Epistemic Fetishism and Deweyan Faith

Jonathan L. Kvanvig

§1 Introduction

In A Common Faith, Dewey does two things in the first chapter. One part involves a denigration of religious ideologies, lamenting the focus on doctrinal elements found in organized religions. The other part involves an identification and characterization of a central feature of human life, characterized sometimes in terms of the language of the religious in human experience and other times in terms of the notion of faith. Throughout, however, he registers an antipathy toward the kind of cognitive systems that characterize organized religion, characterizing the relationship between the religious and religions as one involving a kind of enslavement from which emancipation is needed.

Dewey’s discussion deserves attention for a number of reasons. My primary reason for interest is that he offers the best account available of a kind of faith in terms of a functional description of it. The book is worth the price on the basis of this material alone. But I also think that the antipathy toward organized religion can be mitigated by careful attention to the details of the functional account of faith in question. To that end, we begin with Dewey’s account of faith.

§2 Dewey on Faith

Dewey’s account of faith proceeds through an account of the religious, distinguishing that phenomenon from religion and from any particular religion.

The heart of my point …is that there is a difference between religion, a religion, and the religious; between anything that may
be denoted by a noun substantive and the quality of experience that is designated by an adjective. (Dewey 1934, p. 3)

Crucial to Dewey’s approach to the religious is that it involves an attitude. He writes,

To be more explicit, a religion . . . always signifies a special body of beliefs and practices having some kind of institutional organization, loose or tight. In contrast, the adjective “religious” denotes nothing in the way of a specifiable entity, either institutional or as a system of beliefs. It does not denote anything to which one can specifically point as one can point to this and that historic religion or existing church. For it does not denote anything that can exist by itself or that can be organized into a particular and distinction form of existence. It denotes attitudes that may be taken toward every object and every proposed end or ideal. (Dewey 1934, p. 9)

It is clear, then, that Dewey’s approach to the religious and the faith involved in it is attitudinal. Moreover, Dewey informs us early on in the discussion what the general category of attitude involved is:

Let us then for the moment drop the term “religious,” and ask what are the attitudes that lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living. (Dewey 1934, p. 14)

So, we should expect to find that the religious attitude, the attitude of faith, is found as a subtype of those attitudes that lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living. He begins his discussion of the more general phenomenon by describing various types of adjustments we make in the process of experiencing the world around us. He first identifies passive accommodations we make to our environment, and then speaks of more active adaptations we make as well. Both of these count as adjustments, but the kind of adjustment that is more interesting in our context is an adjustment that is both more general and deeper:

But there are also changes in ourselves in relation to the world in which we live that are much more inclusive and deep seated. They relate not to this and that want in relation to this and that condition of our surroundings, but pertain to our being in its entirety.
Because of their scope, this modification of ourselves is enduring. It lasts through any amount of vicissitude of circumstances, internal and external. There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us. (Dewey 1934, p. 15)

It is the claim of religions that they effect this generic and enduring change in attitude. I should like to turn that statement around and say that whenever this change takes place there is a definitely religious attitude. . . . [W]hen it occurs, . . . there is a religious outlook and function. (Dewey 1934, pp. 15-16)

The kind of adjustment in question involves this general and deeper change in attitude, which involves a “composing and harmonizing” of things. Even when special conditions continue to change, there is a deeper sense in which things are “arranged” or “settled” with respect to us. Thus, even though adjustments can be more local and particular, when the adjustment is more general in this way, it involves the taking on of a religious attitude.

The task, then, is to say exactly what is involved in making such a general adjustment in attitude, one that pertains to our being in its entirety and is enduring. To characterize this attitude change, one which involves a harmonizing the self, Dewey employs the notion of an ideal.

The connection between imagination and the harmonizing of the self is closer than is usually thought. The idea of a whole, whether of the whole personal being or of the world, is an imaginative, not a literal, idea. . . . Neither observation, thought, nor practical activity can attain that complete unification of the self which is called a whole. The whole self is an ideal, an imaginative projection. (Dewey 1934, p. 17)

I will return in a moment to the appeal to the imagination here, but the first point to note is the central role played by the notion of an ideal. The attitude adjustment that is crucial for faith involves the entire person, harmonizing the self in its relation to all of reality, and this harmonizing of the self involves a posit, a projection of sorts, one which Dewey terms an “ideal.” We can get a sense of what this appeal to an ideal involves by noting its use by Dewey in moral contexts:
Apart from any theological context, there is a difference between belief that is a conviction that some end should be supreme over conduct, and belief that some object or being exists as a truth for the intellect. Conviction in the moral sense signifies being conquered, vanquished, in our active nature by an ideal end; it signifies acknowledgment of its rightful claim over our desires and purposes. Such acknowledgment is practical, not primarily intellectual. It goes beyond evidence that can be presented to any possible observer. Reflection, often long and arduous, may be involved in arriving at the conviction, but the import of thought is not exhausted in discovery of evidence that can justify intellectual assent. The authority of an ideal over choice and conduct is the authority of an ideal, not of a fact, of a truth guaranteed to intellect, not of the status of the one who propounds the truth. (Dewey 1934, p. 19)

Note first here that Dewey is at least slouching toward a non-cognitivist position regarding moral obligations: believing that some end is supreme over conduct is quite different from believing that something is true. Second, note that the former involves being “vanquished” by an ideal end. It is the authority of an ideal rather than a fact that controls moral obligation as opposed to intellectual assent. It is this submission to the authority of an ideal that constitutes moral faith, for Dewey.

Such moral faith, however, is not sufficient for faith in the sense involved in the religious attitude:

What has been said does not imply that all moral faith in ideal ends is by virtue of that fact religious in quality. The religious is “morality touched by emotion” only when the ends of moral conviction arouse emotions that are not only intense but are actuated and supported by ends so inclusive that they unify the self. . . . The religious attitude signifies something that is bound through imagination to a general attitude. (Dewey 1934, p. 21)

Apart from the tip of the hat to Matthew Arnold, the key element in moving from mere moral faith to the religious are ends or ideals that are “so inclusive that they unify the self.”

---

1See Arnold (1924[originally published in 1873]). The significance of the quoted phrase seems to be Dewey’s agreement with Arnold that morality and religion are not in conflict, but that the latter is, in some sense, “heightened” morality.
Such faith is not unique to religion, however:

Any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality. Many a person, inquirer, artist, philanthropist, citizen, men and women in the humblest walks of life, have achieved, without presumption and without display, such unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence. . . . [T]he claim on the part of religions to possess a monopoly of ideas and of the supernatural means by which alone, it is alleged, they can be furthered, stands in the way of the realization of distinctively religious values inherent in natural experience. (Dewey 1934, p. 25)

The essential components of Dewey’s account of faith, then, are these. Faith involves an ideal, an end of some sort. Moreover, that end or ideal must be all-encompassing, so inclusive that it unifies or harmonizes the self. More restrictive types of faith are possible when the ideal is not quite so all-encompassing, and the more generic attitude is possible independently of commitment to any particular religion, available to all in any pursuit of a life that involves pursuit of an ideal against difficulty and threat of loss. Dewey summarizes this account as follows: “I should describe this faith as the unification of the self through allegiance to inclusive ideal ends, which imagination presents to us and to which the human will responds as worthy of controlling our desires and choices.” (Dewey 2008, p. 23)

Dewey contrasts this functional account of faith—“functional,” because it characterizes faith in terms of the role it plays in a person who has it, how it functions so as to unify the self via attraction and allegiance to an ideal, instead of in terms of some identified components which constitute faith’s nature—with that which is involved in organized religion:

[T]he moment we have a religion, whether that of the Souix Indians or of Judaism or of Christianity, that moment the ideal factors in experience that may be called religious take on a load that is not inherent in them, a load of current beliefs and of institutional practices that are irrelevant to them. (Dewey 1934, p. 8)

The difference between an experience having a religious force because of what it does in and to the processes of living and religious
experience as a separate kind of thing gives me occasion to refer to a previous remark. If this function were rescued through emancipation from dependence upon specific types of beliefs and practices, from those elements that constitute a religion, many individuals would find that experiences having the force of bringing about a better, deeper and enduring adjustment in life are not so rare and infrequent as they are commonly supposed to be. (Dewey 1934, p. 13)

Not only does Dewey think that the beliefs and practices of organized religion are not essential to the proper function of faith in the life of a person, he thinks there is opposition between them.

The intimate connection of imagination with ideal elements in experience is generally recognized. Such is not the case with respect to its connection with faith. The latter has been regarded as a substitute for knowledge, for sight. It is defined, in the Christian religion, as evidence of things not seen. The implication is that faith is a kind of anticipatory vision of things that are now invisible because of the limitations of our finite and erring nature. Because it is a substitute for knowledge, its material and object are all intellectual in quality. As John Locke summed up the matter, faith is “assent to a proposition . . . on the credit of its proposer.” Religious faith is then given to a body of propositions as true on the credit of their supernatural author, reason coming in to demonstrate the reasonableness of giving such credit. Of necessity there results the development of theologies .... (Dewey 1934, p. 18)

Moreover, Dewey is skeptical about the epistemic credentials of such developed theologies:

In reality, the only thing that can be said to be “proved” [by religious experience] is the existence of some complex of conditions

---

I should note that, even though this understanding of Hebrews 11:1 is common and nearly ubiquitous, it is a mistake. A more literal rendering, from Young’s Literal Translation, makes this clear: “And faith is of things hoped for a confidence, of matters not seen a conviction.” The prepositional construction is definitive here, revealing that there is no definition intended, but rather a description of what faith involves, relative to things hoped for and things not seen.
that have operated to effect an adjustment in life, an orientation, that brings with it a sense of security and peace. The particular interpretation given to this complex of conditions is not inherent in the experience itself. It is derived from the culture with which a particular person as been imbued. ... The determining factor in the interpretation of the experience is the particular doctrinal apparatus into which a person has been inducted. (Dewey 1934, p. 12)

Dewey thus contrasts a properly attitudinal approach to faith with a cognitive one, and blames organized religion for substituting the latter for the former.

The proper form of the phenomenon in question is identified progressively. We begin the attempt to say what faith is by considering examples of temporally localized, purposive behavior. Some of our behavior is intentional and purposive, but is also local and particular. One gets hungry and seeks something in the kitchen to satisfy the urge; one wants to sit in the sun and so leaves the house for the backyard. The explanation of such behavior is teleological, in terms of desires, purposes, and intentions. But the teleology here is quite local and episodic. Such local and episodic teleology can be more extended in time, as when hunger leads, in hunter-gatherer societies, to some hunt that might take hours or even days. But the teleology involved is still local and particular.

We then imagine a life filled with nothing teleological other than the local and particular. No long-range planning occurs, and no attempt is ever made to make one's behavior fit into some overall larger plan. We can think of a life filled with nothing more than the local and particular as a life showing no hints of the kind of faith that Dewey characterizes. Hints of faith appear only when longer-term planning occurs or when some overall larger plan is developed to guide the local and particular choices that a person makes. We can understand the reference to ideals in Dewey in terms of such longer-term, overall plans or goals. In pursuing such goals, the goal itself is experienced as worthy of pursuit, as a good of some sort. It is here that we find the first hint of the kinds of attitudes that “lend deep and enduring support to the processes of living.”

Dewey’s account then turns to the distinctions between accommodations to one’s environment and adaptations that are more active. Both of these categories are, however, too shallow to be examples of the kind of faith Dewey seeks to characterize. He looks for changes that are “more inclusive
and deep seated.” Such changes “pertain to our being in its entirety,” Dewey says, and the changes are “enduring.” He writes, “There is a composing and harmonizing of the various elements of our being such that, in spite of changes in the special conditions that surround us, these conditions are also arranged, settled, in relation to us.” (p. 15)

This “composing and harmonizing” can be characterized using the psychological language of integration. As we develop longer-term and large plans and purposes, we move from the more local and particular to the more general and inclusive. Merely moving away from the local and particular, however, doesn’t mean that we’ve achieved the kind of full integration that Dewey speaks of. Instead, we progress toward such an optimal state, in fits and starts. Moreover, the optimal state, we should suspect, is rarely if ever achieved. Instead, the ordinary lot of humanity moves from one semi-integrated state to another, in response to the vicissitudes of experience. In all such experience, however, there is the hint of a better possibility, which is the possibility Dewey describes. It is a state in which one’s plans, purposes, intentions, heart, soul, and mind are all organized, integrated in a fully settled way so that no matter what changes occur in the world around us, the full integration and settledness of attitude and intention remain.

The typical existence, however, involves a less inclusive organizational scheme, and it is far from clear that the total unification that Dewey envisions is really optimal. For the most part, we live in the land of incommensurables, never resolving how the conflicts between our larger purposes, goals, and intentions are to be harmonized, nor needing to. In some cases, the result is a flitting between fates, but in more admirable cases, we find a life with a nice variety of interests and purposes. An adequate response here will have to distinguish between the kinds of motives and interests, desires and preferences, that drive ordinary life, and some grander scheme or plan or stable orientation of a person regarding the possibilities of conflict between the more basic driving forces of ordinary life. Even the most saintly and heavenly-minded often still enjoy a good meal with friends, without any explicit motivational structure that brings this activity to serve more eternal purposes. Nonetheless, such saints may still be characterized by an orientation toward all of life that makes the eternal purposes trump having a good meal with friends when conflict between the two arises. This orientational feature doesn’t, and needn’t, play any causal role in the activity of enjoying a meal with friends, and this fact, ubiquitous in the story of everyone concerning grander plans and visions for their lives and futures and the local,
episodic grit of causation in specific activities. Such disengagement often causes consternation in those who recognize it in their own lives, but it is hard to see the full integration to which Dewey points as anything more than an unrealistic idealization which might guide a life in some weak sense, but not in a sense that requires all of life to be causally affected by it.

There is pressure on the notion of unification from another direction as well. Not only is such unification unrealistic and hardly compelling, even approximations toward it have been challenged in recent years by the empirical data in support of situationism. The challenge of situationism is that character traits of the sort that unification or integration would involve do not enter into the best explanations for how people behave (see, e.g., Sreenivasan (2002), Kamtekar (2004), Prinz (2009), Merritt (2000), Adams (2006), Milgram (1963, 1974), Harman (2003, 1999), Ross and Nisbett (1991), Doris (1998, 2002), Kamtekar (2004), Darley and Batson (1973), Hartshorne and May (1928), Isen and Levin (1972)). One thus might conclude that any talk of composing and harmonizing, of integrating in service of a fully unified self, is chimerical, and that no decent account of anything should be given in such terms. One might conclude, that is, that if two people behave differently, the difference in their behavior needs to be explained by differences in their situations rather than differences in their personalities or character (see, e.g., Harman (1999), Doris (1998, 2002) and Alfano (2013)).

Such a conclusion overreaches, however. First note that it would be a bizarre exaggeration to hold that human behavior is a product only of external circumstances and never internal traits of character of any sort. Such a view would be as objectionable as a view that claimed that human behavior followed exceptionless and necessary laws that predicted that no matter what internal differences one finds between two people, if they are placed in the same external situations, they will always behave the same.

The concern, then, cannot be about whether situational or characterological considerations are relevant to human behavior, but rather about which particular elements from each category are involved. On this score, the most disturbing data is that which shows that non-rational situational factors, such as whether one is smelling the wonderful odors coming from a bakery or whether one has just found money in a phone booth or whether a noisy leaf blower is in the vicinity, affect one’s likelihood of being helpful to someone in need. Such factors are “non-rational” because the mood one is in would never be a reason one could give to oneself for why helping or not helping was an appropriate thing to do. Instead, learning that our behavior is at
the whim of our mood is a cause for chagrin, and prompts a desire to try to become a better person. These non-rational, situational factors are significantly different from temptations to weakness of will, for in such situations, there is some rational factor, some good, the attractiveness of which swamps better judgment about what to do. In the case of non-rational situational factors, the factors in question are ones to which the agent is oblivious.

These concerns raise problems for defenses of a virtue-theoretic approach in ethics, but in our context are less pressing. For they do not show that a fully integrated life of faith is impossible, but incline us toward a realization that even the most integrated of human lives tend to fall far short of the full integration that is the ideal. Such a realization is part and parcel of the enduring attraction of Gnosticism, growing out of a realization, a resentment, that biology and spirituality are at odds with each other, leading to a metaphysical demotion of the one in favor of the other. Regardless of that point, however, the role of ideals in human life is not undermined by noting the rarity of realization, and thus the situational challenge is just another among a variety of ways in which the realities of existence impinge on any optimistic portrayal of the degree to which the spiritual aspect of human beings, expressed in the functional faith that is worth having, explains our experience and behavior.

The proper response to the situationists’ challenge, then, is not to despair of the possibility of faith in Dewey’s sense, but rather to supplement that account with a degree’d notion of faith (or, rather, note the ways in which the account already includes such variability), one which can account for both the first hints of faith and the developments toward full and also a complete faith that involves the harmonization, the integration of ones purposes, intentions, affections, and thoughts. The ideal here is fully integrated singlemindedness of heart and mind, of which we all fall far short, but which remains the ideal of a fully integrated character (though always qualified so that there is no expectation or demand that the integration in question plays a causal role in ordinary, mundane activities).

§3 The Functional Character of the Account

Such an account, as already noted, is a functional account of faith, identifying the phenomenon in question in terms of the role it plays in a person’s life rather than a substantive, structural realization of the phenomenon in
question in terms of some combination of mental states or attitudes that that constitute the phenomenon in question. This approach to the phenomenon might raise the concern that we are leaving out what we really want, telling us only what faith does and not what it is). A functional account of water, for example, would leave out its chemical composition, focusing on its uses for drinking and washing, for example, and would leave us unsatisfied if it is our goal to understand the nature of water. Shouldn’t we think the same about any functional account of faith?

Drawing this conclusion requires ignoring the fact that lots of things need a functional account only. A heart, for example, can’t be characterized in any intrinsic way apart from the functional role of pumping blood, and any physical description beyond that functional one will apply only to some hearts and not others (actual or possible). Moreover, specific descriptions of faith, such as that faith is the belief that God exists and is good, are subject to the same problems as arise when characterizing a heart as something with four chambers: in both cases, there may be examples of the phenomenon in question that meet the description given, but there are also other examples that don’t. The point here is, then, that we should not bar functional accounts, but should rather focus on whether the phenomenon in question is best characterized in that way or in terms of something more substantive.

Moreover, the phenomenon being characterized functionally by Dewey appears to identify a phenomenon that has apparently unlimited substantive realizations. It could be realized by many different combinations of cognitive, conative, affective features of a person, just as hearts can be found in a quite wide array of physical arrangements. In light of this point, we should be far from certain that the kind of faith in question can be characterized by any particular combination of mental states, lending some credibility to the idea that a functional role account is better suited to the phenomenon in question, even if there are difficulties attending Dewey’s specific functional account.

One concern about Dewey’s particular functional account is whether it is too broad. Such a functional account, built on the idea of a fully integrated life, may appear to catch more in the net than is really desired for an account of faith. For such a life can be lived in service of some telos in service of a telos that is purely self-serving, limited to the interests and purposes of the individual alone. Such persons may exhibit no interest in or attachment to

---

3 An account at least suggested in Stump (2010).
4 For discussion of the varieties possible here, see Kvanvig (2013a), ?, 2015.

11
the community or any other element of importance other than their own, displaying a decided distancing toward others except insofar as they are means to private ends. In doing so, such individuals may have no interest in the prospects for others to succeed in pursuing their goals, or may be cynical about humanity and the community they are part of. For want of a better term, they are narcissists, and one may wonder whether a fully integrated, narcissistic life can really be a life of faith.

A Deweyian approach can try to accommodate a negative response to such a suggestion by emphasizing the difference between a disposition to act in service of an ideal and a disposition to act in service of a goal or purpose. In the case of the narcissist, the goal or purpose in question, Dewey could maintain, is not an ideal. It unifies a life, to be sure, but it fails to do so in a way that functions in service of an ideal.

Such a maneuver will handle the problem raised, though it replaces a fully functional account of faith with one that is both functional and substantive. For such a view will now need to say what makes some goals or purposes ideal and others not. On a fully functional account, the ideality in question is completely perspectival, constituted by whatever ideals function to unify the self in the requisite way. Once we require an objective constraint on such integration, we introduce a non-functional element into the equation, requiring that the integrational functioning in question only counts as faith when it integrates toward something on our approved list of ideals. Such a move replaces a functional account of the nature of faith with an account of faith that adverts not only to the functional elements in question but also to the demand that the unifying in question count as valuable. Such an account, mixing function with value, abandons the simplicity of a purely functional account, and that loss should lead us to wonder whether the issue in question is a strong enough consideration to force such a change in approach.

The question to ask, then, is whether we should resist the implication of a functional account that narcissistic faith is possible. Here is an analogical argument that we should not resist this implication, for such faith may be viewed as no more objectionable than the possibility of displaying other virtues, such as courage, in service of bad ends. For example, pursuing Nazi goals in the face of considerable danger is certainly odious behavior, all-things-considered, but the question is whether it can nonetheless involve a display of courage. To this question, some philosophers answer “no.”

5See, e.g., Philippa Foot (1978).
This negative response, however, romances. One should be able to ap-
prove the character trait while disapproving the end pursued, and it provides
no advantage to insist that there is no virtue here when it is obvious that
the behavior is admirable in certain respects. Just so, if one views the ends
of someone lost in self as worthy of disfavor, that in itself should not be suf-
ficient to keep the behavior from being admirable in some other respect, and
perhaps in precisely the way that satisfies a functional account of the virtue
of faith. That is, we should keep separate our assessment of the virtues that
are present from our assessment of the quality of one’s goals and purposes.
In so doing, we leave intact the simplicity of a functional account of faith,
explaining away the disvalue of narcissistic self-absorption, not in terms of a
lack of faith, but rather in terms of objectionable ends.

It must be admitted that there are hints in Dewey of confusing the ques-
tion of the nature of a given instance of faith with the question of the value of
it. These hints arise specifically when Dewey considers theistic faith, where
the ideal would be most obviously characterized in divine terms. Yet, Dewey
resists the idea of taking the term ‘God’ at face value, as referring to a divine
being (if it refers at all):

On one score, the word can mean only a particular Being. On
the other score, it denotes the unity of all ideal ends arousing us
to desire and actions. Does the unification have a claim upon our
attitude and conduct because it is already, apart from us, in real-
ized existence, or because of its own inherent meaning and value?
Suppose for the moment that the word “God” means the ideal
ends that at a given time and place one acknowledges as hav-
ing authority over his volition and emotion, the values to which
one is supremely devoted, as far as these ends, through imagina-
tion, take on unity. If we make this supposition, the issue will
stand out clearly in contrast with the doctrine of religions that
“God” designates some kind of Being having prior and therefore
non-ideal existence.

The word “non-ideal” is to be taken literally in regard to some
religions that have historically existed, to all of them as far as they
are neglectful of moral qualities in their divine beings. It does
not apply in the same literal way to Judaism and Christianity.
For they have asserted that the Supreme Being has moral and
spiritual attributes. But it applies to them none the less in that
these moral and spiritual characters are thought of as properties of a particular existence and are thought to be of religious value for us because of this embodiment in such an existence. Here, as far as I can see, is the ultimate issue as to the difference between a religion and the religious as a function of experience.

The idea that "God" represents a unification of ideal values that is essentially imaginative in origin when the imagination supervenes in conduct is attended with verbal difficulties owing to our frequent use of the word "imagination" to denote fantasy and doubtful reality. But the reality of ideal ends as ideals is vouched for by their undeniable power in action. An ideal is not an illusion because imagination is the organ through which it is apprehended. For all possibilities reach us through the imagination. In a definite sense the only meaning that can be assigned the term "imagination" is that things unrealized in fact come home to us and have power to stir us. The unification effected through imagination is not fanciful, for it is the reflex of the unification of practical and emotional attitudes. The unity signifies not a single Being, but the unity of loyalty and effort evoked by the fact that many ends are one in the power of their ideal, or imaginative, quality to stir and hold us. (Dewey 2008, pp. 30–31)

Hard to understand though the details here be, the overall direction of the discussion is clear: it is through the imagination that talk of God is supposed to have religious significance, and it is best to understand such language not as referring to a being of any sort, but rather only as representing the unity involved in the notion of an ideal. We thus move away from a descriptive account of how people would be likely to describe the ideal that unifies their lives to a philosophical analysis that replaces a person's own description with a more ethereal and philosophical account that strips those descriptions of any ontological significance.

Putting this point in terms of language and the meaning of the term 'God' is, of course, nonsense: it is perfectly obvious that the word 'God' does not mean anything about the unity involved in the notion of an ideal. There may be some analysis possible on which we can distinguish between ontological and imaginative components involved in the idea of God, and one might then insist that a functional account of faith advert only to the imaginative, maintaining that the ontological elements are of no explanatory
significance in understanding such affective faith. But to use the language of reference, meaning, or denotation to make this point confuses one that is, at bottom, metaphysical and explanatory with a different point within the philosophy of language concerning the theory of linguistic meaning and the role of linguistic reference and denotation within it.

Even the metaphysically explanatory point is unfortunately made, however. For what is it that is being explained here? The obvious answer is that we are looking for an explanation of the value of the kind of affective faith that is being given a functional characterization, examining the character of the ideals that unify the self so as to identify what it is about the ideals that can help us understand why such faith is faith worth having. When we separate the cognitive from the imaginative in terms of faculties or organs of a person, we can thereby abstract away from the contribution made by cognition to the understanding of an ideal that people endorse, and thereby find the contribution of imagination to the unity in question. Implicit in this way of proceeding is that such unification is a good thing, or at least a good-making feature (thus leaving open that it can be instanced in a way that allows for this goodness to be overridden by other elements).

There is a temptation here, however, to turn this fine-grained approach to distinguishing what explains the value of faith into a revisionary account of the nature of the faith in question. One might come to view the nature of theistic faith, for example, as involving only whatever elements explain the value of such faith, but that would be a mistake. It is one thing to say that an explanation of the value of theistic faith begins in the same way as any explanation of the value of any faith, namely in the unification of the self that has its source in the imagination. It is quite another thing to conclude or add that the nature of any faith involves nothing more than what is imaginately generated. The attractiveness of a Deweyan account of faith is that it identifies a common feature of instances of faith that is also a good-making feature of it, thereby helping with the task of explaining why some instances of faith count as faith worth having. But it would be a mistake of a rather basic sort to move from this point to the conclusion that every example of such affective faith involves nothing more than the common features that help us explain the value of faith. Theistic faith is a clear example of this mistake, for it is simply false that, for theists, there is a faith that is present which is separable from, distinct from ontological commitments. The same can be said for purely secular faiths as well. On such faith can be heard in the voice of Marcus Aurelius in the movie *Gladiator*, portrayed by Richard
Harris, talking about Rome:

Yet you have never been there. You have not seen what it has become. I am dying, Maximus. When a man sees his end... he wants to know there was some purpose to his life. How will the world speak my name in years to come? Will I be known as the philosopher? The warrior? The tyrant...? Or will I be the emperor who gave Rome back her true self? There was once a dream that was Rome. You could only whisper it. Anything more than a whisper and it would vanish... it was so fragile. And I fear that it will not survive the winter.

In a deep sense, what we hear is an instance of the kind of unification of the self that affective faith involves: “a dream that was Rome.” Essential to this unification, however, is ontological commitment. We might be able to abstract out the imaginative from the cognitive, but that is a quite different claim than that the faith itself involves no ontological commitment at all.

This functional account of faith begins makes the unifying, focusing function of a given character trait fundamental to it. In doing so, it places heart over mind, affection and conation over cognition, in a proper understanding of faith, since the conviction attendant on an ideal, especially “the acknowledgment of its rightful claim over our desires and purposes” is a function of the imagination, not the intellect. Dewey’s own account includes a further element, however, one which involves not merely a demotion of the centrality of cognition to faith but rather an outright hostility to standard assumptions about the cognitive aspects of religious faith in particular. To this second aspect we now turn.

§4 Affective Faith and Ontological Commitment

On Dewey’s behalf, it is easy to see good cause for his opposition to organized religion. First, there is the institutional control explanation for the centrality

---

6I here assume that we can understand the mental life of a person as divided into the cognitive and the non-cognitive, where the latter involves affection and conation. It is a further step to think that these three elements exhaust the mental life of a person, and I make no such assumption here.
of dogma in organized religion, since such control is enhanced by cognitive conformity (and perhaps can’t be achieved without it). So one should expect that institutions of power are organized in ways to generate uniformity of attitude, will, behavior, and thought. Second, lots of people live lives of shallow, or bad, faith in the process, acquiescing to the power structures in question by adopting thought and behavior patterns that conform to expectations while lacking the substance of faith that involves an attraction and full-out commitment to an ideal. On this score, Dewey is correct: better that they find an ideal and pursue it than substitute for full faith worth having some institutionally religious counterfeit for such.

But hostility to intellectual elements can arise in two quite different ways. One such way is Dewey’s, which I will get to in a moment, but the other is worth noting as well. This way arises by adopting a narrow view of what kinds of faith are important, and instead of embracing a fully functional account of faith, constraining one’s account of faith in terms of ideals that are distinctively moral. Such a substantive constraint we noted earlier, for those inclined to object to the possibility of narcissistic faith, but here the path is considerably more restricted. Instead of beginning with the phenomenon of faith, it begins from a standpoint of morality enhanced by full integration, and argues that this valuable feature of human life overlaps on certain rare occasions with faith. Such an investigation would be interesting and worthwhile, but it pales in certain important respects when compared with Dewey’s approach. On that approach, we focus on those elements that lend deep and enduring support to the process of living, and such a focus holds forth the promise of both a better understanding of the good life and what we might attend to in our efforts to pursue such a life. An approach that begins explicitly within the arena of the normative and evaluative, combined with a bit of the therapeutic language of pop-psychology, is less promising. Moralists are good at engendering shame and guilt, but less successful in painting the kind of picture of a well-lived life that guides and motivates.

What would be disingenuous, however, would be to begin as Dewey does, characterizing faith in terms of its functional role in a well-lived life, and then pretending that this functionality is only present when the faith in question is moral faith (enhanced by full integration involving no metaphysical commitments). Such an account is disingenous since it is obvious that the full integration that describes the religious attitude of faith that Dewey is characterizing can be present in a person with strong intellectual commitments of the sort recommended by organized religion. If Dewey wishes
to object to religious faith involving such commitments, he needs an argument against such commitments, rather than some vain attempt to insist that such commitments can’t be present in a fully integrated life of the sort that is constitute of functional faith.

I think the fairest way to understand Dewey is to see him as arguing in this latter way, rather than in terms of abandoning the functional account of faith he endorses. So the question is how he gets from the functional account of faith to his opposition to any faith that involves metaphysical commitments of the sort that characterize organized religion. We assume, that is, that Dewey isn’t claiming that no ideal can involve any substantive metaphysical commitments nor is he claiming that the kind of unification and integration constitutive of functional faith cannot involve such commitments either: it is, after all, obvious that ideals that can guide a life of faith include such things as great teachers (Buddha, Jesus, Socrates) and social causes (democracy, equality, liberty) involve some substantive intellectual commitments or other (perhaps, e.g., that Buddha is wise, that Socrates is admirable, that Jesus is good, that democracies involve everyone having a voice, that slavery is incompatible with the ideals of equality and liberty, etc.). So the mere existence of intellectual commitments can’t be the issue. So what we look for is an argument from Dewey that faith involving the metaphysical commitments distinctive to religion, or at least some religions, is a faith too far.

The Deweyian route to such a conclusion is decidedly epistemological running through a concern that the cognitive commitments involved in any metaphysical faith will come into conflict with appropriate epistemological constraints on such commitments. Dewey makes clear that “the issue does not concern this and that piecemeal item of belief, but centres in the question of the method by which any and every item of intellectual belief is to be arrived at and justified.” (Dewey 2008, p. 23) What is the method? It is the method “conveyed by the word “scientific”…” (Dewey 2008, p. 23). So Dewey’s concern is that as soon as metaphysical commitments intrude into a legitimate attitude of faith, the appropriate methods of inquiry, the scientific attitude that constitutes the way in which responsible individuals arrive at and justify their beliefs, will be abandoned. The result is that functional faith needs to be purged of the intellectual commitments of religion:

[T]he positive lesson is that religious qualities and values if they are real at all are not bound up with any single item of intellec-
tual assent, not even that of the existence of the God of theism; and that, under existing conditions, the religious function in experience can be emancipated only through surrender of the whole notion of special truths that are religious by their own nature, together with the idea of peculiar avenues of access to such truths. (Dewey 2008, p. 23)

This constraint on admirable faith is worthy of reflection. I begin with some minor points. First, the appeal to the scientific method is simply incapable of carrying the weight needed here, for it is clear that any kind of functional faith, whether in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, or in humanity or in the ideals of liberty and equality, will involve intellectual commitments of one sort or another. Among these intellectual commitments may be found ontological commitments and category commitments (e.g., that God exists and is supernatural, that there are human beings and that they compose a natural kind, etc.) but also normative and evaluative claims (e.g., that all humans are, by nature, equal, that human beings are moral agents deserving of respect as persons, etc.). An appeal to the scientific method is both too strong and too weak to handle the diversity of possible intellectual commitments involved in functional faith, the kind of faith that unifies the self and sustains us in the process of living.

It is too weak, since the normative and evaluative claims are as much in need of epistemic propriety as are the ontological and category commitments, and it is a gross exaggeration to hold that any entitlement to normative and evaluative claims comes through use of the scientific method, no matter how broadly conceived. One might wish to note here the Humean point that an “ought” never follows from an “is,” though that claim is contentious and certainly not decisive (since not all epistemic support comes in the form of deductive implication). One might note as well, however, that that there are no ethics labs running experiments to determine whether, e.g., waterboarding is wrong or whether forests are legitimate objects of moral concern. Though empirical information is certainly relevant to normative and evaluative conclusions, no adequate epistemology can rest content with the idea that what is good and right, what is beautiful and why, is to be ascertained by employing the same method we employ to determine the perihelion of Mercury. Finally, appeal to the scientific method cannot sustain the very claim in question, that appeal to the scientific method is required for adequate belief: whatever the appeals of various philosophical doctrines, their
standards of defense have to be found elsewhere than by some appeal to the scientific method.

Appeal to the scientific method is also too strong, for it embraces an objectionable kind of *a priori* unrevisability regarding the ways in which epistemic rationality can obtain. This last point requires elaboration, and one feature that must be noted in developing such an elaboration is the manifold nature of normative evaluation. Human beings are, in Ernest Sosa’s memorable phrase, “zestfully judgmental” (Sosa 2007, p. 70), and the same can be said not only of appraisal in general but also of the sort of appraisal involved in appraisals of cognition, i.e., epistemic appraisal. Cognitive commitments can be unjustified, irrational, unreliable, unwarranted, lacking in entitlement, but also inapt, incorrect, bizarre, fishy, dubious, off-base, ill-advised, far-fetched, half-baked, quixotic, preposterous, strained, abnormal, and even out of character. This “blooming, buzzing confusion” of ways to complain forces on us a need to find some way of limiting the scope of evaluation, since the variety of possible criticism is not only extensive but seemingly open-ended: if it’s not what you say or believe that is the problem, it’s probably the tone with which you say it or the particular way in which you embrace the claim in question. If the goal of theorizing here is to find some way of being immune from criticism of cognitive commitments, I recommend concluding that the task is hopeless.

There is a better way to proceed here, and it involves identifying some important human need, interest, purpose, or intention relative to which we assess various possible cognitive commitments. In the context of evaluating an account of functional faith, however, it is easy to see that an important, perhaps singularly important, perspective to take here, one which makes manageable the kinds of criticism that might be appropriate, is that of the egocentric predicament regarding what to do, what to be and become, and what to think. This predicament is intensely personal, and any account of the functions that unify the self in addressing this predicament so as to sustain us in the processes of living must address this fundamental predicament.

Once we have identified this predicament as the need or purpose relative to which we assess various cognitive commitments, the central issue is that of assessing various resolutions of this predicament. What makes a resolution appropriate, and why? We will still have a multiplicity of evaluations here, for a resolution can be appropriate from a practical point of view but inappropriate from a moral point of view. Fortunately in our context, we can limit this multiplicity somewhat, since the only point of view in question is
epistemic: from a purely intellectual point of view, abstracting from all other concerns or interests, including practical, moral, aesthetic, social and political concerns, some resolutions of the egocentric predicament are appropriate or reasonable and some aren’t.

Which resolutions are to be approved here is thoroughly perspectival, adverting to the perspective of the individual subject to the predicament in the first place. No God’s-eye point of view is appropriately imposed on such resolutions, since from the perspective of the individual in question, such an imposed resolution might make no sense whatsoever. It might be true, for example, that the best way to resolve my own predicament about what to eat for dinner is to eat no vegetables in my fridge (perhaps, for example, they are, unknown to me, tainted with a deadly virus), but our criticisms of any resolution of the egocentric predicament should acknowledge a distinction between good and best ways to proceed and the ways to proceed from the point of view of agents themselves. In other words, the account of rationality that we adopt relative to the interest or need of resolving perplexity what to do and think should acknowledge the difference between the theory of value and the theory of obligation: what is required of one, what is permissible for one to do or think, must be kept distinct from what is best for one to do or think or good for one to do or think.

Once we approach the issue of the rationality of intellectual commitments in functional faith from this fully perspectival way of addressing the egocentric predicament regarding what to do or think, we are in a position to see why Dewey’s appeal to the scientific method for delineating the range of acceptable intellectual commitments is too strong. It is too strong since it imposes a constraint on rational opinion that is a priori unrevisable, and the complaint I want to lodge is that all such constraints are fundamentally anti-intellectual, imposing the same constraints on fully articulate, reflective knowledge that it imposes on the knowledge of the beasts, thereby treating the change of perspective that results from such reflection as if it makes no difference whatsoever to the rational status of the target beliefs in question. The simple fact is that the perspectivality platitude—that rationality is always and everywhere sensitive to change in perspective—undermines any and every attempt to specify, prior to and independent of what is achieved by reflective ascent, the substantive rules or methods appropriate for generating positive epistemic status.

The best way to understand the inadequacy of such anti-intellectualism is that rationality is not merely a function of what evidence or experience
one has. In a slogan, there is both the evidence and what we make of it. Even if there is a beastly dimension of rationality, one that applies when no reflective efforts have been made with respect to experience and what it shows, there is also the reflective dimension, and only an objectionable anti-intellectualism can insist that the same rules and principles and methods apply to the reflective situation as apply to the beastly situation.\(^7\)

We thus should resist the idea that there is a method that is \textit{a priori} un-revisable and relative to which epistemic adequacy is determined. In fairness to Dewey, however, this appeal to the scientific method is not as central to his concerns about religion as it might initially appear. He writes,

\begin{quote}
For scientific method is adverse not only to dogma but to doctrine as well, provided we take “doctrine” in its usual meaning a body of definite beliefs that need only to be taught and learned as true. This negative attitude of science to doctrine does not indicate indifference to truth. It signifies supreme loyalty to the method by which truth is attained. The scientific-religious conflict ultimately is a conflict between allegiance to this method and allegiance to even an irreducible minimum of belief so fixed in advance that it can never be modified. (Dewey 2008, p. 28)
\end{quote}

Though reference to the scientific method is prominent in this passage as well, what is important is not some fixation on that method, whatever it is, but rather the contrast between dogma and doctrine on the one hand and cognitive commitments that remain revisable in light of new information. These latter are supposed to be what we get from applying the scientific method carefully, but a defender of Dewey could easily admit that this appeal to the scientific method was unwise while still retaining the spirit of the view that involves an attachment to ever-present, in principle revisability.

It is worth attending to this concern about the unrevisability of dogma and doctrine in religion, for the attitude Dewey criticizes is surely common in religion. Careful articulation of the concern will show, however, that there is no conflict here between religion and the religious attitude central to functional faith. To see this, note Dewey’s gloss on the the cognitive commitments identified: doctrine is “a body of definite beliefs that need only be taught and learned as true,” a body of belief “so fixed in advance that it can never be modified.” Both phrases involve strong modal notions: doctrine

\(^7\)For full elaboration and defense of these points, see Kvanvig (2014).
need only be taught and learned, and can never be modified. What are we to make of these modal notions? We can bypass the usual philosophical belaboring of non-starters here, and cut straight to the chase, reminding ourselves of the language of the Athanasian Creed: “Whosoever will be saved, before all things it is necessary that he hold the catholic faith. Which faith except every one do keep whole and undefiled; without doubt he shall perish everlastingly. . . . This is the catholic faith; which except a man believe truly and firmly, he cannot be saved.” The type of necessity here is clearly that of salvific adequacy. Without believing the correct doctrines, a person cannot be saved.

In this sense of doctrine, there is good reason to side with Dewey but not in a way that creates a strong divide between faith worth having and religion itself. We can lead a Deweyan functionalist account of faith worth having to a rapprochement with religion in the following way. The first small step is to improve Dewey’s epistemology, dropping the idea that there is such a thing as the scientific method that is fixed and unalterable and controlling with respect to rational opinion. Instead, there is an ever-evolving intellectual understanding of the world and our place in it that involves not only the seeking of evidence through experience and responding to it properly, but also an ever-evolving understanding of what counts as evidence and what we should make of it. That is, we learn about methodology in much the same way as we learn about the world around us, and no a priorism about methodology can be anything but a version of anti-intellectualism that treats methodological insights with the same doctrinal fervor at which Dewey’s disdain is rightly aimed.

Here the notion of an ideal, to which Dewey appeals, enters the story. When the notion of an ideal is given a purely praxical interpretation, the antipathy to theoretical commitments is a natural accompaniment. But if we have a broader understanding of ideals, they can include not only a love of the good and the right, but devotion to a cause or person as well. Once we move away from a purely moral construal of ideals—which must be done to preserve the functional character of the Deweyan account—we have no resources for a blanket prohibition of cognitive elements central to a proper understanding of the ideal in question. That does not mean, of course, a fully formed theology in the case of religious faith, but a follower of Jesus or Mohammed or Ghandi or Martin Luther King must be granted some cognitive elements in the characterization of the ideal in order to make sense of having the following in question be the embracing of an ideal of some sort.
The second small step is to educate both Dewey and the doctrinal fundamentalists—those who, with the author of the Athanasian Creed, resort to anathemas concerning the lack of certain quite precise beliefs or intellectual commitments—to the realities of religious life, even religious life of those within a quite specific tradition. It is well-known that the role of religious truths within, say, various versions of Buddhism is nothing like Dewey’s notion of doctrine, but it is also true that there is no defensible version of this role for religious truth within the Abrahamic traditions either. It is one thing to insist that there are various truths that are distinctively religious—that, e.g., God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself—and quite another to insist that believing such truths is required for salvation. One needs only the slightest sensitivity to anthropological considerations to question which such beliefs could plausibly be attributed to the Patriarchs, for example. Moreover, the stories describing the ways in which these figures secured their favor with God in no way advert to the beliefs or intellectual commitments, but rather to actions which display the kind of functional faith that Dewey admires. Finally, it should be noted that the same things can be said of the Twelve in their following of Jesus: nowhere in the Synoptics are the disciples described as “believers.” Instead, they are always “followers,” making it a pressing question exactly what they believed or affirmed in the process of displaying the functional faith involved in the pursuit of whatever ideality they saw embodied in this man from Nazareth.

A third step will lead us to our destination. Authentic religious life is always personal and never inherited. In the present context, this point shows that whatever intellectual commitments are involved in one’s own religious life are commitments to which one has arrived in the ubiquitous, universal attempt to make sense of oneself and the world around us. To treat various purported truths as items “that need only be taught and learned as true” sounds a discordant tone with any religion, for there are no doctrinal commitments that are both necessary for salvation and sufficient for it by merely being taught these doctrines and taking them to be true.

Moreover, once we move away from a focus on salvific adequacy to normative adequacy, it is an uncharitable understanding of the extent to which religious authorities favor belief on the basis of authority to the conclusion that such belief must be irrational or inadequate in some other way. While it is often true that religious authorities often seem to favor mindless following

\footnote{For defense and discussion, see Kvanvig (2013b), ?, 2015).}
rather than disbelief, there is no good reason to accuse religion itself of favoring mindless belief over any other cognitive attitude toward the claims of religion. Instead, religious authority can play a role of roughly the same sort involved in acknowledging the obvious fact that most of our understanding of the world and our place in it comes through testimony, originally that of our parents, but also that of our teachers and mentors. Such a role for intellectual dependence is compatible with full intellectual autonomy as well, both in religion and elsewhere, for not even the most mindless, rote learning of what we are told escapes the net of rational optionality regarding what to believe and endorse. With only rare exceptions, anomalous experience can intrude in a way that leads a responsible intellect to question even the most deeply engrained attitudes, and religious attitudes and beliefs are no different in this regard. In the face of such, religious authorities are often mind-bogglingly unhelpful, often counseling blind endorsement of creedal formulae, but anyone acquainted with the ubiquitous ineptitude of humanity to comfort and encourage each other through the value of discomfort, disability, depression, and death shouldn’t be surprised to find the advice of the caretakers of our souls to be similarly inept in the face of intellectual doubts. Perhaps there is a special disposition among religious authorities to resort to the hyperbole of anathema in the face of an inability to convince others of a truth perceived and embraced. Instead of coming to loathe such responses as objectionable and both essential and unique to religion, a more understanding attitude would be to see this behavior as merely a particular instance of a more general human phenomenon. As every parent knows from experience, our attitudes, beliefs, and habits, even when formed in the most fully reflective way, forget their origins, and when questioned by our children or others, often cannot account for themselves. It takes immense patience and good judgment in such circumstances to recognize the phenomenon for what it is and to sit with the questioner to think through the issues all over again. Much more common is irritation and impatience at the question and one’s inability to dredge up a good explanation, often resulting in appeals to authority; and it is easy to see how this pattern is writ large in the history of religion. Even so, the legitimacy of the criticism shouldn’t be extended to religion as such, no more than to an opposition to human parenting, but should rather be taken as motive for all authorities to recognize their foibles and try to do better.

This emphasis on a proper acknowledgment of the open-endedness of our attempts at making sense of the world and our place in it must be combined,
both in religion and elsewhere, with an accompanying recognition of the legitimacy of closure of inquiry, if we are to understand a proper role for cognitive commitments in a life of functional faith. Inquiry comes to an end, and often legitimately so, both from a practical and theoretical point of view. Of special interest here is closure of inquiry on a topic, where the information available to one makes it rational to conclude that further investigation is no longer needed. In such a case, one’s commitment to the claim in question can be rational in a way to makes further investigation unnecessary from a purely theoretical point of view. Those in such a position have no theoretical reason to inquire further into the matter, and can thus seem to have become dogmatic on the topic in question. But is a poor philosophical psychology that can’t distinguish between full conviction involving legitimate closure of inquiry and dogmatism of the sort Dewey finds problematic.

It is also worth noting that cognitive commitments come in a wide variety of types. In Dewey’s discussion as in much of contemporary epistemology, everything cognitive is talked about in terms of belief.\textsuperscript{9} Recent discussion, both in epistemology and philosophy of science, indicates the possibility of a broader epistemological psychology: in addition to belief, we see discussion of acceptance, assumption, disposition to belief, degree of belief, presupposition, supposition, opinion, affirmation, confidence, and mental assents, and we could enlarge our list of states to consider by including suspicion, speculation, and expectance along with the attitudes of taking a stance on an issue or cause, making a intellectual commitment, and the notion of judgment itself. When we speak of cognitive commitments involved in a given instance of faith, we thus should not assume that the only possible commitment is doxastic. Moreover, whatever standard of epistemic rationality we endorse for belief, we cannot assume that this same standard is appropriate for every possible cognitive state or commitment.

These points about cognitive commitment have only rarely been acknowledged in discussions of theistic faith. But once we see the attractiveness of a functional account of faith, it is worth considering carefully what would be involved in a functional faith involving a theistic ideal. The issue is what is required for one to be committed to the propositional claim that God exists, say, for example, when that content is the specific content referred to by the

\textsuperscript{9}Though more recent epistemology also includes discussion of degrees of belief, reflecting the beauty and power of Bayesian epistemology, and leading to the important issue of whether degree of belief is to be understood in terms of belief. For discussion, see, e.g., Sturgeon (2008).
tetragrammaton. Any reasonable understanding of Frege’s puzzle\textsuperscript{10} shows how opaque can be the propositional content of an attitude. Lois Lane is in love with Clark Kent, though not under that description; a person can believe that London is pretty while also believing that it is not (by believing the second as expressed by the sentence ‘Londres est jolie’).\textsuperscript{11} Once we appreciate the reach of Frege’s puzzle, one can no longer limit the class of theists to those willing to endorse sentences such as ‘God exists’, ‘Yahweh exists’, etc. For example, perhaps there is fodder in Frege’s puzzle for allowing that a commitment to the Good and the Right is sufficient for theistic commitment, and certainly there is room within the panoply of varieties of pantheism and panentheism for certain commitments regarding the universe itself to count as theistic commitments. So the first point is that a commitment to theism may be much easier to come by than Dewey’s opposition to intellectual components in functional faith takes into account.

The second point to note concerns the notion of commitment itself. Suppose we think of a theist as someone who believes that God exists, an atheist as someone who believes that God does not exist, and an agnostic as someone who is neither a theist or an atheist. Such understandings are typical, but if we accept these definitions, then it is false that one must be a theist to exemplify, e.g., Christian faith. I will not go into the vexed nature of doxastic attitudes, but will only indicate briefly my skepticism about propositional belief being required here. What is essential is commitment to the religion in question, and such commitment involves taking a stand and forming a resolve to follow Jesus. But intellectual commitments need not involve belief. A simple example is philosophical doctrine itself. Each of us defends certain philosophical positions, sometimes adamantly. But the wise attitude to take toward the (positive) positions we defend is that we do not know them to be true: the subject matters of philosophy, politics, and ethics include wide domains of issues that are so complex that claims of knowledge for conclusions reached looks more like swagger than sober judgment. Moreover, many philosophers adopt the point of view that the norm of belief is knowledge, and the possibility exists of governing one’s intellectual life in accord with this norm. But even for those who manage to do so, intellectual commitments to philosophical positions can still be made. In such cases, a philosopher commits to, takes a stand on, a controversial position, defending

\textsuperscript{10}See Salmon (1989).
\textsuperscript{11}See Kripke (1979).
it in sometimes adamant terms, though without actually believing it. One might do all this, never succumbing doxastically, or, as is more likely in the case of Christianity, hoping some day to succumb, echoing the cry of the father of the boy possessed with a spirit, “help my unbelief” (Mk. 9:24).

There is much more to say and consider concerning this second point about epistemological psychology, the analogue of moral psychology aimed at clarifying the variety of cognitive states a person might take toward a given proposition or object, but we have seen enough to be skeptical of the idea that only theists, characterized doxastically, can be Christians. The point of our discussion has been to show how to resist any facile inference from the presence of a functional faith that is specifically theistic or Christian to epistemic impropriety regarding the ontological commitments involved in such faith, even for such basic commitments as theism itself. Dewey resists basic theistic commitments based on religious experience by insisting on distinguishing the subjective quality of the experience from the interpretational aspect added to it, but epistemology since the demise of Logical Empiricism has shown the difficulty of separating the given in experience from the interpretation of it. Moreover, no version of Foundationalism appealing only to the given in experience has been very successful in explaining how we rationally get from such given elements in experience to rational intellectual commitments without allowing the interpretation of experience to play a significant role as well. So insisting that every commitment to bare theism on the basis of religious experience is not likely to succeed, even if appeals to religious experience might not make it reasonable for those lacking such experiences to be theists. Moreover, Deweyan arguments concerning the epistemic impropriety of religious faith can be resisted by seeing the advantages of an epistemology free of appeal to methods of inquiry that are a priori and unrevisable and by seeing the breadth of ways in which ontological commitments can be cognitively realized. Any attempt to argue that theistic faith distorts functional faith in a way that robs it of its value needs more careful articulation than is provided by a facile appeal to the scientific method and

---

12 Remarking on a reported religious experience, Dewey writes, “But it illustrates also the use that [religious] quality to carry a superimposed load of a particular religion. For having been brought up in the Christian religion, its subject interprets it in the terms of the personal God characteristic of that religion.” (Dewey 1934, p. 12)

13 Note, in particular, the way in which elements of coherence play a role in the most influential version of Foundationalism since the demise of Logical Empiricism, viz., that of Roderick Chisholm. See, e.g., Chisholm (1977).
the impropriety of closing off inquiry on certain matters of belief.

§5 Types of Appraisal and Epistemic Fetishism

Loyal followers of Dewey are likely to be left dissatisfied here, however, for our discussion can easily leave one with the sense that there is more to Dewey’s objections to religion than can be explained by undermining his epistemology and noting the paucity of psychological categories in standard assumptions and in Dewey in which ontological commitments might be located. Even if we expand these assumptions and improve the epistemology, it looks like there is still the standard problem of faith and reason lurking here, for will still be the suspicion that religion always involves ontological commitments that cannot withstand epistemic scrutiny, leading one to wonder whether we should side with Dewey in favor of functional faiths that aren’t lacking in this way.

We can make progress in assessing this complaint against religious faith by considering how to assess a given instance of functional faith. We might assess such faith only from a special perspective, as when we assess it in terms of its political usefulness, or whether writing the story of such a life makes for good literature. More generally, one might also ask whether such a faith is morally acceptable, or practically rational, or involves only intellectual commitments are that epistemically justified or epistemically rational or are known to be true. Here the multiplicity of normative categories befuddles, for what we really want to know is not some piecemeal story about which dimensions of normative propriety and impropriety a given element of human life displays, but rather an all-things-considered judgment about whether to view that element as appropriate or acceptable or permissible. On this score, we need an approach that requires an inclusive normative response that speaks with a single voice. To the extent that a response merely identifies ways in which a given instance of faith is propitious and other ways in which it is regrettable, we hear the sound of cacaphony. In order to secure an account that speaks

\[\text{This same issue arises within each local, particular domain of normativity. For example, within the domain of epistemic normativity, many hold and some argue that there are multiple dimensions of normative adequacy. Perhaps, for example, there is a primary norm requiring that one believe only what one knows to be true, but also a secondary norm that makes it OK to believe something that one rationally but mistakenly takes oneself to know. For arguments against such approaches, and an account of how to avoid}\]
with a single voice, we pursue some function on the individual rationalizing factors that enter into an all-things-considered evaluative conclusion about a given aspect of human existence such as the presence or absence of faith.

At the extreme, we find proposed functions that are fetishistic. Fetishism involves an exaggerated weighting of particular dimensions, whether epistemic, moral, practical, social, political, aesthetic, or whatever other dimensions one thinks plays a role in an all-things-considered evaluation of some aspect of human life. A Fetishist singles out one particular way of evaluating the overall status of the item being evaluated, giving it overriding importance. So a Practical Rationality Fetishist insists that the all-things-considered adequacy of functional faith requires practical rationality: no functional faith can be adequate if it doesn’t survive scrutiny by our best decision theory. One kind of Moral Fetishist insists that functional faith is only adequate in this way when it is morally required of one to have it.

A version of Fetishism of special interest in our context is Epistemic Fetishism. Epistemic Fetishism assesses a given instance of faith by looking at the intellectual components of faith and insisting that the faith in question is adequate when and only when the intellectual components survive epistemic scrutiny. Of course, this scrutiny comes in a variety of epistemic personages: those who insist on knowledge, those who insist on justification, those who insist on rationality, etc. But the feature they have in common is more interesting in our context than what separates them, for it is easy to detect the odor of Epistemic Fetishism in Dewey’s remarks. When Dewey claims that “the issue . . . centres in the question of the method by which any and every item of intellectual belief is to be arrived at and justified,” it is easy to sense a requirement that no faith can be adequate that doesn’t pass epistemic scrutiny first (ignoring for the moment the particular kind of epistemic scrutiny in question). If failure along epistemic dimensions is sufficient for failure of all-things-considered adequacy, however, we have the substance and not the mere scent of Epistemic Fetishism. Moreover, as the name suggests, there is little to recommend such Fetishism.\(^15\) Long-term projects often

\(^{15}\) There is one caveat here, and it concerns whether moral evaluation of an act or characteristic is itself the same thing as all-things-considered evaluation. Though this claim is controversial, if it is true, then Moral Fetishism is not a form of Fetishism (and even if it is a form of Fetishism, it may not be an objectionable form of it).

For further discussion of the demerits of the kind of intellectual impartiality toward all things that would be required of a generalized Epistemic Fetishism, see, e.g., Parfit (2001),
required sustained efforts over time, and often in the face of adversity. Some of the adversity comes in the form of evidence that one won’t be able to succeed, and one of the central functions of faith is to sustain people through such difficulties. That requires, however, not allowing the vicissitudes of evidence to always control whether one continues to pursue such projects, and such refusal will often involve a refusal to endorse the conclusions toward which one’s evidence is pointing. It is easy to see how such refusals can be justified all-things-considered when the projects are truly worthwhile, even if they cannot be justified from a purely epistemic point of view. Hence, there is good reason to reject Epistemic Fetishism.

Could one endorse Dewey’s concerns about the epistemic standing of religious commitments and avoid Epistemic Fetishism? There are two ways to try that I can see, but neither is especially promising. The first is to distinguish mere Epistemic Fetishism from sophisticated Epistemic Fetishism, where the latter objects to the presence of faith when constituted in part by fully dogmatic intellectual commitments that are adopted apart from any epistemic merit other than through acquiescence to the authority of some governing body. If, for example, one had faith in monarchical forms of government solely because the King insisted that one believe such, then a sophisticated Epistemic Fetishist would claim that such faith in monarchy is objectionable, even if admissible faith in monarchies is possible.

The problem for Dewey here is that he is simply not a sophisticated Epistemic Fetishist, since his attitude toward religion is one of exceptionless hostility, not the more measured opposition that characterizes sophisticated Epistemic Fetishism. The only way that attitude could be compatible with sophisticated Epistemic Fetishism is if there are no actual examples of more responsible religious adherence. It should be sufficient for resisting this conclusion to describe a kind of religious adherence that finds a place for theology without involving the kind of dogma to which Dewey objects. Here all we need to do is to note the path followed by the early disciples of Jesus. They surely began to follow without much understanding, seeing in Jesus the most promising hope for some combination of a personal and national future. Within a couple of decades, a new religion had arisen, with a relatively advanced theological component, but there is nothing in the development of

---


16 For a defense of the rationality of faith along these lines, see Buchak (2012).
the theology that would constitute the kind of dogma to which Dewey objects. Their faith is thus a clear example of religious faith that could only be objected to on epistemic grounds through appeal to simple, rather than sophisticated, Epistemic Fetishism.

One can hear those wishing to defend Dewey exclaiming, “Even so, that’s not possible anymore!” The idea is that even if religions can begin in epistemically innocuous ways, they promulgate themselves through dogma, not any kind of experimental attitude toward theology that could survive all but the crudest Epistemically Fetishist criticism. In fairness to Dewey, as a matter of large-scale generalization, this point has some truth in it; but as a careful formulation of a criticism of religion in general, it is too coarse a generalization. Even if a large part of the representational system of adherents of religion is present on the basis of the authority of the Church or Scripture, it is simply false that the metaphysical commitments of adherents of religion are based solely on such authority and it is certainly possible to take a less product-oriented approach to religious faith that focuses more on the process of relationship with God involving an open-ended experimental approach to the theological topics that arise in the process of such development. Such experimentalism in theology causes discomfort to the religious structures that are in place, but it is the nature of institutions of power to favor conformity and use resources to demand it. Even so, the possibility and actuality of non-dogmatic approaches to religion in general and Christianity in particular are easily recognized.

We should thus draw the lines between respectable and disreputable religious faith differently from Dewey, distinguishing a dogmatic approach in which the metaphysical commitments appended to functional faith are explained exclusively in terms of the influence of the dominant religious institutions of that religion from an experimental approach in which the metaphysical commitments arise out of the relationship with the Divine, even if under the guidance and tutelage of institutions of power or the more mundane guidance of a local community of faith with its own purveyors of (purported) wisdom and understanding.

It must be granted, however, that even such an experimental form of religious faith of the functional sort that Dewey describes can be subject to epistemic defect in the process, and perhaps most often is. It is worth noting that the same can be said of mundane relationships, such as friendship, where one’s commitment to a relationship can engender and even rely on epistemic
Interpretive shadings of behavior that lead others to criticize can be epistemically innocuous, but can also show bias, and though there are limits to how much bias can exist and still be all-things-considered tolerable, it is not that difficult to see that love of another person can conflict with some purely disinterested and dispassionate love of truth. The Epistemic Fetishists who insists that love of truth must be so strong that no such interpretive shadings of data can ever be all-things-considered tolerated leaves us missing out on many of deepest joys that make for the good life, and any approach to overall adequacy of behavior and belief that conflicts with our best understanding of the good life should be rejected. We are thus fully entitled to reject any attempt to defend Dewey’s antipathy toward organized religion in Epistemically Fetishist terms.

Apart from the exaggerated demands of Epistemic Fetishism, there is one other way to defend Dewey’s hostility to religion, and it involves the method of subtraction. The idea is to any functional faith involving strong metaphysical commitments, a faith that could only be objectionable to an Epistemic Fetishist, and then to compare it to a functional faith lacking those metaphysical commitments. The method of subtraction then objects to the more robust faith when the more minimal faith accomplishes the same purposes, equally well. When it can, the claim would be that the robust faith cannot be all-things-considered acceptable unless the metaphysical commitments pass epistemic scrutiny. The point of the method is thus to isolate the contribution the intellectual commitments make in such a way that the relevant tests of their adequacy are epistemic, and then to see how they fare on those standards. The Deweyan critique then would come to this: the epistemic tests do not look kindly on the intellectual commitments of religion, and since the benefits of functional faith can survive amputation of those commitments, a functional faith is best understood as incompatible with religion.

The experimental setup for this method of subtraction does not withstand scrutiny. The functional faith that involves robust metaphysical commitments is simply not the same functional faith as that of a person without those commitments. In a word, the hearts of those having such faith are set on different things. Even if it is true that the functional faith that sustains us in the process of living is a faith that comes in a variety of forms, some of which are robustly metaphysical and some of which are not, the individuality of what the heart is set on must be acknowledged. Most of those faiths

---

17 For defense and discussion, see Keller (2004) and Stroud (2006).
are not my faith; they do not involve ideals that are my ideals. To apply the method of subtraction in such cases is no better than objecting to relationships of love by insisting that they be amenable to replacement of close approximations or even intrinsic duplicates, and that such replacement occur when some such approximation is, in some way, preferable from an impartial point of view. The desires of the heart, assumed to be morally permissible, do not admit of such substitution, and neither do the ideals at the heart of functional faith.

§6 Conclusion

The result of our inquiry is, despite some appearance to the contrary, decidedly Deweyan. It joins forces with Dewey in opposing the attempts of organized religion to shackle the intellect, even while recognizing that the most important elements of faith are never the cognitive elements. One of the enduring temptations of maturity is to confuse our own individual and collective (purported) understandings of life with eternal verities the embracing of which is essential to true wisdom and success in life. In contrast, intellectual humility and wisdom personified counsels otherwise: we are all explorers of a vast landscape, often seeing only through the mist and sometimes reaching conclusions guided at best by blindsight. In the process, some flourish and some seem to do so. And those who live long enough to preach to the young need to focus, with Dewey, on the process more than on the product. Doing so honors the most important of religious truths, to my mind: that all of life is a grand journey with the one in whom we live and move and have our being. Honoring such a process leaves no room for “truths that need only be taught and learned,” and, with Dewey, celebrates the imaginative, affective and conative sources of the ideals that form the driving force of faith worth having.\footnote{This project/publication was made possible through the support of a grant from Templeton Religion Trust. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of Templeton Religion Trust.}
References


