living?” in Will to Believe and the lectures on healthy-mindedness and sick-souledness in Varieties, but it is worthwhile noting, before we end the chapter, that James’ concern with suffering even extends to later work such as Pragmatism. In the first lecture of Pragmatism James quotes in full the story of a young American clerk, John Corcoran:

67 His introduction of the attitude of solemnity is one of the significant ways, I think, in which James’ notion of religious belief is a specifically Anglo-Saxon Protestant one. The kind of solemnity that James has in mind is conspicuously absent from many religious traditions, from the Southern Gospel tradition of Christianity, for example, or from the various bhakti traditions in Hinduism.
After trudging through the snow from one end of the city to the other in the vain hope of securing employment, and with his wife and six children without food and ordered to leave their home in an upper east-side tenement-house because of non-payment of rent, John Corcoran, a clerk, to-day ended his life by drinking carbolic acid. Corcoran lost his position three weeks ago through illness, and during the period of idleness his scanty savings disappeared. Yesterday he obtained work with a gang of city snow-shovelers, but he was too weak from illness, and was forced to quit after an hour’s trial with the shovel. Then the weary task of looking for employment was again resumed. Thoroughly discouraged, Corcoran returned to his home last night to find his wife and children without food and the notice of dispossession on the door. On the following morning he drank the poison.

[Pragmatism 498-9]

The inclusion of the anecdote is surprising, in a philosophical text, and the only explanation James gives for it is his addition, a few lines below, of the following striking claim:

What these people experience is Reality. It gives us an absolute phase of the universe. It is the personal experience of those best qualified in our circle of knowledge to have experience, to tell us what is.” [Pragmatism 499]

Such passages, I think, only make sense when we see James as concerned throughout his work with the problem of how to respond to suffering, with the need to somehow keep the fact of suffering always at the back of the mind, even when one is dealing with the kinds of theoretical problems that he is dealing with in much of Pragmatism. It is this concern that runs as an undercurrent through “Is Life Worth Living?” and which later becomes the central focus of the chapters on healthy-mindedness and morbidity in Varieties, and taking together and systematizing these discussions it becomes clear, as I have tried to argue, that one of the deeper motivations for James’ interest in religious belief is the profound engagement he takes it to have with the tragedy that runs through the world.
We have spent the large part of these first two chapters looking at James’ religious writing, which, as I have tried to show, is the locus of much of James’ most significant ethical thought. In the first chapter we looked at James’ argument for the permissibility of religious belief, showing that it is successful if we understand the religious hypothesis as a moral hypothesis in the sense that it is a hypothesis about what we should value. To believe in the religious hypothesis, on this reading, is to value what James calls the unseen order above all else, and to do this involves living a life that is shaped by certain attitudes, the most important of which, as we have seen, are the sense of an unseen order, trust, strenuousness, and solemnity. These attitudes, especially trust and strenuousness, clearly shape the texture of the lives of the faithful in deep and rich ways, and insofar as they do it is clear that religious belief contains much that is of ethical significance. As we have seen in this chapter, though, to end an account of the ethical significance of religious belief at this point is to fail to see the profounder ethical resources that James takes religious belief to provide us with. Religious belief allows us not just to live richer and fuller lives, but also helps us, as I have tried to suggest, live up to two deeply ethical ideals, the ideal of non-conformism and the ideal of acknowledging suffering. Far from simply allowing us to pursue our own ethical ideals in more substantial ways, then, James’ conception of religion is itself animated by very specific Emersonian ideals, ideals that he gives us compelling independent considerations for pursuing, ideals that show him, in his religious work, to be pursuing exactly the kind of “tentative and suggestive” ethical inquiry that he takes normative ethics to be so in need of.
In the preface to the 1930 Modern Library edition of *Human Nature and Conduct*, Dewey makes a distinction between the then-prevailing usage of the term “morals” and a wider, more generous usage of the term that was prevalent in the eighteenth century. In the earlier eighteenth century “morals” was a term of “broad sweep,” according to Dewey, one that “included all the subjects of distinctively humane import, all of the social disciplines as they bear upon the interests of humanity.” \[HNC\ 228\] By the early twentieth century, though, the term had come to signify something much narrower, a subject concerned primarily with “controlling human nature.” \[HNC\ 4\] Morality in the twentieth century had become about a system of rules and obligations by which humans could be controlled and made to conform, often in violation of their psychological and social nature, as a result of which it ceased addressing many central parts of human life:

The separation of morals from human nature leads to a separation of human nature in its moral aspects from the rest of nature, and from ordinary social habits and endeavours which are found in business, civic life, the run of companionships and recreations. These things are thought of at most as places where moral notions need to be applied, not as places where moral ideas are to be studied and moral energies generated. In short, the severance of morals from human nature ends by driving moral inwards from the public open out-of-doors air and light of day into the obscurities and privacies of an inner life. \[HNC\ 8-9\]

Reading the preface and introduction in which these remarks occur, it is striking the degree to which Dewey’s distinction between the earlier and later meaning of the term “morals” anticipates the now well-known distinction made by Bernard Williams (1985) between ethics and morality. For Williams, who likely never read Dewey, the Latin term “morality” had come to denote a
specific and narrow conception of ethics that was strongly influenced by the Christian conception of a divine lawgiver. Whereas the “system morality,” as Williams sometimes referred to it, takes the notions of duty and obligation as basic, the Greek term “ethics” signifies concern with the much broader Socratic question of how one should live, a question which makes few conceptual assumptions and which, for that reason, according to Williams, is the best starting point for normative philosophical inquiry into human conduct. To paraphrase Dewey’s prefatory remark in Williams’ terminology, *Human Nature and Conduct* should be understood as a study into ethics rather than merely morality, as an inquiry, in the broadest possible sense of the word, into the question of how we should live.68

It is not difficult to see how this guiding question might get forgotten by commentators attempting to come to terms with all the various parts and aspects of Dewey’s ethical thought. Unlike James, Dewey wrote widely and extensively in ethics. In his major works in the subject – *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), the revised *Ethics* (1932), and the *Theory of Valuation* (1939) – as well as in numerous essays, he dealt with a vast and sometimes bewildering range of issues. His ethical thought developed, moreover, in tandem with his thought in metaphysics, epistemology, philosophy of education, political theory, and aesthetics, so that texts such as *Democracy and Education* (1916) and *The Quest for Certainty* (1929), ostensibly not about ethics at all, can be just as important for understanding Dewey’s views in ethics as his more obviously ethical works. Dewey’s specific positions and overall outlook in ethics changed substantially over the course of his career too, even as older themes were frequently recapitulated in different terms,

68 This is hardly the only example of Dewey vividly and precisely anticipating Williams. Dewey anticipates much of what Williams has to say about the pluralism of ethical considerations, about the alienation that utilitarian procedures of deliberation would create in agents, and the role of contingency in morality. One area in which they do diverge regards the significance of positive ethical theory and the relationship between ethics and science.
making the interpretive task even more challenging. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that most commentators have tended to emphasize specific, technical aspects of Dewey’s ethical thought rather than the more general Socratic concern that motivates him. What is emphasized, most often, are those aspects of Dewey’s work that are most easily recognizable as ethical to an Anglophone philosophical audience: his insightful and compelling theory of ethical deliberation, along with the meta-ethical account of moral judgment and the critiques of utilitarianism and deontological theory that are based on it. According to the general outlines of these interpretations, deliberation for Dewey arises when concrete conflicts arise in our habitual systems—when different habits come into conflict with each other, for example, or when a situation presents some kind of novelty such that our existing habits cannot lead us forward in any obvious way. What makes a problematic situation an *ethically* problematic situation, for Dewey, is that it pertains not just to the situation at hand but to the kind of life we lead and the kind of people we become. We resolve ethically problematic situations, according to his account, by imaginatively rehearsing different possible responses to the situation, coming to a view of the consequences that would arise from each path of action, and provisionally endorsing a moral judgment that favors the path of action we hypothesize will lead to the most desirable outcome. Moral judgments, on this view, are action-

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69 This definition of the ethical is very much intended to broaden what can potentially count as ethical, to blur the boundary between the ethical and non-ethical, and is very much related to Dewey’s interest in ethics rather than morality. Williams makes a very similar point, arguing that the morality system “demands a sharp boundary for itself (in demanding “moral” and “nonmoral” senses for words, for instance). This is a function of its special presuppositions. Without them, we can admit that there is a range of considerations that falls under the notion of the ethical, and we can also see why the range is not clearly delimited.” [1985; p. 7]

70 Though, for reasons mentioned in the first paragraph of this chapter, I will generally refer to Dewey’s *ethical* thought rather than his *moral* thought, or to *ethical* deliberation rather than *moral* deliberation, I will continue to use the expression “moral judgment” rather than “ethical judgment.” This is because, as Bernard Williams (1985; p. 37-8) points out, the term “judgment” is strongly connected with legal systems and the Christian notion of Judgment Day, and is therefore much more closely linked to the morality system than to the Socratic approach to ethics.
guiding: their function is to bring the most desirable possible resumption to stalled habitual activity. In addition to being action-guiding, however, Dewey argues that moral judgments are also descriptive, in the sense that they are subject to empirical testing and verification in the same way that scientific hypotheses are. By acting in accordance with the moral judgments produced during ethical deliberation we come to obtain new evidence with respect to our moral judgments, a more vivid, experientially grounded understanding of their consequences for self and world, evidence, according to Dewey, that may lead us to evaluate them differently in the future and therefore to endorse different moral judgments.

The provisional, hypothetical character of moral judgments on this account is closely connected to another frequently discussed aspect of Dewey’s ethical thought, his concern to put ethics on a “scientific” footing. Once we understand that moral judgments are provisional and hypothetical in the same way that scientific hypotheses are, according to Dewey, we will see that ethical inquiry more generally must proceed along the same broad lines as scientific inquiry. Instead of being a haphazard, undirected activity, as it has been for most of history, ethical inquiry must become a deliberate social practice of ethical hypothesis-making and experimentation that aims at the production of more and more serviceable moral beliefs. 71 Such a practice would require, Dewey argues, the cooperation of both a community of professional scientists and also the public more generally. Anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, biologists, and other human and

71 I use the term “serviceable” here because of its useful ambiguity. Dewey rejected any notion of truth as correspondence to reality, and would not have accepted the claim that scientific theories aim at accurate descriptions of some objective reality or that scientific theories tend over time to closer and closer approximations of such a reality. He does not, for similar reasons, accept the idea that ethical inquiry will lead us to or bring us closer to moral judgments that are true in the sense of corresponding to any kind of objective, mind- and society-independent truth. Though he is an meliorist in the sense that he thinks it is possible for our beliefs to get better in some significant sense over time, progress in ethics, for Dewey, is not about tending closer to some kind of objective ethical reality but rather about finding concrete ethical solutions to concrete ethical problems. It is in this sense that I speak of some moral judgments being “more serviceable” than others.
social scientists would inquire into various configurations of individual and social life, coming to
different hypotheses about how different configurations relate differently to individual and social
flourishing. Society more generally would then transform the best of these hypotheses, by
democratic process, into policy decisions that change the actual configuration of individual and social
life. The changes brought on by these policy decisions, which would amount to a kind of
ethical experiment, would then be studied by scientists, who would form new hypotheses that
would lead, if the policies introduced were problematic, to further public discussion and further
policy change. This conception of scientific-ethical inquiry is clearly very important for Dewey,
but several questions arise regarding the account he gives. What, for example, is the exact
relationship between this organized social practice of ethical experimentation and the ethical
questions we face as individuals? If individuals are obligated to follow the dictates of ethical-
scientific inquiry in their personal lives, what should they appeal to when faced with situations for
which ethical-scientific inquiry has not yet provided satisfactory answers? Is there some kind of
individual ethical-scientific procedure that can be adopted in response to such situations, or must
we resort to more traditional, “unscientific” methods of deliberation? Dewey says little to clarify
such questions, and for this reason there are significant gaps in his account. Even more a cause for
concern than these gaps is the naïve optimism with which Dewey’s entire account seems
permeated.\(^72\) There has been much work in sociology and anthropology of science, in the decades
since Dewey was writing, suggesting that scientific practice, especially outside physics and
chemistry and other “pure” sciences, is shaped by all kinds of racial, cultural, and gender norms
and biases, so that the idea of politically and ethically neutral scientific research on questions of

\(^72\) Dewey himself acknowledges this apparent naivete at one point. “It sounds academic,” Dewey writes in
*Human Nature and Conduct*, “to say that substantial bettering of social relations waits upon the growth of
a scientific social psychology.” [222]
human life and flourishing has come to seem increasingly idealistic. Dewey’s account of the implementation of scientific-ethical research through rational and inclusive debate too, though a central part of his conception of democracy, seems at the very least unrealistic. How can we expect ethical questions, questions of how to live and flourish, to be deliberated upon rationally and fairly when so many incompatible answers exist, each of them supported by different groups and parties with different histories and interests, different degrees of political and social power? As contemporaries of Dewey like Reinhold Niebuhr pointed out, there is something that seems almost hopelessly utopian in Dewey’s idea of a society engaged in some kind of methodologically objective practice of ethical inquiry.

Though I am skeptical about Dewey’s idea for a scientific ethics, both this idea and his more compelling theory of ethical deliberation are important aspects of his ethical thought, and for this reason at least deserve to be studied in detail. Emphasizing either of these aspects too much, however, as commentators have tended to do, is likely to make us forget the broader concern that I have suggested animates Dewey’s ethical thought, the Socratic question of how to live. That Dewey is interested in this question is everywhere apparent in his ethical writings, which are constantly engaged with the concrete problems and possibilities of individual and social life, from labor unions to aesthetic experience to the institution of marriage. How exactly this interest is manifested theoretically, though, is a little more difficult to say, and it will be the project of these two chapters to show how Dewey engages with the Socratic question, how it shapes and unifies

73 Consider, for example, Michel Foucault’s (1970) work on the relationship between the sciences and social power, or Londa Schiebinger’s (1993) work on the ways in which gender bias operates in biological research.

74 Jennifer Welchman (1995) provides the most systematic defense of Dewey’s scientific ethics, but her interpretation preserves the naivete that I have attributed to Dewey on this issue. For a somewhat more sophisticated account of a scientific-democratic ethical project that is influenced by Dewey but different in significant ways, see Philip Kitcher (2011).
his ethical thought. On my view, the most important of Dewey’s ethical writings in this regard is *Human Nature and Conduct*, one of the most overlooked and misunderstood works in his oeuvre. The text is divided into three major parts, the first discussing habit, the second discussing impulse, and the third intelligence. Most commentators have focused mainly on the third section, on the account it gives of ethical deliberation and the critiques it gives of utilitarianism and deontological theory, seeing the discussions of habit and impulse in the first two sections merely as preliminaries to the discussion of intelligence in the third. On these interpretations, habit and impulse are important primarily because of how Dewey uses them to frame the contexts in which ethical deliberation operates, since, on Dewey’s account, it is only when there are conflicts between different habits, or when existing habits fail to apply properly to novel situations, that deliberation is called for. Paying a little closer attention to *Human Nature and Conduct* makes clear, however, that the concepts of habit and impulse are far more than merely framing devices for Dewey. They are in fact the central theoretical concepts of the text, the basic concepts in terms of which not just intelligence and deliberation but other notions of great importance like desire and value get articulated and explained. Even more important for our purposes, it is in his theory of habit in particular that we find Dewey’s most sustained theoretical attempt to approach the question of how to live. Habit for Dewey, as we shall see, includes not just what we ordinarily think of as habits, but also much of the activity that makes up our intimate everyday lives: our character traits, our various patterns of emotion, and our relationships to specific people and places. The vast majority of human conduct is habitual, for Dewey, and insofar as ethics is the branch of philosophy that inquires into human conduct, no ethics can be adequate or even significant except insofar as it gives fundamental importance to the concept of habit.
1. Habit and the Virtue Ethics Tradition

Though I think Dewey’s theory of habit is interesting and worth paying attention to in and of itself, paying close attention to the theory has very significant consequences for how we understand Dewey’s ethical thought more generally. By far the most important concerns the significant conceptual affinities that appear, on examination, between Dewey’s notion of habit and Aristotle’s notions of virtue and vice, affinities which are alluded to very early on in *Human Nature and Conduct*. “All virtues and vices,” Dewey writes, “are habits which incorporate objective forces.” [HNC 16] As Dewey makes clear here, all virtues are instances of habit. The connection between habit and virtue, though, is much more than the virtues simply being instances of habit, for on Dewey’s view all habits share certain of the important features that Aristotle attributes to virtues. Like the Aristotelian virtues, habits for Dewey involve various kinds of learned competence or skill, and like the virtues, habits bring with them various specific ways of thinking, perceiving, and feeling. Like the virtues, the exercise of habits is meant to somehow be intrinsically satisfying or pleasurable, thus constituting an important basis of desire and motivation, and like the virtues, the exercise of habits is meant to be negotiated by a kind of practical wisdom, enshrined for Dewey in the idea of intelligence. These parallels suggest, in opposition to most commentators, that something more is going on in Dewey’s discussion of habit than him merely laying the social-psychological groundwork for his theory of deliberation. For while the question of deliberation is clearly one of importance, deliberation for Dewey (as it is for Aristotle) is simply one aspect of our ethical lives. Unlike utilitarians and deontological theorists, for whom deliberation is the primary concern of ethics, Dewey (like Aristotle) is above all interested, as I have suggested, in

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75 Interestingly, this makes it the case that for Dewey the features Aristotle attributes to virtues will also be attributable to vices, a consequence that Aristotle would most likely reject.
the questions of human flourishing and what kind of person one should become. Indeed, as I have already mentioned, what makes a dilemma specifically an ethical dilemma for Dewey is the fact that how we resolve it will have some effect on the kind of person we become, and by extension the kind of life we lead. These considerations all suggest a reading of *Human Nature and Conduct* that sees the text as significantly influenced by Aristotelian virtue ethics. In fact, I will argue, the conceptual affinities between Aristotle’s notions of virtue/vice and Dewey’s notion of habit are so strong that the notion of habit can be understood as a kind of sophisticated replacement for the notions of virtue/vice in traditional virtue ethics. Far from being merely influenced by Aristotle, I will suggest that we should actually see Dewey’s theory of habit as a substantial reworking of the virtue ethics tradition along distinctively Emersonian lines.⁷⁶

The suggestion might come as a surprise to readers of Dewey, partly because Dewey’s mentions of Aristotle in *Human Nature and Conduct* tend to be mainly critical, and partly because Dewey himself makes no explicit connection between Aristotelian virtue ethics and his own account of habit. We will return to these considerations more fully at the end of the next chapter, but for now I will simply suggest that Dewey avoids drawing explicit connections between his own ethical theory and Aristotle’s not because there is no substantial convergence, but because there is at least one important sense in which the former diverges significantly from the latter. Unlike Aristotle but like Emerson, as we shall see in the next section, Dewey is constantly emphasizing the fact that nothing stays the same in this world. Complete certainty and security are impossible – our physical and social environments are always changing – and therefore we too must change both in order to readapt ourselves to these environments and in order to readapt them

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⁷⁶ We won’t be able to compare Emerson and Dewey directly in this chapter, but as I suggested in the introduction, the themes of contingency, the fixity of habit, and the value of growth are the Emersonian themes that most influence Dewey in his reworking of Aristotelian virtue ethics.
to us. On Dewey’s account there can be no such thing as a virtue strictly speaking, insofar as we understand by a virtue a habit of action, thought, and feeling that will always, regardless of context, lead us in the direction of ethically good action. What makes a habit ethically good or bad for Dewey – worth adopting or worth abandoning – depends essentially on such factors as the individual, society, and historical time to which it belongs. Now though Aristotle’s attempt to ground the virtues in a universal, objective account of human nature means that he cannot accommodate this observation, the general point about the relativity of virtue to context has been appreciated by contemporary virtue-ethicists like Alasdair MacIntyre (1985) and Martha Nussbaum (1993). MacIntyre, for example, gives a persuasive historical account that shows just how much of what gets counted as virtuous is relative to social and historical context. He points out, for example, that medieval Christian virtue-theorists like Aquinas focus on virtues that Aristotle never considers – love, humility, and charity, for example – some of which, the virtue of humility in particular, seem explicitly at odds with the Aristotelian virtues. Many Aristotelian virtues too, greatness of soul, for example, seem very out of place in modern Western contexts, while virtues that have developed in the latter contexts, constancy in Victorian England or industriousness in capitalist America, for example, were never given much consideration in earlier times. In response to this apparent social and historical relativity of the virtues, writers like MacIntyre and Nussbaum have attempted to provide some unifying account of what makes character traits virtuous, arguing that it can still be the case that there are certain objective properties which make character traits qualify as virtuous, even if the traits that instantiate these properties are sensitive to context and therefore show variation across time and place.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Nussbaum’s strategy consists of focusing on areas of exercise of the virtues rather than the virtues themselves, so that even if there is disagreement about what in actual fact is the virtuous act, there can still be agreement that within certain domains there are better and worse ways of acting, and that the virtue (whatever it turns out to be) picks out the better way of acting. MacIntyre’s strategy consists of identifying
Dewey’s response to the seeming context relativity of the virtues (and habits more generally) is more radical. In acknowledging that what counts as a virtue is relative to context Dewey employs, first of all, a much broader notion of context. Whereas MacIntyre and Nussbaum take it for granted that the same virtues would apply to everyone who shares the same social and historical context (taking for granted, of course, the role of practical wisdom in determining how these virtues are to be applied in specific situations), what Dewey sometimes calls a “situation” and sometimes an “environment” refers not only to the social and historical context of an action or habit but also to the individual concerned – to their physical constitution, psychology, and habitual make-up. For Dewey the same habit could in principle be good for one individual and bad for another individual in the same social-historical context, if the individuals were different enough in significant ways. Even more important than this, however, is the fact that Dewey feels none of the anxiety that MacIntyre and Nussbaum feel about rescuing the objectivity of virtue from the context relativity of virtue. Because of his thoroughgoing commitment to the relationship between the goodness or badness of habit and its larger context of operation, Dewey does not attempt to give any objectively true (even if context-sensitive) account of which habits are worthy of cultivation. It is for this reason that he eschews the terms “virtue” and “vice” as theoretical terms in *Human Nature and Conduct*, replacing them with the more neutral term “habit,” since the latter allows him to refer to the kind of activity he takes to be central to human life without presupposing

the virtues as those character traits that (a) allow us to obtain what he calls the goods internal to a social practice; (b) are necessary for success in identifying and pursuing a flourishing life; and (c) are important for sustaining the communities and traditions that provide the larger framework for social practices and our attempts to identify and pursue a flourishing life.

To emphasize the degree to which virtues/habits are more deeply relative to context for Dewey than they are for Nussbaum and MacIntyre, we might say that whereas for Nussbaum and MacIntyre virtues are merely context sensitive, for Dewey habits are context dependent.
that the activity (or the parts of it usually discussed by virtue ethicists) might be good or bad independently of the contexts in which it occurs.  

This is not to say, however, that Dewey would deny that certain of the habits traditionally distinguished as virtues are often good to have; what he would deny is that there are any habits that are everywhere and always worthy of being cultivated. At various points in different texts Dewey in fact goes on to discuss habits that he takes to be generally worthy of cultivation. It is noteworthy that almost none of these habits are the first-order habits like honesty, justice, or magnanimity which are given prominence by the virtue ethics tradition. The habits Dewey discusses as generally worthy of cultivation – open-mindedness, sensitivity, and sympathy, among others – are primarily second-order habits that shape how we negotiate and relate to our more primary habits. Almost all of these second-order habits are connected with our ability to adapt or transform our first-order habits, and they are in that sense a reflection of Dewey’s conviction that the environment is always in flux and therefore that the best kind of character or the best kind of life, regardless of its more substantial content, is one that is able to adapt and respond to change. We will have occasion to examine these second-order habits a little more closely in the next chapter, but for now it is important simply to register that for Dewey there are no habits that are always worth cultivating, and that even the habits he takes to be generally worth cultivating he does so only because they enable our first-order habits to adapt and transform in response to changing contexts.

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79 As we shall see, Dewey does continue using the terms “virtue” and “vice” in other works, but his usage of these terms follows not the Aristotelian usage but the Humean usage, and should not be confused with his rejection of Aristotelian virtues and vices in Human Nature and Conduct.

80 These various second-order habits might be classed under the more general label of “intelligence,” and they are a parallel in Dewey’s account to Aristotle’s broad notion of practical wisdom. It is only this virtue of Aristotle’s that receives substantial attention in Dewey, and it is no accident that it is the only second-order virtue in Aristotle.
Dewey’s emphasis on change and adaptation marks one significant way in which he departs from Aristotle and the virtue ethics tradition, but it also brings out one substantial affinity with Aristotle that in a way brings him closer to Aristotle than many contemporary virtue ethicists. One of the most well-known (and problematic) aspects of Aristotle’s ethical theory is his claim that the exercise of virtue in accordance with reason is what constitutes a life of eudaimonia – a life of well-being or flourishing or happiness, depending on how the term “eudaimonia” is translated. Now the idea of eudaimonia developed in Aristotle’s famous function argument is based on a kind of teleological biological account about human nature, since it is the exercise of virtue in accordance with reason, Aristotle claims, that is the distinctive characteristic of the human organism. Dewey too makes several claims about human flourishing, and of particular relevance is an important Emersonian claim he makes about growth. According to Dewey, who as indicated in the introduction was strongly influenced by Emerson on this subject, growth is central to human flourishing, and the capacity for growth is one of the primary standards by which habitual systems are to be evaluated. In this regard growth plays a very similar role with respect to habits in Dewey’s account as that played by eudaimonia with respect to the virtues in Aristotle’s account. Commentators have of course raised many questions about Aristotle’s appeal to human nature in his function argument, and Dewey’s claims appeal to growth in his account are prima facie vulnerable to similar worries.\textsuperscript{81} We shall see in the chapter that follows however that the appeal

\textsuperscript{81} MacIntyre (1984; p. 51) argues that Aristotle’s account of human nature is unacceptable to modern readers while Williams (1985; pp. 40-47) argues more generally against the possibility of appealing to non-moralized scientific fact in grounding ethical theory. Scholars of Aristotle like J. Ackrill (1974) and Richard Kraut (1979) have argued that the conceptual constraints on the notion of eudaimonia – in particular the idea of it being a dominant and self-sustaining end – make it hard to imagine how it could actually be a realizable end. There is, moreover, the further claim Aristotle makes later in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} about contemplation being the most perfect eudaimonia, a claim that will strike many modern readers as overly intellectualist.
Dewey makes to growth is more modest and more plausible than that made to eudaimonia by Aristotle. The important point for present purposes is that Dewey’s account has a striking structural similarity to Aristotle’s in virtue of the role played by growth, and because of this similarity and the conceptual similarities already mentioned between Dewey’s notion of habit and Aristotle’s notion of virtue, we can very plausibly see Dewey’s theory as an Emersonian reworking of Aristotle’s ethical theory, can see it, indeed, as one of the most interesting and original modern contributions to the virtue ethical tradition.

I use the term “reworking,” which suggests another set of questions about the interpretive stance I am taking in these two chapters. If Dewey departs so radically from the Aristotelian tradition that he shows no interest in the traditional virtues and denies the thesis that what makes certain habits or character traits virtuous are objective, context-independent matters of fact, is it not misleading, it might be asked, to place Dewey in the virtue-ethical tradition at all, even if he attributes to habit several substantive features that Aristotle attributes to virtue and even if his account is structured in a similar way? Why see Dewey’s account as a reworking of the virtue theoretic tradition, in other words, rather than merely influenced by it? We will have to reserve full discussion of this question for the end of the next chapter, but for the time being there are two brief points that will help make clear the shape of my response to this question. The first is that we will see, over the course of these two chapters, that in addition to the two parallels outlined above there are several other striking parallels between Aristotle’s account and Dewey’s. The second and more important point is about the interpretive significance of claiming that Dewey should be

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82 Of these similarities the most striking are: the role of perception for Dewey in the use of habit (paralleling Aristotle’s account of the importance of perception in virtuous activity), Dewey’s ideal of strong character (paralleling Aristotle’s claim about the unity of virtues), and the role of intelligence in Dewey’s account (paralleling the role of practical wisdom in Aristotle’s account).
understood as part of the Aristotelian tradition of virtue ethics. It should be stated at the outset that the two chapters that follow have their primary interest in Dewey, not in Aristotle or the virtue ethics tradition. What Aristotle’s actual position is in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and what exactly counts as being part of the virtue ethics tradition are questions that are the subject of much scholarly debate, and if our goal is to understand Dewey’s ethical outlook it would surely be a distraction from our main goal to spend too much time on such questions.\(^8^3\) In a way the exact parallels between Aristotle and Dewey and the question of whether Dewey is really a virtue ethicist are not issues of great importance; the point of making the connection with Aristotle and suggesting we see Dewey as part of the virtue ethics tradition, rather, is that it helps us understand Dewey’s ethical project in a more complete and inclusive way. By emphasizing Dewey’s interest in habit and growth, first, we will be able to see how fundamentally interested Dewey is in the question of what kind of person to be and what kind of life to live, to understand therefore Dewey’s suggestion in the foreword to *Human Nature and Conduct* that he is interested in ethics rather than mere morality. Seeing Dewey as a virtue ethicist will help us, moreover, in bringing together the various different, seemingly disparate parts of Dewey’s ethical writing, to appreciate more fully the connection not only between Dewey’s theory of habit and his accounts of ethical deliberation and moral judgment, but also the connection between Dewey’s thought in ethics and his thought

\(^{83}\) There are many different proposals for what makes a theory a virtue ethics. Some writers have suggested that a virtue ethical account is any approach to ethics that takes the notions of virtue and vice as fundamental explanatory concepts. On this suggestion Dewey’s location in the tradition is ambiguous, since although for Dewey the notion of habit is basic, the notion of habit is substantially similar to the notions of virtue/vice. Others have argued that the Aristotelian virtues must be defended by any theory that counts as virtue theoretic; on this suggestion Dewey is clearly not a virtue theorist, since he does not discuss the traditional virtues. Still others have said that there must be a connection between the virtues and some account of human flourishing; on this proposal Dewey can easily be claimed as a virtue theorist, if we accept my claim that for Dewey growth is the primary standard of flourishing by which we are to judge a system of habits.
in education.\textsuperscript{84} Finally, seeing the Aristotelian influence on Dewey’s ethical thought will help us see the ways in which key Emersonian themes have shaped Dewey’s ethical thought, even if we will not be able to discuss the connection between Emerson and Dewey any more directly here than we have already done in the introduction.

Of course, all this will have to wait for our elaboration of Dewey’s theory of habit, which will take up the large part of the present chapter. The next section presents a discussion of Dewey’s notion of certainty, and the various roles this concept plays in Dewey’s philosophical project. Seeing Dewey’s theory of habit in the context of Dewey’s rejection of the philosophical ideal of certainty, I think, will help us see clearly the central way in which Dewey departs from not only virtue ethical but also utilitarian and deontological approaches to ethics. The third and fourth sections of this chapter will attempt to provide an interpretation of the positive theory of habit presented in \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}. The second section will begin with a discussion of the intended scope of Dewey’s theory, and will try to demarcate what counts as habitual activity from non-habitual forms activity. It then moves on to focus on the first of the two substantial features that belong to Dewey’s theory, the fact that the proper functioning of a habit depends essentially on objective elements of the environment. It is because of this feature of habit, as I have intimated, that Dewey thinks that ethical security in the virtue-theoretic sense is impossible. The third section will focus on the second substantive feature that Dewey attributes to habit, its propulsive force. The claim that habit has propulsive force is vaguely articulated and admits of several different

\textsuperscript{84} Briefly, much of the way Dewey connects ethics with education becomes apparent only if we see Dewey as a virtue-ethicist and connect Dewey’s interest in education with the importance Aristotle attributes to upbringing. For Aristotle, as is well known, the virtuous person was a person already fully educated in the virtues. If one did not have the right upbringing, the virtuous life was out of reach. For Dewey too, education is extremely important, but in line with Dewey’s substitution of growth for eudaimonia, Dewey’s conception of education differs from Aristotle’s in that education does not have a fixed end; it is rather an activity based in the present moment.
interpretations, despite being so important to Dewey’s approach, and drawing on Dewey’s account of impulse my goal in this section will be to present a coherent interpretation of this claim. Much of the interest in these two middle sections stems, I think, from the ways they show habit to be a central and intimate part of our lives. In looking closely at Dewey’s theory of habit we come to see how no ethical theory can fail to address the notion of habit without failing to pass over a large and vital part of life. In the fifth section I will draw out some of the consequences of Dewey’s theory of habit, discussing the interpenetration of habit, which is the basis for Dewey’s account of character, and also giving an account of why Dewey thinks that no fixed distinction between ethical and non-ethical life is possible. In the final, concluding section, I will try to suggest why, taken together, the propulsiveness and contingency of habit highlight what is for Dewey perhaps the central problem for ethical life: the importance and difficulty of adapting to loss and change.

2. The Ideal of Certainty

One of Dewey’s primary goals in *The Quest for Certainty* is to give a reading of the Western philosophical tradition that emphasizes its commitment to securing, theoretically, various kinds of certainty. The major epistemological, metaphysical, and moral concerns of this tradition, he argues, have been motivated by a broad concern for obtaining a sort of intellectual guarantee against the latent and living perils of the world. The notion of certainty functions in this reading both as a tool that allows Dewey to diagnose how historical thinkers and movements have gone astray in addressing questions of philosophical significance, and also as a point of departure in his own distinctive approach to these questions. It is in the context of Dewey’s views on certainty and uncertainty, as I have said, that Dewey’s theory of habit and character in *Human Nature and Conduct* must be viewed, and it will be worthwhile therefore to spend some time looking at the
several different notions of uncertainty at work in *Quest for Certainty* to see how they are related to one another and the subject at hand. I will distinguish between three notions that are central to Dewey’s reading of the tradition, which I will call epistemological, metaphysical, and moral certainty, showing how the intellectual pursuit of these forms of certainty are for Dewey related to the pursuit of a more basic kind of certainty in action which might be called practical certainty. The importance of practical certainty will be explained in turn by the yearning for an even more basic kind of certainty, which is sometimes referred to in the text as security. It is the notion of security, I think, that is most fundamental in Dewey’s taxonomy of uncertainties, in the sense that it is what ultimately, if only implicitly, motivates most traditional philosophical thought. Separating this variety of certainty from the others distinguished in the essay helps us, I think, identify more precisely the sense in which Dewey takes contingency to be an inescapable feature of practical life, and to see how the theory of habit and character in *Human Nature and Conduct* is premised on it.

In the context of contemporary Anglophone philosophy the term “certainty” carries with it, of course, a primarily epistemological connotation. Though Dewey’s usage of the term is far broader, he does recognize the pursuit of epistemological certainty to be a major iteration of the ideal of certainty within the tradition. In this particular sense certainty is a property that belongs potentially to our beliefs about the world, a property that marks out the difference between mere belief and knowledge. The philosophical pursuit of this kind of certainty revolves around showing how we can have complete certainty about our beliefs, or about some significant subclass of our beliefs, or, in a less demanding variation, showing how we can have firm justification for our beliefs, or some significant subclass of our beliefs. According to Dewey the ideal of epistemological certainty has traditionally been pursued by means of the spectator theory of
knowledge, a family of views according to which the objects of knowledge are independent of human activity and not affected by it in any way. The implicit motivation for such views, Dewey thinks, is the strong association between uncertainty and human activity. Human activity has always been plagued by doubt and hesitation, by the impossibility of any certainty of success, and so philosophers seeking epistemological certainty have tried to locate it in a sphere of existence that is removed from mere human activity. It is not difficult to see therefore how spectator theories of knowledge often come together with the postulation of some fixed and unchanging realm of objects or structures. For given that the uncertainty that fills human activity arises from the contingency of the ordinary realm of experience – the fact that nothing in it can be counted on to stay the same – it follows that if there are to be objects about which our beliefs can be certain, they must be impermeable to any change or modification. The pursuit of epistemological certainty therefore often goes hand in hand with the pursuit of what might be called metaphysical certainty, the attempt to establish that there exists, hidden above or below or behind the realm of changing, contingent experience, some fixed, unchanging realm of existences, whether forms, essences, monads, minds, or noumena.

These two ideals are similar in the sense that they are both ways of theoretically establishing that the world actually offers us some kind of certainty. Neither of them though, at least in the argumentative or dialectic means by which they are pursued, have any straightforward relationship to concrete life, and often indeed take care to deny any such relationship. Dewey identifies a third ideal of certainty in the philosophical tradition, however, which is theoretical like the other two ideals in the sense that it must be established by argument or dialectic, but which does purport to have some kind of relationship to everyday experience. This kind of certainty, which might be called ethical certainty, is certainty about what the ethically appropriate thing to
do is in a particular situation. Satisfying the ideal of ethical certainty, Dewey writes, takes the form of providing some kind of method or system by which individuals can act with conviction in ethically problematic situations. Such a method or system may come in the form of a utilitarian moral calculus, a general moral principle or set of general moral principles, or some virtuous character type whose natural inclinations are said to be the good ones. What is common to all three kinds of ethical theory, though, is that they try to provide a general and context-independent way of precluding doubt or hesitation about how individuals should proceed in particular ethically problematic situations.

Much of The Quest for Certainty is devoted to providing rich and suggestive readings of particular figures and movements from the philosophical tradition – Plato, Aristotle, the rationalists, empiricists, Kant, Fichte, and Hegel – which show how central the pursuit of epistemological, metaphysical, and moral certainty have been to it. I won’t discuss or evaluate these readings much here, though, because my primary interest is in seeing how the ideals they identify are related to Dewey’s more fundamental claims about uncertainty. The reason, I think, that these three superficially very different ideals can be understood as ideals of certainty, according to Dewey, as opposed to being understood simply as disparate methodological commitments satisfying disparate psychological needs, is that their importance to the tradition can

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85 Following Bernard Williams’ distinction, we might distinguish between ideals of moral certainty and ethical certainty. Moral certainty would be an ideal for systems who are interested in acquiring certainty over the sphere of activity with which the system morality is concerned with, whereas ethical certainty would be the ideal for systems such as Aristotle’s which are interested in the broader question of what kind of life we should live. In what follows I will refer primarily to ethical certainty, but the considerations should apply equally to both kinds of approach.

86 It is important to note how ethical certainty is different from epistemological certainty. It is true that the former certainty can be expressed in the form “I know that the good thing to do in this case is…,” but this does not mean that ethical certainty is a subclass of epistemological certainty. Epistemological certainty, in the way that Dewey typically characterizes it, concerns beliefs that purport to represent the world, rather than beliefs about what is the right or wrong thing to do.
be understood in terms of a more basic concept that Dewey sometimes refers to as practical certainty. The desire for a philosophical outlook that satisfies the three ideals of epistemological, metaphysical, and moral certainty, according to Dewey, comes from a deeper, more primitive need for certainty that arises in our practical transactions with the world:

The distinctive characteristic of practical activity, one which is so inherent that it cannot be eliminated, is the uncertainty which attends it. Of it we are compelled to say: Act, but act at your own peril. Judgment and belief regarding actions to be performed can never attain more than a precarious probability. Through thought, however, it has seemed that men might escape from the perils of uncertainty. [QFC 5-6]

Practical activity, according to Dewey, is fraught with uncertainty: no matter how thoroughly we weigh our options, find out about situations, and prepare for our actions, there can never be any complete guarantee that our endeavors will meet with success.87 “Alien and indifferent natural forces, unforeseeable conditions enter in and have a decisive voice.” [QFC 6] This ineradicable uncertainty about the success or failure of our actions is a constant source of anxiety and frustration in practical life. It prevents us from acting with conviction, and fills our activity with doubt and hesitation. The philosophical attempt to establish epistemological, metaphysical, and moral certainty represents, Dewey thinks, a misguided attempt to mitigate this anxiety and hesitation theoretically and universally, when it can only be addressed in concrete, context-dependent ways. Each ideal focuses on a different way in which practical certainty can be acquired in particular situations, and hypostatizes it into a general feature of reality.

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87 Dewey understands “success” is in a very broad sense: an action can fail to be successful not only when its execution doesn’t go according to plan, but also when the plan itself turns out to be mistaken or misguided, either because it is based on false beliefs or because the desires or values which guide it are not ones that the agent would in retrospect continue to endorse.
Dewey’s account of how the ideal of epistemological certainty is related to the desire for practical certainty begins by noting the obvious fact that in many ordinary situations, successful action requires knowledge of the particular situation in which the action is to take place. I can’t successfully get to Washington D.C. without knowing how to get to Penn Station, and I can’t successfully write a novel without knowing how to manipulate mood and distance. The more certainty we have about all the conditions and potentialities of a situation, obviously, the greater our practical certainty, and the stronger the sense of composure or tranquility in the individual preceding the action, during it, and, insofar as its success takes time to verify, afterwards. This general and obvious relationship between knowledge about a situation and a sense of composure about the specific action to be undertaken explains why philosophers have sought to satisfy the ideal of epistemological certainty. By attempting to show in a theoretical way how our beliefs about the world are generally certain, or at least firmly justified, philosophers have tried to show that the sense of tranquility that comes with acting in a known situation can be had in a general, context-independent way. As Dewey points out, however, the knowledge required for successful action is not of an abstract, theoretical kind, but must be about the concrete situation in which action is to take place. Insofar as philosophical theories do not actually take into consideration the particularity of the situations in which actions take place, the solace or comfort provided by satisfying the ideal of epistemological certainty is misleading at best. A similar point is made about the ideal of metaphysical certainty. By establishing the existence of some realm of objects or structures that are fixed and unchanging, with respect to which contingency can play no role, philosophers have sought to recreate the sense of calm and ease that characterizes activity in situations which are well-known and familiar, in which there is no room for the unexpected. The ideal of metaphysical certainty then is equally misleading, insofar as it suggests that we can have
some degree of practical certainty in general by claiming that a feature of very specific practical situations obtains more generally.

To see how the search for ethical certainty too stems from a deeper concern for practical certainty, we need to note a slightly different direction from which we might come to be uncertain about the success of our actions. Acting successfully in a given situation requires not only knowing about the situation in question and its various conditions and potentialities, but also requires knowing what one wants out of it. In many situations this is relatively straightforward, often to the degree that what one wants can be taken for granted in the situation, as for example when one is preparing for an exam, or departing for a particular destination. It is characteristic of ethically problematic situations, however, that they involve some conflict in this domain:

Only dogmatism can suppose that serious moral conflict is between something clearly bad and something known to be good, and that uncertainty lies wholly in the will of the one choosing. Most conflicts of importance are conflicts between things which are or have been satisfying, not between good and evil. [QFC 212]

The problem of acting in such contexts is the problem of making decisions about which of several competing desires to privilege in the given situation, about which desires should become values. In such situations one often moves back and forth between different courses of action, agonizing...

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88 It is worth noting that Dewey doesn’t take this distinction to be a hard and fast one. It may be useful to distinguish in particular contexts between reflection on means (which is hypostatized into epistemological certainty) and reflection of ends (which is hypostatized into ethical certainty) but by and large, Dewey, thinks, reflection on one is inseparable from reflection on another. This is the burden of his long discussion in Human Nature and Conduct about the relationship between means and ends.

89 The process of coming to endorse a value judgment – what Dewey calls evaluating – is importantly different from what Dewey calls valuing. To value something, on Dewey’s view, is to appreciate it and be drawn towards it in a primitive, instinctual way – it is an uncritical, non-cognitive attitude embodied in impulses. It is only when we experience a situation in which we have no obvious access to what we value – when the impulses or habits that direct us towards them are for whatever reason thwarted – that we come to form a value judgment in respect of them that tells us which of our valuings we should pursue, which of them deserve to be recognized, that is, as our actual values.
over the fact that one or another must be taken, and even when a decision is made one may be filled with doubt or hesitation, with fear of future guilt or regret or remorse. Practical success in ethically problematic situations requires coming to a good decision about what to aim for, according to Dewey, and the ideal of ethical certainty can be understood as a theoretical attempt to alleviate the anxiety that comes from having to make such decisions. By providing a method that guarantees a priori that one will come to the correct decision about what to aim for in responding to an ethically problematic situation, philosophers have sought to provide a theoretical guarantee that no such agony ever need be experienced in practice.

We will have an opportunity shortly, when looking at Dewey’s theory of habit, to see how virtue ethics’ subscription to the ideal of ethical certainty leads that view into problematic terrain, but it is worthwhile pointing out, very briefly at least, how Dewey thinks consequentialist and deontological theories too are led astray by the ideal of certainty. There are, notoriously, many problems concerning how to apply these systems to concrete situations, but more fundamentally, Dewey argues in *Human Nature and Conduct*, the idea that we can make sense of something’s being an end without considering the means that are available to realize it is not intelligible. I won’t be able to outline Dewey’s rich and insightful discussion of this claim here, but the important point for our purposes is that Dewey takes both consequentialist and deontological moral theories of deliberation to be committed to the intelligibility of such a separation. Though Dewey is like virtue ethicists in locating the center of gravity of ethical life in habitual activity and character rather than in ethical conflict, his reservation about consequentialist or deontological approaches is not so much that they focus exclusively on ethical decision-making, but rather that the accounts of deliberation they provide to understand these moments of ethical life are misguided. The presumption these theories make that ends can be given by some a priori calculus or set of
principles takes for granted the idea that ends can be considered independently of a particular context of action and the means which are available within it. The attempt to establish moral certainty in such a way, he thinks, must be rejected as an attempt to secure generally the sense of confidence and clarity that comes from knowing exactly what is best to do in an ethically problematic situation, when in fact such confidence can only be obtained by reflection on concrete particulars.

We have looked so far at Dewey’s interpretation of the philosophical tradition as being concerned with satisfying three different ideals of certainty, epistemological, metaphysical, and ethical. The tradition’s concern with these three ideals is responsible for how it has gone astray in approaching important philosophical questions, and is due ultimately to a misguided concern to establish, in a general and context-independent way, a sense of practical certainty. Now though practical certainty, as we have characterized it, has to do with the success or failure of our actions, it is worth noting that Dewey also often talks about uncertainty as if it had to do with situations rather than merely with actions:

Uncertainty is primarily a practical matter. It signifies uncertainty of the issue of present experiences; these are fraught with future peril as well as inherently objectionable. Action to get rid of the objectionable has no warrant of success and is itself perilous. The intrinsic troublesome and uncertain quality of situations lies in the fact that they hold outcomes in suspense; they move to evil or to good fortune. [QFC 178]

While Dewey does acknowledge in this passage that there is an uncertainty related to the success of action, he also describes an “intrinsic troublesome and uncertain quality” that is predicated

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90 See especially Chapters Seventeen and Nineteen of Human Nature and Conduct for discussion of how consequentialism is committed to and misled by the ideal of moral certainty, and Chapter Twenty for a similar discussion about Kantian ethical theories.
primarily of situations. Let us call a situation *problematic* with respect to an individual when that situation doesn’t allow for the satisfaction of certain of that individual’s desires or values. Following Dewey’s discussion in *The Quest for Certainty*, let us call a situation *secure* insofar as it is not problematic, and insofar as it also gives no indication of becoming problematic in the future. It should not be difficult, given this way of understanding security, to see that the desire for practical certainty is related to a desire for security. For practical certainty is by definition certainty that action will succeed, and action, according to Dewey, is activity that attempts to make a situation more secure:

Interaction is a universal trait of natural existence. “Action” is the name given to one mode of this interaction, namely, that named from the standpoint of an organism. When an interaction has for its consequence the settling of future conditions under which a life-process goes on, it is an “act.” [*QFC* 195]

The concern for practical certainty, then, can be explained in terms of concern for the increased security for our values that our actions are supposed to bring about. Philosophers have been concerned to demonstrate theoretically that we can have practical certainty (in certain domains at least), according to Dewey, because they have been concerned to demonstrate theoretically that our values (in certain domains at least) can have total security. The motivation for establishing epistemological, metaphysical, or ethical certainty by means of philosophical argumentation and theorization derives, then, from a yearning, however unarticulated or implicit, for a situation in which all our values are satisfied fully and permanently.  

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91 This definition of security requires that a situation be satisfactory in two dimensions in order for it to be secure: it must be satisfying in its *consummatory* aspect – it must be unproblematic as described above – but it must be satisfying also in its *anticipatory* aspect – it must show no sign of becoming problematic in the future. There is a rich discussion about the interaction about these two dimensions of experience and the stances corresponding to them in pp. 188-202 of *QFC*.

92 We have been speaking of a “need” or “desire” for security, but it should be clear that the drive for security itself is only intelligible on the assumption that individuals have other more basic desires or values
This yearning for a situation of complete and permanent security is, for Dewey, ultimately a religious yearning. It is instructive to consider just how many times Dewey refers to “Heaven” or “the Buddha” in *Human Nature and Conduct*. Each of these terms refer to different ways in which the image of a complete and permanent security has been constructed by major religious traditions: the Abrahamic Heaven represents the idea of a place in which anyone, or almost anyone, regardless of their background and how they are constituted as individuals, can find intense, endless fulfilment, while the Buddha represents the idea of a person who, regardless of the poverty or harshness or onerousness of the environment to which they belong, is always in a similarly permanent state of bliss. Philosophers have acknowledged that these religious ideals are false, in that they do not represent real possibilities for human life, and that the religious ethical systems that supposedly help us achieve them are misleading. Nevertheless subscription to such ideals is, according to Dewey, the ultimate psychological basis for the philosophical quest for certainty:

The practical impossibility of reaching, in an all around way and all at once such a “perfection” has been recognized. But such a goal has nevertheless been conceived as the ideal, and progress has been defined as approximation to it. Under diverse intellectual skies the ideal has assumed diverse forms and colours. But all of them have involved the conception of a completed activity, a static perfection. [HNC 122]

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93 The two contrasting conceptions can of course be characterized in a variety of ways, but regardless of how the heavenly environment is imagined and regardless of how the enlightened person is described, both conceptions implicitly endorse a dualism that Dewey seeks to reject. The idea that contentment can be attained by working towards a perfect character without paying heed to environment, or by working towards a perfect environment without paying heed to character, rests, Dewey thinks, on a philosophically confused separation of self and world. It is only by paying attention to the structure of habit, as we will see, by understanding clearly how habit ties character and environment together inseparably, that a realistic and effective path to flourishing can be found.
To see how religiously influenced ideals of security play a role in ethical theory, we only need to look at what religious ethical systems like Buddhism and Christianity have in common with secular ethical systems like consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. All of them can be thought of as systems that aim to provide us with complete security for some range of our values. Buddhism and Christianity, by showing us how to arrive at Buddhahood and Heaven, are concerned with giving us a method by which we can come to a state in which all our values have permanent security, a state so satisfying in fact that talk of satisfaction of particular values is replaced by talk of a more general satisfaction, characterized variously as bliss, quiescence, and so on. Consequentialism and deontology on the other hand are concerned to provide us with a method by which we can have complete security over a fairly restricted set of values, our so-called moral values. Such theories aim to give us a system by which we can be guaranteed to act morally correctly no matter what kind of situation we are in, providing us, therefore, with total security for our moral values (though neglecting to say anything about our other values, about light, food, health, companionship, recognition, and so on). Virtue ethics can be thought of as lying somewhere between religious systems and the two modern moral systems with respect to the breadth of the values it tries to secure for us. While it does not try to provide a security so all encompassing as that of Buddhahood or Heaven, it is concerned with a security of values over and above the merely moral, with the broader range of values that we have been calling ethical. Eudaimonia, then, can be thought of as simply the name Aristotle gives to the condition we find ourselves in when our ethical values are totally secure, a security only obtainable, according to Aristotle, by habituation to the virtues from a young age and the subsequent development of practical wisdom.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ It is worth noting that Aristotle’s views regarding the attainment of security are not so black and white as I have presented them. Aristotle never held the belief that being virtuous was sufficient for eudemonia. Eudaimonia, he held, requires a certain kind of environment too – friends, family, wealth, health, etc. – in the absence of which even the most virtuous person could not be happy. I include Aristotle as one of the
Seeing philosophical ethical systems as being on a continuum with Buddhist and Christian ethical systems helps us see the precise sense in which these ethical systems subscribe to myths that might be described as religious. Virtue theory, consequentialism, and deontology all attempt to provide us with total moral or ethical security by describing methods which, any time the security of our moral or ethical values is threatened, we can immediately apply in such a way as to restore it. Such theories are religious in the sense that they “dream,” at least for some limited sphere of human activity, “of an attained perfection, an ultimate static goal, in which effort shall cease, and desire and execution be once and for all in complete equilibrium.” [HNC 72] This assimilation of philosophical to religious motives – the claim that like religion philosophy is also, if only implicitly, motivated by yearning for a situation of complete and permanent security – can be thought of as Dewey’s interpretation of James’ well-known claim in Pragmatism that certain philosophies, philosophies he sometimes describes as “tender-minded,” make demands that are essentially “religious.”95 Most of the philosophical tradition is tender-minded or religious for Dewey too, in the sense that it is motivated by a craving for a situation of Heaven-like or Buddha-like security for at least some range of our desires and values. The problem with such a craving though is that being in a situation of total security is tantamount to being in a kind of “static perfection,” a state in which there is no need to act or even to move, and such a state, according to Dewey, is drastically at odds with the movement that is so vital to human life.96 Paying attention writers that seek through ethical theory the attainment of ethical security, however, insofar as he does not make the crucial step from acknowledging the contingency of security to acknowledging the importance of securing it in a concrete, practical way rather than through theoretical means.

95 Cf. the first lecture of Pragmatism, especially. pp. 491-5

96 Dewey sees the ideal of complete security as leading philosophers to a skewed view of human activity as the exception, and of a kind of static perfection as the norm. The claim he makes, while discussing the concept of motive in HNC pp. 83-87, about activity as being the center and default of life, and of rest from
to the fact that actual situations are always changing, and often in ways that cannot be predicted, requires acknowledging that complete security is not possible for any of our values and not even close to possible for most of them. As Dewey points out, “in every waking moment, the complete balance of the organism and its environment is constantly interfered with and as constantly restored.” [HNC 125] Any attempt to increase the security of our values will only lead to a situation in which our values are threatened in new, different ways:

Indeed every genuine accomplishment instead of winding up an affair and enclosing it as a jewel in a casket for future contemplation, complicates the practical situation. It effects a new distribution of energies which have henceforth to be employed in ways for which past experience gave no exact instruction. [HNC 197]

It is Dewey’s acceptance of these facts – that situations are always changing in ways that threaten our security, and that all attempts to change situations bring in train new challenges to security – that constitutes the sense in which Dewey is a tough-minded philosopher, in which he has, as James might say, “a craving for the hard facts.” In rejecting the traditional philosophical quest for certainty he is rejecting not only the ideal of practical certainty but also the myth of complete and permanent security that implicitly motivates it. Whereas most of the religious and ethical systems mentioned above think of total security as being possible for some range of our values, Dewey rejects the possibility of total security with respect to any of our values for a sustained period of time.97 Neither Heaven nor Buddhahood is attainable for Dewey’s ethical person, then, neither eudaimonia nor even a narrow moral security.

97 It is important to note that Dewey never goes all the way to the other side and claims that absence of security is the only possibility. Just as we must not take one aspect of experience, stability, and claim that all existence or that existence essentially is stable, so we must not take another aspect of experience, instability, and claim that all existence or that existence essentially is instable. Both stability and instability
None of this is to say that the striving for security is pointless. We can attain to a modest and tentative security of values, Dewey thinks – think of how modern technology has made warmth, food, and light secure for many people, for example, how medical insurance and savings accounts provide some people at least with medical and financial security. The important point is that this security has to be attained practically, by constant study of the conditions and consequences of life. An ethical system that concerns itself with complete security in any sphere of life, Dewey thinks, will only have the effect of distracting us from the endless practical task of attaining and retaining as much security as possible in an ever changing environment. It is in Dewey’s theory of habit that we see his most sustained theoretical attempt at making ethics a concrete affair, at providing a realistic and effective answer to the question of how to live and how to flourish that does not take for granted the possibility of complete and total security. It is to this theory that we will now turn.

3. The Contingency of Habit.

The account of habit articulated in *Human Nature and Conduct* is one of the richest and most demanding aspects of Dewey’s text. It is rich because of the phenomenological concreteness with which Dewey deals with habitual life, because of how suggestively his notion of habit is connected to intimate and overlooked parts of human existence, but it is demanding because of the work required to see how all the disparate threads tie together, and what kind of ethical outlook they jointly motivate. Before trying to impose some system on Dewey’s discussion of habit it will be useful to make a few general points about the explanatory function Dewey’s account is meant

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are real and unavoidable aspects of human life, for Dewey, and if he focuses more on the existence of instability it is only because philosophers have most often tended to ignore instability.
to serve. The most important thing to say in this regard is that in presenting an account of habit Dewey is not really interested in accounting for what is ordinarily meant by “habit.” He thinks the term is useful because of several connotations it carries, but is well aware that the concept he develops diverges markedly from ordinarily usage of the term:

The word habit seems twisted somewhat from its customary usage when employed as we have been using it. But we need a word to express that kind of human activity which is influenced by prior activity and in that sense acquired; which contains within itself a certain ordering or systematization of minor elements of action; which is projective, dynamic in quality, ready for over manifestation; and which is operative in some subdued form even when not obviously dominating activity. Habit even in its ordinary usage comes nearer to denoting these facts than any other word. [HNC 31]

The theory of habit presented in HNC is not, therefore, to be judged by its adequacy in capturing our ordinary usage of the term. Habit for Dewey is a technical notion that, together with the concept of impulse, is meant to do fundamental explanatory work in ethical and social philosophy.98 It is in this capacity, above all, that the account he gives should be understood and evaluated. This point is related to another issue that any attempt to interpret Dewey’s work on habit needs to bear in mind, that it is impossible to draw a hard and fast line between the explanandum and the explanans of the account. Since Dewey is not trying to give an account of what ordinary usage calls habit, there is no clear pre-theoretically demarcated phenomena that Dewey is trying to explain. Any attempt to delineate the explanandum of Dewey’s account will, therefore, naturally look to the explanans in order to get clearer about the phenomena to be explained. My approach in this section

98 Insofar, indeed, as the emotions, the faculties of imagination, deliberation, reason, and indeed all of our mental life is to be explained in terms of their place in our habitual lives, habit, along with impulse, should be thought of as the central theoretical notion not just in ethics and social philosophy but in Dewey’s entire philosophical project.
will be to identify, in a loose and suggestive way, the range of phenomena that Dewey intends to discuss under the label habit. I do this by presenting what I take to be a few relatively superficial characteristics of what Dewey calls habit, together with a range of examples that Dewey makes use of in *Human Nature and Conduct*. I will take this fairly open-ended characterization of habitual activity to be the subject matter of Dewey’s account proper. This account is constituted, on my reading, by two substantive features that Dewey attributes to habitual life, contingency and propulsiveness. It is on the basis of the first quality that Dewey argues against the possibility of ethical certainty, and on the basis of the second quality that he frames his account of character and claims that no sharp distinction can be drawn between the ethical and the non-ethical.

The most obvious way in which the notion of habit presented in *Human Nature and Conduct* departs from the popular conception of habit is that it doesn’t necessarily involve regularity or repetition. “Repetition is in no sense the essence of habit,” Dewey writes. “Tendency to repeat acts is an incident of many habits but not of all.” [HNC 32] Plenty of habits are of course routine, brushing one’s teeth before bed, for example, or taking the train to work every morning, but what makes such activities habitual is not the fact that they are regular or repeated. Many habits display significant variation between each of their manifestations, but count as habits because they have other more basic features. The first of these features is the manifestation of skill or technique. “Habit is an ability,” Dewey writes, “an art, formed through past experience.” [HNC 48] The fact that habits manifest skill, which is to say that they are acquired rather than native, sets off habits like walking or gambling from reflex actions like batting the eyes on the approach of foreign objects, or physiological processes like breathing and digesting. The second basic feature that Dewey attributes to habits is that they have “cues,” that they are set in motion by specific stimuli. “Habit is impossible,” Dewey writes, “without setting up a mechanism of action, physiologically
engrained, which operates ‘spontaneously,’ automatically, whenever the cue is given.” [HNC 50]

The claim here that habit is “physiologically engrained” suggests one other important feature of habits, that they may operate unconsciously, not merely in the sense of operating without our becoming aware of it, but also in the sense that we do not need to consciously attend to each step of the action in order for success. This feature actually belongs only to what Dewey calls “routine” as opposed to “intelligent” habits, the latter being a special class of habit which we will consider in more detail in the next chapter. Consider, for example, the difference between driving home from work and driving into an unknown part of the city. Because the former habit is routine we can, for example, have a conversation while doing it, while because the other requires some kind of intelligence we must attend to the activity consciously. Only routine habits, for Dewey, can operate without conscious attention.99

It should be clear from these two and a half features of habitual life – that habits involve skill, that they have cues, and that they may operate without our having to be conscious of them – that a vast range of human life counts as habitual for Dewey. The first and most obvious kinds of example are skills and competences. These range from abilities that are used more or less unthinkingly as ways of coping with everyday environments, walking, for example, or talking, to ones that require more specialized training and which are used only in special contexts, like being able to solve a mathematical problem, or play a musical instrument. For this reason Dewey thinks that the use of our bodies too is a kind of habitual activity, our ability to stand up straight, for example, or to move our arms and legs. Though these are not usually thought of as skills, since

99 Dewey doesn’t talk much about consciousness with respect to habitual activity in HNC, but he does address the subject briefly in Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit, where following Hegel he argues [cf. p. 131] that one of the benefits of habit is that it frees consciousness to think about other things than the tasks immediately at hand.
most able-bodied people have possession of them, the fact that even these require learning in childhood qualify them as habit. Dewey’s conception of habit includes, second, character traits such as honesty, chastity, soft-spokenness, irritability, and irresponsibility, regardless of whether they are deemed beneficial or detrimental to the possessor. It is because Dewey’s notion of habit is broad enough to include character traits that virtues and vices count, on his account, as habits. Third, it is clear from several comments he makes that on Dewey’s account our emotions too, insofar as we can distinguish the “display” associated with an emotion from a “feeling” beneath it, are a kind of habit. Discussing anger, for example, he writes that “human displays of anger are not pure impulses; they are habits formed under the influence of association with others who have habits already and who show their habits in the treatment which converts a blind physical discharge into a significant anger.” [HNC 66; cf. 32] Finally, though Dewey doesn’t talk about them, it is important to see that his conception of habit is broad enough to include important and intimate parts of human life that do not fit easily under the rubrics of ability, character trait, or emotion. Reflection on the process of getting to know a person, for example, or on how mere acquaintanceship is different from close friendship, suggests that human relationships too are kinds of habit. It is not difficult to see that being in a close relationship with another person requires a kind of skill: the slow process of getting to know another person is a process by which the body language of two people begins to match, in which gaits and facial expression fall into a mutual rhythm, in which two different moods of existence slowly find a way of coexisting. People who are really close to each other – parents and children, brothers and sisters, childhood friends and lovers – are people who have learned how to respond almost instinctually to the other, to be aware

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100 We should avoid distinguishing too strongly between patterns of emotional expression and character traits. Being irritable or being kind clearly involve certain patterns of emotional expression, and many recognizable patterns of emotional expression are conventionally thought of as character traits.
of subtle changes in the cadence of speech and gesture, so that all the movements of one person have gradually come to be in subconscious harmony with those of the other, so that each can respond to the other in a variety of situations, often without even having to think. Human relationships too, therefore, are habits, and the people they connect one with are their most immediate cues. So too, I think, are the relationships a person has to their home and to the other places in which they dwell, and so too a person’s membership in their various communities.

We have seen then that habitual life, for Dewey, ranges over the most intimate and everyday aspects of human life, our skills, or character traits, our emotional responses, and our relationships. Having given some sense of the range and quality of the activity Dewey takes to be habitual, we are in a position now to look at Dewey’s theory proper, to examine, that is, the substantive features he attributes to habitual activity. There are two features of habitual activity Dewey emphasizes that are especially important for our purposes, first, that habits are contingent, and second, that they possess propulsive force. The second point is closely tied with Dewey’s account of character, and I will deal with it in the next section. The first point, about the contingency of habit, can be most easily approached by looking at an analogy Dewey makes, at the very beginning of Human Nature and Conduct, between habits and bodily organs. He points out first that we give explanatory accounts of our various bodily organs by postulating that they have specific functions: the lungs are the organs whose function is to let oxygen into the bloodstream and carbon dioxide out, for example, and the eyes the organs whose function it is to transform light waves into neural impulses for the sake of vision. In the same way, he argues, our various habits must also be explained by appeal to the particular functions they play in the lives of individuals. Dewey draws from this analogy an important parallel between bodily organs and habits in terms of their dependence on the environment for proper functioning:
Habits may be profitably compared to physiological functions, like breathing, digesting. The latter are, to be sure, involuntary, while habits are acquired. But important as this difference for many purposes is it should not conceal the fact that habits are like functions in many respects, and especially in requiring the cooperation of organism and environment. [HNC 15]

Just as bodily organs cannot function except in relation to the objective environment to which they are adaptations— the lungs cannot function without air, and the eyes cannot function without light and the objects that reflect it – habits too cannot function except in relation to the specific environmental contexts to which they are adaptations. Every habit, Dewey thinks, incorporates some objective aspect of the environment. “Walking implicates the ground as well as the legs,” Dewey writes, “speech demands physical air and human companionship as well as vocal organs.” [HNC 15] Making music requires instruments, being magnanimous requires money to lavish, anger requires eyebrows to frown and people to get angry with, and relationships require people and time. These habits could not have developed if the environment didn’t contain these elements, and without these elements they would not be able to function. These elements are therefore just as constitutive of habits as are the more obvious physiologically engrained mechanisms mentioned earlier, Dewey argues, and though for practical reasons we talk of habits belonging to individuals, philosophically they should be thought of as belonging as much to environments as to individuals.

Dewey’s point about habits being constituted by objective features in the environment has several interesting implications with respect to the intentional change of individual habits and social habits, which Dewey refers to as “custom.” Here however I want to focus on the relevance of Dewey’s point to what we have been calling contingency. The issue is best approached by looking at how Dewey’s conception of habit undercuts the Aristotelian strategy of providing ethical security. Aristotelian virtue ethics subscribes to the ideal of ethical certainty, recall, in the sense that it tries to delineate a set of virtues that, if cultivated, guarantees that the individual will
act in the ethically appropriate way no matter what the situation.\textsuperscript{101} Given that the virtues are habits, however, and that the functioning of each of our habits necessarily depends, as Dewey claims, on certain objective features of the environment, then, of course, the disappearance or distortion of these objective features alone is sufficient for these habits to be unable to function. The contingency of any system of purported virtues, and any system of habits at all in fact, follows quite obviously from this point together with the fact that the environment, including not just our physical and our social environments but also our bodies, is liable at any time to change. The successful continued functioning of any system requires the world to remain constant in the ways required for those habits to function, and the fact that the world can and does change means that any habit can have the rug pulled from under it in a way that is not up to the individual or society. Since we cannot guarantee that our environment will not change in these ways, since in fact the world is highly likely to change in ways that are relevant to our system of habits, complete ethical security, understood as a life governed by a set of virtues that is final in the sense that it will need no revision, is for all intents and purposes impossible. It is for this reason, Dewey thinks, that the ideal of security, at least in its manifestation in Aristotelian ethics, must be abandoned. Habitual life is contingent, and the same is true for social habits or customs.\textsuperscript{102}

\textsuperscript{101} Not in the sense that there is some pre-existing correct course of action that the virtuous person is then able to identify and act in accordance with, but in the sense that there is a set of traits the virtuous person has in virtue of which what they do can then be identified as the correct course of action.

\textsuperscript{102} As I have already noted, it is worth keeping in mind that the differences between Aristotle and Dewey are not black and white in regard to the attainment of total security. Aristotle never held the belief that being virtuous was sufficient for eudaimonia. Eudaimonia, he held, requires a certain kind of environment too – friends, family, wealth, health, etc. – in the absence of which even the most virtuous person could not be happy. He did, however, hold that possessing the virtues was sufficient, regardless of environment, for \textit{acting} well, which Dewey would reject. He fails to make, in other words, the crucial step from acknowledging that eudaimonia is contingent on environmental to the Deweyan claim that different environments necessitate different habits.
It is important to note that a habit can “have the rug pulled out from under it” in many ways, and to different degrees. There are of course the obvious examples of changes to the environment rendering a habit completely unable to function. A person who loses their legs in an accident can no longer walk. A person whose partner dies can no longer be in a romantic relationship. Social environments too can change so that old habits become impossible. Consider the feudal virtue of chivalrous warfare, which requires for its functioning a kind of warfare that allows for face to face combat in which personal skill, courage, and graciousness all have a place; such a virtue simply finds no application, it has been often pointed out, in the machine gun, artillery, and drone warfare of modern times. Notice, though, that often environments do not change suddenly or dramatically but only gradually, subtly, forcing habits to function in restricted or slightly modified ways. A person whose body becomes weaker as they age may still be able to walk, though they will only be able to move slowly, over short distances, and on flat ground. A person whose partner moves away may still be able continue their relationship by email, phone, and Skype, though without physical contact; the relationship will be modified by the changes in environment, rather than simply rendered impossible. There is no clear distinction, then, in many cases, between a habit’s functioning and failing to function. Notice also that the change in environment that renders the functioning of habits impossible or more difficult may come not only from the changes in body, physical, and social environment, but also in an individual’s own system of habits. A youth with a habit of masturbating might find no impetus to continue doing so once he or she finds a sexual partner; a person who finds recognition in the form of a community may

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103 It is in recognition of this point that Dewey notes there is no concrete difference between habit formation and habit modification: “The moral problem in child and adult alike as regards impulse and instinct is to utilize them for the formation of new habits, or what comes to the same thing, the modification of an old habit so that it may be adequately serviceable under novel conditions.” [HNC 75, my emphasis]
lose the habits of pride and self-praise. In such cases it makes more sense to say that a habit has
become less meaningful or significant, rather than that it is no longer able to function. Sometimes,
moreover, habits may cease to function not because of a change in the environment per se but
rather because the individual is shifting between environments. Dewey is making this point when
he alludes to the fact that many people, at least in modern times, move between different
environments rather than remain in a single, unchanging environment for the duration of their
lives. Finally, as Dewey notes, almost every environment already contains within it several
contrasting and contradicting environments. “The more complex a culture is,” Dewey writes, “the
more certain it is to include habits formed on differing, even conflicting patterns.” [HNC 90] The
interaction between the different elements within a single environment and the conflicting habits
that are adaptations of them may also, therefore, lead habits to cease functioning or to function
differently.

The important point, which all these nuances and qualifications leave intact, is that the
environment is always changing, and therefore that our habits, which are contingent on the
environment, must always be open to revision or renouncement. There is no such thing as a set of
habits which, once cultivated, will guarantee forever that we act in the best or most ethical way. It
is a direct consequence of Dewey’s conception of habit as constituted by objective elements that
no system of habits can provide permanent ethical security. Relevant changes in the environment
lead to our existing habits becoming inappropriate, in the sense of giving rise to action that is likely
to fail ethically or otherwise, unless they are renounced or revised in the relevant ways.

The common notion that enslavement to good ends converts mechanical routine
into good is a negation of the principle of moral goodness. It identifies morality
with what was sometime rational, possibly in some prior experience of one’s own,
but more probably in the experience of some one else who is now blindly set up as
a final authority. The genuine heart of reasonableness (and of goodness in conduct) lies in effective mastery of the conditions which now enter into action. [HNC 48]

The philosophical claim that a permanent set of habits exists that always give rise to appropriate action, Dewey thinks, only serves to tighten the stranglehold that our existing habits have on us, and to make the necessary changes to them more difficult. Now the fact that it is so difficult to make these changes to our habits has to do with the second feature that Dewey attributes to habits, their propulsive force. It is because of this quality that Dewey’s claims about contingency are so significant, for together the propulsiveness and contingency of habit articulate what is on my reading of Dewey the central tension of ethical life. It is to Dewey’s very difficult discussion of propulsiveness then that we shall turn in the next part of this chapter.

4. The Propulsive Force of Habit.

Dewey begins his discussion of the propulsiveness of habits with a discussion of a misleading view about habits that arises when we think about habits exclusively on the model of seemingly technical abilities like walking and playing the piano. There is, in such views, the suggestion that habits are somehow external to the individual to whom they belong, that they are like tools in a box waiting inertly to be used at the right time, rather than constituents of that individual’s identity. In a passage that begins by considering the strong propulsive force of conventionally bad habits such as gambling and drug addiction, Dewey makes the argument that in fact all habits are propulsive in this way:

These traits of a bad habit are precisely the things which are most instructive about all habits and about ourselves. They teach us that all habits are affections, that all have projectile power, and that a predisposition formed by a number of specific acts is an immensely more intimate and fundamental part of ourselves than our vague, general, conscious choices. All habits are demands for certain kinds of activity; and
they constitute the self. In any intelligible sense of the word will, they are will. They form our effective desires and they furnish us with our working capacities. They rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity. [HNC 21-2]

All habits then, according to Dewey, good and bad, have propulsive force. They are not tools that are external to our identity, but rather capacities that constitute our desires and push us actively towards certain kinds of action. When our habits conflict with our “formal decisions” or “conscious choices” it is the former that almost always take precedence, according to Dewey, and therefore it is our habits, for all intents and purposes, that constitute our will.104 The philosophical tendency to identify the “will” with those motivations to action that are the result of the practical deliberation, he argues, is simply the outcome of a self-deluding desire to identify with our consciously endorsed desires rather than with our concrete selves.105

The idea that habits have an intrinsic propulsive quality is suggestive and resonates with our felt experiences, but Dewey’s characterization is not as clear as it could be. There are two aspects to propulsiveness that can be distinguished in the passage quoted above: that habits constitute desires, or demands for activity, and that habits influence mental life, in particular

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104 Dewey makes this point over the course of a long discussion about how a person with a habit of hunching might begin to stand upright. Merely consciously willing to stand upright, Dewey argues, is not enough. First, even the act of consciously willing something is possible only with the right habits, since “an idea gets shape and consistency only when it has a habit back of it.” [HNC 25] Second, even if one was able to consciously will something despite having no habits to make the idea concrete, the conscious will to do anything is efficacious only when the individual has the means to do what is willed, and the only means at an individual’s disposal are their habits. When the only habit of standing up is the habit of standing up with a stoop, therefore, the will to stand up straight leads, ultimately, back into the old habit of hunching. This is not to say, of course, that reflectively driven habit change is impossible. The trick, Dewey says, is to approach the change obliquely; to find some other habit already in possession and use it in such a way as to undercut the habit one is trying to eliminate. Willing something against existing habits can only be efficacious, that is to say, through the use of other already existing habits.

105 This is not of course to say that deliberation is not important for Dewey, of course. Rather deliberation is significant only at times when existing habits fail to apply to a situation or conflict with each other.
emotions and the stream of consciousness, in significant ways. Since the latter can plausibly be seen as a consequence of the former, it is to the former that I will devote most of my discussion.

There is difficulty in understanding how Dewey thinks that desires can be embodied in habit. In what sense, exactly, does he think that habits constitute demands for action? One obvious interpretation is that habits constitute demands for action insofar as we act spontaneously or automatically when the appropriate cue is present. Our ability to mop moves us to mop when something has been spilled on the floor, just as our soft-spokenness moves us to speak softly when someone has asked us something. Our habits furnish us with desires to act in certain ways, it might be argued, in the presence of the right stimuli. It is fairly clear, I think, that this cannot be what Dewey means by propulsiveness. The term “habit” is preferable to the terms “attitude” and “disposition,” he claims, precisely because latter have an unwanted connotation of passiveness:

Attitude, and, as ordinarily used, disposition suggest something latent, potential, something which requires a positive stimulus outside themselves to become active. If we perceive that they denote positive forms of action which are released merely through removal of some counteracting ‘inhibitory’ tendency, and then become overt, we may employ them instead of the word habit to denote subdued, non-patent forms of the latter. [HNC 31]

It is clear from this passage that propulsiveness means more than just operating spontaneously in the presence of cues, according to Dewey. It means wanting to do the habitual act, regardless of whether the right cues are present. Habits can be subdued in the sense of being not propulsive until some inhibitory tendency is removed, but we must not mistake the presence of inhibitions for the absence of cues.

Another possibility for understanding the sense in which habits embody desires begins by noting that all habits involve skill. Perhaps then Dewey is making the point that some commentators have attributed to Aristotle, that habitual activity such as gambling and playing
musical instruments is pleasurable because it is activity whose execution requires skill.\textsuperscript{106} Our habits on this view constitute a demand for activity because they are expressions of skill and the use of skill is intrinsically satisfying. I think there is something right about the idea that habitual activity is propulsive because it is satisfying in and of itself, but I think it is wrong to think of this satisfaction as arising merely as a result of the expression of skill. Such an interpretation would have to explain why it is that two habits that employ what seem like technically similar skills can be very different in terms of how satisfying they are. What makes one relationship more intrinsically satisfying than another, for example, does not seem to have solely to do with the skills or capacities exercised in those relationships. A poor relationship may require much more skill, indeed, than a good relationship, and all the same is less satisfying. This is not to say that skills are not important. They are essential constituents of habit, as we have seen, and we cannot think of the satisfaction involved in a particular habitual activity without also thinking about the particular capacities that the habit essentially involves. What makes a habit satisfying, however, seems to have less to do with the skills themselves than with something deeper that those skills allow us to do. The reason habits are satisfying and therefore propulsive, on my reading, is that they are expressions of what Dewey calls impulse.

Now the discussion of impulse in \textit{Human Nature and Conduct} is, it must be acknowledged, even less clear-cut than the discussion of habit. There is a deep tension, moreover, in the heart of Dewey’s account of impulse. On the one hand Dewey’s use of terms like “instinct,” “native stock,” and “original activities” as synonymous with “impulse” suggests that impulses are innate or physiological. On the other hand, it seems clear from Dewey’s discussion of why no one impulse

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\item[\textsuperscript{106}] See for example Myles. F. Burnyeat’s classic 1980 essay on habituation in Aristotle; the idea is taken up also by Alisdair MacIntyre in \textit{After Virtue} (1985; p. 188).
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can be privileged as basic – whether self-interest, the libido, or the will to power – that the notion of impulse has, on his view, a primarily heuristic or instrumental role. Impulses are concepts we employ solely for their use in explaining human activity, and we shouldn’t take them to be real in the sense of having a concrete location in the body:

… it is unscientific to try to restrict original activities to a definite number of sharply demarcated classes of instincts. And the practical result of this attempt is injurious. To classify is, indeed, as useful as it is natural… Speaking generally the purpose is to facilitate our dealings with unique individuals and changing events. When we assume that our clefts and bunches represent fixed separations and collections in rerum natura we obstruct rather than aid our transactions with things. [HNC 92]

If this seemingly instrumentalist account of impulse is true it becomes unclear, naturally, how impulses can also be thought of as innate or physiological properties of organisms. The contradiction is only apparent, I think, but to discuss the issue in detail would take us too far afield. To put the point very briefly, the apparent tension can be resolved by understanding the claim that impulses are innate in an instrumentalist sense. Impulses are innate, that is, in the sense that there is no more basic kind of concept to appeal to in the explanation and prediction of human activity. The notion of impulse, in this sense, would function in the interpretation of human activity in a way that is similar to how the notions of atom or quark (or whatever the basic particles of physics are) function in the interpretation of physical systems when we take an instrumentalist view of physics – “impulse” is simply the most basic unit that is useful to attribute to humans in our interpretation of their activity. There is more to be said on this topic, no doubt, but for present purposes what matters are two relatively straightforward claims that Dewey makes about impulses: that habits are expressions of impulses, and that impulses are themselves propulsive.107

107 In particular, if we take an instrumentalist account of impulses – if we say that the concept of impulse is a useful instrument in the explanation and predication of human behaviour – then we must take an
“Habit,” Dewey writes, “is energy organized in certain channels.” [HNC 54] “Habits as organized activities are secondary and acquired, not native and original,” he says again a few pages later. “They are outgrowths of unlearned activities which are part of man’s endowment at birth.” [HNC 65] That the vaguely specified “energy” and “unlearned activities” in these lines refer to impulse becomes clearer a few pages later when Dewey is discussing the plasticity of impulse:

Any impulse may become organized into almost any disposition according to the way it interacts with surroundings. Fear may become abject cowardice, prudent caution, reverence for superiors or respect for equals; an agency for credulous swallowing of absurd superstitions or for wary scepticism. [HNC 69]

A habit, on Dewey’s view, should be seen as an organization of impulse into a regular pattern of activity, incorporating specific objective elements in the environment in a physiologically engrained mechanism. This organization happens at an early age, Dewey claims, because otherwise the child’s impulses would be directed in ways that do not conduce towards its survival. Apart from such an organization a child’s impulses are meaningless in the context of its social environment; they fail to communicate anything to the people on which the child depends, and constitute no more than “a physical spasm, a blind dispersive burst of wasteful energy.” [HNC 65] In order to have significance and help the child achieve some kind of independence impulses must be “organized” or “educated” into a system of skilled ways of interacting with the environment.

Dewey’s claim that habits are propulsive, I think, follows from the fact that habits are expressions of impulses together with the claim that impulses themselves are intrinsically propulsive. This latter claim is evident in Dewey’s discussion of impulses that are left out by an instrumentalist account of habits too, since habits, as we shall see shortly, are for Dewey expressions of impulse. And since, for Dewey, the basic concepts of intentionality – desire, belief, value, intelligence, etc. – are to be explained in terms of habit and impulse, it would seem Dewey is compelled to adopt an instrumentalist view of intentionality altogether. The interpretive question here is complex, and there is no scope for further discussion of the topic in this dissertation.
individual’s system of habits. No system of habits, he holds, can perfectly express all an individual’s impulses. “There always exist a goodly store of non-functioning impulses which may be drawn upon.” [HNC 73] The propulsive force of impulse is evident in the fact that these free-floating impulses are always striving to find some kind of outlet. There are three kinds of outlet available for an impulse that has not become embodied in a system of routine habits:

- It may find a surging, explosive discharge – blind, unintelligent. It may be sublimated – that is, become a factor coordinated intelligently with others in a continuing course of action... Such an outcome represents the normal or desirable functioning of impulse; in which, to use our previous language, the impulse operates as a pivot, or reorganization of habit. Or again a released impulsive activity may be neither immediately expressed in isolated spasmodic action, nor indirectly employed in an enduring interest. It may be ‘suppressed.’ [HNC 108]

According to Dewey, impulses that are not already incorporated into existing habits may either be expressed in sudden outpourings of blind activity, in what is commonly called “impulsive” behaviour, or be brought into coordination with existing habits, a process Dewey refers to, interestingly, as “sublimation,” [HNC 98] or they might be suppressed, that is to say, turned inwards towards a “surreptitious, subterranean life.” [HNC 109] Dewey himself prefers the second form of expression because it allows existing habits to be reorganized into a more inclusive system of habits, into a system that embodies more impulse than the previous one.\(^\text{108}\) Impulses that are expressed in this way are “the pivots upon which the re-organization of activities turn, they are agencies of deviation, for giving new direction to old habits and changing their quality.” [HNC 67]

\(^\text{108}\) It is preference for this way of expressing unmoored impulses, as we shall see in the next chapter, that leads Dewey to endorse what he calls intelligent as opposed to routine habit, for the former kind of habit, according to Dewey, is flexible rather than rigid in the sense of being open to the influence of impulse. We will look more closely at Dewey’s notion of intelligent habit more closely in the next chapter.
The fewer unmoored impulses that are sublimated into the existing body of habits, Dewey thinks, the more likely the system is to be broken down at critical moments of unusual stimuli.

The important point for us in this discussion is that impulses, on Dewey’s account, must always find expression, either directly through a system of habits, or obliquely through one of three channels identified above. Impulses are propulsive therefore in the sense that they are always seeking an outlet, and are always moving the individual to act in one way or another. Even impulses that are “suppressed,” Dewey argues, are not annihilated but rather find subtle inward or outward manifestations. If we accept Dewey’s claim that impulses are propulsive in this sense, then it will follow directly from the fact that habits are expressions of impulse that habits themselves have propulsive force. It is because they are embodiments of impulse that habits are not inert but rather constitute active demands for action. Interpreting the propulsiveness of habit in this way, I think, helps us understand Dewey’s important claim that impeded habit “manifests itself in desireful thought, that is in an ideal or imagined object which embodies within itself the force of a frustrated habit.” [HNC 39] To see why, note to begin with that the difference between an impulse and a desire, according to Dewey, is that an impulse is “chaotic, tumultuous and confused,” [HNC 124] whereas desire “means not bare impulse but impulse which has sense of an objective.” [HNC 177] Desires are impulses that contain within themselves some conception of an object or goal which if attained would bring us satisfaction, whereas mere impulses seek satisfaction in a blind, undirected way.109 Since habits are skilled expressions of impulse that operate on particular objects in an environment, a frustrated habit would give rise to desire because

109 The distinction between impulse and desire doesn’t need to be a sharp one, naturally. “The question is now how far the work of thought has been done, how adequate is its perception of its directing object. For the moving force may be a shadowy presentiment constructed by a wishful hope rather than by a study of conditions; it may be an emotional indulgence rather than a solid plan built upon the rocks of factuality discovered by accurate inquiries.” [HNC 176-7]
the impulses that were formerly embodied in the habit would still retain a clear conception of the kind of object that could satisfy it, namely, the kind of object that the frustrated habit had formerly operated upon. The reason that Dewey describes habits as our “effective” desires is precisely because the motivations to act that arise from our frustrated habits have a concrete conception of what would lead to satisfaction (as they would not if they arose from objectless impulses), and therefore are more likely to be effectively satisfied.

We have seen why it is plausible to see Dewey’s claim that habits constitute demands for action as resulting from the fact that habits are embodiments of impulse, rather than because they move us automatically in the presence of certain cues, or because they involve the exercise of skill. It might be argued, however, that this interpretation fails for a very obvious reason: many habits simply do not seem to be expressions of impulse. Though the interpretation we have put forward has said nothing explicitly about habitual activity being intrinsically satisfying, there is, as has already been intimated, an important relationship between a habit’s expression of impulse and the satisfaction it provides. This is the obvious suggestion, already implicit in Dewey’s claim that impulses and desires are distinguishable only by the sense of an object to be attained in the latter, that the more impulse a habit successfully expresses, the more satisfying that activity in accordance with that habit will be. If this is the case then many habitual activities will not seem to be expressions of impulse, simply because they do not seem to be satisfying in any way. It is true there can be something satisfying about even so banal a habit as brushing one’s teeth, provided one is in no particular hurry to go to bed, but it is implausible to think of many habitual activities as satisfying in any such way. There is nothing prima facie enjoyable about being in an abusive

110 Impulses can, of course, also be directed towards objects without being incorporated into habit, by some accidental experience for example, as when a person who felt completely self-sufficient unexpectedly falls in love with a person they meet accidentally.
relationship, or having to mop up spilled milk, or shouting at someone in a fit of rage. The interpretation of propulsive force as arising from expression of impulse must therefore be wrong, it will be argued, or Dewey must be wrong about the propulsive force of habit altogether.

The objection is an important one, I think, and addressing it in some detail will help us understand Dewey’s position in a more substantial way. Notice, first, that it would be implausible to think that many of the obvious counterexamples to the thesis being put forth really are totally lacking in satisfaction. Consider, for example, a poor but formally consensual relationship between two people. To call such a relationship poor is not usually to say that no impulses are expressed in the relationship, or that there is nothing satisfying in them whatsoever, but rather that the relationship is not a good one in the sense that it does not express many of the impulses that should be satisfied in a relationship, or that it expresses them in a way that is harmful. To suppose that a poor or even an abusive consensual relationship is not satisfying in any way would be to simplify such cases drastically, and to make it unintelligible why such relationships are so often important to the people they harm. Consider, also, the case of getting angry. As Dewey actually points out, the habit of expressing anger can indeed be satisfying, when it is expressed fully and without fear of consequence, but “anger or fear or love or hate is successful only when it effects some change outside the organism which measures its force and registers its efficiency.” [HNC 98] Being angry is usually not satisfying only insofar as full expression of the impulse is impeded in some way by the environment, usually by fear of the consequences of expressing anger without restraint. These examples of habitual activity are ones in which some impulse is expressed, just not in a positive way or in an adequate degree. Dewey’s conception of habit as expressions of impulse can account for them insofar as it allows for the possibility that habits may express impulses in different degrees, some more than others. Habits that don’t express impulse very well are naturally less
satisfying in that degree. Although some are never perhaps enjoyable enough for us to engage in them for their own sakes, still there can be something satisfying about engaging in them.

There is of course habitual activity that does not seem satisfying in any degree. Consider habits like taking out the trash, or earning a living in poor, difficult conditions. Such habits, which are generally thought of as means rather than ends, do not seem to express any impulses whatsoever, so that we would if we could part with them without any regret. To see how such cases can be accommodated by Dewey’s claim that habits are propulsive, we must begin by noting that many habits that are initially or primarily conceived of as means do come over time to be important expressions of impulse. Consider, for example, the habit of walking. It is true that most often we walk only for the sake of arriving at some destination, but notice that sometimes we walk for the sake of walking. We take the long way around, or the scenic route, or venture out without any destination at all; we walk in order to reflect, or to watch people and feel a communion with the outside world. Similarly, though it is plausible to think that the habit of talking developed largely for the purposes of sharing information and coordinating with other members of one’s society, it is obvious that often people talk not for any such reason but simply for the sake of expressing themselves. The fact that we would go on engaging in habits like these whether or not we were practically necessitated to suggests that habits engaged primarily or initially as means can often come to express important impulses in and of themselves. There is an important process of transmutation in human life, we might say, whereby habits undertaken initially or primarily as means become, to some degree, ends in themselves; a process by which, to put it in more ordinary words, the activities we are forced to spend time doing become meaningful on their own terms. An hour long commute at the end of the day becomes an opportunity to listen to music and unwind, an otherwise thankless job becomes a way of being in communion with other humans, and a few
hours spent walking the dog each week becomes a way of flexing the arms and legs. The process is the more important, naturally, the more deeply and thoroughly a habit is part of the structure of our lives. It is more important that we should find a way to express impulse during our daily commute than in the habitual act of mopping once every fortnight. Moreover, in addition to being vital for enjoyment of a life in which we spend more time doing what we have to do than what we want to do, the process of transmutation is often essential, Dewey thinks, for habitual activity to be successful even when taken purely as a means. “Control of future living,” he writes, “such as it may turn out to be, is wholly dependent upon taking present activity, seriously and devotedly, as an end, not a means.” [HNC 184]

Reflection on this process of transmutation of habits-as-means into habits-as-ends helps us see, I think, how Dewey would respond to examples like that of factory work. He doesn’t, first, think that any habitual activity can be completely impervious to the expression of impulse. The process of transmutation is such an important part of human life that it operates even with the most joyless habits, if they form a significant enough part of the individual’s life. “Even a workman in a modern factory where depersonalization is extreme gets to have “his” machine and is perturbed at a change.” [HNC 82] Such a response by itself, of course, does not seem sufficient, for if the thesis that habits are intrinsically propulsive is to be more than a nontrivial claim, habits must be propulsive in a significant sense. They must express impulses to a degree that actually moves us act in accordance with them, so that we would have a desire to act in accordance with them if we couldn’t. Dewey himself acknowledges that many habits of work under the conditions of industrial capitalism can plausibly offer no opportunity whatsoever for an expression of impulse that is significant in this way. Such work cannot plausibly be understood by the worker as anything more than a means:
… the whole tendency of modern economic life has been to assume that consumption will take care of itself provided only production is grossly and intensely attended to… As a result most workers find no replenishment, no renewal and growth of mind, no fulfilment in work. They labour to get mere means of later satisfaction. This when procured is isolated in turn from production and is reduced to a barren physical affair or a sensuous compensation for normal goods denied. [HNC 186]

Dewey’s response to such examples is not to claim that they do allow for expression of a small amount of impulse, but rather to hold that working under the conditions of industrial capitalism in such a way actually constitutes a violation of human nature:

The social conditions under which “labour” is undertaken have become so uncongenial to human nature that it is not undertaken because of intrinsic meaning. It is carried on under conditions which render it immediately irksome… It is ‘natural’ for activity to be agreeable. It tends to find fulfilment, and finding an outlet is itself satisfactory, for it marks partial accomplishment. [HNC 86-7, my emphases]

Insofar as factory work offers no scope for being taken as ends rather than means, according to Dewey, such work is an example of habit whose proper mechanism has been distorted. Habitual activity that isn’t propulsive, that doesn’t allow for the expression of impulse, is habitual activity that violates human nature. Taking Dewey’s several references to Marx in these passages seriously, we might say that habits without propulsive force are habits belonging to an individual who has become alienated from their activity. Since industrial capitalism forces the mechanism of habit to operate outside conditions of proper functioning, Dewey can claim that the functioning of habits in such conditions cannot be taken to be illustrative of its nature. Just as we cannot use facts

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Dewey goes even further, in fact, arguing that much philosophical thought about action – in particular, the idea that a conscious motive is required for move individuals to action from a state of rest, that the default state of humans is one of rest rather than movement – is a reflection of economic and social
about what happens when starving people eat rocks to argue against a theory of digestion that claims that food is absorbed through the intestinal lining, Dewey would argue, so we cannot use the example of industrial work to argue against a theory of habit that claims that habit is intrinsically propulsive.

In interpreting Dewey in this way we are, it should be clear, taking him to be offering a teleological account of habit. In taking him to rule out certain conditions under which habits function as being relevant to a theory of habit, we are implicitly taking him to endorse some conception of what it is for habits to function normally or properly. In itself this is not, of course, a problem with Dewey’s account. It marks out the account of habit and character given in *Human Nature and Conduct* as similar in style to physiological theories of vision or digestion, which obviously also involve some conception of proper functioning. What can seem problematic though about this way of understanding Dewey’s theory is that the particular conception of human nature invoked here – the “natural” functioning attributed to habits – seems to hold much ethical weight, since it appears to imply that habits that don’t express propulsive force should be abandoned in favor of those that do. If this is the case, if Dewey’s ethical theory appeals to some conception of human nature that is implicitly value laden, then it will seemingly fail to provide an objective foundation for ethics. This is a charge made by Williams (1985; p. 44-7) and many other writers against virtue ethics more generally, and though the issue is too complex to enter into here, it is worth pointing out that virtue ethicists like Martha Nussbaum and John McDowell have argued, in response to the charge, that the facts about human nature appealed to in virtue ethics were never meant to be value neutral, that no claim about human or for that matter plant and animal conditions that makes action a chore rather than a pleasure. Such philosophical thought, Dewey argues, serves only to intellectually solidify such conditions. [cf. 83-6]
functioning can ever be completely value neutral. Strikingly, Dewey seems to anticipate the response of these virtue ethicists in *Human Nature and Conduct*, where in an important discussion of his methodology at the beginning of the text, he makes very clear that he expects “human nature” to have significant bearing on ethics:

> These pages are a discussion of some phases of the ethical change involved in positive respect for human nature when the latter is associated with scientific knowledge. We may anticipate the general nature of this change through considering the evils which have resulted from severing morals from the actualities of human physiology and psychology. There is a pathology of goodness as well as of evil… [HNC 5-6]

Attention to human physiology and psychology shows, Dewey claims, that much of what passes for traditional morality violates human nature, leading to various “pathologies.” The fact that the pathologies Dewey is referring to here are not medical conditions but what might be called ethical or spiritual conditions – herd conformity, mediocrity, moral hypocrisy, romanticism, spiritual and moral egoism, asceticism, etc. – makes it clear that Dewey sees the choice between different conceptions of human nature as anything but ethically neutral. It is to mark out the connection between ethics and the various claims he makes about what human beings are like “naturally,” indeed, that he conjoins “Human Nature” with “Conduct” in the title of his text.

5. The Interpenetration of Habit

In the last two sections we tried to loosely demarcate the kind of activity that Dewey’s theory of habit is supposed to apply to, and to outline in some detail two of the substantial features Dewey attributes to this activity, contingency and propulsiveness. In this penultimate section I

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want to discuss some of the important claims that Dewey makes on the basis of these two aspects of habitual life, focusing especially on what Dewey calls the interpenetration of habit and its implications. One way of approaching the issue of interpenetration of habit arises in response to a question that might be asked about the claim that habits are intrinsically propulsive. If habits are propulsive in the sense of always pushing an individual into acting in accordance with them, how is it that almost any given habit can seemingly fail to operate for sustained periods of time? Dewey’s response to this question is to say that habits are in fact always operating. Far from being idle or inert when they are not the dominant aspect of activity, Dewey argues, the propulsive force of habits pushes them to operate below the surface of consciousness at all times:

… inactivity holds only of overt, visibly obvious operation. In actuality each habit operates all the time of waking life; though like a member of a crew taking his turn at the wheel, its operation becomes the dominantly characteristic trait of an act only occasionally or rarely. [HNC 29]

What Dewey calls the interpenetration of habits is the fact that a habit continues to have some kind of effect on activity even when that activity is not an obvious expression of the habit; habits operate not within a fixed vacuum but rather interpenetrate into our other activities. Dewey uses the example of walking to illustrate what he means. The fact that the habit of walking is operative at all times, he argues, is evident from the way it affects us even when we are not actually walking. Our perception of distances and direction and sense of orientation are all affected by our possession of the habit. “The habit of locomotion is latent in the sense that it is covered up, counteracted, by a habit of seeing which is definitely at the fore.” [HNC 29] The suggestion here is that the habit of walking continues to operate even when not dominant by affecting how we perceive the world. This claim about the relationship between habit and sensory perception is repeated at various points in Human Nature and Conduct:
… distinct and independent sensory qualities, far from being original elements, are the products of a highly skilled analysis which disposes of immense technical scientific resources. To be able to single out a definite sensory element in any field is evidence of a high degree of previous training, that is, of well-formed habits.

[HNC 25]

This is a suggestive phenomenological claim, and sounds at least intuitively plausible. Just as speaking a language and learning how to play an instrument affects how one hears sounds, it is not implausible to say that virtues like courage or magnanimity also involve perceiving the world in certain ways, or at least having a sensitivity and attention to certain aspects of situations.113 Though Dewey limits himself to this one explicit example of interpenetration in this section it is clear, from his characterization of interpenetration as the operation of habits beyond situations in which they dominate activity, that there are many other ways in which interpenetration can occur. There are, in addition to the effects habits have on perception, also the effects they have on mental life, and the effects they have on the physical, behavioral aspects of activity.

There are numerous ways, first, in which our habits can affect mental life even while they are not actually in operation. Generalizing on the claim that a person with a hunched back cannot form the idea of standing up straight, Dewey argues more generally that our habits delimit the range of intentions we can form: “a wish gets a definite form only in connection with an idea, and an idea gets shape and consistency only when it has a habit back of it.” [HNC 25] This corresponds of course to the Aristotelian point that only the virtuous person knows what it is to act virtuously, that only the virtuous person can properly identify what the virtuous thing to do is in a given

113 This is a point that has been made by many recent virtue-theorists, and is the basis for one of the parallels between Dewey’s notion of habit and Aristotle’s notion of virtue made in the introduction of this chapter. For a forceful exposition of the relationship of virtue and perception see Martha Nussbaum (1990) and part one of McDowell (1998).
situation. Dewey goes even further than this, though, in discussing the effect of habit on mental life. Not only do our habits determine what kinds of intentions we are able to form, he claims, they also at least partially determine the content of our streams of consciousness. Habits that are impeded or frustrated rise to the surface in the form of desires, as we have seen, and these desires strongly affect what we think about. Habits “rule our thoughts, determining which shall appear and be strong and which shall pass from light into obscurity.” [HNC 21-2] This happens not only in the form of rumination on objects that allowed habits to operate in the past, as when I reflect mournfully, for example, on the fact that the neighborhood I grew up in has changed substantially. It also happens when my thought runs around objects that might allow frustrated habits to function once more, sometimes in the form of deliberation, sometimes in the form of fancy or groundless imagination. And not only do habits provide the material and impetus for thought, according to Dewey, they also play a role in delimiting its range and scope. “[Habits] prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice.” [HNC 121] The role of habit in the formation of intentions, in providing material for the stream of consciousness and delimiting how far it can move, all count therefore as examples of the interpenetration of habit, the fact that our habits operate even when not dominating overt activity.

In addition to its effect on perception and our mental life, interpenetration can also occur on the level of what Dewey calls “motor activity.” Notice that many of the overt aspects of a habit

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114 William James makes a similar point about the delimitation of ideas by habit when he distinguishes at the beginning of “The Will to Believe” between live and dead hypotheses. A live hypothesis, according to James, is a belief that presents itself to a person as a real possibility, that makes an “electric connection” with their nature, while a dead hypothesis is one that “refuses to scintillate with any credibility at all.” [WTB 2] James’ claim that “deadness and liveness are not intrinsic properties, but relations to an individual thinker” can be thought of as the effect of a person’s system of habits on the willingness or unwillingness to entertain particular beliefs.
can find minor behavioral manifestations even when that habit is not dominating activity. Consider, for example, the obvious fact that my habit of stooping when I sit can be evident in my posture even when I am standing. Or the fact that the rhythm of my speech in English might be different from the rhythm of speech of most English speakers, simply because of the influence that the other language I speak has on my English. Consider, again, how often we are willing to make inferences from how a person acts in one kind of situation, when one habit is dominating, to completely different situations, when other habits are dominating. It is not unreasonable to expect a person with a hesitant gait, for example, who moves quietly and almost on tiptoe even in loud, anonymous public spaces, to also have soft, mild-mannered speech, a polite and overly cautious way of speaking. If this turned out to be the case, it would be because a certain aspect of their habit of walking had interpenetrated into their habit of speaking (or vice versa). It is for this reason, Dewey writes, that “a man may give himself away in a look or gesture.”

Some forms of interpenetration are seemingly more natural to some kinds of habit. It is difficult to imagine the habit of playing an instrument being behaviourally manifest in speech, just as it is difficult to imagine the habit of soft-spokenness affecting one’s visual perception of the world.

We have looked at what Dewey means by the propulsive force of habit, and have surveyed very briefly the ways in which this propulsiveness can lead to what Dewey calls interpenetration. In the remainder of this section, I would like to focus on characterizing, a little too briefly, some of the important consequences he attributes to interpenetration. The first and most important of these has to do with the relationship just intimated between the interpenetration of habit and character. Interpenetration, Dewey thinks, is an essential condition for character:
Were it not for the continued operation of all habits in every act, no such thing as character could exist. There would be simply a bundle, an untied bundle at that, of isolated acts. Character is the interpenetration of habits. If each habit existed in an insulated compartment and operated without affecting or being affected by others, character would not exist. That is, conduct would lack unity being only a juxtaposition of disconnected reactions to separated situations. [HNC 29-30]

A person whose habits did not interpenetrate at all, according to Dewey, would be a person whose habits were discrete in the sense of having no effect on the individual outside the specific environments in which they overtly function. Such a person would be someone without character in the ordinary sense of the word, for there would be nothing that tied the way they act in one situation, when one habit is dominating, with the way they act in others, when other habits are. There would be no coherence to their actions, since nothing would compel any of their distinct habits to be related in kind or manner or substance. This is not to say, on the other hand, that interpenetration means that people’s habits are all completely integrated, or that there are no divisions or tensions in character:

Of course interpenetration is never total. It is most marked in what we call strong characters. Integration is an achievement rather than a datum. A weak, unstable, vacillating character is one in which different habits alternate with one another rather than embody one another. The strength, solidity of a habit is not its own possession but is due to reinforcement by the force of other habits which it absorbs into itself. [HNC 30]

Interpenetration, then, though it is always present for every habit and in every person, is never complete. The difference between what might be called strong and weak characters, according to Dewey, is precisely the difference between people whose habits thoroughly interpenetrate and people whose habits don’t. Consider, for example, the scholar who within the university is extremely confident, who speaking about certain subject matters in the seminar room is bold and
even imperious, but who in other contexts, in public spaces and social situations outside academia, is shy and even timid. There is a sharp disjunction in the habits of such a scholar within and without the academic environment, and according to Dewey this kind of disjunction is the result of weak character, of a failure of habits to properly interpenetrate with each other.\textsuperscript{116}

Having looked at Dewey’s thesis about the interpenetration of habit, we are also now in a position to answer a discomfort that has been lurking in the background of the preceding discussion. One of the most evident lacunae in Dewey’s theory of habit, for an analytically trained philosopher, will no doubt be the absence, in \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}, of a principle by which habits can be distinctly individuated. Consider, for example, my act of chatting with my roommate after dinner. Let us suppose that I’ve spent quite a bit of time talking to him during our relationship, and that I’ve come to learn how to talk to him in the sense of knowing what interests him, and which of these interests intersect with mine, both in this particular context and in general. Should we say that my act of talking to him after dinner is habitual because it is an application of my very general habit of talking in English, or because it is an application of the habit that constitutes my relationship with my friend, or because it is an application of the more specific habit of conversing fluently and fluidly with my roommate in the evenings before going to bed? How are we to individuate habits, given that we may characterize habits with differing levels of specificity? Dewey gives no principled reason, it might be charged, to pick one of these specifications of habit

\textsuperscript{116} Dewey’s distinction between strong and weak characters and his claim that the former is an “achievement” rather than a “datum” appears to suggest that strong character is an ideal to be striven for. It is worthwhile noting in passing that Dewey’s critique of weak character, of individuals who have highly compartmentalized habits, appears to be influenced by the critique of specialization Emerson gives in “The American Scholar.” The reason so much scholarly work seems inapplicable or irrelevant to the social, political, and ethical problems of real human life, according to Dewey \textit{[HNC 30, 49-50]}, is that the scholar’s highly developed habit of reason, which operates primarily in the library, the study, and the classroom, fails to interpenetrate with the habits they have that operate outside these environments. The intellectual separation of theory and practice, he thinks, is just an intellectual articulation of social conditions that prevent the interpenetration of theoretical or scholarly habits and the practical habits of real life.
over the other. Dewey’s thesis about the interpenetration of habit allows us, I think, to respond that such a principle of individuation simply cannot be given. Because of the way habits interpenetrate with each other, it is impossible to individuate habits in a principled way. The fact that habits are not limited to overt operation in specific environments but rather express themselves even while other habits are overtly operating means that any attempt to cut up an individual’s activity into a system of discrete habits a priori must be somewhat arbitrary. This is not to say that it isn’t good or useful sometimes to distinguish between different habits. What should guide how we distinguish habits, though, has to do less with the fixed boundaries of specific habits and more to do with the interests and concerns that motivate us to understand and modify our behavior.117

This point brings us to the other important consequence of interpenetration that should be mentioned, the fact that no fixed distinction exists between ethical activity and non-ethical activity. Dewey’s refusal to make a sharp distinction between the ethical and the non-ethical, it was said at the beginning of this chapter, is connected with his view that any situation that has the potential to shape what kind of habits and character we acquire, what kind of lives we come to lead. We are now in a position to see why this means that almost any situation can acquire ethical significance, and why therefore no a priori distinction can be made between the ethical and the non-ethical. An action may of course have ethical significance because it concerns something momentous that will alter the shape of our lives: the decision to emigrate, for example, or the decision to get divorced. In a sense, insofar as no action can have completely predictable consequences, any action might alter the shape of our lives: my decision to go to a certain party on a certain night instead of staying at home, for example, might lead to me meeting someone that I spend the next several years of my

117 This would seem to corroborate the suggestion made earlier (pp. 169-170) that Dewey takes a broadly instrumentalist stance towards habits and impulses.
life with, and thus become an ethically significant action. Dewey’s thesis of interpenetration, though, helps make vivid another, deeper way in which any action whatsoever may have ethical significance. The fact that any action will reinforce or weaken a certain habit or set of habits can have far greater implications, if interpenetration is true, than merely the sphere of activity with which the action is immediately concerned. The action can, through interpenetration, affect our other habits, and therefore can contribute to the shape and texture of our lives as a greater whole:

The serious matter is that this relative pragmatic, or intellectual distinction between the moral and non-moral, has been solidified into a fixed and absolute distinction, so that some acts are popularly regarded as forever within and others forever without the moral domain. From this fatal error recognition of the relation of one habit to others preserves us. It makes us see that character is the name given to the working interaction of habits, and that the cumulative effect of insensible modifications worked by a particular habit may at any moment require attention.

[\textit{HNC 31}]

Against the traditional view that moral or ethical significance is restricted to only specific spheres of human activity, therefore, Dewey holds that potentially any kind of activity might become ethically significant. Even the most trivial and banal habits can become ethically significant, depending on the degree to which they interpenetrate with other habits. The question of whether to wake up as soon as the alarm rings in the morning or whether to lie in bed and pretend to be asleep can become, on Dewey’s view, a question about whether or not to face challenges or to run from them, whether or not to see the world as something inviting us to join it or as something to run or hide from. Because every habit interpenetrates with other habits in unpredictable ways and to different degrees, no a priori line can be drawn between the ethical and the non-ethical.\textsuperscript{118}

\textsuperscript{118} The point becomes even more significant when we keep in mind that for Dewey habitual activity takes up by far the largest portion of human activity.
“Potentially therefore every and any act is within the scope of morals, being a candidate for possible judgment with respect to its better-or-worse quality.” [HNC 193] On this view the whole of life, rather than a small and artificially sealed off portion of it, takes on potential ethical significance. One important implication of this position is that deciding which aspects of our system of habits deserve ethical inquiry itself becomes a problem of significant ethical importance. “It thus becomes one of the most perplexing problems of reflection to discover just how far to carry it, what to bring under examination and what to leave to unscrutinised habit.” [HNC 193-4] Knowing how to distinguish the aspects of activity that deserve ethical scrutiny from those that do not, Dewey thinks, is an art rather than a science. Given that interpenetration happens in different ways and to different extents, in ways that can’t be predicted and often go unnoticed, there can be no a priori system to help us decide what is an ethical issue and what isn’t.

6. The Central Question of Ethics

I began this chapter by claiming that existing interpretations of Dewey’s ethical thought tend to focus on specific doctrines that are somewhat detachable from the rest of his thought, and I suggested that the best and most unifying way to read Dewey’s ethical writings is to see Human Nature and Conduct as providing a reworking of the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition, one that replaces the notion of virtue with the richer and more sophisticated notion of habit. In the second section we looked at Dewey’s views on the ideal of certainty and the myth of security, and in the two sections that followed we saw how Dewey’s concept of habit fits into his thought about certainty and security. Habit for Dewey, we saw, is a technical notion, one that is influenced by Aristotle’s concept of virtue in several substantial ways, most importantly in that both involve skill or competence, that both furnish us with our working desires and motivations, and that both shape
our ways of thinking, seeing, and feeling. We saw that habit is constituted as much by the environment as it is by the individual, and that for this reason the ethical system Dewey bases upon it actively makes room, as Aristotelian virtue ethics does not, for the existence of uncertainty and insecurity in our lives. In the previous section, finally, we gave an interpretation of Dewey’s thesis about the interpenetration of habit, and showed how the thesis is related to Dewey’s account of character and his claim that no fixed line can be drawn between the ethical and the non-ethical. By this point we have, thus, made good on the claim made at the beginning of this chapter about the conceptual affinities between Dewey’s notion of habit and Aristotle’s notion of virtue. What we still have to look at, though, is Dewey’s conception of growth and the role it plays in his ethical theory. Before we do so in the next chapter, it will be important to make some brief remarks about why, given everything said so far about habit, the notion of growth is so important to Dewey.

Though, as I have suggested, the concept of growth in Dewey’s theory can be seen as corresponding to Aristotle’s notion of eudaimonia, Dewey’s interest in growth comes not from any ad hoc attempt to preserve the logical form of Aristotle’s account. Dewey’s discussion of growth is motivated, rather, by his account of habit, in particular by a tension between the two substantive features he attributes to habit, contingency and propulsiveness. The contingency of habit tells us that the successful functioning of habit is contingent on objective elements in the environment, that a good system of habits is one that can change in response to changes in the environment. It is the second feature Dewey attributes to habit, its propulsive force, that makes this adaptability or flexibility a challenging ideal. It is a consequence of the propulsive force of habit, according to Dewey, that habits try to perpetuate themselves for as long and as far as possible. By interpenetrating into other habits that reinforce them, by moving us to act in accordance with them even when it is no longer in our best interests to do so, our habits can acquire
a kind of harmful self-perpetuating quality, a tendency to continue to operate even when they are obviously no longer meaningful or effective modes of activity:

No matter how accidental and irrational the circumstances of its origin, no matter how different the conditions which now exist to those under which the habit was formed, the latter persists until the environment obstinately rejects it. Habits once formed perpetuate themselves, by acting unremittingly upon the native stock of activities. [HNC 88]

Dewey does not think that the propulsive quality of habits is in itself a negative thing, of course, for it is after all one of the constitutive features of habit. His point in this passage is that our attachment to habits is often so strong that often they continue to operate long after they cease to play the role that gave them significance, or long after they have become incompatible with the world in the most important ways. To give an example of the first kind, a relationship in which both partners initially came together out of some urgent felt need or love for each other might continue to exist out of habit long after that felt need or love dissipated. To give an example of the second kind, a person’s habit of being together intimately with a partner might continue to affect him long after the latter has made it clear their relationship has ended, in the form of either a desire to change his old partner in ways she will not change or, when this impossibility has become obvious, in the form of a debilitating and harmful nostalgia.

It is the self-perpetuating quality of our habits, the attachment we naturally form to them, that makes Dewey’s point about the tentativeness of any arrangement of habits of such consequence. It is, to begin with, one of the reasons we are reluctant to give up on the philosophical ideal of certainty and its presupposition of an unchanging world. “The assumption of a stably uniform environment (even the hankering for one),” as Dewey writes, “expresses a fiction due to attachment to old habits.” [HNC 38] Second and more importantly, it makes vivid just how much Dewey’s claim about the impossibility of ethical security – the impossibility of a final set of habits
that secures our ethical values – is in conflict with our everyday orientation towards our habits. If the fact that the environment is always changing means that our habits should always be ready to change, then we must in some way make ourselves less attached to our habits. Failure to do so would lead to a system of habits that is too rigid to deal appropriately with a changing world. The point is applicable to not just the habits of individuals but also to the habits of societies, to what Dewey calls customs. It is the self-perpetuating quality of habits, Dewey thinks, that is responsible for the crystallization of customs and institutions long after they have become obsolete, and therefore for the largely accidental and violent means by which these customs and institutions have to be overcome. What this means is that a central question in ethics, perhaps the central question in ethics, is about the possibility of change and the role that change should play in our lives. It is this question that Dewey’s account of growth is meant to help us answer, and it is this question with which the next chapter will be concerned.
Chapter Four:

The Ideal of Growth

Dewey’s solution to what was referred to at the end of the previous chapter as the central challenge for ethics comes, in Human Nature and Conduct, in the form of his notion of intelligent habit. Dewey’s notion of intelligent habit is a normative recommendation, made in light of the impossibility of practical certainty, about what kind of stance individuals should aim to cultivate with respect to their habitual systems. The fact of environmental contingency means that our habits will be compelled to change in any case, of course, but intelligent habit is what allows these changes in our habitual systems to be made in the most significant and productive ways. It is to the task of providing an interpretation of Dewey’s notion of intelligent habit, therefore, that the present chapter will largely be devoted. We will begin by considering Dewey’s distinction between intelligent and routine habit, arguing that the former, unlike the latter, makes room for what Dewey calls the sublimation of impulse into existing habit. The sublimation of impulse, we will see, is central to what Dewey calls growth, and insofar as intelligent habit is characterized by the capacity for sublimation, it is the possession of intelligent habits that makes growth possible in the richest and fullest way. In the second section we will consider Dewey’s account of how intelligent habits can be obtained through the cultivation of a constellation of mainly second-order habits that I refer to as the habits of intelligence. The habits of intelligence include, among others, the habits of sensitivity, sympathy, prudence, courage, and open-mindedness, and on my interpretation they are the Deweyan counterpart of practical wisdom in the virtue ethics tradition. Dewey takes the cultivation of intelligence to be vital to negotiating the change that is unavoidable in our
environments – to negotiating what we have been calling the central problem of ethics – but it is also important, we will see, for a deeper reason.

Having intelligent habits, particularly the habit of open-mindedness, allows us not only to grow in response to the concrete conflicts that we inevitably face in our practical lives, but also actively pushes us towards growth even when growth is not immediately necessary.\textsuperscript{119} Growth for Dewey is an intrinsic end, a necessary (though presumably not sufficient) component of a flourishing human life, and insofar as intelligent habit makes possible a life of constant growth it is something we must strive to cultivate apart from any help it might give us in negotiating a changing world. Growth, as I have already suggested, can be considered the Deweyan parallel of the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia, and in the fourth section we will examine what this means, seeing that unlike eudaimonia Dewey’s notion of growth is not justified by any problematic appeal to biology or psychology. Such an appeal would be problematic, of course, because as Bernard Williams and other writers have pointed out, it is unclear that the most relevant modern sciences in this regard could ever give us the kind of resources needed to independently anchor some particular conception of a flourishing life.\textsuperscript{120} The justification of growth in Dewey is not to be located in the sciences, on my reading, but rather in plausible phenomenological considerations that Dewey adopts from Emerson concerning the difference between conventional childhood and adulthood. Drawing all these themes together, we will return in the final section to the claim made

\textsuperscript{119} Whereas in Aristotelian ethics practical wisdom is necessary to be able to exercise the virtues rationally in concrete circumstances, Dewey’s notion of intelligence is not only necessary for the intelligent exercise of habitual activity in concrete circumstances, but also for growth. This, as has been mentioned, is a significant departure from the Aristotelian tradition, since there is no obvious connection between practical wisdom and growth in that tradition, the virtuous person being conceived as someone who has already been perfectly developed.

\textsuperscript{120} See Williams’ argument (1985; pp. 44-5) that any scientific theory (presumably psychological) that we might use to independently anchor some ethical conception of the flourishing life are plausible in this regard only because ethical considerations have already been in some way incorporated into them.
at the beginning of the previous chapter, that Dewey should be read as belonging to the virtue ethics tradition; I will argue that a considered reading of Dewey’s ethical work suggests such significant conceptual and structural parallels that such a reading is inevitable. Before we can deal with this claim with justice, however, we must first look more closely at Dewey’s conception of intelligent habit, and it is to this task that we will now turn.

1. Intelligent Habit and the Sublimation of Impulse

   Shortly after his discussion of how the continued functioning of habit requires the environment to be constant in certain respects, Dewey introduces an interesting and suggestive distinction between two kinds of habit. The distinction that Dewey is making is between what he calls intelligent habit, on the one hand, and what he calls routine habit, on the other. Intelligent habits are those that can be adapted to new situations, different from those in which they have typically or historically functioned, whereas routine habits are those available only for use in situations similar to those in which they have been formed:

   Habit is an ability, an art, formed through past experience. But whether an ability is limited to repetition of past acts adapted to past conditions or is available for new emergencies depends wholly upon what kind of habit exists. The tendency to think that only “bad” habits are disserviceable and that bad habits are conventionally enumerable, conduces to make all habits more or less bad. For what makes a habit bad is enslavement to old ruts. [HNC 48]

   Defined in this way, it is quite obvious why a system of intelligent habits rather than routine habits would be a better response to contingency and instability. What is intriguing about Dewey’s account of intelligent habit though is the analogy he uses to develop the idea of a habit’s being adaptable to new conditions. Having acknowledged that both kinds of habit, intelligent and routine, involve “a mechanism of action, physiologically engrained, which operates ‘spontaneously,’
automatically, whenever the cue is given,” [HNC 50] he goes on to explain the difference between the two kinds of habit by comparing artists to technicians:

Mechanism is indispensable. If each act has to be consciously searched for at the moment and intentionally performed, execution is painful and the product is clumsy and halting. Nevertheless the difference between the artist and the mere technician is unmistakeable. The artist is a masterful technician. The technique or mechanism is fused with thought and feeling. The “mechanical” performer permits the mechanism to dictate the performance. It is absurd to say that the latter exhibits habit and the former not. We are confronted with two kinds of habit, intelligent and routine. All life has its élan, but only the prevalence of dead habits deflects life into mere élan. [HNC 51]

Dewey’s suggestion here is that what makes habit intelligent, what allows it to adapt itself gracefully to new conditions, is similar to what distinguishes a musician with artistic ability from a mere technician. Whereas the technician is trained to deal with a finite number of discrete situations and is able to extend their training to anything beyond these situations only in a mechanical way, the artist for Dewey has an ability to discerningly apply their training in novel ways and novel conditions: in playing new pieces or new instruments, for example, their performances would be lively and interpretive rather than lifeless or mechanical. This aspect of the analogy is straightforward, and adds nothing new to the characterization of intelligent habit given above. What the analogy does add, however, is the claim that unlike the technician, the artist’s habits are “fused with thought and feeling,” the suggestion that the artist’s ability to adapt themselves to new conditions has to do with some kind of ability of improvise sensitively and inventively. On my reading of Dewey’s analogy, the source of this difference between the two kinds of habit is the fact that the artist’s habits are open to the influence of impulse. It is because intelligent habits are open to the influence of impulse that they possess some kind of “élan,” rather than being “dead” as routine habits are. This idea of intelligent habits being somehow more alive
than routine habits is something we will come to later in this chapter, but we will begin our examination of intelligent habits by first looking more closely at the suggestion that they are open to the influence of impulse.

We have of course already seen that all habits, even presumably the most routine habits, are on Dewey’s view embodiments of impulse. What would it mean, then, to distinguish intelligent and routine habits on the basis of a special sensitivity to impulse that the former possess but the latter lack? Recall from the previous chapter that there will always be impulses that are unexpressed by any given body of habits, according to Dewey, and that there are three kinds of outlet available for impulses that have not become embodied in a system of routine habits:

It may find a surging, explosive discharge – blind, unintelligent. It may be sublimated – that is, become a factor coordinated intelligently with others in a continuing course of action... Such an outcome represents the normal or desirable functioning of impulse; in which, to use our previous language, the impulse operates as a pivot, or reorganization of habit. Or again a released impulsive activity may be neither immediately expressed in isolated spasmodic action, nor indirectly employed in an enduring interest. It may be ‘suppressed.’ [HNC 108]

Free-floating impulses, according to Dewey, may erupt into what is commonly called “impulsive” behavior; they may be suppressed, which is to say turned inwards towards “surreptitious, subterranean life” [HNC 109]; or they may be brought into coordination with existing habits in a process Dewey refers to as “sublimation” [HNC 98]. According to Dewey the first form of expression, eruption, is what often happens after periods of rigidity and control, in the way an individual might cut loose and go an alcoholic binge after a long period of tension or exertion, or the way revolutions are suddenly fomented in long-repressed societies. Such a mode of expression of impulse is not ideal, he claims, because the expression is blind and undirected, as a result of
which conditions often return to the same unhappy state once the eruption has taken place.\textsuperscript{121} The second form of expression, suppression into an inwards, underground life, is not ideal either, for Dewey, because “a suppressed activity is the cause of all kinds of intellectual and moral pathology” [109], and is responsible for conditions such as narcissism or melancholy.

Dewey’s recommendation, therefore, is for the third kind of outlet, which allows existing habits to be reorganized into a more inclusive system of habits, into a system that embodies more impulse than the previous one. Unembodied impulses that influence existing habits in this way become “the pivots upon which the re-organization of activities turn, they are agencies of deviation, for giving new direction to old habits and changing their quality.” [\textit{HNC 67}] What exactly does it mean, though, for impulses that are not embodied in existing habits to be sublimated into them, to be put, as Dewey sometimes expresses it, in “co-ordination” with them? Dewey gives two concrete examples of sublimation that are worth dwelling on:

Thus a gust of anger may, because of its dynamic incorporation into disposition, be converted into an abiding conviction of social justice to be remedied, and furnish the dynamic to carry the conviction into execution. Or an excitation of sexual attraction may reappear in art or in tranquil domestic attachments and services. Such an outcome represents the normal or desirable functioning of impulse; in which, to use our previous language, the impulse operates as a pivot, or reorganization of habit. [\textit{HNC 108}]

To take Dewey’s first case, the impulse of anger in response to a social injustice – a racist remark heard on the street, for example – might erupt into a useless and potentially self-harming outburst

\textsuperscript{121} “Rebellion has at least one advantage over recourse to artificial stimulation and to subconscious nursings of festering sore spots. It engages in action and thereby comes in contact with realities. It contains the possibility of learning something. Yet learning by this method is immensely expensive. The costs are incalculable. As Napoleon said, every revolution moves in a vicious circle. It begins and ends in excess.” [\textit{HNC 114-5}]
of rage. It might also be suppressed and internalized as a kind of melancholy, which, as Freud suggests in his analysis of melancholia, is often the case with suppressed anger. The impulse might also, however, be brought into co-ordination with existing habits, such that the impulse comes to express itself more and more in the individual’s system of habits, shaping that system of habits so that the individual’s life begins, as a result of the initial impetus, to make a practical acknowledgment of the issue of racial justice. This modification of existing habits by sublimated impulses may occur in a single decisive moment but more commonly it occurs gradually, with the passing of time and the availability of relevant opportunities. If one’s system of habits is open in general to the influence of impulse, there might be certain concrete moments of choice – the choice between different jobs, between which books to read or which films to watch, between which friendships to pursue – in which one chooses, say, the job or book or film or person which contributes to engaging with one’s anger in social or political terms. These choices in turn shape one’s experience and lead to certain further changes, and over time the initial anger might become sublimated into a system of habits that takes a specific kind of shape, leading to a life animated by certain social and political ideals.

If Dewey’s example make sense, we see how sublimation might take place in a practical and concrete way. “The significant point,” as he puts it, “is not whether modifications shall continue to occur, but whether they shall be characterized chiefly by uneasiness, discontent and blind antagonistic struggles, or whether intelligent direction may modulate the harshness of conflict, and turn the elements of disintegration into a constructive synthesis.” [HNC 90] What are the conditions that allow the “constructive synthesis” of sublimation to take place, rather than the sudden eruption or harmful suppression of unembodied impulse? We have already seen that the

\[^{122}\text{Cf. Freud’s famous (1917) essay “Mourning and Melancholia” for an account of how this might happen.}\]
body of habits into which the impulse is to be sublimated must be intelligent rather than routine – that it must be open to the influence of impulse. How we can cultivate such a stance to our habits is an important question for Dewey which we will look at in the next section. Before we answer the question of how to obtain intelligent habits, however, we must consider another aspect of Dewey’s account of sublimation – his identification of sublimation with growth:

There always exist a goodly store of non-functioning impulses which may be drawn upon. Their manifestation and utilization is called conversion or regeneration when it comes suddenly. But they may be drawn upon continuously and moderately. Then we call it learning or educative growth. [HNC 73-4]

Dewey becomes more explicit about this identification a few chapters later:

If conditions are right for an educative growth, the snubbed impulse will be “sublimated.” That is, it will become a contributory factor in some more inclusive and complex activity, in which it is reduced to a subordinate yet effectual place. [HNC 98]

It is clear from these passages that growth, on Dewey’s account in *Human Nature and Conduct*, is to be understood as sublimation, the process by which impulses that are not embodied in a system of habits are put in co-ordination with those habits and come, generally over time, to be embodied in them. Insofar as having intelligent habits is essential for sublimation, it is also essential for growth. It is for this reason, on my reading, that Dewey claims that whereas routine habits are “dead,” intelligent habits have a kind of “élan” in them. Dewey is not claiming that intelligent habits are alive because they are embodiments of impulse, for routine habits too, as we have seen,

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123 Dewey’s answer, in brief, is that we must cultivate certain second-order habits like sympathy, sensitivity, and open-mindedness. It is only by the cultivation of such habits – habits which are the closest candidates for virtue in Dewey’s system – that our first-order habits may become sensitive to unexpressed impulse – may become, that is, intelligent.
embodi impulse. Unlike routine habits though intelligent habits contain within them the possibility of growth, and growth for Dewey, as we shall soon see, is constitutive of life.\textsuperscript{124}

A basic question arises with respect to this identification of growth and sublimation – what does Dewey’s account of growth as sublimation have to do with our ordinary understanding of growth? The sublimation of impulse in habit does not seem to have any obvious relationship to our pre-theoretical understanding of growth, so why does Dewey choose to identify the two? It is clear from Dewey’s use of the qualifier “educative” in the passages above, first of all, that the kind of growth he has in mind is different from purely physical growth. His example of how an individual’s anger at some socially inflected slight might become sublimated over time into political activism suggests that what he has in mind is something closer to ethical or psychological growth, to what we sometimes describe as “growing as a person.” Whereas the notion of growing as a person, however, involves a more general implication of learning how to deal with the world more responsibly, Dewey’s account of growth as sublimation sounds strikingly self-involved. It seems to take into account only the individual’s system of habits and impulses, without reference to an external world that we somehow become more adept at negotiating. To see that this is not the case, we must look at an alternative description of growth that Dewey offers towards the end of \textit{Human Nature and Conduct}:

Morals means growth of conduct in meaning; at least it means that kind of expansion in meaning which is consequent upon observations of the conditions and outcome of conduct. It is all one with growing. Growing and growth are the same fact expanded in actuality or telescoped in thought. In the largest sense of the word, morals is education. It is learning the meaning of what we are about and employing

\textsuperscript{124} This latter claim is made on several occasions in \textit{Democracy and Education}, where Dewey states that “life means growth.” \textit{[DE 56]} Though, as I shall suggest, Dewey eventually drops this somewhat strong claim about the relationship between life and growth, it is what lies behind his statement in \textit{Human Nature and Conduct} that intelligent habits have an “élan” that routine habits do not.
Dewey here seems to propose an alternative understanding of growth or education: growth is a process that comes about as a result of our activity gaining in meaning. Specifically, growth occurs when we become more aware of the conditions under which our actions are undertaken and the consequences of undertaking them. The two conceptions of growth are intimately related, on my view, because it is increase in awareness or meaning that leads to the process of sublimation that constitutes growth. Consider, for example, the example of someone learning how to box. Fearing the attacks of a more skilled opponent, the beginner might decide to adopt a completely defensive mindset, blocking her face and turning away at any sign of attack. With time, however, she begins to see that such defensive postures generally only encourage the aggression of opponents, begins to understand how attacking more can actually forestall attacks from the opponent, and is therefore vital to defense. Here the meaning of defensive postures increases with experience, with a more fine-grained understanding of the possible conditions and consequences of defensive gestures in the ring. The impulse of fear, unable to express itself adequately in the act of taking up a solely defensive posture, becomes sublimated into a habit of offense, and the beginner thus grows as a boxer. Consider, alternatively, an individual who moves from a wealthy part of a city to an impoverished area. Initially he might continue to dress in the same extravagant way he dressed in the past, wearing the same expensive clothes and shoes, which in the old neighborhood allowed him to be regarded with a certain kind of respect. In the new neighborhood, however, he observes that he is treated with suspicion, resentment, or even outright hostility, that his way of dressing is interpreted as a mark of pride or arrogance. As in the previous example, a habitual activity – in this case, dressing – acquires more meaning, and this increase in meaning brings about a
sublimation of impulse into existing habit: the desire to fit in or to avoid humiliation leads one to change the way one dresses after being in the new neighborhood for some time. 

If these examples are correct they suggest that growth, for Dewey, involves two closely connected dimensions. Growth involves an increasing awareness of the conditions and consequences of one’s habitual activity – of the meaning or significance of one’s habits – together a consequent sublimation of unembodied impulses into one’s existing system of habits, causing a modification of that system of habits which allows impulses to become more effectively expressed in one’s habitual life. The increased awareness of the meaning of one’s habits that precedes sublimation can occur either in response to a change in environment, such that existing habits are no longer capable of functioning or of expressing impulse as well as they did before, or simply in response to keen observation and exploration of a complex world. The latter generally seems to characterize the growth of children more than adults, but as we shall see Dewey believes that having intelligent habit allows adults too to grow in this more self-directed manner rather than out of compulsion or necessity. If this interpretation of Dewey’s account of growth is correct, we can see why growth for Dewey is not merely a self-involved process that can take place away from the complexities and exigencies of real life: growth cannot take place without becoming more aware of the meaning of one’s habitual activity, and becoming more aware in this sense is becoming more aware of one’s relationship to one’s physical and especially social environments. This

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125 This second example shows us how growth need not be understood as giving rise to some permanent externally visible change. Suppose the individual in question moves back to his old neighborhood; it is plausible to imagine that his mode of dress will once more revert closer to the former style, his way of dressing in the poor part of the city becoming, when he returns, a source of hostility or suspicion from residents of the richer part of the city. This does not mean that the growth is taken back. Growth consists in increase in the meaning attached with the habit of dressing, and with a more flexible and conscious attitude towards dressing in general. The initial growth would remain, therefore, even if the individual moved back and returned to his former way of dressing.
coheres with the account of habit we examined in the previous chapter, according to which habits are defined partially by reference to concrete objects in the environments they function. Growth, since it results in modification of habit, constitutively involves a change in relationship between the self and its environments, and because environment for Dewey includes social environment, growth by definition cannot be a totally self-involved or egoistic process.

2. The Habits of Intelligence

I have argued so far that on Dewey’s account intelligent habits are open to the influence of impulse in the sense that impulses not embodied in existing habits can be sublimated into them. Sublimation, I have suggested, is to be identified with what Dewey calls growth, and comes about in response to an increased awareness of the conditions and consequences of one’s habitual activity. We are now in a position to examine Dewey’s account of how intelligent habit may be cultivated, how we may obtain what he calls intelligent rather than routine habit. We have already seen in the previous chapter how the conviction that stability and certainty are impossible leads Dewey to abandon the search for virtues, to abandon the search, that is, for universal habits that are worth cultivating regardless of individual, social, and historical context. As I have mentioned, though, Dewey does believe that there are certain second-order habits whose cultivation is generally if not universally important because of how they help us in deliberative contexts – contexts where our first-order habits conflict or where they do not apply in any straightforward way. The second-order habits that I will focus on in what follows are temperance, courage, sympathy, sensitivity, and open-mindedness, but it is worth keeping in mind that Dewey’s discussion of these second-order habits of deliberation is open-ended and suggestive rather than
The significant point is that for Dewey an individual who possesses these habits possesses what he refers to as intelligence or rationality:

Rationality, once more, is not a force to evoke against impulse and habit. It is the attainment of a working harmony among diverse desires. “Reason” as a noun signifies the happy cooperation of a multitude of dispositions, such as sympathy, curiosity, exploration, experimentation, frankness, pursuit – to follow things through – circumspection, to look about at the context, etc., etc. [HNC 136]

It is important to see that these habits which constitute intelligence or rationality do not in any conventional sense amount to a faculty of intelligence or rationality; they do not in any sense exist external to or above the rest of our habits. Possession of these habits of intelligence, as we might call them, changes the quality of our first-order habits, rendering them intelligent rather than routine. As we saw in the previous chapter, Dewey makes clear that we cannot think of habits on the model of pure tools. All habits have propulsive force and interpenetrate into other habits, and in this sense no habit, not even the habits of intelligence, can exist in tightly sealed compartments. It would be a mistake then to think that simply because the primary field of operation of the habits of intelligence are first-order habits, that simply because they are primarily second-order habits governing deliberation, they do not exercise influence over our lives in any direct or immediate way. The habits of intelligence do in fact contain substantial ethical content in the sense of shaping the quality and attitude of our lives in certain ways, and this is especially true, as we shall see, of the habits of sensitivity and open-mindedness.

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126 My account of the habits of intelligence largely follows that of Gregory Pappas (2008). Pappas discusses the different second-order habits and the role they have in Dewey’s conception of deliberation at length, noting that “the particularist thrust of Dewey’s moral philosophy is not incompatible with the broad concerns of virtue ethicists.” [185] Pappas however fails to go beyond this recognition of compatibility and see Dewey as heir to the virtue ethics tradition, a failure on my view that stems both from Pappas’ neglect of the importance of habit to Dewey’s ethical thought more generally, as well as his reluctance to acknowledge the importance of growth in Dewey.
Before we look at the specific habits of intelligence mentioned above in more detail, a few further qualifications are in order. It is important to note, first, that though the habits of intelligence are meant primarily to shape how we deliberate, they do not exhaust Dewey’s account of deliberation. As was mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, deliberation for Dewey is a complex process that cannot be reduced to any formal decision procedure, one that begins with the imaginary rehearsal of different possible solutions to a problematic solution and which leads to a provisional endorsement of a moral judgment that privileges one particular solution to the problem at hand. It is beyond the scope of these chapters to offer a comprehensive interpretation of Dewey’s larger account of deliberation, but it would also be a somewhat unnecessary task, as I have suggested, given how many commentators have already devoted themselves to it.127 My goal in this section will be rather to identify certain of the habits of intelligence which I take to be central to Dewey’s account, and to explicate the kind of function they perform with respect negotiating our first-order habits in deliberation. I will show how the habits of intelligence amount to a kind of parallel, within Dewey’s ethical system, of the notion of practical wisdom in the virtue ethics tradition, one which performs not only the role traditionally accorded to practical wisdom but which also goes beyond it in encouraging and fostering a life of continual growth. Growth in turn, as we shall see in the next section, is a necessary component of a flourishing life for Dewey, playing a similar albeit more modest role in his account to the role played by eudaimonia in the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition.

It will be useful in approaching the habits of intelligence to begin by first considering temperance and courage, two habits which in the virtue ethics tradition are used to refer to first-order virtues that shape how we live, but which Dewey reinterprets as second-order habits which

govern deliberation. Temperance for Dewey [cf. Ethics 258] is not the avoidance of excessive pleasure per se, but rather the habit of resisting the urgency of suddenly felt desire or impulse. It is important to deliberation because it allows us to avoid rash and dangerously passionate decisions, because it allows us the patience necessary for the careful consideration of an urgent end, so that we may discover, through the deliberative process, the ways in which it coheres with our other ends and the broader situation we find ourselves in. Temperance is vital, in this sense, to the goodness and viability of a deliberative decision. Courage in Dewey’s hands [cf. Ethics 258], similarly, is not so much a first-order habit that helps us in moments of physical danger but a second-order habit that encourages us, during deliberation, not to shy away from the decision that leads us towards obstacles or difficulty. For Dewey both temperance and courage are habits that are meant primarily to serve us during deliberative contexts, but this does not mean they do not also shape and color our lives outside these contexts. His point is that temperance and courage must be cultivated primarily as deliberative habits, for when approached solely as first-order habits they become stifling and inhibitory rather than positive resources for activity. “When, for example, an independent thing is made of temperance or self-control it becomes mere inhibition, a sour constraint,” while courage when cultivated as a first order habit “shrinks to mere stoical and negative resistance.” [Ethics 258] Dewey is not here suggesting that cultivating temperance and courage would not affect the shape and texture of our ordinary lives – he is arguing, rather, that they should be cultivated primarily as habits of intelligence rather than first-order habits of action.

The same is the case for sympathy, another important habit of intelligence. Sympathy, for Dewey, considered solely as a first-order habit, could very possibly lead to acts of charity and benevolence that are liable to harm not only the agent but also the beneficiary. As a habit which
governs our deliberation, however, sympathy becomes the ability to consider the perspectives and demands of other individuals when deciding upon a course of action:

The emotion of sympathy is morally invaluable. But it functions properly when used as a principle of reflection and insight, rather than of direct action. Intelligent sympathy widens and deepens concern for consequences. [Ethics 251]

If we keep in mind that deliberation involves the imaginative construction and consideration of different possible ways of responding to a problematic situation, then sympathy allows us to vividly and accurately incorporate the points of view of other people into our imaginary deliberative constructions. Unlike utilitarian accounts, which exhort us to consider the consequences of our actions on all relevant agents but which understand this consideration only in the most abstract and formal sense, Dewey’s habit of sympathy is meant to make other people a rich and substantial consideration in ethical deliberation. Like temperance and courage, therefore, it is a habit which is essential to good deliberation.

What Dewey calls the habits of sensitivity and open-mindedness are the two other important components of intelligence that it is necessary to discuss, but insofar as they concern the genesis of deliberation more than deliberation itself, they function slightly differently from the habits of temperance, courage, and sympathy. Sensitivity, to begin with, refers to the ability to emotionally perceive the ethically salient aspects of situations. “Emotional reactions,” Dewey writes, “form the chief materials of our knowledge of ourselves and of others.” [Ethics 269] To be sensitive is to be able to register the subtle emotional cues that a situation gives us – to feel for example that a situation is becoming dangerous, or that a person is in certain respects untrustworthy, or that someone’s attitude towards us has shifted slightly – as well as to understand how those cues are relevant for our choices.
Nothing can make up for the absence of immediate sensitiveness; the insensitive person is callous, indifferent. Unless there is a direct, mainly unreflective appreciation of persons and deeds, the data for subsequent thought will be lacking or distorted. A person must feel the qualities of acts as one feels with the hands the qualities of roughness and smoothness in objects, before he has an inducement to deliberate or material with which to deliberate. [*Ethics* 268-9]

The emotional evaluation of a situation as ethically salient, as Dewey says, precedes ethical deliberation and provides the material for deliberation. In this sense, someone without sensitivity would fail to perceive a situation as potentially ethically problematic, and would likely be unaware of its problematic character until it became too obvious to ignore, by which point negotiation of the problem might itself have become much more difficult or even impossible. Characterized in this way, sensitivity can be identified with the part of practical wisdom in Aristotelian virtue ethics which takes the development of our emotional responses to be a necessary condition for virtuous action. The question of registering the ethical salience of a situation is even more pressing for Dewey because according to his account there are countless ways in which any given situation could be of ethical significance to us. “To know when to leave acts without distinctive moral judgment and when to subject them to it,” he claims, “is itself a large factor in morality.” [*HNC* 31] Any action or activity may have consequences for what kind of person we become, and therefore our sensitivity to the different ethical questions a situation might lead to is itself a factor that shapes who we become.

Open-mindedness, like sensitivity, is a habit of intelligence which functions outside deliberative contexts and therefore in some sense determines them. Openness, for Dewey, is “an active disposition to welcome points of view hitherto alien; an active desire to entertain considerations which modify existing purposes.” [*DE* 82] Being open is not simply a matter of being receptive towards what is novel; it is rather a matter of showing active “hospitality” towards
the new. To have the habit of openness is to actively seek out what exists beyond one’s environments, whether this means putting oneself in uncomfortable situations or allowing oneself to be drawn towards what one does not know. Openness then is not so much a habit of deliberation as a habit that brings about deliberation, for deliberation, as we have seen, is precisely what we do when we find ourselves in new situations, in situations where our habits do not guide us forward in any obvious way. It should be obvious why open-mindedness, together with sensitivity, are the habits of intelligence most responsible for fostering growth. Open-mindedness thrusts us towards environments where our existing habits do not totally determine our conduct, and sensitivity allows us to register the ethical possibilities of these new environments. Finding ourselves in these novel situations we see the possibility of expressing impulses that were not previously expressed in our system of habits; if we discover that the possibility of expressing these previously unexpressed impulses is important to us, we deliberate so as to find ways of incorporating these new environments into our own, which means developing new habits and modifying old ones. To cultivate openness and sensitivity, therefore, is to cultivate habits that actively foster continual exploration and growth. While sympathy, prudence, and courage play an important role in fostering growth as well, insofar as they guide the actual deliberative process, the presence of openness and sensitivity makes our stance towards growth different. Without them we would be content to live in accordance with our existing system of habits, to grow only when we found our practical activity definitively interrupted by some change in the immediate situation. To be open and sensitive on the other hand is to actively seek new environments and new problems for their own sake, to live a life that is exploratory and experimental, a life which enthusiastically embraces change rather than merely acknowledges its practical necessity. In this sense the habits of sensitivity and openness carry more substantive ethical content than the other habits of intelligence.
discussed above, for while those habits do shape the texture of our ordinary lives to some degree, openness and sensitivity in and of themselves constitute a specific ethical approach to life.

It is not difficult to see why what I have called the habits of intelligence correspond to the notion of practical wisdom in the Aristotelian tradition. The exact nature of practical wisdom in Aristotle is of course a controversial question, but it is clear that the primary function of practical wisdom is to help us knowing when and how to apply the virtues in particular circumstances. That the second-order habits of temperance, courage, sympathy, sensitivity, and open-mindedness play a similar role in the exercise of our first-order habits is relatively straightforward, for as we have seen these habits are meant to help us understand in which concrete situations we should deliberate and to guide our deliberation about these concrete situations. We can see, therefore, that in addition to the conceptual similarities between the notion of habit and the notions of virtue and vice, there is also a structural similarity between Dewey’s ethical system and the Aristotelian tradition: in both systems there is the postulation of certain habits – the habits of intelligence in Dewey, and the virtue of practical wisdom in Aristotle – that are meant to guide how we exercise our first-order habits in particular contexts. The notion of intelligence goes beyond the notion of practical wisdom, though, insofar as it includes the habit of open-mindedness, which together with the habit of sensitivity helps us not only with deliberating in unavoidable circumstances, but also exhorts us towards new contexts and environments where new habits or the modification of old habits are required if our activity is to continue smoothly and without problems. Intelligence for Dewey therefore promotes a life of continual growth. In the next section we will discuss at length the status of growth as an end or ideal in Dewey’s ethical thought, but before we do so one last qualification needs to be made about the notion of intelligence.
We have been discussing intelligence as though it is a wholesale matter, but it is important to recognize that for Dewey there is no hard and fast distinction between the possession of intelligence and the lack of it. We saw in the previous chapter, in our discussion of the interpenetration of habit, that interpenetration is not usually complete or total – what Dewey calls strength of character, the interpenetration of all of ours habits into one another, is not so much a datum as an achievement. The same can be said about the habits of intelligence. They may be present in different people in different combinations, and the scope of their interpenetration into our other habits may vary. I might show sensitivity when it comes to issues of the workplace, for example, always anticipating and responding to possible problems that may arise, and yet I may totally lack this habit when it comes to affairs at home, so that I rarely attend to domestic issues that need to be addressed until it is too late. Similarly, I might be open-minded when it comes to my intellectual life, reading voraciously and moving from one subject to another without a sense of constraint, and yet I might lack openness in my personal life, failing to seek out individuals or communities or institutions other than those that I have grown accustomed to and familiar with. In this sense it is possible for some our habits to be intelligent while others are routine, for some parts of our lives to be filled with growth while others remain fixed and static.

3. Growth as an Intrinsic End

We have looked at several of Dewey’s habits of intelligence and how they influence our approach to deliberation, and we have seen why the cultivation of these habits can be viewed as the Deweyan parallel of practical wisdom. We have seen how, moreover, in addition to influencing our approach to deliberation, the habits of intelligence – particularly the habits of sensitivity and openness – seem to encourage a life of constant growth, and therefore carry with them concrete
consequences for how we approach our lives in general. We must now spend some time trying to understand what exactly the source of this normative recommendation is. Why is growth so important for Dewey that he incorporates the habit of open-mindedness into his notion of intelligence? The answer, as I have suggested, is that for Dewey growth constitutes a central dimension of a flourishing life. In *Human Nature and Conduct* Dewey suggests that there is a qualitative difference between routine and intelligent habits, between people whose habits are not amenable to growth and those whose habits are. The suggestion has often been ignored by commentators, but even passing attention to Dewey’s language in *Human Nature and Conduct* makes clear that he takes the quality of life provided by intelligent habit to be of great ethical significance. This significance shows up most vividly in the various references that are found throughout the text to the habitual and impulsive lives of children. In passages that are clearly reminiscent of Emerson, Dewey writes that the plasticity of habit in children confers upon their experience a kind of freshness or vividness that adults are rarely able to experience:  

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… the intimation never wholly deserts us that there is in the unformed activities of childhood and youth the possibilities of a better life for the community as well as for individuals here and there. This dim sense is the ground of our abiding idealization of childhood. For with all its extravagancies and uncertainties, it remains a standing proof of a life wherein growth is normal not an anomaly, activity a delight not a task, and where habit-forming is an expansion of power not its shrinkage. Habit and impulse may war with each other, but it is a combat between

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128 Dewey references Emerson explicitly while discussing the nostalgia for childhood that adults often feel. “… we have a sneaking sympathy for the courage of an Emerson in declaring that consistency should be thrown to the winds when it stands between us and the opportunities of present life. We reach out to the opposite extreme of our ideal of fixity, and under the guise of a return to nature dream of a romantic freedom, in which *all* life is plastic to impulse, a continual source of improvised spontaneities and novel inspirations. [*HNC 72*]
the habits of adults and the impulses of the young, and not, as with the adult, a civil warfare whereby personality is rent asunder. [HNC 71]

The extreme plasticity of habit in children, the fact that their habits have not hardened into fixed forms and are still receptive to the influence of impulse, means that the capacity for sublimation or growth is always present. This, Dewey suggests, gives the experience of childhood a kind of vividness or freshness that becomes increasingly difficult with aging. With the advent of age comes the increasing mechanization of habit, and while the mechanization of habit allows for certain kinds of practical efficiency, its effects are often largely negative on our quality of life:

[Habits] are blinders that confine the eyes of mind to the road ahead. They prevent thought from straying away from its imminent occupation to a landscape more varied and picturesque but irrelevant to practice. Outside the scope of habits, thought works gropingly, fumbling in confused uncertainty; and yet habit made complete in routine shuts in thought so effectually that it is no longer needed or possible. The routineer’s road is a ditch out of which he cannot get, whose sides enclose him, directing his course so thoroughly that he no longer thinks of his path or his destination. [HNC 121]

Despite this seemingly emphatic contrast of the plasticity of childhood habits with the fixity of adult habits, Dewey makes it clear that the routineer’s road, as he calls it, is not an unavoidable outcome for the adult. Even though the diminishing of plasticity with age is, as he acknowledges, an inevitable biological fact, it is within our power to maintain some degree of intelligence in our habitual systems, to maintain some room for the sublimation of habit.129 If it is possible to give a more prominent role to impulse in the lives of adults, Dewey argues, then perhaps something of the vividness of childhood can be retained:

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129 In Democracy and Education Dewey writes: “Routine habits, and habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity. There can be no doubt of the tendency of organic plasticity, of the physiological basis, to lessen with the growing years.” [54]
The first toddling is a romantic adventuring into the unknown; and every gained power is a delightful discovery of one’s own powers and of the wonders of the world. We may not be able to retain in adult habits this zest of intelligence and this freshness of satisfaction in newly discovered powers. But there is surely a middle term between a normal exercise of power which includes some excursion into the unknown, and a mechanical activity hedged within a drab world. [HNC 51]

It is clear from these passages that Dewey is putting forward the cultivation of intelligent habit and the possibility of growth that comes with it as a normative ideal, one that is worth following not merely for instrumental reasons. This is a significant point. We introduced the notion of intelligent habit as Dewey’s solution to a practical problem, the problem of maintaining an adaptable or flexible relation to our habits in a world in which stable, permanent habits are likely to lead to difficult and sometimes painful incongruities between self and world. In this sense intelligent habit is something we must adopt because it is the best way of managing our ever shifting contexts and environments with the resources we have. We see now, however, that Dewey seems to think of intelligent habit as worth cultivating apart from its helpfulness in negotiating change. Growth for Dewey is part of what it means to lead a flourishing life, and insofar as intelligent habit is necessary for growth, the cultivation of intelligent habit it is necessary for a life well-led, for an adult life that retains the vividness and freshness of childhood.130

What, however, is the exact status of growth as an end in and of itself? Is it a dominant end that trumps our other ends, or is it just one of several intrinsic ends that govern activity? The

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130 It is worth noting that Dewey is not suggesting that fully returning to the experience of childhood by means of intelligent habit is desirable or possible. It is not possible, as has already been mentioned, because of the biological fact that plasticity diminishes significantly with age. It is not necessarily desirable either, however, because the yearning to return fully to the world of childhood is a nostalgia that expresses dissatisfaction with the mechanization of adult life rather than the complete desirability of childhood. Even if returning to childhood was possible what would result would be an impotent, sentimental childishness rather than in the venerable childlikeness described in the passages discussed above.
question of the role of growth in Dewey’s ethical thought is difficult, and to answer it we will have to turn our attention to *Democracy and Education*, the text in which Dewey spends most time developing his views on growth. Before looking at this account it will be worthwhile, for the purposes of our broader interpretive project, to first make some comments about the role of *Democracy and Education* in Dewey’s ethical thought. This text is of course, as its title suggests, devoted primarily to Dewey’s revisionary conceptions of education, democracy, and the vital relationship between the two, and for this reason it has often been overlooked as a resource for understanding Dewey’s ethical thought. Writing towards the end of his career, however, Dewey claimed that it “was for many years that [work] in which my philosophy, such as it is, was most fully expounded.” [1930; p. 15] Dewey is clear in the text itself, moreover, that he sees *Democracy and Education* as being central to his philosophical project. In a telling passage where he is discussing the philosophy of education, he recasts the traditional pragmatist maxim that there can be no philosophical difference without a practical difference in pedagogical terms, arguing that education is the practical sphere in which differences in philosophy more generally must be tested:

> If a theory makes no difference in educational endeavor, it must be artificial. The educational point of view enables one to envisage the philosophic problems where they arise and thrive, where they are at home, and where acceptance and rejection makes a difference in practice. Education offers a vantage ground from which to penetrate to the human, as distinct from the technical, significance of philosophic discussions. If we are willing to conceive education as the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men, philosophy may even be defined as the general theory of education. [DE 338]

To describe philosophy as the general theory of education seems like a radical and perhaps even intentionally provocative statement, but it will be clear to any reader who has followed *Democracy and Education* up until the end that the claim is not mere exaggeration or rhetoric. Dewey gives
several plausible accounts of the consequences that traditional philosophical dualisms have had on pedagogical practice, and his critiques of traditional pedagogy in *Democracy and Education* are replete with restatements of central themes from his work in other areas of philosophy. Given his definition in the passage above of education as “the process of forming fundamental dispositions, intellectual and emotional, toward nature and fellow-men,” it should be clear why ethics in particular is central to Dewey’s educational thought. Education is about growth in the sense of the modification and development of new habits, and formal education for Dewey is simply a formal, institutionalized environment intended to foster growth in specific directions, growth which allows individuals to participate effectively in the complexity of modern social environments. If we accept that growth is a necessary part of a flourishing life, it follows naturally that education will be intimately related to ethical life.

Dewey is not, of course, the only philosopher who has brought attention to the relationship between ethics and education, for as is well known education in the sense of moral training or moral habituation is a central aspect of Aristotle’s ethical thought as well. For Aristotle having a good upbringing is essential to becoming a virtuous person, and ethics as a philosophical discipline can only be addressed to individuals who share such an upbringing, even if the demands of ethics are in some sense relevant to all agents. The specific details of Aristotle’s account of moral habituation have been debated by commentators, but it is obvious that it involves not only

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131 To give a few examples, the dualism between mind and body is, according to Dewey, responsible for the sharp division between liberal education and vocational training (*DE* pp. 316-330), while the dualism between mind and world is responsible for the sharp division between humanities and sciences (*DE* pp. 286-299). The spectator theory of knowledge and the separation it makes between knowing and doing, meanwhile, is manifest in the traditional pedagogical distinction between subject matter and method (*DE* pp. 301-15), while a false conception of the relationship between means and ends has led educators to view motivation of students in terms of external rewards and punishments instead of focusing on their natural interest in learning (*DE* pp. 301-15).
mechanically learning to do what is ethical but also shaping one’s desires, emotions, and rational capacities in the direction of the virtues. In this sense learning for Aristotle is very similar to learning for Dewey, which is also a process that involves the shaping of desire, emotion, and rational capacity. The two stances towards education differ radically, however, when it comes to the goals of education. Education for Aristotle is a finite, goal-oriented process, in the sense of beginning in childhood and coming to an end at a certain stage, at which point we can more or less take it for granted the individual has become a fully virtuous agent. Dewey by contrast repeatedly criticizes the idea that education should be seen as leading up to some final or finished state:

The seriousness of the assumption of the negative quality of the possibilities of immaturity is apparent when we reflect that it sets up as an ideal and standard a static end. The fulfilment of growing is taken to mean an accomplished growth: that is to say, an Ungrowth, something which is no longer growing. The futility of the assumption is seen in the fact that every adult resents the imputation of having no further possibilities of growth; and so far as he finds that they are closed to him mourns the fact as evidence of loss, instead of falling back on the achieved as adequate manifestation of power. Why an unequal measure for child and man? [DE 47]

The traditional conception of education, which has followed the Aristotelian treatment in this respect, treats the goal of education as leading to a state after which further education will no longer be necessary – once the child has been furnished with the intellectual capacities that allow it to become a useful contributor to society, to share the values and norms of the community etc., there will no longer be need for further growth. For Dewey, on the other hand, growth is something that can and should continue throughout the life of the individual, and those responsible for formal education must view the growth it fosters in children as no different:

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132 See for example Burnyeat’s “Aristotle on Learning to be Good” or Hursthouse’s “Moral Habituation.”
The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling... Since life means growth, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. [DE 55]

While it is reasonable to expect education to achieve certain outcomes in children, for Dewey it is counterproductive to conceive of education as a purely goal-oriented enterprise. “Growth,” on traditional conceptions of schooling, is mistakenly “regarded as having an end, instead of being an end.” [DE 56] One of the consequences of this view is that education gets seen as a dreary, mechanical process that a child must be forced to engage in rather than something the child will organically find pleasure and enjoyment in, so that a regime of punishment and reward must be introduced as a form of external motivation.133

In line with his discussion of intelligent habit in *Human Nature and Conduct*, these passages seem to suggest that growth for Dewey is an intrinsic rather than a merely instrumental end of activity. Significantly, though, there are several passages in *Democracy and Education* where Dewey seems to suggest that growth is not only an intrinsic end but also the most dominant or most important end of human life – that it is, even, biologically constitutive of human life. Commentators such as Axel Honneth (1998) have pointed to these passages and others, arguing that Dewey grounds his concept of growth in an indefensible biological teleology and in doing so

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133 This view is a consequence of Dewey’s account of means and ends more generally (cf. *HNC* pp. 154-163). For Dewey we must abandon the dualism of means and ends, because reflection on either is impossible without the other. On the one hand, we do not know what are ends are, what we really value, until we know what means we are willing to adopt for their sake. On the other hand, and more relevant to the point made above about reward and punishment, we cannot successfully achieve our ends unless we are willing to view the means required to achieve them as ends in themselves. A regime of reward and punishment is ineffective, in other words, insofar as it has to be introduced because classes and lessons are so mechanical and dreary that they cannot be engaged in as ends in themselves.
also abandons his commitment to the plurality of ethical considerations, promoting growth as the single most important ethical consideration. Such interpretations attribute a basic inconsistency to Dewey which would, if correct, be very problematic, but on my view the reading of growth as biologically constitutive of human life and as the dominant end of human activity are both inaccurate characterizations of Dewey’s views. The issue is central to our purposes here, and it will be worthwhile therefore spending some time looking at the relevant passages in some detail.

The suggestion that growth is an ideal that is biologically constitutive of human life is brought up at the very beginning of Democracy and Education, when Dewey discusses the significance of education to the maintenance of life. Dewey begins by distinguishing between living and non-living things on the grounds that the former renew themselves while the latter do not. “The most notable distinction between living and inanimate beings,” he writes, “is that the former maintain themselves by renewal.” [DE 4] The idea here is that living things attempt to use the energies of their environments to maintain some kind of core structural or functional integrity, whereas non-living things do not. When for example a stone is struck it resists the pressure of the blow, but if its resistance is not as strong as the blow it shatters into pieces. A living thing on the other hand tries to incorporate these external forces into itself in productive ways, and if it fails it loses not just its structural identity but its identity as a living thing – its identity as something that seeks to maintain aspects of its structure and functioning. “Life,” Dewey concludes, “is a self-renewing process through action upon the environment.” [DE 4] In humans this process of self-renewal takes places on at least two levels, first and most obviously on the level of the individual, including the physical growth and repair of the body as well as what we have been calling the

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134 Honneth himself seems incredulous at the obviousness of the error his interpretation attributes to Dewey. “It seems that here everything has been forgotten,” he writes after concluding his interpretation, “about what Dewey said previously with regard to the regulative principle of the “inclusive good”…” [pp. 706-7]
ethical growth of the individual. Growth cannot continue in the individual indefinitely, of course, since the power of renewal dissipates over time, forcing all individuals to succumb eventually to the pressures of environmental forces. This does not mean that the process of renewal ceases in humans when they die, though, for renewal also occurs on the second level, that of society. With each new generation society attempts to renew itself, and formal education is an essential aspect of this social renewal. “Education, in its broadest sense, is the means of this social continuity of life.” [DE 5] It is for this reason that Dewey thinks that education should emphasize growth rather than fixity of habit, for as environments change societies too, not just individuals, are called upon to change. An educational system that tries to rigidly recreate every previous generation through schooling will be a society that fails to renew itself in the way necessary for continued existence in a constantly changing environment.

It should be obvious, given Dewey’s definition of life as self-renewal, how growth might be seen as not just an intrinsic but as a dominant end built into the concept of life. For given that the aim of life is self-renewal, and that what we have been calling ethical growth is a vital component of the process of renewal as it occurs in human beings, it would seem to follow that individuals qua human beings must aim at growth. Dewey is explicit about this point in the chapter on growth in Democracy and Education that comes soon after these passages on renewal. “Since life means growth,” he writes [DE 56, my emphasis], “a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims.” Such passages very much seem to suggest, as commentators like Honneth have argued, that for Dewey growth is not only an intrinsic end but more importantly a dominant end that is grounded ultimately in a teleological conception of life. Though I disagree with this reading, there does seem to be much to recommend it. First, as we have already seen in the previous chapter, Dewey is no stranger
to appeals to human nature in order to justify his claims in ethics. His account of habit appeals to the fact that their proper functioning requires them to be expressive of impulse, and relies on the view that conditions of modern industrial labor violate human nature in this sense; more generally, his account of habit and impulse are clearly meant to based on contemporaneous research in social psychology. Second, the appeal to growth as constitutive of human life parallels the appeal that Aristotle makes in his famous function argument to virtuous activity as constitutive of human life, an appeal that is paralleled more generally by appeals that recent virtue ethicists have made to different conceptions of human nature or natural human functioning in order to ground the virtues. What could be easier, then, if we are reading Dewey as a virtue ethicist, to see him too as attempting to ground his ideal of growth on some conception of human nature or human life?

In response to these considerations, we must distinguish first between something’s being grounded in human nature and something’s being a dominant end in life. We might say for example, that the aim of reproduction is grounded in the biology of human beings, in the sense that it is constitutive of properly functioning members of the human species to aim at reproduction, but this would be very far from saying that this is the dominant end of human life. As McDowell (1998) has argued, the rational self-consciousness of humans implies that what might in lower organisms be understood as aims constitutive of the nature of those organisms can, in the case of humans, be questioned and rejected not just as dominant aims but even as non-dominant aims. One only needs to consider, for example, the increasing number of same-sex couples in industrialized societies, or the increasing number of heterosexual couples that are choosing not to have children.

choices which would, it seems, suggest that one of the most traditionally prominent candidates for an end that is constitutive of human life can be rejected as ends by rational agents. The issue about the relationship between human nature and the ends of life is a complex one that has engaged many prominent virtue ethicists, but fortunately we can in any case leave the question aside for present purposes, since Dewey himself seems to drop the claim of growth as constitutive of human life in later works. Even in *Human Nature and Conduct*, which was published only three years after *Democracy and Education* and which describes growth as a necessary component of human flourishing, the relationship between the constitutiveness of growth to human life or functioning is never mentioned. Dewey does, however, seemingly continue to endorse growth as a dominant end in later works, above all in the mature *Ethics* of 1932. It is to these passages that we must turn our focus, for even if there is sound textual basis to disagree with Honneth’s claim about the mature Dewey’s purported biological justification for growth as an intrinsic ideal, the mere suggestion that growth is the dominant end of human life is itself a prima facie problematic one. The remarks that Honneth refers to come in the chapter on “The Moral Self” which occurs towards the end of the middle section of *Ethics*:

> In the strictest sense, it is impossible for the self to stand still; it is becoming, and becoming for the better or the worse. It is in the *quality* of becoming that virtue resides. We set up this and that end to be reached, but the end is growth itself. To make an end a final goal is but to arrest growth. Many a person gets morally discouraged because he has not attained the object upon which he set his resolution, but in fact his moral status is determined by his movement in that direction, not by his possession. If such a person would set his thought and desire upon the process of evolution instead of upon some ulterior goal, he would find a new freedom and happiness. [*Ethics* 307, my emphasis]

Note, first, that in line with my suggestion above, Dewey here drops the claim of growth as a biologically grounded end, appealing instead to the qualitative aspect of growth to justify its status
as an intrinsic end. As in *Human Nature Conduct* but unlike in *Democracy and Education*, growth is worth pursuing in and of itself not because it is part of our biological nature but because it is a necessary component of a flourishing life, providing us with “a new freedom and happiness.” More difficult to make sense of, of course, is Dewey’s very strong claim that growth is “the end.” It is clear that Dewey cannot mean that growth is the *only* end, for this would fly in the face both of common sense and the fact that Dewey explicitly acknowledges, in the same line, that we do have other ends.\(^{136}\) What Dewey appears to be saying here, then, in line with the second of Honneth’s interpretive claims, is not that growth is the only end but that it is the most important of all our ends – that it is our dominant end.

If this interpretation were correct Dewey’s would indeed be a very unsatisfying position. Consider, for example, the case of an individual who privileges growth to such an extent that it comes at the cost of satisfying other ends, of an individual who follows Emerson’s exhortation in “Self-Reliance” to forever continuing breaking boundaries no matter what the consequences. Such individuals are likely to learn much more about themselves and the world than less adventurous people, it is true, but they are also likely to do so only at the cost of much to themselves and others. A person who chooses to join a war effort just for the adventure of it, for example, privileging growth over and above the ends of safety and security, can very possibly be harmed in a very serious way, even hampering the likelihood of future growth. Or consider, to use a different kind of example taken from Bernard Williams (1981) “Moral Luck,” how unforgiving we would be towards a man who leaves behind his dependent family in order to seek growth, forsaking all his obligations to them. Dewey does indeed seem to get worryingly close to endorsing such a position:

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\(^{136}\) Dewey is a pluralist about ends in that he does not think that our ends can be reduced to a single conception of the good such as pleasure or desire-satisfaction (*cf. Ethics* pp. 184-213).
Indeed, we may say that the good person is precisely the one who is most conscious of the alternative, and is the most concerned to find openings for the newly forming or growing self; since no matter how “good” he has been, he becomes “bad” (even though acting upon a relatively high plane of attainment) as soon as he fails to respond to the demand for growth. [*Ethics 307*]

Here Dewey seems to go to the extent of suggesting that not just the other ends we deem important to our welfare but even our moral obligations must be disregarded in favor of the ideal of growth. A careful reading of the passage and its context, however, shows this to be an uncharitable reading. Dewey’s use of quotation marks around the terms “good” and “bad” indicates, to begin with, that he is speaking somewhat rhetorically when identifying the good person as the person who cares for growth as opposed to conventional moral obligations. He does, it is true, take growth to be an end in and of itself, an intrinsic end, but the passages in question occur after several chapters devoted to the notions of the good, of moral right and obligation, and of moral approbation and censure, chapters in which Dewey clearly states that each of these notions are central considerations in ethical life. Dewey is a pluralist about the considerations that can figure in ethical deliberation, and states on several occasions that it is impossible to adjudicate in the abstract about which considerations must take precedence when deliberating about a given situation. “A moral philosophy which should frankly recognize the impossibility of reducing all the elements in moral situations to a single commensurable principle, which should recognize that each human being has to make the best adjustment he can among forces which are genuinely disparate, would throw light upon actual predicaments of conduct and help individuals in making a juster estimate of the force of each competing factor.” [*TIFM 288*] Dewey is explicit that moral obligation (as

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137 The claim that satisfaction of ends, moral obligations, and social approbation and censure are all distinct and irreducible considerations in ethical deliberation is the central thesis of Dewey’s celebrated paper “Three Independent Factors in Morals.”
well as consideration of other ends) have a central place in ethical deliberation, and for this reason we simply cannot read him as making some kind of absolute end out of the notion of growth or as abstractly exalting it over and above our other ethical considerations. It is not an objection to Dewey’s account to point out that some forms of growth are morally problematic or that some forms of growth may stunt our growth in other directions, because for Dewey there is always room in deliberation for considerations that militate against such forms of growth.

What then can Dewey mean when he claims in these passages that “the end is growth”? On my view, Dewey’s claim is not that growth must always take precedence over other ends, but rather that growth is the only end which is always present as an end in ethical deliberation. To see how this is the case, begin by noting that there are two different kinds of situation in which we might be called upon to make an ethical deliberation, one in which there is a change in the environment such that we are compelled to revise our existing habits, and one in which there is a change in the environment that does not so much compel as offer the possibility of revising our existing habits. The difference corresponds to changes in those aspects of the environment that our habits objectively require for their functioning, and changes in those aspects of the environment that do not concretely involve our habits but which nevertheless present us with the possibility of a different kind of life, a life in which our impulses are more wholly expressed. To begin with the first kind of deliberative context, suppose for example that we learn that the partner we loved and trusted has been unfaithful to us. There has been a change in our situation such that our existing habitual life cannot continue as it has up till now. One of the objects that constitutes our habitual life, our partner, has changed in some significant way (at least in our perception of them), and we are compelled to make a choice between staying in the relationship by working through our issues, and leaving our partner and beginning life as a single person, finding other ways to satisfy our
needs for companionship and intimacy. In this type of case we have a choice between two kinds of growth. Perhaps one choice requires more growth than the other – perhaps staying with our partner and working things out is the easier option – but in either case, no matter what we choose, a certain kind of growth will be the result of our deliberation. Consider now the second kind of deliberative context, when the situation at hand does not so much force us into deliberation as suggest it. Suppose for example that I am living my ordinary, seemingly perfectly adequate or satisfactory life, when I come across a person who immediately intrigues and attracts me. Nothing in my situation necessitates that I do anything, that I seek to make changes in my habitual system by trying to make this person part of my life, but the encounter does provide me with the possibility of a new kind of life, the possibility of a life in which impulses previously unexpressed might find expression. Such encounters need not be romantic, of course, and can just as well suggest possibilities for association with new communities or for engagement with new skills or interests. They can occur to anyone, but they occur most frequently and intensely to people who have the habits of open-mindedness and sensitivity, to people are continually investigating the unknown. In these kinds of situation, even though we are being presented with a choice not between two kinds of growth but between growth and no growth, growth is still an end that figures vitally in deliberation, whether or not we end up endorsing it in the situation at hand.

In both kinds of context, therefore, growth is always present as an end in deliberation. Consider, in contrast, other ends we might have: to obtain pleasure of various kinds, to achieve

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138 This second kind of deliberative context need not arise in response to actual changes in the environment; it might arise simply in response to noticing something already present in the environment that one has not noticed before. Consider as a variation of the above example a situation in which we suddenly begin paying attention to someone in our life that we have not paid attention to before, in which for whatever reason we suddenly develop a liking or infatuation for such a person. Here deliberation is brought about not by any obvious change in the environment but due rather to a change in our own perception of the environment.
Recognition in some field, to help someone near and dear to us. Such considerations might be present in specific deliberative contexts, but they are not relevant to every deliberation. The question of success in my chosen field, for example, simply doesn’t arise when I am deliberating about whether to stay with a partner who has been unfaithful to me – the end is irrelevant to the deliberative context. The same is not the case for growth, however, and this is a point which has to do with the way Dewey frames the general context in which ethical deliberation takes place. We deliberate, according to Dewey, whenever our habitual activity comes to a stop because conditions have changed, either so as to make an existing system of habits impossible or so as to make an alternative system of habits seem viable and attractive. In every ethical deliberation there is a question about whether and how to modify our habits – about what kind of character we want to have – and the question of growth is therefore always present. Growth, in other words, is a consideration that is always present in ethical deliberation and which has its source not in this or that particular situation but rather in the very structure of ethical life itself. Ethical life is structured by our system of habits and the ways they channel our impulses and allow us to relate to our environments, and given this structure growth is always a relevant consideration. It is in this very particular sense, on my reading, that growth for Dewey can be considered “the end.” If this suggestion is right, we do not need to attribute to any blatant inconsistency to Dewey. On the one hand acknowledgment of the importance of growth in his system does not mean jettisoning the system as a whole, which would be the implication if Honneth is right that growth is the dominant end, and on the other hand taking Dewey’s ethical system seriously need not require, as some commentators have assumed, that we minimize or deny the importance that growth plays in it.\textsuperscript{139}

\textsuperscript{139} See for example Elizabeth Anderson’s (2018)’s otherwise excellent summary of Dewey’s ethical thought, which does not once mention the concept of growth. Pappas’ interpretation goes further in
We are now in a position to look more closely at the claim made in the previous section that growth plays a structural role in Dewey’s ethics similar to that played by eudaimonia in the Aristotelian virtue ethics tradition. Now the nature of eudaimonia and its role within Aristotle’s ethical system is, of course, a notoriously difficult issue for scholars of Aristotle, but we will not have to enter into these issues to indicate how growth and eudaimonia play structurally similar roles in the two ethical systems. The parallel role I have in mind is a broadly justificatory one that has been appealed to by contemporary virtue ethicists in the Aristotelian tradition who would not accept many of the specific details of Aristotle’s view. Virtuous activity, understood by most contemporary eudaimonists as activity in accordance with the virtues of character and practical wisdom, is held to be something we must strive for because this is what it means to live a flourishing life, a life of eudaimonia. Eudaimonia, on these views, is what justifies the cultivation and exercise of the virtues. Now though Dewey does not attach much importance to the virtues of character, as we have seen, he does elaborate several second order habits that govern deliberation, the habits of intelligence, which constitute his own version of practical wisdom. Just as eudaimonia is meant to ground the virtues in Aristotelian virtue ethics, on my interpretation it is the end of growth that is meant to ground the habits of intelligence in Dewey’s system. We have already seen how acting in accordance with the habits of intelligence is essential to a life filled with continual growth, and how the habits of intelligence, especially the habit of open-mindedness, foster such a life. Given that continuous growth is an essential part of Dewey’s conception of a flourishing life,

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140 It is unclear, for example, whether eudaimonia for Aristotle is an inclusive end (a composite of several ends, each of them intrinsically good) or a dominant end (a single end that is more important than any other), and it also unclear whether Aristotle takes eudaimonia to consist in virtuous activity in accordance with reason, or in theoretical activity alone. For a basic account of these interpretive debates see Akrill (1974) and Kraut (1989).
of a life that retains the zest and vividness of childhood, it should be clear how growth in turn provides a justification for the cultivation and exercise of the habits of intelligence.

Though both Aristotelian virtue ethics and Dewey’s ethical system share a broad justificatory structure wherein the notion of a flourishing life justifies the cultivation and exercise of certain habits or virtues, it is important to keep in mind that growth plays a far more modest role for Dewey than eudaimonia does in eudaimonistic virtue ethics. While both growth and eudaimonia are meant to be ends worth pursuing in and of themselves, eudaimonia in the Aristotelian tradition is usually taken to be the end for which all other ends are pursued, as well as being an end that is not pursued for the sake of any other end. Growth on the other hand, as we have seen, is merely one component of a flourishing human life, and we cannot reasonably read Dewey as claiming that growth exhausts what it means to flourish as a human or that all our other ends are pursued for the sake of growth. Dewey is explicit, moreover, that growth is important as a means of resuming stalled activity, of adapting to situations in which the objects of habitual activity have been changed or removed, and thus it is clear that growth, unlike eudaimonia, can also be a significant instrumental end. Finally, Aristotle’s substantive conception of eudaimonia as rational activity in accordance with the virtues is explained by appeal to a biological-teleological conception of human nature, whereas on Dewey’s considered view growth is an intrinsic end not because of any fact about human nature or human functioning (though Dewey has, as we have seen, flirted with this idea) but because of phenomenological considerations about what a flourishing human life must plausibly look like. For all these reasons growth is a less outsized end than eudaimonia, and for all these reasons the justificatory role growth plays in Dewey’s ethical system is correspondingly more modest than that of eudaimonia in the Aristotelian tradition. Whereas most contemporary eudaimonists would take a substantive account of eudaimonia to
ground, at the very least, all of the practical virtues as well as the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, for Dewey growth only serves to justify the cultivation and exercise of a much more limited set of habits, what we have been calling the habits of intelligence. The important point these differences in justificatory ambition leave untouched is that both approaches have a parallel justificatory structure. As I have argued, this parallel justificatory structure together with the strong conceptual affinities between habit and virtue, on the one hand, and the correspondence between the habits of intelligence and the virtue of practical wisdom, on the other hand, suggest that Dewey’s ethical system must be seen not as competing with the Aristotelian tradition but as growing out of it and significantly reworking it.

4. Dewey and the Virtue Ethics Tradition

We are now finally in a position to bring together the discussions of the present chapter and the previous chapter, to take a step back and reflect on what the interpretive suggestions I have made about Dewey’s notions of habit, impulse, intelligence, and growth tell us about Dewey’s ethical thought more generally. In the previous chapter we examined the general role of uncertainty and instability in Dewey’s thought, then looked at the way Dewey’s ethical thought – specifically his theory of habit – gives prominence to the fact of contingency in ethical life. Dewey’s theory of habit, we saw, takes habit to be partially constituted by specific objects in the environment, and this fact together with the propulsiveness of habit means that one of the central problems of ethical life is negotiating the fact that habits propel us to act in the same ways even as the variability of the environment makes such constancy impossible. We began this chapter with an examination of Dewey’s solution to this problem, his account of intelligent habit. Intelligent habit, we saw, is habit in which impulse can be sublimated, and which is therefore central to our capacity for growth. We
looked at some of the specific habits that Dewey takes to confer intelligence on our general body of habits, and saw how the habit of open-mindedness in particular has substantive ethical content in the sense of actively encouraging and fostering growth. In the last section we examined Dewey’s notion of growth more closely, and saw that growth for Dewey is an intrinsic end because of the vital contribution it makes to a flourishing human life. Growth is not, as critics have sometimes claimed, a dominant end in Dewey’s ethics, nor is it an end grounded in any specific biological or teleological conception of human life. It is, however, a vital constituent of a flourishing life, and is unique as an end in the sense that it arises out of the very structure of ethical life itself and is therefore always present, even if not explicitly, in ethical deliberation.

We are now in a position to return to the remarks made at the beginning of the previous chapter on Dewey’s relationship to the virtue ethics tradition. I suggested there that Dewey should be considered part of the virtue ethics tradition, as opposed to the utilitarian and deontological traditions in modern ethics, because of the conceptual and structural similarities between his approach to ethics and that of Aristotelian tradition. In the previous chapter we examined some of the ways in which the concept of habit in Dewey parallels Aristotelian concepts of virtue and vice, and in the present chapter we have seen how Dewey’s habits of intelligence perform a function very similar to that played by practical wisdom in the virtue ethics tradition. We have seen, moreover, that the concept of growth for Dewey plays a justificatory role in Dewey’s ethics that is analogous to, albeit more modest than, that played by eudaimonia in the Aristotelian tradition. All these considerations suggest, as I have argued, a reading of Dewey as fundamentally influenced by the Aristotelian tradition in ethics, as providing an approach to ethics that can be seen indeed as a radical revision of that tradition. Now as was mentioned at the beginning of the previous chapter, there are several reasons one might be hesitant about accepting such a claim. The first set
of considerations have to do with Dewey’s own attitude towards ethical theory and the virtues, and
the second set of considerations have to do with how we understand the historical trajectory of
virtue ethics. In this concluding section I want to discuss these two considerations and to explain
why, given the interpretation forwarded in these two chapters, I do not take them to present
problems for my proposed inclusion of Dewey in the virtue ethics canon.

The most obvious issue with my claim about Dewey’s relationship to the tradition has to
do with his own explicit remarks about the role of the virtues in ethical life. We have already seen
that Dewey’s theory of habit rejects the universality and context-independence of habits (and
therefore of the virtues), and that the closest he gets to endorsing any habits in a general sense are
the habits of intelligence. Dewey neglects to discuss most of the traditional Aristotelian virtues,
except for example in his reinterpretations of temperance and courage as habits of intelligence,
and denies moreover any claim that ethical life can be understood solely in terms of virtues and
vices. As we have already mentioned in passing, in Dewey’s important 1930 essay “Three
Independent Factors in Morals,” one of the few texts where he discusses virtue and vice at length,
Dewey’s goal is to show that there are at least three independent kinds of considerations that might
be brought to bear in ethical deliberation. There are considerations of what would be good for us
(what our ends our, what we desire), considerations of what our duty is (what others demand of
us, what the law demands), and considerations of whether our actions will be lauded or derided
(whether they are virtuous or vicious).\textsuperscript{141} As many commentators have pointed out, this means that

\textsuperscript{141} A virtue, as Dewey defines it in this essay, is to be understood simply as a character trait that is socially
praised, while a vice is a character trait that is chastised. Dewey’s usage of the terms here has its origin not
in the Aristotelian notions of virtue and vice, in which virtuous activity is seen as constitutive of the good
or flourishing life, but rather in what he calls “English moral theory,” referring specifically to Hume’s
notions of virtue and vice. Dewey’s interest in virtue and vice here lies not in their contribution to any
unified character type that defines a good or flourishing life, therefore, but rather in the importance of the
estimation of others in our ethical deliberation.
Dewey’s approach to ethical deliberation is pluralistic – there are many different and irreducible *kinds* of consideration that he takes to be relevant to ethical deliberation. “What is good from the standpoint of desire is wrong from the standpoint of social demands; what is bad from the first standpoint may be heartily approved [as virtuous] by public opinion.” [TIFM 287] Each of these considerations capture different aspects of ethical life, for Dewey, but philosophers have gone astray in taking these aspects of ethical life to exhaust the whole. If this is the case, it would seem that in addition to rejecting utilitarianism and deontological theories, Dewey also rejects any approach to ethical life that takes the virtues and vices to be fundamental to or exhaustive of ethical life. Many contemporary virtue ethicists, however, take the centrality of virtue and vice to be definitive of virtue ethical approaches. Christine Swanton (2013), for example, claims that the broadest and most inclusive definition of virtue ethics is as an approach to ethical life that makes virtue and vice central in its account of right and wrong action (as opposed, for example, to definitions of virtue ethics that focus on agent-centeredness or the connection between virtue, practical wisdom, and flourishing). If this was the case, Dewey would clearly be excluded from the virtue ethics tradition. In neglecting to talk about specific virtues and vices (except perhaps for the second-order habits of intelligence), he cannot furnish us with concrete rules for action in the way that conventional virtue ethicists might – he cannot, for example, provide us with what Hursthouse (1999) has called V-rules, rules of the form “Be kind” or “Don’t be callous.”

On my view, it would be narrow-minded to deny Dewey’s position in the canon of virtue ethics because he fails to give pride of place to the concepts of virtue and vice or to explain right and wrong action in terms of them. To begin with, as I have already suggested, the concept of habit can be seen as a psychologically rich, value-neutral replacement of the Aristotelian concepts of virtue and vice. The concept of habit shares many of the features of virtue – the fact that habits are
learned manifestation of skill, that they have emotional and cognitive dimensions, and that they are propulsive – and to say therefore that Dewey rejects talk of universal, context-independent virtues is not to say that he does not think of ethics in terms that are substantially consonant with them. In taking habit to be the basis of ethical life, as we have seen, Dewey gives pride of place in his ethical thought to several themes that have also been seen as central to the virtue ethics tradition: character as a focal point for evaluating action, practical wisdom as a means of negotiating problematic ethical situations, the relationship between ethical life and education, and the relationship between ethics and human flourishing. While it is true that none of these themes need be seen as definitive of virtue ethics, the project of finding necessary and sufficient conditions for a theory to count as virtue ethical is itself somewhat misguided. Given the diversity of thinkers who can plausibly be considered virtue ethicists, from Confucius to Nietzsche, a more pluralistic approach would take virtue ethics to be a family resemblance concept rather than a strictly defined and sharply demarcated group of theories.

This becomes especially clear when we consider Swanton’s own criteria that a virtue ethical approach to ethics must take virtue and vice as primary in explaining right and wrong action. To take the provision of rules for action as a criterion for a theory’s being a virtue ethics is to rule out several views that are very clearly virtue ethical in inspiration and substance. Consider for example Robert Louden’s (1990) persuasive argument that there is a significant tendency towards anti-theory in modern virtue ethics, where to be anti-theoretical is to reject of some or all of the theoretical demands placed on ethical theory by writers from the modern utilitarian and deontological traditions. Such writers generally expect ethical theory to provide us with decision procedures to solve ethical problems, and generally expect that these decision procedures to be stated at some level of abstraction, to be universal in their application, and to be objective in the
sense of not being contingent on the beliefs and values of any particular individual or group. As Louden argues, much of what is commonly counted as virtue ethical denies the possibility of meeting many of these theoretical demands, and therefore counts in various ways as anti-theoretic. Elizabeth Anscombe (1958), for example, who is often seeing as the pioneer of the study of the virtues and vices in twentieth century, goes so far as to claim that “it is not profitable for us at present to do moral philosophy; that should be laid aside at any rate until we have an adequate philosophy of psychology, in which we are conspicuously lacking.” In denying that virtues and vices exhaust ethical considerations and that virtues and vices (or any other kinds of ethical theory) can provide us with a procedure, formal or otherwise, for resolving real life ethical problems, Dewey must be seen, on my view, as belonging to this anti-theoretical strand of the virtue ethical tradition. His reluctance to discuss the traditional virtues and vices or to claim that we can navigate ethical life in terms of virtue and vice alone should be viewed as part of a principled refusal to meet theoretical demands such as providing rules for action or decision procedures for ethically problematic situations. Many recent contemporary virtue ethicists have, of course, tried to show how virtue ethics can meet such demands – Nussbaum (1993) with the demand for objectivity, for example, and Hursthouse (1999) with the demand for formal rules – but there is good reason I think to see these writers as deviating from the anti-theoretic spirit that has characterized much modern ethics. As Talbot Brewer (2011) in the introduction of her Retrieval of Ethics has argued, many of the pioneers in the twentieth century revival of virtue ethics, Anscombe and MacIntyre in particular, were steadfast in their broadly anti-theoretical inclinations, and to the extent that recent

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142 Though Dewey rejects Anscombe’s suggestion that ethical thought must do away entirely with the notions of right and obligation, there are other ways in which his approach is consonant with hers. Dewey can for example be read as making good on Anscombe’s demand for a philosophy of psychology. Specifically, his theory of habit can be seen as meeting her demand that we need to better understand what kind of characteristic a virtue is.
virtue ethicists have attempted to show that such demands are in fact possible to satisfy, they represent an attempt to compromise on these more radical aspects of the twentieth century revival of virtue ethics in an effort to present virtue ethics as a viable theoretical competitor to utilitarianism and deontological theory.

This point brings us to the other set of considerations that might cause us to hesitate in seeing Dewey as part of the virtue ethics tradition: the current widely accepted narrative about the trajectory of virtue ethics in the Western philosophical tradition. According to this narrative, virtue-theoretic approaches fell out of repute after several centuries of prominence in the classical Greek, Islamic, and medieval Christian philosophical traditions, so that deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethical questions came to dominate the modern European philosophical scene. It was only beginning in the mid-twentieth century, according to this narrative, thanks in large part to the pioneering work of writers like Anscombe and Foot, that interest in Aristotle’s ethics and the virtue-ethical tradition more generally was revived, leading to renewed significance being attached to the tradition from the late twentieth century onwards.\(^\text{143}\) If this narrative is true, then it makes sense that there would be reluctance or unwillingness to see that and how Dewey might fit into the tradition. It is not surprising given the predominance of this narrative that recent interpreters have failed to see how, already in the early twentieth century, Dewey could have taken the virtue-ethical framework as providing a serious and compelling framework for thinking about ethical life.\(^\text{144}\) If my interpretation is correct, therefore, it would also force us to significantly

\(^{143}\) See Timothy Chappell (2016) for a sophisticated exposition of this dominant narrative of the history of virtue ethics.

\(^{144}\) Another narrative about Anglophone philosophy more broadly in the twentieth century might also be connected with this interpretive blindness. This is the narrative proposed by Richard Rorty (1967), among others, of the linguistic turn in philosophy during the early twentieth century, a development which in ethics has its manifestation in the movement away from normative ethics and towards meta-ethics. It is no doubt true that meta-ethics rather than normative ethics has been one of the prominent domains for novel work in
rethink the current historiography of modern ethics. A growing body of compelling recent virtue-ethical interpretations of figures such as Hume and Nietzsche has already led to a more complex understanding of the place of virtue ethics in the modern philosophical tradition and to a questioning of the prevailing narrative, and my reading of Dewey would contribute to this more complex and historically nuanced narrative.\footnote{145}

The question of how we should understand virtue ethics and the place of virtue ethics in the history of Western philosophy is a complex one, a question which cannot be discussed here in any detail or finality. What I have tried to suggest is that two of the major sources of hesitation in including Dewey as part of the virtue ethics fold must be rejected, based as they are on limited conceptions of virtue ethics and its history. Given the striking conceptual, structural, and methodological parallels between Dewey’s ethical thought and that of the Aristotelian tradition, as I have argued, Dewey must be seen as working within and substantially reworking the latter along distinctively Emersonian lines. What I have presented is, of course, far from a complete interpretation of Dewey’s ethics, for such an interpretation would need to discuss Dewey’s account of deliberation as dramatic rehearsal, his account of the relationship between ethics and science, and his account of how democratic ideals inform ethical life. The reading I have presented in these two chapters has, nevertheless, wide-ranging consequences for how we understand Dewey’s ethical thought. First, in taking habit and habitual life to lie at the center of Dewey’s ethical

thought, it allows us to bring together in a systematic way the seemingly disparate ethical concerns in texts like *Democracy and Education*, *Human Nature and Conduct*, and *Ethics*. Second, seeing Dewey as a virtue ethicist provides us with a framework for relating Dewey’s ethical thought to the history of ethics in a substantial way rather than seeing it, as many commentators have, as a sui generis approach whose only relationship to the history of ethical thought is negative and critical. Third, and though there is no scope to elaborate on this point in the present context, it provides contemporary virtue ethics with substantial new intellectual resources for future development, specifically in the context of the new recent interest in the relationship between virtue ethics and education and social psychology. Finally, if the interpretation I have presented in the last two chapters is plausible, it shows how not only James but Dewey too has taken Emerson themes – especially his claims about contingency, the fixity of habit, and the value of growth – seriously enough for them to substantially shape his ethical thought and to lead him away from more traditional approaches to ethics. Taking this reading of Dewey together with my account of James in the first two chapters, we have seen, hopefully, just how much there is to be gained by taking the intellectual genealogy that runs from Emerson to the pragmatists seriously, just how much of what is novel and challenging in James and Dewey’s ethical thought becomes visible if we approach these two thinkers outside the prevailing frameworks of contemporary ethics.

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146 For recent virtue ethical accounts that emphasize the importance of education to the virtues, see Athanassoulis (2014) and Curren (2015). With respect to social psychology, I have in mind Dewey’s anticipation of recent situationist critiques of the virtues. Harman (2009) and other philosophical situationists have argued that virtues are character traits and that research in social psychology suggests that character traits lack cross-situational consistency. Insofar as consistency across different kinds of situation is part of the concept of character traits, it follows that there are in fact no such things as character traits and therefore no such things as virtues. Dewey anticipates the general observation made by the situationists in his discussion of the interpenetration of habit and in his claims that interpenetration is never complete and must be considered a personal achievement. Dewey’s theory of habit therefore already incorporates the situationist observation into his approach to ethics.
Bibliography


